

Last Class Notes

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Abstract

This chapter contains thoughts on 23 issues that Lilian Katz has shared with her students during her teaching career. Topics covered include adults' attitudes toward children, teachers' professional development, equality, dispositions, the goals of education, the power of ideas, and the importance of striving for the well-being of all our children.

During my 31 years at the University of Illinois, I taught a graduate course titled Early Childhood Curriculum Trends and Issues. The topics included selected aspects of child development, the role of play in learning, parent-teacher relationships, curriculum models and teaching methods, and examination of research related to all of these matters.

I have long thought that a useful part of pedagogy at every level is to engage learners in a debriefing or summarizing process about the main issues that have been addressed in the class. Students were asked to write a final reaction paper indicating what topics and readings were more or less useful to them, considering their own unique backgrounds and professional roles and offering any suggestions they might have for my future teaching of the course.

At the last class of every semester, I also evaluated the semester in terms of what was accomplished or omitted, and I provided some reflections on the main points. During the first few years, the list of main points for the last class meeting was about a half-dozen. But over the years, the list grew to its present length. The list includes some professional, pedagogical as well as philosophical, principles that I hoped students would carry with them as they returned to their work. I hope they are useful to others as well.

We have lingered over many topics concerning children, parents, teachers, and curriculum issues. There is still much to learn about how to help all our children so that ultimately they can lead a "good life." As you return to your work, keep these main points in mind:

- #1 Remember that adults know more about almost everything than a small child does—except what it feels like to be that child, and how the world makes sense to him or her. Those things are the children's expertise from which a teacher must learn—to be able to reach and teach them.

- #2 Remember also that through their behavior children often ask us to help them become the kinds of persons we want them to be, because that is what they want to be. They want to be the kinds of persons we like—especially while they are still very young! We won't harm them by being clear about what we think is good, right, valuable, worth knowing, and worth understanding.
- #3 Take care not to confuse what is exciting, amusing, and fun with what is educative. Excitement is appropriate for entertainment and special occasions; it is short-lived pleasure—easy come, easy go. But what is educative requires sustained effort and involvement, often includes many routine elements, and offers long-term deep satisfaction rather than momentary fun and excitement.
- #4 Remember that learning and development take time—change may not! We can change behavior quickly by using threats and punishments; but when these are removed, there is no real development. And remember that it is very hard to grow around impatient people!
- #5 Remember that meaningful relationships have to have *content*. Relationships cannot develop in a vacuum; people have to relate to each other *about* something that matters to the members of the relationship. The content of our relationships with children should not be mainly about rules, regulations, and conduct but about their increasing knowledge and developing understandings of those things within and around them worth knowing more about.
- #6 In teaching, as indeed in life, we constantly make decisions. Every decision carries with it its own potential errors. There are probably no error-free decisions. So we have to think ahead about the possible errors embedded in each decision and then choose the “least worst errors!” In this sense, life is a series of choices of which errors we prefer.
- #7 It is a good idea for all of us as teachers to seek a balance between sufficient skepticism
- to be able to go on learning and sufficient conviction to be able to go on acting—for to teach is to act. And effective teaching requires optimal confidence in the rightness of our actions.
- #8 As teachers, all we have at a given moment in a specific situation is our own very best judgment. Throughout our professional lives, we study and reflect in order to refine that judgment; we exchange with colleagues, consider others' solutions to the problems we face, examine the available evidence—all in order to improve our judgment. But in the last analysis, our very best judgment is all there is.
- #9 Teaching involves many conflicting pressures and situations. We cannot respond fully or equally to all of them. We have to decide what is worth making an issue over. Don't make an issue over everything; a half-dozen issues will do! Select those issues that really matter to you. Then take your stand on them with clarity, confidence, and with courage—for the sake of the children.
- #10 Cultivate the habit of speaking to children as people—people with minds—usually lively ones. Appeal to their good sense. It is not necessary to be sweet, silly, or sentimental at one extreme or somber, grim, or harsh at the other. Let us be genuine, direct, honest, serious, and warm with them and about them—and sometimes humorous too.
- #11 The goal of education is not enjoyment; that is the goal of entertainment. The goal of education is to engage the mind of the learners so that their understandings of significant phenomena and events become deeper, clearer, and more accurate. When we succeed at engaging their minds, the learners find it enjoyable. But enjoyment cannot be our goal; it is more likely a side effect of good teaching.
- #12 Cultivate your own intellect and nourish the life of your mind. For teachers, the cultivation of the mind is as important as the cultivation

- of our capacities for understanding, compassion, and caring—not less, not more—but equally important. In other words, see yourself as a developing professional; become a student of your own teaching—a career-long student of your own teaching.
- #13 Respect your adversaries and resist the temptation to be defensive. Remember, whenever you respond defensively, it is partly because you believe the attack, or believe part of the attack; and when you are defensive, you are responding by the attacker's rules! Sometimes the attacker is right. But it seems best to respond professionally rather than personally. It seems to me that adversaries and enemies tend to become alike!
- #14 Never take someone else's views or opinions of you or your work more seriously than you take your own! Take others' views seriously—there may be much to learn from them—but not more seriously than you take your own; for that is the essence of self-respect, and I believe that children benefit from being around self-respecting adults.
- #15 I really believe that we cannot have optimal environments for children in preschools, child care centers, and schools unless the environments are also optimal for the adults who work with them and care for them. Certainly on some days what is optimal for the children will be obtained at the expense of the adults (like Halloween parties), and on other days, vice versa. But on the average, on a day-to-day basis, both the children and the adults must find their lives together satisfying, interesting, and worth living.
- #16 Always assume that the people you work with have the capacities for greatness, creativity, courage, and insight. Occasionally, this assumption will be wrong, perhaps. But if you always make it, you will be much more likely to uncover, encourage, strengthen, and support these qualities in them.
- #17 Never underestimate the power of ideas! Bad ones as well as good ones! Ideas are distinctly human creations, and if they were not powerful, many people would not have been imprisoned, exiled, assassinated, sent to Siberia, burned at the stake, executed, or crucified—because of their ideas.
- #18 Identify as clearly as you can what your own assignment is, and what is yours to do, and do it as well and as wholeheartedly as you can. Don't waste time blaming history, tradition, politicians, administrators, parents, or any other category. In other words, avoid being caught in the "blame drain." We are with the children for such a short time and at such an important time in their lives. Make that time count by giving it all you have.
- #19 I think the great struggle of our time—and no doubt for generations to come—is the struggle for *equality*. But we might ask: equality of what? People are not equally tall or musical or mathematical or athletic or beautiful; *but they are equally human!* They are equally human in the sense that they all have hopes and dreams and wishes and fantasies and aspirations and fears and doubts. They all want to be treated with respect and dignity and want to feel loved by someone. In these ways, it seems to me, all of the world's people are more alike than they are different!
- #20 The struggle for equality is very much a struggle for the "good life," and the right to a good quality of life, and to the feeling that life is worth living, satisfying, and enriching. And it is the aesthetic dimension that accounts for the quality of our lives. As H. S. Broudy (1972) points out, aesthetics have to do with elaborations upon the basics, those elements of form, pattern, and texture above and beyond the simple instrumental and that serve to alleviate tedium. The aesthetic dimensions of experience transform caves into homes, running into dance, shouting into singing, growling into poetry, eating into dining, reproduction into romance—and those aesthetic dimensions mark the quality of our lives.

#21 I have tried to share my own views of what education is about. To me it is about developing certain dispositions in the young. These dispositions should include being reflective, inquisitive, inventive, resourceful, and full of wonder (wonder-full?), wonderment, and puzzlement. These dispositions should include the habits of searching for evidence; they should include also the dispositions to be tender, courageous, caring, compassionate. And they should include some humor as well! But I refer you to the definition of education provided by the British philosopher R. S. Peters:

To be educated is not to have arrived at a destination; it is to travel with a different view. What is required is not feverish preparation for something that lies ahead, but to work with a precision, passion, and taste at worthwhile things that lie at hand (Peters, 1965, p. 110).

#22 It may be time to rephrase the ultimate goal of education, so that it is not driven by the notion that unless all our children grow up to be engineers, scientists, CEOs, doctors, and lawyers, etc., the education system has failed. Rather, the goal should be cast in terms of the proposition that whatever a child ultimately does for his or her life's work, and in whatever way he or she contributes to his or her communities, is not predetermined at birth by gender, race, ethnicity, or family income level. This is not an easy goal, but one that is more realistic than pushing all children to become rocket scientists.

#23 I really believe that each of us must come to care about everyone else's children. We must come to see that the well-being of our own individual children is intimately linked to the well-being of all other people's children. After all, when one of our own children needs life-saving surgery, someone else's child will perform it; when one of our own children is threatened or harmed by violence on the streets, someone else's child will commit it. The good life for our own children can only be secured if it is also secured for all other

people's children. But to worry about all other people's children is not just a practical or strategic matter; it is a moral and ethical one: to strive for the well-being of all other people's children *is also right*.

Remember that whoever might be president of our country in 40 or 50 years is likely to be in someone's early childhood program today; and I hope she is having a good experience!

References

- Broudy, H. S. (1972). *Enlightened cherishing: An essay on aesthetic education*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Peters, R. S. (1965). Education as initiation. In R. D. Archambault (Ed.), *Philosophical analysis and education* (p. 110). London: Routledge Kegan Paul.