

Dear Rachel

Greg Peters, California

Rachel, an experienced and talented educator, having just joined the staff of SF Community in December, asked me to visit her seventh grade humanities class, where she was worried about engaging three of her students. Two males – one African-American and one Latino - regularly don't complete class work for the most part due to acting out of classroom expectations. Vivian – an Asian American female – is simply distant. She often does little to no work and has little to say about it. During my observation, the two young men came in late; still it was Vivian who made an impression on me. While my observations most often are objective and descriptive, this visit left me wondering about Vivian's voice. I asked Rachel permission to share a fictional letter from Vivian that was meant to communicate one of many possible connections between the snapshot I observed and what actually may have been happening. Rachel agreed to the exercise in an effort to consider "What if...". She then responded to the letter before we debriefed the actual visit and exercise. Actual observations are italicized in the letter.

Dear Rachel,

I heard that you were concerned about me and about my participation in class because you have not seen a lot of my work. You also haven't heard me ask or answer a lot of questions.

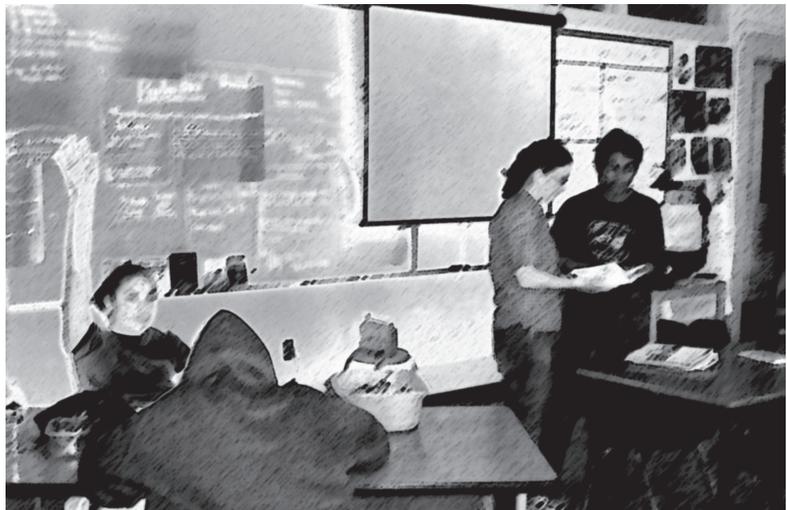
Well I guess I want to thank you. It is really nice to know that you are thinking about me. Do you worry about everyone this way – or just me?

Anyway, I was thinking, maybe I should tell you about my day today. Not the whole day – I don't know if you want to hear that, but I want to tell you about today in class. I don't remember what I was doing at the beginning of class, but I remember when I started to think about it. You were giving directions to the class and I had my hand up while you were walking around the room. After about a minute I put my hand down. Then you went to Sergio's table.

After you were done at that table, you walked closer to me so I raised my hand again. You started

to walk around the room again; this time you went to Jenet's group table. After you were done, you went to Isais' table and then back to Sergio's table so I put my hand down again.

After a while, you walked over to my table – but to be honest, I did not ask my question to you. I don't really know why. I think I gave up. I am not sure. But, you asked me which chapter I remembered best. You said I could use the notes I handed in if I needed them to help me remember. I guess we handed them in, but I just sorta was moving my stuff around in my bag – I don't like taking it off, so I keep it hanging in front of me. Then Tavia told



me what to do and then I started reading the book again.

After a little while (you were still helping a lot of the class), Dontel and Jorge came back to class. Then you had to spend a lot of time with them. I understand why. I know they give you a lot of trouble and you have to keep talking to them. So when it looked like you were done, I raised my hand again to ask my question but you still had to deal with Jorge... and then you had to introduce him to our visitor so I still waited. Then you came near me, but you had to give directions for us to take out paper. When you went back to Jorge, I put my hand down.

Maybe I shouldn't have put my hand down because then I saw Kaleb raise his hand and you went and answered his question. So I put my hand

back up and you did come and stand next to me. But you didn't say anything so I did not want to interrupt you – but Tavia didn't care. She said out loud that I had a question. I was glad she did, but I still was a little embarrassed.

You put your hand on my chair and told me you would get to me after an announcement. Now, I was kinda tired, so I put my head down. I had my back to you, but I was listening – sorta.

After you finished giving us directions, you answered another one of Kaleb's questions. Then a bunch of other kids had questions and you had to answer all of them too. I understand that you had to do this – this is your job, but I started to get bored I think... I don't know. I just started to drift and was looking away.

Now, you said we had to start working in 100% silence (we were practicing for a big state test). I kinda knew that and what to do... I think. Maybe not, because Tavia had to tap on my paper and help me – she just told me what to do – oh and asked for a piece of paper. Then that's it, I did what I was supposed to and then finished writing this letter.

Anyway, I don't know if I will give this to you, but I am thinking maybe I should move my seat. I mean my back is to the board and to you most of the time and I don't really turn around when you teach. But I do see other students raising their hands and getting their questions answered... and some don't even have to raise their hands. So maybe I am not doing something right.

I am not complaining. I know you have a lot of work to do and I really like you as a teacher. That's why I don't want to cause any trouble. But maybe I shouldn't be quiet either because Jorge gets all his questions answered and he is not quiet. But he also gets in trouble a lot and I don't want to get in trouble. To be honest, I really don't want a lot of attention. But deep down I think I do want to pass even if it looks like I don't – maybe I just don't know how to.

Writing this letter was not so hard – I think about things all the time. If you are reading this, that means I gave it to you and that's cool. I guess I am just surprised to hear you were thinking about me.

Thank you again.

Vivian

Dear Vivian,

Thank you so much for your thoughtful letter to me. I really appreciate you taking the time to tell me how you were feeling in class that day.

I've been thinking about you a lot, because I see that you are a bright young person who wants to do well in school, but that you sometimes don't do your class work. I want to know more about what is happening for you in class that helps or makes it harder for you to get your work done.

I also wanted to let you know that I read the writing that you began on that day, and you have a great beginning. You did a good job of putting the story in your own words and adding details of what you thought Ulysses was feeling.

I'm sorry for all the times you've raised your hand and I didn't see you, and the times when I asked you to wait a minute, and then I forgot to come back to you. I don't do those things because I don't think your question is important. That happens because I can get distracted really easily and sometimes forget who is waiting with a question. I need to work on making sure I remember the list of students with questions and making sure that I look around the room to see who has a hand up.

Every time I see your hand up, I am glad to see you participating in class or wanting to ask a question. It is a sign to me that you want to do your best, and I want to help you do that. I'm also glad that Tavia has been helping you out, either explaining directions to you or reminding me that you had a question.

I appreciate your patience with your classmates who "give me trouble" and your understanding that I need to talk to them a lot, but that does not mean it is okay for me to not talk to you, and one of my class goals is to talk more to students who are quiet. You deserve just as much time to ask questions as they do, and I want to be better about doing that.

I am going to be making a new seating chart this week, and I will give you a new seat where you will be facing the board and me directly. I would like to know if there are any students you would like to sit with. Other than Tavia, are there other students you feel comfortable talking to about work?

I know that you

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practice. I hope folks will move from seeing it as all about their subjects to seeing that it's all about the students.

I hope as an administrator I'll be able to provide the follow-up, the extra push or accountability that's needed to transform our practice.

What's your greatest fear?

My greatest fear is that teachers will pay lip service without really changing their practice or improving instruction. I don't want to be involved in lots of planning unless it leads to changes in the classrooms.

What's your greatest hope and greatest fear for NSRF in the next period?

I think the organization is evolving and needs to continue to find ways to reach all students and not just the kids in the classrooms of the teachers who are the first ones to volunteer for CFGs. I think we need to expose everyone to best practices continually. My hope and fear for NSRF are related to my hopes and fears for my school. I hope we continue to connect our ideas to real changes in practice. I'm always worried about talk without action and hope we will hold ourselves accountable to each other in support of our students. ■

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adopted June 2001

were unsure about giving me this letter, and I am happy that you did. It shows a lot about your character, that you are brave, thoughtful, and caring. It also helps me to understand you better so that I can make class better for you.

I see that you are raising your hand and asking questions A LOT more than you did when I began teaching, and it is my goal now to make sure I am there to be answering your questions. I would like to ask you to write me another letter in a few weeks to let me know if you think class is getting better.

Thank you,
Rachel

Rachel later said that she really appreciated this exercise and how it allowed her to think about her initial questions. The *Connections* editorial board is wondering how others would respond to Vivian's letter and invite you to try this same reflective activity. To continue the shared reflection and learning we hope you will post your own letters to Vivian on our website at www.sfcess.org! ■

Rachel Kliegman is a middle school English teacher at San Francisco Community Alternative School – a San Francisco Small School.

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Protocols in Practice
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Thanks to friend and colleague Anne Rhodes - who lives outside of Ithaca in Freeville, New York and is a facilitator/trainer working on "Creating Inclusive Schools" - for the original version of these activities which I have adapted. ■

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