

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA SOUTHEAST

THEORY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR

THE LEARNER AND THE LEARNING PROCESS

ED 333

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

BY

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May 1, 2016

Introduction

I believe that people are inherently good. I believe in and appreciate the potential that all children possess. I want to be a teacher because I feel I have personal strengths that can help students to realize their full potential. I care about people, especially children. I am an effective communicator and listener and I love to share and learn new ideas. I appreciate diversity and value the opinions and gifts of others. I feel that becoming a teacher will allow me to implement these strengths on a daily basis for the benefit of my students and will enrich my life in return.

When I was earning my Bachelors Degree I had an education professor who would always say, “Children will *rise* to your expectations!” I never forgot that and I have found it surprisingly easy to, unilaterally, have high expectations for the children I’ve worked with. It’s encouraging to read Perrone (1991) who says,

“...life in classrooms is shaped by the expectations that are held for children. No matter how good a school might appear physically or how many books and computers exist, if teachers don’t believe firmly that *all* children can learn and *all* children have important interests, intentions, and strengths that need to be seen as starting points for ongoing learning, they are failing children, their families, and their communities.” (pg. 33).

Maintaining the belief that all children have potential and all children can learn is a priority of mine and I hope this belief will be conveyed to my students in everything that I do.

Development

It is imperative to understand students and their developmental level with regard to their physical and emotional maturity, as well as their cognitive and moral reasoning abilities. The UAS School of Education Goal #2 states that UAS teacher candidates will “Understand how human development affects learning and apply that understanding to practice.” (pg. 7). To be an effective teacher, the starting point to lesson planning will have to be verifying that the lesson will coincide with the developmental level of my students.

Learning Theory

One of the things I’ve learned as an adult is just how effective it is to learn by building on prior knowledge, learn by interacting with others, and to learn by doing. Because this has been my personal experience, I tend to agree with Constructivist Theorists such as Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Marie Montessori that true learning takes place when learners are actively engaged in discovery for themselves while building on prior knowledge. Emel Ültanır (2012) gives the following definition:

Constructivism is an epistemology, a learning or meaning-making theory that offers an explanation of the nature of knowledge and how human beings learn. The real understanding is only constructed based on learners’ previous experience and background knowledge. It maintains that individuals create or construct their own new understandings or knowledge through the interaction of what they already believe and the ideas, events, and activities with which they come into contact. (Introduction)

I look forward to helping students make connections (provide the scaffolding) so that the things they are discovering have a purpose and a meaning to them personally.

Motherhood has taught me a great deal about communicating and relating to children. I can call on that skill when I need to facilitate those connections for my students.

There is a benefit to the social nature of schools and classrooms as well. I plan on taking advantage of this built in benefit. Peer teaching and learning is not only fun for students but as Noreen Webb (1995) explains:

“Students can benefit from both giving help to and receiving help from their peers. The process of giving explanations may encourage explainers to clarify or reorganize material in new ways, recognize and fill in gaps in understanding, recognize and resolve inconsistencies, develop new perspectives, and construct more elaborate conceptualizations than they would when learning material by themselves” (pg. 406).

When learning is fun and engaging for students, lessons are more likely to be remembered, but also, it gives students an opportunity to learn how to think and problem solve.

Standards and assessment

When the classroom is student-centered, students have to be engaged in their learning. If students are engaged in their learning it becomes less likely that they will be distracted or cause disruptions. I will strive for each lesson and activity in my class to be engaging. Perrone (1991) says, “We engage students more fully when we play down competition and emphasize appreciation for one another.” (pg. 33) This is precisely the climate I will encourage in my classroom. My students will know that we are a team; that we approach the school year together, to learn from each other, and to hold each other to

a high standard of respect as well as responsibility to ourselves, the classroom, and the school community.

Assessment will be a constant in my classroom. In order to move on to the next stage or lesson, I will need to gauge understanding by my students and to do this I will incorporate a variety of feedback methods. I can check for understanding while students are completing seat work by walking around and observing their work directly. I can gauge understanding by a show of hands in response to a question and naturally, through testing. Even students' body language and focus can be used to assess how engaged the class is. If they are losing focus it can be an indicator that the lesson is not interesting, too simple or too difficult. It's important to be aware of these indicators and make adjustments accordingly.

Some assessment will be used for me as the teacher to serve as a guide for instruction or scaffolding. Assessment in the form of tests will be used to gauge learning and understanding and serve as feedback for not only me but for students and parents as well.

Discussion

I was inspired to pursue teaching by spending time in an elementary school as a noon duty and teacher aide. I learned a great deal from the teachers I worked with but I also learned from the students. In performing the job of teacher aide, I had several opportunities to “teach” the students I was working with. I was fascinated by how they thought things through, their perspective on the world, as well as how incredibly

observant and curious they were. I was able to relate to students and actually help them with concepts they were stuck on. It was exciting to see the proverbial light bulb go on over their heads.

In the role of teacher aide, students would quite often ask for help by simply asking for the answers. Because I believe in teaching children *how* to think and not *what* to think, I always thought of ways to draw the answer out of the student or have them think it through and discover the answer for themselves. I saw and participated in scaffolding at work which was rewarding for me and educational for the students.

Though I was “just” a teacher aide, I had an opportunity to teach the class as a whole one day. Previously, while working with the students one-on-one in math, I noticed a common problem with the second graders remembering which line segment was horizontal and which was vertical. I had a realization of a trick using visual cues and asked the teacher if I could share it with the class. She agreed and gave me the “stage.” I shared with the students how they could look to the first letters of the names of the line segments for clues as to which line they belonged. The “H” in horizontal has a horizontal line segment in the middle and the “V” in vertical looks like the point of a downward pointing arrow. If they could imagine the up and down line connected to the “V” they could remember which line was vertical. The “Other” line was the oblique line. I noticed a lot of students nodding their heads in understanding and a lot of them smiled. That afternoon they had a math test. The next day I asked the teacher how they did. Every student got the horizontal, vertical, and oblique questions right! I taught an idea and the students learned it! It gave me butterflies in my stomach and I want more of that.

Foundations

The time I spent in the classroom gave me an opportunity to imagine what it would be like to be a teacher today. I had a great example before me where students worked together in a positive environment and each of them enjoyed learning. It was evident in the smiles that beamed from their faces, the care they took with their handwriting, and the enthusiastic way they raised their hands to be called on. The driving force behind all of this was a teacher who led the class in a way that put the responsibility for learning all on the students. They rose to the occasion and thrived in that environment. I will strive to create the same climate in my classroom.

With students of today using technology at a younger and younger age, they are accustomed to immediate gratification and answers at their finger tips. This is the language they speak and the way they think. They can't go from that type of interaction and learning at home to antiquated methods and tools in the classroom. My job will be to incorporate technology into my class whenever possible not only to help keep students engaged but also because students of today are different learners than prior generations. Don Tapscott calls the youth of today the "Net Gen," short for Net Generation (2008). He says, "Evidence is mounting that Net Geners process information and behave differently because they have indeed developed brains that are functionally different than those of their parents." (Tapscott, pg. 29).

Because students of today think and learn differently, I will strive to meet them where they are; to speak their language. I will no doubt have plenty of opportunities to

learn from my students. This will then be a valuable opportunity to model life-long learning for my students.

One benefit of teaching in the “digital age” is the many technology tools available to enhance communication with parents. A weekly newsletter on paper is nice but creating a website can allow for up-to-date information, homework resources, and calendars to be available to students and parents, all at their convenience. I plan on taking advantage of this technology (as well as email) so that parents can easily be in on the learning process of their child. As a parent myself, I appreciate my children’s teachers being available this way.

Diversity

I appreciate and value diversity. The one thing we all have in common is that we are all totally different. I will conduct my classroom in such a way that every student will be respected by me and by their peers. We will make the most of our time together in a safe environment to learn about each other and the different cultures, backgrounds and abilities we each bring to the group. My classroom will be a place where students learn to appreciate themselves for their uniqueness but also will learn to appreciate others for theirs. This belief is consistent with the Alaska standards that Culturally Responsive Teachers (1999) will:

“a. develop a philosophy of education that is able to accommodate multiple world views, values and belief systems, including attention to the interconnectedness of the human, natural and spiritual worlds as reflected in Alaska Native societies.”

I have no tolerance for bullying and it will be addressed immediately in my classroom as well as any bullying I'm aware of school-wide. The first week of school will entail a significant amount of time spent on the subject of respect and bullying so that every student understands the expectation from the beginning.

In my classroom we will respect all degrees of ability, showing compassion towards those with more obvious disabilities as well as those whose disability may not be so visible. Some students may need a lesson on disabilities that aren't as visible and I am willing to have those discussions for the benefit of all students.

Motherhood has taught me that children can have certain conditions or disorders that are not always easy to identify but are no less deserving of our understanding and patience. I will look at my students in much the same way. I will not prejudge any student but I will be more than willing to work with the school, the parents, and the student to ensure necessary supports are requested and implemented. This philosophy is consistent with the expectation that Culturally Responsive Teachers will "e. approach the developmental potential of their students in a way that recognizes that all children develop at their own rate and in their own way."

Conclusion

I want my classroom to be a place where students feel safe to be themselves and to take risks. It is important to me that my students not only learn the expected material but more important, that they learn how to think, how to appreciate themselves, and how to appreciate others. My students will own their learning and in doing so, they will be

invested in their own achievement. I will trust my students with the responsibility they have to themselves as well as the responsibility they have to the class and the school. I want to inspire my students to find joy in learning and as a result, become life-long learners. I will consider myself an effective teacher if my students leave my class confident in themselves and eager to learn more.

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