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Reflecting on the Craft of Teaching and Learning: How Experienced Educators Cultivate Authentic, Meaningful, and Inspiring Classroom Communities

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Integrative Masters Project: Reflecting on the Craft of Teaching and Learning; How Experienced
Educators Cultivate Authentic, Meaningful, and Inspiring Classroom Communities

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Abstract

This independent study explores the question, “*What do educators do to cultivate authentic, meaningful, and inspiring classroom communities?*” And, what are the key elements required for educators to sustain an inspired educational career over time? Five lower school teachers and graduate school of education professors were interviewed to explore key threads among these educators who embody strong teaching practices which they have sustained over their career in the field of education. Each interviewee was asked to reflect on their craft and their approach to teaching and learning. Selected findings from three of these interviews are presented. Three themes emerged from these interviews: joy, respect for the learner, and relational teaching. A selective review of the literature was conducted to further explore these three essential elements of good teaching. This experience deepened the author’s self-reflection process as it both reinforced some aspects of her teaching philosophy that existed prior to the study and shifted some of her thinking around what the priorities need to be to have a long and satisfying career in teaching. Both the analysis and conclusion are presented in a podcast format.

Dedication

I want to express my gratitude to all 5 interviewees. I am appreciative of our conversations and the wisdom you shared. I remain inspired by each of you and the commitment you show as educators.

Thank you to my family including my mom, dad, grandpa, and brother who have always supported me unconditionally, especially in my move to NYC to become a teacher.

To my conference group whom I will never forget. I am grateful for the space we held for each other week to week, even while learning online and never meeting face to face until our very last week. Our week-to-week Rose Bud Thorn share was the inspiration for this project. Thank you.

To Eric, my first mentor teacher. Thank you for directing me to Bank Street and supporting me along the way. I have learned a great deal from you and aspire to have an inspired and engaged classroom similar to yours.

And of course, to Mimi, who has been a Rose even before I defined what “rose” meant. Thank you for your infallible good cheer, the care and attention you provided me, the encouragement, and certainly for the space to reflect on my practice. You are one of a kind; an intentional teacher who encompasses joy, and deep respect for the learner, showing me relational teaching at its best.

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Rose Bud Thorn Inquiry

It is the end of another challenging day within the Covid 19 pandemic. I have spent my entire day in front of a computer screen, Zooming with my students, creating video content instruction during my breaks, and now it was time for my Bank Street conference group, once again, meeting virtually. My seat in my studio apartment is unchanged, only the link to the Zoom meeting is new.

As the conference group arrives, our first task, done with consistent ritualistic regularity, is Rose Bud Thorn. What in the past week was a blossoming rose? What was a bud, brimming with potential, or a prickly thorn? As the Zoom circle shares, I am filled with warmth and empathy for my peers. I feel heard and I feel my listening engaged. I feel that even though this experience is repeated each week, once the sharing begins, it is new, genuine, and vital.

So imagine my surprise when I began another educational engagement, and one of our first activities together was Rose, Bud, Thorn. I felt surprised by my own reaction. I felt cynical. It felt forced and manufactured; inorganic. I wondered why this time Rose, Bud, Thorn felt so different? Why did I feel this way? What had changed? Over the next several months, I thought more critically about my experiences both as a teacher and learner. What were the ingredients that transformed the same activity from mediocre to magical, from tragic to transformational?

From these contrasting experiences and my sense of awareness of how connected and engaged or disconnected and disengaged I was, I was given the inspiration for my IMP. Striving to make sense of effective, powerful teaching became the backbone behind my culminating graduate independent study.

Introduction

For my integrative master's project, I am interested in exploring the question, "*What do educators do to cultivate authentic, meaningful, and inspiring classroom communities?*" My five years of experience as an associate teacher in two different independent elementary schools, at three different grade levels and in four different classrooms combined with my graduate studies in education have affirmed the important practice of reflection as I grow in my craft. I seek to gain further insight into how great teachers make the "magic" happen. The focus of this study is to engage in dialogue with educators and ask these participants to reflect on their approach to teaching and learning. I am intensely curious about what can be revealed through conversations with other practitioners' reflecting on their practices, conversations that often are neglected within the day-to-day grind of running a classroom. I am a deeply reflective educator, and as I have learned in my first five years of teaching, I gain so much by listening and initiating dialogue with other teachers. This integrative master's project, in essence, is about self-reflection through the process of honest, focused conversations with five practitioners, artists whose medium is teaching. These conversations, when combined with a targeted review of literature, will serve as a springboard for my own personal growth as I continue to refine and cultivate my personal philosophical foundation as a teacher.

Rationale

A teacher without a strong philosophical grounding is like a sailboat without a rudder. The wind blows, and the ship is tossed in whatever direction the breeze blows that day. As I

prepare to graduate from Bank Street, I intend to not only hone my tightening convictions as an educator, but also establish a routine where the deepest questions of my craft are discussed with other educators. I envision a lifelong career in the field of education and this project seeks to strengthen my roots as I begin to reach for the sky.

The reason I did this independent study was to explore how experienced teachers create a powerful practice that remains fresh and growing over the years?

There are many educational resources, books, and articles to turn to yet I find it equally as important to talk to individual teachers who work in the field day in and day out. I not only wanted to talk to educators engaged in the work, I was also interested in learning about how that engagement can be sustained over time and their thoughts on what was necessary to create powerful educational experiences in the classroom. Through this independent study, I am looking for a theme or thread from people who I think embody successful teaching practices and philosophical groundings. I am curious if any specific elements are similar or differ from educator to educator. There are many resources to turn to but I was especially curious to explore what can be gained from highly experienced teachers that I think embody reflective teaching. This study offers something different than only looking at literature.

Method

After deciding that this question, “*What do educators do to cultivate authentic, meaningful, and inspiring classroom communities?*” would be the pillar of my project, I set out to develop several categories or indicators that I believed would support the questions that I ask

leading the conversations. I started with more categories but as my initial interviews were completed, I found that the conversations became most invigorating when focused on three main themes, joy, respect for the learner, and relational teaching. As I progressed, I began to refine my questions based on these three themes. In the end, I am grateful for each of the five interviews I conducted and found wisdom and was inspired by each of these generous educators who agreed to spend an hour of their day sharing their thoughts with me. I chose the three interviews that I found spoke most directly to my three chosen themes as the source for my conclusion and analysis podcast.

How is the data analyzed?

After conducting each recorded interview, I recorded a reflection capturing my initial thoughts and questions sparked from our conversation. Listening back to the three core interviews, I took notes, pulling and transcribing the sections that spoke to my central topics and which I found inspirational and thought-provoking. Since I had established the three themes that were my focus, it was easy for me to categorize and compare my subjects. I found that the interviews lived inside my mind through this process. I was turning over the answers I received and seeing how my practice reflected and contrasted with those of my interview subjects. I found my clarity of purpose as an educator intensifying through these interviews and the ensuing process of self-reflection as I embarked on analyzing the data for my use and for the final podcast, titled *Rose Bud Thorn Inquiry*.

The Participants

The five participants in this study were selected from a pool of educators that I have had

direct experiences with. Each has inspired me in some way through their teaching, and I sensed that they were deeply dedicated, curious, and reflective practitioners. I was eager to learn more from them, not only from seeing them in action but also by asking targeted questions which requested access to their process. I was asking for a backstage pass. Three teachers I interviewed were lower school teacher colleagues and two were graduate professors at Bank Street College whose courses I attended during my years at Bank Street (2019-2022). All five of the teachers have fifteen plus years of experience in the field.

The Interview Questions

My initial idea was to ask each participant the same 10 questions. These were the initial questions prepared for each interview:

1. Where do you cultivate inspiration in yourself as an educator?
2. What drives joy in your classroom?
3. What does your best day as a teacher look like? How does it look for students?
4. What is your relationship to teaching?
5. How do you stay inspired?
6. What do you wish you had more of in your work? Less of?
7. What role does authority play in your classroom?
8. What matters most to you in your classroom?
9. What in your personal experience drives good teaching? How does that show up in your practice?

In designing the questions for the interviews, I reflected on my teaching practice and identified what aspects of teaching I consider to be most important to my work with children. I focused on questions that could illuminate what teachers do in their practice to stay inspired and lead powerful communities of learners year after year. My intention in these questions was to make it possible for my interviewees to feel open to sharing and reflecting on their personal

experiences and intentionalities about their work.

After the first interview, I realized that it was more fruitful for me to engage in *conversation* with the subjects, actively listening and appropriately responding to the participants as they shared and even occasionally sharing my own stories as we engaged in mutual reflection on education as a craft that can be refined. The follow-up questions I asked in each conversation were responsive to what the person shared.

The Consent Form

All participants were asked to sign a consent form before participating. *See Appendix A.*

Results

The complete interviews are confidential, however, for the purposes of my thesis, I selected specific examples that correlated to my three themes: joy, relational teaching, and respect for the learner. I chose moments which I found especially interesting and profound. As you will see, some of the examples are quotations and some are paraphrased. These are the “golden nuggets” of wisdom that I pulled from the interviews.

Question 1: *“Where do you cultivate inspiration as an educator?”*

- Interviewee One stated, “Like any teacher, regardless of what age students, I find people themselves interesting. The idea of what keeps us going, staying in teaching, is that we find the people themselves interesting, as different as loving everybody.” He continued to explain that although often a cliché: there can be an emotional connection and attraction but you don't love everybody (every student) but what keeps people going, including myself, is that they (people) are interesting to work with.

- Interviewee Two stated that inspiration can be cultivated by the learner by listening to questions being asked (by students) and went on to say, “The curiosity that exists in the space is really exciting, and keeps the job interesting.”

Question 2: *What do you wish you had more of?*

- Interviewee Two expressed, “I wish I had more moments of joy,” going on to elaborate, “As a classroom teacher, as an admin, as an educator, there are ways in which days feel hard and I think when I look at how packed our days are, our schedules are activities with expectations, commitments that are not always our own or of the kids' suggestion. It can feel like we are getting through the day to get through the day.” On the subject of joy, Interviewee Two also explained that there are not always moments that are joyful and that, “Teachers have to make it feel like it was worth their time. One of the norms in equity work is to respect and accept a lack of closure, something about coming back to what you are thinking now, and how dialogue can be a part of that learning.” Interviewee Two defined joy by what it is and what is it not, expressing, “Joy doesn't just mean we are being silly or doing something that feels art-based, that it is not getting them to think or feel challenged,” instead, “Joy in a comment from a kid, it's not giving me the assumed or “teacher -fied answer.” Concluding that joy is, “Genuineness and authenticity, something fun and beautiful in that, engaging in that and bringing others into that (space) and my response(s) into their (students) thinking.”

Question 3: *What drives joy in your classroom/work?*

- Interviewee Two stated, “When there is that excitement...you’ve gone off track, there is an element, someone’s question that becomes the focal point.” She went on to say, “When these moments happen, kids are upset that time was taken away from traditional learning because they don’t see value in the moment of the unexpected event.” She noted that “Something that happens, there is a moment in time where students feel they need to get back to the learning. This is all learning.” Interviewee Two concluded by saying, “Why does it feel like such a juxtaposition that learning is unscripted and that “that” is bad and or “that” is taking away from the learning. The act of learning can’t always be scripted or rigid - learning can’t be regurgitation of information.”
- Interviewee Three stated, “Community building is really important to me.” She went on to explain, “I want students to feel like they know each other in ways that help them feel like they can take risks, explore things, and share... I spend a lot of time around community building as far as celebrating birthdays with each other...or finding different ways to hear one another’s stories.” She went on to say, “Usually my classes have some sort of self-reflection, some form of sharing about their personal histories as well as professional experience,” and that, “I try to bring in humor or videos of kids, bring a lot of joy, anything of that sort.” She emphasized, “A lot of the topics that I explore in my courses tend to be pretty heavy and intense, very social-justice-oriented and so remembering that we also must sustain each other through joy. There is so much to be celebrated amid things that are hard is something that is important to me.” Interviewee Three also stated, “When thinking about teaching to an individual in a class...I want to

know who my students are as people,” going on to say, “In terms of giving permission or offer to create a space where people feel safe to be "off task,” She concluded by explaining, "I feel that if we are going to have meaningful conversations like linguistic genocide, white supremacy, or ableism, people have to feel like they are in a safe place with each other and that is not going to happen unless they know each other and so in some ways I do welcome that and I trust my students. If they feel like they talked about the prompt and want to talk about something else now. I have intentionally actively said, “Yes” that is fine and that is welcome when you do go off task and that helps.”

Question 4: *What is your best day and how does it look/feel for your students?*

- Interviewee Three explained that “Not an entire class - moments when something happens and that was the most important conversation- we can just end the year now - those moments where you feel like we were all super invested in this conversation because it was that important - whether it was good or bad.”

Question 5: *What drives good teaching?*

- Interviewee One emphasized “As teachers, if we can be as natural as we can, up to a certain point with other people, with the way we speak and the way we answer. If we bring our natural selves from outside the classroom into the classroom, then we are more fully ourselves.” He went on to clarify the point of being, “genuine, a deeper way of being with a learner rather than building the learner up in a superficial way.” To further explain their point, Interviewee One provides the example of students being asked to draw a plant that was recently picked, to look at the anatomy of the plant, using a pencil

or watercolors. Emphasizing that, as you pass by a student rather than saying "good job" or "that looks great," genuinely looking at what the person has done and showing as evidence that you've looked at what the learner is doing by the specifics of your feedback demonstrating evidence to the learner that you've actually looked at their work before moving on. He further emphasized that educators should provide comments that are substantive rather than superficial. Interviewee Three also went on to explain, "If you have had the experience of being part of a community (in conference group) then when you go into a teaching situation as a classroom teacher." He made the point that through the experience of having been in a successful community, you not only strive for building a community but you know the pillars of what it means to sustain a strong community. He went on to say, "You don't choose the lower school director, your students, colleagues, classroom partners." The point being that each year you meet a whole new group of strangers, so how do you build a community if you have never experienced a successful community. He emphasized that relationships are, "built upon trust and trust plays out in how willing someone is to take a little risk." Further concluding that "I see my role, one way it plays out is building this trust. To pay very close attention to someone, what a person says, that I (*interviewee One*) have a strong feeling is a little risky for that person today and it may be subtle but if I feel that, then it is something I hold onto and not respond right away but it's very clear in my mind and at some later point, I will say something or look for an opportunity to comment on my own, about myself, that relates to that little risk-taking bit or to say that I've been thinking

about what ___(person's name) said last Wednesday and I'm wondering and I'll ask them (I've noticed that and giving it some thought) and inviting them to say more.”

- Interviewee Three explained, “If you feel like you know your students and they know you and there is trust there - anything is possible and so much is possible.”

Question 6: *Final Comments and Questions*

- Interviewee Two expressed that “On the subject of Rose bud thorn (RBT) - inquiry got me thinking about how being a part of a school community will have its challenges and its beauty, the idea of RBT, being able to see that prompt or title, gets you to think beyond the linear, beyond "things suck right now... Well, not everything sucks right now, there something that feels problematic, and there is something really beautiful. Thinking about questions that get to each of those three stages. Thank you.”

This information can also be found in Appendix B: Results.

Literature Review

My Approach to the Search for Literature

My literature search was somewhat unconventional in that I conducted it after I collected my data. Before beginning my project, I engaged in a deep synthesis of what I had learned throughout my Bank Street courses intending to try to define for myself how Experienced Educators Cultivate Authentic, Meaningful, and Inspiring Classroom Communities. I determined what the three essential elements of the kind of teaching I aspire to were, based on my thinking before beginning this project combined with what I noticed and experienced during the five interviews I conducted. These elements were: relational teaching, respect for the learner, and joy.

What follows is a highly selective sampling of some amazing authors whose ideas felt relevant and inspiring. Most of these authors were not new to me but came from exposure during my Bank Street coursework. Two scholars were new to me based on my search.

How I Presented my Findings

Continuing in my unconventional approach to the literature review, I presented my findings by first sharing what some scholars have to say about these three essential elements of teaching. I then worked to come up with my own definitions for each theme which were reflected by and supported by the literature.

Relational Teaching

According to Bovill et al. (2020) “relational pedagogy puts relationships at the heart of teaching and emphasises that a meaningful connection needs to be established between teacher and students as well as between students and their peers if effective learning is to take place” (p. 3). My working definition of relational teaching is quite similar. At its core, I use the term relational teaching, to mean that the student and teacher form an authentic connection with one another, thus cultivating mutual respect and trust when teaching and learning together. I similarly define relational teaching to the Bovill et al. (2020) definition where relationships between teacher and student are at the heart of teaching. Palmer presents the idea that strong classroom communities are essential stating, “We cannot learn deeply and well until a community of learning is created in the classroom” (Palmer, 1983, as cited in Bovill et al., 2020, p. 1). Recently educators have examined the impact of relational teaching on student outcomes. Palmer emphasizes that “Real learning does not happen until students are brought into relationship with

the teacher, with each other, and with the subject” (Palmer, 1983, as cited in Bovill et al. (2020, p. 1).

Bell Hooks offers a transformative perspective on what it means to be relational. Hooks (1994) points out that a transgressive pedagogical approach fundamentally rethinks democratic participation. She offers that education is the practice of freedom for her students. She writes, “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (Hooks, 2017, p.13). Together, these statements pulled from seminal texts, indicate that being an adaptive, transgressive, and student-centered educator is essential for effective teaching. Concluding that, to create nurturing and authentic learning spaces, students need to form trusting relationships with their teachers. Relationships are at the heart of teaching and learning. Relationships emphasize a meaningful connection between the teacher and student. When respect and trust are built, real learning can occur.

Respect for the Learner

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) defines respect for the learner to mean, “regarding them with special attention, honoring them, showing consideration toward them, being concerned about them, appreciating them, relating to them, admiring their strengths, and caring for them. Young people are dignified and strengthened by adult respect” (ASCD, 2022, para. 1). While a variety of definitions of the term respect for the learner can be found, I will use my definition: individuals in a classroom are seen, appreciated, and valued not just for their actions and or behaviors but their innate personhood. In effect,

teachers have greater influence over students who feel that they are respected by their teachers.

In this section, the term “respect for the learner” will be used in its broadest sense, to refer to how educators successfully demonstrate care for the individuals they teach. Hooks (1994) saw it as, “to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential” (p.13).

The use of the word souls in Hooks’ writing emphasizes that the teacher is not charged with only respecting students who are behaving properly or excelling academically in the classroom. Each person touched by the teacher is deserving of full respect as they navigate their educational journey.

In his seminal text, *We got this: Equity, Access and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be* Minor (2020) devotes attention to educators and their role in being who our students need us to be. He outlines how taking on listening approaches can not only support teachers in becoming more attuned to students' needs but also their values. Minor and Alexander (in the book’s forward) argue for the importance of listening to our students and asking questions to deepen our understanding of what our students are telling and or sharing with us. A connection can be made between Minor (2020) and Hooks’ (1994) statements, that caring for the soul of a student and listening to our students is imperative to demonstrate to the learner that you are there for them as much as you value and appreciate them in your community. Likewise, Vallance (1996) offers insight into how nurturing spaces can support a thriving learning environment:

All we can do is to speak with others as passionately and eloquently as we can;

Our classrooms ought to be nurturing and thoughtful and just all at once; they

ought to pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it is to be human and alive (p. 43).

A clear connection can be made between the statements of Vallance (1996) and Minor (2020). They offer further explanations of how listening can be radical and drive a student-centered space. Furthermore, Minor (2020) explains, "listening in this way means that you are radically kid-centered, that you are adaptive, and that you are willing to take public risks" (p. 24). In my mind, radical listening means that students are not speaking simply to be part of a routine classroom protocol which is subsidiary to the prepared lesson, but the listening teacher is hearing the core ideas being shared, following their trail, and probing deeper allowing students to see how much their ideas are valued. This type of listening is being attuned to the individuals in the classroom, and showcasing their brilliance.

Similarly, Carla Shalaby's landmark book, *Troublemakers* (2017), provides a description to remind us that early learners demand in their environment what all learners need, stating:

Everything I know about what it means to be human, I learned from kindergartners. When we become distracted by what we think is important, young children redirect our focus, centering on the need to be human together. They are blessed with self-restraint and abandoning the pretense of politeness, they center their interests, their questions, their desires, over and above the imposed agenda of adults. In this way, they remind us that they are in charge (p. 58).

Shalaby explains how important it is to recognize what can be learned from our students and discusses embracing that learning. She elaborates on the deepest purpose of a classroom,

"...to figure out - in classrooms and beyond them - what it means to be in community, what it means to protect each other, and what it means to be human" (p. 60). Together these quotes provide important insights into why educators must maintain ongoing respect for the learner. Furthermore, given all that has been mentioned so far, one may suppose that we invite students to envision the world they want to live in, supporting their developing understanding of who they want to become.

Likewise, Hooks (1994) emphasizes the pedagogical approach of inviting democratic participation. She stresses that democratic education is the practice of freedom for her students. In her seminal text, *Teaching to Transgress* Hooks (1994), presents the powerful idea that teaching to transgress means the teachers are learners and the learners are teachers. In that process, we can all learn from each other and gain new insights on how to act better in the world. In thought-provoking reflection, Hooks (1994) shares what was learned from her twenty-plus years of teaching writing:

During my twenty years of teaching, I have witnessed a grave sense of dis-ease among professors (irrespective of their politics) when students want us to see them as the whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge (p.15).

Respect for the learner demands that educators see whole human beings in the students they teach. Learning and teaching can not be fully scripted if we are nurturing a trusting community willing to share our authentic selves and willing to transgress as we follow the lead of the subjects being taught and the passion for ideas being shared. Collectively, this research

outlines a critical role for democratic participation, listening to our students, and teaching to transgress, to support success in demonstrating effective relational teaching.

Joy

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines joy as:

The noun as the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires; the expression or exhibition of such emotion; a state of happiness or felicity; or a source or cause of delight. (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2022)

I define joy as the emotion evoked when synapses form and connections are made. As a student or teacher, it can also be experienced when witnessing or experiencing a breakthrough or having successful peer interactions. Joy can be felt by the learner but also spread through empathic connection throughout the classroom. Poetter (2006) describes joy as:

The knower and the known are connected. These connections can take place in the present moment or over time; the joy comes in the process of working toward a relationship, in that transformational moment of knowing more fully the self and the other, and, perhaps, afterward during moments of reflection on past events.” (p.3)

Poetter (2006) explains that joy occurs when connections are formed, during a process of working together (in community) and or looking back to reflect. Joy can be felt in the present but also in recollection, a powerful reminder for teachers to allow time to reflect upon achievements within their classrooms. Poetter (2006) writes about joy as an educational construction explaining, “When I speak of joy here I am speaking of an existential sense of connection, of

pure relationship in a complex web of interactions that bring joy to the knower and known. I take a Buberian approach to thinking about teaching and focus mainly on our work in schools as opportunities to come into true relation with self and other (Buber, 1996 as cited in Poetter, 2006).

In her seminal text, *Finding the Joy in Teaching: From the Toilet to the Scaled Universe* Fredericks (2020) outlines the four elements of finding joy in teaching. Fredericks (2020) describes joy can be found when embracing curriculum, strengthening assignments, enhancing classroom management, and or developing relationships with students. On the topic of joy, Fredericks (2020) writes about reaping the benefits of building strong relationships with your students, explaining that, “many students need: a caring, supportive adult whom they can trust and confide in” (p. 115). Fredericks (2020) further emphasizes, “When you build a relationship with students, not only do you provide needed support to your students, you also open yourself up to an infinite supply of joy.” (p. 115) Fredericks (2020) also writes about how to find joy through learning, explaining that one must, “embrace the curriculum and bring back the wonder, passion, and creativity for yourself and your students.” (p. 1)

In summation, joy is felt and experienced, whether that be joy in forming connections with students, finding a balance in classroom management, or passion for the curriculum. I see joy as a marker for success, an entity to work towards, an emotion that I hope can be woven into the fabric of my classroom community just as much as it courses through the veins of the individuals I teach.

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Conclusion

This project has afforded me the space for deep reflection and thoughtful conversation with experienced educators. I am grateful to be nearing the end...inching closer to being a lead classroom teacher and a graduate of Bank Street, using what was learned from this study and infusing it within my teaching practice through the years to come.

When I embarked on this year-long study, I wasn't exactly sure what the culminating findings or presentation would be. I wasn't exactly sure what my question would be. I had an idea (What makes good teaching?), an observational experience, as I shared within the Rose Bud Thorn vignette, that formed into a question: *What do educators do to cultivate authentic, meaningful, and inspiring classroom communities?*

It's true, my curiosity has always been a driving force in how I interact and see the world. Although I wasn't so sure what my findings would be, I was determined to ask the questions. I was determined to speak with experienced teachers and explore their thoughts on what were the key elements of a thriving educational environment. It is one of my passionate convictions that in my practice, a teacher is not in the position of the dispenser of knowledge within the classroom. The teacher doesn't know it all. In the same way, I approached this project to share my thinking but not to bestow knowledge. This IMP process has supported me in solidifying the foundation of my philosophical grounding. For me, this has been both affirming and also illuminating, new light being shed allowing me to reconsider positions I held. *You see* - I started the project by creating a list of what I thought were the fundamental elements of teaching. I considered exploring classroom management, behavior management, inspiration, passion for

curriculum, and engagement. What happened, as I began to join in conversation with my participants, was a reformation of what were in fact the critical elements of strong teaching. I was inspired to hear about what drives inspiration - leading to what brings joy! Joy encompasses all the elements that sustain and engage both the teacher and students. I also was deeply invested in understanding the relationships between teachers and students and learned that being relational is as important as having respect for the students.

For me and the teachers I spoke with, teaching is a lifetime craft, a journey, an art form of working with people to activate learning and community. As I close the chapter of graduate school and my role as an associate teacher, I am beginning a new chapter, leading my own classroom, aspiring to put my philosophy into action, and continuing to gain perspective as I shape my own environment, a place where joy is welcome and nourished and profound respect helps relationships of trust form, the foundation for our work together as a community.

Appendix A

Podcast: *Rose Bud Thorn Inquiry*

You can listen to the *Rose Bud Thorn Inquiry* Podcast here:

- To listen on Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/3iKdfhup4Inca1W9sGXXOU?si=MXOztK-BTjit-OHtg55clw>

- To listen on Anchor:

<https://anchor.fm/heather-mohamed/episodes/Rose-Bud-Thorn-Inquiry-e1ho3kv>

The podcast combines the analysis and conclusion sections. The outline for this podcast episode can be found in Appendix B.

Appendix B

Podcast Outline

Welcome

Welcome to the culminating podcast for my Integrative Masters Project: Reflecting on the Craft of Teaching and Learning; How Experienced Educators Cultivate Authentic, Meaningful, and Inspiring Classroom Communities. I am eager to discuss my analysis (my findings) and conclusion to this very special project. Before we jump in, let me share the inspiration behind my culminating graduate work.

A short vignette...

Rose Bud Thorn Inquiry

It is the end of another challenging day within the Covid 19 pandemic. I have spent my entire day in front of a computer screen, Zooming with my students, creating video content instruction during my breaks, and now it was time for my Bank Street conference group, once again, meeting virtually. My seat in my studio apartment is unchanged, only the link to the Zoom meeting is new.

As the conference group arrives, our first task, done with consistent ritualistic regularity, is Rose Bud Thorn. What in the past week was a blossoming rose? What was a bud, brimming with potential, or a prickly thorn? As the Zoom circle shares, I am filled with warmth and empathy for my peers. I feel heard and I feel my listening engaged. I feel that even though this experience is repeated each week, once the sharing begins, it is new, genuine, and vital.

So imagine my surprise when I began another educational engagement, and one of our first activities together was Rose, Bud, Thorn. I felt surprised by my own reaction. I felt cynical. It felt forced and manufactured; inorganic. I wondered why this time Rose, Bud, Thorn felt so different? Why did I feel this way? What had changed? Over the next several months, I thought more critically about my experiences both as a teacher and learner. What were the ingredients that transformed the same activity from mediocre to magical, from tragic to transformational?

From these contrasting experiences and my sense of awareness of how connected and engaged or disconnected and disengaged I was, I was given the inspiration for my IMP. Striving to make sense of effective, powerful teaching became the backbone behind my culminating graduate independent study.

The Project

This project has inspired me to explore, through literature and conversation, my IMP's essential question: *“What do educators do to cultivate authentic, meaningful, and inspiring classroom communities?”*

I have created a podcast episode titled, “Rose Bud Thorn Inquiry” reflective of my time at Bank Street which has been filled with constant personal reflection, a close examination of my teaching practices, and a deep investigation of how relational teaching, respect for the learner and joy are indeed pillars of what drive good teaching.

The Participants

The five participants in this study were selected from a pool of educators that I have had direct experiences with. Each has inspired me in some way through their teaching, and I sensed

that they were deeply dedicated, curious, and reflective practitioners. I was eager to learn more from them, not only from seeing them in action but also by asking targeted questions that requested access to their process. I was asking for a backstage pass. Three teachers I interviewed were lower school teacher colleagues and two were graduate professors at Bank Street College whose courses I attended during my years at Bank Street (2019-2022). All five of the teachers have fifteen plus years of experience in the field.

This project...

Has been invigorating, each interview I conducted left me inspired, affirmed, and ready to reexamine my own practice and philosophy. I found that the interviews lived inside my mind through this process. I was turning over the answers I received and seeing how my practice reflected and contrasted with those of my interview subjects. In the end, I limited this exploration to three different educators but the process had me engaging with many more teachers, opening a window to a sustaining practice of communication and mutual support as we educators continue to search for that “magic” in our daily practice.

The Podcast

This podcast is recorded after the five conversations were completed. My conclusions are based on my conversations and the literature review and my analysis. Through this process, I have gained greater insight and personal clarity about my philosophy and how it can feed and nourish my practice as a teacher into the future of my career.

Analysis

Relational Teaching

Relational teaching is defined by Boville, Jarvis, and Smith (2020) as a kind of teaching that, “puts relationships at the heart of teaching and emphasizes that a meaningful connection needs to be established between teacher and students as well as between students and their peers if effective learning is to take place.” Concurring with the central role that relationships play in learning, Palmer (1983) noted that, “Real learning does not happen until students are brought into a relationship with the teacher, with each other, and with the subject.” Melissa Fredericks (2020) writes about this way of thinking stating, “When you build a relationship with students, not only do you provide needed support to your students, you also open yourself up to an infinite supply of joy.”

This idea of a meaningful connection was underlying #3’s sense of what makes learning possible when she said, “If you feel like you know your students and they know you and there is trust there - anything is possible and so much is possible.” Trust is a feature that also was mentioned by #1 when he identified it as a key aspect of classroom relationships noting that they are ‘built upon trust’. He further explained the ways in which trust is such an important factor in learning, noting that it “plays out in how willing someone is to take a little risk.” Risk is an important part of Cornelius Minor’s (2020) focus on listening as a part of relational teaching. He explains that listening in this way means that you are radically kid-centered, that you are adaptive, and that you are willing to take public risks. Risk also appears in #2’s discussion of building a strong community when she noted that relationships are, “when there is that excitement...you’ve gone off track, there is an element, someone's question that becomes the focal point.”

Another aspect of relational teaching is community, and Palmer (1983) stresses that, “We cannot learn deeply and well until a community of learning is created in the classroom”. #1’s emphasized the importance of leading and sustaining a successful community stating, “If you have had the experience of being part of a community (in conference group) then when you go into a teaching situation as a classroom teacher,” (you) know how to build a community.”

Bell Hooks (1994) again affirms the importance of relational teaching, stating, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.” Although no interviewee mentioned “caring for the souls of students,” #1 focused on authenticity in relationship building, and noted that, “As teachers, if we can be as natural as we can up to a certain point with other people with the way we speak and the way we answer and the tone in which we use...if we bring our natural selves from outside the classroom into the classroom, then we are more fully ourselves.” Hooks’s (1994) writing emphasizes that the teacher is not charged with only respecting students who are behaving properly or excelling academically in the classroom. #1 aspired to be “genuine,” within the classroom further elaborating that success as a relational teacher demanded, “a deeper way of being with a learner rather than build the learner up in a superficial way.” To further explain their point, #1 provides the example of students being asked to draw a plant that was recently picked, to observe the anatomy, emphasizing the importance of feedback, instructing the teacher not to simply comment to students "Good job," or "That looks great!" but to genuinely look at what the person has done and show in your direct feedback, evidence that you've looked at what the learner is doing, that

you've actually absorbed the content of their work and commented on a tangible observation before you move on.

The literature and the interviews concur that relational teaching requires building a network, a community of trusting, authentic relationships. Hooks (1994) tells us that, “Students want us to see them as the whole human begins with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalized bits of knowledge.” Likewise, Vallance (1996) offers insight into how nurturing spaces can support a thriving learning environment, describing that, “All we can do is to speak with others as passionately and eloquently as we can; Our classrooms ought to be nurturing and thoughtful and just all at once; they ought to pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it is to be human and alive.” *Being genuine with our students contributes to essential relationship building, crucial to fostering a strong classroom.*

Respect for the Learner

I define respect for the learner to mean that individuals in a classroom are seen, appreciated, and valued not just for their actions and or behaviors but for their innate personhood. In effect, teachers have greater influence over students who feel that they are respected by their teachers.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) defines respect for the learner to mean, “Regarding them with special attention, honoring them, showing consideration toward them, being concerned about them, appreciating them, relating to them, admiring their strengths, and caring for them. Young people are dignified and strengthened by adult respect.” While a variety of definitions for the term “respect for the learner” can be found,

in this section, the term “respect for the learner” will be used in its broadest sense, to refer to how educators successfully demonstrate respect for the individuals they teach. Maintaining a strong respect for the learner is an important part of #3’s practice. She explained that “I spend a lot of time around community building as far as celebrating birthdays with each other...or finding different ways to hear one another's stories.”

#1 sees a broad curiosity as core to respecting the learner. He says, “Like any teacher regardless of what age students, I find that people themselves are interesting. The idea of what keeps us going, staying in teaching, is that we find the people themselves interesting, as different than loving everybody,” He went on to say that, “although often a cliché: there can be an emotional connection and attraction but you don't love everybody (every student) but what keeps people going including myself is that they (people) are interesting to work with.”

Minor (2020) saw the pathway to respect, not as Hooks’ nurturing of the soul (1994) or #1’s curiosity, but instead as requiring, “devoted attention to educators and their role in being who our students need us to be.” He outlines how adopting a strong listening approach can not only support teachers in becoming more attuned to students' needs but also their values. Minor argues for the importance of listening to our students and asking questions to deepen our understanding of what they are telling and or sharing with us. A connection can be made between the quoted literature and #3’s statement, “I want students to feel like they know each other in ways that help them feel like they can take risks, explore things, and share.”

Furthermore, Minor (2020) explains, "Listening in this way means that you are radically kid-centered, that you are adaptive, and that you are willing to take public risks." Radical

listening means that students are not speaking simply to be part of a routine classroom protocol which is subsidiary to the pre-prepared lesson, but the listening teacher is hearing the core ideas being shared, following their trail and probing deeper, allowing students to see how much their ideas are valued. This connects to what #1 said about risk-taking. He spoke with great sensitivity about how, if they sense a true risk is made by a student, he might not even address it at the moment but store the information in his mind, coming back later, with a comment, perhaps a personal small risk in his share as the teacher which might allow the student to feel heard and supported, always continuing to nurture their mutually respectful relationship and trust.

These decisions as a teacher are so important and they do not come from a textbook. They come through true listening and knowing and respecting all the learners in the classroom deeply. I am drawn to #1's words, as they indicate how powerful a teacher can be in helping to facilitate the trust that allows students to say more or to act on a brave moment. This type of listening also allows individuals to showcase their brilliance within the classroom because the space is being carved out for true sharing and ideas to flourish.

One may suppose that we invite students to envision the world they want to live in, supporting their developing understanding of who they want to become. Respect for the learner is key to helping our students grow into themselves as the environment of respect creates an opening to allow each student to reveal who they are and to grow as they risk becoming.

Joy

The Miriam Webster dictionary defines joy, the noun as, “The emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.” #3

described her conscious efforts to cultivate joy within her classroom, explaining its importance, “A lot of the topics that I explore in my courses tend to be pretty heavy and intense, very social-justice-oriented and so remembering that we also must sustain each other through joy. There is so much to be celebrated in the midst of things that are hard, something that is important to me.” She provided concrete examples of how joy is manifested in her classroom space, explaining that she tries to “bring in humor, or videos of kids (which) bring a lot of joy, anything of that sort will.” Poetter (2006) writes about joy as an educational construction, emphasizing, “When I speak of joy here I am speaking of an existential sense of connection, of pure relationship in a complex web of interactions that bring joy to the knower and known.” #2’s sense as that pure relationship leads to joy can be seen here in her words, “Genuineness and authenticity, (there is) something fun and beautiful in that, engaging in that and bringing others into that.”

Fredericks (2020) writes about joy, approaching joy from the vantage point of the teacher more than the learner. She describes that there are four parts to finding the joy in teaching: embracing curriculum, strengthening assignments, enhancing classroom management, and developing relationships with students. Fredericks highlights how joy can be approached through several avenues for teachers seeking to find and sustain joy in their practice. She charges teachers to, “embrace the curriculum and bring back the wonder, passion, and creativity for yourself and your students.” #2 defines joy in learning by what it is and what it isn’t, posing this question, “Why does it feel like such a juxtaposition that learning is unscripted and that *that* is bad and or *that* is taking away from the learning. The act of learning can't always be scripted or

rigid - learning can't be a regurgitation of information.” *I am drawn to how in order to define what joy is, the conversation first turned to what it is not.* #2 claims that learning needs to have an organic flow rather than simply be a “regurgitation of information.” This raises the question of how much a scripted curriculum can influence not only how students are engaging with the curriculum but how a teacher feels about implementing it and the joy that is felt within the classroom environment.

Joy should be a regular part of classroom life, experienced by teachers and students when witnessing or experiencing a breakthrough or having successful peer interactions. #3 supports this vision of joy within the classroom by explaining, “Joy doesn't just mean we are being silly or doing something that feels art-based, that it is not getting them to think or feel challenged,” instead, “Joy in a comment from a kid, it's not giving me the assumed or “teacher-fied answer.” Learning itself is a joyful act, as the achievement of small daily goals can generate the feeling that Websters supplied of, “well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.” Students desire progress and achievement, so school can and should provide many opportunities to feel joy, not only for the student but for the teacher who bears witness. Joy feeds joy.

I wonder if, with so many teachers dedicated to getting out of school as close to dismissal time as possible, are they missing out on an element of joy that teaching provides. Is creation and investment part of the formula which feeds the feeling of “well-being, success, or good fortune... the prospect of possessing what one desires,” within a teacher's practice? I wonder if having so much of the curriculum scripted and mandated, are teachers stripped of the

opportunity to find the joy of creation and refinement that can fuel the joy in a teacher's professional life.

In summation, joy can be felt and experienced in school life, whether it is the joy in forming connections with students or in finding moments of respectful classroom management. It can be experienced through a passionate connection to the curriculum taught or the creation and nuanced refinement of content, finding a new read-aloud that will be a window or mirror to the students you teach. Joy is watching a child make a breakthrough, learning a new skill. Joy can be felt watching a student playing well with a friend or in the glow of feeling good about a lesson that went well. Joy can live in a powerful parent interaction during which the shared respect for the learner is communicated and understood. Joy in teaching can take so many forms and is ever-evolving as we progress through our teaching careers. I see joy as a marker for success, an entity to work towards, an emotion that I hope can be woven into the fabric of my classroom community experienced by the students I teach each day and myself as I guide the community through the year.

Conclusion

This project has afforded me the space for deep reflection and thoughtful conversation with experienced educators. I am grateful to be nearing the end...inching closer to being a lead classroom teacher and a graduate of Bank Street, using what was learned from this study and infusing it within my teaching practice through the years to come.

When I embarked on this year-long study, I wasn't exactly sure what the culminating

findings or presentation would be. I wasn't exactly sure what my question would be. I had an idea (What makes good teaching?), an observational experience, as I shared within the Rose Bud Thorn vignette, that formed into a question: *What do educators do to cultivate authentic, meaningful, and inspiring classroom communities?*

It's true, my curiosity has always been a driving force in how I interact and see the world. Although I wasn't so sure what my findings would be, I was determined to ask the questions. I was determined to speak with experienced teachers and explore their thoughts on what were the key elements of a thriving educational environment. It is one of my passionate convictions that in my practice, a teacher is not in the position of the dispenser of knowledge within the classroom. The teacher doesn't know it all. In the same way, I approached this project to share my thinking but not to bestow knowledge. This IMP process has supported me in solidifying the foundation of my philosophical grounding. For me, this has been both affirming and also illuminating, new light being shed allowing me to reconsider positions I held. *You see* - I started the project by creating a list of what I thought were the fundamental elements of teaching. I considered exploring classroom management, behavior management, inspiration, passion for curriculum, and engagement. What happened, as I began to join in conversation with my participants, was a reformation of what were in fact the critical elements of strong teaching. I was inspired to hear about what drives inspiration - leading to what brings joy! Joy encompasses all the elements that sustain and engage both the teacher and students. I also was deeply invested in understanding the relationships between teachers and students and learned that being relational is as important as having respect for the students.

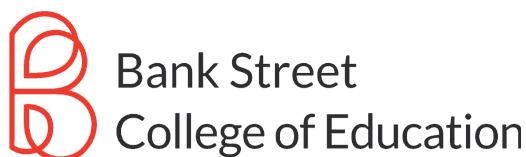
For me and the teachers I spoke with, teaching is a lifetime craft, a journey, an art form of working with people to activate learning and community. As I close the chapter of graduate school and my role as an associate teacher, I am beginning a new chapter, leading my own classroom, aspiring to put my philosophy into action, and continuing to gain perspective as I shape my own environment, a place where joy is welcome and nourished and profound respect helps relationships of trust form, the foundation for our work together as a community.

Thank you for listening.

Heather Mohamed

Appendix C

Consent Form



Consent Form

Dear Research Participant,

I am asking you to participate in a research study titled “Rose, Bud, Thorn, Inquiry.” This study is being conducted for my *Integrative Masters Project (IMP)*, a graduate program requirement.

What the study is about:

The purpose of this research is to interview teachers who have inspired me [Heather Mohamed] as a student and/ or colleague. Through recorded interviews, I would like to explore “*what educators do to cultivate authentic, meaningful and inspiring classroom communities.*” Participants are either former/current colleagues *or* graduate professors that I have taken a course with from 2019-21.

The research study will take the form of a podcast series, “Rose Bud Thorn Inquiry,” that answers the question “*What can teachers do to make deep meaningful, and authentic experiences and interactions with their students?*” My time at Bank Street has been filled with lots of personal reflection, a close examination of my teaching practices, and a deep examination of culturally relevant, anti-racist, and progressive pedagogies.

This [*working*] title came to me after a striking experience I had participating in the same activity, “Rose, Bud, Thorn” presented to me as a community-building experience in multiple educational areas. In seeing how different both the authenticity of the presentation and the reaction in both myself and my classmates as students, I was inspired to think about my IMP and what would be the backbone behind my culminating graduate personal independent study.

Each interview will be recorded as its podcast episode, culminating in a final episode where I

will analyze all interview responses by:

- 1) Reflecting on the experience as a whole.
- 2) Share what I have learned.
- 3) Discuss any big take aways and what aspects of the study and/or research can be added to my teaching practice.

What I will ask you to do:

I am requesting consent to record the interview session, via Zoom and use it as part of a podcast series, "Rose Bud Thorn Inquiry." I plan to use the app, Anchor, as a platform for creating the podcast. The audio recordings from the zoom casting will be transferred to this app, which I will create my podcast from.

Taking part in this project is entirely up to you, and no one will hold it against (you) if you decide not to do it. If you do take part, you may stop at any time without penalty. In addition, you may ask to have your data withdrawn from the study after the research has been conducted.

This podcast will be accessible from the Bank Street Library + [online Library portal](#). The Bank Street Library uploads resources to [Educate](#) (an online repository), and [WorldCat](#).

If you choose to participate, you give consent to:

- 1) Share your interview podcast episode with all other participants of the study. **Initial (if yes):** _____
 - a. If yes to (#1) you give consent to Have the *entire podcast* shared with you upon completion. **Initial (if yes):** _____
- 2) Have *only your podcast episode* shared with you upon completion. **Initial (if yes):** _____
- 3) Give consent to share the podcast with the Bank Street Library & Bank Street's online library portal. **Initial (if yes):** _____

Risks

I do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research.

Benefits

Although there are no tangible benefits to those who participate, you are contributing to a personal passion project for my culminating graduate degree final thesis project. You have been selected to participate in a purposeful (small, less than 10 participants) sampling. Participants are teachers who I believe to have inspiring qualities to answer my research question(s).

Compensation for participation

There is no compensation for participating in the study.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security

1. All publications will use your personal name. **Initial (if yes):** _____
2. All publications will use a pseudonym **Initial (if yes):** _____

If you want to know more about this research project, please contact me at (203) 449-2161 & hmohamed@bankstreet.edu and/or my IMP adviser, Mimi Rosenberg at mrosenberg@bankstreet.edu.

This project has been approved by the Institutional Research Review Board at Bank Street College of Education. Information on Bank Street College policy and procedure for research involving human participants can be found on the college website at: <https://www.bankstreet.edu/graduate-school/academics/institutional-research-review-board/>. Additional questions or concerns you have about the way the research is being conducted should be addressed to the Co-Chair of the Institutional Research Review Board, Dr. Cecelia Traugh, and Dr. Margaret McNamara at ResearchReview@bankstreet.edu

You will be given a copy of this consent form. Any materials (e.g., writings, audio and/or video recordings, etc.) used to document your participation in this study will be kept for up seven years in a locked cabinet within a locked office, and in the instances of electronically stored materials, in a password- file on a password protected device.

Sincerely,

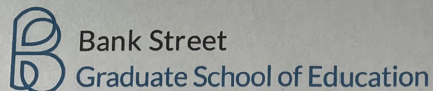
Heather Mohamed, *Rose Bud Thorn Inquiry IMP*
Bank Street Graduate School of Education

Name

Date

Appendix D

IRRB Approval Letter



**Bank Street College of Education
Institutional Research and Review Board**

November 12, 2021

Dear Heather Mohamed,

The IRRB committee has reviewed your application for the study "Rose Bud Thorn Theory." The documents that you have submitted meet the requirements for IRRB Exempt status approval. According to the documents, your study will be completed by May 2022. If you need additional time, please apply for an extension by April 2022. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact IRRB at researchreview@bankstreet.edu

Should you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the IRRB at researchreview@bankstreet.edu. We wish you all the best in your research.

Sincerely,

Cecelia Traugh, Ph.D.
Dean, Bank Street Graduate School of Education
Margaret McNamara, Ed.D.
Senior Director of Student Learning Support and Community Initiatives
Co-Chairs, Institutional Research and Review Board

For office use only:

Reviewed by: Margaret
McNamara & Nicole
Limperopulos

Date November 8, 2021

Approved November 12, 2021
IRRB#111221

cc:

Jessica Blum DeStefano, Ed.D Leadership Department
Lynne Einbender, EdM Teaching & Learning Department
Nicole Limperopulos, EdD Leadership Department
Mark Nagasawa, Ph.D. Straus Center for Young Children and Families
Dirck Roosevelt, Ph.D. Teachers College, Columbia University