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A Thesis Titled: Valuing Children's Natural Thinking in the Classroom

for the Degree of Master of Science in Education

Art of Teaching Program

SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

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May 2021

Abstract

This thesis discusses the importance of valuing children's natural thinking in the classroom. Our education places a significant emphasis on literacy and math and recognizes human capacity mostly just through performance on standardized assessments in these two fields of study. But human capacity is much more than just math and literacy. Moreover, even math and literacy are taught in a very process-oriented, rote fact-based curriculum that does not allow children to learn through their own natural way of thinking. This contrived way of thinking and limited support for creative avenues leads to a very narrow definition of success, a fixed mindset and visibility only for the privileged. In this paper, I argue for knowing children, valuing their imagination, trusting their purposes for learning and making meaning and inculcating habits of mind through every aspect of study in the classroom. I provide examples of how our curriculum is riddled with contrived thinking and counter examples of how we can allow children to enter the same concepts through their natural thinking. I also provide examples of knowing children's interests and provisioning a classroom that values imagination and creativity. If we trust the capacity of children to think and learn, our children will enter adulthood as confident, contributing, capable, curious, creative, compassionate, critical, community-minded citizens; citizens that are empathetic and happy, who are unafraid to deal with uncertainties and ready to persevere through hardships and dilemmas.

Keywords: natural thinking, critical thinking, creative thinking, thinking in early childhood education, thinking in schools

Acknowledgments/Dedication

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the professors of the Art of Teaching program at Sarah Lawrence College. I am extremely grateful to my professor, Patricia Virella, who has helped me build this concrete pedagogical foundation and value system that will support my onward journey as a teacher in service; Jerusha Beckerman, for teaching me how to see each child as a unique maker of meaning and full of strength and capacity to contribute to the world; and Dr. Denisha Jones, as the most accommodating and understanding program advisor that always supported me to continue the work despite my circumstances.

I also want to especially thank my host teacher Taz Azad. I have learned so much from her and I will always be reminded of her thoughtful and nurturing classroom as I look to build my own. Jasmine Robinson, for taking me on as a student teacher at the start of one of the most challenging years in schooling history. I also want to thank Mrs. Elizabeth Capuano. She allowed me into her classroom and inspired and mentored me into taking on this career change.

Lastly, I want to thank my husband, Suhas, and my children, Mahira and Manjri, for supporting me through and through this journey. I would not have been able to pursue this degree and be a teacher if it had not been for their constant motivation, support, and love.

Outline

1. Introduction

“Our classrooms ought to be nurturing and thoughtful and just all at once; they ought to pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it means to be human and alive. They ought to resound with the voices of articulate young people in dialogues always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered and more to be said.”

(Greene M., (1995), Releasing the imagination)

2. Thinking about thinking

i. What is thinking?

Looking at 77 words from the English dictionary that are synonyms of the word “think”. The importance our society places on “thinking skills”

ii. We think all the time - thinking is commonplace

3. Problems with thinking in education

i. How are you intelligent?

The 100 languages of children but we only value math and English

ii. Contrived thinking in education

We conflate more facts/knowledge assimilation with “good thinking”

iii. Examples of contrived thinking

a. regrouping and decomposing in math

b. 12 easy ways to make learning to read difficult by Frank Smith

iv. Method vs Concept

4. Implications of this limited perception of thinking in classrooms

- i. Narrow definition of success
 - a. The toll of assessments on children
 - b. Example of thoughtful assessment
 - ii. Visibility in the classroom
 - a. Who is visible and how?
 - b. What is the teacher's expectation of the child?
 - c. How does the child perceive how he is visible?
 - d. Who has authority to think and make their thinking visible?
 - iii. Disposition of children
 - a. Growth Mindset vs Fixed Mindset
 - iv. Privilege is maintained
 - a. Whose voice remains powerful?
 - b. Whose voice is oppressed?
5. How can we reduce contrived thinking and make children's creative and critical thought the central mode of learning?

Were all instructors to realize that the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth, something hardly less than a revolution in teaching would be worked." (Dewey, J. (1916), Democracy and Education)

- i. Underlying principles for valuing thinking in the classroom
 - a. Valuing our imagination
 - b. What's worth knowing? Making learning purposeful
 - c. Build new context and bring in context
 - d. Habits of mind

- ii. What does a thinking classroom look like, sound like, feel like?
 - iii. Examples of thinking as commonplace aspects of a classroom
 - a. Rekenrek work for number sense
 - b. Reading for meaning
 - c. Work time
 - iv. The role of the teacher
6. In conclusion
- i. Confident, contributing, capable, curious, creative, compassionate, critical, community-minded citizens.

Quotes

- “Were all instructors to realize that the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth, something hardly less than a revolution in teaching would be worked.” (Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*)
- “Thinking is a continual, all-embracing operation of the mind, powered by the imagination that never rests.” (Smith, F., (1990). *To think*)
- “Education is good just so far as it produces well-developed critical faculty. A teacher of any subject, who insists on accuracy and a rational control of all processes and methods, and who holds everything open to unlimited verification and revision, is cultivating that method as a habit in the pupils. Men educated in it cannot be stampeded. They are slow to believe. They can hold things as possible or probable in all degrees, without certainty and without pain. They can wait for evidence and weigh evidence. They can resist appeals to their dearest prejudices. Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizens.” (Sumner, W. G. ,(1940). *Folkways: A study of the sociological importance of usages, manners, customs, mores, and morals.*)
- “Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results.” (Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*)
- Reading the world precedes reading the word, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world. Language and reality are

dynamically intertwined. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context. (Freire, P., *the importance of the act of reading*)

- For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.” (Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*)
- “How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I dialogue if I am closed to - and even offended by - the contribution of others? At the point of encounter there are neither yet ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know.” Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*)
- “Children grow into the intellectual life of those around them.” (Vygotsky, L., 1997).
- “Our classrooms ought to be nurturing and thoughtful and just all at once; they ought to pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it means to be human and alive. They ought to resound with the voices of articulate young people in dialogues always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered and more to be said.” (Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination*)
- “I care about the lives of children at school because I am an educator, and as an educator it is my job to insist on every child’s right to a classroom experience that daily honors her, reveres her smarts, engages her curiosities and ensures her dignity” (Shalaby, C. (2017). *Troublemakers: Lessons in freedom from young children at school*)

- “The purpose of education is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it – at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.” (Baldwin, J. (1963). *“A talk to teachers”*).
- “School experience should be about finding out our natural aptitude and personal passion - what is it that we love doing and in doing it, we feel like our most authentic selves; that time passes differently and that we are more alive, more centered and more vibrant than at any other times.” (Robinson, K., (2009). *The element*).
- The two themes central to an egalitarian philosophy of education are a robust and nuanced model of mind and a foundational commitment to equal educational opportunity. These themes, taken together, fuse the cognitive and the civic, ground the civic in specific obligations to the conditions of learning, connect events in the classroom to a vision of both a knowledgeable and a good society.” (Rose, M. (2005). *Lives on the boundary: A moving account of the struggles and achievements of America's educationally underprepared*)
- “We frequently slot rather than shape, categorize rather than foster. And poorer children, the kids whose parents have less power, are more likely to be harmed by this judgment

made on their intelligence and ability very early on. This then affects the curriculum they receive, their place in the school and the way they are defined institutionally.” (Rose, M. (2005). *Lives on the boundary: A moving account of the struggles and achievements of America's educationally underprepared*)

- Debate makes it personal. It supports the child’s longing to make sense of the world through questioning, wondering and posturing; it makes learning an active pursuit, an engagement with the curriculum; where our differences are appreciated for the contribution they make to the texture and quality of life (Carini, P. (2001). *Starting strong: A different look at children, school, and standards*).
- Human intelligence seems to have at least three main features. The first is that it is extraordinarily diverse. The second feature is that it is tremendously dynamic. The third feature of intelligence is that it is entirely distinctive. (Robinson, K. (2009). *The Element*).
- To describe teaches me that the subject of my attention always exceeds what I can see. I learn from describing a painting or a rock or a child or a river that the world is always larger than my conceptualization of it. I learn that when I am seeing a lot, I am still seeing only a little and partially. I learn that when others join in, the description is always fuller than what I saw alone.” (Carini, P. (2001). *Starting strong: A different look at children, school, and standards*)
- “A child free from the guilt of ownership and the burden of economic competition will grow up with the will to do what needs doing and the capacity for joy in doing it. It is useless work that darkens the heart. The delight of the nursing mother, of the scholar, of the successful hunter, of the good cook, of the skilful maker, of anyone doing needed

work and doing it well, - this durable joy is perhaps the deepest source of human affection and of sociality as a whole.” (Leguin, U. (1974). *The dispossessed*)

- “But what if, all along, our well-meaning efforts at closing the achievement gap has been opening the door to racist ideas? What if different environments actually cause different kinds of achievement rather than different levels of achievement? What if the intellect of a poor, low testing Black child in a poor Black school is different—and not inferior—to the intellect of a rich, high-testing White child in a rich White school? What if the way we measure intelligence shows not only our racism but our elitism? Gathering knowledge of abstract items, from words to equations, that have no relation to our everyday lives has long been the amusement of the leisured elite. Relegating the non-elite to the basement of intellect because they do not know as many abstractions has been the conceit of the elite. What if we measured literacy by how knowledgeable individuals are about their own environment: how much individuals knew all those complex equations and verbal and nonverbal vocabularies of their everyday life? What if we measured intellect by an individual’s desire to know? What if we measured intellect by how open an individual’s mind is to self-critique and new ideas?” (Kendi, I.X., (2016). *Why the academic achievement gap is a racist idea*)

Process Paper

In a way, this thesis is a bringing together of all that I have learned to value as a teacher through this Masters program. When I started the course, I knew I had this desire to be a teacher but I had no experience as a teacher and all I knew about teaching and education was from my own personal experience as a student in a school in India and then what I was witnessing my children experience at their schools - the the town's local Montessori pre-school and the public elementary school. I had some good experiences and some bad and no way of telling why some felt better than others. All this implies that I knew very little.

In the first few weeks of starting the Masters program, I read a chapter from John Dewey and soon after from Paulo Freire. I had to read and re-read to understand them. I had just never thought of teacher's taking on the child's perspective and valuing his purposes. I had never experienced being seen as a student that is a person. As a student, I always aimed to try and be "the best student", that is to say, do whatever the teacher desires. But what it meant to be me, I had never thought about it. Simultaneous to reading Dewey, Freire, Ellen Schwartz, Bell Hooks, that were dispelling old myths and creating this new ideology for me regarding what it means to be a teacher, I was also learning about the descriptive review process and Patricia Carini's writings about seeing children as makers of meaning, as each individual child and not one size fits all, learning to observe and describe and refraining from judgement. And it all really started to make me critically question the purpose of education and what it means to be a teacher.

Simultaneous to the question about purpose, I was also wondering about equity and who is visible, who is invisible, who is hypervisible; about judgement and labeling in classrooms; about the narrow definition of success; about culture and privilege.

A common thread that stood out to me that connected all of these wonderings was thinking. I started to connect that our thinking connects to everything that we do and everything that we learn and everything that we feel. And I was beginning to hypothesize that the purpose of education should be to make children comfortable in thinking so they can build their value system, they can know what they truly enjoy doing and what makes them happy, so they can practice what it means to be part of a community, a democracy and the world.

The more I wondered about thinking, the more connections I was seeing in everything I was reading, discussing in the class and experiencing in the field placements. I wrote my conference paper for Emergent Curriculum on critical thinking in the classroom. That paper helped me understand the role of questioning and dialogue and listening and how as a teacher I need to be thoughtful about what I decide to teach and how I teach it. It is the process of growing understanding that is important, not the sheer knowledge of facts.

In the next year, I wanted to expand on that notion of thinking critically to understand what's more. How do we think, what's good thinking, are there types of thinking, can thinking be grown?

And a lot of the reading that I was doing for class - Math and Tech, Language and Literacy, Emergent Curriculum, Foundations of Education, Theories of Development, all were helping me build a response to the questions I was wondering about.

I wanted to dismantle this myth that thinking is a privileged activity that only some people born with certain intelligence do well. I wanted to showcase how each of us is born with immense capacity to think well and we do it quite comfortably and effortlessly all day long.

Moreover, I was beginning to see that the reason why children's thinking is invisible is not because it does not exist but because of the way we teach and what we teach and what we

value as thinking. Our notion of what constitutes good thinking is all messed up. I was witnessing many teachers teaching in these very contrived ways that made it very hard for children to really understand. I was witnessing that the curriculum per-se was also very contrived for children - it is hardly purposeful. Our education system is riddled with process-oriented teaching; everything is broken down into smaller and smaller steps (perhaps to make it teacher-proof and child proof). It feels the education system does not trust the passion of teachers and capacity of children to make meaning.

I was drawn to this idea of “you cannot teach what they already do not know” - and how much of the way things are taught have no connections to the child. On the other hand, in my school placement at Ella Baker, I was noticing that when you actually value children’s thinking, the outcome in terms of product produced by the children, their learning and their self-confidence is so markedly different. Through this thesis, I wanted to bring children’s thinking capacity to the forefront.

In addition to the books I was reading as part of the course, I also read more books by some of the same theorists that we were reading for class. I was finding connections to classroom thinking with books I was reading for myself like James Baldwin and Ken Robinson and news and podcasts that I was drawn to and wanted to listen to. Whilst the final presentation outcome only encompasses what I can say in 45 minutes, I have been so mesmerized by this topic that I see connections to classroom thinking everywhere.

Since I was seeing connections to children’s thinking everywhere, it was hard for me to distill my thoughts in a short 45 minutes presentation. I decided to focus on two aspects - process vs concept, and expanding the notion of what it means to think to include many many different modes of thinking as equally important as literacy and math.

I leave this program knowing very well that I have found my calling in life. I am not sure in what capacity I will contribute, but I will forever remain connected to the field of education and children's thinking will always remain at the forefront of my values that I will passionately strive for.

“A child free from the guilt of ownership and the burden of economic competition will grow up with the will to do what needs doing and the capacity for joy in doing it. It is useless work that darkens the heart. The delight of the nursing mother, of the scholar, of the successful hunter, of the good cook, of the skilful maker, of anyone doing needed work and doing it well, - this durable joy is perhaps the deepest source of human affection and of sociality as a whole.”

(Leguin, U. (1974). *The dispossessed*)

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