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The sun is yellow, the bird is black : fostering a progressive pedagogy in rural Rwanda

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Running Head: THE SUN IS YELLOW, THE BIRD IS BLACK: FOSTERING A
PROGRESSIVE PEDAGOGY IN RURAL RWANDA

**The Sun is Yellow, the Bird is Black:
Fostering a Progressive Pedagogy in Rural Rwanda**

By

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Abstract

This is an experiential narrative of how I applied asset-based progressive pedagogical approaches to develop curricular context and help foster creative teaching strategies at a rural public school in the village of Musha, Rwanda, over the course of three weeks in June 2013. As an outsider approaching a traditional education setting, I found that the most effective way to introduce a progressive approach was by developing an understanding of the context of the environment and culture through careful observation and a willingness to engage and communicate with the people of the community. With this contextual information, an educator can then work with teachers and students to use the tools at their disposal to create a unique, effective learning environment that is both experiential and meaningful.

The following is a description and reflection of the context, work, and resulting outcomes of my time in Rwanda. My careful observation of the work and play habits of the children and adults in the community let to an ability to establish a contextual framework in which to communicate progressive educational ideas in such a way as to help teachers and students create emergent curricular learning opportunities. Through this asset-based evaluation of classroom community, I was able to collaborate effectively with fellow educators in a meaningful way.

All names of persons, organizations, and institutions have been changed. Geographical and topographical names remain unchanged for purpose of clarity and context.

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The Context

In December of 2012 I sent a simple email to my graduate advisor requesting some information on his upcoming panel discussion for Bank Street graduate students on international education. I had known of his personal international work and found it intriguing and something I wanted to consider as an option for myself in the future. I received an equally simple, but life changing, email in return:

Hi Stephanie,

There is a possibility of doing an Independent Study in Rwanda.

The focus is Nursery school in a rural area that I've worked in three times over the past few years. Detail to follow.

By June 20th, 2013 I was on a flight to Rwanda where I would spend three weeks working with Nursery teachers and students.

During my first days in Rwanda my senses were heightened and on alert to capture and remember everything around me. I was totally absorbed in observing both my environment and the people that I was meeting and interacting with. Based on my experiences at Bank Street and my work in classrooms, I knew that documenting my observations would be integral to my work with the Rwandan teachers and students. In fact, my training at Bank Street was what allowed for my clear and certain priorities. Included in Bank Street's – then known as The Cooperative School for Student Teachers, – first catalogue in 1931 was the credo:

We believe that the purpose of education is to help students develop a scientific attitude toward their work and toward life. To us this means an attitude of eager, alert observation; a constant questioning of old procedure in light of

new observations; a use of the world as well as books as source material; an experimental open-mindedness; and an effort to keep as reliable records as the situation permits in order to base the future upon actual knowledge of the experiences of the past. (Haberman, 2000, p. 203)

This role of the teacher as one who looks closely is intrinsic to every aspect of pedagogical training at Bank Street. When I first encountered the children and teachers that I worked with, I asked myself, “Who are these people?” and “What work will we do together?” But, for teaching and learning to occur my questions needed to become more specific and researched thoughtfully. As Eve Haberman states in her essay “Learning to Look Closely at Children” (2000): “Teaching requires an understanding and appreciation of a child as a unique individual, shaped by genetic makeup, age, experiences in the various arenas of family, neighborhood, school, the wider social world, the physical surround...” (p. 204). She adds that a teacher must also have: “a parallel awareness of herself as a unique individual” (Haberman, 2000, p. 204), being shaped by all of her past and present experiences. In order to develop and understand the work I would do with Nursery students and teachers in rural Rwanda, I needed direct experiences with the people, institutions, and landscape in that environment.

My initial observational experience formed the foundation for the work that I would accomplish. Paying close attention to these experiences was of the utmost importance in establishing a contextual basis for my work. Graue and Walsh, in their essay “Children in Context” (1995) ask and answer the simple but all-important question: “What is a context? A context is a culturally and historically situated place

and time, a specific here and now” (p. 141). Observing and reflecting upon the particulars of my “here and now” in Rwanda provided a way to relate to and interact with the features of the environment, the culture and daily lives of the people, and the politics and priorities of the institutions that I encountered. Establishing this proper context allowed me to develop a strategy for doing meaningful and effective work with the community into which I was entering.

A context does not merely contain the child and her actions; contexts are relational. They shape and are shaped by individuals, tools, resources, intentions, and ideas in a particular setting, within a particular time...Contexts are inherently social, reflecting and framing interaction (Wertsch, 1985). The most important facet of any context is the other people who share a particular here and now. (Graue & Walsh, 1995, p. 143)

What follows is a detailed account of my observations and experiences over the course of my first three days in Rwanda, and what I was able to learn from the people, places and cultural norms in order to engage fellow educators on progressive, child-centered educational theories and practices.

Day 1: Arrival in Kigali

I left New York the evening of my last day of the school year, with contradictory feelings of completion and anticipation, exhaustion and exhilaration. The plane took off and I was officially on my way to a continent, let alone country, I had never imagined I'd get to experience firsthand. In fact this was to be my first traveling experience outside of the contiguous United States. I took many deep

breaths and repeated to myself the mantra: “Expect nothing, but prepare for anything”. This phrase has guided me through much of my personal and professional life, especially my current practice as an early childhood educator. For me, this phrase means that any – especially new – endeavor requires informed planning, but also a willingness to let go of plans when necessary and improvise. In my experiences with classrooms of two and three-year-olds in an emergent curriculum based setting, this meaning could never ring more true. And between those experiences and my classes and coursework at Bank Street, nothing could have better prepared me for working in an environment and culture distinctly different from my everyday life.

I landed at the Kigali International Airport near midnight and as I stepped off the plane I could not only feel that I was on the African continent, but I could smell it in the air. Throughout my initial research on traveling in East Africa, I encountered numerous accounts that mentioned the smell of the air. It is a sweet, smoky smell, not unlike incense, but much less dense. It is distinct and permeates everything; my clothes retained the scent even weeks after returning to the states. There was something about the scent that was refreshing, clear, and expansive, which living and working in a major U.S. city I rarely get to experience. It might seem trite and romanticized, but in the moments that I stepped off the plane and into that air with the vast dome of pitch-black sky and intensely bright stars above me, I felt grounded, invigorated, and open to any and all experiences that were to come.

Entering the airport was a slightly more sobering experience. The space was small, but modern, and in the bright fluorescent lighting one of the first things I

remember seeing was the Bourbon Café, which I would later find out to be ubiquitous in Kigali, not unlike Starbucks here in New York City. Security was nowhere near as invasive as in the U.S. (or perhaps because I was coming from the U.S.), but I did have my photograph taken and my fingerprints scanned. I was asked to fill out a form that included the purpose for my trip. In order to avoid the bureaucratic red tape that I was told permeates Rwanda's sociopolitical affairs, I was advised to label my purpose as "visiting" and was given the name of a Rwandan contact. Although not unexpected, I was slightly taken aback by the armed military presence, which I later found to be just as ubiquitous a presence as the Bourbon Cafés. These were all reminders that I was entering a city and a country that was advancing quickly, yet not so far removed from its difficult past, most prominently the influence of European colonialism and the repercussions of the genocide.

I was traveling with the head of the non-profit group with which I would be volunteering during my time in Rwanda. A social worker by profession, Ted's work in Rwanda began when his teenage daughter asked to visit Rwanda with her high school friend, who was an exchange student from a private school in Kigali. On their visit, they stayed at an orphanage in a rural area approximately an hour outside of the capital. Living in this orphanage were children orphaned by the genocide, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, or because of their disabilities or their family's extreme poverty. While spending time with these children, he also visited their school – a public primary-through-secondary school situated a two-mile uphill hike from the orphanage. Spending significant time with children and adults at both the orphanage and the school inspired him to create a non-profit group dedicated to

promoting sustainable empowerment and change through education. Over the years he has forged collaborative relationships with a private Kigali school, the orphanage, and the rural public school, as well as community members and local government officials. This network of collaborators created a supportive environment for a newcomer like myself to enter into with comfort and ease.

Gérard, elementary principal of the Kigali private school, met us at the airport. Even though it was past midnight, he greeted us with energy, enthusiasm, and the warmest of smiles. He led us out to a van; we loaded up our luggage, and headed out into the velvet black night and onto the winding hilly roads. I had read about Rwanda's epithet, "land of a thousand hills," and this certainly proved to be true. As we drove toward the hotel where we were to stay before traveling to the orphanage in the morning, I half listened to the pleasantries and anecdotes bouncing back and forth between my traveling companions. I was mainly staring in awe out of the van windows, watching the scenery change from a neat and functional urban landscape into the suburban hills with large walled and gated estates surrounded by lush vegetation. I had so prepared myself for spending significant time in an impoverished rural environment that it was actually more of a shock to see our overnight accommodations. We stayed in what were referred to as apartments, but appeared to be a converted estate. I retrieved my bags from the van and was escorted to my apartment, which I was sharing with another colleague who had arrived earlier in the evening. She was already asleep and I would not meet her until the next morning.

I walked quietly around the apartment, surveying the layout and locating what would be my room for the evening. I remember making a particular mental note to wake up early enough in the morning to spend some time making coffee, which I had brought with me as a reminder of home, and sitting out on the balcony directly off the living room. Even at night, I could tell that there would be a breathtaking view of the landscape waiting for me in the daylight. Before I went to sleep I unpacked my things in my room and went to the kitchen to sterilize a glass of tap water using a Steri-pen; I had been warned not to drink water directly from the tap without boiling or sterilizing it first. Bringing my water back to my room, I swallowed an anti-malaria pill – the very first out of my month-long supply. As I did so I noticed a few mosquitoes buzzing near the window I had opened to enjoy the cool night air. It was the first time I viewed a mosquito as not just a pest, but also as a potential threat of illness. I was relieved to find a mosquito net tied up above my bed. Standing on the bed, I released the net from its knot and draped it around the mattress and me. Then, finally readying myself for sleep, I looked up at the canopy of protective netting, took a deep breath of the fresh night air coming in through my window, and fell almost immediately into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Day 2: Meeting the Team

I had set my alarm to wake me up at 8 the next morning, but I remember waking up at around 6:30am or maybe a bit earlier. Throughout my time in Rwanda I consistently woke up on cue with the sunrise, which is highly unusual in my everyday life. One reason could be the pure adrenaline rush of starting a new day in

a new country. Arriving at the orphanage, it was a mixture of adrenaline, roosters crowing, and the sounds of the day beginning for the orphanage inhabitants that woke me up on cue. I don't remember waking up to the sound of my alarm once during my entire trip.

On this morning – my first experience with Rwanda in the daylight – the first thing I did was walk into the living room to see the view I had so anticipated the night before. I opened the curtains and, although I was still in my pajamas, I couldn't help but walk out onto the balcony to admire the landscape. From my vantage point, I could see the hills set just outside of Kigali and a seemingly endless clear blue sky. I had my first glimpse of the unforgettable orange-brown earth that would eventually coat my shoes and most everything else on my person. I was touched by the beauty of the landscape and took a few photographs with my phone – the only technological device I brought with me. I remember becoming suddenly aware of another presence and looked down from my balcony to see a young Rwandan man watching me. He politely waved to me; I waved back then quickly retreated back into the apartment, slightly embarrassed by both my informal dress and my obvious tourist behavior. I would very soon meet and befriend this young man, Pascal, as he was the on-site project coordinator for the non-profit I was working with.

Torn away from my reverie, I began dealing with the day's practical matters, which included taking my first cold shower. I had anticipated this lack of warm water for showering, but I still needed some mental preparation to begin my day in this way. I arranged my towels, toiletries, and anything else I needed so that I could get in and out of the cold water as quickly as possible. Needless to say, I survived,

and it was not half as difficult an experience as I anticipated. I emerged from the experience feeling a little bit tougher and ready for the next three weeks of cold showers.

Freshly showered, I dressed in what was to become my uniform: hiking pants and t-shirt. I made sure to cover myself in a layer of sunscreen and insect repellent, protecting my foreigner's skin from equatorial sun and mosquitoes. I then made my way into the kitchen to make my ritual morning coffee. On recommendation of my Bank Street advisor, I brought along a few reminders of home, including freshly ground coffee and a reusable coffee filter. The other creature comfort items I made a deliberate decision to bring were music via my iPod and books for leisurely reading. During my stay, I made my way through *By the River Piedra I sat Down and Wept* by Paulo Coelho. In retrospect, I realize this was an apt choice of reading material. Most, if not all, of Coelho's work is based on the idea of traveling outward in order to travel inward and find what was always there.

I found an electric kettle in the kitchen and began boiling water for coffee. While I was waiting and looking idly out the kitchen window, I heard the door of the other bedroom in the apartment open, footsteps cross the floor, and the water begin running in the bathroom shower. I knew this must be my roommate and fellow team member, Hannah. Prior to arriving in Kigali, I had learned from Ted that Hannah was a literacy specialist, particularly focused on working on English as a second language with impoverished and underserved communities throughout the U.S. and internationally. The woman who eventually emerged and greeted me with a smile and sing-song "Good morning" was not exactly who I expected. Hannah is a petite

woman with a sweet yet pert German accent, whom I never would have guessed was in her late sixties. She introduced herself and I offered her a cup of coffee. She graciously and gratefully accepted, commending me on my forethought and prioritizing. We sat down together and spoke casually of our flights and what the day ahead would bring. Ted had told us both that there would be an early morning meeting with a representative from an organization geared toward empowering school age girls, with whom Ted was interested in collaborating. However, I had already been briefed, and Hannah verified, that meetings in Rwanda rarely, if ever, happen on schedule. There was an ongoing joke about “Rwanda time” throughout our trip, which meant that any appointment could acceptably take place up to three hours after it was scheduled. This meeting, my first official meeting as a team member, was no exception.

Near 10am, Ted knocked on our door and came in with Pascal (ever on his cell phone organizing something for Ted) in toe. I instinctively offered to make them both a cup of coffee. Ted accepted in the same vein as Hannah, but Pascal declined. Later into my stay I would regularly pass fields of coffee plants on my daily walks to and from the school. Even though coffee beans are one of Rwanda’s major exports, Rwandans themselves rarely drink coffee. Tea is the hot beverage of choice for a variety of cultural and socio-economic reasons, and when consumed usually consists of $\frac{3}{4}$ milk and sugar, and only the remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ actual tea. As we foreigners drank our coffee, I distinctly remember Pascal asking me what kind of work I did in the U.S. I explained that I worked as a preschool teacher with two and three-year-olds at a small private school in Brooklyn, New York. He was shocked that I worked

with such young children and asked me if they could even talk yet. He was also taken aback when I told him I taught up to twelve students at a time. He bluntly, incredulously, and honestly asked, “What do you think you can do at (name of public school)?” This time it was my turn to be slightly taken aback.

No one had asked me so directly what I, an American, middle-class, urbanite, privileged, white teacher, could possibly hope to accomplish with a group of over one hundred impoverished, rural, African Nursery students. I needed a moment, but took his question seriously and responded that my biggest hope was to share ideas with fellow educators and, as the team’s early childhood expert, offer my observations, insights, and recommendations for working with young children. I admitted that ultimately, I didn’t know what the result would be, but that my goal was to come away from the experience leaving the Nursery teachers with ways to use their strengths, resources, and understandings to provide developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant learning experiences for their students. What I didn’t say (because at the time it felt too selfish) was that, at the very least, I knew I would learn something about myself as both a teacher and a human being.

Not long after Ted and Pascal arrived, and my usefulness as a team member was called into question, a quiet and mysterious young Rwandan woman brought us a breakfast of omelettes, bread, bananas, and of course, tea. She then disappeared as quickly and quietly as she entered the room. The four of us ate, chatted, and ran through our schedule for the day. After our meeting we planned to leave Kigali and head to the orphanage.

Around noon there was another knock on the door, indicating the arrival of our anticipated guest. She was a Rwandan woman approximately forty years of age, dressed in a simple, smart navy blue skirt and blazer. Her hair was closely cropped and her skin had the soft glow and slight dryness of being freshly scrubbed with soap. While she was not religiously affiliated, she had the sparse yet kindly appearance and presence of a nun. Perhaps due to my many years in Catholic school, I felt comfortable and familiar in her presence as she explained that she was the representative of a Rwandan women's organization. The main initiative of her organization was to promote a program called *Tuseme*, a Kinyarwanda word meaning, "Let us speak out". "*Tuseme* trains girls to identify and understand the problems that affect them, articulate these problems and take action to solve them. Through drama, song, and creative arts, girls learn negotiation skills, how to speak out, self-confidence, decision-making and leadership skills" (FAWE, 2009).

Post-Genocide Rwanda has become quite progressive in their gender politics, with a particular focus on what is referred to as "gender balance". This concept of "gender balance" is an attempt to ensure equal numbers of – and therefore opportunities for – both men and women in schools, community leadership, and government positions. In fact "Today, women make up 64 percent of the country's lower house of Parliament — a far higher percentage than in any other nation" (Kelemen, 2014, p.1).

However, as the *Tuseme* representative emphasized, women in impoverished rural areas continue to struggle with internalized patriarchic notions of womanhood and are socialized to be submissive and unquestioning in the home, school, and other

community environments. As a self-identified feminist, I was particularly interested in the description of the *Tuseme* groups and their role in empowering and giving voice to young Rwandan women. While this was only an initial meeting with the representative, my later experiences with young girls in the classroom demonstrated a distinct need for the proposed type of intervention and leadership training.

Our meeting ended and we soon found out that we would not yet be leaving Kigali and heading for the orphanage. I was to find throughout my trip that there would be quite a few detours and asides from the planned itinerary. While this could be tiresome at times, I found it necessary to be flexible and approach the unexpected with equanimity. In this instance, patience was especially a virtue because we would be meeting the Headmaster of the private school – an integral supporter of Ted’s work with and funding for the non-profit. It would also be an experience with wealth and luxury in an area of the world not usually associated with such adjectives.

Driving from our overnight accommodations to the Headmaster’s home, we again passed large walled estates, some with the remnants of barbed wire. It was an eerie experience to recognize and reflect on the original purpose of these architectural elements, which was to protect the wealthy – mainly white – citizens of Kigali during the Genocide. And as we drove further from the center of Kigali, the stark contrast between the unpaved burnt orange dirt roads and the looming fortresses was unsettling to say the least. Very soon we pulled up to the cast-iron gate of one of these estates, which was surrounded by a high brick wall. Our driver

exited the van, and since Don – the Headmaster – and his family were expecting us, we were immediately buzzed in and the gate opened.

Don, his wife, and a little boy of about four-years-old, promptly came out of the house greeted us at the top of the stairway. Don warmly greeted Ted with the familiarity of long-time friends and we were all welcomed, introduced, and invited into his home. On our way inside, Don pointed out the newest family pets, Tom and Jerry, which were two grey crowned cranes: beautiful and massive crested cranes indigenous to East Africa. I marveled for a moment at these fascinating creatures casually strolling around the lush green and flowered grounds of the estate. We were then led into a living room area with stunning dark wood furniture and plush couches and chairs. I sat down beside Hannah, Ted sat beside us in his own chair, and Don sat across from us with his wife, the young child having disappeared to go play, possibly with Tom and Jerry. The striking difference between Don, a Canadian man in his mid-to-late sixties, and his much younger Rwandan wife was at first a bit startling and even uncomfortable, but once we all began to speak over a sophisticated spread of wine, cheeses, and meats I began to feel more at ease.

While Ted and Don began exchanged stories and reminisced, Hannah and I spoke with Don's wife, Sabine. We learned that she and Don had just had their first child together, a baby girl. Sabine called for the children's nanny, and asked for the baby to be brought out to meet everyone. In tow of the nanny and infant came the little boy from earlier and a teenage girl, children from a previous marriage. All three children were stunningly beautiful and the pictures of perfect health and pampering, not unlike the children I work with on a daily basis. Sabine was clearly

quite proud of her family and as Hannah is also a mother and I had just recently become an aunt, us three women all spoke at length about babies and children. We also found out that Sabine had been a preschool teacher at Don's school when they met and had recently become the head of the preschool program. She and I then exchanged stories about working with two and three-year-olds and their families, and I found our schools had much in common in terms of curricular approach, class size, and socio-economic population. As the one member of our group thus far with any connection to early childhood education, I was excited and comforted by discussing our shared experiences.

After we guests were poured some more wine and offered some more food, it was time for the children to eat their afternoon meal. As Sabine and the nanny shuttled the children away and they all disappeared into the vastness of the home, Don finally turned his attention to Hannah and I to make sure we were enjoying our time and satisfied with our meal. As if anticipating my curiosity of how his family came to be together, Don offered a brief account of how he met Sabine. In a hushed tone he then explained that she had experienced a very difficult life before coming to work at his school. As a school aged child in April of 1994 she witnessed her father's murder. Her family then fled to Uganda, where they then lived in extreme poverty. She married quite young to another Rwanda refugee and had her first child – the teenaged girl we had met earlier in our visit. As Rwanda began to stabilize, she returned to Kigali with her daughter, and unborn son. This was as much as Don shared, but it was the most I would actually hear of anyone's experience with the horrors of the genocide. Though everyone I met during my time in Rwanda more

than likely had a similar story, it is very rare to hear anyone directly reference his or her experience during that time. Even though the effects are present everywhere, the events of the Spring of 1994 – or any person’s affiliation with either the Hutu or Tutsi population – are not topics of discussion, especially with outsiders.

There was finally some discussion about the work we would be doing in the village and Don assured us that he was always within reach should we need any support or supplies during our stay. As the sun began to set Ted politely declined any further food or drink so that we could be on our way to the orphanage. We said our goodbyes, and, as we drove off, I heard the strange, soft evening calls of Tom and Jerry.

I do not recall much of the ride out of Kigali until we came close to the village of Musha and the orphanage. I am prone to falling asleep quickly and deeply as a passenger while traveling, but I do remember being awakened by a series of sudden jolts. We were finally in the rural hills Rwanda, where roads are cleared just enough for cars to maneuver, but not enough to prevent even a seat-belted person’s head from nearly hitting the roof every few yards. I would later see people biking up and down these dirt roads or riding on the sides and tops of pick up trucks with no apparent concern. We finally approached a fork in the road with a sign pointing left that read “Maison des Juenes.” This was the orphanage that was to be our home base for the next three weeks. Our van pulled up to a massive, rusted, wrought iron gate and the driver called out to two children that were walking along the road nearby. The children opened the gate for us and we entered slowly into their home.

The orphanage is situated on a hill sloping down toward Lake Muhazi and as our van rumbled down the dirt path, small children wearing brightly colored flip-flops emerged from the cottage-like buildings lining the pathway. They watched with silent curiosity, some children following slowly behind the van as it approached the garage-like building where the orphanage vans parked. We emerged from the van, stretching and readjusting our bodies after the physically taxing ride. More children appeared and surrounded us, keeping a cautious distance. I waved my hand somewhat awkwardly in the direction of a small cluster of girls – a gesture immediately met with whispers and giggles. We began to walk down the hill on a stone walkway and I could hear the smacking of flip-flops on stone as children called to each other that “Teddie” had arrived.

We walked to a path surrounded by beautiful flower bushes and luscious greenery on our way to the small, compound-like area that made up the orphanage’s guest buildings, meant for travelers, aid-workers, and orphanage volunteers. We passed a large Christian chapel with floor-to-ceiling windows, and an exceptionally inviting-looking gazebo crafted from trunks and branches of the delicately curved and gnarled trees that grew throughout the grounds. While the grounds of the orphanage were not massive, there was a sense that a visitor could get lost easily in the greenery and winding pathways. These two structures became my landmarks en route to the place I would call home for the next three weeks.

As we entered the small complex of three buildings that would be our home base, we passed a group of boys gathered around a large bucket. Some of them were using a hose to rinse it out; others were spreading out newspaper on which to place

the contents of the bucket. A few feet away lay two or three dogs staring intently at and salivating over whatever the boys were handling. Upon closer inspection, the bucket was filled with fresh organ meats, which would soon be turned into someone's meal – ours most likely. Fueling my assumptions about our upcoming meal, the first room we entered was the kitchen, where Ted greeted and hugged tightly an older woman wearing an apron and carrying various cooking supplies. We would come to know her only as "Mama." Mama and her small staff of older adolescents would be keeping us exceptionally well-fed throughout our stay, crafting large meals of soup, salad, rice, bean casserole, vegetable stew, fried potatoes, meats, cheeses, and fruits. The bountiful and delicious foods were not only a credit to Mama and her culinary skill, but also the small yet fully functioning and self-sustaining farm on the grounds of the orphanage.

After meeting and exchanging pleasantries in broken English and a bit of French with Mama, we entered the main dining area where we came upon a middle-aged American gentleman with glasses and a thick head of white hair heartily laughing and playing a card game with a young Rwandan woman. As we approached them, the young woman had just exclaimed "Uno! I win again, Seth!" I heard him say "The fabulous Fabianne wins again" as he feigned humiliation by slumping over the table. Fabianne giggled, coyly hiding her smile with her hands. Seeing our group, she quickly scuttled away, probably back to help Mama with dinner preparations. As soon as Seth noticed our presence, he immediately recovered from his loss and stood up with his arms stretched open, waiting to envelop his friends Ted and Hannah. As soon as he saw me, I was also privy to an enveloping bear hug and "You

must be Stephanie, Annie told me so much about you! I'm sorry you missed her, she was so excited to see everyone." In this moment Seth was referring to another graduate student who I had contacted and spoken with before my travels. A student of Seth's from a college in Florida, Annie was about my age and someone I had been looking forward to working with. But, due to a family issue, she had to cut her time in Rwanda short and return to the states before our arrival. In any case, this was yet another warm and welcoming greeting from a soon-to-be colleague and I immediately felt like I was part of a team.

In addition to relating the story of Annie's return home and her struggles with the Kigali International Airport, Seth also told us about some of the work they were doing together before our arrival. A professor of education and former elementary school teacher, Seth was working with the primary grade teachers at the village school. He and Annie had been asked to assist with English literacy skills: reading, writing, and speaking. He explained that they had the most success in modeling and teaching conversational skits that included important vocabulary, such as:

"Hi, my name is Seth."

"Hi, my name is Annie."

"I like your shoes."

"I like your shirt"

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

I would later glean the success of these skits by the number of children I encounter who wanted to engage me in these types of dialogue, though occasionally a child would get confused and introduce him or herself with “Hi, my name is shoes.”

Seth informed us that the kitchen staff had been waiting for us and would serve dinner in about twenty minutes. Ted asked if anyone wanted to join him on a quick walk to visit with some of the children, many of whom he’d watched grow into adolescence. While a part of me wanted to stay with Seth and Hannah and relax before dinner was served, I knew I should take every opportunity that came my way to meet and interact with new people. Ted reminded me that I would need to carry my flashlight, since there was no electric lighting outside of the living quarters. We both grabbed our flashlights and began to walk on the stone path back up the hill. Now that it was night, there were mostly teenagers and adolescents walking around the grounds. Most of them were talking on or listening to music on their ubiquitous cell phones. While cell phones are exceptionally easy to come by in rural Rwanda, I’m still not certain how the orphanage became saturated with them. I came to appreciate that for these children, their phones served as life-line to pop-culture and the world outside the orphanage, but I also could have done without hearing Rihanna’s “Diamonds” a dozen times a day.

The older children did not gather or approach with the same curiosity, so Ted and I remained fairly inconspicuous as we continued on our path. Ted told me that he particularly wanted to locate a young man named Auguste, whom he had met as a child and was now on the verge of aging out of the orphanage. Ed shared his concern that due to Auguste’s blindness, there would be minimal opportunities for him to thrive

outside of the orphanage gates. Adult life for any child of the orphanage would be difficult, but for those with disabilities or diseases, such as HIV and AIDS, the odds of finding work or necessary care are essentially insurmountable. Even Auguste, a skilled musician and trained masseuse with strong English-speaking skills, had attempted and could not find work because of the societal stigma towards disability and illness – the two often being confused. He was lucky in that the Salesian missionary, known as “Father”, who founded the orphanage, felt a particular affection and sympathy for Auguste, as he was a part of the first group of children in his care post-genocide.

As if Auguste had heard of our intentions to find him, we came upon a group of boys gathered around a tall young man in sunglasses playing music from his cell phone. As soon as we approached, Ted held out his hand to the young man and simply said, “Hello, Auguste.” Without missing a beat, Auguste grasped Ted’s outstretched hand and gently stroked Ted’s forearm. “Hi, Teddie,” he said. The two spoke briefly about their time away from one another and Auguste’s general health and well-being. Ted asked if Auguste still had his radio, a cherished gift from a prior visit of volunteers, and Auguste lamented that it had broken some time ago. I had stayed quite during their interactions in an attempt at politeness while old friends reconnected, but soon into their conversation Auguste turned to me and asked, “Who is with you, Teddie?” Ted introduced me and I too extended my hand to Auguste, receiving the same delicate holding and stroking Ed had received. “Hello, Stay-fah-nee,” he said, with the slightly French-tinged accent that made my name feel much more classic and lovely than when pronounced in the typical American

style. I would grow quite fond of hearing my name spoken this way by the Rwandan children and adults I met throughout my stay. His next questions for me came directly, unabashedly, and in succession: “How old are you? Are you married?” I was asked these two questions quite a bit during my stay, as well as other direct and honest questions I’m not used to fielding so readily or early in meeting a person. There was no sense of rudeness or invasiveness to Auguste’s or other’s questions – just pure curiosity and a desire to know something about me that held meaning and cross-cultural significance.

I answered Auguste honestly and told him I was here to work with Ted and the Nursery school children. He expressed gratitude and happiness that Ted and his group were back, that he would remember me, and to come back and say “Hi” to him and his friends during the coming days. I assured him I would, and for the rest of my time at the orphanage, seeing Auguste and being greeted with his affectionate handshake and immediate recognition after a long day of work, made the orphanage feel like home.

As dinner was likely almost ready, we left the teenagers to their music, gossip, and maybe a little mischief, and headed back to our area of the grounds. Seth and Hannah greeted us warmly and we sat down to the first of many of Mama’s extraordinary and nourishing meals. As we passed dishes and helped serve each other, we discussed our schedule for the next morning. We would leave for the 45-minute walk to the school no later than 7:30am, in order to have a brief meeting with the school’s Headmaster. Afterwards, we would go our separate ways until noon. During this time I would be on my own observing the preschool classrooms. I

remember not only the excitement of what was to come, but also a distinct fear that I would not know what to do or how to interact. This was my first true realization of the immensity of this new experience.

By this time it was well past 10pm and everyone was ready for a good night's sleep. Fabianne had returned from her work with Mama and showed Hannah and I to our room. It was sparse but pleasant, with well-constructed solid wood furniture, crisp sheets, and knit blankets. We both quickly and quietly put away belongings, arranged our mosquito nets, and settled into bed.

Day 3: The School

I awoke to a rooster crowing at about 5:30am, well before the sunrise. Not wanting to wake Hannah, I went through my morning rituals in the dark – including ample sunscreen and bug spray – and packed my backpack. I packed light: a notebook and pen, a handful of Rwandan francs, and a flashlight just in case we returned home after nightfall. In a small pouch I packed hand sanitizer and travel toilet paper for my first foray into using pit toilets. The chill in the air surprised me – mornings before sunrise were in the 50s (Fahrenheit) – so I pulled on and zipped up my hooded sweatshirt and walked the short distance to the main building and kitchen.

I found Mama alone in the kitchen and preparing breakfast, which would not be ready until 6:30am. I had been told beforehand that rising this early meant waiting for coffee, so I had the forethought to bring my coffee and filter. Mama spoke very little English, but I was able to communicate well enough using gestures and simple

words, to locate a tea-kettle for boiling water. She was clearly curious about what I was doing, so I walked her through the steps of using my coffee filter and made some for the both of us. She seemed pleased, but clearly wanting to get on with her morning routine, so I departed her kitchen and sat quietly in the dining room, feeling the gentle breeze from the open windows and watching the sun rise.

Hannah joined me not long after and we made some more coffee. Shortly thereafter our food began arriving plate-by-plate, carried by Fabianne and another teenaged young woman. Bread, cheese, jam, coffee, and tea were laid out before us. Hannah recalled that there was some Nutella in the pantry, so we helped ourselves and set that out as well. While not a seasoned traveler, the whole scene felt very European and was once again more abundant than I had anticipated. While eating, we were joined by Seth, and then finally Ted. Ted was quite anxious to begin our walk and though being a little late to breakfast himself, he made sure that we all prepared our lunches (with breakfast leftovers), supplied ourselves with water bottles, and began our uphill trek to the school before 7am.

Leaving the grounds of the orphanage, we returned to the path we had entered upon our arrival by van. I felt relatively confident that I would be prepared for this daily walk because I had spent the prior two months building up my stamina by walking to and from work each day. I hadn't anticipated that this walk to the school would be entirely uphill, or that the cool breezes I'd felt before sunrise would fade as the morning sun began to beat down on our shoulders. Despite being the eldest member of our group, Hannah kept a steady few feet ahead of me no matter what, though she often slowed down so that we could talk. On that first walk, she taught

me the greetings “Muraho” and “Mwaramutse”, meaning “Hello” and “Good morning” respectively. Greeting the locals in their language as we walked by inevitably brought a look of pleasant surprise to their faces and became an important courtesy. Even these small courtesies were especially important due to our incredible conspicuousness. Being in the only white people walking the path through the village, we were clearly visitors. There was no way to pass unseen or unnoticed and as walked I heard my first cries of “Muzungu!” – meaning “light skinned foreigner” – from the village children.

As we continued onward, we slowly accumulated a small parade of school children and village children – some of whom were not even going to school. The younger children were the boldest and would either request “bon-bon” or simply want to hold our hands as we walked. I was the only member of my group that consistently accepted a hand, or two, or more. I knew I was a novelty, but as I spend every day with young children, I understand the meaningfulness to a child of that simple gesture. I can’t deny that seeing the dirt marks left behind on my hands and forearms didn’t leave me with a slight tinge of worry, particularly when I could smell the distinct smell of feces or urine. However, my daily work with young children has essentially desensitized me to bodily fluids and functions, so I was less put off than my cohorts. Despite some initial reservations, I could not deny these children seeking attention and acceptance. Holding their hands was an ultimate symbol of trust and camaraderie.

Walking along on what became our parade through the village I was struck by both the natural and manmade environment. There was an extraordinary tidiness

and meticulousness to the mud-brick homes and their small courtyards. Early in the morning, the adults were already outside fastidiously sweeping and smoothing down the orange, dusty earth, feeding cows, and putting out laundry to dry. All chores were done with such organization and attention to detail, and it was clear that people took exceptional pride in their homes and daily work. Every home had a small plot of land with either Banana trees or Sorghum plants, and they lined the route to the school with their painstaking domestic beauty. At certain points the landscape took over and I could look out into the hills and fields of grasses and wild flowers. I had heard rumors, but could not have anticipated how stunning the scenery could be. The wonder I felt looking at and experiencing this environment made the long walk seem much less tiring.

Before I realized it, our small parade grew much larger as we entered the grounds of the school. Straight ahead was a brick building with tin roof that read “Welcome to (name of school).” Other brick buildings outlined a large open field, where children ambled, sat chatting with each other, or kicked a soccer ball around. The Nursery was a separate building to the right of the entryway. It was similar to the other buildings in structure, but the fresh brick, glass windows, and the bright blue paint of the doors made it apparent that it was the newest addition to the school. I later found that the Nursery program had only existed for about two years per the recent movement in Rwanda toward compulsory early childhood education. As I approached this building, children were trickling into the two adjacent rooms that composed the Nursery.

I entered the first door I approached, and was met with at least fifty small faces sitting around handmade tables with at least two children seated to a chair. The cement floor was coated with a thin layer of the ever-present orange dirt. Chalkboards surrounded the rectangular room, each rectangle covered with writing or drawings meant for academic instruction. A woman stood at the head of the classroom, looking the picture of a teacher in an ankle length skirt, collared blouse and sweater, and hair straightened with the ends curled into ringlets. She appeared to be no more than twenty years old. In her hand she held a stick – which more than likely had recently fallen from one of the tree branches outside – which she used to point to the blackboard as the children recited their ABCs and 123s. It was difficult to get a sense of the classroom ratio of boys to girls. Seated at their tables, all the children looked quite similar with closely shaved hair and freshly scrubbed cheeks (even if their hands still bore a weeks worth of work and play). It was not until they stood up to continue their recitations, this time in Kinyarwanda, that I could differentiate the sexes based on their attire, as girls and women wear skirts almost exclusively. These young girls and boys, between the ages of 3 and 5, with their chorus of individually tiny voices, created an almost deafening roar in the small space.

The Work

Before even reaching Rwanda, the ideas and goals I had for my work in the Nursery went through at least a dozen iterations. In the months before traveling I had numerous discussions with my advisor and with Ted about possible educational approaches, materials, and activities to introduce to the Nursery teachers and students. I was admittedly overwhelmed by all of the options and expectations presented to me in these planning discussions. While I had a vague idea of what to expect from the school, the teachers, and the students, I knew that only my direct experiences and interactions with these new people and institutions would guide my actual work.

As I was entering the epitome of traditional educational approach, I knew that introducing progressive educational practices would serve as a fundamental challenge in my work in Rwanda. In his seminal text, *Experience and Education*, John Dewey (1938) reminds us: “Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of *Either-Ors*” (p. 17). Based on history, culture, government, and personal experiences with education, the belief in and practice of either traditional education or progressive education becomes deeply imbedded in both communities and individuals. And the rural public education system in Rwanda is decisively traditional. Dewey (1938) defines the traditional approach to education as having three underlying beliefs:

1. *The main purpose or objective is to prepare the young for future responsibilities and for success in life, by means of acquisition of the*

organized bodies of information and prepared forms of skill which comprehend the material of instruction.

2. *The attitude of pupils must, upon the whole, be one of docility, receptivity, and obedience.*
3. *Teachers are the agents through which knowledge and skills are communicated and rules of conduct enforced. (p. 18)*

It makes sense that a society that has faced so much conflict and turmoil in its recent history would cling to stability and tradition with regard to its approach to pedagogy. Unfortunately this stance does not bode well for the teaching and learning of children a rapidly changing world, particularly in areas, like the rural school I worked in, where “preparation for future responsibilities and success in life” (Dewey, 1938, p. 18) is the most crucial.

When viewed through an *Either-Or* lens, the ideals of progressive education are in direct opposition to those of traditional education.

To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill, is opposed acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world. (Dewey, 1938, p. 19-20)

If I were to use this oppositional definition of progressive education as the frame for approaching my work in Rwanda, I would have found my task extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible. When I was finally confronted with the reality of the contrast between the Rwandan school and my own teaching practices, I found it absolutely necessary to use a broader and more inclusive definition of progressive education. I made the decision to use Dewey's (1938) thesis regarding the theory of progressive education as my own: "I take it that the fundamental unity of the newer philosophy is found in the idea that there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education" (p. 20). With this statement as my guide, my role and work would not be to replace one educational approach with the other, but to infuse and inspire relevant educative experiences into the existing structure.

Establishing the point of reference for my work led to a second challenge: What kind of experiences would be educative and valuable for these students? I again turned to Dewey for inspiration.

It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience, nor even of activity in experience. Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had. The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences...The central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that will live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences. (Dewey, 1938, p. 27-28)

In order to resolve this central problem of selecting experiences, I relied heavily on my personal experiences as an educator working within an Emergent Curricular approach. In her book, *The Unscripted Classroom: Emergent Curriculum in Action*, Susan Stacey (2011) defines emergent curriculum “as a cycle that involves: watching and listening to children with care; reflecting on and engaging in dialogue with others about what is happening; and responding thoughtfully in ways that support children’s ideas, questions, and thinking” (p. 1). A fundamentally asset-based approach, the cycle of an emergent curriculum develops from the image of the child as a complex, competent, and capable human being who is an active co-constructer of his or her learning. Therefore, a primary consideration when selecting experiences for the Rwandan children was to engage them in activities and ideas that were interesting and relevant to their daily lives and experiences.

Selecting interesting and relevant activities that I could insert into the traditional curriculum of the rural public school took a great deal of observation, improvisation, and creative experimentation. In order to do any of this work with the children, I needed to establish a positive collaborative partnership with their teacher.

Teachers who respond creatively to children often say they rarely come up with wonderful ideas when they are thinking alone. When teachers talk, referring to reflective dialogue rather than planning, they bounce ideas off of each other, brainstorming their way toward thinking outside the box. (Stacey, 2011, p. 18)

Engaging in collaboration with the teacher, understanding and valuing her priorities for her students, is what ultimately led to the exceptional learning experiences that

took place. Approaching both her and her students as co-equals and co-constructors in the introduction of progressive practices was the ultimate answer to the question of what type of work could be accomplished during my three weeks in Rwanda. The following is a description of the most significant aspects of this work.

Watching and Listening

Like any brand new experience, my first day in the Nursery classrooms was very disorienting. I had planned well in advance with my graduate advisor to use the first two days to quietly and inconspicuously observe. However, as I was a new person in their space and more than clearly a “Muzungu,” it was nearly impossible to be a “fly on the wall” with at least sixty pairs of children’s eyes watching my every move. Fortunately the teacher I worked most closely with, Michèle, understood my desire to observe and kept the attention of her students and the pace of the daily schedule. With this foundation of understanding and collaboration I was able to orient myself by watching and documenting the daily routines and schedule of the classroom. Using this starting point, I began to understand and related to the new environment, people, and educational practices.

From what I could initially discern, the day began at approximately 8:30am with a series of routines and recitations in both Kinyarwanda and English. First everyone stood and performed a Kinyarwanda song or chant along with a series of gestures. Next there was a recitation of vocabulary, letters of the alphabet, numbers, and colors. After recitations, Michèle modeled a new lesson, in this instance a writing lesson focusing on the letters “O”, “N”, and “M”. Then the children were

dismissed for a recess lasting approximately thirty to forty minutes. When the children returned they reviewed the previous writing lesson. Finally each child received a pink plastic mug full of milk before dismissal at about 11am.

Throughout my time observing the daily schedule from as neutral a perspective as possible, I couldn't help but notice the glaring and sometimes startling differences between my everyday classroom experiences and the everyday experiences of these children and teachers. As I traveled the same morning route as the school children, I knew that all children, including the three-year-olds sitting before me, walked to school by themselves every morning without adult accompaniment or supervision. Consequently, children arrived and made their way into the classroom throughout the morning depending on how far they had travelled from home or how much assistance they received from older children on their journey to school. I also watched quite a few children fall asleep, heads bobbing as they attempted to stay awake long enough to participate in recitations before finally resting heavily on the tables.

During the writing lesson, I also noticed the extreme lack of supplies for writing. While some children had well-worn, hand-me-down notebooks, most children had single sheets of paper borrowed from classmates or siblings. I watched closely as children carefully unfolded these precious sheets of paper from their school bags or pockets. Some children had their own writing utensil, usually a pen with only the very last drops of ink left inside, and some would wait patiently for a writing utensil being passed around the table. Others, having just one or no supplies at all, would sit quietly or rest their heads on the table until the lesson concluded.

Even with supplies, there was a distinct unfamiliarity with how to hold or orient writing materials.

Recess brought yet another surprising observation. Children were simply released from the classroom and immediately ran off to unknown reaches of the large school complex. I was surprised and impressed that eventually all returned with the ringing of a bell by the teacher. And not only did they return from their completely unsupervised time away, they immediately gathered into neat rows of boys and girls before performing a special chant and movement routine before returning to their classroom.

While I believed I had accurately identified the schedule and foundation of daily life in the Nursery, it was of primary importance to share my observations with Michèle and find out if my perceptions were valid or required adjustment.

Even though Michèle could speak and understand some practical English, many of our conversations were translated and mediated by the Nursery program's nurse, Simone. With Simone's help, Michèle and I were able to decide on a time to meet the next day after a second morning of observing and documenting on my part. Entering this second day having at least an outline of the daily schedule allowed for my second phase of orienting and anchoring myself in this new experience: identifying good teaching and learning practices.

When I speak of good teaching and learning practices, I know that I am approaching the idea of "goodness" within the context of my experiences as a western, progressive, graduate student and early childhood educator. However, the concept of "good practices" is not entirely subjective when it comes to practices that

truly benefit young children in a classroom setting. An attentive teacher, who cares about both the educational and personal needs of the students in her class is hardly arguable. Additionally, there are studied benefits to experiential and contextualized learning. With these basic ideas in mind I was able to identify the “good practices” happening in Michèle’s classroom and share these observations with her.

In addition to establishing a daily schedule of predictable routines important for you children in a school environment, Michèle also joined the students in their morning recitation of songs and exercises. While reciting the alphabet, numbers, and colors, she pointed to the areas of the room where children could locate and reference the information. When she noticed an area of struggle in recitations she utilized individual or small groups of children to assist and lead their peers. After demonstrating the writing lesson, Michèle walked around the room, checking in with individual children and offering support. When she noticed a child falling asleep or resting his or her head on the table, she would speak to them gently and attempt to re-engage them.

Michèle also enthusiastically embraced my presence as a fellow educator and resource in her classroom. Primarily, she expressed awareness of and sincere concern for the children’s lack of materials and therefore limited ability to participate in the lessons she was teaching. It was very important to me to establish my relationship with Michèle by communicating the positives of her classroom. I was highly aware of my position as privileged outsider and wanted to both acknowledge that position as well as approach her as a fellow educator. While my training and education were fundamental to this decision, I also knew that this was

the type of interaction to which I would be most appreciative and be most receptive to if our roles were reversed. Thus, with Simone's help, my first meeting with Michèle was both positive and productive. Beginning our relationship through an asset-based approach allowed for open communication and collaboration throughout my time in her classroom. We were able to discuss the priorities Michèle had for her classroom and her students and how I could serve as a resource and guide during my short stay.

Engaging in Collaboration

Aligned with my observations during the writing lesson, Michèle's first priority was acquiring and maintaining classroom materials. She explained that there had once been a supply of paper and writing implements in the classroom, but because of their novelty Nursery or older students would often steal these supplies. It then became the responsibility of the children to bring in their own supplies, which was similarly unsustainable and impractical. Michèle also noted and was concerned that requiring children to bring in their own supplies meant that only children able to do so were participating in the lessons, creating overwhelmingly varied development in early reading and writing. We could both see how developmentally inappropriate it was to teach writing lessons to a group of children of whom the majority had never held a writing implement.

Now I was set with my first task: find a method to acquire and introduce classroom materials in a way that was both sustainable and a learning experience. When I brought my concerns to my colleagues, they let me know about a supply of

paper and crayons in the school library that was rationed to the primary school classrooms. The Nursery teachers were unaware that they could utilize these resources too. I was able to reserve a stack of paper and plastic jar of crayons for Michèle and we discussed how best to use and store the materials. I am privileged to have never been at a loss for paper, but I also work in a school environment that prioritizes conserving and sustaining materials. I introduced the ideas of quartering the sheets of paper to create a longer lasting supply and highly encouraging the use of both sides of the paper. We also decided that the crayons would be passed out before a lesson and collected directly after so that each child both receives and returns a writing implement each day. Michèle shared with me that the Nursery teachers did have a locking cabinet in the administrator's office, which we decided would be the designated storage space for writing materials.

Once we surpassed the hurdle of actually having materials to work with, it was then time to discuss and decide how to use them in the most practical, engaging, and developmentally appropriate – therefore sustainable – way. I first asked Michèle what she knew about drawing as a pre-writing skill and method of developmental assessment. She admitted that she was aware of its importance, but felt pressure to teach traditional literacy skills, such as formal writing, in order to prepare her students for primary school. This pressure lifted quickly once we ascertained that due to the newness of the Nursery program and lack of an actual curriculum – she only had a early primary school curriculum as a guide – she actually had more freedom than any of the teachers in the school to limit the scope of the topics covered in favor of depth. This was a defining moment in our work

together, and as we discussed the importance of children holding an implement and experimenting with forming lines and curves as precursors to writing letters, I could tell that our work together would have a significant impact on the teaching and learning in her classroom.

With all of this planning in place it was time to put our ideas into practice. I asked Michèle's permission to formally introduce myself to her students and co-lead a lesson. We decided that we would split our lesson into two parts, the first half during her usual lesson period and the second during the review period. The first lesson would be about ten to fifteen minutes of drawing. Each child would be given a sheet of paper and crayons for sharing would be placed in the center of the table. Unlike most lessons, there would be no need for teacher intervention or correction, which was a new but exciting concept for Michèle. The purpose of this lesson would be two-fold, first to acquaint the children with using and returning classroom materials and second as a way for Michèle and I to assess the varying levels of pre-writing development in the classroom. After recess, the second part of the lesson would be a time for children to share and describe their work with their classmates. Children would be invited to stand at the head of the class and tell the group one thing about their drawing. The purpose of this part of the lesson would be to encourage expressive language skills, equally important to literacy development as reading or writing. While seemingly simple in nature, each of these active and child-centered lessons would be very new to both Michèle and her students.

Arriving at the school the next morning, I immediately went to the library where I had locked the Nursery paper and crayons overnight. Carrying them across the

school grounds to the Nursery, I felt like I was carrying gold. These materials were precious and would be in high demand. I felt a twinge of guilt every time a primary school student glimpsed what was in my hands. But with my focus on providing the youngest children at the school with this unique opportunity, I carried on toward the Nursery classroom. When I entered the classroom, the Nursery students were beginning their morning recitations. I set the materials down in a corner of the room, as there were no other surfaces that weren't occupied by children. After the children completed their routine, Michèle invited me to the front of the room to introduce myself. The translator, Simone was with me and aided my introduction.

As a longtime teacher of young children, I can immediately sense when attention is waning. As I introduced myself, some of the children began to shift uncomfortably in their chairs, clearly anxious for some type of movement. I asked Michèle if she would mind my leading them in a song before we began our planned lesson. She seemed excited by my request and gave the go-ahead. Using an upward motion with my hands to gesture to the children to stand up from their seats while I asked in the sing-song fashion that I use in my own classroom, "Will you please stand up?" This did not require translation for the majority of the children and those who did not understand my request right away followed the lead of their peers and stood up from their seats. I then shared the following song along with gestures that included waving hello, pointing to myself, and pointing to the group:

"Hello, hello, hello and how are you?/I'm fine, I'm fine, I hope that you are too!"

After completing the song I broke down the phrases into smaller segments for the children to repeat. Within about five minutes the whole class was singing this song

together. Throughout my trip, whenever I would come upon a Nursery student on my walk to or from the orphanage and he or she wanted to greet me, I would be treated to a performance of this song.

Before starting our drawing activity, Simone and Michèle helped explain to the children that they would be handed paper, crayons, and asked to draw. The children immediately wanted to know what they should draw as they were not used to such an open-ended activity. Michèle was set on challenging the children and reiterated my instructions that they were to draw anything that they wanted to, that the decision be up to them. Michèle, Simone, and I then passed out paper to each table, ensuring that each child received one piece. Then we passed out the crayons, counting out the amount of children and placing that amount in the center of the table. Without prompting, each child took one crayon and began to draw. While I stood back and observed, Michèle circled around the classroom, asking the children questions about their drawings if they seemed stuck or confused. As children finished, they asked Michèle to check and grade their work, but again Michèle let them know this was self-directed and creative work and it was not to be graded. It was interesting to note that only one table of children decided to share their crayons, trading and switching colors with their peers.

After about ten minutes it seemed like most children were finished with their drawings. Michèle then signaled to them it was time to clean up. I brought around the bucket that contained the crayons and gestured to each child that he or she should put their crayon in the bucket. While a few children need a little more coaxing than others to hand over this treasured drawing implement, Michèle

assured them that they would have other opportunities to use the crayons. Feeling confident that they would have future access to the materials, all the children ended up giving back the crayons. We also requested that the children leave their drawings on the table so that we could use them for the second activity of the day. Again, they were assured that they could take their drawings home at the end of the school day, and again, almost every child complied with our request immediately. Michèle later communicated to me that this type of sharing and returning of materials was a rarity. More often than not, children would hoard or steal materials because they assumed it would be their only opportunity to possess them. She was proud of her students for not only taking care of the materials, but also actively and enthusiastically participating in such a new type of activity.

While we would later use the drawing activity to determine the children's level of reading and writing readiness, the second part of our activity was based in English language learning. English language learning was another of Michèle's priorities for her students. Like many of the teachers, she believed that learning English now would be a major asset to not only the children's academic lives (all national exams are in English), but also their personal and economic futures. Speaking English fluently can almost assure a career in the ever-increasing tourist industry in Rwanda, including national parks, resorts, restaurants, and other related work in Kigali and the surrounding region. And as a native English speaker and teacher of young children, Michèle looked to me as an expert and wanted me to engage her students in English language learning as much as possible.

When the children returned from their outdoor play, they were asked to sit back down at the tables that held their drawings. Michèle explained in Kinyarwanda that the children would be introducing themselves and sharing at least one thing about their drawings with the group. She then modeled in Kinyarwanda and English exactly how the children would introduce their work: “My name is ___,” “This is a ___.” She then called up one table at a time to stand in front of the class and share their drawings. At first the children were shy and hesitant to speak about their work in front of the group, but Michèle stood next to them, coaxing them to speak loudly, clearly, and to their audience of fellow students. As the children shared and listened to each other, they became more comfortable with the process and became bolder and prouder by the minute. I even noticed children beginning to talk about each other’s drawings while waiting in line for their turn. This was the most child to child and non-recitation based talk that I had witnessed in the classroom up to this point, and there was a clear atmosphere of joy and excitement. Below is a transcript of some of the children describing their drawings in English:

(This is a...)

“sun, cup, board.”

“car, a small cup.”

“sun, a umbrella.”

“house, a boy.”

“cup, a sun.”

“bicycle, a cup.”

“car, ball is on the chair, ball is near the chair.”

“sun, flowers.”

“house, a girl, a boy.”

“sun, a fish.”

“car, a book.”

“sun.”

“sun, a cup, bucket.”

“ball, fish, a sun.”

“ball, flowers.”

“chair.”

“a sun, a ball is under the chair, flowers.”

“cup, a sun!”

It was very clear that the children were using both the drawings and labels from the chalkboard and their daily recitations, but this gave them a new and direct experience with labeling and vocabulary, as well as a defined purpose of communicating with others.

These simple activities of drawing and communicating were actually quite profound for Michèle and her students. When Michèle and I reflected on the activities later in the day, she was impressed with how engaged the children were and how much knowledge they were able to express without the traditional recitation or question-and-answer approach. For one of the first times, she was truly able to see their learning, including both strengths and weaknesses, in action and in context. This led us to look more deeply into what Michèle’s goals were for her students, what understandings she wanted them to achieve, and the methods

with which she would assist their learning process. We then had to narrow down her objectives to something that could be achieved within short time frame of my stay. She ultimately decided that we should focus on labeling and understanding colors. She found that while her children could recite in English the colors of pieces of paper of the chalkboard when prompted, if she then asked them to describe the color of a real object they were suddenly at a loss. They could recite the English label, but they had not established a connection between the label and their world. In other words, they did not have a context or real life application for their learning. It was here I discovered the purpose of my work with Michèle and her students, which was to demonstrate and actively engage them in contextualized learning.

Responding with Contextualized Learning

My first consideration while planning a lesson on colors with Michèle was to determine the strengths and resources of the environment: the school and the rural landscape. Making connections between colors and the natural environment seemed the most relevant and useful way to promote and provide a concrete example of contextualized learning. Using the colors that they had been learning through daily recitations – yellow, blue, red, white, and black – I located examples that could be found in the children’s daily environment. I connected yellow to the sun, blue to the sky, red to a flower, white to the clouds, and black to birds. I added the color green for plants because it would be immediately recognizable due to the overwhelming amount of vegetation in the landscape. I planned to incorporate viewing or handling these natural elements into the lesson, but I also wanted to create a tool for Michèle

and her students that could be used inside the classroom for later reference. However, in creating this tool, I did not want to erase the painstaking work on the chalkboards or use the precious resource of paper. Communicating with my colleagues, I found out that the school had a relatively ample supply of rice sacks, since rice was regularly distributed to a group of children in particularly impoverished living situations. Seth mentioned that he had used some these rice sacks to create posters for the primary school teachers, so it seemed like the logical solution to my slight dilemma.

I discussed all of my ideas with Michèle and received the go-ahead. The evening before our lesson, I got to work making a rice sack poster with a landscape drawing, utilizing the aforementioned colors and features of the environment. I also labeled the features with both the color and the item, i.e. “green plant”, “red flower”, “yellow sun”, to provide context and add on to the children’s English vocabulary. I arrived in the classroom as the children were beginning their morning routine. Before they recited the colors, Michèle invited me to begin the lesson we discussed. The first thing I did was to introduce my poster. I described each object and color in the drawing – “The sky is blue. The sun is yellow.” – and Michèle translated. Then we reviewed once again, this time modeling a question and answer: “What color is the sky? The sky is blue.” Michèle then asked for volunteers to come up to the drawing and identify colors. We asked in English, and again in Kinyarwanda if necessary: “What color is the sky?” Most of the children wanted to respond in English, but again had difficulty labeling the colors correctly. Though the drawings had more context than the pieces of paper on the chalkboard, it was clear that the children needed

more direct experiences with the natural world and colors. Michèle requested a volunteer to look at the sky and then asked in English, “What color is the sky?” This time the child was able to label the sky “blue.” She then brought the group’s attention back to the drawing. We then worked together to prompt the same process for the yellow sun and white clouds, connecting the drawing and label to the real world. By the end of the lesson, the majority of the class was able to identify and label the colors blue, yellow, and white. Before we parted ways for the afternoon, I asked Michèle if we could continue our color lesson the next day outside where we would have full access to the natural environment. She immediately agreed. It was clear to us both that using the environment was invaluable to the children’s learning.

I arrived the following morning to find Michèle already reviewing the previous days colors using the rice sack poster. As soon as the review was finished we directed the children outside to a grassy area near the school’s entrance. With just a few directions from Michèle, the fifty or so children arranged themselves in a large circle. To make sure she had everyone’s attention, she began a clapping and rhythm game, not unlike games I’ve played with my own students. To demonstrate she was ready to begin, Michèle carefully unrolled the rice sack poster that she had brought outside with us. She then began to model labeling the objects and colors as we had done the day before. As she did so, she would also reference the real world elements that surrounded us. While doing so, she pointed to, touched, or asked the children to touch the elements. I noticed she was struggling to hold the poster during all this activity, so I asked two children to assist her. This freed her to walk

around the space and interact more directly with the environment and the children. She was clearly enjoying herself and her student's success and enthusiasm. Suddenly she said something to the class in Kinyarwanda and motioned to the flagpole in the center of the school grounds. I looked up at the flag and quickly realized that she was pointing out the colors of the flag: blue, yellow, and green.

Michèle then walked toward the flagpole and the entire class followed, enthralled by the exciting connection. Conveniently, in the Rwandan flag the colors are arranged so as to resemble a yellow sun in the blue sky over green grass. As the children gathered and looked up at the flag, once again we labeled colors. Serendipitously, as we were about to end the lesson and head back to the classroom, one of the children pointed up to the sky and shouted "bird is black!" There could not have been a more perfect connection to both our work with colors and the children's lives.

It is important to note that the days described were not consecutive and that this work took up most of my three weeks in Rwanda. I was also working with a second Nursery teacher, but I do not detail those moments mainly because my interactions with her were unfortunately minimal due her multiple absences. Because of low pay and under-appreciation, it was not unusual for teachers to either leave early from the school day or not show up at all. Other reasons for absence included limited access to transportation, illnesses like malaria, or attending to family responsibilities.

After our successful lessons on color, Michèle and I decided to spend our remaining days together continuing the work on the children's English language

learning. We used our observations from the children's drawings and their excitement about the sun imagery on the Rwanda flag to begin learning more about the sun and its connection to daily life. It was through these brief lessons that Michèle and I engaged in an emergent curricular approach toward learning. We developed our lessons based on the children's interest in and knowledge of the sun. In our last week together we created and engaged the children in lessons about the sun and morning waking rituals. We described and engaged in vocabulary about opposites: sleeping and waking, light and dark, sky and land, up and down. Most importantly we introduced and engaged the children in these concepts through child-centered methods like song, movement, and play. By our last days together the children had new English vocabulary and some new and basic knowledge about the scientific and cultural significance of the sun. Not only were they retaining this new information, but they were also having a tremendous amount of fun. I left Michèle with materials and methods that she could utilize for any unit of study she chose to pursue with her students. Like her students, she had a renewed sense of joy and playfulness in her teaching. While seemingly simple, these outcomes exceeded any expectations I could have had for my time in the Nursery classrooms.

The Play

My three weeks in Rwanda were not exclusively spent working with the Nursery teachers and students. My days in the Nursery generally ended by about 1pm on the days I was able to hold meetings with the teachers, and 11am when they understandably needed or wanted to go home. Additionally, my evenings and weekends were spent at the orphanage. When I was not creating teaching tools or planning activities I often chose to casually interact with students, teachers, or children at the orphanage. And with the children especially, this meant that we would play.

The perception of play in rural Rwanda is distinctly different from my everyday experiences as a preschool teacher in Brooklyn, NY. Play is neither discouraged nor actively encouraged, it is simply viewed as the activity of children. Adults do not usually participate or intervene in the play of children. The sense I received from the teachers is that they understood on a basic level the value of play for their students. Unstructured time was built into everyone's daily schedule, from the Nursery through secondary classrooms. However, prompting or engaging in play was not viewed as having a role in academic instruction, and was seen as a distraction from both academic learning and the teacher's role as authority figure. Consequently, my willingness to engage in or set up provocations for play was a novelty and highly sought after. At times this meant I became more of an entertainer than observer of play, but there were a few instances that I was able to step back and witness the interaction of play and learning that I hold so dear.

One of my first and perhaps favorite experiences with play was during our first weekend at the orphanage. On that first Saturday, my first true day off since leaving work in Brooklyn to travel the previous Friday, I relished the opportunity to have a leisurely morning and take a walk around the grounds of the orphanage. In my wanderings I ran into Ted and he suggested visiting one of the fields near the base of the grounds where he knew the children gathered to play on the weekends. He had a soccer ball and a football with him because he knew quite a few of the children enjoyed playing these games. I had only myself and a plastic bottle of water that I had been drinking from when I bumped into Ted. I could not have anticipated that my water bottle would become one of the highlights of the morning for the young children I would meet and play with.

As soon as we got to the field, the children who had been playing their own football (soccer) game crowded around Ted, wanting to greet him and play with the new sports equipment. He began to organize a game of catch with a few of the children and attempted to persuade me to join in. Notoriously uncoordinated and accident-prone when it comes to playing any sport, I politely declined.

Fortunately, I noticed a group of children who appeared to be around two or three years old playing nearby with a set of nuns who were their caretakers. I was immediately drawn to the familiarity of their age and style of play and walked over to introduce myself to the nuns. They spoke minimal English, but I was able to communicate that I too work with and care for young children. This put them immediately at ease and they invited me to sit with them and a set of two-year-old twin boys who were sticking close to them. I sat down and smiled and waved at the

twins. The nuns instructed them to shake my hand, which they did hesitantly. In order to shake their hands, I had set down my water bottle and because we were sitting about halfway up a slight slope in the grass, the bottle began to roll down the small hill. The action of the bottle immediately caught the attention of the twins and they watched with curiosity and delight as the bottle came to the bottom of the hill and rolled a short distance to a stop.

I latched onto this moment as a way to connect with them and engage them in a play interaction. I retrieved my water bottle, and this time deliberately set it down so that it would roll. Again, they watched with rapt attention. As the bottle rolled to a stop once more, one of the twins became bold and ran down the hill to retrieve it. He brought it back up and handed it to me, clearly wanting me to repeat my action. We repeated this game of rolling and retrieving until he decided to try both actions on his own. At this point his brother joined in and they took turns rolling and retrieving. This went on for a few minutes until a slightly older toddler noticed our little group and climbed the hill to join us. He watched the twins intently for a short time and then ran to the bottom of the hill to catch the bottle. The twins did not seem thrilled by this, but waited and watched instead of making an attempt to reclaim the beloved bottle. The new participant climbed back up the hill, but went higher than where us adults were seated. He let go and clapped with delight as he saw the bottle roll and stop further away than any of the previous attempts. He allowed the twins to chase after it and soon all three children were participating in a new game of rolling the bottle from different parts of the slope of the hill and joyfully observing the results.

Another moment occurred at the school during the unstructured time after the Nursery children's first lesson of the day. On this occasion, many of the Nursery students had run off to other parts of the school campus and I was by myself with just a handful. Based on our previous days together, they were looking to me with the expectation that I would start a game and entertain them in some way. At this point I was beginning to run out of the movement game ideas that they had been enjoying, so I quickly looked around me for something else to do, particularly something that would free me from the responsibility of performing. I caught a glimpse of two older primary grade children playing with a bunch of loose bricks that were sitting haphazardly near the side of the Nursery building. Unfortunately the play they were engaging in was that of throwing the bricks and just barely missing the heads of the younger children surrounding me. To both prevent impending harm to the littler ones and hopefully provoke some productive play, I walked over to the bricks and began stacking them. Soon, a slightly larger crowd, including the primary students, had formed around me. I handed one of the children a brick and gestured to my stack. Without hesitation, she added her brick to the top. With that simple interaction between her and me, the rest of the children began to gather bricks and bring them to us.

The girl and I continued to build, but before long our stack became too high and fell to the ground. The sudden crash surprised the others enough that for a moment everyone froze. This time one of the older primary grade boys came forward and began to pick up the bricks, this time arranging them in a semi-circle, and stacking them in an alternating pattern. At this point I stepped back to observe

and allow the children to independently interact with the bricks. When the older boy felt satisfied with his structure, he looked up at me from where he was crouching to build, and said, "House." I nodded and smiled with understanding and approval, but remained a passive observer. Now it was the older boy's turn to attract a crowd. He spoke to his peers in Kinyarwanda and gestured to the other bricks. Slowly the crowd dispersed to go pick up their own bricks and soon there were multiple structures being built around the Nursery yard by small groups or individuals. Some of the structures were stacks, much like the one the younger girl and I had worked on, others were similar to the older boy's "house," and still others were lined up in neat rows, or piled into small mountain-like clusters. This building activity continued with great attention and intent until the Nursery teachers rang the bell for the children to return to their classroom.

Yet another memorable moment occurred while I was assisting with organization of the school library. Before my colleagues and I arrived that summer, the library had not truly been functioning as it had been originally envisioned. It had essentially become a book storage area and not a space for children to experience language and literacy learning. A group goal that summer was to organize the space so that it would be useful and accessible for students. While we worked in the library in the afternoons, secondary students (high school aged) would often stop by to look at books, utilize writing and drawing materials, practice their English with us, and play the few board and card games that were available. I often observed the young men and women who joined us on their afternoon break from class using the Scrabble board and pieces to experiment with spelling in English. One day, I noticed

a group standing around the table with the Scrabble pieces scattered about. They were working together to spell out “WELCOME TO (name of school).” I acknowledged their work and asked if I could join them. I sat down with them and one young man began collecting the letters and assembling words. When he was finished, he backed up to view his work and I saw the words “ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE WHEN YOU LEARN TO BE SMART.” I was not only impressed at his spelling and sentence construction, but in that moment was incredibly struck that this was how these teenagers were choosing to spend break from class. With access to the library they were thrilled by the opportunity to have a space to practice their reading and writing through games. As the days past and we continued our work in the library, I began to introduce this young man and his friends to the rules of Scrabble. It became a routine for these students to visit the library for an afternoon game of Scrabble before returning to class. While playing we not only worked on English language spelling and reading – I introduced them to the large dictionary housed in the library – we also had conversations about their interests, goals for school and life, and the similarities and differences between our cultures.

These moments were so significant to me because I was able to witness learning and development in what I hold to be its most authentic form. I am of the strongest opinion that play is the work of childhood and not only does it facilitate learning, but it is learning. Attending to the play of the children in Rwanda immediately reminded me of Vygotsky’s (1978) view of play in his theory of development:

In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development. (p. 102)

In their play, I observed children operating with a level of focus, enthusiasm, and experimentation that was not available in their day-to-day classroom experiences. These children were inspired, creative, inquisitive, and capable of investigating and demonstrating their own ideas, which are central attitudes for true learning. In her essay “The Having of Wonderful Ideas,” Eleanor Duckworth (2006) points out the importance of inquisitiveness and exploration to intellectual development:

The right question at the right time can move children to peaks in their thinking that result in significant steps forward and real intellectual excitement...children can raise the right question for themselves if the setting is right. Once the right question is raised, they are moved to tax themselves to the fullest to find the answer. (p. 5)

During each of the described moments children were raising and investigating questions that mattered to them and in doing so engaged themselves in sophisticated learning that otherwise wouldn't have occurred.

It is also important that I acknowledge my own role in setting up the circumstances for the children to engage in their own wonderful ideas. It did not take great effort to provoke their playful interactions with the environment, materials, and each other, but my role was not a passive one. Because of my deep respect for and experiences with play, I was able to recognize opportunities, supply

or utilize materials, and facilitate interactions. “There are two aspects to providing occasions for wonderful ideas. One is being willing to accept children’s ideas. The other is providing a setting that suggests wonderful ideas to children – different ideas to different children – as they are caught up in intellectual problems that are real to them” (Duckworth, 2006, p. 7). That I was able to recognize and facilitate these opportunities for having of wonderful ideas with children whose environment, resources, culture, and language are all so different from my own has had a distinct and invaluable impact on my life and work after Rwanda. These moments that I shared with the Rwandan children provided me with the direct experience of the universality of play and it’s inextricable link to teaching and learning.

The Outcomes

My immediate response to returning to New York after my time in Rwanda was one of exhaustion and disorientation. After going directly from the year in my classroom to a classroom on another continent, coming to a full stop at home in Brooklyn was a surreal experience. I was not just tired from my work, but I had also grown incredibly accustomed to and comfortable with daily life in rural Rwanda. I had quickly adapted to the pace, the culture, the people, and the routines and rituals of life at the orphanage and school. Once home I yearned for the work-intensive but languid and pleasant pace of life I had grown to enjoy. I missed the warmth and appreciation of the children and adults I had met, and the camaraderie of my colleagues. I had no interest and was actually quite disappointed in returning to the fast pace and pretentious interactions of life in NYC.

However, I gradually recovered my bearings and began to spend time with my friends and family, who were intensely curious about my experiences and wanted to hear my story. As I recounted stories of people and places and reflected on my journey, I felt a renewed sense of energy and motivation. In the year after my trip to Rwanda I was asked or volunteered to share my story with fellow graduate students, fellow educators, and families and students at my school. With every retelling, I came to realize more and more the significance of my work in Rwanda both for others and myself. I truly began to feel like an expert in my field and that I had important skills and ideas to share with a wider community than just my classroom. I also came to realize that my work had inspired in others around me. While sharing my experiences, many people, especially other graduate students and

teachers, confessed to me that they could never have imagined doing international work. However, upon hearing how I was able to use skills and ideas that seem so simple and ordinary to our daily progressive practices in a distinctly different international setting, the concept of doing similar work felt more realistic and valuable.

After my time in Rwanda I also noticed a gradual yet distinct shift in my perception of and way of interacting with other educators, students, and families. While I had formerly prided myself in taking an asset-based approach to new situations and interactions, I now have the experience to back up the efficacy of this approach. I feel a new confidence that has allowed me to not only recognize the best in others, but to actively utilize the assets and resources of the community of teachers, families, and students that surround me. I have also come to recognize and place my experiences in Rwanda as part of a greater tradition of preparing teachers for meeting the ever-growing challenges of an increasingly diverse and global society.

The idea of community field experiences in the education of teachers has a long history in U.S. teacher education. In the Flowers Report (Flowers, Patterson, Stratemeyer, & Lindsey, 1948), which initiated the modern era of school-based experiences in U.S. teacher education, schools and their communities were defined as sites for field experiences in teacher education programs, and much attention was given to providing various kinds of community experiences for prospective teachers to enable them to better utilize community agencies and resources in the school program, to help them learn about their students and

their families, to foster a greater sense of community service among both teachers and students, and to generally help break down the barriers between schools and communities by creating more community responsive schools.

(Zeichner & Melnick, 1996, p. 176)

From my intensive observation of the Rwandan people, landscape, and culture, and my daily work with the teachers and students in the Nursery, I have altered how I observe and work in my own community and environment. My experiences have given me the skills and confidence to successfully understand and collaborate with people and organizations that are distinctly different from myself. I have developed a sense of cultural competency that would not have been available to me in such a deep and authentic way had I not spent that time in Rwanda. Again, I can situate my personal experience within the context of importance of fieldwork to teacher education:

The literature strongly indicates the need for an experiential component in teacher education programs that helps prospective teachers examine themselves and their attitudes toward others, and helps them develop greater intercultural competence. The preparation of teachers for cultural diversity involves a fundamental transformation of people's world views and goes far beyond giving information about cultures, curriculum, and instruction (Nieto, 1992). (Zeichner & Melnick, 1996, p. 178)

I believe that my experiences in Rwanda will serve me as an educator for the rest of my career, and I further believe that this sort of fieldwork provides perspective essential to the professional development of all educators.

The importance of viewing children in the context of their own histories and experience is referenced in Linda Levine's essay, "Everyone from Everywhere Is in My Class Now:"

Harry Rivlin evoked an unforgettable image in 1970. It has even greater resonance, I believe, for today's teachers: "Every classroom in the country is crowded, no matter the size of the class register, because when a child comes to school, he does not come alone. He brings his family, his friends, and his whole cultural background." (Levine, 2000, p. 109)

It is in this vein that I find that my experience in Rwanda led me to a newfound perspective on how to translate my knowledge and experience with developing experiential, asset-based progressive teaching methods into the context of any environment.

Whether standing in front of fifty to sixty children in a nursery school in rural Rwanda, or working with ten to twelve upper-middle-class children at a progressive Brooklyn preschool, the dynamics of the teacher-student interaction are inherently the same. All children carry with them a multitude of contextual concerns that, with proper observation and understanding, help to create a unique learning environment in the classroom community. Each student's familial, cultural, and personal history contributes to the content and form of the learning environment and curriculum in a productive, meaningful way.

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