

**Making the Familiar Strange and the Strange Familiar:
How can individual early childhood educators foster classroom cultures of safety and inclusion?**

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PROLOGUE

A Strangely Familiar Life: Setting the Context

In this personal scholarly narrative, I explore the concept of culture as it relates to the classroom. More specifically, my intent in this inquiry is to connect educational experiences with current research and literature to explore pedagogies that foster individual classroom cultures of safety and inclusion. By reflecting on various moments in my teaching history, both the good and the bad, I hope to extract practical wisdom that will transform my personal practice, and hopefully provide new insights for anyone reading this. No matter what future context I find myself in—be that in early childhood, elementary, abroad or here in the US—I plan to foster a safe and inclusive classroom culture. As a teacher, I want children to feel valued and a part of my class community. Yet how does one do that? How does an educator create a classroom culture that is truly inclusive, meeting all the unique learning needs of every child and helping them to feel safe? Furthermore, what is meant by the term *culture*? These questions guided this scholarly personal narrative.

I am particularly curious and well acquainted with the idea of culture as I have centered most of my teaching career in foreign lands. I have traveled to nearly thirty countries and taught in four of them: China, Vietnam, Oman, and my native country, the United States. I feel immensely fortunate to have lived and taught in these places as I was able to interact with people from all over the world and work in several different cultural environments, often as the only American teacher. These experiences have centered my philosophies of education on both a more universal as well as deeply individual level. On a universal level, the more I traveled, the more I found a shared human experience irrespective of language, climate, or system of government. To borrow a phrase from the anthropologist George Spindler (1982), “the strange became familiar.” Yet what was also true, and more painful, was the individual level of confronting my own cultural beliefs when realizing that some views I took for granted were *not* universal. In this way, “the familiar became strange” (Spindler, 1982). In this inquiry I explore what it means for an educator to do both in a classroom; namely, making the familiar strange and the strange familiar, and what effect that has on a culture of safety and inclusion.

Though many of my personal anecdotes come from international schools, the concept of creating a culture of safety and inclusion is not exclusive to that setting. Most recently, I have worked in an American Montessori classroom that eschews traditional schooling in favor of a very different educational philosophy. It is worth mentioning, however, that most of the educational research that I draw upon was written before the pandemic. COVID19 forced the entire world into a massive experiment of online learning, the ramifications and aftereffects of which are still being studied. In fact, some children around the world have not been inside a physical classroom since March 2020. While there may be future value in extending the conceptualizations of human culture and learning experience to the online world, I will not address that matter in this inquiry. Creating online classroom cultures would require an inquiry beyond the scope of this paper. However, regardless of context, I write from the belief that educators in any setting need to create safe and inclusive classrooms if learning is to occur. Though some may disagree, current literature on the understanding of neuroscience makes a strong case that these conditions are necessary. This research is woven throughout the narrative, but my focus is not to scientifically explain the inner workings of the brain beyond what is useful to the discussion of best practices in inclusivity. Instead, I weave research and literature as I examine real moments from my experience that have left me troubled and puzzled, picking them apart, and examining them from new perspectives on culture and inclusion.

Until recently, the notion of being a scholar-practitioner was foreign to me. I was forced to examine my understanding of the *telos* of education and now heartily agree with Piantanida et al. (2019) that it is “to

bring forth, to lead toward the fullest realization of each individual's potential" (p. 45). I believe that *every* child, regardless of their background or personal history, has potential. As previously mentioned, I have been fortunate enough to work in many diverse settings. The initially daunting enterprise of writing a scholarly personal narrative gave me an opportunity to begin a deep exploration into some of my own kairotic teaching moments. There are many of these moments embedded throughout this inquiry, some that are validated by understandings of theoretical frameworks and others that stand condemned by what I now know. All names have been changed to respect the privacy of the individuals. In Chapter One, I explore the concept of culture, drawing largely on anthropological traditions that claim human life is experienced through a cultural lens, impacted by the nuances of culturally learned behaviors, attitudes, and biases. I begin with the story of Hamza to highlight how though there may be very little difference in structure or material, the individual classroom culture has the power to impact student success. This is informed by understandings of implicit bias and ecological theories which examine how every child is influenced by the adults around them.

In Chapter Two, I explore how trauma informs our reactions to certain situations. Like the attitudes and beliefs that come from our external environments, trauma informs our behaviors, albeit from an internal place. To overcome this, we must be willing to feel strange and uncomfortable. Here, I begin with the story of Farah who never felt safe to have a voice in my class. To be a trauma informed teacher is critical to creating a safe space that will allow children to be courageous enough to take risks. This requires that both child and teacher be vulnerable, which can only be done if shame is kept out of the classroom. Students acting with a certain behavior are doing so in response to the activation of their own stress system and need to be met with consistent compassion. Teachers must also be empathetic to their students, and for this reason I examine the defining attributes of empathy. Observation can be a helpful tool in this regard, as it reminds teachers to slow down and truly see their students.

In Chapter Three, I examine how we can find familiar connections through the application of reality pedagogy as well as culturally relevant teaching as it applies to the classroom. Another student, Ma'ad, provides a clear example of how using student interest and cultural knowledge is an effective pathway to learning. If we understand students as children influenced by other spheres of culture, specifically their home culture, then in a harmonious and inclusive classroom the home culture must be connected to the school content. Both teaching theories argue that this is the most conducive environment to learning. Triggers can hinder learning, and individual teachers must do the work to identify their own personal triggers. This is examined in a discussion on the necessity of approaching teaching with a pedagogy of faith over achievement.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I propose certain educator attitudes that might help transform the educational cultures in a classroom. Within an individual early childhood classroom, what strategies can the teacher use to foster that culture of safety and inclusivity? Indeed, this has been explored throughout but in this final chapter I discuss the necessary *attitudes* modeled within the classroom: an intrinsic love of learning, value in playfulness, and warm demands. In addition, there must be a pervasive value and attitude of playfulness. Last (but perhaps most importantly), I discuss finding meaning in my moments as a scholar practitioner.

Chapter 1

Exploring Culture: Conceptualizing the Strange and Familiar

I first heard his name when it was spoken derisively by a colleague. “Hamza,” she said, shaking her head in exasperation, “that *bliksem* is driving me crazy.” It would be sometime before I figured out what *bliksem*¹ meant, but it would be the first of many times that I heard her say his name. It was almost always followed by a litany of complaints: Hamza never followed directions; he never had his materials; he was always pushing the other children; he was always interrupting. After a few weeks, her derisiveness was entrenched in the classroom culture. Her students could frequently be heard imitating her exasperated tone of saying “Hamza!” If Hamza did anything wrong, it was to be expected. It seemed the entire class was bothered by him. Yet even with all this, Hamza was nothing compared to his mother. To hear my colleague speak about Hamza’s mother was to dive into a sea of character defects and poor parenting choices. It was no surprise that after a few months, the student-teacher relationship had deteriorated to the point that school administration saw it best to move him. My colleague agreed. Thus, Hamza was moved into my classroom. After hearing my colleague and her students complain about this child for a few months, I was nervous but hopeful and vowed to do things differently.

From the moment Hamza stepped into my classroom, I made a conscious decision not to use children’s names when discussing mistakes. Instead, I used conflict as *whole class* teaching moments. *We* as a class would learn how to be better. Hamza challenged me at first; he was a foot taller than the others and had some sort of undiagnosed sensory processing delay. My early attempts at constructive classroom discipline were imperfect and clumsy, as I lacked much of the understanding I have now. However, with an attitude of care and acceptance, aided by my other students and teaching assistant, Hamza settled into class. I found that he was a child who wanted to do better, but just needed the instructions repeated in simple language a few times.²

Academics proved challenging for him, and he had never received the differentiated instruction he needed. He also struggled to make friends. As a class, I made sure that everyone knew we were going to support each other and notice our strengths rather than our faults. After some time, Hamza started to bloom with the appropriately leveled material and even became good friends with another child in our class. I carried this strengths mindset with me when I met Hamza’s mother. We developed a friendship as I took the time to listen to her experience and struggles. We shared best practices for Hamza. Over time, others noticed that he was improving too. His behavioral issues decreased, and he gained some lost ground in his literacy skills. When our year finished, I said goodbye and wrote glowing handover notes about how much he had improved. Once, when I was sharing about how well Hamza was doing with his decoding skills, my colleague shook her head in disbelief. She credited his success to the fact that my class was “nice to him.” I tended to agree; I did have nice students.

Why was Hamza able to thrive in my room but struggled so much in another? What made my class a “nice” environment for him? This question has no quantitative answer. My colleague and I taught the same grade, the same subjects; we even had the same weekly team meetings to ensure that we were teaching with the same activities and resources. However, something was different, and I believe it was our respective class cultures. Having the unique perspective of watching one environment fail him so powerfully, I was able to identify many things I did *not want* to incorporate. Sometimes contrast is the most powerful illuminant. I changed some practices in exchange for unfamiliar (strange) ones, while also trying to build connections and familiarity with him. In this way, I did everything I could to create a

¹ Directly translated, it means “strike, hit, or punch” in Afrikaans. It is usually used as a curse word.

² Had I known then what I know now about child development, I would have advocated for him to be evaluated.

welcoming culture for him in the classroom. Yet what is culture? How do the decisions an educator makes, from the large curricular changes in scope and sequence down to small everyday choices in language and body posture, influence a classroom? To explore this further, I need to consider the concept of culture itself.

Concepts of Culture

When I started this inquiry, I wanted to find a set definition of culture. However, the more I explored the concept, the more I realized I could not use a singular definition because there is so many nuances in the term. Also, an exploration of various meanings is more useful to a Scholar-Practitioner than a dictionary definition (Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2020, p. 140). Thus, I had to embrace the contextual. In doing so, I stepped into a rich tradition, as there are many others who have also explored this concept that defies simple definition. Jenks (2004) explores four applications of the term *culture*: one, an intelligible general state of mind that highlights the difference between humankind and the natural animal world; two, a state of moral development in society; three, a collective body of works or art within a society; and four, a social category denoting a whole way of life for a group of people (p. 11-12). The fourth is perhaps more closely related to the groupings within a classroom, but none of these definitions quite fit the role of culture in education. In a collection of essays on the topic of culture from a humanistic perspective, anthropologist Edward Sapir (2002) explores three common uses of the term. The first is understood as the opposite of primitive, to denote someone who has superior customs or behavior to another (p. 25). In modern times, this use of the term is generally outdated, and I believe is best left to the colonial past. The next aligns with the German word *kultur*, a term that denotes a spirit or soul of a people: “The German philosophers’ idea was that there were general and absolute trivialities and could be said to be characteristic of a group” (p. 30). However, this definition is also problematic as it leaves little room for the role of the individual. It instead focuses on generalities that are widely applied to a group, and indeed slides down a slippery slope to stereotypes. The third definition Sapir proposes is what is of main interest to this inquiry; that culture encompasses “all those aspects of human life that are socially inherited, as contrasted with those types of behaviors that are biologically inherited” (p. 34). This definition allows for us to examine the idea of the individual’s role within a culture as well as the importance relationships have within a wholly social construct. Relationships provide the social aspects that go beyond the biological functions. Sapir goes on to elaborate slightly on what “those aspects of human life” might encompass:

Any form of behavior, either explicit or implicit, overt or covert, which cannot be directly explained as physiologically necessary but can be interpreted in terms of the totality of meaning of a specific group, and which can be shown to be the result of a strictly historical process, is likely to be culture in essence (p. 38).

Therefore, culture may include nuanced aspects such as gestures, whistling, attitudes, speech, etc. that are often left out of more formal definitions. To borrow a more modern analogy, culture is “software for the brain’s hardware” (Hammond, 2015, p.22). Educational consultant Hammond explains that culture encompasses the mental schemas that individuals develop to help us make sense of the world and function in our given environments (p. 23). Like the individual computer programming software, culture influences our behavioral operating systems. Culture as a social construct that includes any non-biologically necessary form of behavior allows us to apply this in a classroom.

The small everyday actions of a teacher can transform the classroom and children within it. Spindler (1959) extends the work of such anthropologists as Sapir, Mead, and Benedict from the products of learning to examine the culture of learning itself. He argues that teachers must be mindful of their own cultural background (p. 396). He also claims that teachers must be mindful of the extent to which their

culture is similar or different from their students, considering what avenues of communication may be opened or blocked as a result (p. 397). This is particularly important “when we realize that the teacher is charged with transmitting selected aspects (curriculum content) of our culture to *all* of the children, and that the teacher must create a receptive learning environment in order for this to happen” (p. 397). In the case of Hamza, my colleague’s derisive tone seeped into the class’s view of him. She modeled a social behavior—whether intentionally or unintentionally—where it was acceptable to tease another. I can only speculate that her attitude may have been informed by an unconscious bias against him, a bias that she was subconsciously transmitting to her students.

Embedded Implicit Biases

After years studying Native American tribes and German schools, George Spindler (1959) argued that “virtually all human learning occurs within a culturally influenced, if not culturally created environment” (p. 395). His argument is supported by Hammond’s neuroscientific research: culture lays the groundwork of neural pathways to create mental schemas (2015). Hammond identifies three layers of culture: *surface* that includes all the layers of observable and concrete elements (which perhaps are those observable social characteristics that Sapir identifies); *shallow* that is made up of the unspoken rules around every day social interactions and norms; and *deep* that is made “up of tacit knowledge and unconscious assumptions that govern our worldview” (2015, p.23). Hammond uses the metaphor of a tree to help illustrate these layers: *shallow* culture is represented by the leaves and branches while *surface* culture is the fruit that the tree bears (p. 24). These are not static but can shift and change over time. However, one’s *deep culture* is like the root system and is “the bedrock of self- concept, group identity, approaches to problem solving, and decision making” (p. 24). It is in this *deep culture* layer where implicit biases lie within constructed mental schemas.

There is a movement in education and indeed across many spheres of American society to recognize and remove implicit biases embedded within an individual’s deep culture. Sapir’s inclusion of *implicit* as well as *covert* behaviors in his definition of culture encompasses any subtle thing classroom agents are doing. Implicit biases reside in (and often arise from) the cultural contexts in which we are raised. Melanie Funchess, an advocate for mental health, defines implicit bias as “those attitudes and stereotypes that affect our behaviors, our decisions, and our attitudes unconsciously” (2014, 4:35) or, in other words, “those unconscious things that have been flowing through us since childhood” (4:37). Hammond (2015) identifies implicit bias as “the unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that shape our responses to certain groups” (p. 29). These are so familiar to patterned ways of thinking that individuals are not even aware of them. However, the first step in creating an unbiased room is the teacher’s examination of their own implicit biases.

There is much discourse these days from respected publications such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) on the active role educators need to take in explicitly teaching anti-bias education and, in the same way they do with other learning standards, focus goals to teach children about identity, diversity, justice and action (2019). Early childhood educators Derman-Sparks and Olsen (2019) advocate for anti- bias education to be seen as “an underpinning perspective, which permeates everything that happens in an early childhood program—including your interactions with children, families and coworkers—and shapes how you put your curriculum together each day” (para. 1). If teachers are not actively *anti*-biased, then we may be passively biased and unintentionally create exclusionary spaces. Bias often leads to microaggressions, subtle insults or actions which communicate hostility or mistrust (Hammond, 2015, p. 157). Unfortunately, these negatively impact BIPOC children the most. As a now famous Yale study shows, Black boys as young as preschoolers are perceived to have more behavioral issues than their white or female counterparts (Gilliam et al., 2016). Bias also affects Black girls as they are seven times more likely to be suspended than their white peers (Morris, 2019). Teacher and administrator biases also influence the rate at which Black children, both boys and girls, are

negatively affected by school disciplinary codes; for example, Black children account for nearly half of all children suspended more than once (Elias, 2013). Children can only safely exist in a space if they are not the target of biases. Therefore, all components of those socially influenced spheres should be intentionally anti-biased within the classroom culture.

Culture in Microsystems

Where does this bias come from? Child psychologist Bronfenbrenner mixes an anthropological understanding of culture with the realm of natural sciences in his ecological systems theory of development. His theory proposes that an individual is the central locus influenced by various environmental systems. These systems range from the micro to the macro. Closest to the child and most applicable to this study is the microsystem; the microsystem is “the most immediate environmental settings containing the developing child, such as family and school” (Guy-Evans, 2020, para. 1). Where previously psychologists had studied only narrow aspects, Bronfenbrenner believed a child’s development was shaped and influenced by the bonds they created with trusting adults, as well as larger societal factors (Brendtro, 2006). He proposed that every child needed an adult who was “irrationally crazy about them,” allowing them to safely make mistakes secure in the knowledge that they would not lose that adult’s love or faith (Bronfenbrenner, 1991 cited in Brendtro, 2006). Ideally, this was provided by the immediate family, as was the case in past societies. In modern society, however, children frequently spend most of their waking hours away from family, namely in school settings. Therefore, the role of creating these safe, secure, and trusting relationships often falls to the teachers, mentors, and coaches who work with these children. Under Bronfenbrenner’s theory, the close proximity primary caregivers and teachers have to children gives these relationships the power to influence a developing child’s culture and world view.

Spindler researched how teachers as agents of cultural transmission unwittingly pass on cultural knowledge (1959, p.397). In this sense, I am reminded of an Irish coworker who used a native colloquial term to address the students as “lads” while I slipped into my own American use of “guys.”³ It was not long before one could distinguish my students from hers depending on what second person plural pronoun was used on the playground. We were, inadvertently, socially influencing the English language of our students. Bronfenbrenner’s illustration of an ecosystem purposefully invokes images of the interrelatedness of the agents within it; healthy ecosystems cannot flourish without a multitude of species interacting harmoniously. In the same way, different influencing cultural agents on a child need to be in harmony for a healthy individual to arise (Brendtro, 2006). The question that adults should be asking themselves is, “Does this circle of influence create stress or offer support for the child?” (Brendtro, 2006, p. 164). A healthy circle is communicating in all directions and ideally, teachers and parents should be communicating on more than superficial levels about the child’s progress. In Hamza’s case for example, taking the time to connect with his mother allowed us to discuss his successes and challenges on a deeper, more effective level. I believe this connection with his mother helped contribute to my success with him in the classroom. This highlights Bronfenbrenner’s theory that good relationships between the parent and child provide positive influences on the child’s development (Guy-Evans, 2020, para. 53). However, my efforts to connect to a student’s microsystem were not universal. I reached out to Hamza’s mother intentionally, but that effort did not extend for all my students. Yet whenever I did take the time to connect with parents beyond the required conferences, I saw many more positive results in the classroom. Positive relationships with parents take work and intentionality, but the benefits of connecting with adults in a student’s microsystem make a strong case for including this practice in every classroom.

From personal experience and understanding supported by anthropological and ecological theories, classes can be considered a microcosm of culture. These microcosms come complete with their own inside jokes, roles, and expectations of behavior, norms, and attitudes. Bronfenbrenner theorized that

³ I recognize now how neither term is particularly inclusive due to the gendered nature.

cultural spaces have *behavioral transactions*, meaning that behavior is not fixed “but a reciprocal transaction with others in a child’s life space” (Brendtro, 2006, p.164). Parents influence children, and vice versa. Teachers impact students, but students also influence teacher behavior. Behavior is constantly being developed and informed *together* as the atmosphere in a classroom emerges. Reflecting on my time with Hamza, I can see how the conscious decisions I made in my attitude and behavior worked towards creating a more welcoming space than the one he was in previously. I choose to ignore the definitions others had imposed upon him, forcibly extracting any bias I may have had against this student. It was tempting to think of him as a “difficult” student, but I intentionally made a conscious effort not to do so. I made a concerted effort to engage his wider world by connecting with his family. I attempted to meet him with inclusion where others had previously expected conformity. However, I was not the reflective scholar-practitioner then that I am now, and my behavior was not universally applied to all students. In that same class was another little girl who did not speak for half a year and who, unfortunately, did not benefit from the same dedication and attention that I afforded Hamza. If I want to create an inclusive space for everyone, then I must be willing to step into the strange realm of vulnerability and empathy.

CHAPTER 2

Stepping into the Strange: Fostering Safe, Courageous Spaces

Farah was a second grader who joined my class midyear when her parents were getting a divorce. The first month she was with me, I wondered what I could do to get her to talk. Contrary to my initial assumption, language skills were not the issue, as both my Arabic teaching assistant and the Arabic teachers confirmed she would not talk to them either.⁴ She was not talking to the other children and had not made any friends. If she did speak, it was in a hardly audible whisper. I was at a loss as to what to do or what was going on. However, it was not long before I was handed a court order roughly translated to say that only her father could pick her up. Two days later, I was given an order saying only her mother could. This back and forth continued for the next two weeks, and I heard terrible stories about an ugly custody battle.⁵ Realizing what was going on, I saw that Farah desperately wanted to be invisible, and I erroneously let her become that in the room. I stopped calling on her, let her get by with little work, and expected little of her. Looking back, I'm not sure what I hoped for, but perhaps I passively thought that only when the situation resolved outside of the classroom could she then become a "teachable" student. Instead, she slipped quietly through second grade. It was only the following year, when I heard her talking and laughing on the playground (without a resolution to her family situation), that I realized the error of my ways. What should I have done differently? How could I have responded to what I knew was a traumatized child? How does an educator include children like her in the classroom?

Trauma Informed Practice

I cannot go back in time to experiment with different methods of assisting Farah to see what may have worked. I can only hope to do better in the future. If culture encompasses the way in which we view the world and is influenced by the small aspects of daily life, then perhaps I can affect the classroom to be a space that is sensitive and empathetic to trauma. As students (and teachers) adjust to life after the disruption and grief of the COVID19 pandemic, recognizing the characteristics of trauma in learning environments will be more important than ever. In this way, the teacher can see behavior as the symptom of an underlying cause rather than intentionally disruptive or uncooperative (Souers and Hall pg. 34). Trauma in children can occur in single events or long-term exposure to what are known as adverse childhood experiences (ACES). Dr. Nadine BurkeHarris (2014) identifies ACEs as one of the greatest health crises never spoken about. In her work as a pediatrician, she realized that many of the illnesses she was treating were symptoms of an underlying cause: trauma. Those who have higher ACE scores⁶ were connected to worse health outcomes and a higher likelihood of developing heart disease, hepatitis, depression, suicide, anxiety and lung cancer (BurkeHarris, 2014). This is a result of the long-term exposure to toxic stress (BurkeHarris, 2014). In their book *Fostering Resilient Learners*, Souers and Hall (2016) explain toxic stress in more detail:

When brains are triggered by threat or perception of threat, they release chemicals into the body to allow us to "survive" those states of threat. When released in large doses, these chemicals become toxic to the body and can create significant impairment in

⁴ Arabic was her first language.

⁵ Once, when Farah's mother took her to get her hair cut, her new stepmother came in and snatched Farah from the beauty salon while Farah's mother was in the other room. When the mother found out, she got the police in the mall involved to try to find the child. Farah was returned to her mother that day, only to be removed with the police by the father the next day. It seems the legal matter was quite muddled, and Farah was caught in the middle. Any outing could become a traumatic experience where she was ripped from one parent to be given to the other.

⁶ Higher ACE scores correspond to more traumatic incidents in a child's life. For example, a child with an ACE score of 4 may have an incarcerated family member, divorced parents, substance abuse in the family, and experiencing neglect. Each primary traumatic event is counted as 1 (Souers and Hall, 2016).

development (p. 22).

It is worth taking a moment here to examine current understandings of neuroscience and what happens to the brain under stress. Hammond (2015) explains that the brain is divided into three layers: the reptilian, limbic, and neocortex regions. The reptilian region, or what Souers and Hall describe as the “downstairs brain” (2016, p. 33), is pure animal instinct. It is always active and scanning the environment for danger⁷ while the limbic region is sometimes known as the emotional brain (Hammond, 2015, p. 38). This area “records memories of experiences and behaviors that produce positive and negative results in the past, so a person knows what threats to avoid or what rewards to pursue” (p. 38). This area also stores the background knowledge necessary for survival; for example, touching a flame results in a burn. Working-memory, short-term memory, and long-term memory are all stored in the limbic region. The amygdala, or “the brain’s guard dog” (p. 40), can also be found here. The amygdala is the seat of our fear system and “is designed to react in less than a second at the hint of a social or physical threat” (p. 40). It is important to note that neuroscientific research indicates that *social* threats are perceived with the same brain response as physical threats. That means our human brains literally cannot distinguish between a physical or a social threat, both are biologically felt in the same way. There are many social threats that humans experience, which I will discuss more in depth in Chapter 3, but one that teachers need to be especially wary of in early childhood classrooms is the threat of *shame*: the belief that there is something wrong with us and that we are bad or unlovable. Social scientist Brene Brown identifies that in lower elementary classrooms, “shame is actually neurobiologically experienced as trauma. Because when you are not lovable, and you’re dependent on safety and nurturing and food and shelter, then being not lovable is a threat to your survival” (SXSU, 17:52).

When the amygdala senses a threat, it bypasses the higher thinking regions and sends stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline straight to the lizard brain in what is known as an “amygdala hijack” (Hammond, 2015, p. 40). No learning can occur when students are in their lizard/downstairs brain because it is only capable of an instinctual *fight, flight, freeze or appease* response (Hammond, 2015). The negative outcomes and impaired neurological development from traumatic experiences are due to a developing brain being frequently soaked in the stress hormone cortisol (BurkeHarris, 2014). According to Tough (2012), the exposure to stress in a developing brain negatively impacts the prefrontal cortex, “which is critical to self-regulatory activities of all kinds, both emotional and cognitive” (p. 17). These self-regulatory skills are also sometimes known as executive functioning skills and the impairment of these skills may result in children who have a more difficult time concentrating, sitting still, handling disappointments, or following directions—all skills necessary for school success (p. 17). The human brain is only designed to be under stress for brief periods during extreme danger; therefore, it is referred to as *survival mode* (Souers and Hall, 2016). When in this state, our brain’s entire mission becomes “to escape danger and return as quickly as possible to a regulated and safe state” (p. 27). When students are undergoing stress and an amygdala hijack, there is very little an adult can do besides try to help convince the reptilian brain that it is safe. Farah was clearly under a great deal of stress. Her amygdala’s response was to freeze, and so she simply stopped speaking. I did not recognize this behavior as a stress response necessarily, and erroneously thought that space and time would heal all wounds. However, I realize now that there was a much more proactive approach that I should have taken.

Vulnerability and Shame

We may not be able to control what happens in a child’s life outside the classroom, but we can control how we respond to it. I could not stop Farah’s parents’ divorce, but I could have created a space for Farah

⁷ The reptilian brain never sleeps; it controls all automatic body functions like the heartbeat and lung expansion to keep the organs functioning. It is also on alert to environmental changes and is what allows you to wake up to a loud alarm when you are sleeping (Hammond, 2015, p. 37).

to feel safe, understood, and able to work through her stress response. To do that, I needed two things: vulnerability and empathy. The two are intricately linked, and both are antidotes to shame, according to Brene Brown (SXSW, 2017). A vulnerable teacher must be one who is comfortable with the uncomfortable territory that goes with taking risks into the unknown. Brown defines vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure (1:58).

Without vulnerability, there can be no courage. Therefore, to create courageous and daring classrooms that allow students to be brave, a teacher must be willing to embrace some degree of uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure themselves. Due to accumulation of negative interactions or as a result of ACEs, individuals develop coping mechanisms that involve moving away from relationships in order to protect themselves. However, with vulnerability, as well as trust and resilience, a teacher can create a culture of courage in the classroom: “You can create a space in that classroom if you are willing to be excruciatingly uncomfortable and vulnerable that may be the only space that student has to take the armor of his or her heart” (SXSW, 2017, 15:26). This may be as simple, and difficult, as writing alongside your students and being willing to open up your own writing to their scrutiny. Writer Ralph Fletcher explains that “When we write, and share that writing, we really do make ourselves vulnerable. We put ourselves on the line. But we will continue doing that only if it feels like a safe place” (2017, p. 32). What kills a communal sense of safety in the classroom? Brown warns that “The one thing that will kill it faster than anything else is shame” (SXSW, 2017, 15:35). As already mentioned, shame is perceived as a threat to a young child’s very survival. Therefore, shame has no place in a classroom, and it is critical that teachers identify and eliminate any practices that might induce shame or ridicule.

What does shame look like in the classroom? It may most easily be identified in punitive classroom management techniques, which will be discussed later in Chapter Four. However, some teachers may inadvertently be practicing shame-inducing teaching strategies as part of the general curriculum. When in doubt, I believe many teachers fall back on what they know, staying in the familiar space of the way they were taught despite having no evidence or training to support those methods. I did just this when I was tasked with teaching fourth grade English Language Arts (ELA) in Vietnam without any training. I did not know anything about the science of reading, so I fell back on what I remembered from my own school days. However, the goal of teaching differentiated reading instruction should be to meet students where they are and scaffold them to the next step, not to turn reading (and by extension any curricular area) into a stressful or shame-inducing exercise. Walpole et al. (2020) explains how a common reading practice, round-robin, is actually detrimental to student learning:

We actually find that round-robin reading can harm students’ reading fluency and their will to read. The practice may increase anxiety among students with weak oral reading fluency and direct their attention to reading ahead in order to practice silently, so that they will not be embarrassed when their turn comes (Kuhn, 2014). It can also lead to frustration for students with strong oral reading fluency who must listen to weaker readers. Therefore, whatever its name, round-robin reading is not a method you should keep in your tool box. Luckily, it can be replaced easily with choral reading, partner reading, and whisper reading procedures. (p. 80)

In my fourth-grade class in Bien Hoa, Vietnam, I called it “popcorn reading.”⁸ I thought I was being inclusive by allowing everyone a chance to read aloud. Yet, it was not long before our popcorn reading time became one of anxiety-riddled torture for some students. Two students, Hannah and Trevor,⁹

⁸ That’s what it had been called when I was in elementary school.

⁹ Every student in the school adopted an English name for their classes with the Western teachers. Sadly, I did not know anyone’s given Vietnamese name, and honestly never gave it much thought. This was the case in China as well; students were told they had to choose an Anglicized name as Western teachers could not (or would not) pronounce their names

especially struggled. I felt for both Hannah and Trevor, who effectively could speak very little English and unsurprisingly had poor reading skills. Hannah had the added burden of a cleft lip, while Trevor was always eclipsed by his more skilled twin brother. We did not assess at that school, but I would not be surprised if they tested well-below grade level. Popcorn reading was torture for them, for me, and for the rest of the class as we listened to them struggle. Yet it was the main way in which I tried to increase student participation in reading texts. My colleagues had no advice to offer me and couldn't conceive dropping the practice, so we powered through—I just helped read alongside Hannah and Trevor when it came to be their turns. Neither one ever spoke much in my class and found their own ways to armor up and protect themselves (Brown, SXSU, 2017). Hannah's pronunciation even of Vietnamese was impeded by her cleft lip, and she relied predominantly on her precocious friend Nina. She did her best to become invisible. Trevor, fluent in his native language and clearly a funny and outgoing child to the class, relied on his twin brother Noah for help. He became disruptive, telling jokes in Vietnamese that my teaching assistant would scold him for. Had I known what I know now about differentiated instruction, and had I been a reflective enough teacher to recognize that the practice I as employing was doing nothing academically nor emotionally for these children, I would surely have stopped. Yet I didn't, and instead watched passively as Hannah slipped farther and farther into invisibility while Trevor resorted to increasingly disruptive 'class clown' techniques. Without realizing it, I was creating a classroom culture riddled with anxiety and shame.

However, I should have known this even without reading the latest literature on round-robin reading. When I first arrived in Vietnam, I jumped at the chance to learn the language with the same enthusiasm with which I had approached Chinese. The Vietnamese teachers offered an optional night class for the Western staff, and I eagerly signed up. I did not stay long, however, since despite having some familiarity with tones from Mandarin, I simply could not wrap my tongue around the diacritical marks that deceptively twisted and curled simple monosyllabic words. Then, there were the round robin reading sessions. I cringed as every single word I spoke was corrected, attempting to model the teacher's tones and being shown again and again, in the nicest way possible, that I was saying it all wrong. I quickly gave up and left the class. It was painful, and yet I had the luxury of walking away from this optional class. Hannah and Trevor did not have that option. Unfortunately, I was not reflective enough in the moment to recognize that I, too, was fostering an English reading environment of anxiety and shame.

Empathy

Having had the same experience with the negative side of round robin reading myself, it should have been easy enough to stop round robin reading and truly empathize with my students. Perhaps this would have helped Hannah and Trevor engage in reading. Brown identifies empathy as the antidote to shame: "Empathy is 'me, too.' And if you don't think you're alone, you can't stay in shame" (SXSU, 2017, 30:12). Theresa Wiseman identified four defining attributes across the literature on empathy; sees the world as others see it; is non-judgmental; understanding of another's feelings; communicates the understanding (Wiseman, 1996, 1165). Her work does not explore how to foster empathy but merely tries to understand it as a concept. To Wiseman, empathy is an exchange and "the consequences of an empathic interaction is that 'empathes' have a basic need to be understood satisfied, they feel valued and more ready to understand themselves and change" (Wiseman, 1996, p. 1166). Therefore, any student is going to be more likely to learn following an "empathic interaction" where they feel understood and valued. It may not be that the teacher has to have experienced the exact same situation, but that they demonstrate to students a sense of non-judgmental caring. I had never experienced divorce, but I *have* been scared. I may have been non-judgmental and understanding, but I never communicated that to Farah. I never said to her, "I know what is going on, and I know you feel scared. I feel scared too sometimes.

correctly. Yet how powerful is a name in shaping a child's identity and sense of self? This could be its own SPN topic and deserves further development than I have space for in this inquiry.

This is what I do when I feel scared. If you ever want to talk, I am here.” I wish that I had.

While empathy builds positive relationships, it cannot be expected that a teacher will build a strong empathetic connection with every single child in their classroom. It is a noble aspiration, but quite often time and curricular constraints get in the way. However, Souers and Hall (2016) argue that a teacher can aim for a *safe and healthy enough* space. Teachers can do this by modeling and teaching appropriate strategies for handling stress. Souers and Hall encourage educators by giving them a simple guide to providing trauma informed care:

If we can provide consistency, positivity, and integrity in all our interactions with our students, we’ll establish a relationship that is safe enough for them. And if we initiate a repair whenever necessary, earnestly working to model and engage in appropriate interpersonal behaviors, we can cultivate an environment that is healthy enough for them. If they know we will be relentless in our support of their endeavors, forgive them the errors they make along the way, and maintain our determination that they will live up to their potential and our expectations, then relationships will follow. Nothing more than that is required. (p.96)

There are three main takeaways for teachers: teachers must carry the above mentioned attitudes in student interactions to establish relationships; they must model conflict resolution; and they must demonstrate to children that mistakes and errors do not extinguish potential. If teachers can do this, then whenever individual situations of stress arise, the teacher will already have established a *safe enough* classroom space to work through it.

To be able to step out of survival mode (the brain’s stress response), students need to be able to identify their feelings, name what is happening to them, and be attuned to their biology. This then gives them power to master their emotions. Souers and Hall recommend directly teaching students about the difference between their downstairs brain and upstairs brain. As previously mentioned, the downstairs brain refers to the limbic area, the part of the brain that controls emotion and the *flight, fight or freeze* response (2016, p. 33). When students are in their downstairs brain, they cannot learn and retain new information. The student may start withdrawing, daydreaming, hiding or wandering (*flight*); acting out, behaving aggressively, acting silly, being hyperactive (*fight*); or exhibiting numbness, refusing to speak or answer, giving a blank look (*freeze*). When this is happening, the goal should not be to punish children in order to teach them a lesson, as this results in the further alienating sensation of shame. It is important to remember that children physically *cannot* learn in this state. Therefore, the goal of teachers needs to be “to get them into the higher-functioning part of their brain—the prefrontal cortex—which enables them to think, reason, and maintain flexibility” (p. 31).

Fortunately, the body has a natural antidote to the stress hormone cortisol in the bonding hormone known as oxytocin. Oxytocin is released by “social activities such as laughing, talking, and even hugging” (Hammond, 2015, p. 44). This does not mean that one should necessarily hug a child who is screaming and yelling—every situation will require a healthy amount of practical wisdom—but it does provide hope for children who have an uphill battle with toxic stress. The more that a teacher is able to build an environment with a relationship that is fostered on positivity and empathy, the more the brain’s amygdala can stand down. Therefore, on a biochemical level, adults who can form “close, nurturing relationships with their children can foster resilience in them that protects them from many of the worst effects of a harsh early environment” (Tough, 2012, p. 28). Even when students cannot speak the same language, humor and shared laughter can create a powerful bond. When a negative behavior in response to stress does occur, a teacher should consider the underlying *motive* behind it, and address the cause, not the symptom. Souers and Hall (2016) say that “We may not be able to stop the trauma from happening, but we can give students the skills and strategies to manage the intensity, through intentional teaching in a

safe, predictable environment” (p. 34). Therefore, based on the research behind trauma informed care, I believe it is important for teachers to recognize that behavior may be a symptom of stress, show students strategies for handling stress, and demonstrate empathy if they intend to have a safe classroom.

Power of Observation

Another pre-requisite for a teacher to build safe and healthy enough spaces is to ensure that the teacher takes the time to see their students and the interactions within the room. This is perhaps best done through careful, intentional observation. How can one help their students if they do not know them? How can you know your students if you do not see them, *truly* see them? Had I observed Farah, I may have seen which students in my class were most empathetic and paired her up with them as partners. Moreover, I might have seen that she felt safest expressing herself in art. Her third-grade teacher did this wonderfully and that may have been a contributing factor to her opening up the following year. My experience in Montessori has given me insight into fully observant, empathetic teaching in action:

Dr. Maria Montessori developed a style of education that allows the space for a teacher to be empathetic while also charging teachers with the task of being a refuge for children. Children develop their own intrinsic motivation and value as they explore independence, but within the careful safety of the teacher: “Dr. Montessori saw the task of childhood as being to become increasingly independent, and the role of the adult as assisting children toward that independence [...] Dr. Montessori maintained the teacher should serve as a safe haven whenever the child needs that” (Stoll Lillard, 2007, p. 265).

In a lecture to teachers in 1915, Montessori called for teachers to shed their old habits of too much talking in favor of learning how to be still, be patient, and observe: “To observe means to be there, means to be making an effort to see, not to see just those things which one can see easily, but to see the special phenomenon which will develop in the children” (1915/2007, p. 45). Though it feels strange to essentially relinquish power as controller and move into the space as guide, the Montessori Method of allowing the teacher to carefully observe the child is conducive to trauma informed teaching. This can help teachers to be more proactive in their actions as well.

If a certain situation frequently causes a stress reaction from a child, then one might think about how that situation can be minimized or altered. I believe that if teachers can take the time to step back and look at what is happening to the child, that “special phenomenon” as Montessori describes it, they will be able to see below the surface and perhaps better understand what is truly going on in the child’s world. This careful balance between warmth and control, action and inaction opens up many opportunities for learning. Careful observation also allows the teacher to consider the unique interests of the child and consider ways to bring what is familiar from their home experience into the classroom.

CHAPTER 3

Finding the Familiar: Intentionally Linking Home and School Cultures

Seemingly on every cultural level, Oman was a very different place from the United States. Yet despite the difference in language, dress, and beliefs, I could generally find common ground with my students on some shared interest: be that the latest Pixar or Disney movie, the rich stories that we read together, or our science topics. I felt I could engage with any student, that is, any student until I met Ma'ad in my second year of teaching. Ma'ad was Omani, and not very interested in our class. I could not get him to engage. I suspected he could speak more English than he let on, as he was just as disengaged in the Arabic (his native language) classes. There was no traumatic event like Farah; from what I knew he came from a relatively stable home environment. It was alarming for me to find a seven-year-old already so disengaged from his school experience, and I believed that if I could just find something to get him interested, I could "win" him back, so to speak. One day, he was sitting next to another student who was describing to me their drawing of the Omani landscape, complete with camels. At this, Ma'ad perked up and joined in, adding that he had camels. I asked him how many and he replied with a smile, "Too much,"¹⁰ Miss. I have too many camels." I observed him as he spoke and noticed a light in his eyes that I had not seen before. I decided to try something the next day and gave him a math problem involving camels. He was delighted and eagerly took to solving it. Then, I found a book about a little boy who goes with his camel to Dubai. Ma'ad, who had never shown much interest in reading, wanted to read that book again and again. Though he could not read it on his own, it served as a catalyst that fueled his sudden interest in English again. Whenever I could, I gave him prompts or stories about Middle Eastern children or camels. He frequently requested the story about Dubai or Aladdin, correcting my American shwa to help me pronounce it the Arabic way.¹¹ It was only when he talked about camels or the desert that his English came easily and I saw him smile. It seems that when I finally took the time to find something he was familiar with and incorporate it into our learning, he engaged. How is it that something as simple as giving him a mirror into his own experience was so successful? And why had it taken me so long to figure that out?

Reality Pedagogy

In the past, education theorists considered children empty vessels to be filled, but modern interpretations informed by understandings of culture and development recognize that children are anything but empty. Due to the fact that children learn in culturally informed environments, they already have established neural pathways that are largely informed by their culture, or as Hammond puts it "culture is software for the brain's hardware" (2015, p. 22). Educator Discepola points out that "our student's culture, interests and backgrounds can no longer be left out of learning" (ISTE, 2016, 4:25). This means that it is important to teach children in a way that sparks their interest and uses learning structures already familiar to them. This is done best by making connections between the home and school. Educator Christopher Emdin calls for teachers to use something called *reality pedagogy*, "an approach to teaching and learning that has a primary goal of meeting each student on his or her own cultural and emotional turf" (2016, p. 27). In Chapter Two, I discussed at length the necessary emotional components of vulnerability and empathy, but what does Emdin mean by cultural? In this instance, it is helpful to think of culture in reference to the community group that children identify with, in addition to the socially influenced aspects of their home and classroom experiences. Emdin argues that one needs to see the student as they authentically are and find the learning strategies that most speak to their experience. For example, *neoindigenous* students

¹⁰ Too" was frequently used instead of the grammatically correct "so" by my first language Arabic speakers. "Much" was also frequently confused with "many". Despite his grammatical errors, I was delighted to hear Ma'ad speak English.

¹¹ He told me to say "Al Adeen" and thought the American way of saying Aladdin was hilariously wrong.

(BIPOC urban Americans) benefit from assessments in the form of rap cyphers¹² (Emdin, 2016, p. 65). While this may look different for every child, “one thing that we do know is that it can only be triggered in a place that values the codes that students bring to the classroom” (p. 176). For Ma’ad, his code involved camels and seeing someone who looked like him in a story. While I do not know what my classroom will look like in the future, I think the lessons from Emdin are valuable regardless of the student population. This is because according to Emdin, the goal of education is self-actualization for the students (2016). I too, believe in a *telos* of education centered in helping students realize self-actualization.

A teacher should understand the reality of a student’s cultural context, but Emdin warns that the American urban *neoindividual* face a significant amount of bias against them. Teachers often see or receive pressure to “see urban youth of color as a group that is potentially dangerous and needs to be saved from themselves” (p.36). If a teacher sees a student as potentially dangerous, then that is going to impact the way that the teacher interacts with that student. I believe it is human nature supported by neuroscience: anyone who is perceived as a safety threat will be kept at a distance. As previously discussed, our brains naturally seek safety and move away from threat. It seems that if a teacher believes their students are a threat, then they cannot invest the human element that is so critical to including them in the classroom. They may react with microaggressions, thereby communicating to the student that they are not welcome and many of the unequal punitive measures against Black students mentioned in Chapter One arise.

The safe and caring classrooms that Brene Brown advocates for cannot happen if the one adult who should be the catalyst of a safe classroom is on guard. The rest spirals. If the teacher doesn’t feel safe, how can the students who look to the teacher for guidance? Without safety, learning will be next to impossible. Therefore, this whole notion of seeing students as dangerous, whether consciously or unconsciously, is an impediment to learning. Emdin advocates that educators must be retrained to see urban youth as a *neoindividual* culture and as such, their cultural attitudes, patterns, and language deserve as much respect as any other cultural group. According to Emdin, just as a teacher may curiously explore ways to incorporate Middle Eastern culture into the classroom, they should also consider ways to incorporate Black culture. As Emdin says, “to be an ally to the *neoindividual*, the teacher must unpack the indoctrination that we have all been subject to” (Emdin, 40). For a teacher to be an ally, they need to connect the students’ home cultural learning experiences into the classroom.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Finding ways to connect a student’s home culture, language and experiences into the school environment is also a central tenet of culturally responsive teaching. Zaretta Hammond (2015) defines culturally responsive teaching as “the process of using familiar cultural information to scaffold learning” (p. 156). Though it goes by a different name, this is similar to Emdin’s reality pedagogy. Both state that a child’s home culture has already embedded neural pathways that an educator should take advantage of rather than ignore. These neural pathways are like “a footpath through a forest” (p. 43), that allows the brain to solidify long term learning into automatic pathways. The human brain has something called *neuroplasticity*, or the ability to continuously grow new neural pathways (p.42). This neuroplasticity is what allows us to learn, but learning within already established neural pathways allows for faster links to deep thinking and long term retention (p. 43). What does this mean in regard to culture? A culturally responsive teacher uses the established neural pathways of culture to teach a difficult new concept. For example, a student who comes from a strong oral tradition may best memorize a new mathematical equation in a song.

¹² Rap battles

American pedagogical theorist educator Gloria Ladson Billings discusses how culturally relevant (responsive) teaching requires three components: academic achievement/student learning, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness (Brunsahan, 2018). The first component, academic achievement, needs to involve appropriate challenge that holds all students, regardless of culture, to a high academic achievement level. Teachers need to have faith that all children can achieve deep critical thinking skills. Too often children, particularly children of color, are taught to a test (Brunsahan, 2018). The second element is cultural competence; “true cultural competence is the ability and knowledge to help students grow in the understanding of their own culture while acquiring skills in at least one other culture” (6.24). Often this requires connections with parents and the community, as well as the teacher providing stories that act as windows and mirrors. She explains sociopolitical consciousness as “the *so what?* factor” (10:45), the explanation of how the content is relevant and important to their lives. Many students, not unlike Ma’ad, need to be able to see both their culture and the relevance of the content represented in the classroom before they can engage with learning.

A key tenet of culturally responsive teaching is ensuring that student voices and experiences are reflected in the classroom. Children need to see themselves represented in the classroom, be that in the stories they read or in relevant math equations. This should be expanded beyond cultural or ethnic boundaries to include all students of difference. Ma’ad, for example, saw learning to read in English as a worthwhile experience only when he saw someone who looked like him. Yet what of a homogenous class? Is there still value in seeking out learning experiences that expose students to other ways of life? Some might argue no, and indeed right now in America there is a bitter debate over whether nondominant perspectives of history should or should not be allowed in the classroom. However, there are many who argue *for* exposing children to experiences unfamiliar to their own in the effort to show common humanity. Rudine Sims Bishop argues that classrooms need to be full of metaphorical windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors (1990). This is most easily done through the books and stories we tell children. For children, books can provide the windows to other experiences and “books may be one of the few places where children who are socially isolated and insulated from the larger world may meet people unlike themselves” (para. 5). Sims Bishop goes on to warn that “If they see only reflections of themselves, they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world—a dangerous ethnocentrism” (para. 5). It may be that no matter what a classroom composition is, even if teacher and class all share the same ethnic background, showing experiences of others is valuable. Teachers from homogenous communities may find it easier to connect home cultures to the learning experiences and should still strive to include diverse experiences from the broader world.

One part of culturally responsive teaching that should be universally applied is Ladson Billings and Hammond’s emphasis on the necessity of challenging student thinking. Naturally, this is always important, but Ladson Billings and Hammond argue that there are some students who have historically been left out of the high-achieving category because their teachers simply did not believe they were capable. In classrooms where students felt that teachers had high expectations of them, students were more likely to have a mastery orientation: “they wanted to learn, rather than simply get a good grade” (Stoll Lillard, 2007, p.279). If I am not “building a classroom culture that celebrates the opportunity to get feedback and reframes errors as information” (Hammond, 2015, p. 104), then I am doing my students a disservice. Students look to teachers to see if they will be Brofrenbrenner’s “irrationally crazy adult,” one who will believe in them despite setbacks, as well as challenge them to achieve their best. I examine the balance between demandingness and warmth further in Chapter Four, but it is worth considering the pervasive pedagogy of faith that strengthens classroom cultures.

In *Embracing a Language of Spirituality*, Llewellyn (2006) examines the difference between educators who operate from a pedagogy of faith versus a pedagogy of achievement. I know that once the school year begins and the pressure of standardized and benchmark testing set in, teachers can become susceptible to seeing student progress only in terms of graded achievement scores. However, I believe

that there is so much more to learning than just test scores. Though I also fall into this trap, and during my graduate course strove to get full marks on every assignment to “prove” to myself that I was learning, I realized that I too judged myself by what Llewellyn describes as a pedagogy of achievement, one that defines learning in numeric scores (2006, p.103). In contrast, a pedagogy of faith considers learning to be a communal sharing of ideas and shaping of knowledge (p. 103). In the article, Llewellyn says that “learners and teachers express a relationship based on faith not through articulation of formal doctrines, but rather through openness to contextual, experiential meaning and trust in ordinary, day to day exchanges” (p. 102).

These ordinary, day to day exchanges make up the classroom culture and teachers should be open to *all* children, even those from different backgrounds to their own. I did not give up on Ma’ad but believed if I could just find the key to engagement he would learn. Teaching with a pedagogy of faith requires teachers to “risk seeing the other person in fresh and new ways, to believe that the possibility of growth is always present” (Llewellyn, 2006, p. 103). In other words, the teacher must be willing to reexamine the child from a growth mindset, reframing whatever flaws or setbacks there might be as new opportunities for growth. Failure in the classroom may be due to stress (feeling unsafe), or that they do not see themselves represented in the classroom (feeling excluded). However, that does not mean that a student must be defined by those experiences nor that the teacher’s view of their future be reduced to diametric scores. Faith provides a belief in the student that they may not be where they should be right now, but they have the potential to get there. Stepping into the classroom with a pedagogy of faith requires seeing *all* students as capable and deserving of edification.

Finding Triggers

In my Montessori classroom, there was a little girl named Ella. Though she came from a white, socioeconomically advantaged family, she was very easily triggered (and triggering). If I was being generous, I would describe her as a young lawyer in training. Some days, I felt much less generous. One day, I was covering for my head teacher, and it was time to line up. Ella was quick to point out that (in her opinion) I had put the wrong child in front.¹³ We needed to get to recess, and I believed I had chosen the correct child. Ella, in her typical style, was insistent and (in my opinion) very insolent and disrespectful. She was challenging and undermining my authority (or so I felt) in front of the other children. I was triggered. My blood pressure started to rise, and I went into a *fight* psychological response. For the next few minutes I argued and snapped at her. She matched my level and went beyond, yelling, crying and eventually refusing to come out to play. I did not win the power struggle, but instead, only ended up making myself and a small child feel terrible. Here I was, the teacher, pushing a six-year-old to cry. Was she wrong about the line leader? Yes. Was I giving her a safe space to come to the realization that she was wrong, apologize, and move on? Absolutely not.

A culturally responsive teacher needs to be aware of their own triggers and responses to perceived threat in the same way that they must be aware of their own implicit bias. The two are often inextricably linked as bias may be informed by threat. Emdin points out that *neoindigenous* students are often seen as dangerous or “problem students” (2016, p. 32). As discussed in Chapter One, those biases lead to a disproportionate number of expulsions and suspensions for students of color. For students to feel safe teachers must eliminate any bias or microaggressions that are causing stress as well as build connections and relationships to include aspects of the student’s home culture in the classroom.

Though students from marginalized communities are more likely to experience microaggressions, ACEs do not discriminate and can be found across all races and socioeconomic classes (Souers and Hall, 2016).

¹³ There was a line leader rotation in the class to avoid exactly this scenario. The line leader was always chosen by the previous one the day before by picking a name from a jar.

Brains that have developed coping mechanisms to deal with toxic stress will not differentiate between home and the classroom. Both students and teachers come into a space with their triggers intact, but it is the role of the mindful adult to identify them before they react.

Triggers are often set off by the teacher feeling threatened in a particular situation. Hammond explains that “there are five elements of social interaction that activate strong threats and rewards in the brain, thus influencing how we react in given situations: *standing, certainty, connection, control and equity*” (p. 65). No doubt with Ella, my control and certainty were threatened. I was the only adult in the room and wanted to prove my competence to myself. A child telling me I had made a mistake threatened that, as well as my control over the group as a trusted decision maker. However, did it really? Or did I just *feel* like it did? With Ella, I should have tried Hammond’s *S.O.D.A. strategy*: “Stop, Observe, Detach and Awaken” (2015, p. 67). The first step of stopping is critical and yet, it is also the hardest for me. So much of teaching requires quick reactions. However, the *S.O.D.A. strategy* is based on neuroscience research that shows just 10 seconds of buffering time between the moment of trigger and our reaction can “preempt an amygdala hijack and avoid responding negatively” (p. 67). How often have we adults told children to take a few deep breaths when they feel scared or angry? I know I have and yet, I have a hard time remembering to do that myself. Often, it is only after the fact that I recognize how much a moment triggered me. Nevertheless, if a teacher is going to create an environment full of both overt and subtle behaviors that promote inclusivity and safety, then triggers should be removed, as well as any attitudes that stand in opposition to these characteristics.

CHAPTER 4

Adopting Attitudes: Connecting the Strange and Familiar in Practice

The concept of culture has been examined and the practical truths embedded with trauma informed and culturally responsive teaching theories explored. Thus, it is time to connect theory to practice and explore what elements must be present in a classroom to create an empathetic, vulnerable, and inclusive classroom culture. The guiding question remains: *What does this classroom look like?* I believe it is necessary for a teacher to consider the embedded background and any stressful experiences that may impact a child, but in addition to that, what kinds of attitudes should they carry into the classroom and model for the children? Montessori spoke about the necessity of new attitudes in her 1915 address:

He must prepare himself not only with a culture which is easily acquired but with attitudes of character, called virtues, which he may acquire little by little in the exercise of his work. This is not easy to obtain in a teacher who is accustomed to teach in the methods used up to now, which we might call the old method. The point is that the teacher must not learn a new method but must acquire new attitudes. That is why this is not so easy in the actual practice, although it seems so simple in words. (cited in 2007, p. 44)

Teachers get to choose what attitude they bring into the classroom, and those attitudes, from what we learned in Chapter One, are reciprocally transmitted. Ultimately, I believe the classroom culture I strive to create must have a balance of both the familiar practices and strange new attitudes. Perhaps the best way to find this balance is to be informed by the previously examined explanations of culture and development in order to foster an intrinsic love of learning, use restorative discipline practices, recognize the value of play, and become warm demanders. There are moments from my own practice strewn throughout as I explore these ideas.

Intrinsic Motivation

A large part of the Montessori curriculum that I now work with is centered on helping foster a child's intrinsic love of learning. Montessori believed that the traditional classroom, with its design inspiration from industrial era factories, was stifling to learning (Stoll Lillard, 2007). Instead, she sought to revolutionize education by creating a different kind of classroom, a classroom that allowed children to move freely and master skills in their own time rather than prescribed subject blocks. In contrast to the thinking of her day, Montessori believed that children "must decide and choose for themselves all the time...they cannot learn through obedience to the commands of another" (Montessori, 1989, p. 26 cited in Stoll Lillard, 2007, pg. 80). Some critics of this style of education cannot imagine how such a structure could resist falling into chaos. Yet, it doesn't. Children move about busily, making choices on what materials they want to work with, for how long, and then putting them away when they are done. Perhaps the most surprising element to me when I first stepped foot in the classroom were the three simple rules: Respect Your Self, Respect Others, Respect the Environment. If children were doing something that was not respectful of one of the three, then the teacher acts as a guide and helps them to realize their mistake and make amends. The tool used to make amends in the classroom is the Peace Rose, a simple tool that provides a bridge for children to practice resolution skills. That was it, and it works! The youngest children may need guidance on getting started, but many times I have seen four and five year olds independently get the Peace Rose and come to a resolution on their own. The teacher does not have to entice with a reward or a punishment for any misbehavior. It turns out that in the absence of this common disciplinary practice of rewards and punishments, children can still learn.

Montessori figured out nearly a hundred years ago what research is now proving, positive discipline is far

more effective than carrots and sticks as a classroom management style (Smith et al., 2015). This may be because children are hardwired to learn, and offering rewards cheapens the lesson. In my own Omani classroom, I mistakenly tried to use a stoplight system for years, having been told that visual representation of behavioral standings was an effective class management strategy. Abdulkareem, a particularly bright but interruptive boy, challenged that idea. One day as we were learning about autism spectrum, he blurted out, “Ms. Brooke, I think I have autism because I am always in the red!” His connection to the fact that he was “always in the red” with what he had just learned was a neurological difference greatly troubled me, and I quietly stopped using the stoplight system after that. When that happened, I found that it was just as effective to give him verbal reminders. Perhaps, as Stoll Lillard suggests, I was using an extrinsic motivation (don’t get your name put in the red) because I was influenced by “a cultural assumption that children do not like school and cannot be motivated in school any other way” (2007, p.152). This model was merely trying to force Abdulkareem into compliance of what I expected classroom behavior to be like (and if I am being honest, my social control may have felt threatened by his outbursts). Research shows that for students of *any* age, “receiving a reward for engaging in an activity negatively impacts (among other things) motivation for that activity once the reward is removed” (p. 157). The early childhood age group that I hope to work with in the future is already intrinsically motivated to learn. The rewards of learning are new knowledge and skills—nothing more needs to be tacked on.

Abdulkareem proved to me very clearly that he not only wanted to do well in school, but that the stop light system I was using was negatively impacting his developing sense of self. This tool was teaching him that there was *something wrong with him*, planting daily seeds of shame. Now, let me be clear: there are times when a student will become distracted and need to be reengaged. While Montessori strives to set up the classroom in a way that children have a plethora of interesting materials at their fingertips, there have been off-task moments. This was also certainly true in the traditional school settings I’ve worked in; depending on the subject and difficulty level, some students had difficulty engaging. As discussed in Chapter Two, some children may react to perceived threats in their environment and go into behaviors stemming from their instinctual downstairs brain. What does a teacher do in these situations? While every situation will have to be handled on a case-by-case system, I believe teachers must carry an *anti-shame* attitude towards any methods they engage with. They must consider whether a punishment is necessary and whether the intended punishment will help repair the relationship that was broken or not. Instead of focusing on a violation of *rules*, teachers should consider restorative practice that focus on the violation of *people and relationships* (Smith et al., 2015, p. 24). If any punishment is intended to make children feel ashamed, humiliated, or fearful in an effort to gain compliance, then it does not belong in the classroom (p. 12). My stoplight system, though I did not realize, was a public shaming tool and was beginning to destroy a child’s enthusiasm for school. I had never considered that children could actually be empowered to solve their own conflicts in the classroom, like they are with the Peace Rose. Particularly for those who teach young children, we must always consider the methods and tools that we use. Instead of trying to control behavior, we might develop an attitude that sees behavior as learning opportunities.

The Power of Play

At first, I thought of including play in the chapter on trauma, as play can be a relief to trauma to help children feel comfortable. However, it can also be an avenue for culturally inclusive opportunities, and therefore is relevant to connecting the two issues and led me to the conclusion that a class should play together to learn together. This is because playing, especially that which is complex and purposeful, is learning. Fred Rogers once said that play is the work of childhood. Famed child psychologist Vygotsky considered play the means by which children overcome impulsiveness and develop higher mental functions (Bordova and Leong, 2015, p. 317). Developmental approaches to learning “emphasize play—autonomous choice of activity—as the primary mode in which young children construct their understanding of the world” (Jones & Reynolds, 2011, p. 2). However, the research suggests teachers

should not promote just any kind of play, and the ubiquity and vagueness of the term may leave many feeling wary. Early childhood consultant Gaye Gronlund (2010) clarifies that high-level, purposeful, and complex play is what needs to be developed, encouraged, and present in the classroom (p. 7). This play is “so all-engaging that the children stand tall in confidence, using skills in a variety of ways and symbolically representing what they know and are learning about the world” (p. 11) While play is often protected in early childhood settings such as preschools, for older children it is often left only to recess and taken away as a common form of punishment. Yet studies show that recess increases children’s attention span and productivity in the classroom, improves grades, attendance, classroom behaviors, and cognitive performance (E. Neff, personal communication, June 5 2021). I believe play should not just be left to recess, but playful attitudes should be embedded throughout the classroom culture. For preschool and kindergarten children, that will involve more sociodramatic activities (Jones & Reynolds, 2011, p. 10). For older children, they become “serious players” intent on *investigations* that they undertake as well as more industrious constructive play such as writing stories, acting in Reader’s Theater, or drawing (p. 11). Regardless of age, in play, children are safe to take risks, practice their skills, and remain engaged.

In addition, for both the developing child and the adult teacher, play can be therapeutic and liberating. Psychotherapist Esther Perel explains play as a medium to escape the restrictions of the present; “You can maintain your freedom there, and freedom in confinement comes from our imaginations” (Shepard & Padman, 2021, 19:37). In Gronlund’s 2010 work *Developmentally Appropriate Play*, she outlines the power play has for helping children develop their self-regulation skills to cope with events and situations: “the enjoyment children experience in play relieves stress and anxiety. And when pretending, frightening feelings can be dealt with in safe ways” (p.106). Sometimes, play provides opportunities to help students understand large ideas about beliefs, values, biases, and stereotypes (Gronlund, 2010, p. 105). This is because in play, children may be acting out concepts from the culture they have unconsciously picked up, such as exclusionary tactics of creating in-groups and out-groups. If I want to create a safe and inclusive classroom, I must be cognizant and mindful of children’s play so that I can meet the call to challenge exclusionary behaviors and use them instead as learning opportunities.

I have seen firsthand how students try to make sense of a traumatic experience through play. A little boy in my class died suddenly this year. As a Montessori teacher, we were able to give the children the time and space that they needed to grieve and were encouraged to appropriately model our own grief. I sat back and observed the children interact with a room that we had carefully arranged to provide more opportunities for creative play. Adam, the deceased child’s best friend, was having a particularly hard time. The first day back after the news, he spent a great deal of time drawing a picture at our art easel, cluttering it with many angry faces. Art is a type of constructivist play, and I recognized that he was trying to process his intense feelings. As I usually do, I asked him to tell me about his drawing. “This is Mario,” he said pointing to a stick figure with a sad face and tears behind bars. “He’s frozen in jail and won’t ever get out because there are bad guys everywhere,” gesturing to the angry faces that filled the page. Emboldened by my graduate level understanding of play and empathy, I decided to dig deeper. Over the next few minutes, we discussed how Mario was feeling (“sad and mad he can’t get out”), who the people were in our lives that we could go to when we felt sad and mad (“his mom”), and what she might be able to do (“give him a hug”). He was not going to make the connection to himself, though I tried a little bit, and only wanted to talk about his fictional Mario. Afterwards, I offered to give him a hug and he accepted, saying he was going to take the picture home for his mom. Though it was a bit uncomfortable, I was glad to have stepped into that space. It was a bit unnerving, as I did not know how Adam would react. Nevertheless, what I understand from the research on empathy and vulnerability, as well as the theory of trauma informed practice, is that an adult should not ignore the pain a child is experiencing. Instead, they should proactively find ways to help them, like orchestrating playful moments or empathetic conversations, even if that requires stepping outside of their comfort zone into the strange unknown.

Being a Warm Demander

Teachers who long to create safe and inclusive classrooms must be wary of a potential trap: sacrificing content for feelings. Indeed, teachers must have an attitude that values high standards in learning for all students. Culturally relevant teaching requires that educators be *warm demanders* (Hammond, 2015). I would add that teachers need to be *playful and warm demanders*. This term warns against teachers having acceptance without accountability. They need to have a “tough love” stance with their students, not letting them get by with anything less than their individual best. This requires a challenging balance between active demandingness and personal warmth (Hammond, 2015, p. 99). Too far in either direction without this balance may result in a teacher becoming an incompetent sentimentalist, a lenient elitist, or a cold technocrat (p. 99). To be a warm demander, the teacher must establish a strong relational foundation while adhering to the pedagogy of faith mentioned in Chapter Three. If you have a faith in each child’s potential to grow, and an understanding that it is your job to help them do it, then you cannot let them slide with anything beyond their best: “As warm demanders, our job is to get students to recognize that putting forth effort is worth the risk” (p. 109). Therefore, the classroom must be a space that maximizes the space for risks, another key component of vulnerable classrooms. Students must see risks as progress on the road to success, and they must be encouraged to always try their hardest even when they are unsure of the outcome. Montessori advocated for classrooms to be spaces that have “a friendly feeling towards errors” (Montessori, 1967 as cited in Stoll Lillard, 2007p. 277). Just as with modeling strategies for handling stress discussed in Chapter Two, the best way to cultivate this feeling is through modeling and action.

Unfortunately, I think it may be tempting for inexperienced early childhood educators to fall into the role of the sweet, undemanding sentimentalist. In my first year of teaching, when I was confronted with a student who did not conform to my expectations (i.e. implicit biases) of how a Chinese student should behave, I did just that. Angus was not timid, shy, or quiet in class. In fact, he was quite loud and quick to point it out when I made mistakes. I was insecure and often felt triggered by Angus. At the time, I was teaching his class in China, and I was armed only with a rudimentary TEFL certificate and a shaky foundational knowledge of the language I spoke. I was no match for his superior knowledge and therefore let him get by in class with little work. He was bored by the tests the English center provided and thus, did not take them seriously. I let him do the bare minimum, as I was just puzzled by his (in my opinion) very *non-Chinese* behavior. I was warm towards him, but I demanded very little. As a result, I can confidently say that Angus learned very little in my class. Angus did not fit my expectations of how a student should behave. Over the years, I believe I have learned enough to realize that students come in all shapes and attitudes. However, I am still developing my skill as a warm demander. To truly be an effective one, I must both embrace the strange uncomfortable feelings of vulnerability to build trust and rapport. Yet, I must also show a personal regard for student lives and find ways to connect the things they are familiar with into the classroom. A warm demander must *earn* the right to demand, Hammond explains, with a mix of personal warmth and authentic concern (p. 98). This quality cannot be quantified and can only be developed in classroom cultures that are ripe for those conditions. I may not have helped Angus, but I believe I was a warm demander for Devi.

Devi was a little girl in my third year of teaching in Oman whose family was going through some financial difficulties. Her family fell behind in making school payments. At that time, my school’s solution was to remove the offending students to the library to sit *and do nothing* through the day to teach the parents a lesson. When they came for *my* Devi,¹⁴ I was furious. I refused, so they snuck her out of her Arabic class instead. When I found out what had happened, I left my class with my teaching assistant, marched down to the library, and took her out with a strong lecture about how you *cannot* punish a child

¹⁴ As a teacher, it feels only human to use the possessive pronoun towards the students in one’s class. They are *your* students, after all. practice of sending children to the library stopped shortly thereafter.

for their parent's finances. Devi's mother came into the school to thank me tearfully, though I honestly just could not believe that I had to even do that.

After having fought so publicly to get Devi back into my class, I think I earned the respect of Devi and her family. The extra effort it took to fight my administration also awoke my inner belief in the *telos* of education to be helping every individual reach their full potential. Prior to this incident, Devi had been a bit flighty (or perhaps I had just let her get away with distractions), but after this, all that stopped. I did not know how much time I had with her. There was the potential that her parents' financial situation would not improve. I started to demand, warmly, that she give her all during the time that she had at school. Devi responded, and her writing and reading skills subsequently skyrocketed. She moved from the bottom of the class in terms of ability to solidly in the middle. I gave her the tools she needed to get there and demanded that she do it. And she did. The incident just proved that Devi was always capable of doing more, but I had just not yet earned the right nor, if I am being fully honest, had the desire to be her warm demander. It took the fight with an unfair policy to show that she could rely on my support, but it does not always take this extreme of a situation for a teacher to become a warm demander. I know from the example with Angus and my general personality that I am inclined towards being a sentimentalist, only focused on rapport and trust without any accountability. To be a warm demander though, one has to encourage what Hammond calls "productive struggle" (p. 13), or the necessary strategies to work through difficult challenges. While I cannot truthfully say that I do that for every student under my charge, I certainly hope to.

Becoming a Scholar-Practitioner

For me, the process of becoming a scholar-practitioner is like being in an airport. There is something oddly comforting for me about being in an airport. You hear so many languages, observe so many various outfits, watch the world coming and going, and feel the excitement of the not-yet-arrived-at destination. It truly is a firsthand study of the variety of human cultures. I love airports not just because they are the portal to new destinations, but they themselves can be surprisingly wonderful places to explore. Some are large; Heathrow's in London requires multiple buses to get from one gate to another. Some are small; the original airport in Muscat was a large single room. Some airports are visually unappealing: Moscow's airport is cold, gray, and massively uncomfortable. Some airports are downright beautiful; Kuala Lumpur's airport has a massive jungle in the center of it, and one can walk a sky rail path around it, observing the beauty of nature that was left untouched. Just like an airport, the process of becoming a scholar-practitioner is different for everyone. Yet it, too, is filled with feelings of potential and possibility.

For this creative inquiry, I began with moments, and those moments led me to questions, which led me to a desire: to be the most authentic teacher I could be. This desire is rooted in my exploration between the tension of both the familiar absolute and the strange contextual. Like an airport, there seems to be a space in between, one in which absolute knowledge meets, is informed by, and changes depending on the context. This topic of creating safe and inclusive classroom cultures, if it is not abundantly clear, fascinates me. While it was exhausting to try to synthesize a year's worth of learning and a decade of career experiences into these few pages, it was surprisingly enjoyable in the end. Extending the metaphor, this inquiry was my airport, and I explored it with the rush of someone knowing that their time was limited before they had to board the plane. I had a vague notion of my destination, but I had never traveled there before. The overall process was new, though the medium of writing and research was vaguely familiar. I got lost a few times along the way, but I was grateful for the structure to keep me safe as I explored, the directions from my guide and professor Maria Piantanida, and the eventual ideological space it launched me to; becoming a scholar-practitioner. I began with a claim, that it is important for teachers to create classroom cultures of safety and inclusion. However, that claim would turn out to be impossible to prove, as words such as *important*, *culture*, *safety*, and *inclusion* are themselves subjective

concepts. Therefore, I was quite relieved to realize that the goal of this inquiry was not as much to prove a point as it was to explore the various nuances within that point, examine the current literature that applied, and connect it to my own experiences. I needed to have contextual literacy, as this process is both iterative and recursive:

You do not wait until all the information is gathered and then try to figure out what it means. You will constantly be assessing and reassessing how the accumulating information provides insight into the intent of your study and the guiding inquiry questions (Piantanida et al., 2020, p. 157).

This was quite true for me and even as I edited, I struggled to focus on grammatical elements as I kept wanting to add more and more thoughts, moments, and ideas. Many of the moments mentioned were awakened from memory during various class discussions over the past year. Revisiting them, dissecting them, and applying new theoretical lenses helped me understand my own shortcomings and successes. As I would re-read a section, I would constantly reassess the ideas presented and make connections to others.

This writing process was also discursive, one of the many new terms during this course that I had to find in a dictionary. Indeed, reading about the nature of scholar-practitioner inquiry was almost like learning a new language as I was forced to define, integrate, and master elevated educational vocabulary. The discursive nature of the SPN allowed me to digress from subject to subject, but I had to make some difficult editorial decisions. For example, I had originally wanted to include a discussion on emergent curriculum but decided not to as I would not be able to give enough time to develop the idea properly. Emergent curriculum and the related idea of improvisational pedagogy are so expansive that it could be its own SPN topic. This discursive writing process also required a great deal of courage and vulnerability. I had to go back into my past, find moments that troubled me, put them on paper, and then apply theory to examine what was done well and what was not. I had to show up to class, without fully understanding where my inquiry was leading me, and risk emotional exposure as I presented my ideas to my classmates and professor. My learning was on display, without a certainty of outcome. Just as I advocate for students, a scholar-practitioner also requires a great deal of vulnerability.

At first the process of writing a narrative inquiry was far from naturally intuitive to me. Often, during class discussions, I felt my own stress response system because I did not know the “right answer.” The longer our discussions went on however, and the more I learned about the process of narrative inquiry, and the more I began to feel comfortable stepping outside the realm of absolute knowledge. The discussions were challenging because *there were no right answers*. Everything was contextual, rooted in my fellow classmates’ and my personal experiences and interests. A story about an experience cannot be right or wrong, but it can be viewed from many different lenses. That scared me, at first. I know it seems contradictory: even though most of my adult experiences were shaped in contextually foreign environments, I tended to feel most secure in quantifiable scientific inquiry. My fondness for the scientific is probably most evident in the discussion on current neuroscience understandings. I would have confidently written an entire paper describing the neural pathways within the brain, but this knowledge on its own, outside of the context of education, provides little benefit. These theories require context, and for them to be valuable to any future educator (myself included) it was helpful to embed them into moments.

Moment leads to question, question to investigation, investigation to conceptualization (Piantanida et al., 2019, p. 158). For me, there were many moments. The more I started to sift through the sources I had accumulated during this graduate study, the more moments and questions from my past came to mind. Again, in the interest of time and space I could not include every moment I originally wanted to, but instead focused on those that aided one overall desire: to understand what I can do in the classroom to create a sense of safety and belonging for all students. Examining these moments from a theoretical lens as a scholar-practitioner allowed me to explore the practical wisdom at the heart of those moments. It was during this process of an SPN that I was introduced to the idea of teachers as stewards of the profession.

Piantanida et al. (2019) explained that “As stewards of the profession, however, Scholar-Practitioners use the results of their investigations to fulfill their responsibilities as advocates for education and as contributors to the well-being and knowledge-base of the profession” (p. 227). I believe it is true; that those who teach must constantly be learning and educating themselves and those around them on the nature and purpose of education. I plan to always challenge myself to consider the *why* of what I am doing in the classroom in order to keep my actions in line with my authentic beliefs. Of course, that requires stepping outside the daily grind of practice and looking at education from a metacognitive level.

This process is not meant to be an isolated endeavor. As stewards of this profession, we must constantly be thinking about how our knowledge of child development and educational theories can be used to create environments conducive to learning. During the writing and class discussions, I was challenged to think how I might share my understandings with others. Indeed, I saw my concept reflected even in an explanation of the very term scholar-practitioner: “Scholar-Practitioners are challenged to create welcoming spaces where learners feel safe and respected, where a sense of community, belonging and self-worth can flourish” (Piantanida et al., 2019, p.44). It was this idea of creating a welcoming space, where every student feels like they belong, that I hoped to find an answer to in my inquiry.

While I have now accepted the fact that there can be no definitive answer, I feel more confident identifying myself as a scholar-practitioner. I hope that, after going through these pages, those reading may feel inspired to consider my moments as learning experiences for their own practice. Students come into the classroom with their own stories of trauma or cultural hierarchy. They may come into the classroom believing that they belong there, or that they do not. I believe it is the role of every educator to help all students feel that they belong. Scholar-practitioners examine their own ideas of what the purpose of education is, and my moments helped me to see that it is not to meet standards and tests scores, but to help children reach their full potential. It may also be to help teachers reach their own, “By embracing the stance of a Scholar-Practitioner, educators can embark on a journey to cultivate practical wisdom” (p. 10). Practical wisdom can help the scholarly practitioner make informed decisions about the right thing to do in challenging moments. If they fail, a scholar-practitioner mindset gives them the grace to be reflective and learn from their mistakes. At the heart of pedagogical wisdom is making wise judgments. Very often life cannot be distilled into right and wrong decisions. Perhaps no place is that more evident in the classroom, as teachers must make thousands of decisions throughout a day to help developing humans. A behavior or action often lies in a gray area laden with cultural influence, biological habit, and immediate context. As teachers, we can only hope to do the best we can with the information at hand, both about the situation *and* ourselves. This requires a certain level of curiosity to search out a theoretical understanding of such situations and a desire to distill pedagogical wisdom from them. After all, “responding in pedagogical moments where one’s own beliefs and those of other learners are challenged requires a sensibility and wisdom that elevates teaching to an art” (p.165).

The scholar-practitioner has a duty to find theoretical understanding, to research what puzzles us in our practice. Though I research with the hope to be proactive to any troubling moments, I also recognize that one can never be fully prepared for life. No teacher will be without their own troubling moments. The longer you teach I think the more you are guaranteed to encounter situations that no textbook could prepare you for. If I learned anything from living abroad, it is that the strange and the familiar experiences of life often come inextricably linked. Cultural practices are powerful influences on human development and impact the way that we speak, behave, and interact with one another. Yet, no matter what or who we are influenced by, I believe that individuals have free will and the power to make their *own* decisions. We as teachers must help children recognize that they have an intrinsic power in their own learning and the potential to realize their fullest selves. All our life journeys remain full of potential, and perhaps the most powerful thing an educator can do is prepare the students who wait in the airport with us, so they are ready for destinations yet unknown

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