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A Work In Progress

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by

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The title says it all, "a work in progress." I feel like I am a work in progress. As a teacher in training, I have come a long way since the doors opened for school this semester; yet I still have a long way to grow in order to be the early childhood professional that I would like to be.

In the fall, I began graduate study in early childhood education at Mills College–a small, private, liberal arts school situated in Oakland, California. My teacher training began immediately, when I was assigned to student teach in a second, third, and fourth grade combination classroom. I had no prior teaching experience in a formal classroom. I felt apprehensive and scared about directing and teaching a classroom of 7, 8, and 9 year olds. I personally had only experienced the traditional, behavioristic, putting-knowledge-directly-into-a-child's-head teaching paradigm–sit in your chair, be quiet, complete these worksheets as accurately and quickly as you can, and let me tell you everything that you need to know. Therefore, my ideal classroom was a quiet, efficient one where all of the children were busy little beavers getting their work done, mastering correct spelling, computing the right mathematical answers, writing grammatically correct essays, and obediently and smoothly proceeding through the day's activities.

To my relief (and yours as well, I'm sure), my conceptions of what is an effective classroom and what it means to learn and what it means to teach were radically revolutionized by my first semester of teacher training. Through my coursework covering major child development theories and my classroom practice where I witnessed and applied those theories to thinking, feeling children, my entire outlook on the profession of teaching changed.

What is an Effective Classroom?

I realized that an effective classroom is not a monarchy, ruled by the teacher, where children are motivated by competition or fear. Rather, it should be a place filled with laughter, conversation, and collaboration. As a class, we are a community of learners who work together, respect each other's ideas, and help one another (DeVries & Zan, 1994). Similarly, in an effective classroom, the children have roles to play. They are learning how to be independent and autonomous, how to think for themselves, and how to make their own decisions (Kamii, 1984).

I witnessed these principles in action while the children studied a unit on butterflies. The unit concluded with the authoring and illustrating of a class book on butterflies and caterpillars. We teachers were not sure whether the pages of the book should be handwritten or typed. Therefore, we turned the decision over to the children themselves. In pairs, they talked about whether the pages should be written or typed. Then individually several children presented their views to the others. Then as a class they voted. When the majority chose to type the pages, all were happy. I believe that such an experience exemplified an effective classroom where teacher and students worked together to accomplish a common goal.

What is Learning?

This semester, in addition to seeing that an effective classroom is a community, I realized that the actual learning process occurring within the classroom did not match my concept of learning. The second, third, and fourth graders did not sit quietly at their desks individually completing worksheets, memorizing multiplication tables, or perfecting conventional spelling. Instead, they were active participants in the learning process. They had something valuable to contribute to their education: their interests, their previous knowledge, their personal experiences, and, most importantly, their own wonderful ideas (Duckworth, 1987). As the semester progressed, I began to realize, accept, and even enjoy that children construct their own knowledge (as Piaget asserted) and, therefore, need to be scientists, explorers, and inquirers, interacting with the physical environment, materials, and people around them (NAEYC, 1991; Wadsworth, 1996). Much of the learning occurring in the second, third, and fourth grade classroom happened within the context of social interaction. Children frequently discussed their ideas with one another and worked in partnerships to complete projects.

One example of learning occurring within social interaction happened during a unit on earthquakes. During the final lesson, focused on preparing for an earthquake, the children designed safety kits for the home, car, and school. To work on the assignment, the students were divided into groups of four and five to design their kits. There were three roles to be played in each group–reporter, recorder, and illustrator. I explained that everyone would need to be flexible in deciding who would perform which role. Those without a role should help someone else. Each group was then allowed to assign its own roles. After 30 minutes, the groups returned to the rug, our class meeting place, to explain what they had decided to put in their kits and to show their illustrations of the contents. Classmates were then able to comment or ask questions about each kit.

This activity allowed me to witness social learning, learning how to work together with others. Before beginning kit design, each group had to negotiate role assignments. As I walked from group to group, it appeared that every group successfully negotiated the job assignments and developed unique ways for everyone to participate. For example, in one group they had two recorders generating lists and then they combined the lists. In two other groups, they had two illustrators drawing the items to go in the kit. In a fourth group, one student who had abdicated all jobs was now excitedly helping the recorder to generate the list.

This activity also fostered learning through social interaction. Each group presented its kit to the rest of the class. During the class discussion, children questioned each other about the usefulness of and reason for including specific items in the kits. "Would you really need a brush or battery powered television in an earthquake kit?" "Why would you take your dog along with you during an earthquake?" "What could you use the pencil and paper for after an earthquake?" Because of the group discussion, the students were able to think about and to communicate their thought processes and to hear their peers' opinions. Such opportunities to exchange and even debate ideas raise children's level of logical reasoning and promote children's social, affective, moral, and political development (Kamii, 1984).

Not only has my understanding of how children learn been transformed, but also my realization of what they learn has been enlarged. Primary education is social and emotional, as well as academic. This was a surprise and a revelation to me. Children not only need to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic, but they also need to develop the ability to work together and to relate to

one another. Therefore, as the teacher, I want to introduce the ideas of negotiation and flexibility (as in the earthquake safety kit assignment) and then support the children as they learn to work together and to resolve their own conflicts. Similarly, during classroom life children learn to recognize, express, and deal with their emotions. Throughout the earthquake unit, the children addressed their fear about earthquakes and gained mastery over their emotions. Therefore, my classroom experiences taught me that primary children are not only achieving academic mastery but also social and emotional mastery as Erikson stated (Gordon & Williams-Browne, 1996).

What is Teaching?

This semester greatly affected my view of myself as a teacher. I now conceive of my role in the classroom as being that of a facilitator rather than a dictator. I design and provide the time, opportunities, and environment for the children to construct their own knowledge rather than simply infusing the curriculum into them (Chaille & Britain, 1997; Duckworth, 1987). Now, during interactions with the children, I strive to ask open-ended questions to which I do not have a predetermined answer so that the children may initiate and develop their own topics and enter more fully into the learning activities (Buzzeli, 1996). I also focus on asking questions that highlight metacognitive strategies, "How did you know?" or "What gave you a clue?" or "How did you find that word on the page?" By listening to the children's answers, I show them that they are respected and that their ideas are important.

Although I see myself as a learning facilitator, I also realize that children need structure, limits, and clear enunciation of expectations in order for them to feel safe and to work to their potential (Miller, 1984). Just because I believe that children construct their own knowledge, does not mean that anarchy and chaos rule in the classroom and that children behave however they choose. Rather, I, as the teacher, provide the structure and define the boundaries within which the children may exercise their autonomy and make their own choices.

Finally, this semester has somewhat freed me from the idea that my teaching will someday arrive at perfection. Rather, I am beginning to realize that my teaching should be an ever evolving process of exploring subject matter with children, assessing their learning, and refining my practice (Schifter, 1996). Even lessons and activities that "flop" provide me with helpful information about how children learn and how to adjust my teaching to better meet my students' needs and interests.

Although I have described a semester's worth of growth, I still have much to learn and experience as a teacher in training. I also realize that operationalizing my vision of what it means to teach and what it means to learn will require some years of practice. For example, I will continue to work on developing limits and enforcing them. I also hope to acquire more strategies for dealing with the unexpected. Eventually, I would like to be resourceful enough to utilize even the most novel situations as teaching opportunities. Additionally, I hope my ability to facilitate group work will advance. In sum, I feel like I've just begun my journey of discovering and becoming the teacher that I would like to be. Therefore, I call myself a work in progress.

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