

Letters from Home: With Graduate Students?

Kimberly Hill Campbell and Ruth Shagoury Hubbard

Dear (Friend? Family? Advocate?):

Ideally, schools and families form a partnership, helping each other to create the best possible educational experience for every unique learner. It's what every parent wants for their children, what every teacher wants for the students in their classroom. No surprises here. But what if the school is Graduate School—one that includes both rigorous coursework and an intense year-long internship? And what if the family extends beyond parents, but includes kids, close friends, spouses, and significant others? Shouldn't we still work together to make this the best possible learning environment for our teachers-to-be? We think so.

So, help us out here. Tell us what we should know about Jane and the way she approaches learning. What should we bear in mind? What hidden talents will she bring to the class? What are some tips you have about the best ways to help her grapple with new material and difficult situations? We'd really appreciate it if you'd take a few minutes and write a letter to us and tell us what we need to know—help us get to know her a little better as we embark on this journey together.

*With
Downright
Good Cheer!
Kimberly Campbell Ruth Hubbard*

What happens when we invite the families and friends of graduate students into a partnership with us, their teacher education faculty? We get a lot of insights into our students' learning that we would never have otherwise, we open up a new teaching dynamic based on relationship by sharing our own "letters from home" (Kimberly's was from her husband and Ruth's from her daughter!), and we create a surprising sense of goodwill with those closest to our graduate students.

As Mark¹ told us after sharing excerpts from the letters and the process of obtaining them, "One of the best things that came out of this was that my wife feels less resentful of the program now—she feels more invited into the process." His wife had even closed

her letter to us with the words, "Thanks so much for including me." She had clearly spent time composing this letter, sharing specific anecdotes about how he learns, as well as analyzing his processes: "Mark spends a great deal of time thinking. Not thinking about money or the future, or other really common stuff. He gets really deep into his own head, and I think he can be difficult to reach when he's in there. He can be really focused, he is a very auditory learner ... he's not very good at the whole multi-tasking thing (unless you count walking and reading)."

Emily felt that the letters opened up communication with her 18-year-old daughter, Shannon. "It gave her a chance to think about me as a learner—and I think she liked the chance to brag about me, and show me she's proud of me." Besides her pride, though, Shannon showed she really does

1. The names of all students in this article are pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

understand her mother's learning strategies: "Bear in mind, Emily is a perfectionist. ... She is incredibly methodical about doing her work and writing. She has to do everything the best it can be done and won't settle for second. It can be annoying if you're her daughter, but we love her anyway!"

Blake's "significant other" wrote of her pride in his willingness to take the risk of changing professions just six years shy of retirement, recounting delightedly the way he informally teaches his three-year-old grandson: "They explore and share the information [about birds] between adult and child. They are of one age when they are student and teacher." She also wrote: "I think the best way to help Blake grapple with new material and difficult situations is to provide encouragement and challenges. Allow him to do his work in his own style and still provide guidance, resources, constructive criticism, positive feedback, and two-way conversation. He's open to new and innovative ideas and believes that people learn in different ways."

"Hello, I'm Kelly's mom," began one three-page, detailed letter. She told us how Kelly learned to read as a child, as well as some of her struggles and triumphs in school. "What is most important to Kelly, I think, is her relationships with people. This affects her approach to learning." There's a lot of depth to her comments about how people perceive Kelly, too: "I think one way in which Kelly's personality can be misunderstood is that she can be perceived as very quiet and shy, and initially, she sometimes is. But I've also seen her be very assertive about expressing her opinion about something she feels strongly about—which includes quite a few issues."

Inviting Families' Letters

Parents know a great deal about their children's learning strategies. For decades, childhood educators have recommended inviting families' "funds of knowledge"

(Moll 1992, p. 53) into the classroom. Educator and principal Shelley Harwayne (1999) writes eloquently about the importance of reaching out to families. Harwayne has come to view parents as "the best informants about their own children" (Harwayne, 1999, p. 159). She writes directly to parents, requesting that they write to her about their child and provide her with information that "you think would help us work with your children in ways that are rich and rewarding" (Harwayne, 1999, p. 159).

Home-family connections remain crucial in successful secondary education (Smith & Wilhelm, 2001). As teacher educators, we have always stressed the key role of partnerships with parents with our secondary intern teachers. Yet we failed to model how. Drawing on Harwayne's work, we decided to invite the families of our own students to share their knowledge with us.

Though we were initially excited by our idea to model family involvement, we were also a little apprehensive about how to initiate the process with our adult students. We decided we should meet jointly with the cohort, and also write a letter to them, explaining this idea. We read them the following letter and gave them a copy:

Dear _____:

As kids advance through their school years, one common complaint is that the home-school connections that are so eagerly forged in the elementary school years fall by the wayside. There's so much to be gained from these bonds. That's one reason we stress continuing to work with families throughout the secondary school years.

As we were talking about making this a priority this year, we realized that we continue to make the same omission that many middle and high schools make—we leave out an important source of information and support—your friends and families. With your help,

we'd like to make an attempt to invite those close to you to give us some insights into what helps you learn and what special gifts you bring to the classroom community we are building together.

Please give the attached letter to someone in your family—significant other, son or daughter, mom or dad, close friend, roommate. We'd really appreciate hearing from them. It's not just young children who need the support and insights of family and friends in their educational pursuits. We're all in this together!

Sincerely,

Kimberly and Ruth

After we shared this letter with them, we each explained the process we were going through to narrow down who we were planning to ask to write a letter about ourselves. Then we asked them to freewrite about who they would choose. This was an important step, because it allowed us the chance to hear from each other and also to help them work through possibilities as they came up with their choices. We were also clear that the letter would be sent to them, and then they would choose whether to give the letters to us or not. And everyone did get letters to us—most in the quick turn-around time of two weeks that we requested, and a couple of letters from across the country dribbled in the following week.

We were floored by the richness of the letters, each as unique as each individual in the community—and most at least two pages and some as long as five.

The Letters' Impact on Our Teaching— and Our Teaching Community

"Teaching is an interactive practice that begins and ends with seeing the student. This

is more complicated than it seems, for it is something that is ongoing and never completely finished. The student grows and changes, the teacher learns, the situation shifts, and seeing becomes an evolving challenge. As layers of mystification and obfuscation are peeled away, as the student becomes more fully present to the teacher, experiences and ways of thinking and knowing that were initially obscure become ground on which an authentic and vital teaching practice can be constructed." (Ayers, 2001, p. 25)

The letters we received from graduate students' family members or friends helped us to see our students through a different lens, opened new doors in our relationships with our graduate students, informed our teaching practices, and provided important modeling. Letters from people who knew our students better than we and cared deeply about those students allowed us to see sides of them not evident to us. It was like peeling an onion. A student who proved to be challenging to us in what we saw as a dismissive, even flippant, attitude at times—his outer layer—was described by his father as an independent learner. "As a young child, Greg would be instructed to perform a task and he would refuse until it was his idea to do it. Over the years his mother and I learned that if we planted the right seeds eventually Greg would come up with an independent way to do what needed to be done." We used this information to frame our work with Greg in a more invitational manner so he could see there was, in fact, room to make assignments his own.

The frustration we had observed in another student made sense when we learned from his mother that "frustration in learning comes to Peter when he isn't sure what is expected of him; or if the classwork is vague as to how it applies toward the learning experience." This informed our conversations with Peter as he navigated his way through the question-driven process essential to good teaching. We also made sure we

placed him with a mentor teacher that could speak clearly with Peter about the process he used to create teaching plans so Peter could see the rationale and application for the plans we required of him.

We also were buoyed regarding our own efforts. Kristine's mom let us know, "I believe that the method you currently use works for Kristine because the feedback we get from her is enormously positive. Her learning curve has been very high. She can relate to the reading material that you have selected and she enjoys it very much. We often hear excerpts from the books which helps the material sink in."

From the letters, we were able to cull a list of advice to remind us of what our students needed from us as teachers. Hearing these strategies from the families of our learning community reminded us of important teaching truths that were vital for us to model for our interns—for their own sake as learners, as well as for the thousands of students they would teach and work with in their future teaching careers (see Sidebar: Advice from Our Students and Their Families).

Advice from Our Students and their Families

- Listen attentively and encourage our students to do the same.
- Allow for creativity.
- Provide time frames but allow for flexibility.
- Be sure students know what is expected of them and why. (How will the assignment support their learning?)
- Provide time to think.
- Allow opportunities for independent and small group work.
- Engage in conversations and assignments with students. (Talk with, not at.)

This *advice* regarding strategies came into greater focus when we sat down several months later, in January, to write back to the folks who had so thoughtfully shared insights about our students. As we reviewed the letters from home, we made notes as to how we had used the stories and insights that family members and friends of interns had shared with us. Our conversation with each other about the letters opened the door to a continuing discussion that deepened our understanding of our students and the importance of family partnerships. This collaborative talk led us to share new stories of how we were seeing further examples of what we had learned from the family letters. For example, in a letter about Susan, her college roommate noted, "Susan demonstrated an interest in exploring multiple perspectives of an issue and encouraged all who were present to state and explain his or her point of view." In our letter back to the roommate, we shared the story of watching a video of Susan's teaching in which she facilitated a conversation with a group of seniors about Constitutional Law and also how this discussion then enriched our own classroom discussion regarding school law by raising the question of whether high school students have the right to demonstrate at public high schools. Susan drew on her knowledge of law, her students' stories, and shared her own stories of high school sit-ins.

As a result of our own writing in response to the letters from families, we deepened our understanding of our students. We began our second semester of work steeped in the insights that come from shared observation and dialogue. Our teaching was more authentic and vital because we had rich data to help frame our own observations and interactions. And we allowed ourselves the playfulness that comes with familiarity in our letters of response to families. Leslie's husband had written to us in the fall using the metaphor of his wife as a robot prototype. In Kimberly's response, she followed his lead:

To: Mark
Re: Leslie

I am pleased to report that Ruth Hubbard and I have documented a successful experience to date with Leslie the Robot. We have a great deal of evidence regarding Leslie's consumption of written material. We can also document that she is skilled at generating written material; she does this with verve and passion—unexpected in a robot prototype. We are very pleased that when placed in the challenging situation of dispensing wisdom to a classroom of middle school robots—whose programs were set on hormonal frenetic—Leslie showed no signs of short circuiting. We can only hope that future prototypes will function so successfully.

We are convinced that the effort to write the letters back to families was particularly worthwhile. (Kristine told us her mother attached the letter to her refrigerator with a magnet—a proud display of her daughter's graduate work reminiscent of her younger years!) This became apparent at graduation, when family members and friends went out of their way to meet and greet us; we were the letter writers!

In addition to relationship building and insights we could use to see our students and inform our teaching practice, this letter writing activity served as inspiration for several of our students. Our intern teachers take on the responsibility of teaching in late January. In classes that run year-long, this can be a difficult transition for students. One of our interns, Ingrid, wrote a letter about herself as a learner to introduce herself to her new class. She followed up by inviting her students to write to her about themselves as learners. They responded to her letter, but were amazed when she wrote back individual notes to each of them. As she returned these handwritten letters, one young man noted, "Yeah, you wrote the same letter

back to us, so what." But after reading her response, he commented, "Wow, you didn't just write one letter, you wrote to each of us." Her message of commitment and caring for each student was evidenced in the letters she crafted.

And this year we saw the cycle continue. When we met with Ingrid and Leslie in October to find out more about how their first year of teaching was going, they both told us that they had begun their school year by inviting the families of their high school and middle school students to write to them, just as we had done with them the previous year.

As the conversation turned to the letter-writing experience, Ingrid and Leslie uncovered another unexpected outcome of the project. We learned that the letters from home helped them see their fellow graduate students in a new light. Ingrid noted, "What bugged me about Michael also bugged his girlfriend. She wrote about this in her letter about him and I thought, well, it bugs her but she still loves him." Tolerance and appreciation were at the heart of this "Aha" experience and contributing to our cohort's sense of collegiality. It also reinforced what we remember from reading letters we received from parents of middle and high school students in our own teaching careers—letters that served to remind us that a student that was causing difficulty in class was loved by someone who could look through the layers to the heart and soul of the child. It reminded us, as it did Ingrid, that there was more to see.

Leslie noted that hearing unedited stories about each other's childhood helped her feel connected to her cohort members. Both told us that hearing "outside voices" humanized the institutional setting in which we did our work: "Letters cordoned off a space that's not academic." They also stressed their appreciation for our modeling: "You didn't just tell us it was important to know our students, you modeled this for us."

William Ayers (2001) reminds us that "the learning environment is a complex,

living reflection of a teachers' values" (p. 48). We believe the letter-writing experience not only modeled possibilities regarding home-school connections, it also allowed us to tap into the "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1992, p. 53) that exist in our students' families. These informants enriched the classroom learning community in ways we could never have imagined. We value the connection between family and school—even graduate school.

References

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