

Reflection: Why & Where We Teach

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Teaching can take you places. I always knew this, and it's one of the primary reasons that I became a teacher. For stints of a few months to a few years, I have taught in the United States, Mexico, Japan, and Chile. In the beginning, it was about me. Let's be honest, there are very few people who wouldn't be drawn to exotic destinations, meeting people from around the world, learning about new cultures and languages, and those long weeks of summer vacation. International teachers, particularly, often have a few shared character traits that I also find in myself: insatiable wanderlust, a love of change, a high degree of adaptability, and intellectual curiosity. These characteristics serve as a catalyst for change. Most international teachers I know are constantly asking themselves: *How long should I stay here? What's next? WHERE do I go next? Would a position in Thailand/Brazil/Austria be better? More interesting? More challenging? More...?*

I had this same conversation with several international teachers at a dinner party last night. It is a constant refrain. As such, it would be easy to talk about the

differences among teaching contexts. However, I am more interested in sharing what I see as similarities among what could be considered widely disparate settings. Rather than focusing on what is different in terms of student dispositions, access to resources, and instructional environments, I want to reflect on how the dispositions an individual teacher espouses impact her teaching context.

In my first teaching position, I was assigned a faculty mentor who had been at the school for, at the time, twenty-eight years. Mrs. Jones knew every child in the building by name, had taught many of their parents as elementary students, and every lesson I observed was highly engaging and effective. She had boundless energy, a constant smile, and a friendly greeting for every child as they walked in the school building each morning. Despite serious budget difficulties in that district, lackluster administrative leadership, and near constant changes in standards and curriculum, Mrs. Jones taught me that the students do not know about those things. Nor should they. What students do need is a teacher who is consistent in her interactions, and who is constantly growing in her practice as a professional educator. One of her mantras was, “You’re either green and growing, or dead on the vine.”

Fifteen years after hearing that axiom, I still use it to stimulate learning and change in my practice as a teacher - whatever my teaching context. Diaz-Rico (2013) calls this “the edge,” and states that in nature this is “the growing tip of the root where growth is possible. If possible, this is where the expert educator works, at the edge where learning takes place, a social and cultural border that functions as a horizon of opportunity” (p. 292).

Moving from country to country, the contexts may be widely disparate but I try to be consistent in my approach to education in each new setting. This consistency includes my

philosophy of teaching and learning, learned practices to put to use, and a reflective mindset. These dispositions are essential because they determine the learning environment that I create in that context. Regardless of the larger setting, teachers can, and should, be very intentional in the creation of the classroom environment. As an English as an additional language teacher (EAL), I share three essential beliefs with Buhrow and Garcia (2006) in creating a favorable learning environment: students should be able to study topics that are interesting and comprehensible; students should be highly engaged, such that they forget about the stresses of language production; and the teacher should not push for output before the student is ready. We can create an environment like this whether in a small pull-out classroom in Chile of eight students or in a class of forty in Japan. Granted, the curriculum can be limiting or the resources sparse depending on the school. Yet, if we keep our attention on the important task of teaching students the strategies they need to make connections between what they know and what they are expected to learn (Alvermann, Phelps, and Ridgeway, 2007), students are more engaged in the process.

It is encouraging to see this structure of support for student learning wherever it occurs. In the years since my first teaching position with Mrs. Jones, I have learned that there is no end point for someone who strives to be an expert teacher. To use Diaz-Rico's analogy of the root, the edge is always pushing deeper. That is true of roots of everywhere, no matter the location of the soil called home.

References

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