

May 1, 2011

Dear Students,

For the past semester, I have been studying myself and my role as an educator. I have looked at many different parts of my career, including you, the students. I often reflect on my teaching (you may have noticed me writing in my little red journal this year). By doing this, I am able to better see myself as a teacher. I can look at what we have done and how I am working as a teacher and make any changes to better ensure further success. I make notes and go back to them so that I can be the best teacher for you and your classmates. I make sure that I hold true to my beliefs and values. It is important to me to maintain my personal philosophy as well as my educational philosophy when I am planning for and working with you.

While I ask you to learn more and more each day, I am also learning along with you. You are learning the curriculum that I am teaching while I am in the process of learning about how this curriculum is best taught so that you are able to best learn. I am learning how everything I do has a huge affect on you and your education. I am learning what changes need to take place in order for you to be the best learners that you can be. Without you to teach me, I wouldn't be an effective learner. I hope that you feel the same way. I would like to share some of the things I have learned with you along this journey.

I began this semester looking at the achievement gap that is present in all of education. When we talk about this gap, or hole, in education, we have to look at a lot of factors. One such factor is the community that we live in, our town, your home, your friends, and your school. All of those people play a role in your education, whether directly or indirectly. Have you ever heard the saying "It takes a village to raise a child"? This is what I'm saying. Your learning is affected by all of those things I mentioned.

One article called "The Role of Schools and Society in Closing the Achievement Gap" by Richard Rothstein (*Principal Leadership*, 5 no 7, 16-21) talks about how your parents affect this learning. He tells us that "child-rearing styles, ways of disciplining children, ways of communication expectations, and

even different ways of reading to their children” (p18) have a great influence on a child’s success in school. Learning doesn’t take place only in school and we teachers aren’t the only ones you learn from. We are all responsible for your education, and the more we can work together, the better off you students will be. There are many times that parents seem to blame the school for the child’s failure, but oftentimes do not realize the importance that they have in helping you along.

I realize that you and I only get to spend about 7 hours a day together. When you take out that time we have for Physical Education, Technology, Lunch, Recess, and passing time in the hall, we are down to less than 5 hours total. We have an awful lot to learn in that amount of time. I have an awful lot to teach you and I need to be sure that I’m well prepared to use that time effectively. In order to do this, I need to spend many hours outside the classroom getting things in order and ready for you. I spend time in the evenings, on weekends, and yes, even on winter and spring break working to ensure your success. I have learned throughout this semester that while I feel like I have no more time in my life, I need to continue to eke out every second I can to work on keeping up-to-date so that you are provided with every opportunity for success.

It seems like we spend much of our time testing. We start the year with tests and those tests drive many of our groupings. For example, some of you go to different classes during Community Collaborative Teaching (CCT) time to work on different skills. How do you think you ended up in those classrooms? We used data collected from testing to place you in homogeneous groups. The other students in your group are working on the same skills that you are. Isn’t that great? How does that make you feel as a student? I remember being in different reading groups when I was in school. We had different colors that named our groups. The kids in the red group were the highest ones and boy did they show off! They knew everyone else couldn’t read as well as they did and they made others feel bad about that. Have you noticed that in your groups? I sure hope not.

That type of grouping was brought on by what is called tracking. As an educator, that sounded great to me. We have students in groups that are learning at about the same level. That should make it easier to teach, I figured. Then I

read an article by a person named Jeannie Oakes. She told us that research shows that “students placed in average and low-track classes do *not* develop positive attitudes.” Further, “Students in upper tracks…sometimes develop inflated self-concepts as a result of their track placements” while “students in low-track classes have been found to have lower aspirations and more often to have their plans for the future frustrated” (Oakes, 2005 *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Chapters 1, 10, and 12. Haven and London, CT: Yale University Press p8). In essence, I have learned that placing you into a homogeneous group may have a large impact on your learning. Therefore, that is something I need to unlearn and stop doing so that you can be a better learner.

In the future, I would like to work with students in what are called “cooperative groups”. David and Roger Johnson (1986, *Learning Together and Alone: Cooperative, Competitive, and Individualistic Learning* (Chapter 8). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.) and Paul Deering (1994 *Is “Cooperative Learning” Either, Neither, or Both? Tales From Three Middle School Classrooms*. Paper Presented at Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. New Orleans, LA.) have presented research that finds that this type grouping can be very beneficial to all involved in a student’s education.

“The most important aspect of school life is empowering individuals by organizing them into cooperative teams.” (Johnson & Johnson, p169). These teams are set up as a type of base group. You would work together with one another as your own little community. For example, in the morning, your cooperative group would meet, make sure everyone is set up and ready for the day, help with any questions on homework, and talk about any other issues that may be present. Throughout the day, this group would be the “base” for you. In a way, it would be like we talk about our classroom in relation to the school. Our classroom is a community. We treat each other with respect and expect the same. These cooperative groups would be smaller communities within our larger one of the classroom, just as our classroom community is a part of our school community. While these groups would follow you throughout your school career, they would change a bit with students moving in and out. In addition, you would also work in other small groups for different projects. This would just be a foundation group.

The great thing about these communities is the longevity that they will have. It would be wonderful to be able to begin to build these groups while future students are in lower elementary. In this way, the groups will already have a background and know how to work through any issues that may arise before they get into upper elementary.

Of course, this would require the entire school system to get on board. Oxley tells us “An inconvenient fact of Small Learning Communities (SLCs) is that they cannot be simply added on to the existing school organization... When administrators, counselors, and special education staff members continue to operate at the school level, rather than in SLCs, they do so without the knowledge of students that SLC staff members have.” (Oxley, 2005, *Small Learning Communities: Extending and Improving Practice*, p48). Oxley also tells us that “Practices associated with success in serving diverse students in SLCs include student advisement; parental collaboration; and interdisciplinary teams that have special education teachers and English language learning teachers, subject-area teachers, and counseling staff members.” In essence, everyone needs to be involved and this does include all the way up to administration.

Do you realize that we teachers are part of a cooperative learning group ourselves? We talk with one another in the mornings, during lunch periods or breaks, after school, and during our staff meetings. Much like cooperative student groups work, staff cooperative groups are a “base group” for teachers and staff. Lieberman and Miller (2008) tell us “as teachers learn from one another they begin to see the ways that group members can contribute to and enrich one another’s development and growth.” This seems to enforce the importance of the right types of grouping. If it works for us adults, it should be successful for you students as well.

These groups brings me back to what I talked about earlier about the others involved in your education. You aren’t on this journey alone. There are so many factors that play a role in your education. I spent 13 years in school from Kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, then another 2 years for my Associate’s Degree, 2 more for my Bachelor’s Degree, and am still in school working on my Master’s Degree. Education is such a large part of your life. Some of you, like me, will spend a great portion of your life being educated and sometimes teaching others. Having a steady group of people to grow with, learn with, learn from, and help

you along your journey will be very beneficial. If those same people can be with you for the long haul, both you and they will be able to benefit from the past and work together for the future.

Another important aspect of your education has to do with the fairness in the classroom. Now, I'm one who does NOT like to hear "that's not fair". When I was little, my mother, my father, my grandmother, all answered that with "who told you life's fair?". I have found that I've picked up that bit of wisdom myself and tend to pass it on to my students whenever I'm given the chance! That said, I try to be fair in everything. I usually find myself using that response when students are whining. I want my classroom to be a fair, democratic entity. While I want you to behave in a manner that is expected in the classroom setting, I also want to afford you the freedom to be unrestricted in your opinions and thoughts. Everything that you have to say, every question that you have, deserves to be addressed. An egalitarian classroom would allow for that. I would like to share with you some thoughts that I ended one of my editorials for my college class with. It would seem that creating democratic classrooms simply requires teachers to be in control, but to offer the lead to the students. Students need to feel ownership and accept responsibility for their actions. By giving them the liberty and lack of restrictions, we are providing them the opportunity to become better citizens outside of the classroom. They are learning to hear and be heard, respect their own opinions and others, and work together to be "thoughtful and empowered citizens".

When I began my career, I had all of my notes from college and all of my lesson plans that I had taught while in college. I was ready for the classroom. However, when I walked into my own classroom on that first day, I was probably ten times more scared than you are walking into your classroom on your first day back from summer vacation! At that point I realized that everything I did was going to have an effect on all 28 of you. While I learned a whole lot of pertinent information in class, and I was prepared to teach, I was not prepared for the personal part of it. I was bringing my whole life into this classroom and we were going to live together for 10 months. I didn't even know you and you didn't know me. I was terrified that I was going to mess up big time and not only would all of you know it, you'd never let me forget it. I had to figure out how to fit my values and beliefs into my teaching in a way that you would benefit. Over the past five

years, I'm getting a little more comfortable on that first day of school, but I still look at those new faces out there and wonder, how can I be what they need?

As I mentioned at the beginning of this letter, I have learned a lot during this semester. I have learned from you, my students. I have learned from my colleagues. I have learned from my studies. I have considered which things are important and which things need to change. I have taken into consideration all who are affected by what I can present. I want you to know that you are a driving force for my continued education. I want to be able to provide you with the absolute greatest opportunity for education. I believe I have encountered some wonderful ideas and I hope to incorporate many of them into future classrooms. I expect also that your future teachers will continue to learn and grow as I have so that you are given the best instruction for each of you. Continue to work with your teachers and other students through not only this educational journey, but in your future endeavors. Reflect on your actions and accomplishments and share what you've learned with others. Be fair with others and yourself. I look forward to hearing from you and talking with you as you go through this journey. Enjoy!

Sincerely,

Mrs. Shannon Haines