“Pay attention.” These words are very familiar to youngsters everywhere. They hear them spoken to them by mothers and fathers, grandparents, Scout leaders, Little League coaches and, of course, by their teachers.

This spoken directive implies that their minds have wandered off onto other things. A butterfly flitting outside the window, what goodies might be packed in their lunch box, whether they can win the video game next time, if they are in trouble for not taking out the trash, or why the kid in the front row wore that outfit to school … all these thoughts distract from the main thing on which they are supposed to be focusing. When it becomes evident that they are neither watching nor listening as they should, they hear the words: “Pay attention!”

Perhaps it’s only fair to take the spotlight off the youngsters for a moment and turn it on the teachers. In our classrooms there are times when someone needs to walk up to the teacher and clearly say, “Pay attention”.

Let’s break these two words down into their separate meanings. Multiple definitions are given in the dictionary for each word, but we can pull out those that have particular meaning now.

PAY – To discharge an incurred obligation. To give a person what is due in return for what has been rendered. To offer to another, as respect.
ATTENTION – A condition of readiness involving narrowing the focus of consciousness or receptivity. The act of mental concentration. Thoughtful consideration, notice, or observation.

Young students come to class, thanks to their parents or care providers who bring or send them there. Since they rendered their presence by showing up, what is the teacher’s “incurred obligation”? What is “due in return”? What should the teacher “offer” them? The answer is Attention. The teacher can come to class in a condition of conscious readiness, thoughtful consideration, and mental concentration on the children and their specific needs.

Who are the children in your classroom? It will take close observation to know each one individually instead of merely as a conglomeration of small faces. It means focusing on areas needing improvement. Isn’t Melanie ready to move up to a higher reading level? Did I pair Mahmoud with the right buddy as he learns English? Should I refer Liliana for special ed? I’m not sure that Danayo really got that lesson on map skills. What materials does Shaniqua need to help her understand fractions?

It takes awareness of social factors that might be affecting their lives. Is Dimitri acting out in class to cover his anxiety over his mother’s third hospitalization? Did Timothy have to sleep at the homeless shelter again this month? Why is Ling crying?

It requires the ability to listen as they talk about the events of their lives that take place outside of school. How did Carlos enjoy the fishing trip with his dad? Are Tosha’s grandparents still visiting from Romania? Did Marcia get started with her ice skating lessons? Isn’t there a new baby at D’Andre’s house?

Teachers also must turn their attention inward. Self-assessment is important for the benefit of all. Have I come to terms with my own biases? Am I fair and equitable to children with physical challenges? Do I plan and implement culturally-relevant lessons, activities and events?
Pay attention, please.

Of course, the best of teachers are very human so they also see the butterfly flitting past the window, think about their lunch, and wonder why the child in the front row wore that outfit to school. But the best of teachers do not let random thoughts monopolize their day. Their focus is on providing caring, sensitive instruction for their students. They continually keep their hand on the cognitive and emotional pulse of the children under their instructive care.

It is evident that 21st century teachers sometimes feel overwhelmed with testing mandates, longer school days, larger class sizes, less planning time, and myriad other concerns. Despite all of this, thousands of teachers still find great joy and satisfaction in their chosen field. They are the ones who remember to focus on the children. They know each child as an individual, not as a statistic on a data sheet or a designation in a district-level report. They are the ones who see their students making academic progress and developing socially and emotionally. They are the ones who experience the reward of influencing young lives and the lives of their families. They are the ones who care.

Pay attention, please! Paying attention pays off in the end.

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