Talking about Listening: Urban Teacher Responses to Empathetic Listening Training

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Urban Teacher Responses to Empathetic Listening Training  

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Abstract  

Teachers in urban school districts need to learn better listening skills. The high-stakes world of parental involvement, especially with parents who have not had good school experiences themselves, necessitates that faculty and administration be able to listen with clarity and calm. Emergency-licensed teacher education students at a major urban institution of higher education were trained in empathetic listening, practiced these skills, and then were asked to use these skills in the field. While most believed they did not need the skill when they first heard of it, all discovered its complexity and utility during the course of the semester. 

Introduction: The Need for Empathetic listening in Urban Teacher Education  

Under pressure it is easy to tune out the voices of students, parents and colleagues as unnecessary distractions. Even so, most of us automatically notice and make judgments about facts and ideas presented by others. According to attorney and trainer Gerry Spence (1995), the best listeners also make the effort to learn about others’ perceptions, motives and feelings. No greater need exists for the understanding that empathetic listening fosters than in urban education environments. In highly diverse settings teachers need to listen even more vigilantly to assure that they understand the speaker, and can put the parent at ease, which encourages their participation. 

Joseph Fernandez, one-time principal of New York City Schools, emphatically discusses school climate in his book, Tales out of School. He worked to put policies in place that would foster parent/teacher communication. He notes that we should be preparing students for meaningful lives in the schools, therefore working with students, parents, and teachers on effective communication is vital. It is important that the administration be a role model in this. Parents should feel welcome in the school by each member, not just the most visible. We know that parental involvement helps struggling students to achieve. By allowing students and parents a voice in their schools, we foster two-way communication. Even more important than newsletters and web sites is the one-on-one dialogue that professionals and parents have to provide a complete support system for students. 

Kaplan (1996) has identified several common elements among effective reflective listeners. Their efforts are transparent; they let the speaker know that the whole message is being heard and understood. They generate trust. People want to talk to them. Better listening habits can help all of us understand and motivate students, and build better working relationships with
Listening

parents, colleagues and administrators. Pickering (1989) identified four discreet skills of empathetic listeners: The desire to be other directed, not projecting one’s own feelings and ideas onto the other. A desire to be non-defensive. The desire to imagine completely the experiences of the other, rather than assuming they are the same as one’s own. Finally, the desire to listen as a receiver, not as a critic, and desire to understand the other person rather than to achieve either agreement from or change in that person.

Teachers are in a powerful position to hear students and their parents. Urban settings are frequently multicultural and multi-socioeconomic. Banks (1990), among others, writes that a teacher’s values and attitudes towards diversity will greatly impact the way in which that teacher interacts with students, parents, and colleagues of different ethnic backgrounds and socioeconomic levels. Feeling heard has been shown to positively impact the self-esteem of students, and also create positive relationships between adults (Shlien, 1994). If true listening were simply smiling and nodding our heads while someone else spoke, or trying to think of a reply while that person spoke, most of us would have it well in hand. Since this is not the case, we must be very careful to understand the process each person goes through to listen effectively. The first step is to understand what stands in the way of effective listening.

*Emotional Barriers*

Parents come to us with emotional baggage. In fact, we are bringing our own emotional baggage to the conversation as well. How many of us have had parents yell at us or tell us we’re just overpaid babysitters? How many parents have had teachers tell them that their child “can’t learn”? Trying not to be defensive ourselves will go a long way toward making parents feel comfortable with us, and allow them to let go of their defensiveness.

It is difficult for many people, including teachers, to treat each interaction separately. If we have had a person from a certain category (economically disadvantaged, person of color, single parent, etc.) treat us badly during an interaction, it is that much more difficult to treat others in the same category well during our interactions with them. Consider, though, how many parents have had negative interactions with teachers when they were students. They will come with this baggage. It is our job, then, to help them set down that baggage, and partner with us on their child’s behalf.

*Jargon*

Education is famous for its buzzwords. Try to use the most plain, common language that is available. Clearly stating something means not using jargon, buzzwords, or other vocabulary that is unfamiliar or confusing to the audience being addressed. Sometimes we fall into using jargon because a parent is yelling at us, and questioning our competence. By using jargon, our emotions tell us, we can appear more knowledgeable than the parent, and they will understand not to question us. More often, though, we use jargon because that is our shorthand when we talk to each other. Our colleagues understand this shorthand, and we forget that parents do not.
Ego: The Need to be Right or Appear Smart

To piggyback on the use of jargon, ego needs are very important to most of us. We want to feel competent, and by and large, teachers are very competent. But just as I have always said this to my students, I say to you, “I don’t know,” is a perfectly legitimate response to any question. It does not mean we aren’t competent – it simply means we don’t know the answer to one specific question. So when a parent wants a change immediately, if we don’t know whether it can be done or not, rather than saying no, simply say that you don’t know.

When parents are upset, angry, or agitated this can be the best time to use reflective listening. By refusing to be defensive and simply listening to their side of the story, we can diffuse their anger and effectively calm them so that we can all work together. Parents love their children. They wouldn’t be at school yelling at me if they didn’t care about that child. I always keep that in mind during these confrontations. This anger isn’t about me. It is about a parent who wants the best for a child. This attitude makes it much easier to listen to harsh words without being defensive.

Assumptions about people

How many of us have had people make incorrect assumptions about us? It is a tremendously common experience. After a few years of teaching, we may be used to hearing the same questions and concerns from students and parents. Do not lose sight of the fact, though, that while these concerns seem normal enough to us, this may be the first time the student or parent is asking such a question. To have their concerns be treated with respect is critical. My favorite example of how listening can increase a person’s sense of self and what they can accomplish in the world is from Melba Patillo Beals’ wonderful book, *Warriors Don’t Cry*. In it she gives us a wonderful example of the power of listening:

“Miss Patillo, how do you feel about going back to Central High?”
“Miss,” I whispered as my hands perspired and my knees shook. Thoughts buzzed inside my head like bees disturbed in their hive. It was the first time anybody white had ever called me Miss. They cared what I thought. I struggled to find a suitable answer.
“We have a right to go to that school, and I’m certain our governor, who was elected to govern all the people, will decide to do what is just.” I felt myself speak aloud before I was ready. Who said that? It sounded like me, but the words . . . where had they come from? The white reporters wrote my words down and behaved as if what I said was very important. Pride welled up inside me, and for the first time, I knew that working for integration was the right thing for me to be doing. (p. 88-89)

Teaching the Teachers: Steps to Listening Reflectively

Most of my education students have never been taught how to listen reflectively. The
majority have gone into the lesson believing that they will learn little because they have been listening all their lives. When I go through the steps, they take notes politely, but rarely ask questions. The steps themselves are fairly basic.

Stop

No matter how busy we are, we need to stop what we are doing and listen to the person speaking. When we try to speak to another person, doesn’t it matter that they stop typing on the computer, watching TV, or cooking dinner? This first step is critical to the others.

Look

Even when I am teaching, I make sure to look at each of my students. I scan the room with my eyes, making regular eye contact with each student. This matters tremendously. The gift of our attention is no more powerful than when it is accompanied with our eyes.

Listen

Erskin, Moursund, and Trautmann (1999) found that empathetic listening during therapy created the type of relationship that led to real progress, especially among regressed or defensive clients. The point of this type of listening is to gather the information needed to tell the person’s story from his or her perspective. The point of view is critical. We should not be listening to compare with our own experiences, or make judgments about the person and her experiences. We are listening in order to understand fully the speaker’s story. This means that we will listen for emotional as well as factual content.

Reflect back

Think of the reflection in a mirror. It does not attempt to change or add anything of its own to what is reflected; it simply shows us what is there. It doesn’t matter at all if we agree with the speaker’s perspective on the situation; we must focus on what they believe to be true. The object of this technique is to tell their story from their point of view.

Listen again

If the reflective listener did not tell the story to them the way they believe it to be, then they will begin again. Most of the time they will not repeat the entire story. They will focus on the parts they believe were not understood or reflected correctly. At this point it is typical for the speaker to be more calm and receptive to the listener (Picker, 1989).

Reflect again

Reflect back what the speaker has said during the second telling. The parts that were not
mentioned in the second telling were things the speaker believes you already understand, so you need not repeat all of it.

Observe

One of the best ways to reinforce good habits is to notice the way in which people listen or fail to listen. Everywhere we go we can see examples of good and bad listening habits. We can observe our own listening as well as other people’s. When evaluating other people’s skills, make sure to observe the listener more closely than the speaker. Is she trying to understand the speaker’s ideas without judgment? Is she learning the speaker’s motives and feelings? Are her efforts apparent to the speaker? Is she building trust and understanding?

Of course it is most important to observe our own behavior.

When a student comes to me with a problem or question, do I listen without judgment? Do I strive to understand his motives and feelings? When confronted by a parent, do I demonstrate understanding or just try to win the argument? When I get instructions from an administrator or unsolicited advice from a colleague, do I take the opportunity to learn or do I immediately reject anything outside my preset beliefs?

The steps seem easy enough in theory. But like many simple-sounding theories, this one is particularly difficult to implement.

“Your Hackles Are Up”: Reflecting on Listening

Genuine reflective listening is not an accident. It takes effort, self-control, and patience. It means controlling the desire to be in control, and to force one’s own perspective on the other party. Listening is half of all communication. It is the part of communication from which we learn, and during which we demonstrate respect and build trust. It is the opposite of lecturing, but just as critical to teaching effectiveness. It is an essential skill for future teachers. It is also considerably messier than pretending to be in control of every situation. It requires more risk from us and from the people with whom we communicate. Lawrence-Lightfoot writes about this phenomenon in her book, Respect.

Kay wants to make sure that I understand that the journey toward mutual understanding is not necessarily peaceful or comfortable. It is full of minefields. It requires that people be “ready to put themselves out there.” The pretense of harmony never leads to the kind of vigorous questioning and “interweaving of ideas” that is the bedrock of respect. “To pretend to understand is a cardinal sin in my classroom,” exhorts Kay as if she is describing the worst possible transgression. “If you sit there passively, not learning, not taking advantage of the moment . . .” Her voice drifts off as she remembers her own English teacher in high school. “She helped me learn that agreement and consensus are not always the best thing” (p. 104).
Only by trying to implement reflective listening in their own lives do students truly appreciate how difficult it can be.

When I have described the process of reflective listening to my students who are currently teaching, they frequently react as if I am telling them the most obvious thing in the world. When they try to model the behaviors, though, they immediately see where the bear traps are. I break the class into pairs. One of them plays a parent, colleague or administrator who is coming to the teacher angry or upset. The other party plays him or herself, the teacher. I give them a few minutes to develop a scenario. Then they portray their scene in front of the class.

When I recently did this unit with a group of first year urban teachers, all of whom were emergency certified in secondary mathematics and science, they gave essentially the same reaction to the information as most other students. Then it came time for them to develop their scenarios. One of the pairs of female teachers had difficulty coming to agreement about what their scenario should even be about. Another pair of women got into an argument during their first run-through prior to their class presentation. Still a third pair had difficulty identifying the steps that they were supposed to use for the scenario.

Then pair number one went up to the front of the group. One woman, acting as the parent, walked “in” and began questioning the teacher about her methods, grading practices, and moral fortitude. The teacher began calmly by asking the woman to sit down, and expressing that she wanted to hear what the problems were. The woman remained standing, and began to get louder. The teacher talked louder to be heard over the parent. Neither backed down, and within two minutes, I asked them to stop and take their seats. The class could not have known what the problem was from watching their role-play.

As the two women sat down, I asked the other students to react to that scenario. The response was immediate.

“Your hackles were up,” said a male student, “You need to stop talking while the parent is talking and listen to what she’s telling you. It doesn’t matter if she never sits down if she knows you’re listening.”

“Don’t interrupt. When you interrupt you aren’t listening.” These types of comments were overwhelming. When they were finished talking, I pointed out two places in the conversation where the teacher could have changed what she did and become reflective, which would have changed the outcome. Both women were defensive during the first three to four comments, but after I told them that their difficulties were common, they seemed to relax and stopped trying to explain their behavior.

The second dyad came forward. A male student was the teacher this time, and a female student portrayed a difficult colleague who had a problem. As the woman explained the problem
she was having with a student, the male colleague began to offer her advice almost the first time she took a breath. At that point I stopped them and reminded him that he needed to listen to her full story before reflecting. He looked startled, but agreed. She continued to tell her story, and then when she had “talked herself out,” he began to retrace the story she had told him. She nodded at some parts, and interrupted him twice to correct things she believed he had gotten wrong. Almost 12 minutes later, she told him she felt better, and thanked him for listening. They looked at me, and the class applauded. I asked the class for their reaction.

“After you reminded him, he could do it.”

“She got calmer once he really started listening.”

The man who had been involved in the scenario indicated that at first he was analogizing her experience to his experiences, and wanted to offer her suggestions based on what he had done. Once I reminded him about the process, and he really started listening, he realized how much different her experience was from his, and wanted to hear what she was experiencing. He felt like she felt better even though he hadn’t offered her any advice. The woman participant said that she felt better in a way because he hadn’t offered advice.

The dyads that went after that pair had a much easier time. There were still rough spots, yet it seemed that once they saw it done correctly it was easier to emulate. They identified a few points where they still had difficulty:

• Reflecting emotional content was more difficult than reflecting factual content;
• Parents were tougher to reflect with than colleagues or students, even when the issue was seemingly easier to resolve;
• On their own no one would be there to remind them about the process, so when they were upset or “had their hackles up”, they would be more likely to stop listening;
• Habits are tremendously hard to break, and the habit of advising rather than listening was going to take much practice.

Overall students believed the training was helpful, and that they were going to have an easier time talking with parents, colleagues, and students because of their heightened awareness of the listening process. Some indicated concerns about having a turn to be the one who is heard. I told them that focusing on their own listening behaviors was the primary issue at hand. To reinforce their learning each student wrote a reflective essay on an interaction they had with a parent during the next two weeks of the class during which they tried to listen reflectively.

In addition to their class participation, students wrote about these experiences. They were expected to use their listening skills during parent teacher conferences, difficult interactions with colleagues or administration, students, and any other situations that arose during the two weeks following the training, and reflect on these interactions in their journals. The most involved writings from these students were regarding parent interactions, which had the most
listening stress attached to them.

Their journals and essays showed that they are still struggling with the process. Most of them related stories of angry or distraught parents yelling at them or berating them. Overwhelmingly the students indicated that the degree of calmness they were able to maintain had a direct impact on the outcome of the situation. The two who were not able to do any reflective listening at all ended up with the principal involved. Several others were able to reflect at least part of the parent’s concerns back, thereby creating a bridge with the parent. Three students wrote that they used all of the steps in the process, and that the parent seemed more open to their point of view after feeling heard by the teacher first.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

Clearly reflective or empathetic listening skills are important for teachers to master. Yet it is a difficult set of skills to teach since very few people realize they need such training. Once teachers realize that they need these skills, they are open to learning them. Emergency licensed teachers have a particularly difficult task, in that they are trying to learn everything about teaching while trying to do a job that is exhausting when done correctly. We must develop better support models for these teachers that will allow them to grow in all areas needed for the difficult job of teaching in urban centers. They need mentors and administrators who listen to them, as well as developed listening skills themselves.

Working with small groups has been effective in terms of long-term gains. Having each student work with a partner to model the skills gives them insight into the process, and helps them to practice it in the “real world.” Several students have reported similar situations with parents as they observed during the training dyads. Remembering the techniques and feedback from the group helped them work through the problem with the parent. Fully two-thirds of these students have told me that they have used these techniques in their work, even though when I first started explaining it to them they thought I was crazy.

I would like to look at the research in counseling to discover methods that are used to facilitate greater listening skills. We need more administrative training in this area as well, so that teachers feel that they are being heard. It is clear when people’s own frustration level is lower, they have an easier time listening to others. Training parents and students in these skills would also be helpful, as when everyone is listening to one another, the whole system works better. With my students, some of their most challenging moments in listening have been with parents who were the most disenfranchised from the system. The teachers’ ability to listen without malice, but with respect, fostered ongoing relationships with these parents that would not have been possible in a more hostile or non-empathetic environment.

If we are truly to create partnerships with parents and colleagues, we must understand their point of view. Only through genuine listening can we find the bridges that lead us to proactive relationships, especially among the most at-risk of our families.
References


