My Teaching Philosophy

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“I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom where I can hardly hold the joy” (Palmer, 2007, p. 1) expresses better than I could why I believe teaching is a calling. I could define myself as a professional in training, but without that feeling in my heart all the coursework and fieldwork I have done to date is worth nothing. Like Palmer, I marvel at the moments when a student makes a real intellectual or emotional connection to some concept, principle or text. My spirit jumps when I witness the inner pride turn into an outer glow as a student masters something he didn’t think he understood and selfishly, I cherish the connection I make with the student who doesn’t seem to connect with anyone else.

I teach to transform. I believe the right education will empower a student to consciously determine his or her life after school. Equally, “education is not preparation for life. It is life” (Newman, 2006, p. 245) and I believe that school and the education must be relevant and meaningful, and that problems posed in school should be representative of problems that students will or do encounter in life and society. I believe a completed high school education should allow students to create a life they that they choose from a position of empowerment and critical consciousness, a true awareness of being and relating to their world.

Finn (2009) speaks of powerful literacy, defined as the development of “creativity and reason – the ability to evaluate, analyze, and synthesize while reading and listening and to persuade and negotiate through speaking and writing” (pp. 124-125). I believe this literacy is the right of all students and one of the main purposes of education. I believe the development of this literacy should be embedded within all content and curriculum.

Freire (2010) calls for a problem-posing education in which “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (p. 83). If students can develop this critical consciousness and are armed with Finn’s powerful literacy, then I believe transformation is possible. This is my mission as a teacher.

I believe that this transformative education can be embedded within a broad, liberal curriculum which is the right of all students, regardless of socioeconomic class, ethnicity or any other category used to segregate people. To me, “the objectives of basic schooling should be the same for the whole school population” (Adler, 1982, p. 142).

As to *what* is taught, in many ways I align myself with the perennialism theory of education, as represented by Adler (1982) in *The Paideia Proposal: Rediscovering the Essence of Education*. Adler (1982) sets forth a curriculum that is the same across the student population, regardless of student ability or even interest. It includes language, literature and the fine arts; mathematics and natural science; and history, geography and social studies. (p. 143). As specialization or differentiation in schooling inevitably leads to discrimination and subjective judgments of a student’s ability, I support this principle of equal educational opportunity.

However, I believe that within each subject area the teacher must have great latitude and autonomy in the choice of texts and references so as to bring relevancy to the subject, engage the students, and build powerful literacy and critical consciousness. World history should encompass much more than the European and Western point of view, for many may relate more to the accomplishments and exploits of great Africans and Asians, for example. U.S. History should be regionalized. I strongly support a curriculum in which the majority of time is spent analyzing various points of view of the native peoples of the student’s physical area and the people who emigrated there from areas that comprise students’ ethnicity. Perennialism speaks of “essential truths” that are embedded in great works of the past and therefore are relevant today, and I agree. It then stands that great works containing essential truths exist across all cultures, and these should have equal weight within the curriculum.

Adler (1982) proposes three additions to his main curriculum, “physical training, accompanied by instruction in bodily care and hygiene…the development of basic manual skills, such as cooking, sewing, carpentry and the operation of all kinds of machines…(and) an introduction to the whole world of work” (p. 145). I imagine a world where these adjuncts haven’t been cut! To me these additions are the bookend to his recommendation that “inequalities due to environmental factors must be overcome by some form of preschool preparation - at least one year for all and even three for some” (p. 141). I believe that too many children fall behind or drop out due to socioeconomic inequalities. I believe that the home supports and the socioeconomic situation of the student makes all the difference in the education of a student, from their introduction into the system to their success upon exiting high school. I believe our school system should provide both preschool support and the additional curriculum to all students, especially as it allows some to “catch up” and learn skills they may not have learned at home. Additionally, students may discover otherwise deemphasized talents and opportunities to shape their world.

As much as I believe it is the parents’ responsibility to provide their children with adequate sleep, good nutrition and a minimum of stress in their home situation, I believe it is the teacher’s responsibility to provide a quality education once the child arrives at school. First, the teacher must have the autonomy to address how children learn. Adler (1982) pronounces that “learning must be active. It must use the whole mind, not just the memory. It must be learning by discovery, in which the student, never the teacher is the primary agent”. (p. 146). Dewey (1897), whose theory of education became known as progressivism, agrees on this point: “I believe that the active side precedes the passive in the development of the child nature” (p.8). Dewey (1897) is even more adamant that “the neglect of this principle is the cause of a large part of the waste of time and strength in school work. The child is thrown into a passive, receptive or absorbing attitude” (p. 8).

As a teacher, I believe I should provide an active learning environment. This is especially true in my field. Science should be primarily taught by active engagement in laboratory experiments, hands-on models and direct relation to life. Where appropriate, I believe in using the Socratic method of questioning (Adler, 1982, p. 144). Asking students to think about ideas, express their thoughts and defend their positions leads to skills in negotiation and critical thinking, components of Finn’s powerful literacy, and additionally raises the students’ consciousness and awareness. This is somewhat related to situated learning theory in which learners are learning by a process of social participation. As students express and defend their thoughts in class, they are becoming more active members of their classroom community. Students learn to act, speak and improvise in ways that make sense in the community (Smith, 1999d, p. 2). This theory argues that knowledge be presented in context and not be abstract or general, and that all new knowledge comes from the communities. Here I have some points of disagreement. The study of science often becomes abstract - atomic theory, for example. And in my own case, I often obtain knowledge by solitary reflection of what occurred within a classroom setting, within a discussion or upon reflection of a book I read earlier.

I am additionally of the belief that different students learn in different ways, a component of the cognitive orientation to learning (Smith, 1999b, p. 1). In one of my educational experiences, I provided lecture, supervised practice, a hands-on activity and group work and then asked students to anonymously report “which method of learning worked best for them”. The tabulated results showed almost equal distribution, though I wonder if those who preferred lecture and practice felt that it most mimicked the upcoming test. In general, I subscribe most closely to the cognitive learning theory for I believe it most closely describes the process of learning and is a practical way for a teacher to guide learning. For example, as a teacher I can make good use of principles such as “instruction should be well organized…clearly structured…the perceptual features of the task are important” (Smith, 1999b, p. 1). In contrast with behaviorism, cognitive learning theory presents reinforcement as giving information or “knowledge of results”, rather than a reward or consequence. I believe that in a true learning environment, students should be engaged and motivated to learn such that they obtain satisfaction internally and without extrinsic reward.

In all cases, I am opposed to the concept of a student as an empty receptacle who receives what the teacher provides. Here I directly differ with Adler and the perennialism perspective, for Adler described differing capacities for learning using a bucket metaphor, in which some students are “large buckets who can hold a great deal…and some of us are small buckets with small capacities” (as cited in Newman, 2006, p. 229). Adler simply wants to “pour the same wine into all buckets, irrespective of size” (as cited in Newman, 2006, p. 229), but I believe this is far too passive and in line with what Freire (2010) describes as a “banking education” in which the student is “an empty ‘mind’ passively open to the reception of deposits of reality from the world outside” (p. 75). Freire (2010) warns “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (p. 73). Instead, he believes that education should be problem-posing in which “the students - no longer docile listeners - are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and re-considers her earlier considerations as the students express their own” (p. 81). In time, students develop “a deepened consciousness… [that] leads people to apprehend that situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation” (Freire, 2010, p. 85).

In the progressivism theory of education, students are expected to be critical thinkers who question the status quo and pragmatic problem solvers. I find myself much more aligned with this theory of education in my beliefs about *how* students should be educated and what the outcomes of their education looks like. The critical theory of education pushes this even further, with the goals of empowering individuals and transforming our oppressive society (as cited in Newman, 2006, p. 257). I do not go as far as the critical theorists who believe that people *must* transform society, I believe that teachers must guide their student to develop awareness and the freedom to choose whether or how they will transform society. I am aligned with the critical theorists who believe that each school and each teacher should have the authority and autonomy to negotiate the content of the curriculum (Newman, 2006, p. 258) for I believe that only the teachers and immediate community can best know how “to select the knowledge that can help empower the particular people in that particular situation” (Newman, 2006, p. 258). I do not mean this belief to be a means of disregarding the language or the texts of the dominant class. I intend that students should learn “standard” English and study Western texts in the context of mastering the language and the references of those in power. Finn (2009) states that his “New Paradigm…relies on Freirean motivation to urge students to learn traditional school discourse not to replace their discourse but to acquire powerful literacy…that will enable [them]…to become better able to exercise their social, civil and political rights” (p. 261).

I believe society has a place in education. I support a voluntary national, liberal arts curriculum that does not dictate how one teaches. (Ravitch, 2010, p. 236) I believe the authority of schools should come from the community and schools should be as decentralized as possible. Educators, not policymakers, should make decisions and reach consensus on what constitutes a liberal arts education. The school, teacher and to an extent, the community, should determine how to regionalize and bring relevancy into the curriculum. I believe that education succeeds when the parents, teachers and local community come together in the common interests of the children, the students and the future. I believe that educational standards developed in this way, with an attitude of mutual trust and respect, will be meaningful standards.

I believe in the neighborhood school. As does Ravitch (2010), I believe “the neighborhood school is the place where parents meet to share concerns about their children and the place where they learn the practice of democracy. They create a sense of community among strangers…[they are] the local institution where people congregate and mobilize to solve local problems, where individuals learn to speak up and debate and engage in democratic give and take with their neighbors” (pp. 220-221). Just as I believe students should develop powerful literacy and a critical consciousness, the neighborhood school can act in the same way for the parents. Federally and state-mandated standards, rewards, and punitive consequences will never create the positive outcomes that motivated and empowered students, teachers and communities can create. Empowered students cannot be quantified through standardized tests that measure breadth of factual knowledge and not depth of critical thinking skills.

There are few professions that so profoundly impact the people within it and I believe that teachers should take on their mission thoughtfully and consciously. I believe the teacher should consciously bring their personal philosophy into the classroom. Otherwise, the risk is great that one will eventually become a “clerk” in banking system of education, fearful of the consequences of doing anything other than depositing content standards. I believe teaching from one’s personal philosophy is a complex and challenging process, but can bring great reward for both students and teacher.

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