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# Building Higher Than We Are Tall: The Power of Narrative Inquiry in the Life of a Teacher

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**BUILDING HIGHER THAN WE ARE TALL:  
THE POWER OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY IN THE LIFE OF A TEACHER**

**stephanie bevacqua**

*Will takes the bin of Cuisinaire Rods into the block area and calls Nicholas over to join him. The two boys begin to construct a tower that “starts out fat on the bottom and gets skinny at the top, like the Empire State Building,” with the collection of rods, colorful units ranging in length from one inch to ten inches. As Will and Nicholas arrange the rods, they stretch to place the units higher and higher. When they can no longer reach the top of their structure, Will gets a stool from the meeting area and Nicholas grabs a chair. Perched gingerly above their building, the boys continue to make the tower taller. Children gather in the block area to watch. They speak. “It is going to fall!” “Hey, you can’t build higher than you are tall!” “Are we allowed to stand on the stool?” “That’s Stephanie’s stool.” “Nicholas is standing on the chair!” “One more rod and the whole thing is going to fall!” “How high are you going to build it?” “Can I help?” “The rods don’t belong to you.” “I don’t think it looks like the Empire State Building.” “You are building it crooked.” “Look how high it is getting now.” “I’m going to tell Stephanie that you won’t let me help.” “I can’t believe you’re on the teacher’s stool, you’re gonna fall on your head.” “Higher and higher, going up, up, up!” “Can we build with the rods when you are done?” “Watch out, watch out, it is going to fall!” “Wow, that’s tall!”*

*Will and Nicholas continue to build around the comments and through the questions. They do not respond to the other children with words, but gesture them out of their way, remaining focused on the tower. They do, however, glance towards me, the teacher, when someone’s words threaten the continuation of their work. I haven’t said anything about the tower, about the building of the tower. I remain silent about whether or not Nicholas and Will can stand on the furniture or build higher than they are tall. Although I hear the children’s questions and comments, I realize that none are actually directed towards me. I remain on the outside of their interaction, yet I feel my presence plays a major role in defining it. My authority—the fact*

*that I am cognizant of the rules Will and Nicholas may be breaking, the fact that at any moment I could interfere with the building of the tower by telling the boys to get off of the chair, the fact that I am not saying anything at all, fuels the activity.*

*Will and Nicholas have begun to build faster. The other children's voices are rising. The tower begins to wobble. A learning specialist enters the classroom, looks towards the block area, scans the room for me and says, as she points to the construction site, "This doesn't look promising." I remain silent. She says, "Do you think they are okay standing on the furniture?" I nod affirmatively. The tower looms. Will reaches to place a rod on the top of the structure. He disturbs the balance. The tower tumbles down. The rods scatter across the floor. There are exclamations of excitement, disappointment, anger, and joy. The children scurry to collect the rods. The building begins again. The children build the tower of rods every day. The tower or the construction of it has become a familiar fixture in our classroom.*

*Late one evening I return to the classroom to pick up a file. As I enter the classroom, I see the tower standing in city light coming through the window. It leans this way and that as it goes up higher than any of the children are tall. I pause in the doorway and stare at it for a long time. I make my way across the room towards the filing cabinet and as I pass the tower, my coat-tail brushes up against it. As I turn to pull my coat close to my body, the tower begins to collapse. Green, red, yellow, black, brown, pink, orange, white, blue, and purple fall around me. I am embarrassed and I am thrilled. I watch the rods land and when the room is still again, I gather them up and begin to build.*

*As I think about the building of the tower, I realize that the experience is most meaningful to me in terms of what it reveals about social relationships in the classroom. As Will and Nicholas built the tower for the first time, the entire classroom became consumed in defining and testing the roles of teacher and student, and community rules. Although the children were excited to build with a new and interesting material, their experimentation with limits charged their play. The fact that the building of the tower relied on the suspenseful approach of the top of the tower only augmented the feeling of pleasure they all received from brushing up against behavioral codes and established limits.*

*When I observed Will and Nicholas standing on the furniture to reach higher, I thought it was important to let them do this because they were so entirely thrilled with making the tower taller. I thought it was more important for*

*them to build the tower taller than it was for me to insure their safety, and classroom order, by asking them to get down from the furniture. When other children became involved in their building, especially in the fact that they were breaking classroom rules, my intrigue grew. I listened carefully to the children's comments and questions. As they continued to reflect on Will and Nicholas' building in terms of classroom rules, stated clearly through my authority as the teacher, I realized, more clearly than ever before, the amount of power I possess as a teacher. I was momentarily appalled and frightened. We had worked hard to establish a democratic environment and yet this incident seemed to testify to the fact that I was omnipotent. I was troubled by this power and more, I loathed the children's cognizance of it. I remained silent. I wanted to see them test the limits. I wanted them to rebel against my authority. I wanted to see how high they could build the tower. When the learning specialist entered the classroom and questioned my judgment, I began to test limits too.*

*After the tower fell to the floor for the first time and the children began to build it up again, the process became part of our classroom activities in a silent manner. We never talked about if it was okay to stand on the furniture in order to reach higher, or if it was okay to build the tower high above heads. The children did not ask me these questions directly and I did not bring them up. Every day, they built the tower, watched it crash to the floor repeatedly and built it up again. Every day, I was silent, until I made the tower fall late one evening and built it up again myself.*

*Building the tower in the block area that evening brought me close to the children's experience. As I put together the rods, I reviewed all that had occurred around the building of the tower. The children's voices filled the classroom and as I built the tower higher than I am tall, their struggle to understand themselves in relation to me as their teacher and each other as friends and classmates grew lucid. The questions and comments children made as Will and Nicholas built the tower no longer made me anxious about our relationship and roles. Rather, I saw the experience as an opportunity to explore and define ourselves together.*

*Returning to the classroom the next day, I told the children about what had happened the night before. I told them about how I knocked down the tower and built it up again. They were impressed with the height of the tower. We talked about building with rods in the block area. We talked about what rules are, how we make rules and whether or not we should be able to stand on the furniture in order to reach higher, and if we should be able to build higher than we are tall. After we talked and listened together, the children*

*went into the block area and delighted in making the tower fall down. Then, they built it up again.*

Writing teacher stories offers me the opportunity to reflect carefully on my practices as a teacher and to build an understanding of my students. I wrote the above narrative, “Building Higher Than We Are Tall,” to examine power relations in an early childhood classroom when I was a graduate student at Bank Street College ten years ago. My graduate studies at Bank Street encouraged me to create and share narratives about teaching with my colleagues as a means of critical reflection about our work as early childhood educators. The block building experience was a formative moment in the construction of the image of myself as a progressive teacher who works to redefine traditional power relations in the classroom by supporting the children’s investigation of community rules and codes of appropriate behavior, illuminated here by the children’s testing of the limit, “Do not build a block building higher than you are tall,” and the classroom dialogue about community rules that ensued following the children’s and my experimentation.

Revisiting the block building story now, ten years later, in response to Steven Schultz’s work on resistance, I re-examine my work as a progressive educator as a kindergarten teacher in a laboratory school for children at a conservative, Midwestern university. When I originally wrote the block building narrative, I was teaching in a progressive setting in New York City that supported the development of a dynamic teacher-student partnership, which worked to create a democratic community and learning agenda in the classroom. By supporting the children’s experimentation with classroom rules, I situated myself comfortably within the progressive tradition of the school as I worked to build a non-hierarchical relationship with my students. Reading the story now, I reflect on the development of myself as a progressive educator and as a resister to conservative notions of the role of the teacher and the goals of early childhood education. I search for my teacher-self in the stories I tell about my current kindergarten classroom, still believing that the sharing of teacher narratives plays a vital part in our self-evaluation as educators.

### **THERE ARE NO CITY LIGHTS HERE: REFLECTIONS ON MY TEACHER-SELF**

There are no city lights to illuminate my classroom here on the edge of the University of Notre Dame’s campus in South Bend, Indiana. When I enter late at night to write this story, the glare of my computer screen is the only mark on the darkness of the still room. I reflect on my work for the last six years at the Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC). Here I have designed and implemented a developmental interaction approach to curriculum that values the young child as a social individual involved in the construction of knowledge through his/her interactions with the world. Although the ECDC administration supported my efforts to move their program’s theme-based, teacher-directed curriculum towards an integrated, project-approach, the community as a whole, conservative to begin with, enthu-

siastically embraced the national shift towards the implementation of state standards and testing. Parents began to express concerns that our child-centered, hands-on learning approach was not fostering the necessary reading, writing, and math skills that the children needed to succeed in public school first-grade classrooms.

At the beginning of each year, I observed that an increasing number of the parents were anxious about reading instruction. Curriculum night discussions, which in the past had focused on the development of cooperative social interactions, creative and critical thinking, and a commitment to intellectual curiosity, now began to center on the literacy goals for kindergarten. In addition, the local school corporation focused their kindergarten curriculum on basic skill development. Graduate school classes in reading and math at Indiana University, South Bend, began to attend more strictly to skill-based learning and assessment. Members of the early childhood education community spoke out at local conferences and in the newspaper against whole language practices and demanded accountability towards the standards.

Committed to an understanding that children learn through interactions with the materials and people of their world, I struggle with the pressure to add more direct instruction of skills. Under pressure to respond to the fervor, my own teaching team at ECDC began to speak of “tweaking” our curriculum to meet the first-grade expectations, especially the demands of the assessment test that the children were faced with during the beginning weeks of first grade, an achievement test that determines the child’s placement in leveled reading and math learning groups. The struggle to balance my goals as a progressive educator with the community’s demand to teach to the state standards continues in my kindergarten classroom.

Recently, the children joined in the conflict as they engaged in an act of resistance against a teacher-directed lesson. The ECDC kindergarten conducts a yearly study of multicultural markets in the city of South Bend. As we prepare for our visit to the local markets, the children formulate questions for the shopkeepers about their work. My training at Bank Street helped me realize the importance of children’s taking ownership of their investigations as they create these questions, thus, in effect, directing their own exploration of a particular topic. A diehard constructivist, I believe the children actively participate in the building of knowledge as they pursue their own research agenda. When we gather together to create our questions, I am always delighted by the diversity of the children’s inquiries, and I write up their questions on a large chart for all to see. We refer back to the questions throughout our preparation for the field trip, seek out the answers at the field trip site, and reflect upon our research when we return to the classroom.

This year, in an effort to have the kindergarten curriculum respond more directly to the reading and writing standards, I added a new activity to our question creation. The standards state that the children must exhibit “print knowledge,” cognizance, for instance, of the fact that letters make up words, and that words come together to form sentences. After the children had constructed their questions for

the market trip, I printed each sentence on brightly colored “sentence strips,” strips of lined card stock paper designed for exactly this purpose. I gave each child their sentence strip and a handful of plastic chips. I then asked the children to place a chip on the letters of the words, and then on each word in the sentence. The activity had been described to me in a local graduate course on reading as a tangible way to measure the children’s understanding of the written system of letters and words. As the activity progressed, the children sorted their plastic chips by color, stacked the chips and watched them fall, and traded chips with each other for favorite colors. I quickly realized that the children were not interested in dissecting words and sentences. Soon the children began to place the sentence strips around their heads, forming a band. As more children noticed others creating these headbands, more began to make the bands. The student teachers in the room, speaking with increasingly firm voices, encouraged the children to put down their sentence strips and listen carefully for the next clue about where to put the chip.

Then Max spoke, “Hey, Ms. Bevacqua, we can wear the headbands to the market tomorrow; that way, we won’t forget our questions!” Max’s suggestion was met with a roar of consent from his friends. The children began asking how to fasten the bands onto their heads. Friends began to hold the bands around each other’s heads. An argument ensued about whether we should call the new objects “headbands” or “crowns.” The goal of counting letters and words fell away as I watched and listened to the intensity and delight of the children as they pursued this new endeavor. As they worked to fix the sentence strips around their heads, their questions for the market workers took on a revered place in our community. Of course, we will wear our questions around our heads like headbands or crowns—our inquiries will become, quite literally, a part of ourselves!

Thrilled, I began a clapping pattern—our class signal that we all stop our activities and listen for an important message—and began a conversation about the “question crowns.” Together we worked out ways to fasten the sentence strips around heads so that they did not fall into the children’s eyes. We settled disagreements about who wanted which color strip. We took turns reading each other’s questions as we revolved around our friends, recognizing familiar words and figuring out new words together. We defined our field trip work as the children asked significant questions: “How do you work the cash register?” “Do you drive the delivery truck?” “Do you sell treats?” “Do you like your job at the market?” The next day twenty-seven kindergartners loaded onto the bus for a trip to the market adorned with question crowns.

One interpretation of the “question crowns” story suggests that by stepping back and allowing the children to take over the lesson, I relinquished my role as the authority figure in the classroom and shared power with my students. This interpretation, although it may apply to the narrative itself, does not fully capture the meaning of the experience for me. By creating the crowns out of the sentence strips and wrapping them around their heads, the children took what had been a contrived

activity and made it an authentic engagement by putting the questions back into the texture of their lives. In doing so, their questions, which had been removed from them on the sentence strips, became real again, as evidenced by the children's desire to wear the crowns to the market.

Educators adore talking about “teachable moments,” experiences in the classroom that invite instruction if seized by the teacher. For me, there are also monumental moments in our daily lives with children—moments that define our beliefs about the children we care for, the teachers we are, and the work we do in our classrooms. In this paper, I have shared two such moments of young children's acts of resistance in early childhood classrooms. Finding meaning in these experiences has helped me define my role as a teacher who is committed to resisting pedagogical practices that take away children's opportunity for genuine investigation of their worlds. At a time when teachers are under pressure to transform early childhood education into the downloading of a certain set of basic skills, sharing teacher stories about how children actually construct knowledge through their explorations no longer functions just as a means of critical self-reflection, it becomes a public act of resistance.