

ECHOES FROM THE GAP SERIES

THE VIEW FROM THE LIGHTHOUSE

By Brooke Haycock

“Those who have been tossed on the stormy waters of the ocean on a few frail planks can alone realize the blessings of fair weather.” — Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo*



“You really want to know what makes this school different?” high school Principal John Capozzi leaned in, “Talk to a kid like James.” A “tough kid from the Bronx,” James transferred to Elmont Memorial High School in New York, where he slid silently into seats in the back of his classes and waited for the same bad experience that met him at every school before. But this time, it never came.

“He was in my first period class when I was still teaching,” Capozzi recalled. “And, this one particular day, the kids were really whiney — ‘why all these rules,’ ‘why all this work,’ ‘nya, nya, nya.’ And, as they were complaining about things,

James — who never said anything in class — looks up and says, ‘You guys don’t know *what* you have here. You got teachers who care, who want you to do your work. Y’all wouldn’t last one minute in a bad school.’

“So you want to know what makes this school different?” challenged Capozzi. “Talk to a kid who’s been somewhere else.”

Ten years later and Capozzi’s words remain one of the best pieces of advice I’ve ever received.

In the last few decades, education leaders, researchers, and advocates have amassed rich lessons from adults in high-performing schools: lessons about effective practices, leadership, and what it takes to sustain real change. These contributions, distilled in studies, books, and reports, have provided sharp insight into the workings of successful schools and have shifted

the national conversation from one of *whether* educating all students is even possible to one of *how* best to do it.

But as keen as the observations of these highly skilled educators are, any of them will tell you the same thing Capozzi told me: If you really want to “get it,” you also need to hear from students.

Unburdened by the jargon and acronyms that can dilute adult conversations, student perspectives on what makes high-quality schools can be refreshingly clear, surprisingly nuanced, and remarkably consistent. In particular, students like James, who have experienced the drastic differences that often exist between schools, have much to teach us about what really matters.

Anchoring Relationships in Learning: Growing Through Instruction and Support



You pretty much can't attend any convening of educators without hearing some version of the following: “Kids don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.” I wish I could send that well-intentioned but threadbare platitude back to the mealy mouth it came from. Yes, kids want caring teachers. And for students with few supports outside of school, caring adults are especially critical. But students like Keisha will be the first to set you straight: That's not all they want.

Before Keisha came to Elmont Memorial High School, like many students, the world-wise, feisty teenager hungered for the attention and friendship of her teachers, with less concern for whether they taught her anything. But teachers at Elmont gave Keisha a new perspective on the role of educators in her life and the difference between a teacher caring about a student — even a lot — and caring enough to make sure that student learns.

“The teachers here,” Keisha explained, “they get to know you so they can help you — so they can teach you. They're, like, first your teacher — but your friend too. My other school, it was more like, they're your friends but they kinda missed the teacher part.”

Demitri, a senior at University Park Campus School in Worcester, Mass., expressed a similar experience: “The teachers, they're mad cool. You could go to them and talk to them about anything. The teachers like to play with you — but then they get serious — they get mad serious, but they tell us why: because we're here to learn.”

Soon, students come to appreciate and respond to these dynamic, learning-oriented student-teacher relationships — and question anything else. At Granger High School in rural Yakima Valley, Wash., George, a junior, reflected on his relationship with a math teacher at his old school: “He was really nice but he never made us do anything. And, like, if we were late for another

class, even if it was our fault, we could just go by his classroom and he'd write us a pass. At the time, I liked it. And he was my favorite teacher. But now, I'm kinda mad, because I realize we weren't learning anything. I don't think he meant to do that — I think he was just more worried about us liking him.

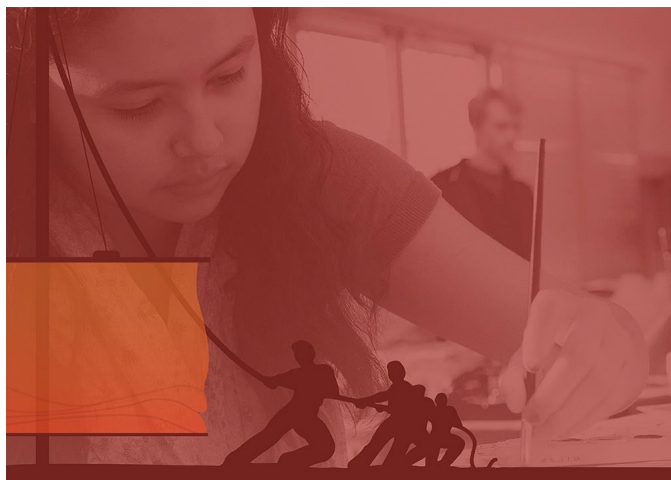
“But,” he adds, “he forgot to teach us.”

When you talk to educators at schools like Keisha's, Demetri's, and George's, they are unequivocal about the importance of relationships. But they are equally unequivocal about the need to anchor and grow those relationships in the context of classroom learning. They know that students need supportive and consistent caring adults in their lives, especially those students navigating challenging circumstances outside of school. But, ultimately, they know that regardless of what's going on in their students' lives *outside of school*, their primary role is to ensure that those students get the skills and knowledge they need *inside of school* to change their circumstances in the long run.

This notion of learning-oriented caring is clear in the sentiments of Alicia Calabrese, Elmont High School's former English chair and now an assistant principal: “The relationship between the faculty and students is a caring, working relationship. It's almost like a puzzle where you can care, but if you don't care enough to be rigorous — I have to question that caring.”

When you listen to students at schools like Elmont, Granger, and University Park, you never hear them question that caring.

Teaching Them the Ropes: Building Knowledge and Agency Through Supports



For students who are academically struggling, even caring relationships anchored in rigorous instruction can unmoor if they aren't simultaneously buoyed with clear guidance and real support.

Consider 15-year-old Paula, a self-described “OK” but disengaged student, who transferred to the high-performing, mostly Latino Imperial High School near the border in southern California. She arrived at Imperial, having wholly internalized the low expectations that had long stunted her in school. “When

I came here,” Paula confessed, “I didn't have the best grades. I didn't really care about my future; I didn't even really think about it.”

But she quickly learned that her “OK” performance didn't even pass for “OK” at her new school. “It was late in the year when I came,” she recalled, “and my algebra I class at my old school, we were barely in chapter four. I came here and they were on chapter 12. I didn't know anything, and I was like the dumbest girl in the class.”

Paula's algebra I teacher, David Arceo, knew exactly how she felt. He'd been in the same

situation himself, graduating from a high school in the same district at the head of his class only to find himself woefully unprepared for the rigors of college. “In high school, I always got A’s in math. But when I went to the university, it was a whole different game. Let’s just say that the first grade I got there was not an A — it was not even a C!” he laughed. “I had to tough it out. That’s what I try to teach these kids: It doesn’t matter where you start — you can be successful.”

And, according to Paula, he did just that. “He actually helped me. I came to tutoring on Saturdays and I passed the class,” she beamed. “That was my reality check.”

With extra time and targeted instruction outside of class and regular assessment, progress monitoring, and instructional adjustments by the teacher inside, not only was Paula beginning to experience real success in the classroom, she was beginning to believe that she could be successful beyond it. “It’s scary ‘cause you’re like, ‘uh-oh, I’ve got to be better,’ but it’s cool ‘cause you start to think, ‘wow, I could, you know, actually do something — be a better student and go to college.’”

Educators tap into students’ growing notions of agency and encourage them further.

“At my old school,” Paula reflected, “they didn’t really push us — they didn’t ever say, ‘hey, you could go to college.’ They didn’t talk about how you can go to college; they just said, ‘pass your class.’ Here, they push you to want to succeed in the long run, to be happy.”

As a first-generation American, this takes on particular significance for Paula: “My parents were immigrants from Mexico so they always wanted better for me — to have an education and do something with my life with more than they had.”

Like other schools serving struggling students, educators at Imperial know that their students will have to persist through significant frustration and real challenge to meet high standards. What makes them different, if you ask students like Paula, is that, in schools like these, students can trust that when they succeed, it wasn’t because educators lowered the bar to meet them. It was because educators taught them how to reach it.

Training Eyes on the Horizon and Charting the Path: Making Rigor Relevant



In too many schools, rigor and academic stretch are considered important for only a select few. For all the rest, educators rattle their brains, searching for alternatives that will be more “practical” or more “interesting” for lower achieving students.

But if I’ve learned anything listening to high school students across the spectrum of achievement over the years, it’s this: When educators can connect rigorous learning to student goals and opportunities beyond school and make students feel worthy and

capable of real rigor, students don’t complain about the work or question its relevance.

Many, however, will tell you that it takes some getting used to. In part, because in many cases, this is the first time they're being asked to do anything that is genuinely hard.

Just ask Miguel. He transferred from a school in Las Vegas to Imperial High with straight F's and little in the way of a belief that anything school had to offer was relevant to his life. In short order, he was failing three of his classes at Imperial. The counselor pulled him into her office.

"She asked me what I was gonna do after high school graduation," he said. He told her he wanted to help run his grandmother's restaurant where he was already working to help support his family.

Counselor Stephanie Castillo, knowing an opportunity when she saw one, said, "Well, do you know how to write an invoice? Do you know how to pay your employees? Do you know how to do payroll? — No.

"I was just making all this stuff up," Castillo remembers. "I say, 'You have a great opportunity. You go work for your grandmother now, start taking those math classes, and then you enroll in college and start taking business courses, and you get your business and administration degree.'"

A year later, Miguel points to that conversation as an awakening: "I realized no one had ever asked me what I wanted to do before. I guess most people think we're not gonna do anything but just work like our parents." The counselor's words that day, in combination with schoolwide efforts to demystify a college- and career-ready curriculum and expose students to the full range of possibilities, switched on that proverbial light in Miguel's head.

Miguel began to appreciate being expected to master a broad and challenging array of work: **"They work you hard — like, not really hard, but kinda hard. But we don't really care 'cause we're getting something good out of it. It's getting us ready."**

According to former Imperial Principal Lisa Tabarez, now the district superintendent, it's about taking students from where they are and helping them make connections to opportunities beyond high school: "How can we help you get to where you wanna be? Let's map it out. Don't think of school as spinning your wheels. It's actually a part of your life that's going to get you where you want to go. Make it happen here."

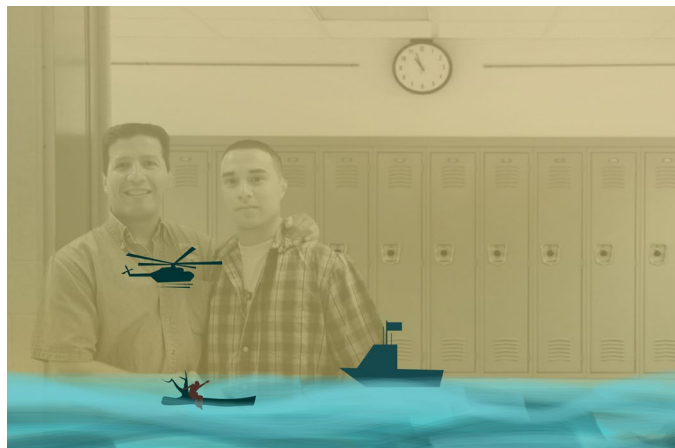
And, while educators like Tabarez and Castillo are clear on the importance of "hooking students" on school through their immediate interests, they are equally clear on their role in broadening those interests.

Like their counterparts in other high-poverty high schools, educators at Imperial know that their students often come to them without the luxury of exposure to the full universe of opportunities available to them beyond high school, a vista too often afforded exclusively to affluent youth. But instead of determining that the interests students enter with are somehow fixed and unchanging, based more on the students themselves than on their experiences, they challenge students to explore a range of subjects and opportunities. According to Miguel, "They get you interested so you want to learn other different things instead of like, just playing sports. Especially, I'm very good at history, yeah. And, like, biology — I like biology. But the math, too much stuff to learn — just kidding."

By using student interests as a starting — not an ending — point and helping students make connections between classroom learning and goals beyond school, schools like Imperial are

ensuring that when Miguel and his peers graduate and chart their path beyond high school, it will be with eyes trained on the horizon, not just the closest buoy.

All First Mates: Making Students Feel Relevant



Transfer students at high-performing schools don't just talk about educators who make *challenging learning* feel relevant — they also talk about educators who make *them* feel relevant.

Taylor transferred to University Park accustomed to feeling invisible in her old school and was shocked by the level of attention students received: "The teachers at my old school, you could leave school and, like, never come back and they wouldn't even notice. Here, you

miss one day of school and they'll be like, 'where is she?' They call your house! They call, like, Search and Rescue!"

"Yeah," added her classmate Jose, a fellow transfer student. "If you skip class they're like, 'Aww, you skipped class!' They want to know why you skipped and you have to do more work!"

"It's horrible," laughed Taylor. "But it keeps you on task, it keeps you here."

But teachers aren't the only ones students have connections with in schools like University Park. Transfer students also talk about administrators who are ever-present and know them by name. "Like, our principal — you don't feel like you're just a number. That's how I felt at my old school. Here, you feel like what you say actually counts," shared Scott, an Imperial High School junior who transferred his sophomore year from another school. "She knows all of us by name. She knows every student's name. And not because we're discipline problems, it's just like, because that's how it is here.

"It's not like you're one of the many, you're part of the whole group. You're not, uh, a single speck, you're not a single grain of sand on the beach, you're a part of the beach."

His classmate Theresa agrees, "Yeah, like the other principals I've had, like, they would just yell at you and they wouldn't even know you. Here, everybody knows you. And they go out of their way to help you. The counselors — they pull us aside like every semester and, say 'OK, how are you doing?' 'Why are you falling behind in this?' But it's not like they're pushing us; it's like, they're encouraging us."

"When students come in, I think they're surprised," said one long-time faculty member at Imperial. "I don't think that they're used to the attention. I don't think that they're used to us knowing everything about them. They see us in class and then you show up at their football game. Building trust. You have to be visible, you have to, you know, prove it to them. We care. We want to know who you are. We want to know what you think."

At schools like these, students are not just seen, they are known, they are heard, and they are valued. And, as Taylor only half-teased, made to feel worth calling Search and Rescue.

The View From the Lighthouse



In over a decade of asking students like James, Demetri, Paula, Miguel and others what makes the real difference in schools, I've heard the kinds of answers that can only come from students who have lived those differences. And who have been forever changed — perhaps even saved — by them.

"They wash up on our shores," said former Granger High School Principal Ricardo Esparza of transfer students, "like academic refugees. So beaten down. We educators don't even realize

the power we have every day, in our every action, in the lives of kids."

Perhaps we need the unique perspectives of transfer students, who wash up on wave-battered shores on weathered driftwood and worn dreams and see the view from the lighthouse for the first time, to remind us of that transformative power.

About This Series

Written by playwright-researcher Brooke Haycock, this Ed Trust series, *Echoes From the Gap*, puts front and center the stories of students. These are the young people behind the numbers we look at in our districts, offices, and states, those whose lives are deeply affected by — even determined by — their educational experiences.

We share their stories with respect for their privacy, by changing names and omitting details of place when appropriate. And, with respect for their words, whenever possible, we let those words speak for themselves. We do, though, attempt to zoom out from individual student experience to students generally, integrating existing national data to draw larger connections to key issues educators and advocates grapple with as they work to improve schools.

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