

An Arts-Based Classroom Confronts Educational Metanarratives: Grand Narratives, Local Stories and a Classroom Teacher's Story

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This paper examines and deconstructs how a 4th/5th grade independent school teacher and his teaching partner were assessed based on their classroom management and teaching styles. The school administrator's perspective and critique of this teaching team is expressed through a six-page performance evaluation report. As a member of the teaching team, the author presents an alternate perspective; advocating for self-initiated, interdisciplinary and creative approaches to learning. He viewed his practice as a site for a critical pedagogical discourse, ongoing analysis, reflection and revision. Here the author reflects on how two conflicting teaching paradigms perceive and evaluate the management style of this unconventional classroom.

“In my own teaching practice I find it increasingly difficult to enact a pedagogy that empowers children, even in an independent schooling environment.”

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I was part of a fourth and fifth grade teaching team whose classroom practices and teaching styles were based on student agency and creative engagement. My classroom management and teaching styles were viewed, critiqued and ultimately prohibited by the administration. This is a commentary on the grand narratives surrounding traditional schooling and the power of those narratives to suppress “or preclude the existence of counter discourses and ways of knowing” (Rolling, 2011, p. 101). This case reflects how metanarratives operate as self-legitimizing frameworks that are validated and reified by popular consensus (Lyotard, 1984). It is a difficult and frightening proposition for teachers to openly oppose the precepts set forth by those in positions of authority. The simple act of acquiescence emboldens and solidifies the dominant discourse silencing voices and leaving the local stories untold. The local stories or “indigenous ways of knowing” (Kovach, 2005, p. 28) are essential to sustain a classroom where children are allowed to use arts-based approaches of inquiry. Arts-based classrooms offer students unique learning opportunities because “the arts provide a special way of coming to understand something” (Sullivan, 2006,

p. 24). Additionally, “the arts provide access to forms of experience” that are otherwise difficult to obtain (Eisner, 2006, p. 11). Our students had opportunities to engaged in self-directed learning and our classroom was a safe space for creative “exploration, innovation, collaboration, and personalization by all students, with strong focus on process, not product” (Hathaway & Jaquith, 2014, p. 27).

Our classroom was more lab or studio than traditional classroom. Instead of desks and chairs, we had stools and butcher-block tables. Each table leg was affixed with furniture sliders so we could easily move the tables to the perimeters of the room when we needed an open space. My teaching partner and I taught at a Pre-K -12th grade independent school in upstate New York. Visitors often mistook our 4th grade classroom for the art room or part of the PE program. We integrated arts-based and kinesthetic modes of learning throughout the day. We constructed a climbing wall on two adjacent walls that ran from floor to ceiling. Students performed skits, presented ideas, or debated issues on a stage my teaching partner and I built. Once the lake effect snows arrived in billowing drifts, we took full advantage of the classroom set of snowshoes hung by our backdoor. During the 2012-2013

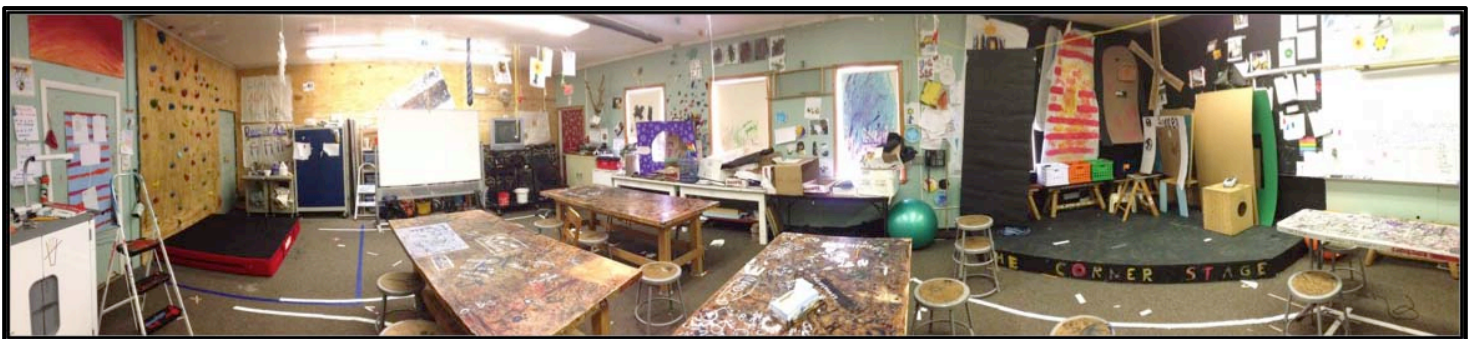


Figure 1. A panoramic view of the classroom showing the climbing wall, butcher block tables, walls adorned with students' creative expressions and the classroom stage.

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school year, our students were sawing, hammering, drilling, climbing, trekking, sculpting or painting in addition to reading, writing, conducting science experiments or solving mathematical algorithms.

Our pedagogical philosophy emphasized student agency and self-governance, where students and teachers maintained equal ownership of the learning space. Students and teachers alike were allowed to access furnishings, materials and supplies. We removed the teacher desks and students sat or stood where they felt most comfortable.



Figure 2. Clockwise from top: Students on the climbing wall, a student using a handsaw, a student learning woodworking skills, a student sets up an impromptu painting studio

At the beginning of the year we did not set up or decorate our classroom. The stools remained stacked, the walls blank, doors unadorned, and supplies sealed in boxes. The students unpacked the room both figuratively and literally.

Students marked and decorated the walls, tables, floor, and ceiling according to their personal needs and interests. Eventually our classroom

reflected the collective aesthetic of our new student body. The classroom transformed into a physically and visually active environment; an organic and ever-evolving work in progress.

Over the course of the year we received a great deal of positive feedback from parents, many of whom credited our hands-on, experiential, arts-based, child-centered classroom for their child's successful learning experience. Oftentimes a prospective family member exclaimed from our doorway, "I wish I could go to school here!" However, our school's new administration required faculty to move toward a traditional pedagogical framework.

The Meeting

At the end of the school year, two school administrators called my teaching partner and I into a meeting. We received an email prior to the meeting indicating that the Head of Lower School wanted to reflect on the 2012-2013 school year and discuss the upcoming fall semester. In her email she stated "I see many great things in both of you as teachers...but I also see some significant areas of vulnerability" (personal communication, May 27, 2013). To our surprise, the administrators handed us a six-page document outlining a list of over sixty complaints levied against our classroom practices and approaches to learning. Thinking this was our exit interview I braced myself and expected to be terminated. Surprisingly, both of our contracts were renewed.

In recent years, this independent school went through seismic upheavals, resulting in hiring a completely new administrative team. Our school was still reeling from the effects of the 2008

economic melt down and desperately searched for a fresh vision and new identity to secure its future in the 21st century. My teaching partner and I hoped for a plan outlining progressive ideals, democratic learning environments, critical pedagogies, and autonomy in learning and choice-based education. Above all, we valued student voice and agency and wanted our students to become critical thinkers, inventive problem solvers, and creative innovators.

By the end of the spring semester it was apparent that we fell on the opposite end of the spectrum with the administrative team and some of the traditionally minded faculty regarding educational theory, which made open and candid conversation surrounding educational practices futile. For years, the previous administration had instructed me to abstain from entering into a critical discourse, said my demeanor was off-putting, and informed me that any top-down initiatives were not open to debate. The enormous philosophical gulf between our educational approaches clearly informed this mandate. The aforementioned six-page document rebuked our classroom practices that valued student agency which included: enacting student generated ideas, holding debates and votes to determine classroom protocol, students co-creating the curriculum, allowing students equal access to classroom materials and supplies, offering opportunities for students to freely navigate about the classroom space, etc. During the meeting we were told our classroom time was “wasted by students negotiating the plan or agenda for the day” (personal communication, June 14, 2013) and that “students’

degree of control over the direction of instruction” made it “challenging for other teachers because students often expect the opportunity to vote regarding instructional decisions.” The administrators prohibited us from allowing our students to “negotiate assignments, projects, lessons” or any other aspect of the school day. As I began the 2013-2014 school year, I did not know how to comply with the demands put forth by the administration without sacrificing the key element of my educational philosophy: student agency.

Two Lenses

This paper will examine and deconstruct the two lenses through which our classroom management and teaching styles were perceived. The first perspective embodies the opinions expressed through the six-page document presented to us at the meeting. The other is from the perspective of the teaching team who viewed their practice as a site for a critical pedagogical discourse, ongoing analysis, reflection and revision.

Since the national move toward standardization in education following No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, classrooms became increasingly restrictive environments as discovery-based learning experiences offering relevant and meaningful ways of understanding were replaced by teacher directed instruction, prescriptive projects, and top-down educational initiatives (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Smyth, 2008; Zhao, 2006). Traditional and progressive approaches to education always clash. Gehrke (1979) wrote that schooling practices are “imbued with a certain sacred air.” Anderson &

Milbrandt (1998) recognized that schooling practices resist spontaneous expression and Friere (2005) maintained that schooling practices “negate education and knowledge as a process of inquiry.” In his Flow Theory, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described the optimal learning experience as one in which participants find “a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment” (1990, p. 3) becoming “so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (p. 4). In this state of flow people are intrinsically motivated as they engage in self-initiated endeavors. When children begin the schooling process external forces control their learning experiences. These external forces extinguish the sense of agency found in what I consider optimal learning experiences. The dominant culture of education in the United States requires children to follow a standardized set of “social rules and norms” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 21) where learning is decontextualized and children cannot pursue their own interests. Similarly, Glasser (1969) argued for the use of relevant teaching material, found through agency, for meaningful learning experiences. Glasser believed that students “should have a voice in determining both the curriculum and the rules of their school” (p. 37). Critical theorist Joe L. Kincheloe (2008) argued that educators should replace scripted curricula, reductionist epistemologies, positivist attitudes, rigid classroom practices and decontextualized learning environments with a focus on “generative themes” (p. 11) that connect with the students’ life experiences. In my own teaching practice I find it increasingly difficult to enact a pedagogy that empowers

children, even in an independent schooling environment.

Point – Counter Point

I informed the administrators that I could contextualize and respond to the assessment item by item after hearing the criticisms leveled against my teaching team. The head of Lower School replied, “I would prefer that you not go through and contextualize each of the comments shared. I understand that any one of the comments made could be slightly inaccurate or taken out of context. It’s the totality of these types of comments, taken together over the course of a year, that necessitate the need to impose greater structure and consistency so that the lower school program is more cohesive and in alignment with the vertical articulation school wide” (personal communication, June 14, 2013). This perspective denied “pluralist modes of thinking” (Malpas, 2013, p. 104) and failed to consider the local stories of our classroom. The perspective of the administration favored the grand story or metanarrative engendered by the school’s political framework and disregarded the complex and rich milieu of our classroom. Burbules describes metanarratives as “attempts to offer general and encompassing accounts of truth, value, and reality” (1995). Metanarratives organize and transmit knowledge into a prevailing, overarching and accepted truth (Malpas, 2013). I had a different perspective of my classroom than the one put forth in the document. In order to completely articulate these contrasting viewpoints it is imperative to analyze the comments, to offer my own “local understandings” (Jones, 2003, p. 510) providing a contextualization through a

first person narrative.

Areas of Focus

The six-page document criticizing our classroom practices was organized into 10 areas of focus. The topic headings included:

1. Curricular Alignment with Grades Above and Below
2. Instruction
3. Use of Instructional Time
4. Instructional Norms Regarding Student Behavior
5. Classroom Management
6. Degree of Student Choice
7. Classroom Cleanliness and Safety
8. Resistance to Engage Students in Science Fair Process as is the Institutional Expectation
9. Participation in the Learning Environment is Not Negotiable
10. Team Spirit and Collaboration.

The comments contained within topic headings 6-10 repeated the themes of the comments contained within topic headings 1-5. I will concentrate my efforts here on the first five topics to avoid redundancy.

1. Curricular Alignment with Grades Above and Below

The critique commented that the school's curriculum is "not driven by an organic nature at its core" (personal communication, June 14, 2013). By contrast, the school's mission statement and core values emphasized a student body that "thinks critically" and "discovers a passion for lifelong learning." The school appeared to foster creative problem solving and critical thinking. These tenets did not coincide

with the linear structures and emphasis on a sequential curricular alignment in the administration's critique. My teaching partner and I defined our classroom as "an organic and ever evolving site for inquiry, reflection, self-governance and community" (Rufo, 2013, p. 149) and desired to contribute to a school that offered opportunities for reflective professional discourses.

The critique went on to say that we had "difficulty connecting with colleagues in a way that results in meaningful and useful collaboration" and that the "Middle School teachers have expressed that they will not be able to teach the same content that they have in prior years and that they will have to completely re-vamp their plan for next year in science." Throughout our tenure my teaching partner and I consistently reached out to our colleagues in an attempt to offer a better understanding of our philosophies and methodologies. In faculty meetings these attempts were usually met with indifference and sometimes with outright derision. When we met with faculty individually, they would appear amicable but we often heard that they later met surreptitiously with the administration to register a complaint or share concerns.

We were shocked to learn that the Middle School teachers felt they would have to overhaul their science curriculum. The Chair of the science department had an open invitation to our classroom throughout the year and many times she accepted. She observed our students as they conducted science experiments, wrote lab reports, and discussed findings. Additionally, I sat in on a number of sixth-grade classes including math, language arts, social studies, science, and fine arts in order to

learn how to better prepare our students for their eventual entry into Middle School. These visits provided me with opportunities to see how students navigated the various classroom spaces, the ways curricula were delivered, the interactions between teachers and students and the general culture surrounding the sixth-grade experience. Although my classroom operated quite differently, I felt able to ascertain the skills and content knowledge our rising sixth graders needed to be successful in Middle School.

2. Instruction

We were told that our “instructional times often seem chaotic.” This was a common opinion among faculty who were perceivably uncomfortable with our teaching styles. In fact, some of the faculty who made this accusation worked closely with us as part of an earlier teaching team. We held weekly meetings to discuss students, classroom protocol, curriculum, and educational theory so these teachers knew what we did and why we did it. Seemingly, that which began many years ago as a friendly partnership, eroded over time into an acrimonious impasse. If they examined our pedagogy through a traditional lens, they would likely misidentify or dismiss our classroom as chaotic or unstructured. We didn't follow linear curricular pathways, adhere to prescribed programs, or place an emphasis on ‘ritualized practices’ (Gehrke, 1979, p.106) common to traditional schooling culture. Arguably the learning environment we fostered actually required more structure, albeit an organic and malleable one because of its complex and fluid design. We were more interested in tapping into the

students’ interests and how they might want to go about their learning. We developed a practice called “Reciprocal Engagement” which required “teachers to be attentive to the viewpoints of the students and allow their perspectives to effect change within the classroom” (Rufo, 2013, p. 152).

The next string of comments stated that a “lack of visual supports during instruction” reduced its value and that “instruction often seems informal, non-mandatory,” the critique mandating that “student participation during instructional periods will be the expectation.” I am not sure how it was determined that our classroom lacked visual supports during instruction as our walls were filled with student work, messages, and creative expressions. I surmise that this interpretation resulted from our classroom not posting commercially produced educational posters or signs. Everything on our walls was student generated. If our students felt they needed visual aids they created them and hung them wherever they found them most helpful.

I would not classify our instruction as informal, but I would describe it as one that actively confronts traditional schooling protocols. That same year it became a popular practice for teachers to use a poster in their room titled “Give Me Five for Good Listening” as part of their instructional time. This poster sets forth five rules for good listening:

1. Eyes on Speaker
2. Lips Closed
3. Ears Listening
4. Sit up Straight
5. Hands and Feet Quiet

My teaching partner and I did not share in this practice. We knew that

some of our students could listen without looking at the speaker. Others engaged by having side conversations about the topic being presented. We did not agree with the assumption that children had to sit up straight and keep their hands and feet still to be attentive. We felt the poster's message reflected the factory model of schooling characterized by standardized and compartmentalized learning processes (McKay, 2004) and "top-down control and uniformity" (Reigeluth, 2004, p. 8). We believed offering students autonomy in how they engaged in their schooling lead to productive and germane learning experiences.

3. Use of Instructional Time

As our school moved toward more traditional modes of education, teaching was considered as a quantifiable act. Direct instruction was valued over inquiry-based and exploratory methods as classrooms were evaluated by how many minutes per day students were exposed to direct teaching. This initiative ran counter to the practice of "Reciprocal Engagement" (Rufo, 2013, p. 152) that we valued as part of our classroom culture. We found it beneficial to "adjust to the complex, changeable and powerful waves of energy within our classroom" (Rufo, 2013, p. 150) and modify the schedule based on the needs of our students. During the 2012-2013 school year, an active group of students displayed an intricate and complex group dynamic. The students often needed a five-minute snack break before transitioning back to our classroom after music or art class. However, the document claimed that "breaks after encores are unnecessary" and that "walking to and from allows for

movement breaks." My teaching partner and I sometimes suspended a lesson or activity if we sensed that students needed to first address an issue or ameliorate a difficult situation. When students did not find an activity interesting or meaningful, they were allowed to develop an alternate learning plan as long as it included similar skills or content. The administrators perceived this as a wasteful practice: "Time seems to often be wasted by students negotiating the 'plan' or 'agenda' for the day."

4. Instructional Norms Regarding Student Behavior

In most of the lower grade level classrooms teachers and administrators understood student behavior according to how well the children adapted to predetermined rules of etiquette and propriety. Administrators usually stipulated these conventions at faculty meetings in the weeks leading up to the first day of school. Classroom practices that reflected "the factory model of schooling- processing students as if they were widgets on an assembly line" (Grant & Murray, 1999, p. 2) went unquestioned. A classroom that looked and operated differently from the norm, as ours did, was considered an outlier in need of reform. The criticisms ran the gamut from "students currently refer to teachers by surnames only" to "digital technology is often allowed for non-educational purposes."

When students addressed me by my surname it was usually done in a spirit of conviviality. I did not feel the need for children to place the title Mr. in front of my name. I was not concerned with overt displays of respect. I wanted to earn the approval of my students by

being a thoughtful and considerate teacher, rather than garnering the illusion of respect by insisting that they address me by placing a Mr. before my surname.

Digital technologies remain a ubiquitous part of our society as “Internet connectivity in schools, homes, neighborhoods, and communities has become increasingly pervasive” (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009, p. 246). Although most teachers at my school integrated some degree of digital technology into the classroom, it was usually instituted by top down initiatives and seldom student generated. We ascribed to the belief that “people who have grown-up with personal computers and the internet (digital natives) function and think differently from people who had to adjust to and learn new technologies and approaches (digital immigrants)” (Kinash, Wood, & Knight, 2013, p.57). There is a disconnect in education between the way in which teachers and students “define, conceptualize and position technology and the role of teachers and learners” (p.58). We realized that technology permeated every aspect of the lives of “digital natives” by using technology as a learning tool. It seemed unproductive to relegate technology into narrowly conceived curricular frameworks, in a world where “computing and network capabilities [were] being designed and engineered into all sorts of everyday devices” (Goggin, 2012, p. 203).

Under the heading “Instructional Norms Regarding Student Behavior” were also the comments: “A culture of respect for property is lacking”, “Tables, walls have been routinely written upon, stapled and defaced” and “War paint in lunch room.”

I find the accusations that our students defaced school property especially disconcerting. During the 2010-2011 school year our students could express themselves by drawing and painting directly on the classroom walls. This practice began in late 2009 when students were permitted to draw a series of mazes on our classroom wall as an attempt to “allow creative independence” (Rufo, 2012, p. 45) and give students “a sense of ownership, a deeper relationship with the classroom space” (p. 46). However, students were never simply allowed to paint the walls whenever or however they pleased. Students first made proposals after which we would hold a class discussion, debate, and vote on whether or not the student should be allowed to mark a predetermined section of the classroom walls. It was a democratic process and all members of our classroom community were invited to voice their opinions and cast votes. Teachers as well as students were only allowed one vote each. Therefore, each student had joint ownership of the classroom space, a voice in determining classroom protocol, and agency as a member of our classroom community. That summer, the school painted over the student work on the walls and we were informed that our students were to abstain from painting or drawing on the walls. The students were saddened to learn that they were no longer allowed to paint on the classroom walls but their disappointment was somewhat assuaged because they were still allowed to affix their work to the walls using staples, pushpins, or tape. However, the administration also considered this a form of defacement. This leads me to conclude that it was not necessarily the way our students marked

the walls, but that they were allowed to mark the walls at all. Giving the students the agency to make decisions concerning classroom décor and allowing them self-governance seemed to be the real issue. By “curating the classroom space” (James Haywood Rolling, personal communication, February 12, 2013) our students were able to “stake a claim of personal agency” (Kear, 2007, p. 89). We believed these acts of agency provided our students with “a sense of connectedness, active involvement, and personal investment in their learning” (Killeen, Evans & Danko, 2003, p. 254) that led to higher levels of motivation and learning (Zimmerman, 2000).

5. Classroom Management

My teaching partner and I disliked the term Classroom Management. To us, a classroom was not a governed space but a place for children to engage in learning that was relevant and meaningful to them. Schooling curricula and organizational approaches influenced by managerial styles consider children to be “adaptable, manageable beings” (Freire, 2005, p.73). Schools fill their classrooms with “routines of instruction” where “children are not conceived as co-agents in the process of education, but only as patients, recipients” (Hawkins, 2002, p. 229). As part of my teaching practice I would occasionally sit amongst the students so that I could hear what they were talking about in side conversations during instructional times. I was surprised to find that they were usually discussing the topic at hand. When they were not, I would try to ascertain how I might pique their interest in the subject or to determine if their line of inquiry

was a more beneficial learning experience for them at that moment.

Reflections

Clearly student agency was at the heart of the matter: “The degree of student choice and autonomy will be more in alignment with organizational norms.” It went on to state: “Students’ degree of control over the direction of instruction makes it more challenging for other teachers because students often expect the opportunity to ‘vote’ regarding instructional decisions and/or do not expect to have to maintain sustained attention.” And as if to drive the point home, “Students may not negotiate assignments, projects, lessons, etc.” The administration wanted to focus on the aggregate of the comments rather than hear my contextualization and clarifications; the aggregation aligned with their argument. Although our classroom contained a structure, it did not coincide with the prevailing metanarrative at our school; a hierarchical model positioning the administration near the top, followed by the faculty, with the students at the bottom. Every aspect of the Lower School students’ schooling experience was organized and controlled; protocols surrounded each portion of the student’s day. Students were given instructions on how to operate in the hallways, classrooms, and dining hall. Adults led students through the hallways who were expected to walk quietly in single file line. At the same time, the Middle and Upper School students were allowed to navigate the hallways in a more natural way: laughing, moving quickly or slowly, or stopping to chat with friends. In the dining hall students were expected to remain at their seats unless given

permission to get up by a teacher. On the other hand, teachers could often be seen gathering in small groups to have conversations, text or check email. Within the classrooms, tables once clustered together for cooperative group work were separated and organized into rows that faced the front of the room. Commercially produced programs were adopted with purchased texts and behavioral expectations established. The prevailing metanarrative ensured a framework that went unquestioned by the vast majority of practitioners. Teachers who chose to shed light on the metanarrative in faculty meetings or challenge its precepts in classroom practices were in danger of being considered outliers unwilling to collaborate, resistant to established conventions and “lacking team spirit.”

Nine Months Later

Nine months have passed since I began writing this narrative. Over the summer my teaching partner decided to take a year long leave of absence and home school his three young children. The following September I returned to my classroom as the fourth and fifth grade math instructor. This arrangement provided a way for me to continue teaching while avoiding the many conflicts I had experienced the previous year.

Because there was no mandated math curriculum set in place, I designed and adapted a portion of my math class based on the interests and learning styles of my students. Since I was no longer teaching science, I did not have to concern myself with aligning more closely with the science department. Because of logistical changes classroom locations were rearranged and the

faculty members who previously complained to the administration about our classroom practices were moved to a different building.

However, it was evident that the administration settled on a specific agenda and plan for the future of the school. I no longer shared thoughts or ideas that could be perceived as critical or antagonistic to the status quo. My teaching practice became a subterranean affair. I began shutting my classroom door, especially when my class was involved in noisy, energetic activities. I refrained from sharing my articles and publications via our school's newsfeed or Twitter sites. I kept a low profile when it came to creative productions such as Math Palooza (a student-run, carnivalesque, math-based gaming celebration) or Math TV (a student produced math show using a closed-circuit television and camera set up). Parents, administrators, faculty, and students from other grade levels were usually invited to attend such special occasions, but I decided not to publicize our classroom events school-wide. This decision took the pressure off of my students and enabled them to work at their own pace, without being constrained by predetermined schedules or outside expectations. Students had the freedom to develop their personal visions without following a specific format or producing a final product that fit within an established criterion. In order to remain inconspicuous, I allowed my students only one hour a week to engage in open-ended creative learning explorations.

These changes made my teaching experience much easier though less fulfilling. Not having my teaching practices so closely scrutinized came as

a relief. During a recent lesson observation by an administrator, I received positive feedback including the comments “the classroom is less chaotic” and “students are more engaged in your instruction.” Yet this year I have not offered my students the same measure of agency as in previous years and there were fewer opportunities for creative investigations. Additionally, having four different groups of students for a quarter of the day meant there was less time to develop a sense of community. The departmentalization left little room for cross-curricular experiences or organic learning opportunities. Math class became an isolated event. Last year, my teaching partner and I designed an environment where our students had a substantial say in how they went about their education. Previously, our organic approach and extended blocks of time with the students provided many occasions for self-directed learning. This year, opportunities for self-governance and creative serendipity were limited.

I did my best to keep my math classes innovative. Most lessons included a constructivist approach with an accompanying hands-on activity. Students could choose to sit wherever they pleased and move the tables about or create alternative seating arrangements by stacking stools. Students continued to decorate the walls and mark the tables according to their personal aesthetic. Visitors still consistently mistook our classroom for the art room or part of the physical education program. But I wondered what my teaching partner would think of this year’s classroom. Would he find it in accordance to our philosophy or would he think it was too much of a

compromise? Although we have kept in constant touch via email, snowshoe treks, and mountain bike outings, he has not been in the classroom since his hiatus. Our pedagogy hinges on student agency. Although I have offered my students creative and innovative learning experiences, I feel this year I have acted as a director rather than a guide and facilitator.

What Next?

If I remain at this school a new math program will be in place by next year. New construction is scheduled to replace our current building. The Head of Lower School informed me that students could not mark the tables, walls, and floors as they did in the past. I expect we will not be able to build a stage or construct a classroom climbing wall. Once again, I am faced with the challenge of trying to preserve a child-centered, experiential, arts-based classroom within an increasingly traditional school environment.

I believe every decision made by the administration was done, in their view, in the best interest of the school. The administration worked very hard to establish a solid reputation and ensure the school’s financial stability. Changes in personnel, curricula and classroom configurations were enacted to promote vertical alignment and ideological uniformity. However, failure to consider an institution’s diverse local stories can lead to unintended consequences such as narrowly focused pedagogical practices and a reification of entrenched metanarratives. Teachers who use arts-based methodologies can become marginalized when assessed through a fixed lens of traditional educational hierarchies. Arts-based approaches to

teaching and learning require divergent thinking made possible by an organic classroom structure that embraces student choice and teacher autonomy. In *Engaging Learners Through Artmaking*, Katherine Douglas and Diane Jaquith ask us to rethink education by imagining a “curriculum that emerges out of student-directed learning rather than explicit directions” (2009, p. 1).

Next September, as I head into the 2014-2015 school year, I will be separated from my teaching partner and placed in a new classroom. Nevertheless, I will continue to rethink education, imagine a student-centered curriculum and find opportunities to allow my students creative agency.

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