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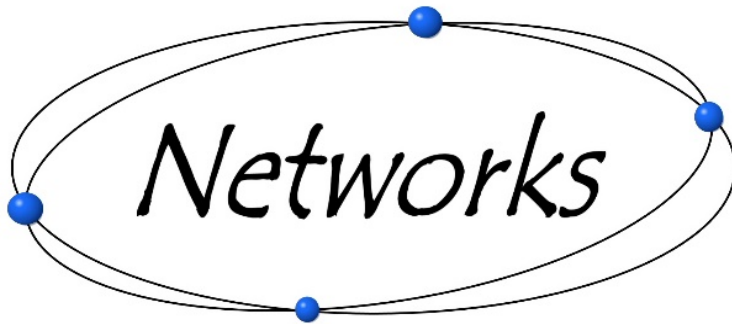


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**An Online Journal for
Teacher Research**

Puzzling Pieces and Spiders' Webs: A Narrative about My Personal Journey to Teaching

Stephanie Burns – University of Wisconsin - Madison

Abstract

I wrote the following paper upon completing my semester as a Student Teacher at an elementary school in a mid-size Midwestern university town. The goal in writing and presenting this paper was to select a focus area of growth throughout my time in the education program, considering how I've developed, what I've learned and where I hope to go as I continue forward on my journey of teaching and learning.

In the pages that unfold, you will learn how I came to the field of teaching, as I introduce the pieces that inspired me most and that put me on the path in which I belong. Through my written words, you will find how the smallest connections I made as a child influenced the decisions I made in the classroom as an adult. The remainder of this narrative is structured similarly to my personal journey, describing the key lessons I learned each semester in the education program that led me to where and who I am today.

Early on in my educational journey, I came to truly love school because of the powerful relationships I had built with my teachers who were genuinely invested in me. My teachers believed in me, which allowed me to believe in myself. They fostered a love of learning within me and granted me the opportunity to explore my creative side through conveying my understanding of content, whether it was through original lyrics and musical composition or by sewing together clothing to depict differing styles across history and cultures. I found myself excited about discovering more in any way that I could. Although the rest of my life often felt unstable, I found strength in my learning and my spectacular teachers who inspired me to push myself and always try my hardest.

I whole-heartedly adored my teachers growing up. I found far more joy in having in-depth conversations with them at recess about creativity in schools and the world's injustices versus

actually playing with my friends on the playground. I was only eight at the time, although I would have liked to believe I was one of the grown-ups in the room. It's funny to think about now, but I so appreciate that they were willing to treat me with such respect. They were the ones who inspired me to think deeply and critically about the world around me and to never stop learning.

Inspiration is such a beautiful thing, isn't it? I distinctly remember the moment I began writing as a way of better expressing myself. I was in the third-grade and had heard a peer in my class recite a free-verse poem she had written about her struggles at home. It was far more profound than anything I'd ever heard. I was so fascinated by the techniques she used and how she was able to take such ordinary words and turn them into something raw and monumental. I felt so inspired by her; I wanted to try creating something as magical of my own. So here goes just part of the story...

I am, and think I always have been, a lover of the little things in life. I'm one who can wake up at 5:00 in the morning to make it on time for coffee with my practicum supervisor and feel a sense of peace and joy and gratitude as I drive with the dark sky enveloping me, welcoming me in like a warm blanket on a dreary fall morning. By the third grade, I began noticing words like never before, capturing the richness in each one as I created nearly tangible images in my mind, linking them together to make poetry you could just about taste on your tongue. There is so much beauty, I've found, in something as little as words. One word alone can be so powerful, and yet when you're able to tie it to multiple words, suddenly you have poetry that speaks volumes to one's soul. And that touches you. And leaves you with countless memories you can never forget.

Aside from words, I am quite notorious for making connections between anything and everything. I'm not sure what it is, or when it started exactly, but I've known for a while now how keen I am at seeking and finding patterns and connections in my everyday life, and then analyzing them in depth to determine the significance behind each one. Recently, as I was thinking about making connections, I began imagining spider webs. There is something so simple and easy to miss about a spider's web, and yet when we look more closely, we can notice the beauty and intricacy of it, how purposeful and artistic the result truly is in the end. The web always starts with a single thread, connected to an anchor of sorts, but it quickly transforms into something far more complex. Without that anchor though, a surface from which to begin, there would be no web; it would all just fall apart.

I think about how deeply that resonates with our own needs as people. We could think about it in the sense of how greatly we seek to build relationships and feel connected to those around us and how unbelievably fulfilling that can be with those relationships feeding our lives or how empty and lost we can feel without them. Or maybe, as teachers, we think about it in the sense of connecting our curriculum to our students and who they are as individuals and how much more powerful that can be when those connections are in place. Or in one final manner, we could consider how ineffective and challenging it would be for a spider to try to spin a delicate web with only one thread, or similarly how difficult and detrimental it would be to simply try to teach to one child's identity—just their academic self, when we know how intertwined their identity as a learner is with who they are and what they need as a person.

Connections. One word can be so very powerful and can hold so much meaning for us. To me, connections are everything. Whether I'm thinking about the first time I received a hug from one of my students who would never be caught showing compassion for someone else or the time

another student of mine trusted me enough to walk away on his own from an otherwise volatile situation, these depict connections I've made with students that have truly changed my life. Without a sense of genuine love and care on my part, there would have been no hope for bridging the gap between us, no possibility of making any sort of positive connection, a starting point for an intricate web. Likewise, had I simply attempted to teach my students, not considering who they are as individuals and what they may need from me in any given moment, there would have been little chance of ever being successful. As teachers, we have to really know our students as whole people to know when to grant them space and when to jump in and catch them before they fall. Connections are everything, and they leave you with memories you can never forget.

My very first semester in the education program was the first time I knew I was right where I belonged. To say the least, there were some bumps along the way, but I came back to my students' warm smiles each morning and was reminded of how very much I loved teaching. As much as I try to support them as learners and as people, they too give me strength to keep going on the toughest of days.

My cooperating teacher was no exception to this. I feel so honored to know I had the grand opportunity of working alongside her in her second-grade classroom. I so valued her understanding of needing to meet more than just students' academic needs, and her belief of building strong relationships with her students, which fit perfectly with my own core values as a teacher.

Each morning, our kids scuffled in from breakfast, and my cooperating teacher greeted each individual student at the door, inviting them into the circle on the carpet. Before doing anything else, we came together as a class community, emphasizing the importance of making time and space for simply being together. Our students took turns each day bringing in something special from home to share with the class, a treasured privilege felt by everyone. It was about better understanding each other, embracing our diversity and recognizing that things don't have to be extravagant to be special or meaningful or powerful.

One example of this was a student of mine who, upon his turn to share, chose to bring photos of his new baby sister. He was so thrilled to show us the pictures and to talk about and share her with the class. You could see it on his face, with a huge grin and his eyes lit up. The rest of the class chimed in with questions and comments in response, each noting how adorable they thought she was, as they expressed their interest in this prized treasure of his. I'll never forget that moment.

There was one student in particular though, who really shaped my journey going forward. The following is an excerpt from a journal I wrote at the end of this semester:

The other part of leaving that makes me sad relates to an ongoing conversation I've had with my cooperating teacher. There is one student in the class who has unintentionally pushed me to try to be better. He has an identified disability and has been having a really hard time these last few weeks. He sometimes becomes angry and doesn't know how to cope with it yet. There are other staff in the school who don't seem entirely sure how to best help him and so lately things have been getting worse. It was hard leaving today because it feels as though I can't be there for him now and I think more than anything right now he needs support and positive role models in his life who show them they care...Either way, he's pushed me to learn more

about my students, himself included, to know how to best work with them so they can reach their fullest potential.

I felt so uncertain of how to address peoples' perceptions of him, and yet I knew I had to advocate for him and support him in the best way I knew how. Through observing my cooperating teacher, I learned which strategies worked well for this student, such as granting him the chance to step away from a group if he was upset and clearly too engrossed in his inner feelings to actually retain anything of value from the lesson.

I wanted to learn more about supporting students' needs, though, and critically think about the impacts of placing labels on students, teachers' understanding of disabilities and the discourse around that, and how unfortunate it is that far too often people confine individuals with disabilities in boxes, believing they are less capable of academic success compared to their peers. I thus began my (Dis)Ability Project, attending workshops and conferences, meetings with support staff, along with watching movies and reading related literature. I know the knowledge I've gained will help me better support my kids, and challenge the problematic language and thinking that others tend to engage in around this topic.

We, the ones who are challenged, need to be heard. To be seen not as a disability, but as a person who has, and will continue to bloom. To be seen not only as a handicap, but as a well intact human being. -- Robert M. Hensel

These particular words speak so strongly to me and my own beliefs as a teacher. I've come to recognize how extensively students just long to be seen and heard, and the negative outcomes that arise when we neglect to do so. And how powerful and necessary it is to enable other people to fully comprehend that: the idea that every single person has their own challenges and needs, regardless of whether they have a disability or not. And we all have strengths and diversity, all of which is worth celebrating.

My second semester of the program, I continued thinking about the power within building strong relationships with my students. I felt so incredibly challenged though with having such a large class. Suddenly instead of fourteen students, I had twenty-five, plus several more that transitioned to our room for Math and Literacy from another fourth-grade class.

How could I ensure I gave ample attention to each student? How could I effectively support everyone, and live up to my own expectation of making sure everyone feels visible?

I found myself making precise day-to-day decisions regarding with whom I chose to work during independent work time, being mindful that I wasn't consistently granting attention to the same students, but instead spreading my love to everyone. I think it can be so easy for people to, although unintentionally, give a disproportionate amount of attention to students with higher needs, letting some of the quieter students to fall behind the curtain. I can understand how that happens, and yet I try so hard to prevent that in any way that I am able, especially as a means of pushing back on certain peoples' ideas that kids with disabilities should always be placed in separate, segregated classrooms to avoid their own child missing out on receiving support. I do recognize that importance of advocating for one's own child, but we have to think about at what cost does that come?

After my semester with fourth-graders, I attempted to prepare myself for the next step. To be honest, I think I was most fearful for my Science and Social Studies placement because I knew

I'd have to work with kindergartners. Although they are cute and little, the thought scared me. I could not imagine sitting in front of a whole group of five-year olds, trying to keep them engaged in a lesson when they would so much rather be dancing to gagman style or talking for days on end about how awesome the boys from One Direction are. I mean, really, in looking at a map of the United States, two of my students pointed out "One Direction." I couldn't figure out where they were seeing anything related to it on this standard map until one of them exclaimed, "Duh, Ms. Burns! It's right here, see it says 1D. That means one direction!" Really, they were pointing to the state of Idaho, or as noted on the map, ID. The connections were everywhere.

But even with my hesitation to jump right in, my cooperating teacher made it look so darn easy. Aside from her joyful personality, she made time for activities that she knew were appropriate for the kids, being that they were only five and regardless of what any outsider says about what we should expect of them at such a young age, they deserve to be kids.

And she let them be kids. During snack, we often times turned on the beloved One Direction. I even found myself listening to them on the radio while driving around town, singing along to their hottest songs. I'm still not sure how I feel about that. We tried to find opportunities for our students to engage in choice time, where they could do art, play in the house area or on the carpet with blocks, or engage in other fun activities. Oh, and I can't forget the dance parties. Oh my goodness, did my kids love to dance!

Beyond that, my cooperating teacher was always flawless with connecting material to her students' own lives. I remember our Social Studies mapping unit that we did, where she made a display of all of the kids' home addresses in relation to each other. I think they gawked at the board for about a week; that's how thrilling it was to them. We also worked on identifying and labeling familiar places in our neighborhoods. How exciting for a five-year old to look at a map made just for them and find their own house! Or McDonalds!

Last but certainly not least comes the best part of the story where I had the chance to learn a wealth of knowledge from two phenomenal teachers in their fourth and fifth-grade class and in whose class I got to teach and teach and learn and teach.

Literally upon writing this, I felt so unbelievably stuck. How do you even begin to put into words an experience that drastically changes you forever? I feel so lucky to know I've been able to learn from both of these teachers who know so very much when it comes to understanding students on a holistic level and attending to their needs accordingly.

During my time in their classroom, I have had ample opportunities to think about students' needs and how to support their learning and social-emotional well-being. I've come to fully realize how necessary it is to meet our students with compassion, always. I have a couple of students in my class who often experience very intense emotions and will, for lack of a better word, explode. I think about how easy it would be for someone to automatically escalate themselves, choosing to send them to the office or handle the situation in a harmful manner. But I don't, and I won't. Instead, I pause and question what might be going on for these nine, ten, and eleven-year olds that they are acting this way.

That reminds me of something one of my cooperating teachers once told me, how every child's behavior is an attempt to communicate something, whether it's an effective means of doing so or not.

Through being a full-time teacher in a class of students with a wide range of needs, my own approach to understanding and supporting them as human beings—beyond simply being there to serve them academically, changed drastically. At some point early on, I realized that in order to sustain my own abilities to provide support to my students, I would have to transform my mindset. With students in our class with unique behaviors and ways of interacting with the world around them, it was likely that we, as teachers, were bound to face far more challenges and setbacks before experiencing any sort of success. Through recognizing the emotional toll that can take on a person, I realized my own need to detach a bit in order to remain strong and ready to try again the next day. And it was so incredibly important that I was constantly ready to leave the past behind us and try again the next day because, if anything, our kids deserved at least that much. Thus, I began looking at these particular students—the ones who pushed me every day to be better—in a far different manner.

I started thinking about them as puzzles that I was trying to figure out, carefully considering how each individual piece fit together in the big picture. Puzzles are intended to be challenging but enjoyable, and yet it's the type of activity you engage in over time. Some puzzles are much easier, with pieces that are larger in size, making it easy to see where each piece belongs. But other puzzles hold much more power, begging you to give up. In each piece, you can sense the history of people before you who have tried to complete the puzzle in its entirety without any success. We had a few of these types of puzzles in our class this year, and although they are still incomplete, I have managed to approach them with care, patience, and the strongest sense of both compassion and empathy that I am able to offer. These are the ones who have taught me to be not only a better teacher but a better person, and I have so much appreciation for them as a result.

Although it's been a semester of learning a great deal about students' social-emotional needs, we have also spent plenty of time laughing together, enjoying each other's company, and learning incredible skills and knowledge through memorable experiences.

We spent a couple weeks studying spoken word and listening to and analyzing videos of spoken word performances that connect to our lives. We engaged in daily Creative Expressions where students could bring in something related to their own strengths and passions to share with the class. We were lucky enough to have the Chief Justice, along with a second Justice, from the State Supreme Court come into our classroom and share their expertise with us! Really, is there any better way to learn about the justice system than from the judges themselves?

It's been an unbelievable journey, and although I've learned a lot, I know I still have so much learning to do. But that's okay—because I've always felt the learning never stops, and it will forever be my goal to continue growing so that I can be my absolute best for my students. My teachers inspired me, and I now hope to inspire my own students. And to continue forming connections and making memories I know I'll never forget.