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## Personal Philosophy of Teaching

“Man's mind stretched to a new idea never goes back to its original dimensions.”  
-Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

Just as this quote reflects that life is essentially about transitions of growth, I believe that one's personal philosophy of teaching should be constantly growing and constantly changing. Similarly, one's philosophy of *learning* should also evolve, for it must never be overlooked that when we are teachers, we are learners as well. I have never taught a lesson without learning one in the process.

I believe that all teachers should have the capacity to be consistently self-evaluating their process, and consequently, teachers must consistently be re-inventing their techniques and themselves. More than anything, I suppose that this is because there is so much to be considered when teaching; for the product of our labor is precious and highly delicate; our goal is to contribute to the growth and development of children's minds.

To truly teach a child is not merely to have a child learn intellectually, processing facts and storing information to be used at a later time. A child walks into a classroom as a complex and dynamic human being, and to cater only to the growth of a child's mind is to fail the rest of that child. I believe in teaching the whole child, which means, not just intellectually, but physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, each and every child has different needs which are of equal importance, and deserve equal attention. The heart, mind, soul and spirit work together to make each person whole- these aspects of the self cannot be taught separately.

This philosophy of teaching the whole child presents educators with a great challenge, and that is to find a balance between making sure the content of the curriculum is met and meeting the needs of students on a personal level. “There is a narrow but distinct line one has to walk between teaching content and skills that are expected of educated adults in our society and letting students follow their inner needs and explore those areas of learning where they have particular skills or affinities” (Kohl, 63).

In order to be able to reach a child’s mind, a teacher must learn to open that child’s mind and heart. This is why I strongly believe in the liberationist approach (Fenstermacher, 1992) to teaching, in which students’ minds are open to an awareness that stays with them for a lifetime. This approach views the teacher as the liberator of the mind of students. I feel strongly that the purpose of education is not to merely fill a mind with facts, but to awaken the mind to being inquisitive and to instill in students an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and an indefinite fountain of hope.

Personally and professionally, I view myself as what Herbert Kohl describes as a hopemonger. Being a teacher and a hopemonger means that it is my goal to help students “keep their dreams while struggling to survive in practical ways. It means we keep our teaching on hope rather than on conformity and mere survival” (Kohl, 66). I am an advocate for helping students learn about themselves and discover their identity with the support and love of people who care about them. I deeply relate to what Kohl is saying in his heartfelt words: “I know of no finer gifts we adults, teachers or not, can give to children than nonnegotiable love, support, and all of the resources we can muster as they learn what they must do and resist doing what is foreign and alien to their internal

imperatives. A decent world can only be made by people whose growth has not been stunted by the imperatives of others” (Kohl, 88).

I have come to love the power of critical thinking and problem solving, and I hope to share that passion with students and inspire them to view education as a key to freedom from any and all aspects of life which may at times seem to inhibiting. Students cannot reach this level of understanding without accessing higher order thinking skills, and those skills cannot be achieved without a teacher who has patience, respect and understanding. Not only must there be equity in the classroom, but there is a need for respect for the subject being taught and the process of education in general.

Showing respect for the process of learning means making it clear to students that teachers are learning along with them. At *no* time should a teacher claim to have all of the answers, but at *all* times, teachers should be willing to make themselves vulnerable enough to share with students the things they do not know, (Palmer, 1998) and share in the process of learning with them, modeling how resources can be used to find answers to all kinds of questions. With this approach to teaching along with setting high standards and long-term goals for students, it is amazing what can be accomplished.

I believe strongly in the process of students engaging as active learners, and find that more than often, there is less lecturing needed, and more exploring through hands-on learning experiences; Good teachers view themselves as facilitators, not dictators. It is essential for one’s top priority being that of the student’s learning, instead of the teacher’s instructing. When students are presented with the opportunity to learn through real-life situations, not only are they intellectually grappling with the material to be learned, but also, they make personal connections to what they are learning. This is how students

come to love the process of learning, as I was blessed to experience throughout my education.

However, learning cannot take place under any circumstances if students are not provided with an environment conducive to learning. A classroom should be set up to meet both the physical and emotional components needed to help achieve a milieu optimal for students. Aesthetics must be taken into consideration when decorating a classroom, making an empty room into a second home for students; it should be print-rich and welcoming in every aspect possible. The physical layout of the room should be arranged so that it can adapt to various learning situations, ranging from group work to whole class discussion. It is my opinion that a classroom should be student-centered, not teacher centered. But it is not the physical design of a classroom which contributes most to making students comfortable. As Antoine de Saint-Exupery so accurately declares in *The Little Prince* (2000, p. 70) “What is essential is invisible to the eye”.

I believe that students should be grouped heterogeneously and I am determined to create a milieu in which students have respect for diversity, which should be embraced as an opportunity for genuine learning experiences. “We must open children’s eyes to the wonder of difference, to help them recognize the imaginative genius of all peoples” (Kohl, 100).

Educational equity is “a check on the justice of specific actions that are carried out within the educational arena and the arrangements that result from those actions” (Kohl, 91). Equity and equality are essential components to every aspect of education that should be incorporated into the curriculum at every opportunity in addition to being a part of life for educators; “We must enter other worlds of literature, imagination, and culture

in order to enrich ourselves and inform our teaching. This enrichment is at the heart of excellence and is the core of equity” (Kohl, 101).

There are several specific things that can be done in a classroom to provide a culturally responsive educational experience for students. It is my intention to have each and every child in my classroom feel empowered by their attitudes, beliefs, and especially proud of anything which makes them ‘different’ and unique. In order to create such an environment, I plan to encourage cultural diversity in addition to all forms of diversity by becoming involved with the community and parents, providing additional materials if textbooks fail to draw a clear and true picture of historical events, and by making sure that the curriculum affirms all people as creators as culture (Kohl, 95).

The dynamics which make a classroom setting feel safe for students to explore are an intricate part of an optimal learning environment; all students must know that their contributions will always be welcome and respected, and that they will never be penalized for ‘wrong answers’. A large component of establishing a healthy classroom means helping students to overcome fear of all forms, and providing them with a safe place to learn in is essential.

Once students are provided with an environment that is conducive to learning, the teacher is able to open their minds and hearts with knowledge. To think of the implications of this statement brings more passion to me than my own words are capable of describing, but Maria Montessori expressed it well when she said, “To stimulate life, leaving it then free to develop, to unfold; herein lies the first task of the teacher.” (Teacher Inspiration and Tribute) How true this is, and what an opportunity it is to have the honor and privilege of being a teacher for this reason.

Margaret Riel stated that “being able to help someone learn something is a talent”. (Teacher Inspiration and Tribute) And yet, along with that ‘talent’, one must develop strategies that foster the development of skills which can be utilized to make the process of learning everything it has the power to be.

I believe it is essential for teachers to implement interdisciplinary lesson plans. I believe that the best way to teach information so that students will see it as having meaning in real life is to integrate subject areas. A lesson should demonstrate that science, math, literacy, art, and social studies are all interconnected, because in the real world, there is no isolation between these topics, they co-exist, so intermingled that often we fail to recognize them as being separate.

In addition to the mandated curriculum, I think it is imperative to address non-academic areas of instruction, as real life issues are at the core of a child’s life and children want to make connections between academia and their personal lives in order to make learning more relevant. Making these connections is especially important for students who are English Language Learners (ELL), who deserve to have foreign language addressed as an essential aspect of education. As Lisa Delpit understood, we have to “recognize that the linguistic form a student brings to school is intimately connected with loved ones, community, and personal identity” (Delpit, 53). If we expect to bring diversity into the classroom and have students embrace cultural differences, we must demonstrate that it is important to learn about different cultures. Teaching foreign language is a key component of understanding in addition to respecting cultural diversity, which is not merely a unit or concept to be taught, but an essential component that should be incorporated into the classroom on a consistent basis.

Just as there is a sense of connectedness among subject areas, there must also be a sense of connectedness established with all students. Regardless of culture, race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic-status, or any other factor, *all* students should be provided with the same rights and responsibilities; In the context of schools, equity and multiculturalism are inextricable”.

Lessons should be created to provide differentiated instruction for all students, especially those with special needs, including students with learning disabilities, students who are gifted, ELL students, and so on. However, it must be remembered that each and every student will learn differently, whether she or he is classified or not. Equally it must be recognized that teachers need to differentiate their instruction whether they are teaching in a culturally diverse area or not. If we have learned anything at all from the immense contributions of Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, it is that *all* students have *special* and different needs, as well as talents, which have the right to be acknowledged accordingly.

In addition to having a variation to the kinds of learners that fill the classroom, it is also important to recognize that there is a substantial range of diversity in terms of how students think. For example, we are conditioned and socialized to interpret silence as a symptom of something negative, perhaps even a dangerous sign of a lack of students learning, however, for some learners, silence may be an indicator of learning of the deepest form occurring within the quiet abyss of the complicated and mysterious mind. This is why it is so essential to be open to adapting as an educator. An effective teacher must constantly be conscious of so many factors that contribute to the intricate process of learning.

I may not have conquered the task of mastering every aspect of the tangled jungle that is education, but I know that I want nothing more than to contribute to its growth and discovery. I know myself and look forward to getting to know all of the students that I will be blessed to teach throughout my lifetime, with tremendous anticipation. I know that as a beginning teacher I will face obstacles that will seem at the time to be immense. I know that there will be times when I feel like I am not reaching my students. I know there will be times when I will feel that I am inadequate and there will be times that I feel that I have failed. However, I embrace each experience as a learning opportunity, and as much as I know that the rough times will be really rough, I suspect that the difficult experiences that I will face as a beginning teacher will be the experiences that I learn the most from. I do not view education simply as a career that I have chosen to pursue, but as a chance to nourish and be nourished in the rainfall of learning experiences that make miracles possible in a lifetime.

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