

Dare To Care and Be Aware

Heather Tabios

“What is your educational philosophy?” is a question I have been asked a multitude of times throughout my educational journey. I thought I could easily define it as being able to present the children in my class with real life experiences that would create a spark and interest in wanting to find out more about a subject in a safe environment. Through the following action research project, I became aware of how all interactions and experiences each one of us has, no matter at what stage in life, impacts the way one thinks, feels, and acts differently. I challenged myself to create an environment for the children to feel safe to question and provide experiences that would allow them to explore the world around them. I hoped to establish a foundation that would drive each child to want to care and become more aware of themselves, others, and everything around them based on who the child is as an individual at that point in their educational journey. What I did not realize is how this experience would make me take a step back and reflect on the way I think, feel, and act in response to others.

Action Research Background

In my classroom, I have 17 children who range in age from 3 to 4 years old. Each child comes from a diverse cultural background and family dynamic. Six of the children are also considered English Language Learners. The idea came about when I watched the children become interested in a fire fighter outfit a child wore to school. As soon as the child walked into the school, the child got immediate attention from some children. Other children saw the costume and continued to play as if they were not fazed.

I wanted to figure out why the children became so interested in the child’s costume. Was it because the child was wearing a costume and not “regular” clothes? Did they even know what a fire fighter was? I continued to observe the children with these questions in mind. Throughout the day, some of the children continued to be intrigued by the costume. Some children pretended to “put out fires” with an imaginary hose and ride in a fire truck. The interest in fire fighters was apparent through their actions but I wanted the children to be exposed to a deeper understanding of how fire fighters help in the community. I asked the children if they had been to a fire station and talked to a real fire fighter.

Only 3 children of 17 answered yes. I then set up a visit to the local fire station.

Before going to the fire station, the children were asked, “What do you think we will see at the fire station?” This question allowed me to get a baseline of what the children knew about the subject fire station. It also gave me insight into “where the learner is starting from in his or her learning process, and where the learner still needs to grow” (English 2011, 180). During the fire station visit, all the children were exposed to the same experience. All the children watched and listened to the firefighters talk about the equipment they used, watched the fire fighter put on the uniform, and toured the fire station. They also got to hold the water hose that shot water at a cone, knocking it down.

Each child was presented with the same real-life experience of visiting the fire station. However, after discussing with and observing each child, what they got out of the experience was very different. For this action research, I will focus on three children, referred to as Child A, Child B, and Child C for the remainder of the paper. I will explore the conversations, observations, and interactions I had with each child about their experiences before and after the visit to the fire station. I picked these three children since they allowed me to question how I could support each individual child in their own educational journey in relation to community, culture, and well-being.

Case Studies

Child A: Community Awareness

When A was asked, “What do you think we will see at the fire station?” A answered, “Daddy.” At first glance, A’s response may seem out of place. One might assume A was hoping to see her father on this field trip. I was reminded of “Symposium” by Plato, explained by Haroutunian-Gordan (2011) and how Diotima “addressed her listeners by posing questions rather than giving the answers and speaking like an authority” (136). Instead of telling A, “No, you are wrong,” I asked, “Why?” A responded, “Because my daddy is a firefighter.” Questioning A’s response gave an opportunity to clarify her thought process out loud to herself, other children, and the teacher, who were unaware of the family background. The follow-up question also allowed A to

come to a conclusion for herself instead of being told the right or wrong answer, which many students have become accustomed to.

When A initially answered “Daddy,” I understood her reasoning because I had knowledge of the family background. Without this knowledge, a teacher could conclude that the child is not aware of the subject or not even listening to the question. Asking the follow-up question, “Why?” helped to clarify A’s perspective. It also made me realize how important having a relationship not only with the child but with other family members as well was.

After going to the fire station, A came to the conclusion that “Daddy” was not there. As a class, we looked at a map. The children became very interested in this “picture.” For some, it was the first time they had seen a map. The children asked about all the different shapes and letters they saw. The children and I circled all the different fire stations we found on the map. We put a star next to the one we visited and a star next to A’s father’s fire station. A then said, “My daddy is far away but he is still a fire fighter!” By introducing the concept of a map, A was able to understand how her father could still be a fire fighter even if we did not see him.

Although the initial purpose was to assist Child A to achieve this understanding, it also helped other children become aware of the things around them and begin to understand that there is more in the world than just what they see in their everyday routine. By going to the fire station, I hoped to widen their lens and spark an interest to investigate what else could exist. “Education becomes possible when students open to the mysteries and doubts of life and to the influence of the surrounding world” (Olsson 2018, 164). The map also introduced the idea for some children that they are part of a larger community.

Child B: Cultural Awareness

When the child first walked into the school with the uniform on, B just stared. B went up to the child with the other children. B was around the other children as they discussed the fire fighter costume. B then came to ask me, “Fire fighter?” and pointed to the child wearing to the costume. I said, “Yes,” fire fighter. B still looked puzzled. I continued to discuss with B that that is what fire fighters wear. B said, “No. That is no fire fighter.” I thought maybe he did not know what a fire fighter was. I asked B, “What does a fire fighter do?” B replied, “Water, fire.” I then became confused myself. B could verbalize what a fire fighter does but was certain that was not a fire fighter.

As the day continued, B distanced himself from the other children engaged in fire fighter play. I had to question, “Was the child afraid of fire fighters? Why was the child insisting this was not a fire fighter uniform?” I then realized B did not think the costume represented a fire fighter because of how the costume looked. I knew that B was from Brazil. I assumed Brazil had fire fighters but what I did not realize at the time was that I was also assuming fire fighter uniforms were very similar in all countries. I did not even question that the image B was thinking of when hearing the word “fire fighter” was different than the image both I and most of the other children thought of.

Just to be sure the uniform was the reason for the misunderstanding, I looked up pictures of Brazilian fire fighters. I asked B to point to the fire fighter. Out of the images displayed on my computer, B pointed to adults who were in a “military” looking outfit which was next to images of adults dressed in uniforms that resemble “American” fire fighters. I asked again just to be sure. I continued to research the fire fighters in Brazil and learned that the department was under the Brazilian Army. The confusion became clear. Although both B and I understood what a fire fighter does, the representation of what a fire fighter looks like was very different. I could see how the interaction between B and I could have ended in differently if I did not make the connection of how B’s experience coming from another country can affect his views. If I continued to assume B was wrong and just confused, I could have created a relationship of mistrust and an unsafe environment for B to ask questions in the future.

After talking to B’s mom about the confusion with defining what a fire fighter looks like, she brought up her concern that B might be afraid to go to the fire station. She continued to explain that back home in Brazil, there was a lot of corruption and some fire fighters were even feared of because of their military background and mistreatment of people. “Connecting with others is at the heart of communication—defined best as one person understanding what another wants understood. The key to this understanding is listening” (Jalongo 2008, 116). As she talked, I just listened. It felt as if she saw me as a “safe” person to communicate her experiences with. I acknowledged her concern and discussed that this was an opportunity to experience fire fighters that would hopefully have a positive impact on B. If she did not feel comfortable, B did not have to attend. I also invited B’s mother to come with us as well if she felt comfortable. It became apparent that her views impacted how B viewed fire fighters.

B and his mother came with us that day. From B's mother's body language, you could sense she was a little uncomfortable. She was shaking her leg constantly while sitting in the chair waiting for the bus as B became more physically attached to his mother. Although she did not express her feelings to B, her demeanor had already affected B. As we arrived at the fire station, B and his mother sat in the back. She still appeared tense holding B tight on her lap. They listened attentively to the fire fighters go through the explanation of what all the equipment was called and used for. When the fire fighter was completely dressed, they emphasized that if they were in an emergency and saw a person dressed like them, it was okay to go with them. I watched B's mother's reaction. She sat and stared and did not nod in agreement like the rest of the parents with their children. As the presentation continued, B's mom seemed to relax and let go of B who was still sitting on her lap. Her own body started to calm and slouch. She became more interested during our tour and even wanted to participate in shooting the water hose that was in close proximity to a fire fighter.

B became more interested in fire fighters after the visit. B started to look at books about fire fighters and even joined a group of children who were pretending to be fire fighters. B's mom was also glad she went and admitted that it changed her views of fire fighters here in Hawai'i. From the dialectics between B and myself and further discussion with B's mom, I was able to become more aware of other's perspectives on even things that I assumed were clearly defined. In the case of B, it became clear that having interactions with real fire fighters redefined the association he initially had of the fire fighter costume.

The interaction with B has made me realize that even though these children are starting to define vocabulary, they already might have an awareness and definition completely different because of their family's background and experiences that lead to different perspectives. I started to think more about the relationship with my parents and grandparents. What beliefs and ideas were passed down to me? Would they be passed down to my children? More importantly, I thought of how these ideas and knowledge were passed down.

I thought of Manulani Meyer's (2003) work on Hawaiian epistemology as she states the importance of "knowing who is talking and how what's being said gets incorporated into what is learned" (156). Caregivers are often assumed to be the knowledge holders and are not often questioned due to cultural reasons as signs of respect. At times teachers can also take on that caregiver role and that of the knowledge holder. Too often,

information is given without an explanation but instead using the statement, "Because I said so." It is often used when explanations are thought to be too complex for the person who is asking or if the discussion could lead to emotional vulnerability that one is not comfortable with. The interaction I had with B's mother has shown me that when a person feels comfortable, she is willing to share information that helps you understand how these events shape her life and possibly the lives of the next generation.

Child C: Safety Awareness

C was also asked the same questions as A and B. However, C did not respond to the question or even look in my direction. If I asked this question on the first day of class, I would get the impression that C was being shy or not interested in what I was talking about. But for the past few months, I had observed C not being able to communicate verbally with his peers, teachers, or mother. When asked a question, C would either look away and not respond or repeat the last word that was heard. With this observation, I tried to assist C by presenting three different books with a variety of pictures displayed. I then asked C to point to what he thought would be at the fire station. C did not move or point to any picture. I thought maybe I did not present the picture of what C was thinking, or maybe C did not know how to answer.

I became frustrated, not with C but with myself. I did not know how to help C express himself verbally and I did not want to infer something C really was not thinking. I felt as if I was letting C down because he was not being heard. I hoped that this was not affecting C's self-esteem since "[s]elf-esteem is importantly connected to the confidence and motivation children need in order to engage in and achieve educational goals" (Ferkany 2008, 120). C was not able to communicate ideas or thoughts, and I did not know how to assist C.

C also went to the fire station with the rest of the class. C sat with a teacher and did not seem to show any signs of disinterest. C watched the fire fighters and smiled when the other children laughed. As we toured the facility, C wanted to explore independently. I had to remind C that it was not safe to run out the door since we did not know what was behind the door or if it was safe. C stayed near and then ran off again. I continued to tell C to stay with the group since we did not know where the door led to or if it was safe for the children. I found myself being the authoritarian figure. I was afraid of the unknown or having the child get hurt because I cared. I am not sure if C understood what I was saying because there was no back and forth conversation because C

could not provide one. I did not want to be the authoritative figure but in that instance, I had to be. It was my job to keep the children safe. Instead of getting frustrated, I asked the fire fighters if we could take a look through the door since that was piquing C's interest. We were able to open the door to see a closet full of cleaning supplies. That seemed to satisfy C's curiosity since he no longer ran away, and I felt I could continue to keep C safe.

Towards the end of the visit to the fire station, we all got to shoot water out of the hose. C was in the line. He watched the other children go, but when it was his turn, he ran towards to back of the line. I thought maybe C was not ready yet. He continued to watch. When it was C's turn again, he started to cry and hide behind me. I asked if he wanted a turn, but C did not respond and continued to hide behind me. Even though there was no verbal communication, his body language was clear. C did not want to participate. From then on until we got back to school, C did not want to let go of my hand. I was able to provide comfort for C and hoped that this did not traumatize C.

Transformation of Personal Philosophy of Education

Initially I thought this action research would allow me an opportunity to focus on conversations with the children by providing an opportunity to engage with fire fighters and spark an interest to find out other things. What I did not realize was how much this experience would impact how I would approach children and families in the future. I am reminded of Anna-Lova Olsson (2018) definition of moral cultivation. She defines it as "a continuous process of discovering the world and a process that changes and is revised in relationships with others" (172). By observing, listening and questioning each child, I was able to build a trusting relationship that would allow each child to feel comfortable sharing his or her thoughts.

Loris Malaguzzi (1993), founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, states, "[e]ducation is not based solely on relationships; however, we consider relationships to be the fundamental, organizing strategy of our educational system" (10). As I plan new experiences for my students to assist in their development, I am also learning about myself. I reflect on how I need to approach each student differently due to his or her varying perspectives. By caring about the individual students and trying to understand their perspective, the visit to the fire station led to more than just understanding what fire fighters do. Using Child A's experience, I was able to introduce maps and the understanding of a community to the rest of the class. Child B allowed me to become aware of the

assumptions I had made without considering the cultural context of their families. Child C emphasized how even a positive intention could have a negative result and to ponder what else I can do.

Conclusion

At the beginning of my action research project, I wanted to provide an experience to broaden the perspectives of each child and create a spark in wanting to learn. Through the process of this action research project, I learned more about myself and how my educational philosophy has transformed. I can still provide experiences for the children to explore and broaden their understanding of the world in which they exist but also being able to guide my students to want to care and be aware of who they are and the impact he or she can play in the world around them. I hope to lead by example to show my students and their families that I want to be aware because I care. It seems so simple yet complex in what that looks like in the classroom and in life. If individuals want to care, that could be the driving force in solving world problems and not who is right or wrong. I have realized that there is no road or path to follow, but that we create our own path adding one yellow brick at a time to continue to help others become more aware and to care. As Solveig M. Reindal (2012) writes, "[b]eing educated means taking the responsibility to develop one's own humanity as a unique individual" (538). Through this journey we call life, I hope to continue building my path of knowledge into the unknown as well as help others create theirs. We can use education as a tool to help build this path of knowledge. As a fellow educator, I now dare you to care and be aware.

REFERENCES

- English, Andrea. 2011. "Critical Listening and the Dialogic Aspect of Moral Education: J.F.Herbert's Concept of the Teacher as a Moral Guide." *Educational Theory* 61 (2):171-189.
- Ferkany, Matt. 2008. "The Educational Importance of Self-Esteem." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 42 (1):119-132.
- Haroutunian-Gordon, Sophie. 2011. "Plato's Philosophy of Listening." *Educational Theory* 61 (2):125-139.
- Jalongo, Mary R. 2008. *Learning to Listen, Listening to Learn: Building Essential Skills in young Children*. Washington DC: National Association for the Young Child.
- Malaguzzi, Loris. 1993. "For an Education Based on Relationships." *Young Children* 49 (1):9-12.
- Meyer, Manulani. 2003. "Our Own Liberation: Reflections on Hawaiian Epistemology." *Amerasia Journal* 29 (2):139-164.
- Olsson, Anna-Lova. 2018. "A Moment of Letting Go: Iris Murdoch and the Morally Transformative Process of Unselfing." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 52 (1):163-177.
- Reindal, Solveig M. 2012. "Bildung, the Bologna Process and Kierkegaard's Concept of Subjective Thinking." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 32 (5):533-549.