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The Experience of Working and Learning Together

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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you, Harriet Cuffaro for supporting us all here at City and Country School to grow into thoughtful, responsible, creative teachers who believe in the power of asking a good question, and in having fun in our work together. Thank you also for teaching me how to make a bed properly! Photograph, film and teacher quotations are courtesy of City and Country School, with specific thanks to teachers Tatesha Clark, Ruth Conroy, Bridget Curley, Tara DiGerlando, Vanessa Drake-Johnson, Sara Hance, William Harrison, Ann Isaacs, Eliza Romanyschyn, Robin Sage, Debbie Severin, Carol Szamatowicz, and Erin Teesdale. My gratitude and admiration to all other C&C and NYC classroom teachers, teaching artists and administrators who have offered me inspiration through the years.

The Experience of Working and Learning Together

By Jane Clarke

A teacher's classroom life often feels isolated from what lies outside the walls of the school. The experience of teaching is both fragile and powerful; it is full of contradiction, confrontation, and quiet celebration, all woven into the timeless moments of a school day. The central responsibility shared by all teachers is the knowledge that the decisions you make might influence a child's life experience in some important way.

I am a former early childhood teacher with twenty years of experience as an administrator in public and independent schools, as well as in Head Start and Day Care Centers. As the Director of the Lower School at City and Country School in New York City for the past nine years, the most important times of my day are spent in classrooms of children between the ages of two and seven. During the precious moments of observing the interactions between children and teachers I am constantly identifying, revising, adapting, and then re-identifying the multiple qualities that go into making a "good teacher." And in turn, I am looking closely at the supports that teachers need to be successful.

Each teacher I have had the pleasure to observe in action over the years has shown me some of the pathways in their individual evolutions as teachers. Before describing some remarkable learning experiences that stand out from my most recent observations of and conversations with teachers, I want to look closely at an activity that most of us engage in everyday.

The Art of Making a Bed

Making a bed is a daily activity for most of us. It is a task that can be accomplished alone and can also be accomplished without a great deal of thought or attention. However, when it is given mindful attention, and when it is shared with someone else, the experience is different, more satisfying, and probably more effective.

The motivation for making a bed successfully is so that it will be comfortable enough for a good night's sleep.

If you are making a bed with someone else, you must be able to rely on your partner to match your actions in perfect symmetry; this way each side of the bed will be balanced and therefore more comfortable. The satisfaction in this simple task lies in the pleasure of working in harmony with someone else.

Sheets need to be straightened and smoothed out as much as possible. The bottom sheet should be well flattened.

The top sheet needs to be centered in order for there to be sufficient overspill to tuck under the mattress, conveniently and securely. Hospital corners are preferred. The operation is much easier when two people are involved, concurring on the best way to do the corners.

If you add blankets for seasonal warmth, they should be blankets that are both aesthetically pleasing and comforting. For example, if you like penguins choose a penguin pattern, and take time to find just the right softness and fabric quality, important for both warmth and comfort.

Blankets may become cumbersome if they are wrapped too tightly. Blankets should lie centered on the bed, but they do not have to be tucked in.

The wonderful thing about making a bed is that you get to practice it each day. Each experience of making your bed will be slightly different; there may be different colored sheets and blankets and pillowcases, and different qualities of fabric, but there may also be subtle variations in the way you perform the specific tasks.

Although it is work that is usually done alone, it is easier in many ways to make a bed together with someone else.

The Art of Getting One Yard Box on Top of Another

Please observe these brief film clips by following the links:

http://youtu.be/jM2HAjh8_xY

<http://youtu.be/skycty2D444>

<http://youtu.be/mhnbAP297HE>

The film clips demonstrate some activities that can become an important “habit,” as children engage daily in outdoor activities using simple, open-ended building materials. The materials offer an opportunity to practice a daily routine in which, like making a bed, each experience of the routine will be slightly different.

Children of various ages are working together, learning from and with each other and gaining, over time, a trust in, and mastery of, the same open-ended materials. In each segment the children are working with the materials they have used consistently, each day, over several years – indoor unit blocks and accessories, outdoor building blocks, boxes, and boards. The children are experimenting, they are encountering unexpected challenges, they are working together, and they appear to be feeling empowered by their successes.

In the first clip, “Outdoor Challenge,” the two four-year-olds finally get to feel taller than anyone else as they climb into the box they have successfully placed on top of another box. As in making a bed, this operation can be tricky but is made easier when two people are involved. In the

second clip, “Teamwork,” a group of six-year-old girls manages to respond to the guidance of an emerging leader and get that box securely and solidly placed. In the third clip, “Bowling Build,” the three- and four-year-olds are able, over time, to perfect a game they have invented, a game with its own “rules” that others can participate in and have fun playing.

The activities in the first film clip indicate that the drive behind successfully balancing one box on top of another is that you can climb into the top box and feel taller than anyone else in the world. An important first step for a four-year-old is the realization that this is a feat that cannot be accomplished alone; yard boxes, large and small, are heavy and lifting them off the ground requires assistance. Another important recognition is that one person may have a good idea worth exploring but that it needs to be shared with a partner if the team is to work successfully – two heads are better than one.

These are some other important realizations offered by the activities:

- Good ideas don’t always work. When they don’t work, partners need to persevere and try something new in order to get the job done.
- Materials most often used one way can sometimes offer a surprise when used in a different way.
- There is nothing like an unexpected discovery in the midst of solving a problem; always be open to the unexpected!
- Working together with someone else can present challenges, but when both partners reach a common vision it is worth persevering.
- A sense of humor always makes hard work seem easier.
- If there are grown-ups around, it feels good to check in with them. There may not be a need for hands-on assistance, but encouragement helps.
- The pleasure of telling your story after a feat has been accomplished is part of the experience, something that in itself can be thrilling and add to the feeling of satisfaction.
- The most important first step for a six-year-old to recognize is that working on this feat with others is efficient and effective.
- A good leader can be kind and supportive as well as someone who can deliver clear and forthright directions.
- In order to accomplish this feat with perfect balance, it is important to adjust the direction of the box on top. This fact can be learned through practice.

- Girls are just as strong as boys and can accomplish heavy lifting work with enthusiasm.
- Getting it right requires patience and good humor.
- Hard work can be fun and you can learn unexpected things about the people you work with.

The Art of Being a Good Teacher

What is missing from each of the three film segments is the physical presence of a teacher. We hear the voices of two City and Country teachers in *Outdoor Challenge* and *Bowling Build*. They are not visible to the viewer, but in both cases they are fully present to the children. When they speak, they are calm and reassuring. They have a kind, humorous tone that evokes an understanding of the individual children they are talking to. They do not say much, but what they do say, and when they say it, seems to subtly support the children to go ahead with their work. It is this influence, whether silent or verbal, that profoundly affects a child's learning experience. Jerome Bruner (1996) says: "We carry with us habits of thought and taste fostered in some nearly forgotten classroom by a certain teacher." (p. 24)

These film clips invite me to consider the important attributes of effective and successful teachers that have emerged in my own practice over many years.

Making time and space for having a good idea

Supporting teachers to take the time to listen and closely observe children as they think and work is central to the challenge of creating meaningful curriculum. Too often teachers become clouded by a curriculum they are asked to teach, and forget the importance of watching and listening to children to discover meaningful connections into deeper learning. Throughout the school day, whether during snack, working with open-ended materials, or during a more structured activity, children never tire of imagining how something might work. As a teacher commented: "The children in my group seemed fascinated by the concept of 'infinity' and also by the very sound of the word itself. They wanted to know how big infinity was, and what it would look like."

Through her observations this teacher saw children working collaboratively to investigate further, writing endless pages filled with zeros and taking up a lot of space as they taped the pages together. The teacher was captivated by the children's fascination and curiosity about quantity, number, and space. She brought this awareness into her classroom the following year by setting herself the goal of focusing more on mathematical thinking.

Also intrigued by size and space, this group of children built tall block buildings and then looked for the tallest person in the school to compare their building to. How big is big? From here they went on to think about the size of their classroom. How big was it? How could they measure it? Someone suggested Snap Cubes and the idea was "snapped up." Everyone worked to put them together from one end of the classroom to the other. The counting of this large number of Snap

Cubes was a long and complicated feat, but clearly satisfying to the children as they enthusiastically worked together to accomplish their shared goal. When achieved, the final number certainly felt big.

The next idea was to question whether the classroom was bigger or smaller than the director's office. The teacher invited everyone to find out the answer to their question and a trip was organized with an accompanying bag of Snap Cubes. The investigation was thrilling. The number the children counted out together sounded big, but it wasn't as big as the number reached for their classroom dimension. This was also a satisfying reality for the children: we are perhaps more important than we thought, our classroom is bigger than the director's office! Their investigation demonstrates the children's courage to believe in the power of the unknown and in the imaginative process – retaining an ability to “wonder.”

Isamu Noguchi (1967) offers a view of the child's “beginning world”:

Children I think must view the world differently from adults, their awareness of its possibilities are more primary and attuned to their capacities. When the adult would imagine like a child he must project himself into seeing the world as a totally new experience. I like to think of playgrounds as a primer of shapes and functions; simple, mysterious and evocative, thus educational. The child's world would be a beginning world, fresh and clear. (p. 161)

Retaining our openness to a child's natural ability to simply “wonder” requires us to connect flexibly with the unknown, which is not so easy when our work as teachers requires us to be rooted firmly in the reality of the moment. However, for teachers to encourage children to share their wondering, they also need to authentically model this practice. My observations of teachers suggests that they require ongoing support from administrators to remain connected to this crucial aspect of life.

*Not knowing
The name of the tree
I stood in the flood
Of its sweet smell
—Basho (2008)*

One way of nurturing this important connection for teachers is by offering them hands-on experiences with open-ended materials. Allowing teachers the time to paint, arrange, and rearrange collage materials and build with unit blocks can often reawaken pathways to wonder. Reflections on these experiences encourages the practice of asking genuine questions to come alive.



Watching teachers rekindle these values in their teaching practice is always exciting. A kindergarten teacher of many years enthusiastically shared a book the children in her group had made. The teacher had asked the children to remember something particular about their year spent together, and then to “wonder” about what next year would hold for them. One page in the book said: “and I wonder if I will have a friend next year”

Being aware of the power of your tone of voice

If teachers want children to listen and to truly hear what we are saying it is critical to remember that “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it.” This old maxim is perhaps never more relevant than in the relationship between teacher and child. This does not mean that the teacher needs to become a different person, but that teachers should constantly gauge and monitor how they communicate with young children. A kindergarten teacher reflecting on her first year in the classroom commented:

There was a strong current of meaning between myself and the children with every syllable I uttered. I was their teacher. My every move, my expression of body, voice and face, would hold great meaning for them as we all made our way with the ebb and flow of our day(s).

Providing for varying needs within a busy classroom

Every teacher struggles to balance paying enough of the right kind of attention to each of the children in her care. At times the support needed by some children simply requires a presence and/or a look. Many children do not need obvious guidance from a teacher. They are self-sufficient, able to focus, and to resolve conflicts independently. They are often the students we rely on to keep things moving smoothly, the children who we know will quietly and independently engage with materials and other people. But this doesn't mean they don't need anything from us, and it is important for us to build a personal connection with them. Some of the subtle and effective ways to do this are indicated by the year-end reflection of a teacher of three- and four-year-olds:

I want to continue to try and form connections with children who may not always be asking for my attention, or sitting in my lap, or asking me to read them a book. I try to do this by sitting next to some of those children at snack or lunch, or having them come on a “special” one-to-one trip to pick up the snack or to run an errand. But this is an area I'd like to continue to develop, as there are children who do feel so independent, they want to convey that confidence to all the adults in their life. And our connection does not have to be about things they need from me – so my goal is to figure out what I can do to form and strengthen those connections throughout the year.

Recognizing the centrality of conversation

Conversation, silent or verbal, is one of the most important ways in which people, children and adults, get to know and trust each other. It is central to the experience of working creatively and effectively together. As in the art of making a bed, the heightened satisfaction in this simple task lies in the pleasure of working in harmony with someone else.

A classroom that honors conversation is a classroom in which the teacher honors this process of communication in her own life. Making time to talk and connect with teaching partners, and to invite conversation about life and experience is essential to effective school communities. When students observe teachers actively engaging with other adults in curious, authentic, and inviting ways, it has a profound effect on their own desire to connect with others. As they learn the skills needed to enjoy conversations, adults act as role models. Conversations with other teachers outside the classroom are also important. A teacher of two-year-olds reflected at the end of the school year: “The meetings (with other teachers) were thought-provoking as well as a great place to feel understood.”

Practicing the skill of stimulating children to talk to each other is an intrinsic part of building an experience of community. For example, being able to ask a genuine, open-ended question that will invite a child to think about his answer rather than give the teacher an answer he thinks the

grown-up wants to hear is an important skill. The ability to do this requires practice, support, and confidence. We take a risk each time we ask these questions. What will happen if we get “off track” and don’t finish the plans for this part of the day?

Teachers as a community need to feel supported and encouraged in these moments, to ask these questions of each other, to go to unknown places together. As one teacher noted about teacher meetings held at the close of the school year: “The conversation sparked heart-felt, provocative and in my opinion necessary conversations I hope we continue to have as a community.”

Hitting the balance between planning and organization and flexibility and spontaneity

In order to open up spontaneous and connected pathways into learning for children, teachers need time for authentic conversation outside the classroom and to collaborate on curriculum ideas. Such time is crucial for inspiring new ideas and cultivating new ways for children to be truly connected to their learning experiences.

There are many moments in our lives as teachers when we feel overwhelmed with our own agendas, and perhaps those of administrators, parents, and school boards. Teachers need time to “float on top of the water,” and the courage to allow ourselves to confront the unknown unprepared – balanced with the confidence that we are prepared, we know what we are doing, and that we know our children. A kindergarten teacher reflecting on her experience, said:

We headed into the project open, not knowing, and OK with sitting in our dis-equilibrium. We were flexible, we went back and forth and finally we have ended up with a digital shadow book that we will share.

These are just some of the components that feed into the experience of becoming a good teacher. Julie Diamond (2008), a kindergarten teacher with many years’ experience, reflects:

Slowly, I learned to manage my own feelings when things went wrong. The struggle brought hard-won confidence in my powers. Throughout the school day, I communicate – not perfectly, but well enough – a presence that they and I can count on. Teachers’ predictability and flexibility, emotional resilience and resourcefulness, the ability to share children’s sense of humor and to demonstrate firm intent; these create a classroom in which children feel respected, safe and able to learn. (p. 207)

I’ve talked about the art of making a bed, about putting one box on top of another successfully at different ages, and about what goes into the art of being a good teacher. What do these seemingly disconnected components have in common? To me, the common thread that runs through them is the opportunities we have when working consistently with the same open-ended materials and

when working with each other. It is crucial to have the chance to explore and better understand the possibilities that different materials offer and the opportunities collaborative activities reveal for ourselves and for others. Hard work and practice can yield extraordinary results, experiences that we remember, and that silently help us to develop a clearer awareness of who we are and what we are capable of doing. We often surprise ourselves and each other in the process. As an experienced pre-K teacher said recently of her group of children:

They (a group of pre-K students) became more practiced at the teamwork it took to hoist boxes on top (of other boxes). They used sawhorses to raise a roof, stabilize it with boards and then build a bed or table high in the air. We saw things I have not seen four year olds do prior to this year.

Teaching is hard work and may often feel isolating. Perhaps a key to continuing to feel energized by and excited about our work lies in keeping ourselves open to the wonder that children experience each day. As one kindergarten teacher put it: “What I found out, when the door closed and the families left for the day, was that I was faced with 18 surprises daily!”

It is by remaining open to surprise, building trust in ourselves, making time to “float on top of the water,” and communicating and allowing for mistakes that we as adults stay connected to the mind and essence of the child. It is through this window of connection that the possibility to educate lies. As John Dewey (1915) explains:

His [the teacher's] problem is that of inducing a vital and personal experiencing. Hence, what concerns him, as teacher, is the ways in which that subject may become a part of experience; what there is in the child's present that is usable with reference to it; how such elements are to be used; how his own knowledge of the subject-matter may assist in interpreting the child's needs and doings, and determine the medium in which the child should be placed in order that his growth may be properly directed. He is concerned, not with the subject matter as such, but with the subject matter as a related factor in a total and growing experience. Thus to see it is to psychologize it. (p.85)

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Jane Clarke

Jane Clarke is the director of the Lower School, City and Country School, New York City. Beginning as a classroom teacher in London, Los Angeles, and New York fueled her passion for arts education. Transitioning into an administrative role, she worked as a teacher-director at Little Missionary's Day Nursery and as the codirector of the early childhood program of Studio in a School. In this role, she worked collaboratively with visual artists, classroom teachers, and school administrators in Head Start day care centers and public school settings. This work continued to ignite her belief in the creative process and its role in deeper learning for children.

