

Educational Philosophy



The students in my class learn three things every year- to articulate who they are; structure their place in the world; and practice the art of being a good human. The rules sound simple but they encompass much. My job is to provide a setting in which all of these come to be. I firmly believe that each child can succeed— regardless of the starting point, because each child learns to strive to do his or her own personal best. Expectations are high, yet obtainable, because the school environment is structured for success. First, students have complete control over what they do but within the boundaries, I set. These boundaries change throughout the year as the students gain mastery over what they do.

1. History6 students enjoy the day. 2006

John Marsden, an Australian author of fiction for middle and high school students, provided a wonderful metaphor for how boundaries work. To paraphrase, imagine a high suspension bridge. Imagine it without railings, with people huddled in the middle, fearful of falling over. However, add the safe boundaries of guardrails on either side, and watch people go to very edge and look over. They risk because it is safe to do so. This is the function of boundaries my class.

All schools have required units of study. For concepts to move from rote learning into the realm of scholarship, integration is the key. Umbrella concepts, that bind a whole body of knowledge together, are needed rather than parsing out information in isolated, and isolating, fragments. What the umbrella concept is has changed over time depending upon the educational level, the academic benchmarks, the curricular units, and students I have. Content is posed within the context of large, global questions to which students repeatedly return and modify as their knowledge base increases. Spiraling the information makes subject area boundary delineations more porous, pertinent and valid while it sparks student interest and curiosity.



2. Ananzi the Spider. Fincher 2nd Graders. 1991



Constructivist and inquiry-based learning are the foundations of the class. Learning how to learn, to communicate and articulate understanding, to argue well within the context of intellectual discourse and to be deeply reflective are important learned skills. A great deal of time in class for the students is spent on learning how to explain viewpoints, their own and others, with clarity and deliberation. There can be quite a few correct answers, or methods to get to an answer, depending on the logic applied. Variance and divergence, with logic, is encouraged.

3. Fincher 5th graders, with their 8th grade buddies ponder, ethnic issues. 1995

Students live within a larger context. At the start of the year, the class does a great deal of foundation work in conflict resolution. Tolerance and understanding of alternate cultures is stressed. Different configurations of cooperative groupings: within the classroom, within the grade level and in multi-grade groupings add to the children's understanding of social roles and functions. They challenge each other, support each other, and when things go amiss—as often happens, take a deep look at what happened and learn from it. There are no failures. There are just times to learn what didn't work. By calling a spade a spade, and owning actions and feelings, they can think about how to change the parameters next time for a more successful outcome.



5. Fincher 4th graders, walk the Silk Road. 2001

This applies to all the students and it applies to me. I learn three things from my students. Because of them, I refine who, and what, I am as a teacher. They encourage me in finding new avenues of understanding, and growth, as I continue to carve out a place in this world. Through them, I make a conscientious effort be the best human I can. It is quite the gift.