I have always been afraid of the deep end of the swimming pool. Its blue depths are frightening. They're nothing like the friendly sun-dappled bottom of the shallow end. It's always too quiet at the deep end; a silence that makes me both anxious and fearful.

My fear of the deep-end of the pool started when I was seven. As I lived on an island, all students were required by the local school board to learn how to swim well at a very young age.

Mr. H. was the instructor of this very important skill. He was a huge man with a beard, who could balance a tray of beverages on his belly as he floated on his back in the water.

During one particular swimming class, he asked us to sit around the edge of the deep-end of the pool. And so we went, both boys and girls in our uniform navy blue swimming trunks and suits. We were to be tested on how well we could retrieve objects from the bottom, he said. From a large plastic crate, he produced a big black rubber brick. He threw the brick into the water of the deep end. We watched in horror as the brick became smaller and smaller as it sank to the bottom. “Was the deep-end ever this deep?” I thought to myself.

One by one Mr. H. asked each student to retrieve the brick from the bottom and miraculously everyone in front of the line succeeded. Whether through fear of Mr. H. who had an awful temper or through superior swimming skills, the first group of students managed to retrieve that nasty brick from the bottom. Then it was Nick’s turn. Nick didn’t make it to the bottom of the pool on his first try. We watched as he made it half-way before he ran out of air and had to return to the surface without the brick. Something happened next that I shall never forget. Mr.
H. who was already in the water, pushed Nick’s head back down forcing him to try again without catching his breath. We watched the two battle it out as Mr. H. pushed Nick’s head into the water and Nick struggled to push his head out of the water. Finally, Nick made another attempt to retrieve the brick. This time he did it and came out of the water red-faced and upset. Then, it was my turn.

Once again Mr. H. dropped the brick to the bottom of the pool. I watched as it became smaller and smaller. When that brick finally hit the bottom, the entire class looked at me. No one was smiling. There was nothing I could do or say, I went for it.

Once my head plunged under the water, everything was silent. With flailing arms and legs, I pushed myself towards the brick. Finally, after what seemed a long time, I reached the bottom. I grasped the brick with both my hands and lifted. It was heavier than I thought. I planted my feet on the bottom of the pool and pushed up with every ounce of energy that I had left. As my feet left the bottom of the pool, the brick slipped through my fingers and fell towards the bottom. I was faced two difficult options: I could take on an already angry Mr. H. at the surface and re-live Nick’s experience, OR, I could, even if I drowned in the attempt, go for it again. I chose the latter.

That day, I did get my brick at the bottom of the pool. I was given very good marks for that test, but what I gained in evaluation, I lost as a person. Maybe what I fear so much about the deep-end of the pool is not so much its depths, but another kind of the fear that the deep-end symbolized: The fear of failure, the fear of having no real options, and the fear of coercion.

As a teacher, I do not wish to become a “deep end of the pool” in the lives of my students. Having experienced learning as frustrating, restrictive, and fearful, it is my personal mission as a teacher to prevent similar experiences from happening to the students whom I teach. I do not wish for them to associate schooling with feelings of failure, with being coerced, and with having no real choices about important decisions that affect their lives. As an educator, I am responsible for ensuring that students have the opposite of the “deep-end” experience. This is what I believe draws me to the profession.

A metaphor that perfectly encapsulates my teaching philosophy is the tying of shoelaces. My father was my teacher in this particular skill and I found his lessons fulfilling as a child. In what follows I explore the pedagogical attributes of this experience and wonder if in them I can establish the foundations of my teaching career.

Much of my memory about tying my shoelaces appears in my mind like old faded photographs, snapshots of emotions and events all captured in one sustaining image. I remember the shoes that I had been trying to tie all morning. They were canvas running shoes, red with grey-white laces. I remember sitting on the pink-carpeted floor in front of a big wardrobe. I remember that I could only tie knots and that I found it difficult to create the bow-like loops that my heart yearned for. I experimented for a while, growing increasingly frustrated as I repeated the same mistakes over and over again.

It was then that my father found me, hopelessly entangled with my shoelaces! His first word was to congratulate me on being able to tie the first knot of the shoelace. Then through gentle coaching, he showed me how to create the perfect bow-like loops that my heart yearned for. I made several mistakes that morning. Sometimes the loops were of two different sizes and at other times just one big ball of knots. He always undid the knot and we started again, planning together how we’d do it differently next time. Through his patience and my determination, I eventually learned how to tie my laces.

Meaningful Learning Experiences

When I asked my father if he could teach me how to tie my shoelaces it was in the interest of achieving a certain level of independence. The right to chose my own shoes each morning was dependent upon the knowledge of how to fasten shoes to my feet. I couldn’t very well select my own shoes if I had to ask for an adult’s help. From experience, I learned that adults would eventually “convince” you that another pair was a more appropriate choice for the day. But, if I could tie my shoelaces by myself, there was the chance of slipping out of the house without anyone really noticing the shoes I chose to wear for the day.

Tying my shoelaces was a meaningful lesson because the acquisition of this skill was relevant to me and to the world in which I lived. I wish my students to have meaningful learning
experiences that are relevant and respectful of students’ individual inquiries, needs, and personal inclinations. I believe that by doing so, children will feel a sense of ownership and empowerment in their learning.

A Safe Learning Environment

My father created a safe learning environment for my lessons. It took me a long time to finally learn how to tie my shoelaces and there were plenty of mistakes made along the way. Never once during this experience do I recall being made to feel incompetent or unworthy for not understanding how to tie my shoelaces. Mistakes were used, not as the basis of premature judgements, but rather as stepping-stones upon which to move forward.

I feel that learning experiences for young children ought to occur in a safe environment in which students can make mistakes without negative consequences. I hope to be able to accomplish this by encouraging my students when they are discouraged and by helping them recognize that mistakes are foundations on which to build new ideas and knowledge. I would like to build a classroom community in which ideas are shared and each member works to help another learn. Respect and inclusion for each member would be a defining feature of this community. I hope to be able to achieve this by celebrating each student’s uniqueness with the rest of the class, and by encouraging and celebrating class unity through group work and bonding activities.

Student Choice

Having some level of control over my learning was an empowering experience for me. I always valued independence as a child and felt the need to be able to do things on my own. This sense of empowerment and independence I would like to pass onto my own students. I plan to achieve this in my classroom by giving students the opportunity to make decisions that affect their learning experiences. This might include students brainstorming class rules, engaging in self-assessment and/or collaboratively constructing curriculum experiences.

Surfacing

Remembering and reflecting on my own experiences when I was a student and a child enables me to navigate the world of education. In this way, I feel that my past experiences as a student have influenced my teaching philosophy as it stands today. My past experiences have also oriented me towards particular educational theories more than others. Choice theory (Glasser, 1998), for instance, has been influential for me in deciding what kind of teacher I would like to be and the classroom community I would like to have. The notion of having a learning environment in which students are motivated and in which their basic needs of fun, love and
belonging, freedom, power and survival are met is something I would like to able to experience as an educator.

Moreover, multiple intelligences, the theory that there exists numerous paths to understanding, has been important to me especially when I’ve tried to visualize what it must be like for students who know something and yet are unable to find a way of sharing that knowledge because the educational system they find themselves in privileges particular types of intelligence. It is my hope, therefore, that my memories of being a student, combined with the educational ideas that I have taken to heart, will form a strong basis upon which my career as an educator may stand.

It is with a nervous and excited heart that I begin my career as an educator. I know for sure that I will make mistakes, but I also know that I will learn from them. I know too that my philosophy will change over time, but that whatever change it undergoes, it will certainly be shaped and influenced by the children whom I encounter. I hope that I will be successful in making learning a positive, meaningful experience for the children who come into my life, an experience in which students will not be defeated by “deep water.”

References


About the Author

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