



6-1994

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Recommended Citation

Loughlin, Catherine E. (1994) "Becoming a Teacher: Reflections," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 8: Iss. 3, Article 3.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol8/iss3/3>

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BECOMING A TEACHER: REFLECTIONS

by

Catherine E. Loughlin

Months after I retired from the university a new acquaintance made a casual query about my work, and I answered that I was a teacher. I could hardly believe I'd said that. It had been many years since my last elementary school teaching assignment, and more than that, I had avoided the label during most of my classroom years. The incident started me thinking about the long evolution of my ideas which brought me to this point, so I finally could say with conviction, "I am a teacher."

Prologue

I spent a good deal of my early life trying very hard never to be a teacher. As a child, when adults asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I explained that I wasn't going to be any of those things they asked about, and most emphatically that I would *never* be a teacher.

My mother raised her children to become what they chose to be, trying not to impose a direction on our lives. She showed us a world of possibilities, providing the broadest available range of experiences and opening many doors. Despite all her intentions, however, I always sensed that she longed for me to become a teacher, even though she never said this. Mother had been a teacher, and years later still grieved over the rules which made her resign when her coming marriage was announced. She had found joy in teaching, and knowing her own children well, surely thought the profession would be a good fit for me. I was such a rebellious child, this made me all the more determined that I would *never* become a teacher.

When I enrolled at the University of Connecticut, I avoided anything labeled Education, entering the School of Home Economics with Child Development as a major. I spent four years in the nursery school, observing, studying, and working with children; I really enjoyed my relationships with them. As I became increasingly involved, I found myself commenting that working with kids might be an interesting thing to do. "I wouldn't mind *doing* that," I would say, "but I wouldn't want to *be* that." I really didn't want to be a teacher.

My minor was in Merchandising, in the School of Business Administration, so I spent some summers working in the toy department of a large department store. I loved talking to parents about their children, and about materials and toys their children would like to work with, but I wanted nothing to do with *being a teacher*.

No one was more surprised than I when I entered the Emergency Teacher Training Program the year after graduation. A teacher shortage, a persuasive recruiter, and pleasant memories of the nursery school all came together; I enrolled in the new program and signed a contract to teach second grade in a small rural Connecticut school system. Mother cheered.

Beginnings

I remember my early weeks and months of teaching as disillusionment and humiliation that seven year olds could outwit me, moment after moment, day after day. I was consumed with questions of control and authority, which I suppose were as much as I understood of the role of teacher. All my questions were about *discipline*, which to me meant a battle of wills that I needed

to win; I thought the certification courses I was taking during the year impractical and useless because they didn't directly address this urgent problem. As the year moved on, however, I learned how to behave like a top sergeant with the help of the veteran experts in the teachers' room.

Meeting a college classmate one day who asked me how I liked teaching, I growled and said, "I hate it." When she asked how many children were in my class, I answered, "Hundreds!" I told no one else that I was a teacher; and I was fearful that it might show. Whatever I thought it meant to *be* a teacher, I didn't want to turn into that. I knew what teaching was, though. Teaching was making people do what they're supposed to do; that meant they were learning.

Later in the year I began to shift my questions to what children were supposed to do. I assumed, of course, that I could take exclusive credit for any learning that took place; but this also meant I was responsible, and that generated new anxieties. In the absence of teachers' manuals in this small school system, and without methods courses yet, it was up to me to decide how kids learned. I began by assuming a child of seven could read any word in his vocabulary, and also that he could spell any word he could read; I quickly learned otherwise. I asked the other teachers what children should be doing to overcome these deficiencies, and then returned to my basic goal of getting them to do what I told them to do.

I heard about Units that year, and decided to do one on firemen. I taught fireman songs, gave handwriting practice about the fireman, read fireman stories, invented math exercises about fireman problems, assigned worksheets with fireman words on them, and then took a trip to the fire station. One day during the unit a child looked up at me and asked, "Teacher, why are we doing all this stuff about firemen?" and briefly it occurred to me that maybe all this activity about firemen should make sense to the children and not just to me. But I quickly put that aside because I had more urgent things on my mind, such as cursive writing, getting children through the halls quietly, and producing enough seatwork to keep everybody fully occupied all day long.

Those were the beginnings of my teaching. I wasn't very sophisticated, but by the end of two years I began to feel cocky because children weren't running away, they did what I told them to do, they were quiet when I wanted them to be, and now and then we could laugh together. I was feeling as though I was really a second grade teacher now, and I had a teaching certificate. I promised myself never to take another course; and I wouldn't tell anybody what I did for a living.

The First Move

It was my move to a larger school system that first put me in contact with teachers who saw themselves as professionals. At the time, I was busy trying to explain that I was a second-grade teacher, and didn't know a thing about teaching first grade where I had been assigned, but they assured me they could help. I felt like a beginner again, except that "getting control" didn't take weeks and months; soon I was able to turn my attention to other matters. I probably wouldn't have taken this step alone, but the teachers around me weren't talking about controlling children, they were talking about whether teaching manuals could be useful, what kinds of experiences helped children learn, how to organize social studies in their classrooms. We came from different teacher training programs and had a lot to talk about. It was wonderful; we were colleagues, all in our early years of teaching, and our questions were similar. We became friends, and those friendships persist to this day.

My own questions about teaching began to change from “How do you make them” to “How do you teach that” or “Are there other ways I might do this better than I’m doing it now?” As I moved from questions of control to questions of how to teach well, I began to look at variations of practice for different grades and situations. And I now knew how to teach second grade *and* first grade. Although my picture of teaching expanded from specific grades to primary, my perceptions of teaching were still very context bound; I couldn’t even imagine what a teacher would do in any setting except primary.

When I had completed my fourth year of teaching, struggling with questions about living and working with children, with children’s learning, with parent communications, it hadn’t yet occurred to me that what I was doing for a living had anything to do with the Child Development I had studied as an undergraduate. My ideas about the classroom were so clearly focused on what teachers should be doing, I saw the children only as recipients. I was now defining teaching as something a person *does*, and found it fascinating, but was still unwilling to call myself a teacher. It was the idea of *being* a teacher I couldn’t accept.

Some of the group had already finished MA programs, the rest were working on them. So I thought about taking graduate courses, and began to spend summers studying at Penn State. The ideas we brought back from our studies, and inservice programs from surrounding universities, expanded horizons for all of us. We began to risk new approaches, and I arranged to teach the same group of children for a second year, staying with them through first and second grades. Early in that second year I discovered that the first grade teacher apparently hadn’t done anything at all. But I knew I had taught the children a lot. How could it be they didn’t know? And so I began to ask different questions: What does it mean to *know* something? How do you know if a child knows something, and if they really knew it, why do they forget it? What could I do to be sure what was accomplished this year would still be evident the following year? I didn’t have answers to those questions, but at least I was raising new ones. The new questions sent me searching for new ideas. And this time, I was beginning to ask something about the learners.

Teaching in Europe

I had been teaching about six years when I signed on with the U.S. Army’s Dependent Schools and went to my first assignment as a primary teacher in Linz, Austria. I was sure that I was an excellent teacher, mature in my profession, and that I knew the right way to teach in the primary grades. But I had never seen a range of classroom practice as wide as I found in our American school and in the Austrian school in which we were housed. We had come from all over the United States, and each of us was quite sure of knowing the right way. My classroom began to change as I saw other teachers’ approaches and tried out some of them myself.

As I began to apply my expert teaching methods in my new school, it became painfully clear that these primary children weren’t exactly like my students back in Connecticut. Early in the year I gave out the basal reading workbooks and started on a phonics exercise showing a picture of a paper container from a grocery store; the children were to match the sound of its name with the names of other pictures in a row. The object was known by different children as a poke, a sack, or a bag, so the exercise wasn’t very successful; and the vowel exercises didn’t work either, because of the different accents among us. So I forgot about phonics and changed my approach to focus on meaning. Then one day a group of children were struggling with the word *detour* in a basal story. I tried to define it for them, but they were really puzzled. Eventually I drew a picture, and everyone finally grasped the idea of a detour and they said, “Oh! You mean an *umleitung!*,” which is the German word for detour they saw every day on street signs.

In February I decided to create a large flag for the class and write the children's names on the stars of the states where they were born. I forgot that many of them had been born in Europe; and they were devastated, thinking it meant they weren't Americans. It took a long time to explain and comfort everyone. Instead of children's backgrounds, I'd thought only about my own purposes and the activities I planned because that's how I saw teaching. Now I had to look for the fit for the children.

Our informal interactions with Austrian teachers were limited by schedules, but we had some formal exchanges. While observing Austrian six-year-olds one day, I thought about my own class of the same age, who still painted big splashes of color and simple figures on large easel paper. The Austrian children were working with small pieces of paper, using pens and colored ink, as the teacher urged, "Make it rich." With their pens they drew little houses with little flowers around the house and shingles on the roof, and they put in all the details. My child development studies in college had taught me that six year olds couldn't do that, and I wondered if I should be expecting more from my own students. I thought a lot about developmental levels and wondered how the family's culture shaped them; and I began to think it might be important to include that information in my planning. I was beginning to think about teaching in terms of the learners as well as the teacher, and to notice that grade level and geography weren't the only circumstances calling for variations in classroom practice.

Halfway through my European assignment, the U.S. Army closed down its Austrian operations and abruptly shipped everybody to its only base in Italy while negotiating for more installations. The elementary school population suddenly tripled in size; we had well over fifty children in each first grade class. It was physically difficult to get to every child, so even after several weeks there were children I hadn't talked with; I spoke to the group, but rarely to individuals. I was unhappy about it because I had just begun to think about the classroom in terms of individuals and was frustrated at not knowing them better. Finally, after a few months, the crowding at the school was relieved.

I was scheduled to teach summer school that year, and as the term began, I thought about those children who had been overlooked in the crowded classrooms and had been judged "behind" their classmates. These were quiet children who never had a chance to do the art projects, explore books, play games, even use the playground because they were slowly plodding through pages of seatwork. I decided to change their school lives, and turned the day around, beginning each morning with those activities. I taught any lessons at the end of every other day. At the end of the summer it was quite a surprise to everyone when the children tested a couple of grade levels higher than the previous spring. I had decided against a direct assault on learning tasks by cutting back on the amount of "teaching" I did because I thought the children needed some relief from the constant demands for perfection. After the test scores I began to rethink what teaching means. Maybe telling children what to do isn't the only way to foster learning. Was it possible that children could learn some things without lessons? I didn't have a clear answer, but I did have a new question.

In the small American community of a military base, there was no question about *being* a teacher. That's how everyone identified me, and in that setting I found it mildly acceptable, but off the base I still wouldn't call myself a teacher.

Back to the U.S.

By the time I returned to my Connecticut school, I was an old hand at primary teaching. I had worked in rural and suburban schools, taught linguistically and culturally diverse groups of

children, and had tried out a variety of classroom strategies. I assumed I would slip back into my former role at the school, but found myself assigned to a fourth/fifth grade classroom, and I wasn't very happy about it. I was a primary teacher, I complained; what did I know about teaching older children? And age wasn't the only new dimension I needed to consider; now I would teach two grade levels at once.

Assuming that there would be two entirely different programs to carry out, and therefore twice as much to teach, I started focusing on efficiency and logistics. I needed to organize classroom life so the kids could become self-sufficient and leave me free for instructional groups. I began to search out ways they could take a bigger part in the management of the classroom. In the years I had been away, my friends had continued their discussions and inquiries into classroom practice; they had become involved in individualized instruction, math contracts, and self-selected reading programs. For efficiency, I began with math contracts in which children each moved through the mathematics textbooks at their own rate, following the established sequence, completing all the practice exercises, and consulting the teacher for clarification and review. From the start they moved through their work so quickly I couldn't keep up with checking the piles of papers produced every day. So I turned that over to the children.

As time went on, I began to turn more things over to the children, and was embarrassed because it seemed lazy not to do it all myself. Then I found that the more I turned over to the children the more they seemed to learn. Gradually their role in classroom management increased until they were running opening exercises, organizing job tasks, keeping track of classroom provisioning, planning the daily schedule, administering quizzes and spelling tests, checking exercise pages and workbooks.

One morning when I wasn't in school, no adults noticed that the expected substitute hadn't arrived. The children thought I was at a meeting, and they went ahead with the usual morning routines. Looking around for more information, they found the lesson plans for the substitute on my desk and used them to develop the day's schedule. There was a math quiz on the lesson plan; they thought probably they shouldn't do that without a teacher, but went ahead with everything else. They were quite insulted when a substitute finally arrived in the middle of the morning.

I was struck by the facility with which these children made judgments about what they needed to do and how they needed to do it. No matter how much child development I had studied, I had clearly underestimated their competence and their ability to collaborate. In my mind there were two grade level programs going on, but the children consulted, assisted, and collaborated without worrying about that. As time went by, the curriculum boundaries between grade levels faded. We completed the mandated textbook programs before midyear, and planning became much more interesting as I began to take into account the styles and interests of individual children, designing activities for the children rather than for the program. More than that, I began to think beyond the learning activities I would prepare, to consider how to provision so children could also generate some activities for themselves.

I could no longer accept a definition that implied teaching was a matter of doing it for somebody; the process was too complex to be explained that way. I couldn't easily define teaching, but I knew that it wasn't a simple thing, and that children weren't passive recipients.

Moving Again

The next year, a former principal recruited me to teach in a small city in New Jersey where school budgets were generous and salaries high. There were few regulations about classroom practice in the system; ample resources were provided and teachers decided what to do with them. By now my context for thinking about teaching had broadened; I knew how to teach elementary grades, not just primary, so I accepted an intermediate assignment. That year I also returned to the MA program I had abandoned for my European adventure.

In this school system, the group process and individualized or self-selected reading programs were widespread classroom practices. There was a strong emphasis on problem solving and thinking; science and social studies were emphasized from kindergarten on. For the first time I began to see teaching centering on the knowledge content of the curriculum rather than on skills. Thanks to the city library system every classroom started the year with a loan collection of library books; pickup and delivery were scheduled every Monday. Given information on the reading levels of children and on topics under study, librarians selected appropriate titles and sent a large collection to the classroom. In my earlier teaching, children's knowledge had not been emphasized, and it was limited by what I could verbalize, or by the narrow content of classroom books. My ideas about provisioning for learning changed markedly as I saw how eagerly children consumed information and how their knowledge base expanded.

Faculty relationships in the school were less social, but more professional, than in previous settings. My information about child development was appreciated, and I found colleagues' ideas and information crucial for my success with new classroom strategies. I was asking myself questions about stimulating children's thinking, about how humans gain knowledge, and about complex strategies to develop group skills, extend reading and language competence, and increase children's knowledge.

I completed the graduate program at Penn State, and discovered I still wasn't certified in New Jersey, so I began to enroll in any nearby institution offering the required courses; but my own study of teaching had taken me beyond methods. The courses didn't match my questions and I found them meager, so I enrolled at Rutgers, hoping graduate courses would offer more. At school I changed grade levels a couple of times, moving downward to the primary grades, testing out newly acquired approaches with different age groups and broadening the contexts in which I saw them applicable.

I was really hooked on teaching, but couldn't handle the label of teacher, particularly in non-school settings. I found it impossible to respond simply to simple questions about children and schools and teaching directed to me because my concepts seemed much too complex to articulate. I still believed that teaching, however complex, was something a person did, it wasn't what a person was; and after a few more semesters of graduate work, I began to describe myself as a student who taught rather than a teacher who studied.

The Kindergarten

I was aware of a heavier emphasis on skills when I returned to the primary grades, although knowledge content was still extremely important. By the time I moved back to the first grade, I had reverted to a sense of urgency about all kinds of skills, and was irritated with the kindergarten teachers who weren't getting the children ready for me. When a kindergarten opening occurred at

the school, I asked for it; I wanted to get in there and do things right so children would be ready for first grade.

It wasn't as easy as I thought. Even before school opened decisions were hard because what I was supposed to do, what I was inclined to do, and what I really knew ought to be happening for children didn't always agree. I intended to follow the system's broad kindergarten guidelines; child-initiated activity was a large part of every day. Guidelines called for open-ended activities, choice, social interaction, and experience-based learning. Preparation for first grade was just one of several goals, best achieved through these program characteristics. It had been a long time since my experiences with the free flowing days of the nursery school, however, and I had never been in a classroom like that in a school setting.

After more than a decade in elementary classrooms I was inclined to keep teaching. By now my ideas about teaching had evolved to a complex view, I was using a variety of instructional strategies, and I had begun to support some child-initiated activities. But still, teaching meant mainly deciding what children needed to learn and taking their characteristics into account as I decided what kinds of learning activities could best accomplish this.

During the summer I was invited to order supplies and equipment, so I chose instructional materials that were targeted specifically for the skills and other things I wanted to teach. Moderately attractive to children, they had no holding power, and the children had a hard time finding something interesting to do during "work time." With thirty-five children but only one teacher, an hour of self-selection was unnerving for a former primary teacher who was used to being clearly in charge of children's activities and movements. Some days I needed to feel that I was really teaching and would try to impose a planned instructional activity on the entire class; of course, with such a large group of young children it just wouldn't work. It seemed as though the children knew better than I did what they should be doing, and at that age weren't reluctant to let me know.

One spring the other kindergarten teacher and I noted several children who seemed close to reading, and we wanted to do something wonderful for them. One of us worked directly with a group each session in some "advanced readiness activities" in the form of games, special songs, group stories, and various hands-on activities. The other teacher sang, read stories, or went to the playground with the remaining fifty-five. We didn't tell the first grade teachers we were getting those children ready to read but waited for their comments in the fall, only to discover that all our effort in teaching directly for the next year produced absolutely nothing noticeable in the eyes of the teachers who received the children.

I knew that young children needed time to reflect on their experiences without pressure to perform in specified ways; they needed interaction with each other, concrete experiences, opportunities for problem solving. If my knowledge of child development hadn't told me that, the program guidelines made it clear. Still, I couldn't figure out why my planning wasn't successful until the children finally showed me how much their perceptions of what was going on differed from my perception.

One day I saw a child lying on the floor with his eyes half closed. He had been playing with a large, hollow wooden airplane, which was on the floor beside him. Sure that he was succumbing to the chicken pox, I approach quietly so I wouldn't alarm anybody else. I asked him what was going on, and he answered, "Oh, nothing. But I was just wondering what it would be like if I was small enough to get inside that airplane."

The day a child dropped a quart jar of thick yellow easel paint concentrate everybody wanted to see what was going on. I did my best to keep them from walking through the paint as I used a large paint brush and dustpan to get as much as possible off the floor quickly, and the ring of children grew larger and tighter. Finally, as I got the last of the concentrate into the pan, one child asked me, "Teacher, why are you painting the floor yellow?"

It was in the spring that we took our annual field trip to the Bronx Zoo. We spent a lot of time on preparation with stories, filmstrips, and other information about animals, and after the trip we told the children they had to show us what they had learned. They were to draw, paint, write, act out, build, or dictate stories about the zoo. The most accurate and detailed representation of the zoo trip was made by one of the youngest boys who had drawn the front view of the line of buses in the parking lot, with colors, signs, windshield wipers, headlights, and tire treads clearly shown.

The children's persistence in showing me their viewpoints and the graduate studies I still pursued pushed me to what seemed a sudden insight. It was no longer teaching I was trying to understand, but a reciprocal process of teaching and learning. And the learning side of the process was becoming more important than the teaching side. I wasn't fighting the label of teacher quite so hard; but I still thought I could do it without becoming it.

Leaving the Classroom

When I was offered a teaching assistantship at Rutgers, I decided that it was time to leave the classroom and give full attention to my studies. I was immediately assigned two certification courses for recent college graduates, and once again I had an assignment beyond my experience. I saw myself as an elementary teacher, but I knew nothing about teaching adults and I was very anxious. Thinking my experiences as a graduate student were more relevant here than my experiences as a teacher, I carefully outlined the content I wanted to include and began to prepare a series of lectures. Engrossed as I was in important ideas and my new insights into the meaning of teaching and learning, I wanted to explain it all to the students. But they found my courses impractical and useless, because they didn't directly address their urgent problems of discipline and classroom management. And they were obviously bored with class sessions.

In time, I deduced that neither my learning activities nor the way I had organized the content were a good fit for the learners. I was a better teacher than this, I thought, and began to rethink how I should be working with these adults. When I listened closely I could see how distant my offerings had been from the students' concerns as beginning teachers, so I reorganized the content and began to use a more student-active approach with role playing, observing, and analyzing recorded teaching episodes to help them make connections.

One semester brought a couple of students who resented taking a course from a kindergarten teacher. "Don't you find teaching graduate students more difficult than teaching kindergarten?" one asked. My absent minded answer, that I didn't see much difference between the two, was not well received by the questioner, who soon dropped out; but it was a moment of insight for me. The context for my definition of teaching had expanded, as I found teaching strategies used across levels in the elementary school which could also be effectively adapted to this new setting.

Learner perspective became increasingly important to me that year as I spent days in primary classrooms all over the state collecting research data. I saw every kind of teacher I had ever been, and saw it all from the children's point of view. I had never before really grasped what

daily life was like for them, and I wanted to find all the children I had ever taught, to tell them how sorry I was.

When I left Rutgers, I moved across the country to New Mexico and joined a faculty of elementary education who were working on significant changes in viewpoint and programs of teacher education. Nothing could have been more exciting.

As the years passed there were always new ideas and reasons to reflect on classroom practice and reconsider teaching strategies for adult students. We lived in a multicultural setting, which caused me to raise new questions about schooling. There were always colleagues with a commitment to thoughtful and analytical educational practice and a belief in modeling good teaching practice through our own work. There was extensive collaboration with public schools, so we spent a lot of time in classrooms and talking with teachers; this kept our view of schools and teaching realistic. In time we were joined by a special colleague, Marie Hughes, who became mentor for many of us in the last years of her life.

Oddly, it was after leaving the classroom that I began to believe that I was a teacher. Perhaps it was through the study of Hughes' Professional Response (1958, 1963a, 1963b, 1964) that I finally brought to focus what I had been groping for. Now I saw effective instruction as teachers responding to children rather than children responding to teachers. For me it was a revolutionary, yet simple, notion; a person could teach this way only by moving into the child's frame of reference at the moment of response. More than that, it was the teacher, in carefully chosen responses within a unique relationship with each child, who was the instrument of teaching. It was a way of thinking and of relating to others. It called for a set of judgments, not just a set of behaviors. You had to *be* a teacher. You couldn't just do it.

Retirement

Now I am retired, and I find that retirement isn't an end of anything after long years in one profession. I still work with teachers, watch children, try to understand the process of teaching and learning, and wonder whether programs carried out by people who teach can ever replace people who are teachers.

For a long time I said that I would never be a teacher, but that's what I am. I can't stop being a teacher because I am not formally assigned to classroom or courses. I am a teacher all day long, every day. It is my profession; it is what I am. It is not just what I do.

I am a teacher. And I will be for the rest of my life.

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