

Making Magic

Decades of teaching and infusing the joy of learning into children continue to feed my soul! My husband sees the delight I experience in teaching children, mentoring adults, basically assisting all learners in finding their own path, and of course the daily, pretty consistent planning and the stories from my classroom. Each interaction actually makes me tingle. My students are complicated puzzles. Figuring out what makes each individual tick, how to get each personal clock in sync, and simultaneously infused with my passion about life and learning is my daily mission. It's how I approach the art of teaching.

Thirty years of teaching and going strong! Folks ask why I'm still in the classroom. I'm a perpetual learner, a mover, a shaker, a doer. I explored other leadership roles, have multiple certifications, yet I choose to be the daily choreographer of magic in my classroom. I am lucky; I get to teach every single day!

Here's a glimpse into why I have the best job in the entire world.
Close your eyes and imagine...
If you're lucky you'll see what I see.

A crisp fall day during recess. Roaring laughter fills the air. Children run with abandon, looking like a sea of smiles, waves of energy synthesized with leaves rustling in the breeze, branches swaying in the wind. Moments cemented in time.

One child stands on the boulder beside the play structure.
She stands alone on that huge rock, next to the swings filled with friends, her. While giggles ooze from children whose limbs tangle on tire swings,
Annie smiles, hair blowing. With a twinkle in her eye, she whispers to the fluttering leaves.

The special education team that worked with Annie was struggling, having difficulty understanding her. In the midst of this time, Annie was beginning to learn, and I, to teach. One educator confessed that Annie was frustrating: Annie didn't comply, stating that she lived in her own world. Maybe Annie wasn't cut out for public school? That educator didn't see whom I saw. She saw a child disconnected from reality, a little girl who doesn't follow rules. She saw a child who could not read nor solve math problems,

deficits instead of richnesses. She saw a child who had nothing to offer, disconnected. She saw a child living in a parallel universe, not in reality.

I saw a sweet little girl, a child beginning to thrive in a safe space, one with opportunities to explore her interests and communicate with others. She was like a homing pigeon, consistently returning to her positive environment and to me, filled with wonderings and giggles, beginning to apply skills and engage with her learning and her peers.

When I asked Annie about her conversation with the leaves, she matter of factly stated, "Leaves can't talk." Her gentle perspective said, "I talk to the leaves because nobody else does." I saw a child who was the definition of inclusiveness!

Crafting ideas and reworking ways to teach, infusing passion into learning take over my mind, morning, noon and night. 2:00 am: How will I craft friendships for these cherubs? New class, new design. I'll bring in a puppet theater for children to delight in during Literacy. Motivation seeps into each child's very being. 2:45 am: How can I create a learning environment that enables all my children to work together, apply the skills I have taught? Eureka! I am a classically trained ballet dancer. Teaching is dancing, requiring rich choreography, creativity in movement. I am a curriculum developer and a dancer. Still dancing, breathing joy into my body. Hmm. Using Dance I could teach perseverance and practice grit with my students. What better way to experience the satisfaction of working hard? The sheer joy of prancing through discovery became my undercurrent for learning design. Children presenting poetry regularly set the stage for increasing public speaking comfort and practice as a respectful audience member.

Blooming petals turn orange and red. Weather changes and a new crop of students begin under my care. Class chemistry! Solidifying our class community is always a must first step. Designing conscious opportunities for daily greetings and physically engaging activities, actually teaching how to jetté across the classroom or shenae turn while spotting, requires concentration and smiles. Imagine those thinkers transforming into dancers, elongating their step as their minds stretched, experiencing learning while engaging in movement. Aha! That was it. A seemingly universal entry point. Fun

combined with structure, anticipated in class flying. What a draw. Balancing movement with skill development.

My roll of choreographer continued to develop. Incorporating the structure of dance to learning academics was key. Not for performance sake, but for complete engagement. The investment was palpable, even visible, definitely a draw for Annie and her peers. Sometimes my brightly colored puppet theater was an alternative stage for sharing carefully crafted thinking, opinions. Now to design a way to make that within a sequentially sensible and productive framework for Annie so she could be successful. Fair means everyone gets what they need.

Annie, that innocent little girl, the girl that learned to trust, ask questions, stay on topic, share developing insights, happily engage in activities, skipped out the door for recess with the other children on a crisp, cool day. Parallel play looks different in second grade. Annie was finding her way, although not yet consistently included in group activities, she was beginning to learn to navigate unstructured times, times like RECESS.

She needs time, time to develop and formulate her thoughts into words. Our eyes lock and she half smiles, raising her hands to her mouth, emitting that endearing giggle. She knows that I know she has something to say. When she's ready to share her discoveries or frustration, she knows I'll be here.

Of course this is the right placement for Annie. Isn't it? Why don't others talk with her, not at her? All the wonderment of discovery is evident in her actions, her very being.

Although sweet, earnest, and responsive, many don't see that side of Annie. Our interactions help me slow down, solidify my understanding of the importance of educating the whole child. Building relationships, focusing on understanding my students, informal, ongoing assessing, not filling out 12 forms in 20 minutes, looking at each individual in front of me.

A teacher defines and demonstrates kindness, warmth, respect, modeling how to treat others. Everyone can get smarter. For me, teaching how to approach a problem with a

new perspective is nurturing. Teaching children to use strategies, to problem solve sets the foundation for success! Teaching involves smiling from within, celebrating strengths, recognizing areas that can be further developed, then scaffolding a framework in which children can grow. Kindness can be taught, demonstrated when one child quoted me, “I know you can do it. Let me break it down into smaller steps for you so you have an entry point.”

Oh my, the sweetness of that little girl, the honesty, her sincere earnestness, I learned more from her than I realized was possible. She learned how to participate in the world of school. We were both teacher and learner building a community. We learned together. I, an educator with a vision, invested in the process, regardless of the current jargon of academia, engaged in the pendulum of education, she a trusting, soul.

Symbiotic relationships. My students are the sunflowers with fringe of dancing petals of academics, problem-solving and wonderment, with roots intertwined with love, persistence, sweetness and empowerment. I help the roots settle and the children bloom into themselves, choreography by deliberate design.

My class is a living poem, with stretching minds and dancing bodies, twirling into their own creation, creations made stronger and smarter in my classroom.

I see the wonderment of innocence, true joy in the face of discovery. I see the look of recognition when concepts make sense, childlike delight, developing trust, vulnerability, the community built from love and a touch of power from the surrounding universe.

I see the evidence of Annie learning, infusing book discussions into her stories as she stands strong and tall, with that tick where she clasps her hands together and covers her smile while she emits a burst of giggles.

I see that child on the rock, feeling the strength of the shining sun, hearing birds twittering through bent branches. I smile as a sea of children engage with hula hoops, hoops we designed by figuring out how to measure their length so that the hoops went faster and stayed up longer. Children and their imaginations, children creating songs to sing, poems to float upon, developing skits to practice what they learned in class with

the backdrop of changing seasons. That moment of connection, lightening within our souls! That light, blinding, warms my whole being and fills my heart.

My hope, my dream with an unwritten deadline, isn't to leave the classroom, but instead to embrace the joys within it, to unravel the living puzzles residing in that learning lab, to discover the layers of personalities, to decipher the chemistry of each class, to discern how to create a space for children to be themselves, to take risks, to connect with reality, productively, successfully, like the sleek gears inside of a clock, each dependent on the other, to build the community of the future. Magic!