

Chapter 4-2

Pivotal Paradigms

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At the beginning of my teaching career, my goal was to help children learn. I focused on outcomes and wanted to see my students grow academically. I lived and dreamed of the “aha” moments from each student. I desired to see my students’ excitement in learning to read texts, examine maps, discuss places they wanted to explore, and use resources to find answers to problems. As I reflect on my career, three pivotal paradigms have shaped the educator I am today. My initial goal remained, but in what follows, I share these stories to frame pivotal moments that may be lessons for others.

PARADIGM 1: IT IS NOT THE GIFT; IT IS THE LOVE OFFERED

As a teacher, the stakeholders I served included my employers, the community, and my students’ parents. These groups wanted the learners to grow and master all subject areas each year. Specifically, parents wanted their children to excel and perform at grade level and above. On the other hand, the elementary learners in my classes often did not seem to understand that, as their teacher, I was focused on their academic success. They were often distracted but intent on pleasing me rather than producing the work I had assigned.

My initial teaching experiences were with classes of first and second graders. The students were precious and took immense joy in creating things for me. In fact, instead of completing their assignments, some would draw things for me that I could display in the classroom or at home. I struggled with this dilemma. I needed to know how to affirm the children while impressing them on more important things. I wanted them to focus on the academic tasks I assigned rather than work on artwork to give to me. Meanwhile, I smiled as I graciously received their gifts. However, in my heart, I knew my job was not to inspire them to create but to motivate them to learn the assigned content.

One day, as I was talking to my friend Bill (pseudonym), a professional clarinet player, he told me he had a similar problem. Practicing his instrument was essential to him. He spent hours alone with his musical scores to master the difficult part he needed to play in orchestral concerts. His problem was people who loved and cared for him were intent on distracting him from practicing by bringing him snacks and/or drinks during his work sessions.

Those who play the clarinet understand the instrument's keys have pads that can stick, rot, and need replacement if food is blown into the horn. It was important for Bill not to eat during practice sessions so the pads on his instrument would remain in stellar condition when he played the clarinet. A clear, lovely sound needed to proceed from the instrument, which would only be possible if no muck or dirt were allowed to accumulate inside the instrument.

As Bill and I shared, we discovered a common theme. The people, my primary-age students, and his friends wanted to let us know they cared. Bill and I focused on the products important to us, not the people who gave us something they thought would make us happy. As Bill and I talked, we realized that those around us, the children in my class, and his friends were trying to give us something from their hearts they believed would bless us. Their gifts were well-meaning. In this pivotal moment, we both learned to affirm the love offered.

More examples

Through the years, I have received numerous gifts, including one from a precious elementary student who brought me the plastic bride and groom from her parents' wedding cake. Her mother gave it to her to save for her wedding cake when she married. The child wanted me to have it so I could put it on my wedding cake. In all honesty, I did not want to take the gift, but I graciously received the love she offered, for she genuinely wanted me to have this figurine. I took the gift and stored it out of sight for the entire year. At the end of the year, I gave the plastic bride and groom figurine back to the child. She was sad because she thought I needed it. I then thanked her for letting me keep her lovely gift until the end of the school year. I told her I was giving it back to her because it was important to her mother for her child to use it on her wedding cake when she grew up.

On a separate occasion, another elementary student came to class and told me her mother had made the best apple pie for dinner the previous night. She asked her mom if she could take some to her teacher (me). Her mom said there was not enough for anyone else, so the child hid a few handfuls in her pocket to share the delicious pie with me. When the child pulled the crumbled pieces out of her pocket, they were sticky and messy. The girl was incredibly sad because the pie pieces did not look nice. In her sadness, she apologized and told me she thought the pie would still taste great. Again, I accepted the love offered and thanked the child for bringing me part of her dessert. I displayed the pie pieces on my desk for the rest of the day and told her I would save the pie for later.

A third incident occurred when a third-grade boy brought a diamond ring to class. Yes, it was a real diamond. I was aghast. Now, dealing with this situation was touchy. I acknowledged the child's love and his feelings. I told him this gift was inappropriate as the expensive wedding ring belonged to someone. In questioning him, I found out he had taken his mother's diamond ring from the dresser in his parents' bedroom. In my call to his mother, she told me she was relieved the diamond was no longer missing. This treasure had been given to her by her husband and was of the utmost importance. As I talked with the little boy, I affirmed his good intentions and let him know his actions were not good because he had stolen from his mother.

It is not the gift; it is the love offered

I believe most teachers of elementary children find themselves in similar situations. We tell our students about the importance of their work and emphasize the necessity of continually building on what they are learning. We instruct them in critical thinking skills and encourage them to try new and diverse ways of doing things. However, as teachers, we provide our students with instruction in many subjects, and they also desire to give something back to us. To summarize pivotal paradigm one, I learned to graciously receive my students' gifts and, more importantly, accept the love they offered.

PARADIGM 2: NOTHING LEARNED, NOTHING TAUGHT

Being a performance-orientated teacher, I thought through lessons, wrote my plans, and attached sticky notes to the text I planned to emphasize. On the way to school, I often rehearsed what I would say about the concepts I would teach that day. In addition, I was intent on securing all the materials I would need so they would be available for my lessons. All the above is good, but the emphasis was off. In my mind, teaching revolved around me and how I would deliver the content I believed the students needed at any given time.

This pivotal moment came one day as I was listening to the radio in my car to a former headmaster of a school in Africa. As this headmaster shared one of his teaching experiences, he talked about a time when he felt he had planned the greatest lesson, used incredible visuals in the context of the lesson to illustrate the concept taught, and thoroughly enjoyed delivering his lecture. Great disappointment followed because after the headmaster assessed his students, he saw they failed the exam portion related to what he thought had been taught.

It is so easy for us as teachers to work hard and develop something that looks good. We can use beautiful supplementary materials and keep our students' attention while delivering lessons. If our students cannot show us they learned from our instruction, we have taught them nothing.

You have only taught when they learn

My focus shifted that day as I listened to this wise man share his story. From that day on, the lessons I planned were not about how I would deliver content or even the great resources I would bring to the class. My instruction

changed as I intentionally targeted the students' learning rather than my teaching. Delivery of lessons remained important to me, but intentional time was spent on constructing activities involving oral and written responses that would produce evidence of the students' understanding of the concepts taught. In addition, anecdotal notes and checklists were added to document students' learning. To summarize pivotal paradigm two, I learned education is not about the teacher but about imparting and then documenting what students learned.

PARADIGM 3: I AM AN AUTHORITY ON WHAT I KNOW

There has been an inner struggle in the beginning years of my teaching career and, to some extent, even now. As the years have passed, I have become increasingly confident the knowledge base I have acquired and used in teaching others is usually effective. However, in saying this, there is always more to learn. Musings sometimes happen when I ask myself: "Do I really know enough to teach this or that? Is there enough mastery of the concepts I am assigned to teach that I will be able to answer all the questions my students may ask?"

Some years ago, while talking with one of my mentors, who is now deceased, I shared my insecurities. She peered over her reading glasses at me and said, "You are an authority on what you know. Just share what you know. If you do not know something, do not pretend to talk about what you do not know." In her matter-of-fact way, this teacher, who I respected, spoke words that made an essential adjustment in my life. I learned from her that I did not need to be ashamed of what I did not know. I needed to be confident that I was an authority on what I knew. This realization was pivotal for me as I began my teaching career.

Reflecting one day on the above paradigm of being an authority on what I know, I realized I am not an authority on what anyone else knows. This perspective, too, is an important truth to impart to learners of all ages. I have paired young people together and asked them to look into the eyes of the person sitting next to them. I then told them to speak to their neighbor, "I am an authority on what I know." Next, I instructed their partner to repeat the same words to their classmate. The following part of the exercise included asking the pairs of students in the class to tell each other, "I am not an authority on what you know."

Without exception, each time I have done this activity with learners, they seem to enjoy telling their peers about what they know. On one occasion, a youngster was able to share about different kinds of tractors with the girl sitting next to him. His classmate did not know the specific names of the vehicles but was impressed and wanted to learn more. Another child told his friend about insects he had collected. He followed up by bringing his box of dead bugs to class so all his friends could see his bugs.

I am an authority on what I know

Wonderful discussions can arise as students become increasingly free to share what they know and to receive knowledge from their teachers and classmates. We are all authorities on what we individually know. To summarize pivotal paradigm three, our learners need to value what they have learned and respect the knowledge

their teachers and classmates carry. As our students internalize paradigm three, they can understand the importance of listening and even, to some extent, honoring what others know. Our students can learn, “I am an authority on what I know.”

FINAL THOUGHTS

In sharing three of the pivotal paradigms from my teaching career with readers, it is my wish that these stories may benefit you. Likewise, may the stories that have occurred or will happen during your careers in education be lessons for others.