

Alice Nelson

Haitian Multi-Service Center, Dorchester, MA

Alice Nelson, a teacher at the Haitian Multi-Service Center in Dorchester, MA, wanted to recognize that her Haitian students might be having a difficult time emotionally as the one-year anniversary of the 2010 devastating earthquake in Haiti approached. She reflected on this experience below, recognizing—and respecting—that the students had their own way of handling their emotions around this event and other difficult events that were happening in Haiti as well. As a teacher, she realized she could support her students' resiliency-building efforts by following their leads about what they needed most.



This month has been full of ups and downs for us and our students. We approached the one-year anniversary of the earthquake in Haiti on January 12th. Students expressed mixed feelings about acknowledging that day. An overwhelming majority of students and the student council did not want to have any recognition of the day at school. This surprised me in some ways, however as I worked with the students in the days before the anniversary it was apparent that the pain was very deep and personal. They did not want to dig up those feelings. They expressed comments like:

- Talk about it for what?
- Why?
- We move on, keep going.
- I remember in myself.

Instead of discussing the event, we decided to have a short three to five minute time of silence in each class. We let the students know about this ahead of time and suggested if they had a poem or song or words to share they could come with that. Many students said they were going to church to pray on that day. As it turns out it was a snow day, and school was cancelled. In a way it seems to me this was a good thing; they had time with their families at home and in church. When they returned the next day, they did not want to talk about what they did, and we spent a lot of time talking about the snow, developing vocabulary about navigating in the snow, snow accidents, shoveling, and sled riding. We wrote a class story about the snow and managing in the snow. They were very positive about this practical activity.

In addition to the anniversary of the earthquake, political situations in Haiti continued to be very fluid this month, and students would come to class talking about the changing events they

were hearing about at home. The biggest news was Jean Claude Duvalier – ‘Baby Doc’ - returning to Haiti when rumors were flying about Aristide returning also. This brought a real buzz to the classroom every morning. I found that there was so much talk in class about what people had heard that we really could not get started with the prepared English lesson.

Every morning we would spend fifteen to thirty minutes updating the situation in Haiti. These classroom discussions included sharing information they had heard, getting news updates on the Internet and reading them together, talking about Haitian history, sharing students’ personal experiences with politics, reviewing former American interventions in Haiti, and voicing students’ anxieties about what was good and bad for Haiti. These discussions were fluid. I focused on letting the students talk and pressing for English meaning. I began recording the words and phrases that would be helpful for them to describe what was happening. It helped focus them when I said: “What English do you need to know to tell someone here in America about this?”

We began to develop a list of words every morning on the board that they could use to tell about the situation. Words and phrases included: “manifestation, demonstration, unrest, political crisis, suspicious, political corruption, teenagers don’t remember the past, selfish, who takes care of the people, opportunity, hidden motives, and beautiful country. After this exercise the students were ‘talked out,’ and we could easily move into the lesson.

I really did not see this as dealing with stress when we did it. I saw it more as responding to the needs of the students at this unique time in their lives. It seemed to help when I just listened to them and asked meaningful questions about their experience. Then listened honestly. Then I could define my role in their lives as the one who can help them get English to tell others about this experience. They seemed to appreciate this a great deal. I could not change the problems, talk them away, or even really begin to understand them deeply. But I could listen, identify the words of the heart, and give them sentences to express their heart.