

Professional Learning and Student Achievement

Alisha Brignall

273222

Michael Holden

Werklund School of Education

University of Calgary

Many times, I have felt that I am struggling with the hegemonic ideas that perpetuate in our western society. Focusing on my early school experiences I could not understand why we were learning things that I could not see a real-life connection to. Once my neuro-diverse children, started to struggle within the school system which I did not fully support, I started to question the whole idea of traditional schooling. I began “examining how to push back against this exploitation by changing structures and alerting others to its presence” (Brookfield, 2017, p. 26). I began exploring systems that would holistically support my children. I actively engaged in learning more about alternative educational theory and was inspired by the work of Dr. Ken Robinson, Dr. Gordon Neufeld, and other big-picture thinkers.

As the traditional school system continued to fail my exceptional children, I enrolled my children in a Blend-Ed program with dedicated teachers whose goal was to support students holistically, placing mental health above all else. This program required me to homeschool for 50% of the curriculum and as my children aged, I researched educational theories and felt that I needed to formalize my education in the area. As two of my children have learning disabilities, I could see the strains on the system and how easy it was for students to fall through the cracks. However, as with all learning I kept an open mind and allowed all of my assumptions to be challenged.

I knew that I wanted “to leave students more curious, smarter, more knowledgeable, and more skillful than before we taught them” (Brookfield, 2017, pg.20) but I also knew that education could be so much more than that. I believe that “the love of learning is not something that one can teach. It is through mentorship, facilitation, encouragement, and the ability to fail and then learn from these mistakes. These are the qualities that make one a life-long learner, a critical thinker, and one ready to face the 21st-century head-on” (Brignall, 2019). I also feel that

this is true for myself. To engage in professional learning that is authentic and meaningful I must create the above conditions for it to then positively impact student learning.

Engaging in a “sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of [my] teaching assumptions” (Brookfield, 2017, p.21) is one way that I plan on designing better learning experiences for both my students and I. Strategic Thinking is three of my five strengths in the CliftonStrengths Inventory (CliftonStrengths, 2020), and so I am continually assimilating information to better understand ways in which I can improve the learning experiences for my students. By continuing to use a Universal Design Framework (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) to support the health and wellness of both students and teachers, I plan to help bring the current educational system into the future.

As I actively look at bigger systemic issues like curriculum development, and understand that “the performance criteria in a classroom rubric should reflect a positive learning continuum, [if not] they may perpetuate low expectations for certain students rather than promote learning” (Tierney & Simon, 2004, p. 5), I will keep my students mental health needs at the forefront of my teaching. I can “never be sure of the effect [I’m] having on students or the meanings people take from [my] words and actions” (Brookfield, 2017, pg.20), and so I will continue to be authentic and encourage respectful pedagogical relationships with my students. I know that I am working within a system that is "rooted in privilege and functions to legitimize inaction on equity [and allowed] paralysis due to guilt[that] ultimately protects out positions and holds existing oppression in place" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 197) and so I will continue to be an advocate for my students diverse needs by continuing to educate myself on topics that are important to them. I will do this by attending seminars on relevant topics, continuing to converse with colleagues, and bringing these issues to the forefront in PLCs.

By relying on the experiences and conversations with my colleagues, I will continue to learn alongside my students and always have room for improvement. In my practicums I was said to be “open to receiving feedback and receptive to suggestions” (McCoy, 2019). In weekly PLC meetings I “took and applied constructive feedback on lessons and [...] engaged in self-reflection” (Farrish, 2019), and had a “strong desire to be successful and willingness to incorporate feedback” (Hall, 2019). I actively curate my learning, and am the organizer of an annual educational conference, which has allowed me to draw on the experience of a team of impassioned educators that I routinely dialogue with on how my teaching practices can be improved, as well as ways that we can support all students in the system from a government level.

I will continue to actively work to emphasize building relationships and community as the basis of my pedagogy, knowing that “learning is iterative rather than sequential” (Timperley, 2015, p. 800), for both me and my students. I will encourage my students to be “designers and builders who confront and try to resolve big issues or essential questions” (Friesen et.al, 2015) and not focus on using “assessment systems [that focus] around the belief that the most important decisions are made by those program planners and policy makers whose actions affect the broadest range of classrooms and students” (Stiggins, 2002, p.3). Finally, remembering that “improvements in outcomes for students are not a by-product of professional learning but rather its central purpose” (Timperley, 2015, p. 798), as my current students have shown me, our relationships are the most important, and I plan to continue to advocate for these relationships at the classroom, school, and district level.

References

- Brignall, A., (2019, September, 20) Interdisciplinary problem solving and creative 21st century thinkers...[Online Discussion Group] Retrieved from:
<https://d21.ucalgary.ca/d21/le/277367/discussions/threads/839826/View>
- Brookfield, S. (2017) *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. (2nd ed.). Jossey Boss: San Francisco. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/lib/ucalgary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4790372>
- CliftonStrengths. (2020, January 11). *CliftonStrengths for Students*. Retrieved from:
<https://ucalgary.gallup.com/signin/default.aspx?ref=main>
- Farrish, L., (2015). EDUC 540: Field Experience III; Partner Teacher Narrative. [Assessment]
- Friesen, S., Saar, C., Park, A., Marcotte, C., Hampshire, T., Martin, B., Brown, B., & Martin, J. (2015). Focus on Inquiry. [eBook] Retrieved from <http://inquiry.galileo.org/>
- Hattie, J (2013, November 22). *Why are so many of our teachers and schools so successful?*
[Video file] Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzwJXUieD0U&t=28s>
- Hall, J., (2015). EDUC 540: Field Experience III; Field Experience Instructor Narrative.
[Assessment]
- McCoy, M., (2015). EDUC 465: Field Experience II; Partner Teacher Narrative. [Assessment]
- Shepard, L. (2000). The role of assessment in a learning culture. *Educational Researcher*, 29(7), 4–14. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/stable/1176145>

- Sensoy, Ö., & DiAngelo, R. (2017). *Is everyone really equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education* (2nd Ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Southerland, S. A., and Scharmann, L. C. (2013). Acknowledging the religious beliefs students bring into the science classroom: Using the bounded nature of science. *Theory into Practice, 52*, 59-65.
- Stiggins, R. (2002). Assessment crisis: The absence of assessment for learning. *Phi Delta Kappan, 758-765*. Retrieved from <http://www.electronicportfolios.org/afl/Stiggins-AssessmentCrisis.pdf>
- Tierney, R., & Simon, M. (2004). What's still wrong with rubrics: Focusing on the consistency of performance criteria across scale levels. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation, 9*(2). Retrieved from <http://PAREonline.net/getvn.asp?v=9&n=2>
- Timperley, H. (2015). Continuing professional development. In J.D. Wright (Ed.) *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (2nd ed.). pp. 796-802. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/science/article/pii/B9780080970868921342?via%3Di%3Dhub>
- Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design* (Expanded 2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.