




## The Soul Purpose

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### ABSTRACT

The author underscores that in any worthwhile educational enterprise there is not one point to be learned—there are infinite points. Using Nicola Sellitto’s insightful “soul purpose” observation as a springboard, she stresses that having no single “point” to convey does not mean doing no teaching. Instead, it means recognizing what enhances the students’ sense of the world’s possibilities, and of their capacity to take part in them. It means keeping the students connected to the possibilities. Drawing on the work of Rauchwerk, Hawkins, Hughes-McDonnell, Cavicchi, Auger and others, she illustrates how teaching students in genuine open-ended settings—in which soul purposes are cultivated—fosters exploratory behaviour, making them eager and engaged learners.

The egg experiment was my favorite part of the night. When the eggs were first set down at our tables I thought I had it all figured out. We were going to make observations as individuals and then share them in our groups. You were going to stress the importance of hands-on activities and the power of one’s observations. We were then going to move on to the next part of the class. I couldn’t have been more far off from what happened next. I never would’ve thought I could think about eggs for more than one hour in my life. Boy was I wrong! As I was driving home from class and thinking before bed, I still couldn’t figure out the soul purpose of this activity. With a good night’s rest and time to think while I made my morning coffee, I think I have discovered the point. There was no point! There were infinite amount of points! Some of them won’t even come to mind until the very last day of class. (N. Sellitto, personal communication, 2009)

icola Sellitto was a student of Susan Rauchwerk, at Lesley University. It is Rauchwerk's work she is referring to, and this comment from her journal does it great justice. In any worthwhile educational enterprise there is not one point to be learned. There are infinite points. There is a soul purpose, a phrase that Sellitto created as a play on words, and a glorious one, I find.

Rauchwerk did more than simply present the eggs, of course. She has written at length on teaching about chickens and eggs, making clear the depth and subtlety of her own thoughts as she considers her students' thinking, along with everything she knows about chickens and eggs (Rauchwerk, 2005). Having no single "point" to convey does not mean doing no teaching. On the contrary. It means recognizing what enhances the students' sense of the world's possibilities, and of their capacity to take part in them. It means keeping the students connected to these possibilities.

The late science educator David Hawkins said, of a provocative set of objects that gave rise to many hours of fascination and exploration, but whose educational purpose was being questioned, "It's not a matter of what they're good *for*. They're just good!" (Hawkins, personal communication, 1961). It's the same idea. What is *the* point of a Beethoven symphony? What is *the* point of an Alice Munro short story? What is *the* point of coming to know the ocean's life? They give rise to endless exploration and insight into the ways of our human lives, and the ways of the world. Tadpoles, guitar strings, geometry theorems, electric circuits, photographs of the eagle nebula, dance moves, mirrors—there is no one point, to any of these. But each of them offers much, in exchange for our getting to know them.

Fiona Hughes-McDonnell (2009) teaches about science teaching to students in programs leading to certification in elementary schools. The students she teaches, like Rauchwerk's students, typically have minimal preparation in science, and do not envision themselves either doing science or teaching science. She has written about engaging her students in exploring sprouting seeds, among other things.

Finding an authentic way to encourage exploratory behavior and prompt genuine interest in the phenomenon of "sprouting" is always one of the difficult tasks that I face ... Without some action from me, most adults would be content to let their potted seed sit in a window ... And so, whatever my chosen starting point, my aim always is to initiate my students' exploratory behavior with the intent that the seedling and its behaviors will become the primary director and motivator of student explorations. Each decision I make either compromises or opens up the possibilities for my students. (p. 210)

In trying to understand the role of moisture, light, warmth, air and soil (the list the students created of what a seed needs to sprout), students placed their seeds inside plastic sandwich bags, metal storage cupboards, shoeboxes, purses, pairs of plastic cups sealed together; they placed them under beds, fully exposed to the air, taped to windows.

As her seed sprouted, one student was impressed with its root, “completely webbed,” in a cotton pad. She drew her sprouting seed lovingly and wrote, “I wonder how this little seed can have so much potential?”

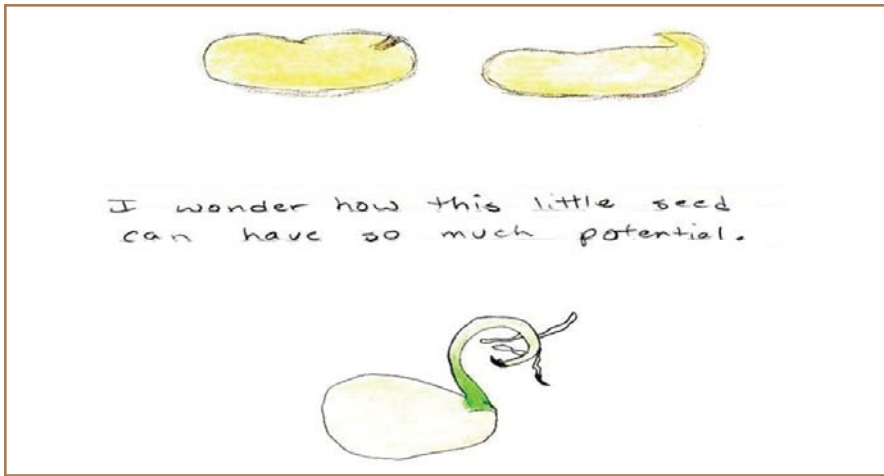


Fig. 1: A page from a student's journal in the second week of the study

Another student, equally attached to her own seed, wrote, “I'm puzzled by my bean tonight ... [I]t seems to be sprouted facing downwards.”

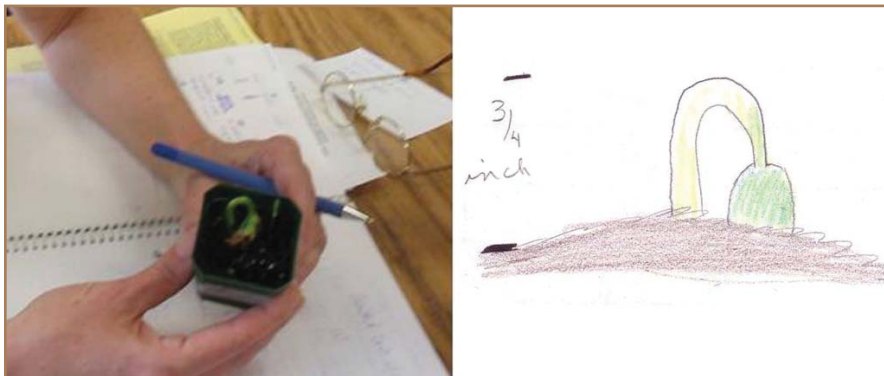


Fig. 2: A student examines a “hook-like” structure

This was a deep and valuable puzzle, leading the whole group to weeks of careful observing and careful thinking about what happened next, and how.

Caring for their seeds, and raising more and more questions about them, they went as deeply into the matter of seed germination as any botany student. Understanding their seeds became a soul purpose.

At the end of the study, one student slipped two photographs under Hughes-McDonnell's office door. One photograph showed a leafy bean plant. The second photograph focused on a single green bean.



Fig. 3: One student's "amazing" green bean

In an email, the student explained, "I am giving you two pictures of my plant ... I wanted you to see them in color because the green bean looks amazing to me!" Like every proud parent; to almost any other adult, the baby is indistinguishable from any other baby.

I give one more example from science, since that is an area where, in current teaching, "the point" is usually so closely prescribed.

Elizabeth Cavicchi (2009) worked with undergraduates (not becoming teachers), with another commonplace object—mirrors. She started with mirrors, not necessarily intending to continue with them. But on the second day, she reports,

Samantha amazed us by telling about the store front window where she works. Standing at the cash register and looking toward the window, she saw an image of the cars approach, until a point where the image met itself and broke off. Then the car was seen directly, but from the rear, driving away. (p. 256)

Samantha's story provoked many questions from the students, and Cavicchi took up Lucienne's, asking, "Can we find out more about where the thing seen in the mirror seems to be?" and she passed out mirrors again.

One pair tried to redo Samantha's shop window, but could not figure out how to coordinate movements of their object, their own selves, the window, and the light source. Peter and Aaron teamed up, intently peering into a calling card sized mirror while trying to measure the height of an object they saw in it. Jenniemae wished she could remember what her physics class said about a mirror's "focal point" (though there is nothing about a focal point involved in activities with flat mirrors); working with Andrew, she placed a quarter and a dime in front of a mirror, moving the dime closer to the mirror until its image matched the real quarter in size.

Cavicchi wrote:

Each experiment uniquely responded to what the students wanted to know. It was their own creation and yet it put them in contact with something they did not understand or control: the reflection of light. When we left off that second day, what stood out for my class was the complexity of factors that affect mirror images ... [M]ore was going on with mirrors than anyone in the class previously supposed possible ... [just like Rauchwerk's eggs] (p. 256)

She went on: "Their knowledge correlated with science laws, like the equal angle reflection of mirrors, and science history, such as operating Ptolemy's curved mirror device [ which they had also investigated]." And: "While shared, ... this knowledge was no uniform 'answer' that anyone could summarize or repeat, and each participant apprehended it by different means." (p. 269)

As a complement to these science examples I would like to describe some work from young children.

In Jessie Auger's grade one class—a two-way bilingual, English-Spanish, class—one of the class practices is "buddy-editing." Whenever someone is ready for

a buddy-editor, he or she seeks out a classmate. In this example, Gabriel has sought out Fernando to help edit his story. For both, English is the second language.

“Fernando and Adrian and me throwing snowballs at the snowman untol we threw the snowman off the cliff. I me and Fernando made a big snowball and threw it at his fase.” “The End”

At one point in their editing, there was this exchange:

Fernando: “We didn’t throw the snowman off the cliff—the snowballs made the snowman fall off the cliff.”

Gabriel: “No, the snowballs threw the snowman off the cliff . . . Didn’t you read the story?”

Fernando: “But . . . snowballs cannot throw the snowman.”

Despite considerable effort, Fernando fails to persuade Gabriel to change the wording.

They go back to the passage. This time Fernando suggests that the word “are” is missing in the first sentence. Gabriel and he discuss this briefly, and then start debating whether the word in that sentence should be “throwing.” Gabriel wants to keep the word *throwing*.

Fernando: “You can put here throw or throwing but *throwing* is not a word.”

Gabriel: “But they threw the snowballs.”

Fernando: “Yes, but they are not *throwing* them when they are doing it—they are *throwing* them.”

“When they are doing it”—Fernando is expressing the need for the present tense. He is six years old! I doubt very much if Auger had set her lesson goal to be to teach the children to recognize the need for the present tense. This is simply how life in her classroom is. The children undertake interesting and worthwhile activities, and help each other do the best they can. There is no “one point” to this editing session—Auger was in fact not in the picture. There were countless points—about telling stories, about working together, about asking for help, about who owns the writing, about spelling and English, about making themselves clear. Auger, setting her classroom up in the most thoughtful of ways, knows how to involve the children in important work. The buddy-editing had for them, I would say, a soul purpose.

My last examples come from a recent book, *Playing for Keeps: Life and Learning on a Public School Playground* (Meier et al., 2010). A school in downtown Boston has a playground with dirt, asphalt, walls, a chain link fence, a walkway, an area of tall unkempt grass—and all the constituent pieces of one enormous tree, which had died, and was cut down, leaving on the ground all the pieces: trunk, small branches and wood chips.

Beth Taylor spent recess in this space with the children, over a period of several years, and made notes. We see and hear the children investigating, building, decorating, digging, imagining, observing, pretending, jumping, climbing, growing things, negotiating, cherishing, hypothesizing, inventing.

Among other things, the children became natural scientists, closely observing, noticing and discussing the characteristics of the creatures on the playground. A butterfly's eggs were spotted on a leaf; a child noted the S shape in the dirt, made by a worm; a group admired a bumblebee's "fur."

Investigating the natural world was intertwined with imaginative play, with constructing, with physical exertion, with caring for each other and for living things.

Children making fairy houses dug up a big earthworm. A new child shrieked. The child holding it said, "You want to touch it?" Very slowly the new girl did. Later, she took it to a hole she was digging, checking again still later "to see if he was safe." (Meier et al., 2010, p. 46)

And the playground also took them back to the classroom, as this child exclaimed when they unearthed a particularly intriguing rock: "We need a world dictionary. We need to find out about all things." (pp. 39–40)

This playground had no pre-determined point. It had a soul purpose. I think that we would be better off to cultivate soul purposes; I think the particular points will become part of the soul purpose, along the way.

## References

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**Eleanor Duckworth**, a former student and translator of Jean Piaget, grounds her work in Piaget and Inhelder's insights into the nature and development of understanding and in their research method, which she has developed as a teaching/research approach, Critical Exploration in the Classroom. She seeks to bring a Freirean approach to any classroom, valuing the learners' experience and insights. Her interest is in the experiences of teaching and learning of people of all ages, both in and out of schools. Duckworth is a former elementary school teacher and has worked in curriculum development, teacher education, and program evaluation in the United States, Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and her native Canada. She is a coordinator for Cambridge United for Justice with Peace, and is a performing modern dancer.

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