

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 785

SP 037 949

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TITLE Harmonizing Self and Community in the Activity of Teaching.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Elementary School Teachers; Grade 6; Intermediate Grades; Student Behavior; Students; *Teacher Role; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching (Occupation)
IDENTIFIERS *Teacher Judgments

ABSTRACT

Using a sixth grade classroom as an example, this paper discusses balance within the classroom, including balance of instruction and learning, of intentions and actions, and of relationships. This balance holds teachers in positive tension with students, parents, and the school community. Three metaphors describe pedagogic judgment as the enactment of the aesthetic and moral balance found in teaching. They are an image of a kitchen scale used to measure out ingredients, an image of a tightrope walker, and an image of a non-symmetrical artistic pattern within which beauty can be found. The paper uses the metaphors to highlight encounters between the sixth grade classroom teacher and her students. She uses her judgment like a kitchen scale to measure ingredients that will be blended to achieve the complex experience of learning math. Like a tightrope walker, she finds balance in her response to students' conflicting demands, resisting jerky, overreaching responses. Like an artist, she interprets the perceptions of the landscape, using her intuition to respond correctly to student behavior. The students' complex weave of behavior and intentions are seen by the teacher as a whole fabric. The teacher takes an active, almost aesthetic approach that gives this pattern of individual behavior its meaningful context. The teacher makes the students consistently aware of the choices of character expressed in their daily school life, guiding them toward balanced independence. (Contains 24 references.) (SM)

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Harmonizing Self and Community in the Activity of Teaching

Dayvid Schultz
AREA 1998 Annual Meeting

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Harmonizing Self and Community in the Activity of Teaching

Good Morning.

Looking out the row of windows above the chalkboards of Charlotte DuPree's sixth grade classroom you see only the gray high-rise apartment building next door. The constant wind off nearby Lake Michigan accelerates through the narrow canyon between the buildings, a howling wind tunnel effect on this rainy December day. Inside there is also movement; it is time for math. Mrs. DuPree, a twenty year veteran now in her fourth year at this private, middle class elementary school, walks her students back from a downstairs video room where they had been watching Anne of Green Gables. Two twelve year olds, Michael and Ashley, are beside her, bombarding her with questions:

“When are we going to do the social studies review?...”

“Can the test be Tuesday? We didn't get home till eleven o'clock...”

“Can we do the review before Ms. Goldman comes for science?”

Charlotte takes a deep breath. Smiling, she pronounces, “We'll do it after math.”

She says “math” loudly enough for everyone to hear as they approach their room. Eight or nine students immediately scamper to their lockers searching for books, papers and pencils, the rest file into the room. Mrs. DuPree pauses, collecting materials, then straightens up and surveys her class. All her students but Ryan are seated quietly, looking ready for the anticipated instruction. Ryan is crouched by his desk, looking through a pile of math papers and notebooks. The silence in the room seems directed at him.

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“I’ve got it!” He beams relief. Several of the girls smile.

Charlotte opens with a quick lesson on decimals for her seventh grade curriculum level math group, while the rest of the class listens, occasionally answering questions. After doing the initial problems together, she calls the sixth grade group over to the open area at the south end of the room. Seated in a circle on the rug, the students look with interest at the scissors and newspapers piled in front of Charlotte. With her hand resting on the papers she begins to explain: “Today we’re going to do a project with these newspapers --- making a chart to show information.”

Observing Charlotte's DuPree's sixth grade classroom invites a palpable sense of balance. A balance of instruction and learning, of intentions and actions, of relationships that hold this teacher in positive tension with her students and their parents, and their school community, in subtle, but powerful ways. Charlotte is one of four experienced elementary classroom teachers portrayed in my recently completed dissertation investigating the facets of pedagogic judgment, a mode of reasoning that is indicative of the balancing acts we are exploring today.

In this study, pedagogic judgment is differentiated from other pedagogic evaluations by its emergence from a dynamic interplay of teachers' perceptions, knowledge and belief systems about classroom life and teaching practice. This knowledge is further distinguishable from instrumental teaching techniques by its expressive, personal,

and inherently moral nature. The pervasive moral expressiveness of teachers' judgment was found to be valued as a legitimate source of ethical insight and as a mainspring for pedagogic action. Emerson, in his essay *Self-Reliance*, strikes to the heart of the quality of expressiveness I am referring to when he remarks: "We pass for what we are. Character teaches above our wills. Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment"¹. From these considerations, a dynamic picture of Charlotte's balancing acts emerges as the attentive and mindful qualities of her judgment enable the full employment of her material and intellectual resources, oriented toward a refined and honest perception of her students as growing, developing human beings.

In the course of my research, I have adopted three descriptive metaphors illustrative of pedagogic judgment as the enactment of the aesthetic and moral balance found in teaching; these are that of a simple scale, a tightrope acrobat, and the balance of a bamboo patterned Japanese textile. Common to these depictions are their portrayal of a cultivated knowledge of life's experience to engage, inform and sometimes challenge the professional practices that ultimately define good teaching.

The first metaphor evoked by this balancing act is an image of a kitchen scale, used to measure out ingredients. Imagine the fulcrum -- centered -- arms outstretched with a waiting capacity to compare the qualities of teaching: ounces of instruction, grams of

¹ Ulich, R. (1954). Three thousand years of educational wisdom. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

character. The second vision is the tightrope walking pedagogue, precariously perched on the highwire. Here the means become the ends as rigorous attention to the qualities of goodness in character and pedagogic action emerge as the realization of goodness, both in the teacher and in the people her students are becoming. Finally, as a full time seventh grade classroom teacher myself, my research has reaffirmed a tangible, if effervescent, sense of pattern balanced amidst the often confounding experiences of everyday life in my classroom. It is a non-symmetrical pattern, emotional, chaotic and at times distorted; but, with practiced cultivation, one finds much beauty in it. Like the viewing of a woven bamboo pattern commonly depicted in traditional Japanese fabrics, the seventh grade distills and highlights the struggle of many individuals to become an integrated whole, a tactile expression of balance itself.

Returning to our scene in Charlotte's sixth grade classroom, I would like to expand our conception of this teacher's balancing acts by employing these metaphors to highlight an encounter between Charlotte and her students. We will first identify a few of the curricular components Charlotte considers in planning her daily math periods. We will then explore two quick exchanges between Charlotte and her students that endanger both her planning and their future learning.

Recall that Charlotte is showing us the details of one ordinary fifty minute math period. She intends for her students to work on a less structured, problem solving activity with newspapers, an activity that will require some organizing strategy, an understanding of basic statistics and attention to graphic presentation. Remembering from last year that

the charting assignment was “fun”, she also recalls wanting to split up her class into a number of smaller groups, hoping that her students will work on the assignment more independently. She then settles on a more realistic image; “I saw that they weren’t going to be able to do the [necessary] counting.” Expecting instead that some of her students would struggle to organize the problem, she anticipates that they will share their successes with other students, “Okay, we’ll do this,” she says, “this [sharing] is the way we’ll do it... kind of plan.”

Charlotte characterizes her reasoning here as a matter of “instinct”, blending her long standing personal beliefs about the worthwhileness of learning math with her stockpile of teaching techniques and her immediate perception of students’ needs. From all her statements, we may infer that there are numerous judgments and interactions employed in preparing and implementing this math project that move to create the sense of balance Charlotte is hoping for in her classroom; a balance between self-motivated and cooperative efforts, and between what she recalls as a “fun” math experience and the requirements of the school’s curriculum guide. She could have chosen to lecture on the subject matter, used the assignment for homework, or not done the project at all.

Given the restricted policies of many urban schools regarding curricular choices and teaching techniques, one might wonder whether Charlotte feels there are any judgments to be made here at all. Indeed, the sixth grade math curriculum at Moore Elementary is part of a school wide program, following a nationally distributed text. Are Charlotte’s curricular and methodological judgments then, merely implementing a school

policy that reflects the edicts of her Board of Trustees, her principal and her middle class community at large?

They may be, but we might apply our metaphors as a map to a more refined understanding. In choosing this project as a group activity, Charlotte's goal is not to measure one specific teaching technique against another. Rather, like an experienced chef, Charlotte's judgment affirms this recipe for math today as enacting her beliefs and knowledge. She uses her judgment like a kitchen scale, taking the measure of various individual ingredients she will blend to achieve the complex experience of learning math. There is little surprise that Charlotte selects, in her judgment, the most appropriate teaching and learning techniques for today's lesson from all possibilities. We might say that while Charlotte could have chosen other ingredients, her stockpile of beliefs and experience first guide her to choose this particular dish for her class, and then masterfully combine the particular ingredients and techniques that will best articulate her choice.

Soon after explaining the charting assignment, Charlotte announces the groups her students will work in during this period. She recalls trying to balance her temporary groups both by mixing up students with varying abilities, and by, "what's going on that day emotionally with them, how they're interacting with each other..."

Immediately Charlotte catches a perturbed, demanding look from Ashley, one of three students in a group, who makes it clear she does not want to work with Ryan. For a moment, Charlotte considers moving Ryan to another, more hospitable group. Her quick read of Ryan's own facial expression, however, confirms that he too, is aware of Ashley's

not so subtle manipulations. Ryan, Charlotte believes, will take her intervention as doubting his abilities to cope. Charlotte's choice, like that of a tightrope walker, is to find a balanced response between the ridicule she predicts Ryan will be exposed to in a group with Ashley, and the danger of communicating to Ashley that she can manipulate her teacher. Of course, Charlotte would rather not choose at all, she regrets having missed some cue earlier in the day, "I should have sensed ...and I may have sensed, and didn't act on it."

Like all highwire artists, Charlotte must resist jerky, overreaching responses to constantly changing and confounding classroom conditions. Teaching is made up of scores of quick, momentary judgments that each carry significant moral resonance. For Charlotte, the essence of teaching is not in establishing large, policy-like objectives, but in taking each small step with her students, mindful of the consequences. While she does not discount the plight she has placed Ryan in, she understands that her reaction to Ashley's manipulation will be a lesson of character and relationship that will, hopefully, encourage Ashley toward a positive framework of integrity and learning. From Charlotte's narrative we can feel her conviction that the practical wisdom and mindfulness integral to a successful journey across the pedagogic tightrope is essentially a moral journey.

In the final encounter we will explore today, we return to Charlotte's recollection of her intuitive judgment as the interpreter of the complexities seen in her daily classroom practice. It is an artist's intuition that interprets the perceptions of a natural landscape, such as a bamboo grove, into an exquisite pattern, a translation of individual experience

into a public apprehension. It is Charlotte's intuition that perceives, as the math period progresses, that the group comprised of Ashley, Heather and Ryan, was "floundering". The girls were, "...lying on the floor... with one leg kicked up. [Ashley] was on her stomach and she was just sort of dilly-dallying..." Charlotte is emphatic here, describing her sure knowledge of Ashley and Heather's intentions as engaged in a pattern of "how cute they looked", a pattern of student behavior she characterizes as resistance to change. Charlotte might have considered responding with a quick, critical comment aimed at returning the group to their task. Instead, she articulates an intuitive sense "to kneel down into the group" and quietly engage the three in questions about organizing their assignment.

Notice that the issue here is not one of gross misbehavior. It is not hard to imagine other classroom situations in which this student behavior, while not on task, would be acceptable or at least overlooked. But Charlotte does not want these girls to believe it so. Math periods, even for groups doing projects, are a time for serious work, and Charlotte's students are expected to reflect her own belief in the worthwhileness of their efforts. Her students' complex weave of behavior and intentions are seen by Charlotte as whole fabric, intuition speaking the truth of the matter. In this sense she takes an active, almost aesthetic approach that gives this pattern of individual behavior it's meaningful context. Charlotte's reaction to the girls' lackadaisical intent defines the goal she perceives for their math period itself. They were "missing the lesson" not from a lack of math ability, but because of their resistance to engage in the task assigned. Charlotte's

knowledge transforms the student's private intent into a public arena inasmuch as it highlights their dilly-dallying behavior as morally and pedagogically risky. If this math period ends without Charlotte drawing attention to her students' risky behavior, she will not only lose a teachable moment, but will have encouraged a behavior destructive to their learning and growth as people. If teaching is to have any meaning for Charlotte it must first and foremost direct students away from such unbalanced, self-destructive behavior.

In the end it is Charlotte's quiet encouragement and hopefulness, supporting these girls' small steps toward self-worth, independence, and even math proficiency, that stays with Charlotte. She perceives that the lesson learned here, the moral implication of the worthwhileness inherent in the curriculum and the effort these girls could make, are necessarily small lessons, the sanguinity and depths of which will become appreciated only in the months or years to come.

For Charlotte, the curriculum is like clay, the textural raw material from which the self-expressive nature of the student sculptor's character and vision emerge with great difficulty. At heart, the teacher's role is to make the student consistently aware of the choices of character expressed in this sometimes tedious work of mastering the clay. In this the teacher must not only understand the medium herself, she must guide the tentative and experimentally inclined young artist through a bewildering array of forms and aesthetic concepts toward a balanced independence. This is subtle work, work demanding attentiveness and care. Thank You.

March 28, 1998

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