Cultivating Attention to Deepen Teacher Relationships with Immigrant Students

David R. M. Saavedra
University of Virginia

While movement across borders is an essential part of the immigration process, there is no essential "immigrant experience." Each individual lives her own personal immigration story. It can be a relatively smooth transition, but it can also be intensely traumatic. It can involve separation from loved ones, reunification, or both. It can be well planned, frenzied, dangerous, or even a complete surprise. There is a vast range of possible experiences. In this article, I offer a philosophy for the education of immigrant students that builds upon Simone Weil's conception of attention. I argue that teachers of immigrant students must cultivate attention in themselves and direct it towards students in quotidian relations and interactions.

When a teacher finds immigrant students on her roster or is interrupted in the middle of a lesson and presented with a new student from another country, there is nearly always a large interpersonal and cultural divide to cross. Relation of a different quality is called for. Immigrant students have left behind the culture of their birth and entered a new cultural space, which they must learn and to which they must adapt. The familiar is left behind, and the new must be deciphered. Even an immigration experience that seems unremarkable can be traumatic in that one's natural way of being is perceived by others as strange or wrong. The term "culture shock"[1] invokes trauma for a reason.

The number of immigrants in the United States has been steadily rising over the past several decades, and schools have seen a parallel shift in student demographics. In 1970, immigrants accounted for 4.7 percent of the US population. By 2016 that number was 13.5 percent.[2] The percentage of 15-year-old students in the United States with an "immigrant background" increased from 14 percent to 19 percent from 2000 to 2009.[3] Yet only approximately 8 percent of United States teachers in 2015 were born abroad,[4] a far smaller percentage

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than in the population as a whole. It appears that many immigrant students are unlikely to have a teacher who can naturally empathize through personal experience with the challenges of cultural adjustment. This situation, coupled with the extensive diversity of immigrant experiences, creates a dilemma for the United States teaching force.

When the experiences of immigrant students are so disparate from those of the other students in the room and from the teacher herself, how should these students be supported? Assuming that teachers generally want the best for their students, what responsibilities do they hold for students who happen to be immigrants? Simone Weil's explication of attention offers a potential answer, which I explore using excerpts from three personal essays written by immigrant high school students.

ORIGINS

In the fall of 2015, I was a teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL) at a diverse, urban, public high school in New England. That year I taught an advanced ESL course, which was composed of eighteen students who were quite literally from all over the world: Bangladesh, China, Dominican Republic, Eritrea, Ethiopia, France, Haiti, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania, and Togo. During the latter half of the first semester, students crafted personal essays. Most chose to write about an experience related to their immigration journey. I saved the essays of students who granted me permission to do so.

This assignment enriched and deepened the insight I was gaining into each student's background over the course of our teacher-student relationship. During my teaching career I held an intuitive belief that teachers ought to listen for what students need and who they are, provide space and opportunities for students to explore important personal experiences, and be open to receiving communications about these issues if students choose to reveal them. Much of my practice as an educator sprang from this ethos. In this article, I attempt to pull out the threads and underlying assumptions of this educational ethos and re-form them into a grounded philosophical stance capable of informing

the work of other practitioners in the field, particularly those who work with immigrant students.

The three essays presented here offer a taste of the range of immigrant student stories. Mariam[5] from Eritrea highlights the complexities of reunion. Yonas from Ethiopia underscores the challenges of a changed role within the family. Fabienne from Haiti illuminates intense trauma. While the fact that this was a graded assignment may have tempted students to embellish or fabricate these stories, I choose to treat them as accurate representations of the students' experiences from their own perspectives. I do so for two reasons. First, there is wide diversity of experience that immigrant students bring with them into a United States classroom. The experiences presented in these essays are well within the bounds of what may be considered plausible. Indeed, in my nine years of teaching immigrant students in the United States, the themes of reunification, separation, changed roles, and trauma recurred frequently. Second, my role as these students' teacher, sometimes for the second or even third time, afforded me many opportunities to "triangulate" the information presented in these essays, to use a social science term. Conversations with students, conversations with their parents, conversations with their other teachers, classroom discussions, and other writing produced by these students give me a high level of confidence that their representations are accurate.

SIMONE WEIL'S CONSTRUCTION OF ATTENTION

Before engaging deeply with these specific cases, we must first understand Simone Weil's conception of attention as it relates to education. In her evocative essay, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,"[6] Weil argues for the cultivation of attention as the central purpose of education. She argues that students should use their studies to develop the capacity for attention and that teachers should make the development of this capacity in students an explicit aim of the classroom.[7] For Weil, the school curriculum is merely the means through which attention is cultivated.

Weil's characterization of attention is that of openness to insight, cou-

pled with patience and pure intent. A person readies one's mind for attention by drawing into the background the relevant knowledge already possessed, making it accessible yet not the focal point of thought. The mind itself must have no focus. It is "detached, empty, and ready" to receive truth from the world.[8] The attender requires patience. "There is a special way of waiting upon truth, setting our hearts upon it," Weil states, "yet not allowing ourselves to go out in search of it."[9] The attender must wait for truth to make itself known. And for truth to reveal itself, a pure intent is necessary. Weil defines this intent as "the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth."[10] Instrumental aims will not lead to true attention. For Weil, the insight that results from attention cannot be expected to appear quickly, and it will only emerge from a motivation for truth.

Undergirding Weil's argument is a deep religious current, which announces itself in the second half of the essay's title: "with a View to the Love of God." Weil explicitly ties attention to Christianity throughout, describing attention as the essence of prayer and as stemming from a desire for connection with God. She names faith as a necessary condition of attention, as well.[11] Connections between religious ideals and attention appear on every page. For Weil the concept of attention is deeply tied to religious convictions.

There is much to appreciate in Weil's explication of attention and much that can inform educators of immigrant students in the United States. Her ideas cannot be transplanted wholesale into this context, however. They must be adapted and repurposed.

IN A NEW CONTEXT: RECONSTRUCTING ATTENTION AS RELATIONAL

In my estimation, bringing Weil's notion of attention to the context of a contemporary classroom serving immigrant students requires that it be refashioned in two major ways. The first is in regard to who must attend and to what. Weil argues for the development of attention in students via the everyday curriculum. While I can think of no reason that students should be denied such an education, I argue that *teachers* must cultivate attention as a guiding principle

in their teaching practice. Immigrant students come to the classroom with an unimaginably wide array of experience that is not patterned or easily categorized. Even if experiences seem similar on the surface, different students will understand and make meaning of them differently. There is not a pedagogical technique or a set of "teaching moves" that teachers can employ to effectively support all students. What teachers *can* do is attend to students with curiosity towards understanding their lived experience. Directing attention towards students allows teachers to see them as whole human beings and understand the unseen barriers that individually impact them. Attending is an acknowledgement of each student's humanity and the uniqueness of each student's experience.

The second change I make to Weil's conception of attention relates to the religious nature of her argument, which is quite obviously problematic in a secular, public school context. To cultivate attention, a "love of God" is not a necessary condition. Weil briefly acknowledges this perspective herself. While explaining that the development of attention is achieved through its very practice, she states: "*[q]uite apart from explicit religious belief*, every time that a human being succeeds in making an effort of attention with the sole idea of increasing his grasp of truth, he acquires a greater aptitude for grasping it … "[12] (my emphasis). This is Weil's only direct statement that a Christian faith is not required to cultivate attention. She thus momentarily acknowledges the possibility that attention need not be underpinned by religious belief. A secular version becomes possible. Yet if attention exists not "with a view to the love of God," then with a view to what?

Weil gives us the answer herself. Once cultivated, she urges that attention be turned to others. Attending to another, Weil argues, requires one to let go of preconceptions and see the other as she is. If the other suffers, the attender is able to understand that suffering and to help in the way that is needed. Weil distills this use of attention into a single question: "What are you going through?"[13] In turning attention towards others it becomes a conduit for compassion and empathy. Via attention we recognize another individual's complete humanity. For Weil, this turning of attention towards others is still religiously motivated. She equates "the love of God" with "the love of our

neighbor."[14] Yet compassion and empathy do not require a religious motivation. Human connection is a positive and strong motivational force that can exist outside the religious realm. In a secular space, then, attention can exist with a view to the love of humanity.

Just as in Weil's original conception of attention, a humanity-driven, teacher-practiced version still requires openness to insight, patience, and purity of intent. In attending to others rather than curricular content, however, the conception of attention becomes relational, with compassion and empathy as core drivers. Attention is turned towards others—the students—and these others will influence just how, when, and even if, the attention of the teacher will bear fruit. This layer of human connection makes the three core aspects of attention all the more important. Teachers remain open to receiving the truths of their students, even if the relationship is strained. They remain patient in waiting for truth, recognizing that it is the prerogative of the students to reveal it when ready. They maintain a noble purpose in attending to their students, one that is in some way directed towards support. Attention in this arena does not have a distant goal of spiritual connection; it has instead the potential to impact the lives of students with whom the teacher interacts on a daily basis.

Some might bristle that attending to students seems invasive, that the teacher is somehow overstepping the bounds of the teacher-student relationship. Yet we must remember that there are two sides to the relation, and both must be willing participants. The attentive teacher moves through the day open to receiving what students are willing to disclose. There is no prying. There is no coercion. Students maintain agency in the relationship, sharing what they want when they are ready. Any outward behaviors they display in the classroom are in the public sphere and available for the teacher to receive and interpret. As the student must be a willing participant in the relation, the teacher will not connect with every student on the same level. A disposition of attention leaves an opening for every student to engage with the teacher on a deeper level if they choose. The teacher opens the door. The student must choose to walk through. A student may communicate her experience and its impact openly, as in the essays below. Behaviors and emotions might index a student's larger

experience as well. An attentive teacher takes in all such signs with curiosity in order to better understand the human being with whom she is in relation.

The stories of Mariam, Yonas, and Fabienne can be instructive here.[15] These examples are not meant to imply that personal stories and behaviors correlate or that one can predict the other. Students with similar behaviors might have vastly different experiences and vice versa. Rather, attention over time allows the teacher to see numerous truths—behaviors, emotions, stories—that, when taken together, lead to a deeper understanding of what is impacting a particular student's development and learning.

Mariam, a student from Eritrea, writes of reunification with her parents:

> *When I was about 2 years old my dad died. … When I was around 4 or 5 years old my mom got married, and she moved to America with my step dad. So, I did not remember her or my step dad that much. I only knew them by picture, and they used to talk to me through the phone. … I never knew what it was like to have parents with me. All of them left me and my little brother when we were very young … When I got to America … I was so exciting to know what it is like to have a mom and dad beside me. But when I met them I didn't know what to say … I didn't know them … I could not even make eye contact with them … I was very disappointed about this situation because I didn't thought it will be like this. … It is a terrible feeling when you aren't feeling uncomfortable with your parents. So, I did everything I could to talk to them to be open with them. I even tried to pretend that I grew up with them … This transition wasn't easy at all, but it helped me see my parent from different perspective. It helped me see what kind of people my parents are and what kind of person I am.*

When reunited with her parents in the United States, Mariam discovered that the parental connection she longed for was not automatic. She didn't know her parents, and they didn't know her. In her early days in my classroom, I remember Mariam as quiet yet eager to please. She was very concerned with getting things

"right," both academically and in her comportment. She sat up straight, always raised her hand, and asked permission even to sharpen her pencil. She managed herself carefully. As time went on, she began to come out of her shell, and the friends she made were very important to her. She was driven to succeed and do well in school and spoke about wanting to go to college years before she would even apply. As we came to know each other, I could see a connection between her developing relationship with her parents and her behavior in school. Building comfort in one arena paralleled comfort in the other.

Yonas writes of separation from family, friends, and native culture and of being forced to adopt a new role in his transition from Ethiopia to the United States:

> *We were fortunate enough to get sponsors from the United States but … [o]ur sponsors could only afford to bring my mom and three children. This meant my mother had to make the terrible decision of bringing three children while leaving three back home to fend for themselves. … Being separated from my siblings, my country and all my friends is the hardest thing I ever had to do. … I was 16 years old when I first arrived in America but I was no longer the baby of the family, I quickly had to transition to the man of the house. … I landed a job at a convenience store. This was a huge transition for me because as the youngest child, I never had to do any work even in the household. But with the rent and bills due, I knew I had to work to help my mother and my sisters make ends meet. On top of paying bills, I also had to take my mother frequently to the hospital for treatment. She didn't know any English and … I was the only choice available. … These challenges have helped me grow faster than I wanted to or was ready for ... but I did it and it lets me know I can overcome obstacles and succeed in life.*

Yonas sees the responsibility that has been thrust upon him as an abrupt end to his childhood. In school, he was sometimes overly tired and lacked concentration and focus. He often was unable to complete homework assignments. He only put effort into assignments for which he saw a useful purpose. (This piece, for example, became his college application essay.) Absences from school or class

were frequent. Understanding Yonas's responsibilities and obligations to his family outside of school were essential to understanding his performance in and attitude towards school. Paying rent trumps doing homework.

Fabienne describes the 2010 Haitian earthquake in chilling detail. She writes of collapsed houses, the injured, and sleeping outside among corpses:

> *As a child, my life was focused on school and hanging out with my friends. However, on January 12, 2010, it all changed when a 7.0 magnitude earthquake devastated Haiti. … I was at my house with my family when the ground began to shake. Thirty seconds later, the earth stopped shaking; the country was blurry. Everywhere, I saw collapsed houses and injured people. So many houses were destroyed with people trapped inside and many bodies were scattered on the streets. With no emergency services, corpses were just left there. I had to sleep among them as we could not trust the integrity of our house. I had never thought about death, but for the first day of my life, I faced it. I had to live with the fear of dying for several days in the street. My hands and body continuously shaking. I was freezing. I felt vulnerable … Due to the earthquake, my father decided to bring my siblings and I to the United States … January 2010 was a decisive month of my life. It was terrifying … I know how it feels to have nothing.*

The earthquake was a traumatic, formative experience that Fabienne will never forget. She first arrived in my classroom after approximately one year of living in the United States. She tried very hard and was very eager to do well. She became frustrated when she couldn't communicate as she wanted. She would also become frustrated with other students if she saw their behavior as disruptive. I interpreted Fabienne's behavior as a need for control. Having experienced such unexpected devastation followed by a cultural and personal uprooting, she channeled her energies into controlling herself and as much of her environment as possible. Over much time her frustration waned and her trauma became distant enough for her to write honestly about her experience.

In attending to students, the teacher begins to see them not as mere

learners, but as human beings with concerns that extend beyond the school walls. Attention to students' whole lives, including past experience, opens opportunities for engagement and support. The essays of Mariam, Yonas, and Fabienne illustrate the incredibly different experiences students bring with them to the classroom. In attending to each individual, the teacher notices behaviors and attitudes that may signal trauma and emotional hardship. This informs the relationships as it develops. With each new bit of truth revealed by the student, the teacher recalibrates in an attempt to provide the support that the student needs to thrive.

THE GOOD OF A RELATIONAL ATTENTION

Why should attention be a teacher's responsibility? There are those who would argue that the teacher's job is simply to impart knowledge and develop skills. Attending to the whole student pushes beyond the job description and into the realm of the unnecessary. Leave individuals to sort out their own lives, they might say. I assert that a teacher's attention can lead to improved learning outcomes for students. While instrumental purposes, according to Weil, undermine the attainment of attention, true attention can still further instrumental aims. When we are overtired, it is difficult to learn. The body demands sleep, and we spend our time fighting sleep rather than learning. This is a simple biological example of how our personal context affects learning. The same is true of the emotional realm. Trauma, stress, and anxiety negatively impact learning. Negative emotions can block our ability to understand new information and integrate it into knowledge networks. If the development of knowledge and skills is the desired outcome of schooling, attention can help teachers reach that goal more effectively by illuminating unseen emotional barriers tied to students' difficult experiences. Once illuminated, the teacher can better help students overcome these barriers and reduce their impact on future learning. If we want students to learn math, English, history, and science, attention helps teachers accomplish those goals more effectively.

Yet there is something more fundamental that obligates teachers to

attend: the view to the love of humanity. Teaching is relational at its core, and relationships need to be nurtured. Students enter the door of the classroom as whole people who want to be cared for, listened to, and understood. They bring with them their joys, triumphs, pain, struggles, and trauma. Attention acknowledges students as human beings and refuses to reduce them simply to the role of learner. It establishes a relationship built on compassion and empathy that can help begin the process of making peace with difficult past experiences and integrating them into one's identity. Attention leads teachers to provide students with what they need in order to learn and to move forward in life.

Attention is not without its challenges, but it need not be burdensome for teachers. The cultivation of attention is a disposition or a mindset, which frames the rest of the work of teaching. It is not an extra duty, tacked on to an overstuffed list of responsibilities. Attention helps the teacher set priorities, plan effectively, and differentiate instruction for students based on a deeper understanding of their needs and struggles. It deepens the sense of purpose a teacher feels and provides rich emotional rewards through the relationships developed with students. In cultivating relational attention, teachers improve their craft through compassion and understanding.

CONCLUSION

Content. Skills. Curriculum. Rubrics. Technology integration. Standards. Learning objectives. Assessments. Best practices. These terms dominate modern educational discourse, but they are only half of the story, maybe less. Teaching is a relational endeavor. As such the relationships between teachers and students should be central in any discussion of education. This is especially true for immigrant students. Unfortunately this concept is too often absent from today's educational discourse. My career as an ESL teacher put me in relation with students from all over the world with vastly differing immigration stories, and my relation to each student was unique. The concept of relational attention developed in this article was not something I could articulate at the time, but I felt the need for it. My relation with students told me that it was necessary.[16]

Students are more than learners; they are whole human beings. Teachers, as human beings in relation with other human beings, have a responsibility to turn their attention towards their students and, with the noble intentions of caring and supporting, wait patiently for students to reveal insights into who they are and what they have been through. The cultivation of an attentive disposition on the part of the teacher benefits students through the recognition of their human potential and an enhanced understanding of their needs and struggles. It benefits the teacher through the development of rich relationships with students that lead to a deep sense of accomplishment in their work. While it is not always easy to sustain a disposition of relational attention in the busy, hectic atmosphere of the school day, one can always take a moment, step back from the pace and pressure, and reset. It requires five simple words from Simone Weil: "What are you going through?"

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1 For the origins of the term "culture shock," see Edward Dutton, "The Significance of British Columbia to the Origins of the Concept of 'Culture Shock,'" *BC Studies* 171 (2011): 111–129.
2 Jie Zong, Jeanne Batalova, and Jeffrey Hallock, "Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, last modified February 8, 2018. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states.
3 "Figure 10-1. Percentage of 15-year-old Students with Immigrant Background, by Country: 2000 and 2009," National Center for Education Statistics, accessed April 28, 2018. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012007/figures/figure_10-1.asp.
4 Dick Startz, "Immigrant Teachers Play a Critical Role in American Schools," *Brown Center Chalkboard* (blog), last modified March 16, 2017. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/03/16/immigrant-teachers-play-a-critical-role-in-american-schools/.
5 The names of students have been changed to maintain anonymity.
6 Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," in *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay Company, 1977), 44–52. Reprinted from Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), 105-116.
7 Ibid., 46, 50.
8 Ibid., 49.
9 Ibid., 50.
10 Ibid., 46.
11 Ibid., 44, 46, 48.

12 Ibid., 46.
13 Ibid., 51. Nel Noddings cites Weil's question in linking attention to care. She sees this question as reflective of the core disposition of one caring. See Nel Noddings, "The Language of Care Ethics," *Knowledge Quest* 40, no. 4 (2012): 52–56, and Nel Noddings, "The Caring Relation in Teaching," *Oxford Review of Education* 38, no. 6 (2012): 771–781.
14 Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies," 51.
15 In these essay excerpts students were expressing themselves in a language they were still very much in the process of learning. To honor their authentic voices no edits to language have been made. The excerpts have been edited for space and to remove the name of the school that students attended in order to maintain anonymity. I acknowledge that in choosing what to delete, I have shaped these essays to highlight themes mentioned in this article. These themes were strongly present in the students' writing prior to editing.
16 For a powerful perspective on the needs of immigrant students in their relationships with teachers, see Cristina Igoa, *The Inner World of the Immigrant Child* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), 99–104.