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How Can I Manage the Unspoken Expectations Placed on Teachers?

In her book *Fewer Things, Better*, Angela Watson (2019) recounts the history of public education in America:

In the early days of what's now evolved into our public school system in the United States, women teachers were required to be single and childless. They didn't juggle work/life balance because the expectation was that they wouldn't have much of a personal life apart from teaching. The profession was seen by many as a calling which one should whole-heartedly devote one's life to (much like a nun). . . . It was seen by many as unskilled labor which focused on imparting morality rather than intellectual skills or academics. As you would expect for a profession that was viewed this way, paltry wages were the norm. (pp. 32–33)

Watson goes on to name the unspoken expectations placed on teachers: Teachers should work through lunches and breaks, nights and weekends; accept the pay given to them while paying for materials themselves; and continually and unquestioningly add more to their plates to make up for any gaps that arise due to disinvestment from the school/district/state.

We can't recall ever being told these expectations outright, but like Watson, we've felt them and consequently lived them—leading to two of the three of us leaving the classroom for a period because trying to live all of these expectations burned us out.

The way to defang these unspoken expectations is to speak about them. As teachers of language, we know that there is great power into putting things into words—especially rarely talked-about things such as the following:

- 👉 **Be clear and consistent with our predictable time off (PTO).** Later in this chapter, we get deeper into PTO, but we encourage being clear and consistent with students and parents/guardians about when you will and won't be checking email or responding to texts. We also encourage planning your time off and even putting it into a planning calendar in the same way that one would plan the start of a unit or a final assessment.
- 👉 **Ask for the help we need.** Far too many teachers act as if they are the sole inhabitants of an island of seemingly infinite work. Of course, those teachers are not alone; they are literally surrounded by people—fellow teachers, parents, learning networks, and the students themselves. While it can contrast with the teacher-as-martyr history and mindset discussed earlier, don't be afraid to enlist the help of those around you to lighten your load. Ask that teacher down the hall about her lesson plans. Invite parents and guardians to contribute to building your classroom library. And even get the students themselves involved!

- 👉 **Bring up times when unspoken expectations impact our lives negatively.** We don't want to be the crabs in a barrel, offering an endless stream of complaints, but that doesn't mean that it isn't all right or even important to question respectfully why teachers are expected to work late or buy all the whiteboards in their classes. If done thoughtfully, and especially with others in productive conversation, improvements can result.

- 👉 **It is OK to not always be working.** If you feel strongly that the unspoken expectations around teacher workload are harmful, we encourage you to join communities like Angela Watson's 40-Hour Teacher Workweek Club (www.join.40htw.com) that discuss and explore ways to find balance and great teaching at the same time.

- 👉 **Teachers are not alone in the classroom.** We share the classroom with our students, and they can help when it comes to dismantling some of those unspoken expectations. Here are some ways to spread the work around in a way that is both better for teachers *and* the students:
 - 👉 **Have students select mentor texts.** Not all mentor texts need to or even should be chosen by the teacher. If you are studying narratives, nature poetry, or how to write strong reviews, have students bring in examples that speak to them to supplement the examples that speak to you.
 - 👉 **Crowdsource bulletin boards.** Instagram-worthy bulletin boards are lovely, but often, teachers can get just as much or more impact from having students help with decorating the room. Students can print out favorite sentences or quotes, write short book talks, or even submit proposals to paint murals. These can add meaning and community—and they don't cost a dollar or a minute for the teacher.
 - 👉 **Have students serve as “social chairs.”** It's natural to want to end a text with a little celebration: get some snacks and sodas—maybe a pizza—play some music, present some projects. The only problem is that a party can end up being a lot of work for any teacher alone. Matt Kay has had success asking students to volunteer as “social chairs” to organize various activities, put together their class's potlucks, and so on.

Notes
