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Classroom Culture: Personal Beliefs of a Pre-Service CAL Educator

As I head into my final year of my second undergraduate degree and slowly morph into an official educator for the state of Minnesota, I have begun to develop a strong set of beliefs when it comes to my future students and classrooms. These principles I expound below are ones I hope to implement with purpose and intent as a future teacher. One can tell when an educator does not hold strong philosophies; they are the teachers that come to work for the paycheck and not much else. Those who have the well-formed and deeply held values of a prosperous class and pupils are the educators that are memorable, favored, and love their job, as demanding as it may be at times. With my own beliefs and philosophies for myself and my future learners and education environments, I desire to be that instructor—the one that students remember and enjoy learning from.

1. I believe all students have the right and capability to learn.

As teachers, it is our responsibility to not only instruct our students but support and guide our student towards success and achievement. Every student has goals that go beyond the classroom, and to get there, students need the skills and knowledge to work their way through the world. Not all students are going to get what is being taught the first time or even the second or third time, maybe not even the fourth or fifth. That does not mean they cannot or never will get the concept they're struggling with. They have the right to understand and acquire that knowledge or skill because they definitely have the capability.

One prime implementation that can encourage this universal right to information and assured capability to learn is differentiation. According to instructor and theorist, Rick Wormeli, “schools are structured according to a false set of beliefs that students are standardized individuals with the same abilities, needs, and motivations” (qtd. in Milner et al., 22). Oftentimes, information and classrooms are presented in the teacher’s most comfortable or favorite teaching method. Not all students are going to learn best the way the teacher likes to teach or how the school, city, state, or country tell teachers how to teach or how students should learn. Wormeli continues this idea by stating, “Rather than acknowledging that students learn at different rates, schools push students through each grade level at the same pace” (qtd. in Milner et al., 22). Bypassing students’ needs and accommodations, they are left behind as they cannot keep up with the material with students who can maintain the pace with the students who can follow the standardization. There’s also those who exceed what is expected from the standardization. They are asked to slow down to stay with the group. To both group of students, the ones who need more time and help and those who are farther ahead, it is a disservice and harm to them to maintain an equal playing field for all students. What I value in a classroom is having an equitable playing field. The ones who need more time or need to be taught a different way or just need reassurance deserve that. Their dreams and goals matter just as much as those who get it on the first go around. Same with those who are father ahead, they deserve to be encouraged to keep going and push themselves. Students who are left behind have the rights and capabilities to learn taken away from them. That’s why I believe that students need a chance (or multiple chances) to achieve that. I want for my future students and classrooms to encourage equitable learning and accommodations, differentiations, and adaptations for those who need extra help or need additional outlets or anything in between.

2. I believe the classroom and lessons should be a place where students see themselves and others.

When it comes to classroom environments and lessons, students should have the opportunity to express themselves, recognize their peers, and connect to their surroundings and education. For reading and literature, students should be able to connect to characters, places, events, cultures, or the author. They should be able to find things to connect to. As well, they should find new things to empathize and understand outside of themselves too. Milner, Milner, and Mitchell state that “[s]tudents in minority groups must see themselves in the books that they read,” and if we hope other students look beyond their own cultures and beliefs, “we must do so gently and with patience. Perceptions and stereotypes can be deeply engrained but they do not have to be permanent” (257). Students shouldn’t go through an entire course and not see themselves reflected in the materials, as it is discouraging and could have damaging effects on a student. The same could be said about students who always see themselves in the literature. This also applies to writing. Setting up writing prompts and activities to allow students to present themselves openly about who they are allows students to find connections with their peers and with the material. Limiting the ideas and concepts to “mass produce” a result does not set up students to create strong writing samples, nor does it promote self-reflection and growth. According to Moffett and Wagner, the first stage of learning progression begins with the individual. They state, “Intellectual growth originates with personal experience. The child properly operates out of the egocentric center of the self” (qtd. in Milner et al., 14). But what if students are not given the chance to find or express that “self?” I hope to give students as much opportunity to turn to that “self” as often as possible, whether they see it in the reading material or are able to practice introspection through writing.

3. I believe my student's grades are not a label of who they are.

Students, oftentimes, see grades as a reflection of self. On top of that, grades tend to be seen among students as a source of competition. If students receive bad marks, they can sometimes see it as a sign of defeat and a label of incapacities or worthlessness. Furthermore, if the idea of competition or comparison of grades among peers occurs, or is even encouraged, students can feel inferior or hopeless. To encourage students and build positivity in their performance, they need confidence in what they're doing. According to Malcom Gladwell, author of *Outliers: The Story of Success*, he discusses the idea that without confidence, "students may find it easier to avoid their work entirely than to take another hit to their self-esteem, and may also lack the confidence to ask for help. Such negative patterns can extend over generations, as the inability to self-advocate is often an inherited trait" (qtd. in Dueck, 16). Grades don't always reflect the student, thus they should not define who a student is. Grades do not show a student's abilities in other, more dominant fields and subjects, circumstances as to why a specific grade was earned, a student's attempt to learn the content, or the student's ability to learn the task, lesson, or subject. As stated by Milner, Milner, and Mitchell, "grading tends to compartmentalize, label, rate, and rank students" (439). Just because a student is getting a poor grade, either overall or on a unit, this does not indicate that a student is a lost cause or is unwilling or unable to learn. Reinforcement and encouragement alongside care and support can build a student's confidence in themselves and boost accomplishment. My goal as a teacher is to promote confidence in student performance and use grades to evaluate students. Each student should have the chance to try again and work towards better learning, grades, and achievement. Outside the academic realm, employers and other personal situations allow for second chances, mistakes, redemption, and growth. To make these things impossible or forbidden, not only turn a

student away from feelings of confidence or capability, but they also do not reflect how the “real world” works. If a student is willing to learn and shows desire to improve and tackle their education head-on, they should be given the opportunity to do so.

Works Cited

Dueck, Myron. *Grading Smarter Not Harder*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2014.

Milner, Joseph, et al. *Bridging English*. 6th ed., Pearson Higher Education, 2017.