IN PURSUIT OF A MEANINGFUL EDUCATION:

A REFLECTION ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

by

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Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University

Submitted to the Honors College

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Science

May 2017

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Abstract

The modern United States school system seems to suffer from an essential lack of connection. Dropout rates of failing and disaffected students plague schools around the country, and teacher burnout continues to be a serious problem. In my own experience, I have found that in the eyes of both teachers and students school is often seen as separate from "the real world," and students often do not find their school learning to be relevant or applicable to their everyday lives. As I enter the education field as a first-year teacher next year, I want to equip myself to face these troubling problems. My goal for this thesis is to develop a workable educational philosophy that takes in the realities of today's schools while striving towards the ideal of the school as a place for positive identity development and authentic relational connectedness. To develop this philosophy, I have reflected on my own experiences in the school, both as a student and as a teacher, and integrated this reflection with insights from pedagogical thinkers who have greatly influenced my understanding of the school and the teaching profession. These thinkers include John Dewey, Nel Noddings, Parker Palmer, and Elliot Eisner. It is my hope that the philosophy I develop and articulate through this thesis will represent the beginning of an ever-growing teaching praxis that is both meaningful and sustainable.

Introduction

Most young graduates enter their chosen field equipped with four years of study and relevant internships. However, unique among other young professionals, first-year teachers have a much greater advantage. By their first day on the job, new teachers have spent nearly their entire lives learning to navigate the peculiar environment of the public school classroom.

I attended public schools for sixteen years, from first grade through college. Overall, my experience in public school was overwhelmingly positive--so good, in fact, that I decided in my sophomore year of college to return to public schools for the next thirty-or-so years, as a middle school English Language Arts and Social Studies teacher.

Right now, I am in the final semester of my teacher preparation program. As a student teacher in a North Carolina public school, I am orthographically and symbolically at a crossroads in this journey. In the classroom I have leadership over the students and assist every day in their instruction, like a teacher; but at the same time, I am still a student--still learning about the teaching profession, still shielded from full responsibility for the students' growth, and still distant from a full place in this system. Student teaching is a liminal space, in which I put on the coat of a teacher while being evaluated more like a student.

At times it is a little awkward to be a student teacher--there have been instances when I've had to juggle taking on more responsibilities of teaching with not wanting to overstep the boundaries of another professional's classroom. But at the same time, I have found that this protected space, where I am involved but not in charge, is an excellent opportunity for me to take a close look at both the teaching profession and the experience of a student.

Even from my limited view as a student teacher, one thing that I have already learned about teaching is that it is an enormous, even awe-inspiring, responsibility. The most obvious responsibility is academic: I will be held accountable for the learning of each of the 120+ students who pass through my classroom. This in itself is a hefty expectation when you consider students' vastly different needs, learning styles, and levels of motivation and academic ability. Any classroom may contain students with academic, intellectual, or physical disabilities; academic/intellectual giftedness; a weak or strong work ethic and motivation for academic success; and an incredible diversity in interests, past experiences, race and socioeconomic class, and dispositions, just to name a few--all of which contribute significantly to how a student will respond in the classroom. Each classroom is a dizzying display of diversity in just about every way.

But beyond this huge academic expectation, there is another responsibility that I find even more compelling.

In *The Writing Life* (1989), Annie Dillard says, "The way we spend our days is, of course, the way we spend our lives." During the academic year, students spend nearly half of their waking hours in school. This incredible amount of time spent in the school setting means that, whether the teacher intends it or not, the time that students spend in schools has an enormous effect not only on their academic development, but in their growth as whole, complex individuals. Students are affected for better or for worse by just about every aspect of their school experience, including the social relationships they form within the school, the encouragement (or discouragement) they receive in school, and the creative and expressive

avenues they are encouraged to explore. The sheer number of hours spent in school means that these and other factors have a deep and long-lasting effect on students' lives.

In his definitive 1938 work *Education and Experience*, Dewey refers to the effects of these everyday experiences as "collateral learning." He describes collateral learning as "the formative of enduring attitudes" towards learning as a result of a student's experience in school. In other words, a negative experience will cause students to form negative associations with school and learning in general, whereas positive experiences form correspondingly positive associations, thus strengthening a student's connection to the school and to the pursuit of learning. The goal of education, then, reaches beyond helping students accrue certain knowledge and includes developing positive attitudes towards the pursuit of that knowledge. In Dewey's eyes, "The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning" (48).

Dewey's thinking was (and continues to be) revolutionary because it draws the educator's attention outside of the boundaries of her subject matter and into the mind of the student himself. The principle of collateral learning reminds us that a narrow focus on just the subject matter cannot be effective; the teacher must keep in mind the way students are responding to their education as well. An education that turns into a struggle between the teacher and the student where the teacher tries to force students to learn may result in a short-term victory for the teacher, if the student does manage to absorb the knowledge sufficiently, but this fleeting win could come at a very high cost. If the student feels alienated and misunderstood in the context of learning, the collateral learning he picks up from this

experience may be that school is an unfriendly place, one where he does not belong and cannot succeed.

Like Dewey, I believe that the effect of education goes far beyond instruction in academic areas. Through every interaction across every moment of the school year, teachers, administrators, and peers have an enormous cumulative effect on practically all areas of a student's development. Alongside their expanding knowledge of school subjects like math and geography, students collaterally learn how to *live*: they learn how to navigate various social environments, how to form their identity and sense of self-worth, and how to define their view of success, along with innumerable other critical life lessons. Contrary to the popular statement, school is not preparation for "the real world;" it is the world itself.

Undoubtedly I have been shaped to a large degree by the time I have spent in school. Now, as I stand at the crossroads of two seemingly polar identities--teacher and student--I want to look back on my education and identify some of the ways in which it has influenced me to become the person I am today. I will combine this reflection with insight from some of the educational thinkers who have had the greatest influence on me, including Parker Palmer, John Dewey, Elliot Eisner, and Nel Noddings, to develop a more complete view of the realities and the possibilities of the classroom.

By reflecting on my time as a student and teacher candidate, I hope to create a firm foundation for myself as a thoughtful and empathetic educator, and use that foundation to build a teaching praxis that is sustainable and worthwhile--one that is *real*--for me and for my students.

Part I:

School As "The Real World"

In eleventh grade, I embarked on what was known to be one of the most difficult courses at my high school: AP U.S. History. My teacher, Ms. Arrington, was a school legend, known both for producing excellent AP exam scores and demanding extremely high standards from her students. Seniors who finished her class in the previous year reminisced on the experience like war vets swapping combat stories. Taking APUSH and hoping to get a high grade meant long nights of reading the textbook and studying, massive amounts of memorization, and always the dread of being surprised with a timed essay assignment in class.

Ms. Arrington herself was an alarming woman, the picture of one of those teachers whose sanity you question in whispers. She was prone to start yelling in the middle of class—not necessarily because anyone had done anything wrong, but just because she felt like a little more volume was needed for the day. She pounced on unsuspecting students for answers and her mood when asked a question was often mercurial. In short, most of the kids in her class were scared senseless of her.

Taking her class was the first time that many of the high-achieving students enrolled had ever experienced failure. For most of these students, in any other context, a failing grade on a quiz or an essay was unthinkable—but few went through Ms. Arrington's room unscathed.

One day near the beginning of the semester, we received the grades for our first major assignment, a tough, detail-specific quiz on the first three chapters of our textbook.

Overall, by honors standards, the class had done abysmally. Many of the students had failed. I was one of them.

Despair sunk like a stone in my gut. I looked at the score and immediately worried about what this would do to my grade in the class, what I could do to bring it back up, and how I could ever have allowed this to happen in the first place.

But Ms. Arrington, for her part, looked supremely unconcerned. She leaned against a file cabinet, she with her short-cut, graying brown hair and her teacherly glasses, and gazed at the dismayed class with just the slightest hint of amusement.

She explained that she knew we all were stressing about this grade right now, worried that it would ruin us forever. "But," she continued, "in the sea of life... What is this one little quiz grade going to matter?"

Immediately we were abuzz with questions. Sure, the "sea of life" was one thing—but did that mean that our grade would still be okay? Would she drop this quiz? Or maybe weight it lightly so that it didn't have too much of an impact? Could we have a do-over?

No.

The quiz was a quiz; she didn't drop the score, and it continued to pull down my grade for a while, though I eventually brought it up again. Throughout the rest of the year she proceeded to hammer us with increasingly difficult assignments and ever-higher expectations.

For me, APUSH with Ms. Arrington was a year of crawling through dozens of pages of the textbook every night, a year of anxiety over my quiz and essay scores, a year of panicking over whether I would ever be able to remember all of the information I needed to

get pass the AP exam. In the end, I did: True to Ms. Arrington's record, I finished the AP

U.S. History exam with a 5, the highest score.

But in the end, once the exam was over and the dust had settled, most of the

information faded away. Five years after I took Ms. Arrington's class, I remember very little

of what I learned. While the class did leave me with a decent understanding of the outline of

our country's history, the vast majority of what I so anxiously crammed into my brain in

order to pass the final exam has been lost.

Except for this. Despite my loss of almost every fact I thought I knew that year, the

one comment from Ms. Arrington that I didn't quite understand at the time still echoes in my

head from time to time. The "sea of life" has stayed.

My eleventh grade year was by far the busiest and most academically packed year of

my pre-college education. For me and for most other college-bound students, this was the

time when we were told to enroll in the most challenging courses and devote ourselves to

extra-curricular activities and leadership roles, all in an effort to bulk up our

quickly-approaching college applications. That year I was swamped with so much work that I

nicknamed my bedroom the "homework cave." I would go there immediately after school,

marching band practice, or musical rehearsal, and stay--writing English essays, solving

calculus problems, or, most often, reading and scribbling notes for U.S. History--for hours,

usually staying up late and taking a break only to eat dinner.

I accrued a massive amount of information that year--geography, names of politicians

and acts and court cases, dates of famous battles in the Civil War, and a host of other

information. But soon after I no longer needed this information for a test, I quickly forgot it. This pattern of brain-dumping became routine for me throughout high school, as nearly every class required me to memorize a vast amount of information that had relatively little meaning for me outside of its importance on a test. At the end of every semester I unconsciously cleared out most of what I had learned from the previous eighteen weeks, to make room for the new flood of information that was about to come in.

Beyond the simple information, I also learned a host of school-related skills from my APUSH class: They included learning how to work diligently and unquestioningly, how to take notes and memorize crucial information, and how to write an acceptably formulaic yet detail-rich essay in thirty-five minutes.

And underneath that, what I was *really* learning--the collateral learning, the lessons that went far deeper and lingered far longer than the basic instruction and the skills development--were very different lessons yet. I learned that I could be rewarded for my efforts in the classroom, not only with good grades, but also through social rewards like my teachers' approval and my parents' pride in my achievement. In some ways, I began to base my identity in my schoolwork. Though no one ever taught this to me intentionally, I started subconsciously believing that if I was a hardworking student who received good grades, then I was acceptable; losing that status--getting a low score or otherwise failing to be seen as one of the "top" students at the school--was a deep blow to how I saw myself, and how I imagined I was seen by others. Perhaps this is why that failing test grade hit me so hard, like a stone sinking to the pit of my stomach: A low score on a single quiz suddenly called into

question my very identity. The dread I experienced when I thought that my efforts were ruined was immediate, and it demanded to be felt.

But in one moment, Ms. Arrington was able to step beyond her role as an AP U.S. History instructor and address that dread. When she made the comment about the "sea of life," Ms. Arrington briefly lifted our focus from the narrow confines of the school day and connected what we were currently experiencing to the bigger picture of our lives. She recontextualized our experience to remind us that school did not define us.

At the time, I was amazed by this. The thought of a teacher telling us *not* to worry so much about a failing quiz grade--in contrast to the much more familiar pattern of teachers stressing the importance of their subject matter--was practically incomprehensible to me. I couldn't get it to square at first with my conception of what school was supposed to be.

Throughout eleventh grade, it sometimes felt like we students were a colony of ants, constantly moving and working with our heads pointed down. Ms. Arrington had reminded us that while our work was important, there was still a world of sunshine outside for us to explore. Although I had a class schedule full of teachers telling me to plan for my future, this moment in Ms. Arrington's class was one time when I was reminded that my future would involve greater things than school.

In the summer after eleventh grade, I attended the North Carolina Governor's School, a five- to six-week program that was acclaimed for its thought-provoking, unconventional teaching methods. It was also known for having an extremely competitive admissions process. On the first day of this program I sat in a room with fifteen or so of my

peers, all of us eyeing each other nervously, making small talk about our schools, hobbies, and hopes for the summer--and secretly wondering how we had each stacked up in the hierarchical admissions list that had gotten us here.

Soon our instructor entered the room. She was a willowy, long-haired woman in her forties, and she spoke in a lilting voice and smiled as she eyed us all sitting awkwardly in our deskless, semi-circled chairs. Our first assignment was simple. She wrote a question on the board and then stepped back, waiting expectantly for conversation to begin.

"What is grass?"

I was perplexed. What kind of an answer was the instructor looking for? Could this question really be as simple as it seemed, or was she expecting a deep, impressively philosophical response? I held my tongue, afraid to speak the obvious.

Slowly my classmates' responses trickled in, spoken as questions. Green? Short? Uh, grows in lawns?

The instructor welcomed our answers but gently pushed back. Is grass always *green? Where else does it grow?*

And after a lengthy discussion of exactly what grass may or may not be, the instructor led us outside into a field and asked us to spend twenty minutes examining the spiky green (and yellow and brown) shards we found growing there. There was no talking, no questioning or note-taking; just twenty solid minutes for us to see all that we could see.

I crouched on the ground, bare knees scraping against the itchy blades. I breathed in the scent of chlorophyll and damp earth. Then I looked at the grass.

I noticed the delicate ridges on its leaves, the brittle brown edge where the top was shorn off, the neatly folded root tucked securely into the ground. I noticed the sheer magnitude of the number of blades and the way they crisscrossed and tangled and drooped over one another, and all the tiny insects that crawled from one leaf to another like morning commuters on a microcosmic, labyrinthine highway.

It was true that grass was short and green and growing in lawns, but this grass was so much more. As I kneeled on the ground, my face just centimeters away from the little sea of twining blades, I realized that grass held much more interest than I ever would have ever known, had I not bent down to look.

I wrote before of the way that I had learned in school to form my identity and measure my self-worth based on my academic performance. That June day in Governor's School, my fifteen peers and I started off the day locked in anxiety over the same problem. Eyeing each other in that small room, we wondered how we compared against each other, whether we were still top students in this situation or if our new peer group had left us at the bottom of the heap. Our thoughts had a competitive bent. Our answers were weighed to see how smart they would make us look in the eyes of our instructor and our peers. Even as we laughed, bonded, and joked around with each other, our interactions--at least at the beginning of the summer--were often accompanied with an undercurrent of anxiety, the fear of not measuring up.

Parker Palmer describes the same phenomenon in his book *The Courage to Teach*. According to Palmer, both students and teachers are commonly locked in fear: the paralyzing

fear of being discovered as a fraud; of being confronted or disrespected; of being questioned and seeing the identity one has worked so hard to establish suddenly crumble away. Palmer considers this fear to be the number-one problem that stunts both educational and personal growth. Teachers who are trapped in fear separate themselves from students with a protective wall of their own ego; meanwhile, fearful students are competitive and self-conscious, equally distant from their teacher, and often silent in class, unless they believe they know what answer the teacher is after.

At Governor's School, my familiar identity as one of the highest-achieving students in the room was suddenly thrown out the window, as I found myself among a group of students of similar age who all seemed to be a hundred times more brilliant and accomplished than me. Looking back, I now wonder if everyone else in the room felt that way, too. But at the time, all I could feel was the crushing sense of my own inadequacy. Because of that, for days I was nervous about showing any sign of my true self to my peers, instead trying to find a mask that would help me feel like I belonged. And I was so afraid of revealing my unpreparedness, my complete lack of merit for being chosen for this honor, that at first I was even afraid to answer a question as simple as the definition of grass.

Of course, when I forgot my inhibitions and took the time to simply gaze at the grass, taking in whatever it had to offer to me, I learned so much more than I could have by giving the smartest-sounding answer. When I knew that I wouldn't be judged by the quality of my observations, it gave me the space to really appreciate what I saw. For the first time I noticed how intricate something as seemingly mundane as grass could be.

Palmer writes that a classroom rooted in fear also preserves a rigid social structure in which the teacher is the intermediary between the object of study and the students. She is the sole interpreter of the object of study, and students learn from what she has to say about the object. In contrast, a free classroom--a learning community--is one in which students and teacher are all focused together on the object of study itself. In this environment, the teacher is also a student, and the students can be teachers in turn.

My fearless teacher did not claim to know everything about grass, nor did she expect us to. What she did was open up a space where we could explore and realize that we did not have to be ashamed of our incomplete knowledge.

Happily, after a few days at Governor's School, I learned to show more of myself without being afraid of being found unworthy. For the most part of those five weeks, we were a community of happy nerds, supporting one another, forming strong friendships, and exploring our areas of study without fear. However, there seemed to be a faint cloud of insecurity and competition that lingered persistently over many of us. Social comparison was a neural pathway so deeply ingrained in our minds that breaking that pattern seemed nearly impossible.

It wasn't until I left for college that I began dismantling these habits of defining myself externally and weighing myself against others' achievements. In college I was finally released from the pressure of preparing the perfect college application; I was happily enrolled in the school of my choice, which was excellent though not top-tier; and I was working toward a degree in my dream career, teaching. And suddenly, I felt like a large part of my identity had been stripped away.

Throughout high school I had unconsciously defined so much of myself based on other people's perception of me, and especially whether they viewed me as successful and high-achieving. In college, where I was part of a fairly non-competitive major and nobody really cared about my GPA, I felt almost adrift--I hardly knew how to measure my own worth anymore.

Slowly, over the past four years, I have learned to untangle my identity from my level of success in school. This has involved learning to set and work toward my own goals, unassociated with rank or prestige, and re-evaluating what I value about myself and why. As I have moved toward developing characteristics that I find intrinsically important I have experienced a slow unwinding of the fear that Parker Palmer describes students and teachers being wrapped up in. I have become more accepting of myself in my successes and in my missteps.

Now as I enter the school again as a teacher, I want to do whatever I can to avoid teaching my students the same lessons I learned, that their worth is dependent on their academic performance. However, while I do not want school success to *become* a student's identity, I do think that school can help students to develop a positive identity. The ideal classroom is one where academic achievement is not entwined into students' sense of self-worth, yet the work of the classroom still allows students opportunities to pursue positive growth.

In eleventh grade, going to English class was one of the most emotionally variable parts of my day. In a typical English class period I might be filled with boundless frustration

over a writing concept that I hadn't quite grasped, laugh at the ridiculousness of the most recent political rhetoric, rejoice at unexpectedly securing a decent assignment grade, or—on the worst days—be filled with anxious dread at the drop of the words "in-class essay." My teacher, Mr. Logan, was at turns a critic, coach, and comedian, and his zinging commentary combined with his obvious passion for caring for students and subject inspired us all to pursue excellence in his class, engaging us with a fervor that rhetorical analysis had never inspired in us before.

Ostensibly, our goal in AP English Language was to master the basics of rhetoric, understanding how speakers modified their language based on the subject, their intent, and the specific audience to which they spoke, and learning how to structure our own language for these various purposes. In reality, the true goal which we so ardently worked toward was impressing Mr. Logan.

Our teacher possessed more than a little flair for the dramatic. At the beginning of the year he explained to us the grading system he would use on our papers throughout the semester, in preparation for the AP exam in the spring, with the kind of solemnity that is usually reserved for arcane religious rituals. A score of 1-3 meant that the paper was insufficient, lacking a properly developed thesis or enough relevant evidence to make a strong case. A 4 or 5 needed more development but was approaching the level of complexity needed in our writing. A 6 to 8 represented a strong and effective paper. We should be very proud to earn a score in this range.

"And a 9?" Mr. Logan lifted one finger, gazing at us all soberly. "Finger of God."

For a moment, all of the air went out of the room. And from that moment on, everyone in the classroom was absolutely determined to earn a 9 at some point before we left his class.

Throughout the rest of the year, we all worked like maniacs to do the kind of work that would gain his attention, earn his approval. We learned to banter with him and, through that joking, became deeply engaged in the topics in class. We felt free to push the limits in his classroom, to try things that we never would have considered in another class. These ranged from the academically risky—presenting powerful orations, or trying our hand at a bold text analysis—to the plain ridiculous: one day a classmate to whom Mr. Logan referred as "Eagle Scout" brought in a foldable tent and set up camp, right at the front of the classroom. And we pushed ourselves to think more deeply, to make more connections, because whenever a student made a comment that Mr. Logan found particularly insightful or intelligent, he rewarded us by rolling his eyes, spiraling his fingers around his gleaming bald head like a flashing police siren, and wailing, "Neeeerd aleeeeeeert!" In this strange, theatrical, wonderful man's classroom, never had it been so cool to be called a nerd.

Mr. Logan taught AP English Language, Shakespeare, and Speech and Debate at my former high school. In a typical high school, any student who isn't a literary geek might consider these some of the most dreaded classes of the day. Yet for decades Mr. Logan consistently created a classroom community in which students of all interests and ability levels loved to take part. Throughout my year in his class, our desire to please Mr. Logan led us to push ourselves to develop better writing and more critical literary and rhetorical

analysis skills. We followed with enthusiasm wherever he led, even into such complex pieces as *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Tempest*.

We were all awed by Mr. Logan's knowledge, his wit, and his piercing sense of humor, but if he had possessed these characteristics alone I doubt we would have wanted to emulate him. More than anything, it was the obvious passion that overlaid all he said and did that instilled in us such a strong desire to make him proud. Though he played a big game at the head of the classroom, we knew that he sincerely cared about us. Essays came back scribbled over with detailed comments and indications of areas where we had done particularly well; if any of us had a problem--academic or otherwise--we knew we could come to him at any time for guidance; and he found great satisfaction in writing lengthy, persuasive recommendation letters for current and former students alike. It wasn't that we were all naturally enthralled by rhetorical analysis or Shakespearean drama in itself. But because we mattered to him, his subject mattered to us.

Apart from the deep level of respect and concern that we knew Mr. Logan had for us, in his class we also had *fun.* He was witty and dramatic; the multiplicity of voices that lived inside his head could make even a vocabulary exercise entertaining. Students' projects and impromptu artwork papered the walls--frequently in the form of bizarre or humorous portraits of Mr. Logan himself. In his classroom, silliness was encouraged, and creativity thrived.

I have heard some teachers criticize what they see as the growing need for teachers to be "entertainers" in order to teach. They nostalgically contrast modern students, whom they

describe as easily distractible and quick to check out of anything that doesn't capture their interest, with the quiet and obedient students of just a couple of decades ago.

I empathize with this frustration. In my limited experience I have already found how disheartening it can be to work hard on designing a lesson for students, only to see them ignore your instruction and sleep, talk, or pull out cell phones in class. It can feel like a slap to the face of all your time spent, all of your genuine desire for them to have an engaging and effective educational experience--although students almost certainly don't intend for their actions to have that effect. When you have worked hard to create a lesson that you believe will be beneficial for students, it's natural to want them to simply accept and do what you ask.

But this situation also reminds me of criticisms Dewey leveled against the education system he witnessed in the early 20th century, which he dubbed the "old school." This "old school" was one where the classroom was set up with a strict and unquestionable hierarchy of teacher over student. Lessons were taught with tight discipline, and students were expected to simply sit and absorb what the teacher said, often through rote memorization, and with little context or practiced application. The benefit of this system was that teachers were able to accomplish their aims with little opposition from their students, as objections were not permitted and disruption was not tolerated.

But Dewey explains that the costs of this system were terribly high. For one, the practice of teaching concepts "in water-tight compartments" (48), or without application and context, meant that students only really understood what they learned in the context of the school--not for use in real life. And even more troubling, Dewey believed that this school

was set up on a foundation of falsehood. When students were not permitted to speak their

minds or even physically move the way they wanted to, they hid behind masks of silence and

good behavior, withholding their true selves from the classroom. The teacher, too, had to

wear a mask, as she maintained solid boundaries of authority and control that necessarily

separated her from her students. This is reminiscent of Palmer's writings about fear and the

way it distorts and debilitates both teachers and students. Dewey believed that being forced

to learn under these conditions day after day would squash a child's natural curiosity and

desire to learn, ultimately stunting the child's development of independent goals, passions,

and purposes.

In contrast, Mr. Logan's classroom was a place where we were unafraid to be as

goofy and creative as possible. We all wanted to learn what Mr. Logan was teaching us, but it

wasn't only the "smart kids" who felt accepted and valued in his class. Everyone had

something to contribute--even if it was as obscure as setting up camp in the classroom. All of

these experiences, no matter how ridiculous, strengthened our sense of community within the

classroom and our motivation to make our teacher proud.

Students today may not be as willing to stay silent and passively listen as they were in

the past, but their new desire for activity and engagement can be a powerful educational force

if we can only learn how to harness that energy. As a teacher, I don't want to underestimate

the value of fun. The classroom is a place for hard work and serious effort, but that can, and I

think should, be tempered with enjoyment--because the classroom should not be a sterile,

isolated environment, but an exercise of real life. And as Dewey would attest, teaching our

students to find pleasure in learning and pursuing challenges can be the most important thing they learn in our class, no matter what the subject area.

Near the end of the fall semester of my sophomore year of college, I spent a solid week locked inside the College of Education from 9pm until early in the morning. Every evening after classes and club meetings I walked there with a snack and a water bottle and camped out in the computer lab, working, working. This wasn't a punishment inflicted upon me; it was voluntary. I had one week to complete a stop-motion animation piece as the final project for a course in educational media, and I was determined to do the best I could.

For two nights I sketched out every scene of my one-and-a-half-minute movie by hand on a whiteboard in an empty classroom, using a rainbow of dry-erase markers. I grabbed stacks of educational DVDs to serve as a makeshift tripod and scuttled back and forth between the board and my precariously-balanced camera, taking snapshots that would soon transform the drawings into hundreds of individual video frames. My hands cramped and became caked with marker residue as I continued, painstakingly drawing and redrawing the pictures, moving them each time just a fraction of an inch forward, slowly advancing the film's brief plot.

When I was finally done setting out the scenes and taking all of the pictures, I moved down a floor into the building's chilly media lab. The room was unnaturally quiet as I sat there alone into the wee hours of the night, focused on editing and arranging the clips just right--compiling the images, making them flow together seamlessly, selecting music and recording homemade sound effects that I would then apply to the video to fit the tone I

wanted, to create the perfect video I had dreamed up a week before. I shifted constantly in the squishy lab chair to fight the familiar prickling feeling of my legs falling asleep, and every so often I stood up to stretch or walk stiffly around the room, shivering under the steady thrum of the room's industrial air conditioner. My eyes were heavy with tiredness and at times I fought to stay awake as I thought, Just one more edit. Just one more tweak.

Finally after several hours of working I would stumble out of the lab into the pre-dawn November cold, shivering my way back to the promised warmth of my dorm room. But every night, despite the tiredness, despite the long hours and the quiet and the cold, I returned to the lab, eager to get back to work on the project that I was so invested in.

The project--that which absorbed my focus, interest, and hours that would normally have been spent sleeping--was not anything profound or groundbreaking. It was nothing more than a silly story about two aliens who make their debut on Earth to share tasty intergalactic cake with the planet's citizens. Nevertheless, on the day we presented all of our projects to the class a week later, I was filled up with pride as my instructor and my classmates watched the fruits of my labor. It thrilled me to share my work before an audience, however small, and hear them laugh at the noises my pink-and-green aliens made, or compliment the effort I had put into creating this short clip.

At the end of the semester, what mattered the most to me was not the grade I made on the project or even the course. The achievement that I most valued was the fact that through my own efforts I had seen my ideas transformed into action, my imagination turned into something real. That was a thrill unlike any other.

This experience in college stood out to me because it was one of the few times when I have been so invested in a school project that I have pursued excellence in it for the sake of the project itself, rather than an external reward like a high grade. Certainly the fact that it would be graded played a role in my motivation--I probably wouldn't have worked on the project quite so intensely if it hadn't been due the following week. But what kept me coming back to the computer lab night after night, staying for hours at a time, was an intrinsic desire to do excellent work on the project, beyond what was required of me to get a good grade.

This switch--changing the motivation from the external reward of grades to the internal rewards of a desire for excellence--is an educational game changer. I was able to summon amazing amounts of energy and focus for this project that I certainly wouldn't have been able to muster for something I wasn't as interested in. And the biggest difference of all is in the way that this project made me *feel*.

In ordinary situations, upon completing a big school project, I would feel relief about finally having the daunting task over with, and perhaps some anxiety about the grade I would receive. Often after finishing an essay I would shut my computer and put it away, refusing to look at my writing again. With this project, on the other hand, what I felt was an overwhelming sense of pride in what I had created. The hard work and long hours that I had put into creating the video gave it value in my eyes, and made me eager to show it to anyone who was willing to watch. Sharing my work with my classmates, friends, and family filled me with a deep sense of fulfillment.

The project I created through this experience could be considered fairly useless; it has no practical merit, apart from being briefly entertaining, and it doesn't contain any kind of

serious message. But despite the silliness of my final video, I believe that this was a more valuable learning experience for me than creating a project involving, say, high-level calculus would be, because of the collateral learning that I gained alongside the project. In creating this video I learned that I had the ability to learn a new skill and create something new with it, and I strengthened my association of hard work and creativity with positive results. These results were not only the product itself, but even more important, the sense of fulfillment and excitement that came along with creating it. Of course I also learned how to use stop-motion animation, which is a skill that I can take with me and use in other ways in the future. But if I had not enjoyed making this stop-motion video in the first place, it would not be a skill that I would be likely to use again in the future, and the whole point of this project would have been practically moot.

The process of creating my video project was possibly the most important part of my experience. There is something deeply, even spiritually, satisfying about being able to create something. As silly as my project was, it was a chance for me to focus all of my energy into one task only, and dedicate myself to making that object of my focus as excellent as it could be. While drawing and editing the frames of my stop-motion project, I became lost for hours at a time in a state of *flow*, as the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi termed it: the all-encompassing absorption in a task which Csikszentmihalyi theorizes results in true, deep happiness. When I was immersed in the activity of creating my project, very little mattered apart from what I was doing in that moment. I was at once oblivious to the world around me and closely attuned to the task at hand. The feeling--the flow--was deeply satisfying, a reward all in itself, apart from the product that was created through it.

I've experienced this sense of flow before in other acts of creating. In my senior year of high school, a spare elective space in my class schedule finally gave me the chance to take art, something I'd wanted to do for years. In art class I found a kind of bliss by plugging in my iPod headphones and zoning into the task at hand, focusing for an hour and a half at a time on nothing more than the music and the absorbing process of whatever drawing or painting I was working on. Just as the time I spent working on my stop-motion project, this time was deeply satisfying to me. The unperturbable peace I experienced while listening to music and focusing in fully on my art was only enhanced by the product I eventually created.

I earlier mentioned Dewey's vision for the "new school." This was a school in which education was based on experiences, and students were given autonomy and freedom--with limits. These limits were not meant to be restrictive, but facilitative, and they were usually in the form of guidance or gentle redirection from a caring, invested adult. Within this structure, students would be able to decide on a goal and then receive the tools and support they needed in order to accomplish it. Dewey believed this kind of school would allow students to learn deep and lasting lessons, both in the form of useful skills and in the knowledge that they could find satisfaction in pursuing and achieving their own purposes.

Both my high school art class and the college class in which I created my stop-motion animation piece were two excellent examples of Dewey's "new school" principles in action. In both cases, part of the great appeal of the project was that it was fully mine; I was given the autonomy and space to come up with my idea for the artistic project. Once I had decided on that purpose, my teachers then equipped me with the training and guidance I needed to carry it out to its end. And again in both cases, I ended the experience with a worthwhile

product of which I was proud, a new skill (or skills) that I could use in the future, and the

knowledge that I could create art and communicate through diverse media.

With the exception of specialty arts "magnet" schools, modern public schools tend to

prioritize a narrow range of cognition that leaves little room for creativity and art. Most

schools push math and English--numerical/mathematical and linguistic skills--above other

classes. Secondary to those two main priorities are the other two parts of the "core"

curriculum, science and social studies or history. Creative arts, including visual art, music,

dance, and theater, are generally pushed to the realm of electives and after-school activities.

But I think this is a great mistake.

The educational thinker Elliot Eisner would agree. Eisner is the author of the 1994

book *Cognition and Curriculum Reconsidered*. In this book, he defines education as a

process of learning to interpret and communicate meaning through different forms of

representation, or media. For example, written language and dance may both be used to

communicate a message, but decoding the message in those media requires two very

different sets of skills.

Eisner postulates that mathematical and linguistic forms of representation are

emphasized over other forms (which include, but are not limited to, movement, sound, and

visuals) because the former two are seen as more objectively understood, and thus more

universally practical for everyday life. But he rejects this idea. In Eisner's view, no form of

representation is fully subjective or fully objective; even the most narrow forms of

communication will still have a layer of subjectivity depending on the disposition of the

person who is interpreting it. Moreover, Eisner argues that developing students' skill in

interpreting a wide variety of forms, far from limiting their ability to understand language and math, actually enhances their ability in those areas. He writes that practicing interpreting and encoding messages through diverse forms helps to develop individuals' "imaginative conceptualization" (36), or their ability to understand new ideas by connecting them to another concept using a different form of representation. Therefore, the more forms of representation with which a student is familiar, the more readily he will understand a new concept.

Finally, Eisner unequivocally rejects the idea that learning to communicate through forms of representation such as movement, sound, and visuals--those which are most commonly found in the arts--is a practical skill. In Eisner's view, interpreting and creating meaning is the work of life itself. Everything we do to communicate with each other or make sense of our lives is based on our ability to interpret meanings through various forms, and our ability to respond--to *create* meaning--is no less crucial. As we move through the world, our senses provide us with experiences; our skill in interpreting forms of expression helps us make sense of those experiences; and finally, our ability to create meaning through different forms of meaning enables us to communicate and connect with others through what we have experienced. This meaning-making, on both an individual and interpersonal or social level, is intimately tied with humans' sense of self-efficacy. A student who is skilled in interpreting and creating meaning through only a select few forms of representation is stunted in his ability to engage proactively with his world.

For these reasons, it is critical to try to include as many different forms of expression as possible within instruction. Of course, it is also important because every student deserves

to have an educational experience that he connects meaningfully to, where he experiences flow and takes great pride in the product he creates through it. Providing practice with various forms of representation can help a student to discover a form through which he can communicate clearly.

Having a teacher there to guide and support him in that experience, like my teachers or Dewey's educators in the "new school," can be hugely influential. I would not have been able to create my projects without my art teacher and college professor there to show me how, and after I was able to take up the project on my own, it meant the world to me for them to compliment my work and encourage me in my progress. Knowing that a teacher cares about what is important to a student can be an amazing encouragement to him and can set him on a solid path for a self-motivated, fulfilling journey of learning and growth.

Part II:

Beginning the Praxis

In the semester before student teaching, I began an internship: A five-week, full-time teacher-shadowing experience at a local middle school, where I would be able to witness the daily routines of a middle school teacher and help out with instruction. On the first day I arrived in the classroom early, gratefully introduced myself to my mentor teacher, and then paced the room in eager anticipation. All the details of the day had been carefully chosen and arranged in advance: My young-professional outfit of a blouse and aubergine slacks; my binder full of paper for writing down observations and notes, as well as a print-out of the school schedule, Common Core standards, and district calendar; and, best of all, the polished, gold-painted nametag that I clipped proudly to my chest, introducing me to the class as Ms. Lowder. I was full to the brim with excitement, eager to experience working in a middle school classroom and getting to know all of the students I would soon meet.

Before long students arrived to fill up the room. First period began, and I spent the period observing the teacher, the classroom, and most of all, the students. I willed myself to remember their faces, sneaking glances at papers to connect them to a name, and studying their facial expressions, clothes and engagement level to divine whatever clues I could about who they really were. How did they feel about being in class right now? Does the girl with thick ropes of braids and almond-colored skin enjoy writing poetry, or does she find it impossible to understand? Was the young boy with a Hornets basketball jersey and a glazed expression strategizing for the game after school, or mulling over a conversation with his crush, or consumed by worry about what would happen when he went home? I watched and

wondered, and as I wondered, I made up little stories about each of the students. I tried to

imagine what each of their hopes and values and worries, their skills and challenges, likes

and dislikes, might be.

It is quite likely that none of the personas I assigned to my students in my head were

remotely accurate. But by the end of the period, I was filled with hope that with time, the

knowledge that I developed of each of them would be deep and true. I was sobered by the

challenge of getting to know each one of my students but so excited by the possibility of it.

Then they left, and the next class of thirty or so students filed in. And the next one.

And the next one.

By the time the final bell rang and the last class made their way out the doors,

scattering to buses or after-school sports or their parents' minivans, my energy was different

from what it had been at the start of the day. More than a hundred and twenty students had

just passed before my eyes, with just fifty-two minutes at a time to reach thirty of them. Just

being in the classroom had opened my eyes to a small part of the daily reality for a middle

school teacher, and at that moment, I was overwhelmed by the expectation that would soon

be set before me. With so many students and so little time, how could I possibly give every

student the individual attention they deserve?

This internship took place only about six months ago, at the end of the fall semester
of my senior year. Although I had very few of the real expectations of a teacher placed on me
at the time, that day was still the first step in redefining some of the idealistic expectations I
have held prior to gaining experience in the classroom.

I think it is important to acknowledge that many of us aspiring teachers dream of entering the field based on expectations that do not always line up with the reality of teaching. Before I entered the classroom that day, I dreamed of getting to know each of my students deeply, and teaching in a way that addressed each of their unique strengths, challenges, and interests. When I left the classroom, I still believed that this was possible, but being in the room had begun to open my eyes to just how challenging such a goal would be.

It is easy to see why aspiring teachers hold unrealistic expectations of the teaching life. Our society cherishes the teacher-savior narrative: the inspiring story of that one feisty, passionate, determined young educator who enters a classroom full of brokenness and helps the students discover brand-new reasons to have hope. For many of us future teachers, it is not enough to simply teach our students about academic subjects; we want to "make a difference" in the lives of our students. In our heart of hearts, we believe that education can save lives. And we want to do that for our students. We want to be the teacher who inspires them, who shows them that they can succeed, that they are leaders, that they are valuable and capable and important. We don't see teaching as simply a job; we consider it a vocation--a calling.

But this beautiful, lofty rhetoric does not tell the whole story of the classroom. For one thing, it doesn't include just how difficult it is to teach a classroom that is full to the brim with students with a dizzying array of unique needs, dispositions, and ability levels--and often with a shortage of resources. When I observed teachers in the past, I would sometimes disapprove of the way that they seemed to hammer students with school concerns, leaving little room for deeper connection to the students' everyday lives. While I hope to teach my

classroom a little differently, I now see that these teachers were really just doing their job. Education doesn't always save lives; sometimes it just teaches a kid math. And that's okay.

The elevated, idealistic view of teaching also fails to really acknowledge the fact that a teacher is just one person. It isn't always possible for us to do everything we want to do, and attempting to hold ourselves to a superhuman standard can result in disillusionment and even burnout. After teaching some myself and observing full-time teachers at length, I have seen that it is sometimes all one can do just to keep up with the basic demands of teaching, without going beyond those to do something truly extraordinary.

I don't mean to say that making a meaningful difference in a student's life is impossible--if I believed that, I might not have enough motivation to continue in the profession. But one thing that I have already learned, even before entering the field as a certified teacher, is that finding the opportunity to do that is *difficult*. It requires dedication and sacrifice to push beyond the already-high expectations of teaching and reach out to a student, and even then, the process is never completely in one's control.

Nel Noddings writes eloquently on this subject in her work, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education.* According to Noddings, a caring relationship is a partnership between the one-caring and the cared-for, in which each partner has to fulfill certain roles for the relationship to continue. These roles are, of course, different for the two parties; the one-caring is the one who is directly giving care to the cared-for. However, the cared-for participates in and strengthens the relationship by responding to the caring--either directly, by expressing appreciation or gratitude, on indirectly, by growing and demonstrating that the needs which the one-caring is tending to are being met.

A key point of Noddings' philosophy is that this caring relationship can only function if both parties are willing for it to work. No amount of pure passion, enthusiasm, and dedication in a teacher can change a student if he is not willing; the effort must come from both sides. Therefore, if a student is not willing to respond to a teacher's invitation to take part in a caring relationship, there is little a teacher can do to establish one. Pursuing a caring relationship where there is not recognition and reciprocity is ultimately unhealthy for both the one-caring and the would-be cared-for.

As teachers, then, our capacity for caring for our students is naturally limited by whether or not those students are willing to accept care from us. Moreover, Noddings also reminds teachers, and all other caring professionals, that caring is limited by our own individual capacity. We cannot truly be all things for all people, and our ability to care is often restricted by the number of potential cared-fors around us. Although we are care-givers, we must care for ourselves as well.

As a caring and effective teacher, perhaps the best way I can enter the classroom is with a mindset of less expectation and more openness to whatever my students bring before me. I want to view my teaching as a gift I am giving my students. With it, I give myself: my time, my care, and my limitations.

If I do justice to my students by teaching them to the best of my ability, and remain receptive to the possibility of deeper connection, I believe I will be able to cultivate meaningful caring relationships where the conditions are right for them to grow. I may not be able to save every student. But for any student whom circumstance and receptivity combine to put in my way to help, I hope I can make a difference for him.

It was a simple situation that quickly became much more serious. Dylan, a student in the seventh grade social studies classroom in which I was student teaching, was standing up beside his desk, shuffling around with his hands in his pockets, while the rest of the class sat and worked on their World War I assignment in groups. When I asked him to sit down, Dylan looked me in the eye, smiled, and point-blank refused.

Exasperated, I tried every strategy I could summon from my arsenal to work with Dylan without escalating the power struggle that was already at play. I asked him why he refused to sit down; he replied, "I don't want to." I told him he could do his work standing up; he left his hands in his pockets and started humming, eyes fixed up at the ceiling. I asked him specific questions about the assignment; he refused to answer.

Finally I recognized that I had to turn my attention to the rest of my students. I left Dylan where he was, standing, humming, shouting out frequent comments to his friends across the room. Thankfully, the rest of the class continued their work. When the bell rang a few minutes later to signal the end of the period, Dylan still hadn't picked up a pencil.

But before Dylan went out the door to head to electives, I tapped him on the shoulder. Nervous, but full of a burning desire to reach common ground, I asked him to talk to me in the hallway for a couple of minutes.

We stood next to the lockers amidst the din of middle schooler activity. "I'm not mad," I prefaced the conversation, trying to assure him that he wasn't about to yet again experience being chewed out by a teacher. "This isn't about you not wanting to sit in your

chair during class. I don't care about that. I just wanted to ask you… What do you want to do

when you leave school?"

The emotions that flickered behind his expression were complex. For a moment I

thought he would say something mocking, or even just walk away without giving a response;

after all, he knew there was nothing I could do to stop him. But when he spoke, it was with

the most honesty I'd ever heard from him.

"I want to own a construction company."

I was shocked. This small admission seemed incredible coming from a student who

had just minutes before refused to even sit down in his chair when asked. After weeks of

nothing but opposition, it was an unexpected honor to hear this student tell me something

about himself. And for him, after weeks of placing himself at odds with me, it must have been

an amazing act of vulnerability.

Excited, I seized my chance, jumping into a spiel about leadership and responsibility

that I hoped was an inspiring, motivational pep talk. In reality it probably came off much

more strongly as a lecture. By the time I was done talking, Dylan's expression was a wall

facing me once again. He extricated himself from my reach as quickly as he could and loped

off to his electives.

As he walked away, eager to leave my classroom behind for another day, I was left

with mixed feelings. I was excited that to have seen this unexpected new side of Dylan,

thinking that this knowledge could perhaps give me a better idea of how to communicate with

him. But at the same time I felt that I had misstepped again, accidentally turning what could

have been a small opportunity for relationship building into yet another experience of

alienation, pushing Dylan farther away from a positive relationship with me and with school in general. As frustrating as this student could be in the classroom, I wanted him to succeed, and I was afraid that his attitude and failing grades would make it nearly impossible for him to do so.

Dylan was a mystery to me. Though he was eager to move on, throughout the rest of the day he lingered in my mind, haunting me. I wondered if I would ever be able to understand who he really was.

Earlier, I spoke of the way my identity was formed through school, and how school became so much a part of how I measured my own worth that it ultimately became very damaging to my development of a strong sense of self. Clearly, my identity was too closely entwined with my academic success. But what about the opposite problem? What happens when you have a student who intentionally builds his identity in defiance of the school?

Dylan didn't appear to care about his success in school; he was failing multiple classes, and he rarely finished assignments or turned in any homework. Nor did he seem to respect very many of the teachers. He was known to disobey rules and ignore teachers' corrections. There were few teachers in the school whom Dylan would actually listen to, even for the simplest of requests.

As a teacher, this frustrated me on two fronts. First, I was pained that Dylan seemed to show no concern at all about failing in school--I felt sure that this would seriously compromise his chance for a fulfilling future. And on a more personal level, I felt disrespected when Dylan disrupted my class and refused to acknowledge me as any kind of

authority. I was concerned for Dylan's development, but a less-admirable part of me was also annoyed that Dylan was getting in the way of me fulfilling my own goals and plans. I took his noncompliance as a personal insult to my legitimacy as a teacher.

But in truth, I doubt Dylan really intended for his behavior to affect me this way. His behavior was bewildering to me because I naturally saw what we did in the classroom as very important, and I couldn't understand why Dylan did not. His other team teachers and I spent time every week trying to correct his behavior, chastising him for not turning in homework, and warning him about the negative consequences of disobedience, but nothing ever seemed to work.

Ultimately, I think that pursuing the question of *why* Dylan apparently didn't care about school, rather than focusing on strategies to "make" him care, could be the only way to a better experience for Dylan and his teachers. Answering this question involves a total perspective shift, from the role of a teacher into the mind of a student. And achieving this perspective shift requires the development of deep empathy.

The school can be an amazing place to learn empathy. Many schools, especially public schools, offer an incredible cross-section of the diversity of our society, bringing together students from all races, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and numerous other variable characteristics. At best, school can teach us to work alongside people who are different from us, learn about other cultures, and broaden the way that we see the world.

In fact, according to psychologist Lev Vygotsky, learning to see the world through another's perspective is an integral part of learning. In a collection of his writings entitled *Mind in Society*, Vygotsky details the tendency for children to talk to others while solving a

problem. By engaging in this "social speech," Vygotsky explains, children are able to examine the problem through the "prism" of another's experience, bringing them closer to a solution. In this way, communicating with each other and being able to understand one another's experiences and worldview are absolutely critical for an effective educational experience.

But on the other hand, the school is all too often a place where empathy is squashed. Like me, teachers get frustrated with students who don't obey, wondering, *Why don't they just do their homework?* or *Why can't they sit still?* They are so overwhelmed by the needs of all of their students that they might not be able to take the time to understand a student as an individual. And when it comes to cultural and socioeconomic differences, teachers may be unwittingly discriminatory, lumping students into different categories of expectations based on outward factors. While few teachers mean to be unfair in their treatment of students, numerous studies have demonstrated the harmful effects of teachers' unconscious bias on students from marginalized groups, including girls, black students, students of lower socioeconomic level, and more (Staats).

By the same token, these students who are at the receiving end of their teacher's frustration can feel misunderstood by their teachers and alienated from a classroom that does not seem to accept them. They may feel that their identity as individuals has been disrespected, or even invalidated. These disaffected students might then pull away even more from a positive relationship with the teacher and with the school in general.

The desire to preserve our own self-concept is a powerful force. It was that desire that pushed me to study relentlessly and get high grades in school, because I had built my identity

on being an excellent student. But if students cannot find a positive identity for themselves in

the school--if the message they receive from school is that they are a failure, that they are not

good enough--I believe the student, in an act of self-preservation, is likely to distance himself

from that association. Rather than being motivated to improve his grades, he will learn to

value his grades even less, so that they do not damage his valuation of his own identity.

   I think this is part of what was going on with Dylan. He had rarely been successful in

school, and after years of teachers' criticisms and stern warnings about failure, he hardened

himself to set himself apart from that danger. If he truly didn't care, I think it was because

caring would have been too painful.

   Another critical aspect of his behavior was social. Dylan had a reputation and an

image to uphold; any time he obeyed the teacher, he risked losing face. Perhaps this was why

Dylan was slightly more willing to speak honestly to me when no one else was around.

Clearly there was so much more to Dylan than the front he put on in the classroom. But in the

current dynamic, it was very difficult for either me or Dylan to move past the roles we had

set up for ourselves.

   The only way we can move beyond those rigid, oppositional roles is through

empathy. And like practically any change in the classroom, this must start with the teacher.

When teachers are overwhelmed with the demands facing them, it is tempting to put up walls

between ourselves and our students, but this serves only to turn the classroom into a

no-man's-land--or a battlefield. If, on the other hand, I can let go of my desire for my

students to reflect me, and instead learn to understand and embrace my students for the

unique, thoughtful individuals they already are, I think I may be able to build a classroom

that is a better place for everyone within it. Learning to develop, practice, and teach this empathy will be my praxis as I soon embark on my first year of teaching.

My mentor teacher stood with his head in his hands. Normally energetic and positive, he now looked briefly blown, sapped of vigor. His shoulders slumped and he shook his head slowly.

"I don't know, Rebecca," my teacher said, sounding exasperated. "I just wish they'd give us more credit sometimes. No one has any idea what we do in here every day--no one gives us any respect for our job.

When I tell people I teach middle school, they say, 'Oh, I would never want to do that,' or 'It takes a special person.' But they never say, 'Thank you. Thank you for teaching my children. Thank you for helping to raise a generation.'"

Later that day, we had a meeting with the other two seventh grade social studies teachers. The four of us sat close together at the corner of an empty conference table. The apparent purpose of the meeting was to decide on a pacing schedule for our upcoming unit on World War II, but as always, our meeting ended up going far beyond that.

We discussed the results of our last unit and compared test scores and commonly missed questions. Then one colleague mentioned a discussion he had had with students the previous week, a conversation about 19th-century imperialism that had morphed into a discussion about imperialist attitudes in the world today. Another teacher brought up an extra-curricular conversation he had had with his students: one about adolescence, about the

changes they were going through and the worries they felt. A lot of teachers don't like to make time for that kind of stuff, my colleague remarked, but his students have always expressed appreciation for taking the time in class to talk about their lives.

The stories were positive and uplifting, and as more of us shared, the more each of us felt encouraged. Soon we were all smiling and listening eagerly to one another, leaning in closely to catch every bit of the stories. Before long the conversation turned to a familiar topic for the four of us: Why we do what we do.

"It's all about passion," one colleague said. "That's what keeps you going when days are tough. When I have my kids in the classroom and I get to tell them, 'Hey, I know that life isn't easy right now, and I know that you're confused. But let me tell you, I'm here for you, and everything's going to turn out okay.' They really just need that assurance sometimes.

"And you know what? Man, these days are long, but when I get home, I sleep great at night."

We spent the rest of the planning period laughing and listening and encouraging each other. By the time we left to start fifth period, my mentor teacher's defeated look from earlier in the day was gone. We were all filled with the energy to give our best.

I have a confession to make: When I first began writing this thesis, the tone was very different from what it is now. I was fresh from a semester of teacher education courses and far from a real classroom, and my writing was full to the brim with righteous indignation,

pointing out all the wrongs I had suffered as a student that I surely would make right in the future.

But after just stepping my toe into the vast waters of classroom teaching--through a five-week internship and ten weeks of student teaching--I now have a quite different perspective. Working in the classroom in even such a limited way has begun to open my eyes to complexities I never saw as an outsider. I realized that my original approach of criticizing teachers for imperfect pedagogy was wrong-headed.

Teachers are already criticized on nearly all fronts--by students, parents, politicians, and sometimes their own administration. Some think that by raising expectations and rooting out so-called "bad teachers," we can convince the rest of the teaching force to shape up. But in my experience, this tough love is more likely to have the effect of demoralizing teachers, like my mentor teacher, who are already working incredibly hard.

As I gain experience teaching and prepare to enter the field as a professional, my focus has begun to shift from the problems in our school system on an institutional level to the ways I can most improve my individual praxis. And a core part of improving that praxis is maintaining my own health and inspiration for continuing to teach.

In my former faith community, we had an analogy about maintaining energy and passion for a task without overstraining oneself and burning out. The analogy used an image of a cup that was filled up at a fountain. If you fill up your cup at the fountain and then go off somewhere else to dump it out, the analogy goes, you will constantly be running dry--constantly having to dash back and forth to be filled again. But if you stand under the

fountain and allow your cup receive the water, your cup will always be filled, and the overflow will spill out of the sides of your cup and water the ground below.

Within my community of faith, the analogy referred to constantly being connected to the Holy Spirit, and the overflow was the peace and good works that would spill out of us as a result of that connection. But I think this analogy can easily be connected to teaching as well.

As I discussed earlier, most teachers want to go beyond simply teaching their students information; they hope to teach students important lessons about life and have a positive, personal influence on them. If the water in my analogy refers to inspiration, passion, and energy, then we are constantly filling up our cup and pouring it out to our students, hoping to inspire and energize them for learning. But if all of our efforts are focused on our students, without adequate concern for ourselves, our cup will soon run dry. We will exhaust ourselves by running back and forth to refill and then spending all the energy we have in our classrooms.

More and more, I am realizing that effective teaching is not just about how much passion one has; equally critical is the ability to utilize that passion in a way that sustains the well-being of the teacher as well. I think our effort and our sense of fulfillment cannot healthfully come only out of what we are able to give to our students. In order to establish a lasting praxis, we must find personal satisfaction and growth in teaching, as well. We must find a way to stand perpetually under the fountain so that our teaching praxis not only serves our students, but also fulfills us and helps us to grow in deep and satisfying ways.

My mentor teacher and I found much of that satisfaction in our relationship with our other social studies colleagues. Weekly meetings like the one I described above were not a strictly-business routine where we got our work done and parted ways; they were a chance for us to come together and share what was happening in our classrooms, celebrate our successes and reflect on the days that didn't work out as well, and--most important of all--remind each other why we found value in the work we did every day. These meetings affirmed us as caring professionals and energized us to continue in our important work. While the isolation of the classroom can be both freeing and intimidating, these meetings gave my mentor teacher and me a sense of community in fellow professionals who would both respect our independence and support us when we needed it.

Another key aspect of a healthy teaching praxis is self-care. Nel Noddings writes about the importance of self-care in maintaining any caring practice. Caring, Noddings explains, is cyclical; if the one-caring is burnt out, it damages her ability to care well for others. Self-care is therefore critical for both the one-caring and the cared-for.

The concept of self-care varies depending on whom you ask. Some say self-care can be as simple as indulging in a luxury like taking a bubble bath or being sure to take care of basic needs such as showering or getting exercise. Noddings' explanation of the concept, on the other hand, goes a little deeper. Her self-care is defined as acts that help the one-caring to hone her receptivity to joy.

Noddings' conception of joy isn't necessarily a dazzling, life-changing moment; she describes the experience more as a realization that creeps quietly into everyday moments, a dawning recognition of the deep value of some commonplace event. In her work *Caring,* she

describes finding joy in bathing, working a garden, and seeing her daughter at rest. Noddings believes that in moments when quietness and openness--receptivity--allow one's spirit to recognize the connectedness between small things in life, joy arises naturally.

Noddings' ideal self-care comes from a deep attunement to what is around her. This is a principle that is also highly applicable to teaching. I have already discussed how detachment in the classroom--in other words, the presence of fear, or the absence of empathy--can be terribly destructive. Perhaps taking the time to be receptive to the beauty and worth of what we are doing can help to outweigh the negativity that sometimes threaten to be overwhelming. In my experience so far, I have glimpsed this worth in the excitement of a student grasping an academic concept for the first time, or even more often, in the unexplainably delightful weirdness that middle schoolers are so often capable of. Identifying and appreciating these small moments is another area in which the support of like-minded colleagues can be an invaluable help.

So far, I am learning that a large part of the praxis of teaching is a balancing act: In one hand, holding on to the ideal of a relevant, positive, life-giving classroom; in the other, developing a grounded, realistic view of what kind of expectations are realistic and healthy. I have come a long way over the past four years from my original desire to solve all the problems of education in one passionate swoop. Now, as I stand at the gate of my teaching career, I am certain that I will learn immeasurably more in the years to come. I hope that what I have learned so far will be enough to equip and sustain me for that exciting journey.

Epilogue:

Lessons Learned

This thesis represents the culmination of all I have thought, studied, and experienced over my four years as a teacher candidate at Appalachian State University and over the other twelve years of my public school education. To the best of my ability, it accurately depicts the journey I have taken so far in preparing to become a teacher and my values, attitudes, and perspective as I stand poised to enter the field next year.

At this point in my preparation for teaching, I am just beginning to understand my role as the teacher in a classroom that is a living, growing part of the "real world." Being part of classrooms where I was able to be expressive and silly, like Mr. Arnold's room, or deeply focused on creativity, such as my high school art class and college media studies course, or where I was simply reminded that there was a life outside of school, as in Ms. Arrington's room, helped me to feel valued and develop as a whole, complex person. In the same way, I want to build a classroom for my students where they are provided the same opportunities for exploration and growth. Studying these exemplars from my own past has helped me to identify what I most loved from these teachers--their energy, their focus on the school as part of the world, their patience, and their investment in me--and understand how I can embody those characteristics in the future.

Appreciating school as the "real world" has helped me to gain a greater understanding of the life-changing potential of a good education, but my experience in the classroom has also led me to realize that the classroom's effects will not be the same for every student. While I responded most positively to those characteristics I have highlighted in this thesis,

my efforts during student teaching have shown me that not all students will respond in the same way. Of course, the example of this mismatch in communication is most evident in my struggle to reach my student Dylan. The efforts that I made to provide meaningful instruction didn't seem relevant to him, and my attempt to build a relationship with him failed--at least within the brief ten weeks that I was in my student teaching classroom. The failure to connect with Dylan was a disappointment to me, but it helped me to recognize some of my blind spots as a teacher. I realized that my methods of teaching are based on the methods that work best for me as a learner. Working with Dylan was a challenge to expand my perspective as a teacher. At the same time, it also served as a reminder to me that I could not expect to have a perfect teaching practice--especially as a beginning teacher--and that even as a more seasoned professional, I still may not be able to reach all students at all times. This is not a way of admitting defeat, but simply tempering idealism with a clearer view of what is reasonable and possible within the classroom. I believe that accepting this imperfection, while balancing it with the hope that I can always improve my practice, is a critical part of building a sustainable teaching career.

Most importantly of all, creating this project has helped lay a foundation for me to have a thoughtful, reflective practice. Questioning my own education has taught me to look critically at what I do in the classroom and the positive and negative effects it may have on my students and myself. My position as a brand-new teacher is a place of great potential for growth; at this point, I do not yet have all of the skills and understanding I will need in order to have the kind of dynamic classroom that I dream of, but I believe that the continual process of reflection is the key to achieving that dream. Reflection involves always looking

toward what is possible, therefore avoiding stagnation or apathy, while also taking in what is real, thus minimizing the danger of ungrounded optimism. It is this process that will enable me to learn from my bad days and make the most of my successes. Ultimately, I believe that pursuing a thoughtful and reflective teaching practice will enable me to lead the classroom in a way that is more fulfilling, worthwhile, and meaningful for both myself and my students. This is the hope I will hold fast to as I embark on the thrills and challenges of my first year of teaching this fall.

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