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# Counting the Minutes: Drawing Inspiration from Deficit

by Christian Palomba

The clock in my room does not work. None of the clocks in any of the rooms work. I have been here for three months, and have yet to meet anyone who can remember a time when any of the clocks worked. In the teachers' lounge, people who have been doing this for most of my lifetime sit and ponder aloud how many minutes they have until retirement. In the classroom, we never know what time it is because the clocks do not work.

Before I began my time as a student teacher in a high needs school district, my friends in the profession told me, "You can't let the kids focus on what they don't have." The kids know when they do not have a warm bed or a hot meal waiting for them at home. They know if their neighborhood is plagued by violence and drugs and they have nowhere safe to go. Most imminently, they know that the quality of their education may be far less than that of students in a neighboring community. They know if all these things are true, so we need to try to redirect their focus from what they don't have to what they do have. They have an opportunity. It was good advice. But, no one told me how difficult it would be to shift my own focus from what I did not have to what I did.

From my first day in the building (and more days after that than I care to admit), I find myself flustered by how many of the seniors in my English IV classes cannot construct a sentence, or read more than a page or two at a time. I recognize how out of my depth I am. The teachers in my school are a genuinely fantastic group of people, but the things I repeatedly hear from them are not positive reinforcements of our ability to make a difference.

*They should have learned these things already.*

*It's just a bad bunch this year.*

*These computers are too old.*

*We don't have any books.*

These are some of the comments I hear almost every day. If I allow this way of thinking to imbue me, it will pervade every aspect of my working life.

As I complete my student teaching residency, I find myself appreciative of the fact that I am afforded a unique opportunity to refresh the inspiration that gets worn away from me. There are no scientific formulas or mathematical equations that will provide you with the opportunity to connect with your students in the same way as simply saying, "Write a paragraph about your day." Without saying a word, a 16-year-old girl tells me about the baby I didn't know she had, and another tells me how scared she is of losing even one of the two jobs she works. The quiet girl, who never talks in class, shows me how nervous she is about having to return to her native country. One student, who constantly impresses me, lays out his vision for how a school day should go. They have so many ideas, emotions, and issues that they are hesitant to talk about. I get to hear them all without making them speak a word, and that inspires me. I know that, even when I am struggling to connect to my students, a simple assignment can open the lines of communication.

There are days where I feel like I am failing. No matter how much time I have spent with my students, I have not taught them all I wanted to. No matter how much time I have left, it will not be enough to teach them all I need to. The clock stands still while I count the minutes I have left to make some sort of difference. I know that when I am done with this placement, I will just be

beginning my career. When I see teachers who have been doing this so well for so long and students who have overcome so much, I am eager to get started.

I know there will still be days when I struggle to find inspiration, when I may hear echoes of these words: *They should have learned this already, so I cannot teach. We do not have any books, so I cannot teach. The clocks do not work, so I cannot teach.* However, I will also recall a group of kids who have shared their stories with me, who knew exactly how little they have, and who showed up every day anyway. So, I will teach.

**Christian Palomba** is a graduate of Rutgers University and a graduate student at William Paterson University, New Jersey. He hopes to find a full-time position teaching high school English in the fall.



Photo by Juliet Slattery