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# Reflections on Being a Public School Teacher

MORRIS YATES

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**M**y career in public education spanned more than 30 years, from the 1960s through the 1990s. During that time I taught grades three through eight and college courses and worked as a school administrator. I became a Christian in 1958.

My life has largely been about integrating Christian faith with teaching in the public schools. To avoid the destructive effects of compartmentalization, I had to find ways to integrate those two elements. The question for me was, “How was I to be a disciple of Christ and public school teacher?” There was no sage to tell me how. I was in need of an adequate and developing theology to give guidance through the maze of “oughts” in which I swam, as well as methods to help me employ those specific skills and databases related to effective teaching. In the beginning, I had neither. Over time, God granted some insight that helped me be a better servant in the public schools.

Upon reflection, I needed a better understanding in the beginning as to why I was there and what I was to be about as an agent of Christ. Time is the stuff that life is made of, and the question of how I ought to use life’s commodity really required that I know or learn where I was going. The real question was, “Why was God giving me time with the students?” There was more to be offered than merely the school’s curriculum.

Where could I go for solutions? The pulpit sounded forth “faith, confession, repentance, and baptism.” What was I supposed to do with that in an eighth-grade class? You cannot verbally preach the gospel, however it is understood, in a public school classroom. My ineffectual Bible reading did not help either. The result was guilt—I was not doing what I thought I should be doing—verbally preaching the gospel. What I came to realize later was *being* is central to the issue of *how* and *why*. *Being was more important than speaking*. Influence was to be found in more than the spoken word. I discovered that *influence resulted from the quality of one’s relationships*. Opportunities to influence came along with good relationships. Of course, speaking is a part of being, but it is the authentic life that gets the chance to be heard. What one does, speaks so loudly that words often cannot be heard.

It is not an accident of teaching when a pregnant 13-year-old comes asking for help when contemplating suicide. It is an opportunity to serve that flows out of trust that is usually developed in good relationships. Unfortunately trust does not automatically come with a teaching position. I have found that if the kids believe you are for them, you can hardly make a mistake. However, if they believe you are neutral or against them, you can do little that is right.

Relational skills are essential. Everything done or spoken is of critical importance. Students can spot a “phony” a mile off. If you say you love them, you had best love them. When I relied on status authority more than quality relationships, I had less influence. Relationships take time. Status authority comes only with the position.

Eventually, I began to ask what relational skills a Christian should have to maximize influence for good. If one knew that influence was the prime target and relational skills led to more of it, then having them

would make for a more effective Christian agent. Those first few years were a mad scramble to be effectively organized for the next lesson. Planning lessons, grading papers, getting supplies and materials were time consuming. Having influential relationships under such pressures increased the enormity of the teaching/learning act.

At time flew by, I began to look at love, community or belonging, kindness, gentleness, loyalty, friendship, and authority with a view toward fleshing them out with students. I looked at the Bible in a new light. I took graduate classes in religious fields. I looked at popular people with "good personalities." I read a little on the subject. And finally, I looked critically at my own experience to discover what makes for good relationships.

I had to put flesh on these skeletons so they would come to life in my classroom. What would kindness look like in my classroom, the principal's office, in the lunch line, when correcting unacceptable behaviors, when talking to parents, settling a dispute between students and teachers, or between parents and teachers?

There were some hard questions to face. For example, "Did I really listen to a student's explanation of this mishap or failure to meet a deadline?" Or "How would I model the relationship between justice and mercy in my room?" Over time, I adopted the "servant model." I was there to serve and would try to do that regardless of the cost. This was to be done with no concern for personal inconvenience.

A parent said he could only meet with me on Sunday afternoon at 3:00 p.m. in a cotton field. Should I go? Could I do that without begrudging the loss of "private time?" How could I convey love and concern? Did I not profess to care about the student? How could love become a way of life?

While teaching a college literature class, I found that most students could not write an essay. What did I hear the cross saying to this situation? Was it really enough to say that the student did not possess the prerequisite skills and should drop the class because he or she had no hope of passing? Did the cross say "no" to the dreams and aspirations of re-entry students, or was it my selfishness over the inconvenience involved in responding in love to their need that was saying "no?"

I am convinced that the ability of a Christian teacher to effectively influence for good can be acquired. And I am convinced that the cross provides a good model.

#### MORRIS YATES

Mr. Yates taught in public school and college and worked as a school administrator during his more than 30 years as an educator.

