

An Interview With R. Vijayagopal of Teach For America

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Introduction

I met Ramya Vijayagopal for the first time in the summer of 2016, where we were coworkers in Residential Life at Ithaca College in Ithaca, New York. Vijayagopal would be entering her senior year at Ithaca College in the upcoming fall and was starting to think about life after graduation. I listened to her bounce her multitudes of options around that summer, and was thrilled for her when she was accepted into Teach For America in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she would be serving as a middle school science teacher for the School District of Philadelphia. Vijayagopal began her service in 2017, after her graduation from Ithaca College with a Bachelors of Arts in Journalism. While serving her two years with Teach For America in Philadelphia, Vijayagopal is pursuing a Masters in Urban Education from the University of Pennsylvania. Teach For America is a diverse network of leaders working to confront educational inequity, with the vision that one day all children in the United States will have the opportunity to receive excellent education (Teach For America, 2018). There are currently 53,000 alumni and 6,700+ Corps members across the United States. As Vijayagopal words it, “TFA is...good for people who want to work with youth and fight for education” (personal communication, June 2, 2018).

On October 25, 2018, I met with Vijayagopal online for a digital interview regarding this assignment for my TEL111 course at Arizona State University. We discussed her role as a Corps member and how she is fitting into it as her second year of service begins, as well as what a typical day in her classroom looks like. Vijayagopal offered insight into what serving in an inner city school is like, and how she curates a positive learning environment while individualizing the

education of her students. After our digital interview, I felt more confident in my desire to pursue education and serve my communities of both San Antonio, Texas and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

A Typical Day in the Classroom

Vijayagopal starts by explaining what a typical day in her classroom looks like. She says that each day is unique because she does not know what to expect -one day her class may be exhausted, the next, energetic. She explains that her school district has recently incorporated a guided release model, meaning she starts her class with a warm up, does her lesson, lets the students do a guided practice, and then independent practice (interview, October 25, 2018). This model is similar to the model that the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) follows in their schools, where they follow an “I do, we do, you do,” guided learning progressions. These progressions seem to be helpful to students, especially those who are struggling with the material, such as students in remedial courses.

Vijayagopal explains that her favorite memory of working with her students through the guided release model has been the “aha” moment when a topic clicks because it is satisfying to watch the frustration transform into understanding once the topic is explained in a new way (interview, October 25, 2018). Through the use of the Internet videos and articles and in class presentations, students are better able to process Vijayagopal’s lessons and achieve that “aha” moment they desire.

Drawing from my own experiences serving in a San Antonio inner city high school, I have witnessed teachers utilizing this model, and it is generally most successful in their college preparatory or advanced placement courses. When it comes to remedial courses, students who

are engaged in their own development succeed with this model. Those who have been in the class multiple times or simply do not care to learn the material often do not succeed through the use of this model, which is designed to reinforce teaching and learning as the teacher goes through their lesson plans.

On Serving in an Inner City School

As previously mentioned, Vijayagopal serves in a school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She works closely with parents when necessary, but overall, since she works with middle schoolers that are more self-sufficient, it is not always necessary to contact parents. She says that when she does contact any parents, the School District of Philadelphia has an online system to log that interaction. Relying mostly on conferences with parents has proven most helpful because the parent will then understand the big picture in regards to time spent with students and grades the student is achieving in her course (interview, October 25, 2018). This also allows parents to fully comprehend the expectations of the teacher and how their students are or are not meeting them.

Vijayagopal explains that the textbooks provided by the school are “easily a decade old,” or even nonexistent: “...last year we didn’t have any science textbooks.” In order to combat the limited materials provided to her by the school district, Vijayagopal strives to incorporate outside resources, such as recent videos and articles to show that scientists are still making discoveries daily and that science is an ongoing and changing field (interview, October 25, 2018). This is an excellent way to combat the lack of up-to-date materials provided by the schools when funding is lacking in specific departments.

In SAISD, many materials are outdated, especially in science and history courses. Teachers instead turn to the use of technology in their classrooms by using platforms such as Google Classroom and Khan Academy to house assignments and up to date information for students to access. Some students in the district enjoy this type of learning- but others find it to be inaccessible. Many students in SAISD do not have access to a computer or Internet outside of the school walls, so teachers asking them to do a group project on Google Classroom easily turns into an awkward scenario for many. In other situations, students who are failing most of their courses are sent to a different building entirely for the entirety of the school day, where they complete their courses online, without teacher instruction. They are sent to this computer lab in place of attending remedial courses because they have failed out of them. This use of technology replaces the role of a teacher, and often leaves the students feeling isolated and frustrated by the end of the day.

On the Learning Environment

Vijayagopal often finds that she must be explicit in her classroom expectations, to the point that it feels redundant- she combats students trying to fight the system and outsmart her, so she has anchor charts up in her room with expectations and a ladder of consequences (interview, October 25, 2018). She emphasises “there can be no classroom management without the setting of clear expectations,” (interview, October 25, 2018) and that even with the expectations set, she still faces struggles daily. When it comes to managing her classroom learning environment, Vijayagopal tries to fill in any free time with extra work and activities to practice what the students have learned in order to reduce any opportunity for behavioral issues.

From my time in SAISD, I have found that students often have few expectations as far as classwork to finish in a time period. As a result of having only one or two assignments to complete in a course, the students often feel it is not important work, so they will either not do it at all, or complete it quickly. Then, they are left with over an hour left of the class to sit and do nothing. Many students in the course I tutored were in a remedial math class, and found the work to be boring and irrelevant to them. Therefore, it was a constant struggle to work with these students and manage how they approach schoolwork. They would battle you about the significance of the work, always testing you and pushing you to see if you would let them get away without doing the work. This work is frustrating at times, but seeing a student who normally does not do their assignment complete it without your asking is a wonderfully satisfying feeling. It is essential to build a rapport with the student in order to have them listen and respect you.

Similarly, Vijaygopal finds that building a positive learning environment is essential to gaining a student's trust and effort:

...I think students do best if they feel like they have some stake in the classroom and outcome and feel responsible for it. If they are invested they will care more and work harder. I try to engage my students and build a sense of community (interview, October 25, 2018).

The lacking of a sense of community or the absence of a sense that someone cares about them is cited most often in a private study completed by SAISD when studying students who dropped out of school in their district. Relationships help students feel like an adult in their lives cares about them and wants them to succeed. Having adults check in on students regularly and who notice when things seem off is a significant element to keeping students on track and in school on the path to graduation.

On Individualizing Education

When it comes to ensuring each student's needs are being met on an individualized basis, Vijayagopal finds it difficult to manage when students are struggling with too many options to choose from (interview, October 25, 2018). She mentions that students who do have Individual Education Plans are given specific worksheets or packets to assist them, or they will be able to work in groups instead of working alone on a project or assignment (interview, October 25, 2018). It can be difficult to meet the needs of all students when you have twenty or more students in a classroom, so I am not surprised that it is such a hot topic in education at the moment. Individualizing education is the ideal, but when it is actually brought into fruition, it will only be fruitful in small class sizes, where all students are contributing to a positive learning environment.

Relating this to my experiences in SAISD, the students who have Individualized Education Plans are often partnered with an extra adult in the classroom space, or given assigned seating near to the teacher so they can keep an eye on the students as they work on their assignments. These students are often given adjusted assignments or extra directions in order to meet their educational needs. With the extra support from the teacher or partner adult, this is successful in allowing these students to learn. In SAISD, there are an abundance of students with Individualized Education Plans, and it can be difficult for the teachers to manage all of them at once. In the remedial courses I assisted with, 50% or more of the students had these learning plans, and there was only three adults in the room including myself to assist them. This made it extremely challenging to bounce between the students while also reaching the students without Individualized Education Plans.

I found that before this interview, I leaned towards individualizing education. In fact, I still do lean towards it, however, there needs to be changes made to the classroom environments to allow for these students to be supported, in addition to their classmates without the Individualized Education Plans. Changes could include more teachers to teach the same subject which would result in smaller class sizes, more adults in the room to support these students, a cap on how many students with an Individualized Education Plan are in a section of the class to ensure that all student needs are being met, or even a section of the class specifically dedicated to students with Individualized Education Plans.

Conclusion

After my interview with Vijayagopal, I have altered my views on several topics, and have had my eyes opened in many others. For example, before the interview, I imagined that reaching individual students in the classroom would not be too difficult of a feat. However, after our interview, I found that in actuality it is going to be a challenge to ensure relationships are built with each student. On top of that, finding out their learning style will also be a challenge, as students may not know their own learning style or there may be such a variety in the room that it becomes overwhelming to meet each need of every student. Some things however, did not change after our interview. I still desire to teach in an inner city school, especially after my experience tutoring and mentoring in SAISD, which allowed me to realize my passion for education.

Vijayagopal influenced me in a few ways- mostly with wonderful ideas to bring to my own classroom someday. I am eager to bring the idea of integrating current articles and videos

from multiple sources into my own lessons, as well as finding new ways to supplement outdated materials. I plan to create a set of expectations for my classroom as well, so that students can help to create what is expected of them on the first day of school and beyond. Lastly, I intend to hold parent-teacher conferences, especially with students who have disabilities or are English Language Learners, as that is what my area of focus will be when I become an educator.

Special Thanks

I would like to extend a special thank you to Ramya Vijayagopal for allowing me to pick her brain for the purpose of this assignment. I learned a lot from you, Ramya, and I appreciate your go-getter attitude and your friendship. I hope to continue to learn from educators like you as I grow in the field. Thank you!

References

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