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Abstract

"The emotional labor of teaching is only exacerbated in the age of COVID, with *more* expectations being placed on educators."

Posting about ways to encourage teachers from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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in things

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How Can We Support Teachers?

Dave Mulder

On the bulletin board above my desk there is a random assortment of photos, notes, reminders, and snippets of work in progress. Among them, I have tacked up a card someone sent me a couple years ago. The text on the card might sound sarcastic at first glance, because it just says, “So glad you exist.”

Why would I keep this card that could be interpreted as sassy, or even impertinent? I keep it because it came to me as a sincere expression of gratitude from a student who totally gets my weird sense of humor. She took the time to hand-write a card that expressed thankfulness and an awareness of the role I played as one of her teachers. And so, on the bulletin board it goes, because it’s one of those reminders of why I do the work I do.

I think most teachers have a file of these sort of cards, notes, photos, emails, and messages of positivity. These reminders of great moments and kind people are important for helping to manage the challenge of remaining positive in a complex and ever-changing work environment. Having a collection of words of affirmation can help keep focus on why we do the work, because the reality is, teaching is hard. The emotional labor of teaching is real, and it is one of the most demanding parts of the profession.

The term “emotional labor” is used in many ways today, but it was originally coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in her book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*.¹ Hochschild depicts emotional labor as work that requires one “to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.”² This sums up so much of the work teachers do—

we are constantly reading the room while managing our own emotional state, to care for students in terms of their academic learning, their social well-being, their emotional and mental health, and even their spiritual formation. When students seem “blah” about the content we are teaching, we crank up the enthusiasm. When confronting student misbehavior, we check our own flashes of anger or frustration. The emotional labor also extends beyond our classroom. We present a face of positivity and level-headedness when having a crucial conversation with a parent or colleague. Teachers do this almost automatically; we are conditioned for this, I think. In order to successfully navigate working with real human beings with real emotions, we check our own (very real) emotions.

Teaching is not for the faint of heart. The work professional educators do is immensely gratifying, of course. There is clearly deep joy for teachers called to this work, or they wouldn't continue to do it. But there is a lot of challenge in this emotional labor. Continually presenting the content as something wonderful and relevant to apathetic students takes a toll. Continually serving as the cheerleader for a struggling student takes a toll. Continually showing a professional and positive face to parents who are not always appreciative—and sometimes are discouraging rather than encouraging—takes a toll. The reality of these demands causes me to wonder if the personal costs of this emotional labor have a long-term, cumulative effect on teachers' emotional health.

All of this to say, teaching is plenty demanding in the best of circumstances. And teaching in the age of COVID? Teaching some students in face-to-face class while others Zoom in, coupled with the demand to develop online lessons to supplement or replace face-to-face interactions when not feeling prepared or equipped to do so has brought many teachers to their breaking point. All of the extra communication and record-keeping related to students who are rotating in and out of class adds an additional burden. Assessment in an inconsistent or unfamiliar learning environment creates additional stress for teachers concerned about the fairness, accountability, and validity of their assessments. Through all of this, teachers are expected to put on a brave face and continue to smile and cheer and look for silver linings. I truly wonder: is this a realistic expectation?

My grandpa used to have a bumper sticker on his Ford Econoline van that said, “I have done so much with so little for so long, now I can do anything with nothing.” I wonder if teachers feel that way today? Are they being asked—or required—to make bricks without straw? I am gravely concerned that we are going to see teachers leaving the profession in greater-than-normal numbers—gifted, passionate, exemplary educators who have simply been asked to do too much for too long. The emotional labor of teaching is only exacerbated in the age of COVID, with *more* expectations being placed on educators.

What can we collectively do to support teachers? I have a few suggestions. Some might sound trite, and some might make you feel a little offended, but I urge you to reflect deeply on these, particularly if you are a caregiver with kids in school today. What are you willing to do to support the educators spending so much time, care, and concern on your children?

Pray for teachers. I fear this sounds like the “good Christian” answer to the question, but I do mean this sincerely. Please pray for educators. Pray for them specifically by name. Pray for their health—physical, mental, and spiritual health as well. Pray for superhuman love, peace, patience, kindness, and self-control, because the Fruits of the Spirit are even more needed in the face of the current challenges. Pray earnestly that teachers will be faithful to the calling they have received, and that God will give them what they stand in need of, whatever that may be.

If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. This is probably a mandate you have heard since your youth. I encourage you to live this out with the educators in your life; extra grace is required all around. If you are upset, angry, or frustrated with how things are going for your child's education, you have every right to feel that way. The educators in your life are probably feeling very similar emotions, honestly—this is *not* what we signed on for. This is hard for everyone. Teachers are already doing the emotional labor of checking their feelings and presenting a professional demeanor. You owe it to them to do the same. If you're going to send an email or make a phone call, sleep on it, if at all possible. And if you do send that email, lead with something positive, if at all possible. Express gratitude or give a word of encouragement.

If you do have concerns about how things are going for your child's education, you should, of course, work through that with their teachers. However, please recognize that the way you approach this can make all the difference! If you can lead with empathy, care, and concern for the teacher's well-being, you're likely to get a better result than coming in with your guns blazing. Teachers are already doing the best they can for their students and are likely overwhelmed. They certainly want to provide the best education possible for your child. Your requests will likely be received best if you do a little emotional labor of your own.

Express appreciation. Take the initiative to be intentional in expressing your appreciation to teachers. Small gestures are welcome! A note or email expressing thanks at the right moment can be just the fuel teachers need. Gift cards with a note of gratitude are always welcome (maybe surprise your child's teacher with a gift certificate for a massage to unwind?). Taking the time to reach out to teachers with an authentic expression of encouragement can be a big blessing to one who is struggling with maintaining positivity. These are all small ways of saying, “I see you; I see the work you

are doing; I see the difference you are making in the lives of the children you teach; and I appreciate it.” Don’t underestimate these small gestures!

Pay teachers what they are worth. I recognize that this is probably a controversial statement for some readers; but the reality is that teachers are almost always underpaid for their work. A gift card given during teacher appreciation week is certainly a nice gesture, but it is simply that—a gesture. Teachers are clearly not in the profession to get rich; every teacher has some sense of calling that is deeper than just the paycheck. While this may be true, we need to pay teachers what they are worth.

Teachers are paid far less than other fields that have similar demands for training, preparation, and professionalism. An argument that is often given is that teachers “only work 7 hours a day for 9 months of the year.” But I want to push forward on this, because while I know that there are some teachers who breeze into the building at 8:00 and fly out as soon as the 3:30 bell rings, these are definitely a very, very small minority. To be prepared for the next day of teaching, most teachers put in another 3-5 hours a day of planning, preparing materials, assessing student work, communicating with caregivers, and working on their own professional development. This is often “free” labor that goes unrecognized. And this is understandable, in some ways, because this is often invisible work to students and parents—work done when students are not in the building.

There are already shortages of teachers in many areas of the U.S. One recent study suggests that between retirement, attrition, and growing numbers of students in some regions, there will be a need for 1.5 *million* new teachers in the next decade.³ In light of the stresses of pandemic teaching, the number of teachers leaving the profession may be growing. About 90% of the need for new educators each year comes from teachers leaving the profession—and about two-thirds of those teachers leave for reasons other than retirement.⁴ How will we keep experienced teachers in the profession and attract new ones? We need to seriously consider paying teachers better.

What are teachers actually getting paid? One recent study found that the average salary for public school teachers in the U.S. is around \$60,000 per year.⁵ That might sound sufficient, but there is a substantial range hidden in this number. It includes novice teachers in their first teaching job right out of college as well as educators with 30 years of experience and a master’s degree. It includes teachers in urban, suburban, and rural districts, and in different states, which fund education differently. For comparison, average annual salaries for a few other occupations that require a similar amount of education as K-12 teachers are as follows: sales representatives average around \$75,000 per year; registered nurses average \$77,000 per year; accountants average \$80,000 per year; and computer programmers average \$93,000 per year.⁶

The average starting salary for public school teachers in the U.S. is around \$40,000 per year.⁷ This number is often lower in independent schools. That starting salary—and the average salary for teachers as well—might not be enough to draw great candidates into the classroom. If we want the brightest and best folks to serve in your children’s classrooms, it’s time for us to collectively examine teacher compensation.

We all want the best teachers possible for the students in our lives, right? No one comes into a new school year thinking, “I hope my child has a mediocre teacher this year.” We want great teachers who are going to make a difference in our kids’ lives! This takes all of us working together to advocate for and encourage educators. How can we support teachers? Let’s move beyond just stating “I’m so glad you exist” to the teachers in our lives, and instead demonstrate real care and concern for these gifted individuals who are investing in the next generation on a daily basis.

FOOTNOTES

1. Hochschild, A. R. (2012). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.
2. Hochschild, 2012, p. 7.
3. Wiggan, G., Smith, D., & Watson-Vandiver, M. J. (2020). The National Teacher Shortage, Urban Education and the Cognitive Sociology of Labor. *The Urban Review*, 1-33.
4. See this report from the Learning Policy Institute: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/covid-raising-demands-reducing-capacity-educator-workforce>
5. See the National Center for Educational Statistics report: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_211.50.asp
6. These numbers come from the U.S. Department of Labor’s National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimate report from May of 2019. You can view the entire report here: https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nat.htm
7. You can see your state’s average starting teachers’ salary in this report from the National Education Association: <http://199.223.128.59/home/74876.htm>