

Stopping Time to Attend as a Care of the Teaching Self

Cara Furman

University of Maine, Farmington

I invite you into a mundane scene: a class of kindergarten children stand in line in a hallway in school.¹ The rule of this class, as in classes across the United States, is that you stay in line. Also, likely familiar to those who spend time with young children, a child falls and, in doing so, lands out of line. The class, again as classes do, proceeds as if nothing has happened. All except one child, Julian, who steps out of line to assist the fallen child, Reuben. Julian is then disciplined by the teacher for leaving the line. Sheri Leafgren, from whom I've borrowed this anecdote, circles around this vignette throughout her book. Leafgren speculates on why Julian stepped out of line and why his classmates stayed put. She ponders why the teacher disciplined Julian, and why she, Leafgren, as another teacher witnessing the scene, simply watched. Leafgren ultimately concludes that the differences in actions were on account of differences in perception. Specifically, where Leafgren, her colleague, and the students saw the rules about lines and adhered to them, Julian saw the hurt. The result of this difference in perception, Leafgren argues, is that where everyone else simply followed a routine, Julian saw an ethical choice and acted on it.

Like Leafgren, as a former elementary school teacher and now teacher educator, I am troubled and intrigued by this anecdote and have circled back to it on many occasions. Like the teacher in Leafgren's anecdote, in the classroom I too have been fixated on the task at hand and missed the student. Extending this discussion to a child's response to curriculum, teacher-researcher Cynthia Ballenger writes, "I learned from this experience how the context of schooling could cut me off from things I've seen, could cut me off to such an extent that, at least for a while, I couldn't figure out what a child meant."² For me, Ballenger, and Leafgren, the daily work of teaching has at times distracted us from attending to the student.

In her trilogy of essays referred to as "Jarring Perception," educational thinker Patricia Carini pivots between a close study of a toddler in an airport,

the educational context in the early 2000s, and Post World War II Germany. As the title of this collection indicates, the juxtaposition of these themes “jar” with the intention of cultivating attention. Carini insists that in creating this intentional disturbance she is not being overly dramatic or gimmicky. As she says:

A snapshot, a child caught for a moment in action, is unequally matched with the weight of the horrors of postwar Germany what went unattended in response to those horrors. What is one child against the backdrop of 200,000 dead, many burned alive, in Hamburg? Less dramatically, but no less at odds in scale, what is the weight of one two-year old against the backdrop of the tired, moribund habits of mass schooling? What of value can calling attention to one child cross-stepping down a row of chairs accomplish, positioned as it is, in the midst of ravaged cities, in the midst of the betrayal of promises of a worthy education for all children?³

In addressing these questions, Carini insists that the consistent neglect of the individual inures the viewer from attending to other people. Be it for the individual or the society, the consequences of inattention can be dire.

In this article, I take up what it means to be attentive to students. I use the word attention to encapsulate both perception and a responsiveness based on that perception. Building on arguments that variations in perception greatly influence how we act, I argue that a teacher’s perception is molded by his or her daily actions.⁴ To examine this, I turn to the discourse of the care of the self to articulate that daily actions are influenced and are informed by our philosophy. This in turn shapes who we are in the world. From this I infer that our daily teaching actions can cultivate a lack of attention to children. I then turn to a practice developed by a long-term teacher inquiry group of which Ballenger was a member, the Brookline Teacher Research Seminar (BTRS), “Stopping Time.” I argue that engaging regularly in the practice of Stopping Time can better equip the teacher to attend to the child.

CARE OF THE SELF

Aristotle argues that living the good life necessitates practical wisdom: that the individual knows what is right and how to act according to these principles.⁵ Contemporary scholars have explored what it means to achieve the good life through one's professional life.⁶ I join others in arguing that our daily work as teachers can be a means of realizing the good life and can also thwart this realization.⁷ As Doris Santoro powerfully argues, grim requirements can lead even the most committed teacher to experience "demoralization," an estrangement from one's values and sense of purpose as a teacher.⁸

As seen in Julian's story, teaching demands that the teacher make ethically challenging decisions throughout the day.⁹ To act with practical wisdom as a teacher requires teachers have clarity about their values and ways to enact them.¹⁰ To this end, teacher education ought to simultaneously help teachers work through and name their values while determining the appropriately corresponding methods.¹¹ Darryl De Marzio uses the care of the self to illuminate the ways in which quotidian teacher practices can lead to the teacher's ethical cultivation.¹² To build on his connection, I first highlight some of the features of the care of the self that relate to an educational context and then apply this philosophy to teaching.

The care of the self is rooted in the writings of the Ancient Greek Stoics. Scholars such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot have applied it to contemporary contexts.¹³ A central feature of this literature is that daily actions form us into the particular ethical subject we each are.¹⁴ Self-formation through our actions is inevitable regardless of intentionality. Further, we are only engaged in caring for the self if this self-formation supports our quest to live the good life. Without careful attention to daily actions, the individual might not live well. Therefore, to develop in accordance with one's values, one should be intentional about rituals. Specifically, by engaging in what Foucault refers to as technologies of the self, "a whole domain of complex and regulated activities," one will be able to cultivate a particular ethos.¹⁵

The notion of exercise speaks to another key component: that these

actions are meant to be practiced in preparation for daily challenges. The idea is that daily life puts forth situations that require swift responses. To respond well demands clarity about both our philosophy and the appropriate attending actions. An added challenge is that our instinctive response may be out of sync with our philosophy. Paraphrasing the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, Foucault “insists that one must be in an attitude of constant supervision over the representations that may enter the mind.” Highlighting the threat of such “representations,” Epictetus uses the metaphor of the “night watchman who does not let just anyone come into the town or house.”¹⁶ We must stand sentinel, guarding ourselves from our baser perceptions and, by association, responses. This guard must be both constant and perpetual.

Regular engagement in exercises provides a preparation for these daily ethical demands. Specifically, in practicing a set of activities, one reinforces a philosophy and internalizes a few essential motions so that, faced with a challenge, one draws upon the rehearsed movements. As Foucault writes, just as a wrestler repeatedly “practices the few moves that he needs to triumph over his opponents,” one must practice exercises that “will enable us to bear up against events that occur.”¹⁷

CARE OF THE SELF AND THE EXERCISES OF THE TEACHER

In a rejoinder to concerns raised about the demoralizing effects of teaching conditions, De Marzio argues that the daily sacrifices a teacher endures offer a way in which teaching becomes a care of the self.¹⁸ The good life is thus achieved through self-denial. This read of the care of the self is in keeping with a turn towards asceticism when the Stoic discourse was picked up by the early Christians.¹⁹

I find De Marzio’s claim that our daily teaching acts serve as a means of ethical development compelling.²⁰ Yet, I part ways with De Marzio’s push for asceticism. Though I appreciate the optimism of writings that seek to attribute positive ethical developments to demoralizing teacher conditions, generally the positives are in spite of not on account of the negative conditions.²¹ Instead,

a variety of adverse conditions more often make the daily life of the teacher a means of ethical degradation.²²

To address this, I respond to just one problematic “exercise” that is endemic to teaching, engaging in a rushed day. Children are rushed through the hallways, from activity to activity, through curriculum, and even particular assignments. I first maintain that this rushed daily schedule is an exercise that can and often does occlude the learner from the teacher. When rushing students and rushing past them has negative consequences for the student and their learning, I focus on the ways in which rushing past students can diminish the teacher as well.²³

Speeding Through the School Day

A teaching memory: It is a minute before school. I am sitting at one of the child sized tables in the elementary school classroom where I teach. I am breathing deeply with eyes closed collecting my thoughts. I can hear the children’s eager voices outside my door. I rise with excitement and trepidation. I know that when I open the door, the children will burst through, and that I will not have a moment to breathe deeply or consider my thoughts until eight hours from now when the last child has left the room. I open the door. With a rush, the children flow through the door. The teaching day begins.

A wise colleague and long-term teacher, Shonelle Cooper-Caplan once commented that children spend much of their day receiving the divided attention of a distracted adult. Most recently, my work with in-service graduate students in early childhood education drives home this statement. In methods courses, I ask students to give an account of their daily schedule. Reading these accounts is dizzying. The majority depict jam-packed days. Typically, major shifts in activity occur at least every thirty minutes. Even within a period, much is happening. For example, in many classrooms children move rapidly from one center to another. Teachers also report trying to meet with as many as five different small groups of children during a period.

In his longitudinal study of time in schools, administrator and pro-

fessional developer, Chip Wood also finds that both this busyness and the accompanying neglect of children's needs is the norm in American Schools.²⁴ Wood employs the powerful metaphor of the traffic signs near schools, "Slow Children Crossing," to highlight the harm that can be done to children when we speed through their worlds.²⁵ He argues that we must heed these signs not only in the car but in the classrooms as well. Following the lives of two sample children, Wood showcases the neglect of learning and emotional needs experienced as children and their teachers are rushed through the day.

Drawing on years of study of children and teachers in schools, Wood and Carini come to the same conclusions as the philosophers writing about the care of the self: our daily exercises influence who we become.²⁶ Responding to the abundance of diagnoses of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, Wood argues "while we constantly complain about not having enough time, we are actually always looking for ways to do things faster and cannot easily tolerate slowing down."²⁷ We begin to crave busyness when we are constantly shifting activities.²⁸ Carini is even more damning in her critique. She argues that in packing the teacher's days, teachers are engaging in exercises that cultivate an ethos neglectful of the individual student.²⁹

Slowing Down

Just as speeding through life makes us crave speed, Carini argues that conversely by slowing down, we can learn to attend.³⁰ In his practical and thoughtful book, Wood suggests alternative schedules for elementary and middle school that more closely follow natural human rhythms. Julianne P. Wurm has similar instructions for the preschool setting.³¹ Inspired by the work in Reggio Emilia, Wurm tells teachers to organize their days around the most basic needs, narrowing her "musts" to only four items: group discussions, project work, food, and rest.³² Both Wood and Wurm provide sage advice worth drawing on.

That said, even with thoughtful reorganization the teacher will continue to find his or her attention drawn away from individual children. I speak from experience. As a teacher of children and then young adults, I have worked to

slow down the pace of my classroom and focus on going more deeply with less. Yet, even with the moderated pace teaching continues to be a distracting endeavor that requires me to organize many moving parts at a relatively fast pace. There is a speed and shuffle inherent to the practice of teaching small children in large numbers. In fact, being responsive to any person in real time requires a certain degree of speed.

The teacher must therefore be able to both stop and attend to the individual while also moving through the busy day. To illustrate, I offer another anecdote. In a famous experiment, cognitive psychologist, Daniel Simons showed a video of people playing basketball and asked viewers to count how many times the ball moves from one hand to another. After showing the video, Simons asked whether the observer noticed “anything strange.” Most people said no. Then watching the video again without the instruction to count, viewers noticed that something strange did indeed emerge: a person in a gorilla suit.³³ Psychologists tend to use this video to illustrate how focusing on one thing prevents us from seeing another. Despite the typical response to this study, I suspect that some teachers see the gorilla from the get-go. I, in fact, did. This is because ideally teachers see both the game and the gorilla: the task in front of them (like walking children down the hall or teaching a math concept), as well as the individual child. The challenge of teaching is that there will inevitably be other things to focus on and yet we must still watch for the individual child. Therefore, to be responsive to the individual student, the teacher must have a means of carefully attending to the student amidst the whirlwind of the school day.³⁴

Looking at the Child

What allowed me to see the gorilla where others only saw the passes? As noted, an essential component of the care of the self is exercises: pre-determined and ritualistic actions that we practice apart from daily living to prepare us to attend in accordance with our philosophy. The remainder of this paper will focus on one exercise, Stopping Time.

Grappling with the un-relenting speed of school time and the many

distractions, the BTRS created the series of related exercises outside of the school day that they referred to as Stopping Time. Fitting Foucault's definition of a technology of the self, Stopping Time is a pre-determined and carefully worked out series of activities that support a particular ethos. As with the care of the self, the BTRS's work was guided by philosophy: in their case a firm commitment to honoring each person's individual way of making sense of the world.³⁵

With these guiding values, Stopping Time was developed to attend to the individual child with an eye towards understanding how the child makes sense.³⁶ The exercise consists of three distinct steps: taping, listening, and then discussing. First, the teachers audiotaped large segments of classroom talk. In choosing what to tape, the teachers sought out moments when children's individual voices were heard. They taped conversations that they found confusing.³⁷ After taping, the teachers listened to the tapes and often transcribed sections.

The teachers then engaged in discussion about the tapes. Not only did replaying the tapes change the speed of classroom time but so did this mode of discourse. As BTRS participants, Ann Phillips and Karen Gallas explain:

Exploratory talk is thinking out-loud, so to speak, and the pace of exploratory talk is unusually slow because the speaker is exploring ideas. Thus, exploratory talk both requires silence and creates it. If the observer is not used to such talk or does not understand its purposes, he or she may believe that the speaker is unsure of him-or-herself. Exploratory talk requires the courage to accept and display the limitations of one's knowledge. It creates not only an opportunity to "stop time" temporarily, but also an opportunity to "stop time" mentally, so that new ways of thinking, unencumbered by ideology or previous assumptions, can develop.³⁸

To be exploratory, the teachers kept the talk moving through a range of avenues instead of seeking and settling on solutions. As with other technologies of the self that both develop and reinforce a way of thinking, exploratory talk "both

requires silence and creates it.”

Engaging in Stopping Time, Phillips and Gallas found: “We were able to snatch further moments from the rapid progression of events in the classroom when we discovered that the taping itself, and then the collaborative and respectful consideration of the transcript with colleagues, ‘froze the action’.”³⁹ The tapes allowed the teachers to take a moment and go back to it again at leisure. Stopping words gave the impression of stopping time.

Taping, reflecting, and discussing classroom events is not particularly unusual. Teachers often tape student interactions to evaluate skills or document for the sake of backing up an evaluation. What is more original is the ways in which the BTRS ritualized and regularized taping. Further unusual is the exploratory stance. The teachers documented moments of confusion. Seeking new ground, the teachers studied those moments together for the purpose of casting off assumptions.

Engaging in this form of self-care led to significant changes. By their own estimation, through Stopping Time, the BTRS teachers began to attend to the individuals more closely.⁴⁰ Cognitive psychologists have found that our attention is seized when we are exposed to something unusual or unexpected.⁴¹ Likewise, in looking for the new in the expected, we are more likely to attend closely to the people, events, and ideas that come into our line of vision. Creating a habit of finding the new trains our minds to lookout for newness. We are more likely to see the gorilla if we expect that something surprising might occur amidst an ordinary game of basketball.⁴² In focusing on the novel, the BTRS came to trust that each child’s unique view of the world would emerge. Finding new and exhilarating directions in what was simply confusing, the teachers looked for newness even in what seemed ordinary and predictable.

Stopping Time allowed the BTRS teachers a different relationship to classroom time and their students. Although the day still moved rapidly, they could now trust that they would have time to slow down and attend to the words of students later. Ballenger depicts a feedback loop. The more she “stopped time” to listen to children, the more she saw that they made sense.

By Stopping Time frequently, the teachers brought this practice in attending back to the classroom. They found they listened better and noticed more even during the busy school day.

Through Stopping Time, the BTRS teachers were able to bring their teaching actions more in alignment with their values. Working towards their values, attending to their students, and being more successful at bringing their values in sync with their actions, all helped these teachers live well. Striking in their accounts is the level of energy, engagement, and even joy that comes forth as they puzzle through classroom situations together. As just one example, Ballenger's colleagues twice use the word "delight" to capture her approach to studying children and classroom life.⁴³ In Stopping Time, these teachers were caring for themselves.

IMPLICATIONS

Leafgren depicts a school scene that is both unpleasant and quite familiar. A rushed day can easily cultivate a teacher self, focused not on attending to individual students but on moving the children rapidly through the day. In contrast, the classroom moments that the BTRS teachers report on are also ordinary, and yet, they describe situations in a way that makes the children seem wonderful and extraordinary. Over the years, I have eagerly digested many BTRS teacher publications.⁴⁴ They read like adventures with the children jumping off the page in their originality. In other words, through Stopping Time, the BTRS teachers were able to attend to the individuals in their classrooms to such a degree that that their writing draws in outsiders as well. I have finished each of their books with a renewed commitment to attending to the individual child and newfound understandings about how we determine the sense that a child makes.

When I learned about Stopping Time, I immediately brought the exercises into my methods courses and, in doing so, made attending to the individual more central. To do so, I had to remove some more traditional delivery methods. I say this to emphasize that Stopping Time is not about adding in new exercises but using time with teachers differently. Opportunities for Stopping Time must

be built into teachers work lives.⁴⁵

Much is at stake and much can be gained. Watching the teacher discipline Julian for helping Reuben, I was upset. I was troubled both by the scene and also my awareness that in similar situations I, like Leafgren, have watched silently. As a fellow teacher and colleague, Leafgren was disturbed both by what happened and her inability to act. Though we never hear her perspective, having spent years as a teacher and with teachers, I suspect the moment did not sit well with Julian's teacher either. Within her busy day, this discomfort might have simply registered as a vague and untraced feeling. It might have also been noted and justified with comments like, "well Julian needs to learn the rules." But if this teacher is like other teachers I know, treating a child as such would have been hurtful for her. In finding exercises like Stopping Time to attend to the teacher self, everyone is better cared for.

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- 14 De Marzio, "Teaching as Asceticism," 349.
- 15 Foucault, Rabinow, & Faubion, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault*.
- 16 Ibid., 103.
- 17 Ibid., 99.
- 18 De Marzio, "Teaching as Asceticism."
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