

## Five Reasons We Will Always Be Educators

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**By Erin Jacobson and Marijke Leibel**

We have all heard the alarming statistics about the number of educators who are thinking of leaving the profession. As coordinators of the North Dakota Teacher Support System, which supports and retains beginning teachers through mentoring and coaching, we wondered what we could do to encourage teachers to think about staying for the long term.

As we engaged in professional learning with mentors, beginning teachers, and instructional coaches, we heard many stories, listened to challenges, and spent countless hours thinking about how we can best support and retain effective teachers in our state. From their experiences and ours, we have created this list of five things that give us joy and are the reasons we will always be educators.

### **MARIJKE LEIBEL: WE HAVE A LOT OF FRIENDS.**

Relationships help us to live a longer, happier life.

A typical teacher averaging 30 students in a classroom each year has the opportunity to develop a relationship with 750 students and their families over a 25-year career. We know our relationships are not exclusive to our class or school rosters and span throughout the building, into the community, across cultures, touch others with diverse experiences, and venture far beyond our imagination. In actuality, the number of relationships created within a teaching career is much likelier to be in the thousands. These relationships create the mosaic of our character and our very person. With each unique connection, our lives are enriched by listening and relating to others (Learning Forward, 2022). It is in these moments that we have the ability to embrace and elevate the beauty of our differences. What other profession gives that many opportunities to make a difference in the lives of others?

### **Relationships promote learning**

The Equity Practices standard of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning states: "Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators understand their students' historical, cultural, and societal contexts, embrace student assets through instruction, and foster relationships with students, families,

and communities.”

Zaraska contends in her book, *Growing Young*, that having robust social relationships can reduce early death by up to 45% (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic showed us the need for social relationships and being close to one another. As educators and parents of young children, Erin and I found that the inability to seek social fulfillment outside our homes was unnerving and distressing on our emotional wellness. The pandemic illuminated the innate desire to interact, engage, or simply be next to other humans. The limiting of personal contact pushed our thinking to a new level, necessitating a global response to connect with others through alternative pathways.

As we emerge from the pandemic, we must recognize the importance and appreciate the panacea effects of human connection so we don't fall back to the old status quo.

Luckily for educators, the number of relationships is sizable and symbiotic. In her popular education blog, *Cult of Pedagogy*, Jennifer Gonzalez says that surrounding yourself with people who encourage, empower, and express optimism will help you become a better version of yourself (Gonzalez, 2013). She likens this concept to the gardening technique using marigolds as protectors and companion plants. When planted next to vegetation and flowers, marigolds safeguard neighboring plants, allowing them to grow and be fruitful.

The concept of finding your marigolds holds particular importance for educational leaders. When hiring, forming grade-level pods, determining professional learning communities, and building school teams, identifying complementary personalities is a crucial skill. Marigold educators strategically dispersed throughout a school can be contagious and result in more effective practices. Marigold educators are those who uplift others, radiate joy, see the positive in situations, find opportunities in challenges, and make you walk away feeling better than you did when you met them (Gonzalez, 2013).

#### **MARIJKE LEIBEL: WE ARE LIFELONG LEARNERS.**

Educators are not only the conduit to learning, but continuous seekers of knowledge themselves.

After a disastrous lesson during my student teaching experience, I asked my mentor teacher, “When did you feel like you had finally mastered the art of teaching?” The lesson had left the students with puzzled looks, and a couple of them wailing that they would never pass 2nd grade. My mentor teacher replied, “You don't.” I was surprised; I was hoping to hear reassurance that teaching would soon feel more natural and I would get better. I needed to know that my toolbox would grow so that I felt more equipped for the moment-by-moment challenges faced during the normal school day.

Fast-forward to now, and I understand what she meant, because I see that my teaching toolbox is never complete – it continues to grow. That doesn't mean I had no tools in my early years of teaching, but I have more now, and more sophisticated ones for tackling more complex projects.

We don't build our toolboxes alone. Teachers collectively contribute to and elevate one another's toolboxes. When you realize this, you recognize the importance of collaboration in professional growth. Jennifer Abrams (2021) uses the phrase "engaging in reciprocity" to describe the concept that working cooperatively with others is more effective than working alone. In essence, we are smarter when we work together.

Being a teacher means being a lifelong learner. It is our responsibility to seek new learning opportunities to keep up with our peers, colleagues, families, community, and, of course, our students. The wonderment, curiosity, and energy that accompany being a teacher are rarely replicated in other careers. Our learning community keeps pushing us further and deeper in our critical thinking and professional relevancy. This instrumental discontent serves as a motivation, as our students inspire us to find innovative ways to constantly rev up our teacher game.

#### **ERIN JACOBSON: OUR WORK HAS PURPOSE AND MEANING.**

As teachers, we may not always feel happy. There are days when we need to step away to re-evaluate. But even on the tough days, we can find meaning. Researchers say that a happy life and meaningful life are often intertwined, but not always (Denworth, 2019; Smith, 2017; Suttie, 2017). Having purpose can also bring stress and challenges, resulting in higher meaningfulness but lower happiness.

Most teachers aim to live a purposeful life filled with both meaning and happiness – and we often find both, though not always at the same time. Most teachers enter the profession because it aligns with our values and passions. With every teacher group I have visited, I am struck by the depth and breadth of their interests. Some teachers are interested in the complexity of teaching a child to read, other teachers get fired up about how using a Socratic seminar helps promote equity of voice, and yet others can talk for hours about coding and experiments they have taught. Whatever their passion is, teachers are passionate. And for teachers who haven't found it yet, their passion is out there, because the field of education provides an abundance of avenues to find your niche.

#### **MARIJKE LEIBEL: WE HAVE FUN.**

Each day in the classroom brings unique situations leading to meaningful experiences. No two days are ever the same, and that makes teaching fun.

A few years ago, I taught what I thought was the perfect lesson. My students and I were absorbed in a science-language arts-math-social studies teaching moment about the how and why of making butter. The lesson connected many standards and content areas while triggering lots of laughter, noise, and a big mess. This lesson affirmed my belief that learning should be

intentionally and purposefully fun. (My administrator, who had been walking by the classroom, hadn't seen it that way at the moment. I had to explain to her why we were making such a noisy mess!)

We can and should have fun while teaching and learning. Just like young learners, most adults crave novel experiences, have a heightened sense of engagement when doing something for the first time, and are better at applying knowledge when they make strong connections to the content. When I speak with my former students, they always remember the lessons that involved making messes, being loud, and usually loads of laughter. I think most teachers would say the same about their own most memorable learning experiences.

Teachers have the ability to practice amplifying their own engagement as they plan the engagement of their students. To successfully transfer this into the instructional classroom, teachers must tap into their creativity to find novel ways to teach lessons so students of variable experiences and skill levels will understand and be able to apply new knowledge. Students are astute in detecting authenticity, and they respond accordingly. Finding your joy in teaching directly influences your students' engagement and buy-in to the learning community.

Teaching requires us to use our creative brain to demonstrate meaningful pathways connecting content with novelty, prior experience, curiosity, and relevance. One of those strategies is laughter. Laughing increases your blood oxygen level, relaxes muscles, triggers the release of endorphins (the hormone that can act as your body's natural painkiller), boosts circulation, builds connections with others, and reduces stress (Tate, 2022). On the other hand, feeling threatened or perceived danger causes the body to move toward the fight, flight, or freeze response (Sousa, 2010; Whitman & Kelleher, 2016; Zaraska, 2020). Because the body is preparing for danger, survival is prioritized. Learning cannot occur when survival is priority. Nurturing the classroom climate to be conducive to laughter and emotional safety benefits the health of both students and teachers.

Lessons like butter-making offer unique experiences for students and teachers to lose track of time and be completely absorbed in the process of learning. Sousa (2010) defines flow as the ability to lose oneself in a task so deeply that time passes with complete absorption and concentration on the task. People experience flow when they are so intrigued and interested in what they are doing that they ignore all other environmental and internal stimuli. You may not notice when you are hungry, should be sleeping, or need to take a restroom break. Finding the flow in the classroom is powerful. The flow reveals our passion, and that can connect us to joy and learning.

#### **ERIN JACOBSON: IT'S WHO WE ARE.**

My husband and I are both elementary teachers. Although our roles in education have changed, our elementary school teacher traits continue to show up. We were drawn to this profession because it leverages our skills and provides a platform for us to do the things we love.

For my husband and I, that includes projects and planning. For the past three years, our daughter has asked us to host a Halloween party. We go all out. We research games, snacks, prizes, music, themes, and decorations. Our party becomes a full-blown project-based learning event. Other parents have thanked us but also wondered why we would want to go overboard like we do. Our reply is: We are teachers. It's who we are. We love to see the joy in children's eyes when a well-planned activity actually goes as planned. It's special and energizing in a way that other teachers fully understand.

Of course, not every teacher loves to throw parties. We all have unique skills and strengths that we bring to the classroom, and teaching provides a home for them. In turn, being teachers nurtures those skills and we can then apply them to our personal lives. I know teachers who are their families' vacation planners because they know how to lead a successful field trip, and others who are asked to run for office because they know how to lead, collaborate, and advocate for groups and issues. Many are trusted friends who get called in the middle of the night because they know how to be good listeners. They're teachers; it's who they are.

## **CONCLUSION**

We can all agree that teaching is hard. Limited time, resources, and public support are just a few of the factors that need to be addressed. It is important to shine a bright light onto the challenges, but it is also equally important to shine a bright light onto the many joys — the fun part of being a teacher. The hard mixed with the fun makes a beautiful combination that keeps us thinking about the student, the lesson, the strategy, the grouping, and all the limitless ways to teach.

Let's continue to rethink how we can improve education for ourselves, those who will teach in the future, and our students. Our relationships, learning, purpose, joy, and personalities have all brought us to this profession. When we focus our thoughts on the joys, we can find the solutions.

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**Erin Jacobson (ecjacobson@nd.gov) is coordinator and Marijke Leibel (mleibel@nd.gov) is assistant coordinator of the North Dakota Teacher Support System.**