

Using Expert and Personal Experiences to Reaffirm My Teaching Philosophy

Part A.

A teacher's careful analysis of her own experience as a form of inquiry provides insight into the everyday classroom. Although it may not be what many would consider a "scholarly" approach to educational research, a teacher who goes about this form of inquiry in a methodical and reflective way often discovers much about how her students learn and how she personally develops as an educator. This is seen clearly in Vivian Paley's *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* as Paley demonstrates her commitment to learning about her students and the ways they learn best and her reflections on her own teaching as well. Perhaps the most valuable quality of teachers' experiences as a form of inquiry, and indeed, what makes it distinct from other forms, is its practicality and use as a primary source of what happens in the classroom. In *The Girl with the Brown Crayon* Paley reflected:

I ask myself: Would I, could I have imagined such a curriculum were it not for Reeny's fixation on Frederick and my equally ardent identification with Tico? Reeny and I are unmindful of the wisdom that cautions "moderation in all things." It is passion Reeny wants...I too require passion in the classroom. I need the intense preoccupation of a group of children and teachers inventing new worlds as they learn to know each other's dreams. To invent is to come alive. Even more than the unexamined classroom, I resist the *uninvented* classroom (Paley 50).

This kind of intimate and experiential reflection can only come from a classroom teacher who has spent time with her students examining each day's events and looking back in order to interpret and analyze them.

The interpretation and analysis of classroom happenings lends itself to thinking about various educational problems and issues. With so many different kinds of learners in a particular classroom each year, teachers face the challenge of meeting individual students' needs. Some of

the issues teachers face every day are students with different intelligences and who come to school at varying academic and social levels, students from financially challenged families or poor home environments, students who come to school on an empty stomach and may have trouble concentrating, uncooperative or overbearing parents, and lack of school funds for necessary supplies. These are just a few of the issues teachers face on a regular basis. Using a kind of teacher research can be an insightful way into coming up with ways to help different students and working through these issues. This is best illustrated with one example from my student teaching experience.

One boy in my second grade class exhibited the worst case of ADHD my mentor teacher and I had ever seen. He was not medicated, and he also had some vision problems, but did not have glasses. He came from a single-parent home and had four other siblings. Another teacher had been witness to his family car, piled high with trash inside so that the kids had to make a new path every time they got in. All of these factors and more contributed to this intelligent and talented boy failing in school. I decided early on to make him my own project to see if I could figure out what to do to help him. He did start taking medication, and his aunt got eyeglasses for him, but he was still far behind. The school psychologist and I came up with some different strategies for him to concentrate on his work. Before doing so, she had me fill out some forms that asked questions about his habits, what he likes to do, what seemed to motivate him, and what kinds of situations distracted him the most. Analyzing his words and actions and reflecting upon them through these forms really helped me gain some insight into how his mind worked and what I could possibly do to help him. Implementing some of the strategies that the psychologist and I came up with, this boy was far from what we might think of as the ideal student, but he did show slight improvements in his concentration and reading and writing

abilities. I hope that teachers continue working with him and the strategies we used based on my analysis and reflection.

Although teacher experience and research is a valuable resource for anyone involved in education, its accessibility is usually, and unfortunately, limited only to teachers themselves. Teacher research is often set apart from the “academic” and “scholarly” education research done mostly by university professionals and other scholars. Even when teacher research is published it is often kept within the circle of teachers and left separate from scholarly publications. In her speech “Teacher’s Knowledge and Children’s Lives: Loose Change in the Battle for Educational Currency,” educator and teacher researcher Karen Gallas stated:

Consider, for example, the absence of citations of teacher work in virtually any published research article directed at the literacy research community, and the scarcity of published research by teachers in more “scholarly” journals. ...Research and writing by teachers is generally relegated to special conferences for teachers, journals for teachers, or collections that feature the “teacher’s voice” (Gallas 571).

Gallas also made a point that teacher research is practical and first-hand, as teachers interact with their students each day. She believes that this kind of research should be utilized by educators and scholars alike because “...decisions are being made that have a serious impact on the lives of children in schools and undermine teachers’ abilities to teach in ways that serve all children” (Gallas 570). If teacher research was a more accepted source in influencing education policy and curriculum, Gallas believes that more children’s needs would be met in the everyday classroom.

Another reason teacher research is less accessible than “scholarly” work is because many teachers do not write about their findings. Paley often referred to the importance of writing down her thoughts and reflections, and made her opinion clear that she believed all teachers should do this, not just to benefit themselves and their students, but also to influence other

teachers. When discussing the value in questioning her work she stated, “Questions such as these can fuel a teacher's curiosity and personal research, for the answers are printed nowhere. They can be found only in the individual classroom as children invent the process and the teacher acts the part of the Greek chorus and amanuensis” (Prof. Weiland’s notes, 2.4). Gallas also stated, “...if you're a teacher and you don't write, when you stop teaching, you leave no physical traces behind that can be incorporated into the body of knowledge about teaching and learning” (Gallas 571).

Teachers’ experiences as a form of inquiry are the most pragmatic ways for teachers to improve their abilities as educators. Through day-to-day, first-hand experiences, and careful recording of and reflection upon these experiences, teachers gain knowledge of their students and of themselves. They discover the best ways for their students to learn, which reflect the best ways for them to teach. Not only can teachers improve their own teaching through their research, but they have the potential of influencing other educators through the publication of their work, just as Paley has done. Through the collaboration of teacher and students, teachers can bring out the most in their students, bring out their full potential as educators, and influence many others in their field.

Part B.

Mary Catherine Bateson’s statement “School casts a shadow on all subsequent learning” (*Peripheral Visions*) made me rethink my belief about the role of formal schooling in society. Her belief that real learning comes outside the classroom from life experiences is a compelling one that I do agree with to some degree. Social and cultural experiences can be great teachers, as I have learned much throughout my life outside of school. However, after some reflection on my experiences as a student and a teacher, Bateson’s statement ultimately brought me to a

confirmation of my original belief: schools play an integral role in giving students the basic academic skills they need to function in society, and teachers have the potential to motivate students to expand their learning through self-education throughout their lives. I believe that arming students with classroom knowledge provides them the confidence to better understand what they find outside the classroom, hopefully allowing them to apply insightful reflection to their experiences.

It is important for students to find the motivation to be life-long learners so that they will continue their self-education and use their knowledge to contribute to society, as Howard Gardiner constantly promoted in *The Disciplined Mind*, and as we saw the seven imminent Americans do in Philip Cusick's book. Indeed, one constant theme throughout this course has been that of continuing education throughout life, whether it is through formal schooling or through life experiences. However, even though most learning through life experiences does not happen in school, classroom education should not be ignored. It is imperative for students to learn basic skills and concepts in school that will foster higher and experiential learning throughout the rest of their lives. Classroom education is the foundation for continued learning, even through life experiences. I acknowledge that there are problems with the structure of the school system and some of the processes used to teach, and perhaps that is Bateson's main discrepancy with formal schooling. But, to say that "school casts a shadow on all subsequent learning" disregards the necessity for its foundational structure in one's life.

One of the goals for students in school is to learn the material in the curriculum, but another goal, not necessarily listed as a benchmark, is for students to learn to think on their own. Learning to think about why and how something happens and analyzing and reflecting upon events and decisions are how we learn from life experiences. By challenging students to think and analyze facts, stories, characters, and motivations, teachers prepare students to maximize the

knowledge to be gained from their experiences. Knowledge coupled with thinking and analytical skills help build confidence within an individual. Hopefully, such a foundation prepares students to carefully consider the environment, opinions, and predicaments in life's path, and learn from these. But, without the classroom to help build that foundation, life experiences can be reduced to mere acceptance of the opinions of others, or the inability to process circumstances and situations into improved life skills. If students use the concepts and skills they learned in school to analyze their or others' experiences, they will have learned more because they have learned to think about them on their own.

Bateson also writes that "Most of the learning of a lifetime, including much of what is learned in school, never shows up in a curriculum" (*Peripheral Visions*). Bateson means that life's most important lessons and social and cultural experiences are what count the most, but are not written in any state or national benchmarks. A student whose classmate forgot their snack may learn the importance of the kindness of sharing from this particular social situation, even though it was not scripted in the day's agenda. It could be that much of what students take away from a particular day at school is not in the curriculum, but it is through the opportunities students have at school to socialize with each other that they can learn from these unscripted lessons. If teachers pay attention and notice these daily interactions, they can also take advantage of such learning opportunities by making lessons out of these teachable moments.

I agree completely with the Deweyan notion, which Bateson emulates, that much learning comes from doing, as I too have experienced this. I did not learn *how* to be a teacher from learning my multiplication tables or spelling words in elementary school. I learned much about *how* to teach from a year of experience as a teacher intern. However, the skills and concepts I learned in school were the basic tools I needed to expand my knowledge throughout my

education, so that I know *what* to teach my students and know the correct answers when responding to their questions.

Perhaps I do not agree with Bateson's statement that "School casts a shadow on all subsequent learning," but her view was important in my own learning in that it helped me confirm and refine my own belief so that it is even stronger now than it was before reading her work. Rather than casting a shadow, school shines a light at the beginning of a dark tunnel that illuminates the student's life as he progresses through the educational system and couples his classroom knowledge with life experiences. My belief that schools play an integral role in giving students the basic academic skills they need to function in society, and that teachers have the potential to motivate students to expand their learning through self-education throughout their lives is part of my teaching philosophy. Having this firm belief will help me in my journey to becoming a great teacher, as it will serve as a constant reminder as one of the reasons I want to teach.