

Reflections on Teaching and Learning in the Age of COVID-19
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All year in the Art of Teaching Saturday Seminar Series we have been inquiring into the college's theme of *E Pluribus Unum* as it so beautifully fits with the work of teaching children. This is even more poignantly true now, as the notions of community and togetherness have been so dramatically shifted for all of us, and in some ways rendered abstract. We felt it was therefore all the more important to find a way to make space for our own community to connect and regroup during this heavily challenging time.

So, on Saturday, May 16th, we held our first ever Virtual Saturday Seminar for alumni and friends of the Art of Teaching program. This seminar brought many of our regular, devoted community but because of the unusual times we are in and that we held this seminar via Zoom, many others were able to attend for the first time. We gathered with about 40 educators from across the country and even some from abroad. Many among us are practicing teachers, working in public, independent and charter elementary schools and early childhood programs. We also had directors of early childhood programs, teacher educators, retired teachers, and school counselors.

As I shared with the participants that day, I asked my own students this semester (at Sarah Lawrence in the Art of Teaching program, and at Westchester Community College) to write about what's been going on from the perspective of teachers, schools and families. As always, I learned so much from their viewpoints and experiences. One student raised questions about what it means for young children's language acquisition not to have access to the usual variety of contrastive language from the different people in their lives and the range of the concrete world to connect language to. Another wrote about computer literacy as its own language and the various ways this plays out across age groups, across family situations, across access or lack thereof. Another wrote about how this has made children's home lives visible in a new way — sometimes intimate, sometimes uncomfortable, certainly not uniform.

In this pandemic, some have lost much more than others. Loved ones, financial stability, access to housing, food and medicine, safety. This comparison is so important to make and to remember and to find ways to act upon. For those of us in a position of great privilege in this world and in this crisis it is important to find balance in being conscious of this while also knowing that each of us and all of us have the right and need to process our feelings of loss, to sit with the range of emotions and complicated, difficult changes this has caused in our lives. We need to do this and we also need to remain connected to the rest of humanity.

We are being forced, for better or for worse, to revisit what really matters about our children being together in this institution called school. In our conversations at the Seminar, many themes arose to guide our thinking and teaching work in the coming weeks and as we prepare for coming back together with students, remotely or in person, next fall.

In our small group discussions, teachers shared many of the practices they've been enacting to remain connected to their students and to help the children remain connected to each other. Many talked about regular meeting times, including those for just "being together" without any explicit goal or lesson in mind. They talked about recurring themes across meetings or having children meet while working on something else with their hands. They also talked about the sharing of stories and games, songs and dances, of sharing resources with families, of writing letters. Some spoke of connecting children across age groups or showing them other places in virtual "field trips."

Many teachers raised the issue of the sudden permeability of the home-school connection, the way children's home lives are visible and accessible in new and complex ways, and that many children have wanted to share objects or work made at home and are curious about their teachers' homes as well. They talked about establishing new dynamics in working with parents, the range of availability across different families and the way families' presence in their child's school experience is dramatically altered.

How time functions within the school day has also shifted considerably. Work and school are in a way more ever-present in the home space now that there is (in many cases) no divide - though children are also spending many fewer hours "doing" school. One teacher spoke about taking advantage of this more fluid experience of home-school time by creating longer-term concrete projects with children, such as complex cooking activities.

Teachers spoke about being gentle and broad in expectations for children and families. Many issues of access and equity were raised - the many children still not able to participate in remote schooling for various reasons, or who don't have needed materials to do projects, or can't get all the services they need, or the many parents not able to supervise the experience - and how this all shifts over time, unpredictably. Teachers also spoke about hearing from students in different ways than before, about in some ways getting to know them anew in this format and occasionally being surprised. For some children, the Zoom meetings seemed to make things harder emotionally and for others they are a lifeline. All of this matters.

As teachers, we are powerful and strong observers. We are practiced in attending to the many cues we see from children all throughout the day, at attending to each and all simultaneously, predicting, absorbing, responding, making space for each child's needs. This is quite different on a screen, without physical energy. In some cases, because children are muted, we may not even be able to hear that a child is crying. On the other hand, as in some ways we have a much more intimate view of children's homes, families, and lives in this format, privacy is more malleable, less containable.

At the end, when we came back together in the full group, we discussed what we will need to hold on to, to protect, defend and restore upon our return to classrooms, remote or not. We have been reminded of all that we value most.

What came through resoundingly is how much all of us are missing each other. Children's social and emotional selves are suffering the most, that much is clear. It will be important to work with families to re-establish trust, to ease the transition for all and to reiterate what we know is most important upon return - not superficial, rote skills, but social experiences and consistent, concerted emotional support. Our expectations will have to shift. We will need to focus ourselves fully on attending to individuals and their diverse needs, centering connection.

Children will learn so much from this experience. They will learn how we come together to support one another during hard times. They will feel our anxiety, our stress, our sadness, our divided attention. But though they are vulnerable they are also adaptable and resilient, strong and wise.

Children will need space to express their feelings in different ways. They will need spaces to talk, to make things and to share and build on their interests. They will need to play, play and play some more - what children always have done and will always do to learn, to heal, to thrive. They will need to interact with each other without constant adult intervention. We will collectively be recovering from a serious, traumatic experience. This will stay with us for a long time. We will need to find ways to bring feelings of consistency and routine to children's lives.

We will have to take all of this little by little. If we are still remote, we will have to learn to get to know a new group of children in this way, so different from just maintaining relationships that began in the physical space of school. We will need to make all the children feel visible, noticed, and cared for. It might be possible in some cases for teachers to loop with their students from the previous year, but regardless space will need to be made for small group and one-on-one interaction with children on a regular basis. We will need to trust in children's capacity to grow, adapt, prevail - listen to them and follow their lead. An open-ended curriculum with more entry points and malleability will be essential if we hope to include and support all children.

There is no shortage of advice bombarding teachers and parents from all angles, these days - lack of information is not the loss we are experiencing now. Personally, as both a teacher educator and parent, though these resources are all well-intentioned and sometimes wonderful, I often find them overwhelming, overstimulating, stressful. And I in no way want to position myself as the expert on what's going on or how to handle it. The last thing anyone needs is to feel more guilty, or further pressured.

Our circle has also always been about lifting up teacher knowledge, valuing the perspectives, experience and wisdom of those on the front lines — across so many different kinds of classrooms and schools. When I look at what's happening now in education on the large scale, politically, I feel an absence, as always, of teachers' voices. Teachers are reaching out to each other and to families, as they always do, providing a crucial glue that holds up our children and families in ways that I think are more visible now in their absence. We have been shown again the amazing resilience, capacity and flexibility they have demonstrated in trying to rise to the occasion as best as possible. Still, they are not heard, respected, or valued as they should be.

It takes a considerable amount of energy just to continue to bounce back and forth in our minds, trying to plan for what may happen next. It is like a kind of grief, as when we've lost someone and keep wanting to tell that person something only to have to keep reminding ourselves that we can't. We are living within an ominous, overwhelming uncertainty. A teacher I once worked with did an interview about her remote teaching recently where she said, "Teachers are planners." How true that is and how hard it is not to be able to do so, not to be able to know. How draining and unnerving. Of course we never really know what will happen in our lives, in the world, but this is on a different scale.

We have to learn to function in a new way. Much is lost, but there is maybe also some opportunity to gain from this, too. I think that if we can come away from this with relationship re-centered in our notion of educating, that would give me hope.

It was reflected by so many teachers on the day of our Seminar and in subsequent correspondence how much community and connection with other teachers will strengthen and support us through this time. We plan to hold another Virtual Saturday Seminar toward the end of the summer, to prepare for the new school year, however that may look. In the meantime, we are thinking of all of you, and your children, and holding on to hope.