

Draft #~~5~~

adding substance

Mackure
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VALUES VERSUS REALITY values in contradiction

My introduction into the world as teacher happened two years ago on my first stage. I went to visit the teacher and students I would be working with the week before I was to spend three weeks in their classroom. I returned to the university horrified and in tears. I did not want to return to that classroom. The teacher terrified me, I could not image how the students in her class felt.

My first three weeks as a "teacher" were spent consoling, trying to make the students feel valued and safe while I was feeling insecure and uncomfortable. I had never been in the classroom as the authority figure and spoke to my host teacher about my insecurities. Her reply was "be a b**ch like me and you'll have no behavioural problems." From this reply, I knew I was on my own.

My second ten-week stage was with a kindergarten class and my experience in that classroom was wonderful. Connie was the warmest, kindest, and most loving teacher. She started the day with hugs or handshakes from the students because she felt these told her how each student's day would be like and how she should approach them. This was a teacher who was in touch with children's emotional side and had created an environment where the children felt safe to explore and grow.

These two, very different experiences, have had a tremendous impact on me as a teacher. I am committed to never being a b**ch and to creating the type of environment which allows children the freedom to explore and grow. These experiences are what led me to be sensitive to the environment I create in my classroom.

I think Brandt (1997) summed up the differences between these two teachers:

"... the best teachers know that kids learn more readily when they are emotionally involved in the lesson because emotion drives attention, which drives learning and memory. Teachers know that emotion is important; they just don't always know what to do about it"

I really believe that the emotional part of students must be addressed before the intellectual. Therefore, I felt it is extremely important to be one of the teachers who know what to do about it.

VALUES TO LIVE BY

Inexperienced, nervous, unprepared, excited, I faced my class of 13 students who were squashed together in a corner of the library. This was definitely not the ideal learning environment. How was I to create a sense of community, a safe place where children could learn and take risks?

By the end of the first week of school I realized that the students I was working with had a strong dislike for school. They would say things like may day may day, I can't read/write, and I hate reading/writing. I needed to find a way to change their attitudes and subsequently improve their skills since 11 out of the 21 students were non-readers and all but two of the others were reading below level as shown on the Durrell, a test of reading fluency and comprehension. The students had ~~no~~ idea how to read. Some were relying on the sole strategy of sounding out words while others did not even have this skill.

Consciously I set a goal to improve the students attitude toward learning but I did not ask an action research question. However, in hindsight my action research question would be: How can I create an environment that will foster a positive attitude toward learning, particularly reading, in my students?

Context here
school
class
No.

triangulation of evidence

1. Changes in attitude
- picture
- parents comments
- student comments;

In order to understand why I had set this goal I must answer this question: Why is the sense of community and a safe environment important to me? Where do these values originate? My desire to create a safe environment for children to learn is based on my two practice teaching experiences. Furthermore, I have developed a strong belief that children must feel safe in their environment and with those around them before any real learning takes place. Real learning being defined as an openness to experience new things and develop new skills.

Furthermore, learning to read is a complex task. In order to be able to construct meaning from text children must be able to recognize many words automatically. Therefore, when children are able to decode words attention can be focussed on creating meaning. For children who develop these skills reading is rewarding and fun which leads them to read more. However, for children that struggle with these skills reading can be frustrating. These children would do anything to avoid reading a book (Allen, 1998). This is the students who I had in my class. Very few had developed decoding skills and for most reading was a frustrating task to be avoided.

The differences between skilled and poor readers is called the Matthew Effects. The implications of the Matthew Effect can be seen in the study by Juel (1988, as cited in Allen, 1998) who found "the probability that a child would remain a poor reader at the end of fourth grade if the child was a poor reader at the end of first grade was .88." This is not what I wanted for my students. I was determined to do everything to help them develop their decoding skills and overcome the frustration they had with reading.

Soon my class grew to 21 students and I was given more time to work with them. It was at this time that I began collaborating with Brenda on a Books and Buddies program which was designed to develop reading and social skills through peer tutoring. The students would spend a half hour a day greeting, spelling, and reading with their buddy. I thought that this program accompanied with a great deal of encouragement and praise, fun activities in the classroom, and little homework would help to improve the students view of school. (Why I assigned little homework is linked to one of the reasons the children had learned to disliked school.)

I had visited Brenda and Betty's classroom's the year before and I remember being fascinated at how independent the students had become and how both academic and social skills were being addressed. I also remember thinking how much effort must have went into creating such an environment. Therefore, when Brenda approached me to begin a very similar program I thought that this kind of program would help me to create the type of environment that would help foster a positive attitude toward learning.

A couple months into the school year I was discouraged. I was still hearing from the children that they hated virtually everything at school including physical education and art. I walk slowly down the hall with the weight of the world on my shoulders. Should I be a teacher? Can I give these children what they need and deserve? As I walk into Brenda's (my critical friend's) room, she is sitting at her desk. She stops, looks up and asks how things are going? This was all I needed to open up and share my frustration and insecurities with her. She listens without judgement and responds by telling her own story. This dialogue continues and I gradually feel the tension leaving my body. I felt reassured, capable of moving forward.

The above is the perfect example of my interpretation of what a positive learning environment means: An environment where I feel safe to express myself openly and honestly...where I can allow myself to be vulnerable with limited fear...peel away the layers of myself...exposure, acceptance, validation...a place where I can grow as a person and as a

Describe
Books
Buddies

professional. The above example is what Jean Clandinin, at the ITCR (1999), called laying stories side by side which does not lead to answers but affirmation and more possibilities.

In our discussion Brenda told me that she thought that there was a discrepancy between what the children were saying and what we were seeing in the classroom. They said they hated things but once they had begun the task they seemed to enjoy themselves. (Old habits die hard.) This is when I began having the students write in a buddy journal, as Brenda had suggested. In this journal they were allowed to express things they disliked, enjoyed, or thought needed to be improved on in the buddy program. It was in this journal that I began seeing that many of the students actually enjoyed taking part in reading buddies. I gave them a place to have a voice: a place where what they had to say was really valued. They were having difficulty, at times, getting their buddy to listen and work. So we began sharing some of the difficulties and the successes we were having and how to solve some of the problems. The students shared a great deal and began helping each other solve problems. I also shared. Many of the problems the students were having with their grade one buddy were the same problems I had in the classroom. A real sense of community was developing in the classroom.

INSERT PICTURE HERE

This picture speaks a thousand words to me. This shows the type of relationships I want the children to have. I want them to feel safe with one another so that they can take risks in their learning. This picture is also an example of the results of our sharing in the classroom. Brittany was having difficulty getting her buddy to focus on the book while she was reading. The solution which came out of our sharing was that Brittany would put her arm around her buddy to help her buddy become more focussed. The type of sharing that was occurring between the students would not of happened if they did not feel comfortable with one another. This is an example that supports my claim that a safe environment had developed in the classroom. Furthermore, this is an example that these students were themselves conducting action research into their practices with their reading buddy.

I really saw the improvement in my students' attitudes in March when a new student arrived in my classroom. She was having difficulty reading. When she came to read to me she said "I can't read, it's too hard." It was at this time that I sat back and realized that I hadn't heard those words in such a long time. The students had come so far. They were saying things like "don't tell me that word I can figure it out myself." One girl's public speech was titled 'I Love Books.' One student's mother came into school one day with her son and told me that last year he would fake sick to stay home but today he didn't feel good and wanted to come to school. These students had come to like school and had developed confidence in themselves.

Furthermore, the students had really begun to understand what reading was about and had developed confidence as readers. They had began using various reading strategies which included looking at the picture for clues, cutting words in half, looking for little words in big words, and sounding out. They also had developed an appreciation for how important reading is. The following are examples of what the children wrote in their journals when asked: What is reading?

Reading helps you to write. It is fun. You learn from reading. You get better. Some books stink. Some books are cool. It is sad. It is special. It is exciting. To know about it is incredible. It helps people learn. You get smarter.

Sabrina Grade 3

Reading helps you to write. Reading is in your life. You have to learn to read because if

claim the Buddy program helped to foster a pos. attitude towards learning

you don't you will not be able to do your groceries. Reading is important for you. Reading is how you get to go everywhere.

Melyssa Grade 2

These two examples illustrate that the children not only understand the importance of reading but had developed a love for reading. Another example that the students' were developing confidence was the test results on the Durrell in June. All of the kids were readers. All but three of the students improved by a grade level and many improved by much more.

I knew I had reached my goal in May when the one student who had believed strongly all year that he hated all aspects of school, came up to me and said "I'm a good writer." I knew then that his attitude was changing and he was opening himself up to learning. I had finally reached the last student in the classroom. Although it was late in the year and he had developed limited skills, I have hope that he will come to school next year ready to begin to learn

My Professional Development

I presented at the ICTR in April, not really knowing until after listening to the keynote speaker, Jean Clandinin, that what I had done was similar to action research. It was at this time that I realized that I belonged at this conference. Prior to the conference I was feeling a little unsure of whether or not I, a first year teacher, had anything of value to contribute. I realized that attending the conference had a great deal of value for me and as things progressed and I talked with other teachers I felt more comfortable, I felt safe.

It was during Jean Clandinin's speech that I realized that what I had been researching all year was how to change my students' negative attitude toward learning. It was also at this conference that I realized the strength and value of the relationship that I had developed with Brenda. Karen and Janice spoke of the openness to vulnerability and shared stories and emotions. This is exactly the type of relationship Brenda and I had developed. We were more than colleagues. She was my critical friend and mentor.

I returned to school to continue my investigation into action research and what I had done in my classroom. At that time I thought I had conducted action research; however, after reading some of McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead (1996) I realize that I have not conducted a real action research project. I did not go through the full process of action research. I did not systematically investigate my own actions called informed action. I also had no preset plans called intentional action (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996). On the other hand, I discussed this with Judy who shared that she had taken an action research course whereby she was required to reflect back and deconstruct their practice. This process, at McGill University was considered action research.

Either way, I believe that I have grown tremendously from looking back on what transpired in my classroom last year. It was not until I sat down to write this that I could fully appreciate the value of a reflective journal. A journal would have helped me tremendously in telling my story. I feel now that there are many gaps in what transpired, in the emotions, the difficulties, and the triumphs. Furthermore, it is this process that has led me to want to conduct research whereby I systematically and intentionally investigate my own practice.

Why is it important for me to do research? What are the implications for my practice? I listened to all the members of this class share and say how they feel they are just beginning to be effective teachers because of this method of research. I want to begin my career feeling that I am an effective teacher because I am a reflective practitioner and an action researcher. I want to develop these skills now so that I am driven to constantly and systematically improve what I am doing. I think this will have a profound effect on my practice and my view of myself as a

teacher. I do not want to look back on my career and say I should have, I want to say I did.

I think the key to be able to look back and say I did is reflection. As Douillard and Hamilton (1999) stated "Reflection is affected by the individual, who sometimes looks closely and at other times takes a broader view. Through reflection we can stay look deep or stay on the surface." This is also similar to what Clandinin (1999) referred to as telling "real or cover stories." I believe this year I opened myself up to being vulnerable with Brenda. I was able to look closely at my practice and share real stories with her. However, Brenda is moving and this leaves me with a fear of not finding someone to be able to critically and honestly look at my practices with.

This process of critically looking at my values and my practice has led me to understand how deeply what I believe influences my teaching and consequently my students. Therefore, to be an effective teacher I must know myself well. As Palmer (1998) states:

...teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge- and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subjects. (p.2)

Finally, this process of critically looking at my practice has led me to many new questions. Prior to taking this course I had decided to examine how I could implement the new curriculum effectively into a split grade 2/3 class. Although this may still be something I will struggle with, I realized that it does not come from inside me. Therefore, I have changed my focus to something that I value, which is community.

THE NEXT STEP

It was through talking with Joann that I have decided to continue my focus on the community but in a broader context and in a systematic way. Our question is: How can we develop caring individuals whose goals include ways to contribute something positive to the community (class, school, town) they live in? This time I will, in collaboration with Joann, follow and adapt an action research model in order to conduct an action research project. I also hope to be able to bring other teachers from my school into this or a similar project by sharing with them the process and the benefits.

I have chosen this research question because I had and will have again this year many children who tended to get into a great deal of trouble on the playground. These students are also the ones who were the most difficult to handle in the classroom. I do not believe that children want to misbehave. I think that if they could develop an understanding of the effects of their actions on others then there would be less difficulties in and out of the classroom. I also think it is by giving them an active role in making the classroom, school and community a better place that they will appreciate their place in that community and their ability to change it.

Joann and I have defined a caring individual as someone who moves away from the self or egocentricism and towards an awareness of other's feelings, needs, and problems. We want the students to recognize the whole picture that they are a part of and the reasons behind behaviour. We want them to think about how they would feel in another person's situation before making judgements about them.

We believe we will have evidence of a caring individual from the students' own reflective journal and pictorial representations of caring, survey questions from both students and parents, responses to literature, video tapes and pictures of students in the class, parent observations of the classroom, and stories which the students create to depict kindness.