

ON TEACHING AND LEARNING: COLLECTIVE GROWTH IN THE CLASSROOM

A Thesis in the Field of Early Childhood and Childhood Education
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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of love, reciprocity, and interconnectedness in the classroom, drawing from personal teaching experiences and the works of James Baldwin, bell hooks, Paulo Freire and other thinkers. Through stories of student-led learning, dialogue, and care, I reflect on how teaching is not a transactional act but a relational one - shaped by deep listening, trust and the full recognition of each child's humanity. Central to this work is the idea that our growth as educators is inseparable from the growth of the children we teach. When we center students' voices and follow their lead, we create space for authentic learning experiences that are grounded in mutual respect. Teaching, when rooted in love, becomes a collective practice of seeing and being seen. As teachers, we have a responsibility not just to guide learning but to co-create it - where everyone is seen, valued and transformed in the process.

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I am grateful to all of my family - across continents - who have ingrained in me the meaning of “dando, recibes más.”

On Teaching and Learning: Collective Growth in the Classroom

1. Introduction

- a. James Baldwin: “The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe.”
- b. bell hooks: “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.”
- c. Paulo Freire: “the teacher is...[themselves] taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.”
- d. My presentation today is a deep dive into the formation of one of the most fundamental aspects of my pedagogy - our interconnectedness.

2. On Seeing Children

- a. Substitute Teaching at Tarrytown Nursery School
 - i. Compassion in the 2s classroom
 - ii. bell hooks: “When we teach with love, combining care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust, we are often able to enter the classroom and go straight to the heart of the matter.”
- b. Descriptive Review of the Child - Early Childhood Center, Sarah Lawrence College
 - i. My first study child: Saleh A. J.*
 - ii. Expressing our love: “Te quiero!”

- iii. bell hooks: “Contrary to the notion that love in the classroom makes teachers less objective, when we teach with love we are better able to respond to the unique concerns of individual students, while simultaneously integrating those concerns into the classroom community.”
- iv. Carla Shalaby: “many leading education scholars called for schools to center authentic and meaningful human relationships, empathy, and care between and among both teachers and young people”
- v. Patricia Carini: “to be more sensitively attuned to who [children] are and are becoming, so that, recognizing them as persons, we can better assist and support their learning.”
- vi. Patricia Carini: “I find this kind of recollecting of children refreshing and renewing of my faith in our human-ness.”

3. Tu Bien es mi Bien

a. Claremont School

- i. Robin Wall Kimmerer: “Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you can take care of them.”
- ii. Embodying “tu bien es mi bien”
- iii. bell hooks: “as a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, in recognizing one another’s presence”
- iv. Collective growth in harmony: “Rosa” by Totó la Momposina

- v. Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade: This ignores the fact that every student in our classroom is part of a delicate balance built on interdependency.
- vi. Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade: K. Wayne Yang, an urban science and math teacher for more than seventeen years, and one of the finest educators I have known in my career, put it this way: “All my students are indigenous to my classroom and therefore there are no weeds in my classroom.”
- vii. Hind K.* - Compassion
- viii. Bisan O.* - Agency
- ix. Motaz A.* - Dialogue
- x. Developing relationships with parents: interview with Kiyomi Sánchez-Suzuki Colegrove
- xi. bell hooks: “Any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone’s presence is acknowledged. That insistence cannot be simply stated. It has to be demonstrated through pedagogical practices.”
- xii. Centering our students in lessons: I Am You: A Book About Ubuntu by Refiloe Moahloli
- xiii. bell hooks: “Love in the classroom prepares teachers and students to open our minds and hearts. It is the foundation on which every learning community can be created. Teachers need not fear that practicing love in the classroom will lead to favoritism or competition between students. Love will always move us away from

domination in all its forms. Love will always challenge and change us.”

4. Collective Learning

a. Castle Bridge School/Escuela Puente del Castillo

- i. Paulo Freire: “When I enter a classroom I should be someone who is open to new ideas, open to questions, and open to the curiosities of the students as well as their inhibitions. It is important to insist on this point, to insist on this kind of teaching as necessary to being a teacher and as necessary to everyone in education. And to understand its ontological, political, ethical, epistemological, and pedagogical basis.”
- ii. Culture Shock at Castle Bridge School
- iii. Paulo Freire: “Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning.”
- iv. bell hooks: “engaged pedagogy begins with the assumption that we learn best when there is an interactive relationship between student and teacher. As leaders and facilitators, teachers must discover what the students know and what they need to know. This discovery happens only if teachers are willing to engage students beyond a surface level.”
- v. Paulo Freire: “praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”
- vi. Reciprocity in Project Time

1. Plestia A.* - Menu
2. Anas A. S.* - Paper Airplanes
3. Mariam B.* - I LOVE YOU

5. On Sustainability

- a. Is this sustainable?
- b. Mosab Abu Toha: poem
- c. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems.”
- d. Love is not an abstract idea
 - i. Making space for compassion
 - ii. Dialogue
 - iii. Trusting in our students
- e. James Baldwin: “The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe.”

*All of the names of the children used in my work are pseudonyms and are inspired by the names of Palestinian journalists.

Process Paper

Putting together my personal experiences with children - both inside and outside the classroom - didn't come naturally to me. These are moments I live fully, often letting them settle quietly into the foundation of how I teach and how I understand my relation to others. But in putting together this thesis, I was intentional about tracing those moments, and articulating what they have taught me about our practice as educators. As someone shaped by Mexican cultural traditions where storytelling is a way of knowing, remembering and honoring - I also saw this work as a form of cultural continuity. I wanted to create something that honored my own and my students' presence in this world and share with others, even if only a small sample, what they have shared with me.

Much of this process began with recalling those moments - both ordinary and extraordinary - and trusting that they held meaning. I had to trust that the story I told holds value not just for me, but also with whom I am sharing it with. One of the most meaningful parts of this process was when I was able to align my lived experiences with the ideas of thinkers like bell hooks, Paulo Freire and James Baldwin. Their words didn't just support my stories, they also added language to things I already felt deep within me. When I came across bell hooks' writing on the topic of dialogue, "conversation is always about giving. Genuine conversation is about the sharing of power and knowledge; it is fundamentally a cooperative enterprise" - I was elated! I remember feeling and saying to myself, "Yes! Yes! Exactly!" I was able to make a connection between this quote and a beautiful moment I shared with a student at a local library that

I shared in my thesis. And James Baldwin's assertion that "the children are always ours, every single one of them" echoed everything I had truly come to believe.

The difficulty I had with this process was finding the right tone. A tone that centers my students and honors who they are as humans. I questioned whether I was being too personal, especially in the stories that mirrored my own childhood. I am aware that these experiences might stir feelings of pity or provoke judgement toward the decisions immigrant families make. But the truth is that these are real and common experiences for children of immigrants, and I wanted to tell these stories to humanize and normalize these experiences. Too often we hear of "marginalized communities" and we don't hear enough about the love, care and sacrifice that exist within these so-called "marginalized" communities.

Choosing to incorporate Spanish and the story of Arabizi into my thesis felt essential. These languages are part of how I move through this world and they are also part of how my students move through theirs. Including them in my thesis was a way to affirm multilingualism not just as a skill but as a cultural and emotional reality. I wanted my work to sound and feel like someone who teaches, who listens and who learns in community with children.

As I moved through this process, I couldn't ignore the weight of my own grief - a grief that I carried with me into classrooms, into my relationships with my students and into this thesis. The constant loss of children around the world, especially in Gaza, became an unbearable backdrop to my work - to my existence. And I have asked myself so many times: how do we teach with love when we are broken? How do we sustain care, presence and energy when we are grieving? These questions shaped the

core of my thesis. Asking the question, “*is love sustainable?*” wasn’t necessarily about offering a follow-up answer. I was seeking to highlight the complexity of teaching with a full heart. But I have learned that this sadness has deepened my capacity to feel, to notice and to listen.

This process has ultimately solidified what I already came to understand, which is that teaching is a relationship - it is a reciprocal relationship of giving and receiving. Through presence, trust, compassion and dialogue - we can embody a practice of love in our teaching. As I asserted in my thesis, love is not an abstract idea. It’s not just in the hugs or gifts we share with children. My students have taught me that love is in the intentional space we create for children to be: their curiosity, their emotions, their voice.

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