

## Philosophy of Education

Lena Thomson

The anthropologist Margaret Mead remarked, “Children must be taught how to think, not what to think.” This is my fundamental belief as an educator. There is limitless knowledge to be learned in this world. *How* to think is using that knowledge to understand, apply, analyze, evaluate and create (according to Bloom’s taxonomy). *How* also encompasses exploring multiple perspectives and being aware of one’s own thinking processes. As the teacher, I am the training wheels that will ultimately be taken away. Therefore, my role is to give students the tools to successfully explore concepts, formulate ideas, demonstrate understanding and take ownership of their learning. I do this by ensuring an inclusive classroom culture and learning experiences that are supportive, relevant and challenging.

As an educator for students who are often learning in a language other than their mother tongue, I am passionate about ensuring that all students have equal opportunities in any learning environment to acquire content and communicate learning in ways that work best for them. My classroom management relies heavily on building a strong classroom community. Interaction is integral regardless of language ability. From day one, students know that their effort and contributions will always be valued. Although essential agreements are student-driven, I guide them toward the school’s core values, which can encompass many behaviors. Within these boundaries, students are provided a lot of freedom. Independence and personal responsibility are the ultimate goals. They are encouraged to make many choices, such as literacy center activities, book selections, writing topics, problem-solving strategies, and performance assessment mediums. I want them to see their own value and believe in their own abilities to achieve success; therefore, self-management skills are practiced through a conflict resolution framework, clear routines and procedures, and visual displays to help students effectively manage time, interactions and work.

Borrowing from the Reggio Emilia view of the classroom environment as the “third teacher,” my organization of the physical space is very intentional. Seating arrangements are flexible and emphasize small group interaction. Carpets and nooks around the room allow for various configurations of whole class, group, partner and independent work spaces. To give students ownership of the classroom, we decide together where to put certain things, such as the alphabet and word wall. Work displays change frequently and show independent thinking. I also post photographs of learning experiences, documentation of visible thinking routines, anchor charts we’ve made together, and students’ questions, discoveries and actions. Additionally, I display visual scaffolds to support academic vocabulary, reading strategies, the writing process, etc. Moreover, I want every student in my class to see her or himself as a learner and valued member of our community, thus I am mindful that books and posters demonstrate diversity in all its forms. Although my classroom shows a lot of learning in progress, I’ve learned to remove unnecessary decorations and hide away unneeded materials, as they can be quite distracting for some students. Ultimately, every piece of furniture, wall display and object that is visible in the classroom has a clear purpose that is relevant to current learning.

Teaching students *how* to think requires that I design purposeful and differentiated learning experiences. New concepts are introduced through impactful provocations, such as experiencing a change in environment, examining unknown objects or confronting a problem that needs solving. Students are encouraged and given a framework to ask questions, which I use to shape our learning experiences. Once the questions are noted, we decide how to explore answers. I am constantly clarifying, probing into and documenting their thinking. When engaging in discussions to make meaning together, students receive wait time to formulate

their thoughts and visible sentence stems to agree, disagree and connect with each others' ideas.

To take Mead's quote a step further, children not only need to know *how* but *why* they think something. It is critical to remember that background experiences, prior knowledge and personal thought processes can vary drastically. It is my responsibility to ascertain, validate and build upon these powerful elements. Differentiation takes many forms, including choice, flexible grouping, multimodal scaffolds, varied assessment strategies and individualized support from myself and co-teaching colleagues. I am striving for each student to make sense of their own understanding and receive ample opportunities to articulate their learning in ways that access their full language repertoire. Within our classroom culture, I place strong emphasis on embracing differences, viewing mistakes as learning opportunities, and respecting each others' unique learning journeys. I conference frequently with students to reflect on their learning and set individual goals. Students receive the message that challenge is exciting, creativity is encouraged, and the process of learning is highly valued.

Assessment is the key to ensuring that students achieve conceptual understanding and acquire necessary language skills. I am constantly taking anecdotal notes about student performance. Additionally, learning experiences serve as formative assessments when supported by appropriate tools. Planning backward from the summative assessment and reflecting on formative assessments, both with students and on my own, ensures that we are heading toward success. Ultimately, in consideration of *why*, *what* and *how* students are learning, I often give performance tasks, such as making books, performing skits, building models or utilizing technology applications. These tasks focus on targeted skills to show understanding of key concepts and can be scaffolded as needed. Summative assessments are always exciting for students because they enjoy being challenged, love opportunities for creativity, and take pride in becoming experts.

Beyond assessment, considering *why* we are learning about something also encompasses what we will do with new knowledge and ideas. If new concepts are worth exploring, then they should motivate action in our lives. Sometimes I model action as changes within our classroom; however, my ultimate goal is for students to connect personally with their learning and initiate changes themselves. For example, guiding students through an inquiry of the form and function of verbs in English has built their confidence and led to more active participate in class discussions, and discovering the connections among natural resources and our responsibility to protect them has inspired recycling and conservation efforts. These actions are what makes teaching most meaningful for me.

Professionally, reflection and collaboration are vital for my success as an educator. I am constantly reflecting on my practice inside my own head, but I also reflect regularly with colleagues to gain new perspectives. Collaboration happens in many different forms, such as: co-planning, co-teaching, sharing resources, aligning curriculum, moderating assessments, and exploring professional development opportunities. These interactions keep me motivated as I give and receive support, better meet my students needs, and stay abreast on best practices. Finally, when strong leadership at the top demonstrates confidence in teacher leadership, commitment to best practice, and opportunities for mentorship, this creates a supportive and dynamic school culture of which I am excited to be a part. Success for me is when leadership, teachers and parents jointly nurture a collaborative school culture, and students respond to that positive energy with enthusiasm for learning.