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Making Sense of The Principles: A Portfolio from Greenfield Center School

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When we work on goal setting at Greenfield Center School (GCS), we have a practice of showing what the relationships, interaction, teaching practices, and evidence of learning look and sound like. Making theory more concrete helps us all to envision the work ahead. In 2006, a group of elementary level Essential school educators developed a Statement of Values about our work. This statement, based upon the CES Common Principles, is guiding our work at GCS, and what follows is the start of a school portfolio documenting the implementation of these values. GCS teachers and their kindergarten through eighth grade students offer this evidence as a way to further the conversation of what teaching, learning, community, and life can be at CES elementary schools.

Habits of Mind and Heart

"Center Circle" is a social/emotional check-in meeting, an opportunity for a class to stop their busy work, come together, and appreciate one another for specific kindnesses they've enacted in school. Most classes do this appreciation circle about once a month, more if the class needs it and less if things are humming along. It almost always leaves everyone feeling more connected.

In Center Circle, younger students participate in a process called "Pretzels." Each student is given a small number of pretzels to distribute. One by one, publicly, students will present one of their pretzels to a classmate as thanks for a specific action. For example, "Thank you for lending me your pencils when I couldn't find mine." In the middle grades students do Center Circle without pretzels. Added to this ritual is the option to apologize. Students will either "thank" or "sorry" someone. They stand up, walk across the circle and shake or "sorry" someone's hand. (To "sorry" a hand, you shake it using both hands, making a hand sandwich.) Then the student sits back down. The chosen person raises her hand and says, "Jake, why did you shake my hand?" and Jake asks, "I wanted to thank you for sticking up for me in soccer." In the case of a sorry, the chosen one will say "Mo, why did you sorry me?" and the response might be, "I sorried you because I'm sorry that I cut in front of you in line."

The rules and expectations of Center Circles must be talked about in advance. Students can articulate the potential pitfalls of the process and the class can problem-solve these before they get started. For example, it is specifically prohibited to make comments that will end up excluding others. Having children take note of daily acts of courage, kindness, and altruism is not only an important observational skill, but also a key modeling technique.

Center Circle allowed Anna to empathize with Sally and begin to mend their relationship. It offered a place for Anna to publicly apologize to Sally for not being a good friend. The two had been "best friends" the year before and Anna had connected strongly with a new student that year. Another Center Circle included Joshua, a fifth grade student who stood out as much younger-acting than most in the class. Joshua played games that others had left years ago. He had a challenging time sitting still and focusing on what the class was doing. He often made silly comments. At the beginning of the year, many students did not know how to respond to him or what to think about him. However, his light, funny, and kind-hearted presence was noticed at Center Circle. Many students thanked him for making them laugh. He glowed with the acknowledgement and grew to be a leader the next year.

Less Is More; Depth over Coverage

As the seventh and eighth graders approached the study to *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, they focused on this Essential Question: Where does our sense of identity come from? Their month-long study led them to assess, compare and contrast community, family, ethnicity, ancestry, gender, and class.

There was constant debate about the degree to which we can shape our identity.

Students read each of Cisneros' vignettes closely, focusing not only on content but on figurative language, which they then demonstrated in creative writing pieces. Students took time to know and empathize with the characters. The culminating project was a personal memoir essay accompanying a visual identity art piece, which showed the students' own identities.

Knowing Children Well

One snowy winter morning the K-1 Primes class assembled in morning meeting. As we greeted each other around the circle, several children engaged in a side conversation. "My cat was stuck outside last night," one of them was reporting. By the time the greeting time ended, it was quite apparent that they all had opinions about how pets could keep warm on a cold winter night. Here was a shared topic that was engaging, personal, and real to our children. Over the next few days, teachers provided time to share stories about pets. This led to students' concerns about the fate of wild animals in the woods.

After reading aloud *The Night Tree* by Eve Bunting, the class realized they could create their own special place out in the forest to help provide food for animals. This project soon opened out in multiple directions. Children were studying animals in literature group, making trips out to the woods to make and revisit our own night tree to see what animals would eat. They recorded results in nature journals.

Our students represented their observations from field walks, readings and group discussions by building "habitat" boxes. Based on their research they wrote and drew plans for what these boxes would look like. They also made lists of materials they would need. They assessed their work for accuracy and reflected each day.

Construction of Meaning; Active Engagement

In the fall of 2006, the fifth and sixth grade "Upper Middles" engaged in a thematic unit of ecology. Included in this unit of study were projects and opportunities for students to engage in "real world" learning. Working in collaboration with two local organizations, Northeast Sustainable Energy Association (NESEA) and the Greenfield Energy Committee, our class set out to survey the residents of Greenfield about local energy issues. Clipboards, surveys, and pencils in hand, all 20 students and five parents hit the streets of downtown Greenfield to ask passersby their opinions about issues such as recycling and composting, insulation, renewable energy, and alternative fuels. After collecting data from 350 people of varying ages and economic classes, students organized, tallied, analyzed, and graphed the data. Finally, they reported their findings to the Greenfield Energy Committee at its monthly meeting, provided information to NESEA, and met with the mayor to discuss their discoveries and ask questions about town initiatives and plans for meeting the town of Greenfield's energy needs. This process assisted students in discovering the importance of various ecological issues, introduced them to a wide variety of opinions, and taught them the power of democratic inquiry in affecting local politics.

Assessment Using Multiple Formats

Deb, a sixth grade student, spent time this year learning fractions, measurement, and geometry in math. When it came time to select a project for math fair that showed her understanding of these topics, she chose to build a bird house. Since Deb had shown her competency on paper, and had used manipulatives to demonstrate her knowledge, she thought this was simply going to be a fun thing to do, an opportunity to use tools, and a way to help the birds in her neighborhood.

The project, guided by her teacher and supported by her parents, offered much more - in particular, a venue for using math strategies and skills. Deb planned the project, defended her plan, and then had to translate the plan into three-dimensional thinking. The final project included the birdhouse, a painted background of the future location of the house illustrating her understanding of the environment, and an explanation of this project as stewardship. She had a step-by-step explanation of the construction of the birdhouse, and the ways in which she had to revise the task. Finally, she was required to explain this work to an audience in a way that showed her knowledge of fractions, measurement, and geometry. She used mathematical vocabulary, such as circumference, when talking about the need for exact measurements for particular birds. Deb chose this piece of work to place in the school museum.

Tone of Decency and Trust

Homework is often a stress on family life. Since we know this to be true, we think aloud with parents about the purpose of homework, and the ways in which the teachers support the students and their families' in this endeavor. At the parent-student-teacher conferences we hold before the year begins, we set the amount of time that students should not exceed for homework, and also empower parents to tell students to stop doing work that is stressing them. Parents or students are asked to call teachers at home or at school the next day to figure out what needs to be done. In many cases, a conversation with parents and students and teachers is arranged to negotiate a plan with the student.

This year Alice was having trouble writing her journal. She was melting down at home. Mom called for help. Mom, teachers, and Alice sat down and brainstormed options to help Alice complete more of the assignment and to get "unstuck." It was important to ask for ideas from Mom in front of Alice and also in conversations previous to this meeting. Some ideas included Alice calling the teacher for help, talking through the ideas before beginning to write, taking breaks to exercise, and setting time limits. Additionally, we got an Upper (a seventh/eighth grader) to have "working lunches" with her several times a week to help Alice flesh out her ideas and get them written down. There were continual check-ins with Mom and Alice about progress.

Generalists with a Commitment to the Community

Teaching the whole child means that teachers take on many roles. In the Middles classroom, third and fourth graders recognized the transitions that happen when students leave the school. "Magic Penny" ceremonies help students say good-bye. Students gather in a circle prepared to share a memory or appreciation of the student who is leaving. This student is seated on a stool so that he/she is higher than the others.

Students experience this circle sharing differently. John was so moved by the process that he chose to repeat the process by interacting individually with each person in the circle. Another student, Jenny, sat through the entire circle and simply said, "Thank you." It always concludes with the song, "Magic Penny." The structure acknowledges the difficulties of leaving and the possibility of losing friends.

Resources Dedicated to Teaching and Learning

As in many schools, the GCS budget is sparse. Ninety percent of the budget goes to salaries. There are two teachers in each classroom and a Special Abilities teacher for every two classes. The teachers receive an allocation for spending in their classrooms that is approximately one hundred dollars per student. There are few other things in the budget. Since the Board of Directors has six staff members on it, there is good communication, support, and advocacy for teaching and learning.

Schools Practice and Model Democracy and Equity

Soccer is taught throughout the school with "social" goals in mind. Regardless of the experience they bring, all students set soccer goals and all work on something. Each person learns the different positions in the game, and, regardless of skill, gets a turn at each position. The use of a soccer wheel ensures this equitable distribution of roles. The soccer wheel has all positions on the outside and the names of students on the inside. Turning the inner wheel changes the positions played by the students. The teacher uses the wheel to assign the positions, turning it one place each day. At times, more skilled players are asked to coach novice players. The number of passes and number of people the ball must be passed to are often set before a game is played. Sometimes students have constructed the rule that no one can score until every team member has touched the ball. It is explicit at GCS that soccer is about teamwork and should be fun, and respectful of experience, age, and skill diversity.

After the practice or game, we leave ample time to debrief with the players. This is a time for players to notice what went well, who has improved, to thank people who helped them, and to notice any other positive events. It can also be a time to note what we need to work on. There is a lot of time and practice allowed to help students learn how to speak in constructive ways during this time. In addition, we teach and practice the "soccer talk" during the game and from the bench. We brainstorm ways to talk while a game is in play, how to be encouraging, how to coach, and how to control both our excitement over wins and good plays and our disappointments. Role playing these occurrences is very important.

Building the Portfolio

Offered as insight into CES values in practice in one elementary school, these snapshots provide a beginning for the documentation of this practice for Greenfield Center School. As we continue to define what the principles look like and sound like in our school, artifacts and stories from all our schools across the CES

network will add meaning, clarity, inspiration, and dimension.

The "Statement of Values" evolved from work done at a gathering in October of 2006 at Greenfield Center School entitled, "Raising Our Voices." This group of 25 educators came together to advocate for Progressive Elementary Education. As a way of defining what we meant, the statement emerged. The "Statement of Values" has been clarified over the year through conversation and reflection upon the CES Principles adapted for elementary schools.

Preamble: Central to the education of the public is the preparation of all youth in the skills, knowledge, and habits of heart and mind essential to sustaining and expanding a democratic, just, and equitable society.

1. Habits of mind and heart

The school's focus is on helping young people use their minds well; the school fosters critical thinking and socially engaged intelligence.

2. Less is more; depth over coverage

Studies include essential understandings and skills and integrate arts, character, and environmental stewardship.

3. Knowing children well

Curricular and pedagogical decisions are based upon student interest, and offer many opportunities to discover and construct meaning from their own experiences. Teachers guide learning.

4. Keeping decisions local

Decisions are centered as much as possible in the community that lives with those decisions; choice of materials and pedagogy rest in the hands of the principal and staff

5. Construction of meaning; active engagement

Schooling is connected to the real world through authentic projects and audiences.

6. Assessment using multiple formats

Assessments from many perspectives include performance of real tasks, projects, portfolios, and self and peer critique.

7. Tone of decency and trust

Families are vital members of the school community.

8. Generalists with a commitment to the community

Educators are generalists first who expect multiple obligations and a sense of commitment to the entire school.

9. Resources dedicated to teaching and learning

Budgets reflect the values of the school and the voice of the people affected by the decisions.

10. Schools practice/model democracy and equity

The school is a small, caring community in which all members are known, respected, and valued, and in which differences based on class, race, language and disabilities are honored. Forms of inequity are challenged.

Postscript: There is an understanding that strong progressive education will look very different in varied settings, in viewpoint and in specific school and classroom structures; the progressive approach is seen as continuous reflection and reassessment of practice rather than adherence to orthodoxy.

Perspective, empathy, and a greater understanding of the experience of others integrate the experiences of the head and the heart. After a simulation in which fifth and sixth grade students were slaves running away in the woods with masters (parents and older students) chasing them, Peter wrote in his journal:

Most people don't know this, but rain has a smell. Not the rain you get in the spring that helps plants grow, but the rain that comes with despair; the miserable rain, the fear rain. The smell is not large and most will never know it, but it's there. We all learned that smell in the days of the storm, because in that forest, most of all, was the smell of your despair coming down on you in the rain; it was strong.

Based at Greenfield Center School, New England Coalition of Progressive Elementary Educators, PreK-8 (NECPPEE) is a newly founded CES affiliate focused on the development of elementary schools within the CES network. For more on NECPPEE, visit www.centerschool.net/necpe/raisingourvoiceshome.html.

Related Resource

For more on the values and practice of Greenfield Center School, please see "Representing: Elementary to the Exhibitions of Learning" by Laura Baker in Horace Volume 23, Number 1, Winter, 2007. This issue, along with the complete Horace archive, is online at www.essentialschools.org/horace.

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