

Personal Reflective Paper

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EDU 6132: Students as Learners

May 26, 2009

This “marker event” really seemed so trivial at the time, but through self-reflection and some nagging from my own guilty conscience, it became a critical moment in my development. Ever since I was very young, it has been a strong desire of mine to stand up for the underdog, or defend people who are (or seem to be) helpless against others. This manifested itself in many ways, but none more prominent than the times that I also allowed my quick temper to interfere with my desire to help. Throughout my eighth grade year, there was one young man in my small class of thirteen students who would constantly make fun of my best friend. Not only did this bother me immensely because I would not want her feelings to be hurt, but I also disliked the fact that others would laugh at what he would say. I do remember telling him to stop, but this was returned with name-calling. I have no doubt that I relayed his actions to the teacher, but, in my opinion, these complaints went unanswered.

A culmination of bad feelings towards this peer finally led me to take matters into my own hands. This event took place on one afternoon during the basketball unit of our twice-weekly physical education class. As the usual teasing and joking commenced, I told my peer that he needed to stop making fun of my friend. Our argument proceeded in typical middle-school fashion, shouting things like “what are you going to do about it?,” “you are so stupid,” and “is that the best you could come up with?” As I grew tired of the pointless debate, I decided to end things by throwing the basketball in my hands at him. As it turned out, my typically terrible aim was impeccable that day and the ball hit my classmate squarely in the nose.

My initial reaction was to try to escape the situation physically, but we were in a small gymnasium; my second plan was to feign innocence and see if the teacher would somehow feel badly for me. Instead, I was immediately sent out of the gym and into the locker room. What

happened next is unbeknownst to me, but the girls who came in not long after told me that my classmate was okay, and some even confessed that they did not feel too much sympathy for him. Regardless, I was pretty nervous to go back to the classroom, given the fact that I was fairly close to my PE teacher and wanted to protect my sterling reputation with my other teacher. Before returning to class, I remember being terrified of three things: my impending punishment, revenge from the classmate or his friends, and disappointing the teachers I looked up to and respected. Perhaps they felt my remorse was enough of a punishment because I was only asked to apologize to my peer and move on. Although it seemed like such a small event at the time, it reveals a great deal about my development and provides a valuable lesson to be applied in my future as a teacher.

This interaction between my personal mental development and my social situations can be explained by a constructivist theory of development. The most basic idea of the constructivist approach is “that children must construct their own understandings of the world in which they live” (Meece, 2008, p. 129). In other words, meaning and knowledge are gained through my interactions with others and previous experience. The way that I choose to interact with people is not based on inherent or instinctual methods; it is shaped and formed by social interactions. More specifically, how I deal with conflict and how I choose to react to frustration is directly linked to my personal experiences with others; this “marker event” revealed to me my tendency to act quickly without thinking about the consequences. It also taught me the importance of thinking before I act. A key aspect of this development theory lies in the fact that children require the ability “to process and store information about social behaviors, to anticipate consequences for certain actions, and to regulate their own behavior” (p. 26). This interaction between a person’s

mental development and key social events make social interactions vital for development. In my case, this interaction with a peer allowed me to not only understand how I react but also to examine my interactions in order to change them in the future.

Lev Vygotsky helped contribute to the foundations of a constructivist approach. He believed that mental processes in general are founded in social interactions and children learn through personal experience, which makes things meaningful (p. 165). He believed that children progress through certain stages in language development, beginning with social speech, followed by egocentric speech, and moving to inner speech. The development of inner speech allows people to “guide their thinking and behavior” (p. 168). Given this idea, I was at a point in my development where, although I was capable of utilizing inner speech and assessing my actions ahead of time, I was also balancing the idea of acting on my impulses.

It does not seem unreasonable to think that students in my future classrooms will find themselves in the midst of similar struggles as they find a balance between their levels of moral, social, and educational development. It only seems plausible to allow students to experience this process, as Vygotsky would argue that while we will progress through the same stages, it may happen at varied ages. This being the case, a classroom will likely be a place where students are constantly changing as they learn from their experiences with one another. My specific “marker event” could very well be experienced by my students as they learn about controlling their temper or how and why they control and express strong feelings.

One of the best things I can do to be sensitive to these changes in adolescents and be careful to monitor how students are interacting with one another. While my instructional practices may not require too much alteration, it will be important to watch certain students that

may be experiencing similar issues in order to help them develop effective and safe conflict management skills. For example, it may be prudent to provide opportunities for group work, provided that groups are well-selected and carefully monitored to watch for any sort of problems that could arise. More specifically, I would assign students to work on a project together during class time and check in regularly with each group, paying close attention to the peer relations of the students that seem to be going through similar experiences to mine. I might also avoid placing certain students together in a group project or near each other in a seating chart in order to ensure that their safety and well-being are protected in the classroom.

Reference

Meece, J. L. & Daniels, D. H. (2008). *Child and adolescent development for educators*. (3rd ed.).
New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.