"More Than a Teacher": Experiencing Obligation in an American Title 1 Elementary School

By Elinor Layne

Introducing a Central Texas Title 1 School

The first time I visited Southview Elementary School over two years ago, I was a senior in high school. At the time, skipping class to do just about anything was a good use of time, but this particular trip to see my friend, Jane and her second-graders had me more excited than usual. Nothing about my visit to a class full of seven and eight-year-olds struck me as out of the ordinary. I helped them rehearse for their upcoming performance of "The Three Little Javelinas," a popular southwestern interpretation of the classic "Three Little Pigs," and the children were so excited to show off their well-rehearsed lines and handmade costumes. They all clamoured to get my attention as I walked between groups, providing assistance and feedback. Jane observed from the back of the classroom, ready to jump to my aid if I needed it, but she also looking a bit relieved to be "off-duty" for a time. I remember feeling flattered due to the excitement that my presence was causing among her students.

One petite little girl, wearing a bright pink t-shirt, handed me a note before I left the classroom: *Ms. Elinor you have boutaful glassis and you have on my favrit coler on your shirt!* I have kept this note with me for the last two years, nestled in a packing envelope among the other notes and drawings I received from the children I've nannied over the years. During this first visit to Southview, I could not have truly understood the pressure that Jane and her colleagues were under or the struggles that her students faced on a daily basis. In fact, I don't think I had any appreciation for the strain experienced by Southview students and teachers until I spoke to them at length for this project. Southview is a "Title 1" school, meaning that its students experience one of the highest concentrations of poverty in central Texas (US Legal 2006). This status provides some extra funding for the school, including free and reduced-price meals for students. Many children arrive at Southview with underdeveloped reading and writing skills, behavioural issues or serious trauma from incidents at home. They are dropped off at school each morning by people who count on the teachers of Southview Elementary to fix their children's problems. These expectations are only compounded by those of the district and of school administration, which demand that students meet highly specific learning standards within a school year. This forms a network of expectation, which in turn translates into a network of obligation. It is this network of obligation that informs and shapes the way in which Southview teachers are able to do their jobs.

In his 1971 investigation of "slum school failure" in Harlem, Gerry Rosenfeld asserted that the "cultural divide" that existed between Harlem School students and their (typically) white teachers from affluent backgrounds led to an inefficiency of teaching (Rosenfeld 1971: 109; Schultz and Jewett 2011: 425). However, the teachers of Southview seem to demonstrate the opposite principle. While a cultural divide between teachers and students may exist at Southview, the network of obligations experienced by teachers actually contributes to creating a

sense of commitment between the teachers and their students. This commitment, in turn, begins to blur the boundary of what one might consider a typical "professional" relationship between teacher and student or teacher and parent. The following discussion will aim to deconstruct this network of obligations and analyse the ways in which it blurs traditional personal vs. professional boundaries, causing teachers to take on the role of an "activist professional," or someone who becomes involved in both the personal and school lives of their students (Day 2010: 7; Sachs 2003).

A Parent/Teacher Problem?

It could easily be assumed that the majority of expectations being placed on teachers come from parents. I will admit that I approached this project with that assumption in mind. Initially, I set out to focus solely on the role of obligation in parent-teacher relationships. But Southview teachers did not seem to find that parents were their main source of stress. While some felt that parents did create a lot of anxiety and added expectations to their job performances, others felt that the comments they received from parents were merely "lip service" unlikely to affect the reality of their teaching. The topic of communication with parents, however, seemed to strike a chord with most teachers. Jenny had an especially meaningful take:

"So I think I'm the only teacher at Southview who really does this," she began, chuckling, and then paused, *"but I actually give parents my cell phone number."*

From the way she revealed this information, one might have thought she was recounting an embarrassing story. To Jenny, as well as to many of the other teachers at Southview, her view of appropriate parent-teacher relationships was shaped by long-standing tradition. To give out her cell phone number, thereby breaching the line of professionalism historically drawn by official school emails and forms and phone lines, Jenny was constructing a very different kind of relationship with her students' parents: a personal one centred around ease, rather than formality, of communication. Other teachers like Kat used online platforms that allowed her to award "points" to her students for good behaviour while also sending regular behaviour and progress updates to parents.

But was Jenny compelled to hand out her personal phone number purely out of convenience? After all, she had given me, a nearly complete stranger, her cell phone number without a second thought, ostensibly in order to make herself more reachable out of work hours. But as she elaborated upon this choice, it became clear to me that Jenny's decision to distribute her cell phone number to parents came from a heightened sense of obligation, one that stemmed from her knowledge of the difficulties her students and their parents faced at home. She explained to me that many of her students' parents worked long or odd hours and weren't always available to come in for conferences or to set up phone calls. And although these long hours often kept parents from consistently communicating with her, Jenny believed that this came from a lack of time, not a lack of care for their children or respect for their teachers.

"[The issue] is not at all that they don't want to help. So many of my kids' parents do everything they can, even if it's not a lot," she explained, "so I want to do everything that I can for them on my side."

Similar to Marcel Mauss' theory of reciprocity and obligation in gift giving

practises, it appeared that in this case, the "gift" of the student's wellbeing was imbued with more value when a parent contributed as much of an effort as they could to help out (Mauss 1925). In Jenny's view, the work that her kids' parents do for their children (and by extension, for her) should be reciprocated through a commitment to easy and frequent communication.

However, this is not to say that Jenny and her co-workers felt a reduced sense of obligation toward those parents who were less able to help teachers. Rather, what appears to happen is a shift in where that obligation was placed. Though every teacher I interviewed said that they felt their primary responsibility was to the students and their wellbeing, the topic of communication with parents raised another issue: to what extent did that responsibility also apply to parents? In cases where parents were minimally involved in their child's education or welfare, many teachers felt compelled to "step up to the plate," and fill in some of the parental duties that children were missing at home.

More than one teacher I spoke to told me that they purchased healthy snacks with their own funds so that every child in their class would have enough to eat. Others supported their students simply by providing a safe place to talk about the issues going on at home. One teacher, Taylor, even described showing one of her students how to tie his shoes when he was seven years old, because no one had taught him at home. As she put it:

"Some of these kids come to school and need me to be their mommy. Why would I not be that, if it's what they need?"

Through conversations with teachers about the role of communication in their jobs, it became clear that there often exists a strong sense of obligation toward parents in addition to the primary obligation between teacher and student: the obligation that teachers experience toward parents is heightened when a parent is more able to be involved. These obligations, which translate into non-traditional modes of communication for teachers and parents, then begin to restructure the expected boundary between types of teacher interactions with students. Teachers suddenly become responsible not only for the wellbeing of their students within the classroom but also their wellbeing outside of it.

Administration and the District: Pressure From Above

The relationship teachers had with Southview's administration and CISD , their Central Texas school district, also appeared to be big sources of stress. Nearly every teacher I spoke with had a lot to say on the issue; some, when asked about the pressure placed on them by the district, laughed out loud. It was readily apparent that this relationship, in the form of standardised testing expectations, had weighed heavily on the minds of these teachers. Elementary school teachers in Texas are required to teach a certain set of "Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills" (TEKS), which are evaluated by standardised tests in Science, Math, Reading, and Writing throughout a child's elementary school career (Texas Education Agency). If a child fails to meet the standards put forth by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), they may be placed into an intensive study programme or be forced to repeat a grade level.

The punitive nature of these tests, in the view of Southview teachers (as well as many other groups of parents and teachers throughout the state), sets students up for failure. Arguably, the state would do

better to use standardised tests simply as a benchmark for learning (Save Texas Schools 2013).

Through the interviews, it became evident that a large part of the teachers' frustrations with the district (and in turn with their school's administration for the enforcement of district policies) was what the teachers perceived to be a fundamental lack of understanding of the needs of their students. For a school like Southview, the variation in skill level when a child enters school makes TEKS very difficult to teach and standardised tests very difficult to pass for some students (Smith 2014). Additionally, schools situated in low-income neighbourhoods often have accelerated rates of administration and staff turnover creating "a state of flux exacerbated by the state's current policy of further destabilizing campuses with low standardized test scores" (Save Texas Schools 2013).

The pressure of TEKS and standardised testing expectations not only lead to a great deal of difficulty for Southview teachers, but it creates two types of obligation. First, teachers feel obligated to teach to the district standards as part of their jobs. Additionally, there is an added obligation to students to make sure that they are learning what they need to in spite of these standards. In the case of the former, many teachers described feelings of expectation from school administration. Pre-K Teacher Alyssa felt that, although her students were still too young to take standardised tests, there was definitely a school-wide feeling of stress during testing season.

"It's like we're all under a microscope," she told me, *"there is definitely a lot of pressure to succeed, not only for the sake of your kids moving up, but for the sake of the school."*

Though it is unclear the extent to which individual teachers can reasonably be held responsible for the poor performance of struggling students (as opposed to the district, parents, or outside factors in general), CISD's approach to TEKS and standardised testing continues to put pressure on teachers to ensure the success of each of their individual students and the school as a whole (Berliner 2009: 21). This pressure undeniably creates a sense of obligation amongst Southview teachers, because they feel that it is a core part of their jobs to ensure that CISD and state standards are being met.

But the effect of these state-imposed standards appears to set into motion a homogenising process by which social hierarchies are reproduced from within elementary schools (Blasco and Vargas 2011: 369). Thus, the second type of obligation experienced by the teachers comes into being, wherein teachers feel a responsibility to defend not only the responsibilty to defend not only the intellectual integrity of what they teach, but also the equity of opportunity for all students. Taylor told me that she always tries to keep these questions in mind when she teaches:

"What am I doing, and how does it benefit my students?"

This is a question that comes up frequently for Taylor when she considered how to teach TEKS to her students. These two types of obligation – meeting standards as well as commitment to student learning – begin to mould teachers into an unprecedented role: one that is neither fully professional nor fully personal and demands a lot from many facets of their lives.

Experiencing Obligation

The "moral obligation" aspect in this case cannot be ignored, as the socioeconomic status of students at Southview is a key part of teacher/student and teacher/parent relationships. Part of recent efforts toward the promotion of human welfare depends upon the "moral imperative to assist the structurally dispossessed and functionally abused" (Van Arsdale and Nockerts 2008). For Southview teachers, this moral imperative plays a significant role in their relationships to their students. We can begin to understand the character of Southview teachers' relationships with their students through this lens: obligations, which come from many different sources, begin to blur the line of what a "professional" teacher/student or teacher/parent relationship must be.

The burden sharing experienced by Southview teachers can be seen as a product of this type of moral obligation, but their network of obligations doesn't necessarily arise strictly from a place of moral responsibility. Certainly, teachers are expected to look after students' needs during the day, and many perceive this role as one that expands based on the struggles of a particular student. But there is also a very basic form of obligation at play between teacher and student, one which is typical of all personal relationships. Even friendship involves (and to some extent requires) a sense of obligation, which can also be accompanied by feelings of gratitude (Epstein 2006: 69). What is important to understand about both the moral and emotional aspects of obligation here is that the conditions from which they arise (namely the difficult home lives and low socioeconomic statuses of Southview students) create an opportunity for the crossing of personal/professional boundaries. Because teachers know that their kids are struggling at home, both emotional and moral responsibility drive them to accommodate all their students.

By dissecting the parts of the network of obligations, we can begin to understand what life looks like for Southview Elementary School teachers when they walk into the classroom. Many teachers spoke of the way in which their students' struggles became a matter of personal significance to them. Over half of the women I spoke to, at some point or other, described their students as "my babies"; it was clear from the very start that they all felt a strong personal bond with the children they taught, and a strong sense of commitment to ensuring that the needs are all students are being met.The network of obligations faced by Southview teachers creates for them an entirely new role, one that is neither informed fully by a professional commitment to the Texas education system nor by a personal commitment to students and their families. I argue that these teachers best fit what Judyth Sachs describes as the "activist professional" (Day 2010: 7; Sachs 2003). The "personal and professional selves" of teachers, as we traditionally understand them, contribute to both "stable and unstable" identities, and these identities are rolled into one to create the multifaceted role of an "activist professional" (Day, Kington, Stobart, and Sammons 2006: 601). Southview teachers in particular are made to fit the role of the activist professional through the unique network of personal and professional obligations that characterise their particular jobs.

One of the common themes among the teachers I spoke to was that their ultimate job as teachers was to "help create productive citizens." This ultimate goal, however important, can often be overshadowed by the other obligations felt by teachers, particularly the needs of parents and the district in which they work. As a

result, the "stable identity" of the teacher as a professional and by extension a representative of their school, district or state, becomes confused (Day and Kington 2006). Southview teachers are made "activist professionals" by the elevated level of understanding and care they provide to their students, both because of and in spite of the obligations placed on them in their jobs.

Southview's teachers work under the influence and expectations of many different groups, leaving them to take on a "multifaceted role" (Rosenfeld 1971: 100). Though strong cases were made by the teachers I interviewed for the extent to which parents and the school district elicit a sense of obligation, it is clear that teachers feel a primary obligation to their students' wellbeing and learning. However, because teachers are not always able to attend solely to the needs of their students as other obligations pull at their attention, a mixed identity that constitutes both a personal and professional relationship to their students is formed.

There have been many calls amongst anthropologists in the last fifty years to attend more closely to ethnographies of the classroom. These ethnographies can provide us with a more profound understanding of the earliest stages of social reproduction and the teaching of culture. By understanding the realities of educational policy from an anthropological perspective, we gain invaluable insights into how culture operates at even the most basic levels (Schultz and Jewett 2011: 438). The teachers of Southview Elementary School, these activist professionals, are a miniscule sample of the hardworking and dedicated teachers of the United States. Their commitment to their jobs and their students, if more fully explored at a state or national level, could lead educational policy to better reflect the social and educational needs of America's underprivileged youth.

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