




An Important Reminder: Structuring a Classroom Environment That Honours All Students

Brenna Millard, University of Saskatchewan

ABSTRACT

All children, regardless of ability, should feel valued and respected in their classroom. At times, the children who struggle miss out on purpose-driven, meaningful learning because they are classified by what they cannot do instead of honoured for what they can do. Through my narrative of Henry, I explore the importance of truly coming to know each student as a learner in the classroom. I begin by reflecting on my own experiences in school as a student and then as a beginning teacher. I then explore the use of the reader's workshop model and discuss how I have used it as an approach to differentiated teaching and learning in a way that creates space for relationships to grow and students to be supported. Finally, I conclude by revisiting my story of Henry and reflect on how his story, and implementing the reader's workshop model, will continue to affect my teaching as I grow both as a teacher and learner.

My Reminder

 It is posted. There behind my desk, it hangs. Attached to my white board along with many others I have collected over the years: pictures, notes, and cards from students, their family members, and special guests—this one being particularly special to me. At first glance you may wonder about its significance. The spelling is not correct and the letters are facing every which way, but this small bright blue sticky note and the words he used, his words, are the very reason why I come to work each day. His words serve as a reminder to me of just how privileged I am to be able to share in the lives of the children whom I teach.

At the end of the day, as I thought about Henry's¹ words, I was reminded of the teacher I once was. To say that I have been on an incredible journey throughout my teaching career would be an understatement. I began teaching seven years ago, although my path towards becoming a teacher began as far back as I can remember. As a young child I would play school with my siblings and I would admire my own mother as she spent time after dinner preparing for the day ahead. As I entered school, I was the student who stayed after class to help my teacher put up bulletin boards or tidy the classroom. I loved being at school and I knew from a very early age that this was what I wanted to do for my career.

Looking Back

I remember answering the phone as my superintendent offered me my first job. I was so happy, I cried. However, my first two years of teaching were not what I expected. You see, I began teaching in the way I was taught. The students learned from what I told them. We would follow our textbook's lesson and complete the activities the same way. I remember planning a Language Arts unit for my Grade 6 class at the time. We read, *Where the Red Fern Grows* (Rawls, 1961). When I handed out the unit outline to the students I had the marks determined per activity and everything was in a nice neat package. The students read each chapter and completed the accompanying assigned activity, aligned with the reading. This was how I taught. This was how my days unfolded. I had a plan and I believed my job was to put that plan into action. I viewed myself as successful when, at the end of a lesson or at the end of a day, everything went exactly as planned. Yes, I would ask how the students were or how their weekend went but in the pit of my stomach I knew I needed—and they needed—more. I felt stuck, like there was a barrier separating me from my students. I soon realized that unless I changed the way I taught, I would not make it in this career. I realized that in order for me to be the best teacher I could be for all of my students, I needed to truly know them. I needed to truly hear their stories. We needed to develop relationships with one another. What I had been previously doing certainly did not allow for my students and me to do this; we did not have the space to share our stories.

Challenging Past Perceptions

The bell is about to ring; a quiet hum fills the room. A group of children are circled around the floor sweeping up the pencil shavings, while others are rearranging the books on the back shelf, busily watering the plants, wiping the tables, straightening

the rugs, and putting away their supplies for the day. As my students get ready to go I remind them to share with me one way they got smarter today. We high five, hug, or cheer as each student celebrates his or her learning for that day. You see, as I learned through Miller (2012), smart isn't something you are, it is something you get. I want my students to know this, to live this, and I celebrate this with them each and every day they are at school.

Slowly the line of children dwindles and it is Henry's time to share with me. Before the school year started, I didn't know who Henry was but I had sure heard about him. He's the student that you hear about in the staffroom. "He's a handful;" "He's not reading at grade level;" "Watch out for him, he gets into trouble;" "He really struggles." These were the stories I was told. Over the past three weeks I have seen Henry in a different light. Henry is always happy to be at school. He is energetic and inquisitive, always asking questions and searching for answers. He is the boy who greets me each morning with a hug or gives me a rock he found in the woodlands. He is the boy who has devoured many of my animal books and comes rushing to me during our "enjoy a book time" to tell me how big sharks' teeth can get or how many stitches one man got because of a shark bite, while he points to the pictures or captions. He is the boy who read *Tough Boris* (Fox & Brown, 1994) over and over again, then sat patiently after school while he waited to read it aloud to the other Grade 4 teacher down the hall. He is the boy who listens intently to *Thank You Mister Falker* (Polacco, 1998), *Chrysanthemum* (Henkes, 1991), or *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman & Binch, 1991) and shares his ideas with us.

Henry comes to me with a sticky note in his hand, ready to tell me how he got smarter. He gives me the note and waits. As I read his words, letters jumbled and every which way, tears come to my eyes. "The more you read, the smarter you get." These are his words, his ideas, his learning. I give him a hug and ask him if I can post it on our *Community of Thinkers and Learners* wall. He beams, says yes, and leaves the classroom for the day. I am alone now, left with his sticky note, my feelings, and a reminder of the importance of a belief in children.

Who Can and Who Can't

Many times we classify and describe children only by what they cannot do, much like in the stories I had heard of Henry before his coming into Grade 4. Henry has his struggles, and school may never be easy for him. But he also has so many strengths that can be built upon once we take the time to know him as a person and get to know his story.

When I think of Henry's story of school I am reminded of my twin brother, James. His story of school was not as simple as mine. I was made for school; I loved it and did well. James did not. Out of the three children in our family, I believe he is the brightest but, much like Henry, he was often described by what he could not do.

James has a bright sense of humour that was often misunderstood. This tended to get him into trouble. He was described as distracted, impulsive, and slow to complete work. I remember in Grade 3, our teacher, Mrs. Simons, was reading *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952) to our classroom. We were gathered on the floor around her when James raised his hand. "Mrs. Simons," he said. "You are a lot like Charlotte. You are kind and caring. The only difference between you two is that your legs are not as hairy." Much like Henry, he saw things and communicated his ideas intently but for some reason these thoughts were not fully recognized. As we got older, my sister and I both were on the honour roll, Kate going on to receive scholarships and bursaries throughout university. My brother did not graduate with me; he was put into modified programming and he had to go back one more year to get his Grade 12.

Dweck (2006) used the terms "fixed mindset" and "growth mindset" to describe how people view motivation and learning. People with a fixed mindset believe that talent determines success. While people with a growth mindset believe that even the most basic abilities can be developed through hard work and discipline. Although Dweck uses these terms as a way to think about personal growth and motivation, I also feel teachers can have these mindsets as they work to realize the abilities of their own students. I believe that teachers' mindsets about the children they teach often affect the success their students have in the classroom. I often wonder what would have happened had James been taught by teachers who had more of a growth, not a fixed, mindset (Dweck, 2006). Would the skills he brought to school each day have been celebrated and used to build his confidence and motivation? Would he have been truly taught and not judged (Dweck, 2006)?

My New Beginnings

It is important for all children to feel valued and respected. I believe that it is my role as a teacher to provide that for my students. This is something much more than a lesson plan can provide. It is embedded throughout all of our days together as a community. The sentiment, "Approach your students as great thinkers," is how I try to live everyday with my students. Keene (2008) questioned what would happen in our classrooms if we

approached our students as great thinkers. There are times within my own classroom that I ask myself, “Is this maintaining the integrity of my students?” Does this enable them to be great thinkers? As a beginning teacher, I know I did not approach my students this way. As a beginning teacher I was concerned with covering the curriculum but did not know how to do that in a way that honoured my students as learners and thinkers. As a beginning teacher I did not allow space for the knowledge that each of my students brought into the classroom each day. I did not see the connection between what children experienced at home and how that may have influenced how they lived out their days within the classroom.

Building Community Through Literature and the Workshop Model

Traditional classrooms are like corn fields. The farmer ploughs the whole field at one time. One type of corn is planted with a standard distance between the rows and between the seeds within the rows. Every row receives the same amount of fertilizer. Each plant should look about the same and will be harvested at the same time. A very simple structure. My classroom is more like a prairie. The grasses, insects, mice, and hawks co-evolve. Each species is dependent on countless others and also on soil and climate. A prairie is difficult to establish, but in place it endures a very complex structure (Wagler, as cited in Allen, 2009, p. 37).

Throughout the first few years of teaching, my classroom was like that cornfield. I was well planned and knew exactly where I wanted the students to be at the end of the day. This was how I viewed a successful day. My students were expected to complete the same tasks and it was my job to let them know how well they did. Much like the corn in the field, they grew and improved from the standard instruction I gave to them all. It is my hope that as I continue to learn and grow as a teacher, my class becomes less like a cornfield and more liked a prairie.

As it is important for me to hear the stories of my students and build relationships with them, it is also important that they grow to know each other in the same way. By structuring experiences that encourage children to build positive relationships with each other, they learn to negotiate their roles within our classroom community. Relationships need time to grow and evolve. I want my students to know that by working with and supporting one another they can accomplish more. It is not, “me, all powerful teacher; it is us” (Epstein & Oyler, 2008, p. 410). Like the grasses, insects, mice, and hawks that co-evolve, I want my students to know that we are all teachers; that we all learn from one another.

I believe that literature can be a very powerful tool used to build relationships with one another. Galda (1998) wrote about

...the potential power that is inherent in reading literature, a power that comes from both books and readers. This power enables readers to transform words-on-a-page into emotional experiences that function as mirrors and windows into our lives and the lives of others. (p. 1)

Stories give us the space and comfort to talk about situations, feelings, and experiences that may be difficult. There is something about sitting close with my students and reading a book with them that creates a sense of intimacy like no other time throughout the day. This intimacy is established as we begin talking and listening to one another, questioning each other about our opinions, and encouraging one another to stretch our thinking beyond the classroom. I get excited about discussing literature with my students while learning about their stories through the process. This is not easy work. At times I can feel overwhelmed and it can be difficult for me to step out of that role as “teacher” and into the role of “responsible responding” to my students, instead of asking them to follow me because I am their leader (Aoki, 2005).

Four years ago I began using a workshop model to teach language arts. Using this model enabled me to celebrate the diversity of each of my students while also giving them the differentiated instruction needed to be successful readers, writers, thinkers, and learners, regardless of their ability. Every student has the right to be asked to think and participate in meaningful learning and I believe that the workshop model honours that right.

As the teacher, I find it offers flexibility to differentiate instruction and provide meaningful interventions for all readers, from the most reticent reader to the most skilled reader. More important, I believe that it empowers students with the sense of time, self-authority, decision-making, and intellectual depth they need to foster their independence as nascent readers. (Allen, 2009, p. 81)

The workshop model is both predictable and consistent while allowing for flexibility and creativity.

It is significant to realize that the most creative environments in our society are not the ever changing ones. The artist’s studio, the researcher’s laboratory, the scholar’s library are deliberately kept simple as to support the complexities of the work in progress. They are deliberately kept predictable so the unpredictable can happen. (Calkins, as cited in Miller, 2008, p. 108)

Each of the workshop components invites purposeful teaching, talking, reflecting, and learning as students are asked to do what successful readers do, not just simply look for answers to the questions at the end of a chapter or draw a picture of their favourite part of the story.

The workshop cycle is separated into three pieces: crafting, composing, and reflecting. Through crafting, the students and I work through text together, focusing on a specific skill or strategy that readers can use to be successful. My students have the opportunity to learn from one another as they share their thoughts and opinions. “Every time we share a book with a class and discuss it, the book becomes a little bigger” (Galda, 1998, p. 3). Composing gives my students a chance to dig deep into their own books to make meaning of what they are reading. It is also my time to work one on one or with small groups of students who may need support or further challenges. This is my favourite part of the workshop structure. Sitting alongside my students and talking with them as true learners gives me the opportunity not only to get to know them in an academic light, but also get to know them as people. Because students have choice in what they are reading or working on, each student can work at the level that fits him or her. This is my time to touch base with students and show them that they are important to me and our classroom. It is my time to show them that their learning matters, their struggles matter, and their successes matter. Reflecting is our time to celebrate our learning for the day. My students get to know themselves as readers and share with one another successes and struggles they experienced. As we gather in a circle at the end of each class to share our learning, my students know that in our class we learn from one another. We are all teachers.

My Guiding Principles

Establishing the routines and structures needed to create and support the workshop model takes time and is not easy. Miller (2012) included proficient reader research, the gradual release of responsibility, creating a culture of thinking, building relationships, and establishing mutual trust as her guiding principles for the workshop model. Each of these components is needed for my classroom to be successful. Allen (2009) challenged teachers to think about what they are willing to fight for when creating a workshop environment for their students.

Over the past four years, I have spent a lot of time thinking and rethinking about what I am willing to fight for. This forces me to be a reflective practitioner as I negotiate and renegotiate my role within the classroom and the lives of the students I teach. I have visitors come to watch our classroom in action throughout the year (we call them our reader's workshop friends). As we debrief about what they saw and experienced during their visit, the classroom environment is always mentioned. This is one of my guiding principles. It is important that my students know that it is *their* classroom, not mine. It is *their* space for learning. In the room, everything is accessible to the students. The walls and bulletin boards are covered in their work, showcasing their learning or learning in progress. I am often asked about the ability level of my students. As I respond, explaining that like any other class I have a wide range of ability, the teachers often comment that they saw all students participating in meaningful learning and sharing. This is another of my guiding principles. I know that each of my students brings with them a lifetime of experiences different from their neighbour. Their experience, or inexperience, outside of the classroom will affect their life inside the classroom. However, I believe that no matter what each child brings to the classroom, he or she will be met where they are and nudged forward in a meaningful and purposeful way. As visitors look around the classroom they notice that, most often, the students are working with and reading different selections. Choice is important to the success of the workshop model. This is a third guiding principle. My students know that they are trusted to make the decisions they need to make to further their learning. This takes time and practice. We spend time discussing book choice and how to look for texts that meet each student's needs. Choice empowers my students and I am there to guide them. Finally, I am asked, "Do you do this every day?" My answer is yes. This is a fourth guiding principle. Children need time to think and to learn. Our mornings from nine to eleven are spent doing just that. I want my students to know that it is okay to sit and grapple with a question. I want my students to know that it is okay to read a book over again if they did not understand it the first time. I want my students to know that learning is a process that takes time; it is not a race. I want my students to know that I trust them to make the best decisions for themselves. I want them to know the importance of sharing our learning with one another and working with, not against, each other. Above all, I want them to know that I am here to support them along their way, no matter what their way looks like, and I will be here as they develop the tools they need to be successful learners and thinkers. Eisner and Vallance (1974) viewed curriculum as self-actualization, a stance which puts emphasis on personal growth and integrity. As I ask my students to reflect on their learning, I hope they begin to see their personal growth as an integral aspect of their learning.

Looking Forward

It is a beautiful Saturday afternoon in January and I am once again thinking about Henry. As I sip my cup of tea and gaze out my window, I wonder what our classroom would be like without him in it. I see, each and every day, the many ways he learns from his classmates and the ways they learn from him. I have seen his confidence grow as he shares with his classmates who he is as a learner and a person. Each day as he shares more of who he is, I get to see the puzzle come together. As I sit alongside him, I am better equipped to offer him the tools he needs to be successful. It saddens me to think that without participating in the workshop structure he may have spent a lot of his class time outside the class with an educational assistant or a special education teacher. It bothers me that he may have missed out on exactly what he needs—intense literacy instruction in a supportive environment that honours him for what he can do, not punishes him for what he can't.

Learning is more than memorizing facts or events. To be a learner is to know how to solve problems. It is to know how to work with one another and share ideas. To be a learner is to compromise while still being confident in your opinions. To be a learner is to make mistakes but be brave enough to solve them. I believe that the workshop model enables students to experience learning in this way.

The book *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes (1991) reminds me of the important role I have in responding to my students. Throughout the story the students make fun of Chrysanthemum because of her name, yet her teacher gives her very little support. As she is teased, poked, and prodded, "Chrysanthemum wilted." Every time her teacher said nothing, she wilted. This line is very powerful in telling how our actions or inactions as teachers can affect our students. I need to ensure that my students do not "wilt" on my account. I need to ensure that each and every one of my students blossoms in his or her own way and on his or her own time. In her concluding statement, Galda (1998) wrote, "The power of literature is perhaps eclipsed only by the power of teachers. What you do with the books in your classroom today will make a difference in the lives of your students" (p. 10). Reflecting on the power I hold as a teacher can be a scary thought. I hope to use the power I have as a means to empower. By teaching students to be proficient readers and fostering the development of their literary knowledge, while nurturing self-understanding and social responsibility, I can use the power I hold in the most beneficial way. By engaging meaningfully with text, it is my hope that my students will leave my classroom more confident, more knowledgeable, more empathetic, and more creative than when they entered.

There are stories I know as a teacher that I will keep close to my heart. These stories become not only part of who I am as a teacher, but also part of who I am as a daughter, wife, sister, friend, and mother. This story is one of them. Relationships with my family, with my students and their families, and those I have with individuals throughout the school, are truly important to me as I begin and end each day. As I continue on my journey, my story will follow me. As my life unfolds, complexities in the form of new relationships and new experiences will be added to my story. My story will evolve as will the stories of those who are a part of my life. Through teaching I have not only come to realize the importance of my own story, but also the significance of the stories of others. It is through building meaningful relationships with my students that I am able to truly hear these stories and walk alongside them as their teacher.

Note

1. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the paper to protect the anonymity of the individuals mentioned.

References

- Allen, P. A. (2009). *Conferring the keystone of reader's workshop*. Portland, ME.: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Aoki, T.T. (2005). Legitimizing lived curriculum: Toward a curricular landscape of multiplicity. In W. Pinar & R.L. Irwin (Eds.), *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted T. Aoki*. (pp. 199–215). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Dweck, C. S. (2006/2012). *Mindset*. London: Robinson.
- Eisner, E., & Vallance, E. (1974). Introduction: Five conceptions of curriculum: Their roots and implications for curriculum planning. In E. Eisner & E. Vallance (Eds.) *Conflicting Conceptions of Curriculum* (pp. 1–18). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Epstein, S., & Oyler, C. (2008): An inescapable network of mutuality: Building relationships of solidarity in a first grade classroom. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 41*(4), 405–416
- Fox, M., & Brown, K. (1994). *Tough Boris*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Galda, L. (1998). Mirror and windows: Reading as transformation. In T.E. Raphael & K.H. Au (Eds.), *Literary-based instruction: Reshaping the curriculum*. (pp. 1–11). Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- Henkes, K (1991). *Chrysanthemum*. New York: Green Willow Books.
- Hoffman, M., & Binch, C. (1991). *Amazing grace*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Keene, E. (2008) *To understand: New horizons in reading comprehension*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

An Important Reminder: Structuring a Classroom Environment That Honours All Students

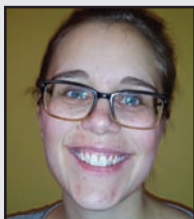
Miller, D. (2008). *Teaching with intention defining beliefs, aligning practice, taking action, K-5*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Miller, D. (2012). *Reading with meaning: Teaching comprehension in the primary grades* (2nd ed.). Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Polacco, P. (1998). *Thank you, Mr. Falker*. New York: Philomel Books.

Rawls, W. (1961). *Where the red fern grows: the story of two dogs and a boy*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

White, E.B. (1952). *Charlotte's web*. New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers.



Brenna Millard recently completed her Master's degree in Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan where she focused her research on the importance of creating a classroom community supportive of all learners. She has taught elementary students for seven years and is currently teaching Grade 4, where she gets to share her passion for reading and learning with her students each day. She lives in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and gave birth to her first child in the middle of June.