

Miranda Bucky

Empowering Learners Portfolio

Spring 2016



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Miranda Bucky

Empowering Learners

May 13th, 2016

Introduction

This portfolio has come together as the location of a lot of thoughts and questions, some of them resolved and some continuing. It is also an attempt to bring together many different topics from class, my placement, and other experiences, interactions, and observations. If nothing else, reflecting on all of these in the portfolio brings them into physical proximity, and I hope that this proximity allows for seemingly unrelated ideas and topics of interest to interact and inform each other. Over the course of the semester, we've studied mindfulness, trauma, healing presence, helping prison, disability studies, adult development, healing justice, and embodied practice, which were all brought together by being applied to education in some way.

One task that I have struggled with through the semester is connecting theory and practice. My second paper attempted to take theory and tie it to concrete goals and examples, but ended up being a pretty weak paper. Since so many of the themes of the course have been only tangentially related to education, it can be hard to bring them back around to directly inform practice. From this difficulty, I've learned that it is sometimes better to push and try to apply theory to different situations to come to better understand the theory and its applicability, and sometimes better to let it be, and see whether any insights end up emerging later on. I've also become more sensitive to the different ways that theory can be applied: sometimes theory can directly shape actions and intentions, and sometimes it's just a tiny thought in the back of my

head that reminds me to be sensitive to something I might not otherwise have noticed about a situation.

Looking at the complexity of the prompt for the final paper, I messed around with a lot of ideas for alternative formats that would be better suited to presenting a lot of information that might not be directly related. I ended up deciding and finding that writing a formal paper was the best way for me to organize and present my ideas. I'm not sure whether that was just because we are trained to express ourselves using essay form so that just feels more comfortable, or whether the challenge of having to find relations between all the seemingly unrelated things I wanted to bring up was fruitful using essay form.

Having worked to compile all of these notes and reflections, I'm finding what things in the class contributed in a big way to my learning. The placement was probably the part of the class that I will remember best and learned the most from. Getting to have a placement at the kindergarten while also working at the preschool was a great learning experience, and definitely validated the feeling I had that sometimes talking about themes and ideas in an education class is just not enough and needs to work alongside our having to do some real work in another setting. I'm hoping to be able to work at the kindergarten or the preschool more regularly next year.

Putting together the portfolio also helped me notice how many parts of the class were collaborative, and in particular how my favorite parts of the course were the parts where we got to work really closely with other people: the placement and the book project. This made me think again about one of the main focuses I had at the kindergarten and the preschool: at both, I had in some capacity to help actively facilitate positive interactions and play between the students. Feeling gratitude for the moments in the Empowering Learners class where I got to

work with others reaffirmed how important a skill it is to build, and made me feel as though what I was working on with the younger kids was worthwhile and valuable.



Miranda Bucky

Empowering Learners Final Paper

May 13th, 2016

Empowerment as a Collaboration

While education can serve many purposes, one of the goals of education is to empower learners to be active participants in creating community. The work of this paper is to use class texts, experience, and analysis to build definitions of power and empowerment, and explore what it means to be an empowering learner. As Judi Chamberlin writes, “Empowerment is not a destination, but a journey” (Chamberlin): one that involves creating the conditions for empowerment by allowing for the correct amounts of both structure and agency, and understanding and critiquing the systems that we are inescapably part of. Constructing and stacking definitions, empowerment involves coming to hold power, and power is having informed desires and the agency to work towards those desires. If being a learner means having a constantly evolving understanding, then being an empowering learner means creating the conditions for empowerment for oneself and others in a way that is informed by a flexible perspective.

To have power is to have the ability to decide what you want, and then have the agency to be able to work towards bringing that about. This involves critical literacy as well as direction, which means being able not only to work within a system but to understand that system and its flaws. Critical literacy is concerned with “Learning to think critically; unlearning the conditioning; seeing things differently... a recognition of the often-hidden power relationships” (Chamberlin) that are part of any societal structure. To have power, one must be able to develop this literacy,

without which it is impossible to think about attacking or changing an unjust system. To have power is to be able to challenge pre-existing structures, like the American school system or government, by being able to characterize the dominant narrative inherent in any societal structure, and understanding how one fits within the system. As Tema Okun writes in “white supremacy,” “One of the purposes of listing characteristics of white supremacy culture is to point out how organizations which unconsciously use these characteristics as their norms and standards make it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards... Being able to identify and name the cultural norms and standards you want is a first step to making room for a truly multicultural organization” (Okun). Naming and understanding the norms of a system make us better able both to work within it and eventually to change it. In his book *Between the World and Me*, a letter to his son about what to expect as a Black man in America, Ta-Nehisi Coates talks about police brutality and systemic racism. He writes, “I came to see the streets and the schools as arms of the same beast. One enjoyed the official power of the state while the other enjoyed its implicit sanction. But fear and violence were the weaponry of both” (Coates 33). The way in which Coates attempts to empower his son is by explaining to him the system in which he is embedded, and through that explanation, give him the tools to act.

Empowerment involves stepping into one’s own power to understand and to act. In his paper “The Right to Research,” Arjun Appadurai defines the ability to research as, “The capacity to systematically increase the horizons of one’s current knowledge, in relation to some task, goal, or aspiration” (Appadurai 176). In his view, being empowered involves having the ability to increase one’s own knowledge. In Appadurai’s discussion of the nature and necessity of research, does empowerment occur when knowledge is gained, or when conditions are made to be conducive to research? This raises the question, can one person empower another? I don’t

feel comfortable questioning whether I've empowered others, but I do feel as though I have been empowered by others. The picture I've been leaning towards more and more is empowerment as collaboration. One example from this semester where I have felt empowered has been in one of my philosophy classes at Haverford. Every student in the class except for me is male, the professor is male, and almost all of the readings for the class use male pronouns as the default, giving examples of the "virtuous man," or the "wise man." This was one of the first things I noticed on the first day of the class, and I was apprehensive about it. But the professor made a noticeable effort to call attention to the obvious sexism in ancient philosophy, to use female pronouns as the default, and to call on me whenever I raise my hand in class. Because of this, I have felt supported, encouraged to participate, and comfortable in the classroom, which I was not expecting from this class. Fitting this example into my chosen definition of empowerment, the professor created the conditions in which I could become empowered. Still, if I hadn't made a big effort to speak up in class and push myself, this wouldn't have been effective. So, in this instance, and, I argue, in most instances, empowerment has to come about as a collaboration.

Working from the definitions of power and empowerment, an empowering learner must be someone who works towards their empowerment and the empowerment of others. The difference between being an empowering person and being an empowering learner is that the learner is in the process of exploring and redefining empowerment. Someone can be excellent at creating the conditions to empower others, but if their viewpoint isn't evolving and sensitive to change, they aren't acting as an empowering learner. Even if someone has reached some sort of peak mastery of how to be a learner or a teacher or just a person in the world, their environment and the people with whom they interact are always changing. So they must adapt, and never stop being learners themselves.

This model is complicated by the fact that, if empowerment is often a collaboration, it is hard to pin down who in a given situation is acting as what we would call an empowering learner. They could be a teacher or a student, either working by themselves or with others. The term could apply to multiple parties if the empowerment is taking place as a collaboration. Also, empowerment can take place in an environment that is not at all school-related. I want to keep it a little hazy who in any learning transaction this term should be applying to so that it can be adapted to fit as many different scenarios as possible.

My placement this semester was at a kindergarten. Working with young kids made me think a lot about the way someone's age influences their education, empowerment, and agency. A definition of empowerment needs to be sensitive to where learners are developmentally. After my placement at the Kindergarten, I found myself questioning much more closely the role that imposed structure plays in empowerment. The teachers at the kindergarten maintain a reliable, tight schedule during the day, with routines for transitions and a set of classroom rules. In an article about adult development, Susanne Cook-Greuter argues that "A development perspective allows for a better match between people and their functions and tasks" (Cook-Greuter). This applies to development at any age, and emphasizes that understanding a person's level of development is key in being able to help create conditions for their empowerment. This supports the idea that of the appropriate level of structure is different for different age groups. Additionally, I found myself thinking about Miller and Cutshall's *The Art of Being a Healing Presence*, which talks about ways to consciously be in the world and connect with others, and how that informs what it means to adopt a developmental perspective: "Healing presence is the condition of being consciously and compassionately in the present moment with another or with others believing in and affirming their potential for wholeness, wherever they are in life" (Miller 12). Bringing a healing presence to interactions with others involves recognizing

where people are developmentally, but doing so in a way that recognizes their wholeness and complexity of character. This is relevant when interacting with people of any age, but notably is key in creating an environment that is empowering for young learners. Bring the idea of healing presence to the way I looked at the structure and rules in the kindergarten, I found myself thinking not only about what the structure was and how to help maintain it, but also questioning the motivation behind discipline in the classroom and on the playground. I think that there is an incredibly important difference between maintaining order in school for the sake of keeping order or for the sake of keeping making things easier for the teachers, and maintaining order by purposefully employing the exact amount and character of discipline that will work towards empowering everyone in the classroom.

I loved going to the kindergarten every week, partly because I felt empowered when I was there because of the mix of structure and agency they created for the college students who enter the school. During the discussion about what I wanted to get out of the placement, Ms. S gave me some directions to go in: focusing on two students in particular and helping them have positive interactions with their classmates, and observing and then leading lunch bunch. This was very different from my placement last year in a 3rd grade classroom, where I mostly sat in the back of the room and took notes during the lesson. In that placement, I didn't feel as though I had any definite direction, or much agency and trust to act how I thought would be best. Contrastingly, this year, I felt as though Ms. S and the Praxis program created the conditions necessary for me to empower myself to have a bigger role in the placement. Again, this exemplifies empowerment as collaboration, in which each party has the chance to be an empowering learner.

In her essay "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," Eve Tuck argues for adopting a desire-based framework for research instead of a damage-based one. She writes

that we ought to, “Craft our research to capture *desire* instead of damage” (Tuck 416). In a damage-based model, researchers and educators attempt to “fix” what’s wrong with students and with their community. Contrastingly, “Desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future. It is integral to our humanness” (Tuck 417). Working from a model based on desire is central to being an empowering learner. Working with the model of empowerment as a collaboration, that collaboration is completely impossible if people are interacting using a damage-based model. I see this definition applying over the summer when I work at Breakthrough, teaching middle school students in Philadelphia. On the program website, they write, “Research shows that students from lower-income backgrounds can lose up to two months of math and literacy skills over the summer.” Their summer program works to address this specific need by offering supplemental classes and clubs during the summer. This alone does not fully validate the program as being desire-based, since this is a need that could be projected on families that might not have named it as a need themselves. However, the fact that parents and students have the opportunity to voluntarily sign up does more clearly make the program one that has the potential to work within a desire-based framework. Still, this will not mean much if interns were to come into the program without this feel for what the program’s goals are and should be. This is where I will rely on the definition of what it means to be an empowering learner, and what it means to be sensitive to desire instead of damage.

One way that the coming summer has complicated my definition of what it means to be an empowering learner is thinking about how critiquing the predominant discourse fits with empowerment. Breakthrough works very much within the American school system, which is based around norms and standards and testing in a way that many would argue is incredibly disempowering to both students and teachers. Does the fact that the program works within this system, helping fill students’ heads with the information that they will need to succeed on

standardized tests, work against the philosophy of empowerment that we have developed in class? Or does the fact that the program works to address a gap in the system (learning loss over the summer) mean that it is sensitive to the system in a way that allows it to more effectively help students be empowering learners? I think that the answer to both of these questions is yes, and this creates tension for my definition. However, even though the definition of being an empowering learner raises questions and doubts, that makes it a more useful definition by prompting further reflection.

Building a definition of what it means to be an empowering learner depends on being able to think critically about the way in which theory informs practice. By analyzing examples in my life where I've felt empowered, I reached the conclusion that empowerment is most often brought about by collaboration, for "empowerment does not occur to the individual alone" (Chamberlin). I define power as the ability to decide what you want and the agency to be able to bring it about, developing critical literacy as well as direction in order to be able not only to work within a system but to critique it. Empowerment is coming to hold power, and an empowering learner must be someone who works towards their empowerment and the empowerment of others, immersed in the constant process of exploring and redefining empowerment.

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Field Notes Day One-- 2/17

Notes: When I arrived, the kids were outside at recess. The fenced-in playground, carpeted in wood chips, has a jungle gym with slides and climbing walls and fireman poles, a small sandbox in the corner with shovels and pails. In another corner was a cardboard box full of toys: binoculars, bean bags, and little boxes of soapy water to blow bubbles with. There was one teacher and two teachers' assistants looking after twelve Kindergarteners, one girl and nine boys, some playing in the sandbox, others climbing on the jungle gym and going down the slide, while others were looking through brightly colored pairs of binoculars or tossing bean bags back and forth. I joined a game of monkey in the middle with Danny¹, Kevin, Andy, and Mr. D, a Haverford student who works at the Kindergarten for a few hours each week. The game went on for a while and then began to die down, so Danny started to toss one of the bean bags up one of the slides, releasing it and then waiting for it to slide back down. Others started to join, and soon there were five at the bottom of the slide throwing bean bags up, and two at the top trying unsuccessfully to catch them before they slid down. Ms. K, who had been keeping an eye on the game, came over to make sure that everyone followed the recess rules, waiting to go down the slide until the area at the bottom is clear.

During the two hours when I observe the class, the students have recess, lunch, speech, and music, each for a half hour. During speech, the students play games upstairs that have to do with language. Today, they played a guessing game, trying to guess types of food based on hints from the class. In music class, they play tambourines and dance to classical music. Today they learn about Beethoven, and use adjectives to describe how his music makes them feel.

Thoughts: Including students who were absent that day, the class includes two girls and 10 (?) boys. This seems to contribute to shaping a fairly rowdy class dynamic. One of the teachers said that Jenny and Hazel, the two girls in the class, are best friends and almost inseparable. I

¹ Names have been changed.

wonder what it would be like to be one of only two girls in a preschool class, and whether that would significantly affect the experience.

The classroom has very specific rules and procedures. Students are reminded to “speak with kindness” and “have quiet hands,” and each member of the class is assigned a “carpet square” to sit on during every circle meeting. By maintaining what sometimes seems to be a fairly unyielding structure, in relation to both the rules of the class and the timing of the day, the teachers help keep the class safe.

Remember: It seems as though this group can get pretty rowdy pretty fast. In particular, Danny and Andy frequently have small disputes that sometimes become physical. While I don’t think it’s really my place to get directly involved in big disputes, I definitely will remember to be careful not to accidentally encourage any games or behaviors that could potentially go in a bad direction.

In order to help maintain consistency in the classroom and not be a disruptive presence, I am trying to get familiar with the rhythms of the class, the expectations the teachers have for the students and for themselves, and the specific language teachers use to address certain situations.

Keep looking at the ways that the structure of the class is shaped and upheld, and thinking about the rationale behind the structure.

Field Notes Day Two-- 2/24

Notes: Today, since it is raining, recess is inside. About half of the class is making airplanes out of legos, while others are playing with playdough or magnetic blocks. I sat down at a table with playdough and started rolling it into balls to build a snowman. Kevin and Robby were making balls and flat discs, and we talked about what foods we like and what we don’t like. They asked me to come play with blocks with them, and we went to build a castle out of blocks.

For lunch, I joined Ms. S, Kevin, Sammy, John, and Andy for “lunch bunch.” During lunch bunch, Ms. S has lunch with a few students and works on conversational skills. Today, she has the four boys go around the circle and talk about each of their siblings, and ask each other questions about what they’re eating for lunch. This turns into a conversation about food, and the students all talk about their favorite foods and about protein, which they learned about during a speech class. When Sammy starts to talk about one of the posters on the wall, Ms. S reminds him that the conversation is not about the poster right now, and asks him to pay attention to Kevin, who is talking about what he has for lunch.

After lunch, I got to talk about the Fieldwork Agreement with Ms. S, and we decided on a few things to focus on for the rest of the placement.

Thoughts: It’s fascinating to see how carefully playtime is regulated by the adults in the classroom.

Transitions, which can often be very difficult for Kindergarteners, are handled by establishing a routine for each one. Every time the class moves to a new classroom, they line up by the door. When they go to music, they all sing a song that goes, “rise and shine and welcome to music class!” In order to make sure that students don’t get bored or restless, transitions happen fairly frequently. Ms. S says that the students have three recesses: fifteen minutes in the morning, thirty minutes right before lunch, and fifteen minutes in the afternoon.

Remember: After talking over the Fieldwork Agreement with Ms. S, we decided that my “small move” is going to be joining lunch bunch every Wednesday, and eventually leading a few of them. Over the next few weeks, I’ll observe how Ms. S leads lunch bunch: the type of questions she asks, how she handles distractions or contributions from the students that are rude or disruptive, and how she structures the time. I’ll also pay close attention to the answers the students give, so that I can ask them specific follow-up questions; for example, John has a little sister named Margaret who just turned two, Sam likes to play soccer with his dad, and Andy’s family recently went to Florida.

While going over the Fieldwork Agreement, we also talked about the ways that students in the class interact with each other. Ms. S said that she focuses on teaching kindness to all of her students, and wants to make sure that they all know how to interact with each other. I’m going to focus on helping students to engage with each other productively, especially Sammy and Danny.

Field Notes Day Three-- 3/2

Notes: Today, I played freeze tag with the kids at recess. Ms. S and Mr. D were playing too, and alternated between participating, running away from the “it” and unfreezing players, and keeping an eye out that the game didn’t get too rowdy and resolving disputes about the rules. Part way through the game, I noticed that Hayley and Jenny, the only two girls in the class, were some of the only people not playing tag. I went over to talk to them (got frozen on the way and had to get unfrozen by Ms. S) and asked why they weren’t playing. Hayley said that Jenny was feeling sick and didn’t want to run. I asked if they wanted to make sand castles; we made a tower with walls and a moat and a drawbridge. Jenny said that it would rain soon and the moat would fill up: “and NO ONE will be able to attack the castle!” Some of the boys noticed the castle and came over to look, and the sandbox gradually filled up with kindergarteners digging and building their own castles. Danny started to toss sand at the girls, so I quickly asked him to help me build a sand watchtower. He hesitated, then agreed.

In the music class, Ms. D is still talking with students about classical composers, Beethoven, Bach, and Brahms (“the three B’s!”). Students also got to play tambourines and get up and dance.

Thoughts: Last week, when I was talking with Ms. S about ways to help students interact positively, we talked about how sometimes just interrupting or pulling attention away from a negative behavior can help solve a problem without directly confronting it. Today, when we were

building sandcastles and recess and Danny started to throw sand at other students, all that was needed was a quick distraction. Maybe it would have been better to directly intervene and tell him not to throw sand, but I think that he knows that he isn't supposed to throw sand and was just bored.

As usual with this class of kindergarteners, when they get into a large group, the energy is very intense and sometimes feels as though things are on the edge of boiling over and turning into a fight or disagreement. This is probably why the teachers seem to structure playtime more than I would have expected.

Remember: Even when focusing on individual students in the class, keep an eye on group dynamics. It would be easy to accidentally fuel some sort of tension or argument just by paying attention to some kids while ignoring others.

Field Notes Day Four-- 3/16

Notes: The Kindergarten is on Spring Break right now, so instead of hanging out with the kids, I went to the Haverfarm with Adriene for my placement. We decided on a time to meet over email, but when I went there she wasn't there. I emailed her again, and she apologized for the miscommunication and we met on the farm later in the week. We planted some seedlings, and pulled weeds for two hours. Adriene mentioned that she would be happy to help me put together a lesson plan for the Kindergarteners, and that the next time they came I could give a quick lesson on planting. I thought it was a cool idea, but the times they come to the farm happen when I have class, so I didn't get further into it.

On an unrelated note, I also went to the Thorne preschool this same week to have an interview about shadowing a new student there.

Thoughts: While I definitely enjoyed spending time doing farm work, it didn't feel relevant to the placement at all. The extent of the connection was that, when I went back to Thorne the week after, I mentioned that I had gone to the farm and got a halfhearted "oh, cool," from some of the kids.

Also, I ended up getting to job at the preschool, and working there has been really fun and a huge learning experience. I'm not sure how much to include it in my fieldnotes, since it doesn't really seem fair to write about a student when that wasn't an agreed-upon thing the way it is in a placement. Still, though, working at the preschool informed my experience at the kindergarten in a huge way, so I will try to talk about relevant things from the preschool focusing on how they relate to the placement and without directly writing about the student that I got to shadow.

Remember: Look for the value in different experiences. What did I learn from the day on the farm? Sometimes a new program can look exciting and cool, and just not work out. Also, I was reminded that partnerships have to be worked on and maintained: it wasn't enough to have a cool partnership between the farm and the kindergarten and the Praxis program without having

a clear idea of how it would play out. I think that sometimes that sort of situation turns into a really cool thing, but maybe this time it just didn't.

Also, it's interesting to think about how fieldnotes, just like any other piece of writing, have meaning that is tied not only to what they talk about, but also in what is omitted.

Field Notes Day Five-- 3/22

Notes: The kids were several minutes late to recess because they were coming from the farm, where they had been planting flowers with Adriene. At recess, the kids were playing freeze tag again, which seems to be the routine for recess. It never gets old! I'm finding myself looking forward to playing tag every Wednesday, not only because I enjoy that the students enjoy it, but also because I really enjoy it myself. Partway through the game, I noticed Bill by himself in the corner of the playground, staring off into space. Remembering the conversation with Ms. S about helping Bill interact with the other students, I went over and asked him, "Where were you all coming from before recess? Did you get to work on the farm?" Bill nodded slightly, still staring off. Hoping to get Amy into a conversation, I asked her too, "Did you guys get to plant flowers at the farm?" Bill didn't look at me or Amy, while Amy talked about planting sunflowers earlier in the day. Later, when I was standing next to the preschoolers in line to go in for lunch, Bill suddenly asked, "why did you ask twice about the farm?" I was caught off guard, because I hadn't thought he was listening. I finally said, "Because I wanted to hear more about it," even though that wasn't a great answer.

In speech class, which is called "Games with Ms. A!", the kids got to go outside and play a tag game where they played "mother may I" and focused on speaking clearly and thinking strategically about what they asked. When Allie asked, "Ms. A, may I take 20 frog jumps?" Ms. A said, "Think about how far that would take you. Do you think there might be a question that would help you more?" Allie reconsidered, and asked instead for 5 frog hops. Ms. A praised the way she spoke clearly and loudly, but without shouting.

Thoughts: I had specifically wanted to talk to Bill, because he was one of the students, along with Danny, that Ms. S had mentioned at the start of the placement as needing a little extra attention. She had said that he is most likely somewhere on the Autism spectrum, and doesn't usually seek out the company of the other students. When I asked what the best things to focus on for him would be, Ms. S said that she has been trying to find ways for him to engage with other students in the class as well as with teachers. While I think it was good for me to try talking to him, I should have been more respectful of the fact that Bill isn't obliged to interact with me on my terms. I will definitely keep trying to engage with him, but more on his terms and not expecting him to answer inane questions that I already know the answer to.

Remember: Kindergarteners are incredibly observant and articulate. If I don't see that, or forget about it, that's my bad.

Field Notes Day Six-- 3/30

Notes: I joined the freeze tag game again, and played for a while until Hallie pulled me over to the sandbox to help her build sandcastles. I saw Bill sitting on a toy tractor, trying to push himself forward because the pedals weren't working. I went over and asked him if he knew why the pedals weren't working. He didn't know why, so I asked him if he wanted to be pushed. He paused for a little and then said, "I guess." I started slowly pushing the tractor forward, gradually picking up speed until I was going at a slow jog, crouching to push the tractor. Bill was smiling a little bit. I said he should try steering a little if he wanted to, and so he started turning the steering wheel and taking the tractor in loops all around the playground while I pushed. After a few minutes, he stopped steering, and said, "Alright, I'm done now."

Lunch bunch wasn't happening because Ms. S had a meeting, so I ate lunch with the kids in Ms. R's classroom. I was sitting at a table with Danny and Jim. We spent most of lunch talking about what foods we liked, and playing a guessing game similar to 20 questions. We were guessing different types of animals. One that Jim picked took us forever to figure out; it turned out that he had picked a stegosaurus. After a couple rounds of guessing, Danny leaned over and whispered, "Guess what?" I asked what, and he asked, confidentially, "Do you want to marry me?" I laughed and said that I couldn't, and he scowled and asked why not. I said that he was too young to get married.

Another startling moment happened on the way to music class. One student, Andy, was not paying attention when Ms. K was lining students up to walk downstairs for music. Ms. K said, in a tone of voice that I thought was fairly angry, "Andy, you are being loud and not paying attention when I am speaking to you. That makes me sad in my heart."

Thoughts: When Ms. K said that to Andy, it threw me off a little. I thought it was a lot to put on a Kindergartener. I have noticed that he often has trouble with transitions, and the teachers often struggle to get him to line up quietly. While I think it was good for her to articulate for him the way his actions made her feel, in that she was trying to show him how his actions affect others, I think that having that reaction to a kindergartener not lining up quietly is a little excessive. Like, shit, I'm in college and I still have trouble paying attention a lot of the time and I really hope that teachers don't take that personally.

While the conversation with Danny at lunch was just a funny innocent thing, I felt a little uncomfortable about it. Since he was the other student that Ms. S had mentioned as needing a little extra help fitting into the structure of the class, I had been trying to get to know him and make an extra effort to include him in games and conversations. I think that's completely appropriate, and I don't need to feel weird about him saying that.

Remember: While I inevitably am going to form opinions about different teachers' teaching styles, I need to keep in mind that, since I'm only there for a couple of hours a week, there's a lot that I don't see. I want to give people the benefit of the doubt when I see them doing and saying things that I don't initially agree with.

Field Notes Day Seven-- 4/6

Notes: Danny and Jill are in LOVE! I heard Danny ask Jill, "do you like me?" and when she said yes he said, "I'm glad you do because I really like you too." They went to make sandcastles together for the rest of recess. Then on the way inside they held hands.

At lunch, I got to lead lunch bunch for the first time. Lunch bunch is always in Ms. S's office, with four kids, every Wednesday. This week it was with Phil and Greg and Dan and Steve, and Ms. S and me. We talked about siblings and birthdays, found out that Phil and I have the same birthday month (September), Greg has a little sister at the preschool who just turned three, and Dan has an older sister who goes to school at the elementary school where some of the friends in the class will be going. The rest of lunch went pretty well, but there were a couple moments where I felt a little lost. One was when we were talking about sports, and Greg started looking at pictures on the wall and asking about them. Ms. S nodded in and said that, since they weren't what the conversation was about, it would be better for him to save the questions for later. He came back to the pictures again later, and I noticed Ms. S look up but not say anything, and understood that it was my job to get things "back on track." I struggled for a few seconds, because I wasn't quite sure how to distract Greg in a way that wasn't just shutting him down.

Thoughts: I'm not sure if the Danny and Jill thing was an isolated incident, or whether it has gone on for a while. A week earlier, he had told me that he "has a crush on every girl!" It's funny and cute but also maybe something to keep an eye on, especially in a class that is overwhelmingly male.

It was harder to lead lunch bunch than I thought it would be. It's a lot to expect of kindergarteners to maintain a conversation in the same way that adults would.

I keep noticing that the teachers really make an effort to refer to the students as "friends" when they're in a big group instead of "boys and girls." I really appreciate that they do this, and make such a conscious effort to maintain it, even though it isn't what many of them are probably used to. Ms. S had said that they are trying to be conscious of the way that the language that teachers use affects the way the kids are going to see the world as they grow up. I remember so clearly how, until I left for college, almost every classroom I was in was addressed as "boys and girls." I think this did shape the way I look at gender in ways that I have had to really push against in the last few years.

At the preschool this same week, I had a little bit of trouble with one of the students, who wasn't sitting quietly during story time. It made me think of the "sad in my heart" comment that one of the kindergarten teachers made a few weeks earlier which I had thought seemed a little too intense. While I had thought at the time that there must have been a better way to handle it, I found myself at the preschool in a situation where I tried all of those things and had none of them work. I still think there is a better way to handle both situations, but have more respect for how tricky it is to balance discipline and kindness. I think some of it must have a root in the motivation of the teacher as well as the teacher's actions. If I were trying to get a student to settle down during story time, I could say the same and have it be motivated by different things and so come across in different way. Motivation could come from a desire to get things in the classroom back to how they "should" be, or from the wish to help students develop the skills that

will help them be successful students later on, which includes following classroom rules and paying attention. There could also be motivation to maintain an environment that is good for other students so that they can pay attention, or even the desire to maintain credibility as an authority figure.

Remember: Even in an environment that feels comfortable, stay ON. I could have planned better for lunch bunch instead of just going with the flow. Also, keep an eye on the language I use in the classroom, especially talking about gender.

Field Notes Day Eight-- 4/13

Notes: At recess, Will wanted to pick a dandelion that was outside of the fence, so Ms. S let me take him out of the playground area to pick flowers. Some of the other kids saw and also wanted to come outside, so I ended up keeping an eye on six kids who were all outside the gate. Sam said, "it's good to pull dandelions because dandelions are weeds!" I nodded and said that pennyroyal, the little purple flowers were also weeds. Sam and I made a "weed bouquet," and Sam went to give it to Ms. S, who was really happy and gave her a hug, then looked over and winked at me. Sam wanted to make bouquets for the other teachers as well, so I picked flowers with him for a little while. Then I taught Annie and Lynn how to make dandelion chains. The rest of kids gathered around to watch, and then some of them tried making their own. We made a dandelion crown for Annie, which she put aside to give to her mom when she got home.

In music class, the Ms. A did a class on Irish music. She started out by playing a couple youtube videos of Irish step dance performances. She went back to some parts of the videos and had the kids pick out different instruments that they could hear. Then she asked them what they noticed about the dancers: "What parts of their bodies move? What parts stay still?" Danny instantly replied, "Their arms stay by their sides!" Some others added, "They're hopping up and down to the music!" "It's like tap dancing but no arms," "They're doing a jig with their feet." Ms. A had the kids stand up and told them they could try dancing like Irish step dancers. She played some music, and the kids went nutz. They loved it. They were jumping up and down and skipping around and laughing, most remembering to keep their arms at their sides. It was a hilarious scene of (barely) controlled chaos.

Thoughts: Hanging out with kids is so fun! I hadn't realized how much I miss it!

The lesson on Irish music was great. For most of the day leading up until music class, I had noticed that there was a lot of energy and tension in the room. Irish step dancing was a great way to let it out in a productive way. Increasingly, I'm appreciating teaching moments where the kids are up and moving, or at least have the opportunity to move around. I appreciate the fact that this is the norm at the kindergarten, rather than a fun alternative.

I was also thinking more about playing roles as an adult going in and out of different classrooms. Sometimes at the preschool I feel a little limited by the fact that I'm focusing on one student. Since I don't have a background there, I sometimes don't know what some of the classroom rules and procedures are, and I don't want to act outside of my capacity. On the

other hand, I also feel more able to interact and sometimes intervene with the student that I'm shadowing, since that is specifically why I'm there. At the kindergarten, I sometimes feel that I can't focus as much as I would like on any particular student because I want to be able to observe the classroom and get to know all the students. I guess it comes down to playing different roles in different scenarios, and being able to be conscious of the role I want to play before stepping into a situation.

Remember: When I'm planning lessons this summer, remember to try and have the students moving around as much as possible and not just sitting at desks.

Field Notes Day Nine-- 4/20

Notes: I led lunch bunch again, this time with Fred, James, Ellie, and Mack. It was another rainy day, so the kids had a lot of energy that wasn't able to get out during freeze tag. During lunch, I left to fill my water bottle and came back to the kids playing a game of I Spy. While this is fine at most point during the day, Ms. S doesn't like having the kids play games during lunch bunch because she wants to work on having them engage with each other and having conversations. So, when I came back, I asked them to save the game for after lunch. Fred refused and kept asking James questions. I said, "alright, let's just finish this round." They finished the round and I immediately asked James whether he'd seen Zootopia this weekend. I'd heard some of the kids talking about the movie and thought it would be a good way to distract them from the game. James started talking animatedly about Zootopia, but then Fred shouted, "My turn! You guys have to guess!" I told Fred to please save the game for after lunch and listen to James. He did, and things got back on track.

Thoughts: How do i feel about telling them to stop playing the guessing game at lunch bunch? It felt pretty awkward, and I didn't like doing it. Maybe in the future I need to be sure to not expect them to just do what I tell them to, and need to present something more fun if I ask them to stop doing something that they're already having fun with. This made me think of the white supremacy reading in class by Tema Okun. From such a young age, certain behaviors are valued more than others. Embracing certain ways of acting and interacting makes students more likely to be successful. Being able to "converse appropriately" is valued. Or at least, lunch bunch is a place where it is valued.

Remember: Shaping a classroom dynamic is not about telling students what to do, and instead about making a space in which students want to do what I would want them to do.

Field Notes Day Ten-- 4/27

Notes: My last day at the Kindergarten! Mrs. R took some photos of me with the kids at recess, and gave me a card that all the kids had signed and drawn picture on. It was a great way to wrap up the semester there.

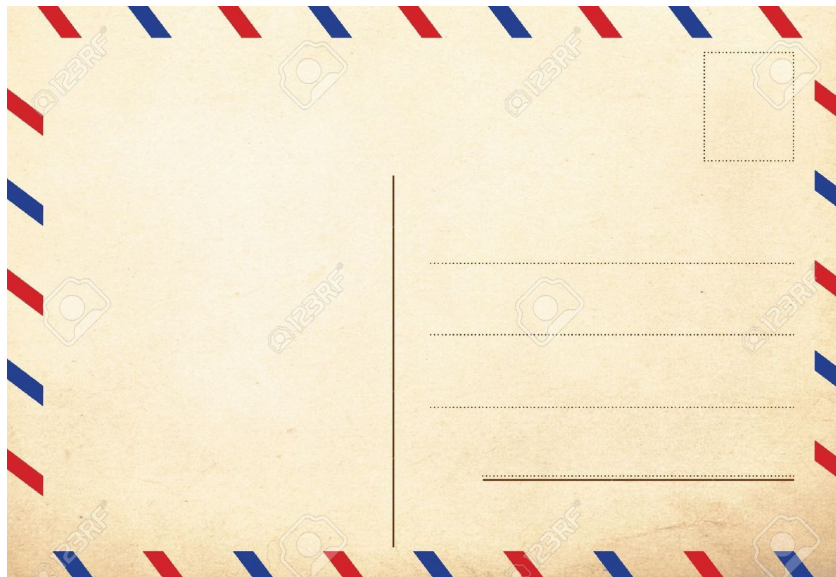
Since Ms. A wasn't there, the class had quiet time instead of speech. During quiet time, the kids are spread out around the room and each kid has their own bag of pillows and books and games. Ms. R played quiet classical music and turned the lights out. She asked me to go around with each students' book box and spend some time reading with each. They each have a book box with books that they read to the teachers. I saw a lot of the same books in different boxes, but it seemed as though the selection was geared towards each students' reading level. It really struck me how some students were at very different levels. This makes sense developmentally; older students are probably at higher levels, and also every student is developing differently. It was cool seeing the kids use different strategies for sounding out words they didn't know. I noticed that they would tap on their fingers as they would sound out letters and syllables in unfamiliar words. Most of them struggled with sounds made by two letters, like "th" and "ng".

Ms. S also had me fill out a form to maybe work at the kindergarten next year, which I really hope works out.

Thoughts: I got the sense that reading wasn't hated or loved by the kids, but was something they were willing to work at for a little bit.

I thought it was so sweet that the teachers had the kids make cards for all the college students. There were 7-10 bi-co students who were in and out of the kindergarten, and I think it's really cool that they let us all really be involved in the classroom. Also, I had been thinking about ways to gracefully leave on my last day and felt a little awkward about saying goodbye, but then the teachers handled it really well by announcing each "last day" for all of us, and letting us take a few minutes to say bye to the students. In a class where transitions are sometimes difficult, this one was pretty seamless.

Remember: It's hard to summarize the takeaway from this placement. I've learned a lot about structuring a classroom, teaching kindness, discipline, incorporating movement into lessons, productive ways to engage with kids and to get them to engage with each other, and lots of other impressions that I will definitely look back on later. I also especially appreciated the opportunity to see and talk to the teachers at the kindergarten, who all bring so much joy into the building. Something that will stick with me, I think, is the way the school focuses on intentionally teaching kindness: incorporating kindness into the language of the classroom and into the ways adults interact with students and the way students are encouraged to interact with each other.



Mindfulness

How do we handle the fact that meditation practice can anesthetize? I want there to be some way of practicing that can be active in the world, without having to step out of it in order to feel emptiness and peace. Pema Chödrön's writing partly addresses this, when she talks about the way our being affects those around us: "Times are difficult globally; awakening is no longer a luxury or an ideal. It's becoming critical. We don't need to add more depression, more discouragement, or more anger... This is the best way that we can benefit others." She believes that living one's individual life in a mindful way can profoundly impact others. Still, it seems as though sometimes the way she advises us to do that denies the importance of the external world, the changing of which is supposed to be her goal. One piece of advice she gives for facing anger or conflict is "regarding all that occurs as a dream." While I can see the possible positive effect this can have as a mental exercise, this seems to be doing harm to the ability, both hers and others', to fully be in the world.

Dana:

"While I loved her writings, I was thinking about this issue as well. Her fourth tenant about thinking about solutions as if they are a dream strikes me as opposed to the Chamberlain definition of empowerment where they say to allow learners to be angry."

Pbernal:

“Miranda, I agree with your take on Pema’s thinking on *bettering* the world. It seems as if she thinks that ignorance is bliss, that the less tangled we are in our social interactions, the better. While this can be effective in small moments, on the long run, it creates this perpetual cycle of ignorance. How can we have critical conversations, which at times can of course be uncomfortable, if we stray away from *negative vibes*?”

Smalina:

“I have similar concerns--and as I read through Chodron's writings, I couldn't help but feel like her perspectives were coming from a place of a lot of privilege. It is easy for me to apply her teachings to the small stresses and struggles of everyday life (like an argument with a friend, for example), but her philosophy seems to ignore those for whom "chaos" is made up of truly life-threatening or traumatizing events and circumstances--even on a daily basis. I was particularly struck by her abrasive line: "Finally, couldn't we just relax and lighten up?" (Chodron, "Three Methods for Working with Chaos"). My immediate reaction was: "How presumptuous!" Sure, it is easy enough to learn how to "relax and lighten up" when confronted with small problems (more often than not experienced by and complained about by people who have enough privilege not to recognize all that they have), but this just seems impossible for some people who are constantly dealing with oppression and marginalization. “

Miranda:

“Thanks for this response-- I wonder whether her points would be less, as you say, abrasive, if she were to acknowledge that her thoughts come from a position of relative privilege. After the speaker today, who I thought had some really compelling stories about applying mindfulness practices in a more "chaotic" space, I'm trying to reevaluate my feelings about the relationship between privilege and mindfulness. “

Mcsweeney:

“I like your idea about being more active in the world through a meditative practice, rather than using meditation as an escape from the world. It makes me wonder about how that could work because I feel like people are more accustomed to thinking of meditation as a break from their daily stresses, but you discuss how a mindful lifestyle could be used actively to somehow

profoundly impact the lives of others in a positive way. It also makes me wonder how meditation could work as a group rather than as an individual.”

Alesnick:

“I appreciate this conversation. Looking forward to pursuing in class!”

Trauma 101

Last week, there was a workshop at Haverford: Trauma 101-- An Overview of Trauma-Informed Care. The workshop was designed to "develop shared language and knowledge in trauma-informed care," and was aimed towards those working or volunteering in positions where they were caring for or interacting with people who had experienced severe trauma. We learned about the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, which found that those who had experienced traumatic experiences during childhood were at a far higher risk for physical and mental illness later in life, and we also talked about the four aspects of the "trauma-informed care framework:" 1) Prevention, 2) Avoid Triggers, 3) Respond Appropriately, and 4) Therapeutic Process.

I thought it was interesting to contrast the approach that this workshop took with the writing in *The Art of Being a Healing Presence*, both of which address how to act in a situation where you are working with people who either have undergone or are currently undergoing things that can complicate the relationship or interaction. While the book speaks mainly in broad, general terms, the workshop dug into more specific things to be aware of and how to deal with those things.

Prove that for any set A in a normed vector space W , we have x be an arbitrary element of $(\bar{A})^c$. Then x is not an element of \bar{A} . Since x is not in A , this means that x is not in A and x is not a limit point of the definition of limit point, there exists $\epsilon > 0$ so that $V_\epsilon(x) \cap A = \{x\}$. Since x is not in A , that intersection can not be $\{x\}$ so we have means that $V_\epsilon(x)$ is entirely contained in A^c , which means that $x \in \text{int}(A^c)$. Then by definition of interior let x be an arbitrary element of $\text{int}(A^c)$. Then by definition of interior $V_\epsilon(x) \subseteq A^c$. This means that $V_\epsilon(x) \cap A = \emptyset$. This makes x not a limit point, x is not in A , since $x \in V_\epsilon(x)$ and $V_\epsilon(x) \subseteq A^c$. Since x is not in A of A , we know that $x \notin \bar{A}$, or $x \in (\bar{A})^c$.

Ex 3.3.5 (assume $W = \mathbb{R}$ here): Decide whether the following are true or false. If true, supply a proof; if false, provide a counterexample.
 The arbitrary intersection of compact sets is compact.
 Each set would be closed, and an arbitrary intersection of closed sets would be bounded, and an arbitrary intersection of bounded sets is bounded. Hence the intersection is compact.

Ex 3.3.6 Let $S_n = \{1/n\}$, a compact set (any one-point set is closed and bounded). Let $S = \{1/n \mid n \in \mathbb{N}\}$. S is not closed, so not compact.

Ex 3.3.7 Let A be arbitrary and K be compact. Then $A \cap K$ is compact.

Miranda Bucky
 Jan. 26th 2016
 Empowering Learners

The idea to draw a piano came from a moment this week, working on a duet with a friend who sings.

I'm thinking about the connection between the moment, the intake of breath, before launching into the chorus, Ruiz's agreement "be impeccable with your word," and agreement #4 in Sentipensante, "the agreement of perfection."

On an notably imperfect practice run, feeling the ^{ability} to be impeccable with what we put out into the world negating the agreement of perfection.

ⓐ + have the potential

“Race is the Child of Racism”

In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes a letter to his fifteen-year-old son, talking about the experience of inhabiting a black body in American society. He talks about the murders of Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, and many others who were killed by police, who, he says, were more likely to receive pensions than punishment. Talking about the way that race and racism are regarded in America, he writes that "race is the child of racism," and elaborates that "Difference in hue and hair is old. But the belief in the pre-eminence of hue and hair, the notion that these factors can correctly organize a society... this is the new idea at the heart of these new people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white" (7). While this view seems to bear similarities to the view that race is not real and that people can and should be "colorblind" and not focus on race, a limited and incredibly destructive viewpoint, in reality the two views are strikingly opposed to each other.

"Colorblindness" seeks to avoid seeing race, while really turning a blind eye to racism and the way that racism has shaped America, while Coates' message seems to emphasize the inescapable role that racism plays in shaping our conception of race and of ourselves in relation to the world.

Justice/Peace/Revenge

In their piece “A Glossary of Haunting”, which is written as an alphabetized series of glossary entries in the first-person, Eve Tuck and C. Ree problematize the connection between peace and justice. Under the entry titled “Decolonization”, they write, “justice and peace don’t exactly cohabitate. The promise of social justice sometimes rings false, smells consumptive, like another manifest destiny” (647). Comparing justice to manifest destiny is a powerful move. Manifest destiny, the assumption that the expansion of the colonization of America was inevitable, further fueled that unapologizing expansion. By placing this alongside “the promise of social justice”, Tuck and Ree draw out the idea that the spread of what we think of as social justice, when it does not and cannot set past wrongs right, is itself a sort of subjugation and erasure. Then, again, under “Revenge [recapitulation]” they say, “revenge and justice overlap, feed and deplete the other... Revenge goes drag as justice, or justice reveals its heat from revenge” (652). After calling out the hypocrisy inherent in our conception of justice, they raise the connection and interplay between justice and revenge, presenting revenge as a more attractive and fair goal than justice, although not one that gets rid of the injustice in the first place. Or maybe they also are suggesting that if we were to fully commit to justice, justice would be revenge.

It seems as though they are making the point that sometimes justice is impossible and thinking that it is possible does nothing but more harm, and the only way to move forward in a way that is at all productive is through revenge, as they put it, “wronging the wrong”. This makes me think of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ article “The Case for Reparations”, which I have not read but have heard summarized, and now definitely will read.

Book Group Presentations

Hearing everyone's book group presentation and getting to present our own was one of the highlights of the course for me. My group presented on Ta-Nehisi Coates' book *Between the World and Me*. We went in with a plan that was fairly loose, and which ended up shifting as the presentation went on. When our group met to plan, we had a great conversation about the book, which was possible largely because having only a half hour to present on the whole book made us really focus on what we thought were important take-aways, and on ways to concisely articulate points from a complex and intensely emotional narrative. While I wish we could have gotten into more of what we talked about as a group during the presentation, I was happy with how it went.

I really enjoyed the other presentations, in particular the group who presented on bell hooks' *All About Love*. The way they had people discuss specific sections, passages, and ideas from the book was a very effective way to present in only a half hour in a way that conveyed the important points from the book. I thought that the points about spirituality being a reaction to the lack of love in our lives, and about true love being impossible in an unjust society were particularly thought-provoking.

Different presentations informed each other, even though each book was very different. Having the bell hooks group present right before us colored the way people went into our presentation, taking it in a direction that was productive and interesting, but distracted from some of things we were hoping to get into that were more directly related to the book we read. Bell hooks thinks that it is impossible to express love through actions that are damaging, which led to a discussion of whether it is possible that, as Coates says in *Between the World and Me*, his father beats him out of love (and fear).

I also thought it was interesting to have the presentations on Dungy's *What to Eat, What to Drink, and What to Leave for Poison* and Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* on the same day. The Ahmed group talked about problematizing the association between happiness and the dominant narrative of what constitutes a "good life," which is often normative in a way that twists our perception of and desire for happiness. Reading and working with Dungy's poetry constituted happiness in a way that seems to tap into the emotion of feeling happy without the complication of any normative or damaging "promise" of happiness.

While it is not directly related, their presentation made me think of this quote:

"I actually attack the concept of happiness. The idea that - I don't mind people being happy - but the idea that everything we do is part of the pursuit of happiness seems to me a really dangerous idea and has led to a contemporary disease in Western society, which is fear of sadness. It's a really odd thing that we're now seeing people saying "write down 3 things that made you happy today before you go to sleep", and "cheer up" and "happiness is our birthright" and so on. We're kind of teaching our kids that happiness is the default position - it's rubbish. Wholeness is what we ought to be striving for and part of that is sadness, disappointment, frustration, failure; all of those things which make us who we are. Happiness and victory and fulfillment are nice little things that also happen to us, but they don't teach us much. Everyone says we grow through pain and then as soon as they experience pain they say "Quick! Move on! Cheer up!" I'd like just for a year to have a moratorium on the word "happiness" and to replace it with the word "wholeness". Ask yourself "is this contributing to my wholeness?" and if you're having a bad day, it is."

Hugh Mackay

Miranda Bucky

Empowering Learners

February 12th, 2016

Do No Harm

In the syllabus for our Empowering Learners class, the guidelines for the field placement begin, “Your first responsibility is to DO NO HARM.” At first glance, this seems like a fairly obvious and straightforward idea, but it brings up provocative questions about the rigidity of the standards we hold ourselves to, what actions do harm and to whom they do so, and the way that our actions are situated within a complex, culturally-constructed framework of power and privilege. While the phrase “do no harm” could be seen as a preliminary guideline, an easy first step towards being an empowering learner in the context of our field placement, it functions more effectively as a guiding mantra, sustained through every step of the learning process and every action taken. To do no harm means to be constantly aware of one’s position in relation to others, whether in a classroom setting or in the world, and to make informed decisions about how to act. For my placement at Thorne Kindergarten, I want to approach the idea of “do no harm” as a complex personal process rather than a rigid guideline.

Bearing in mind the complexity of social interactions, in particular in the context of a Kindergarten environment, to truly “do no harm” is an impossible standard. First, there always exists the balance between doing harm to others and doing harm to oneself. Participating in a field placement involves a balancing between participation and observation, and as observers, we can witness things that we think are harmful but are not in a position to directly address. I heard last year, from a Haverford student doing a field placement, about a teacher shouting at a

student who was fidgeting, and how she could not do anything about the pain it seemed to cause the student. Does witnessing harm without challenging it make us complicit in it? The best we can do is to be aware and present, weighing the options available to us as outsiders in a classroom in order to do the best we can, whether that is to address instances of unfairness in the classroom or to note them but let them go. As Miller and Cutshall say in their book, *The Art of Being a Healing Presence*, “Being present is simple, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy” (Miller 6). To do no harm in a Kindergarten setting involves being present, operating within the set guidelines of the class, and accepting that our ability to be present in this way is sometimes imperfect.

Many ways of doing harm can arise from not being present, taking the form of poorly informed comments or actions. In Sara Neufeld’s article “Empathy, not Expulsion, for Preschoolers at Risk,” a preschooler at a Chicago school was “on the verge of being expelled because his teacher felt he was a danger to his classmates” (Neufeld). It became clear that the aggression that he showed, which the teacher had assumed was because of A.D.D., was in fact the result of trauma. While this student was able to stay at the school because of the intervention of a childhood mental health consultant, the fact remains that “preschoolers are expelled at three times the rate of children in kindergarten through 12th grade, with African-American boys being the most vulnerable” (Neufeld). In the case of the students whose aggression the teacher feared, what seemed to be a simple issue gained complexity and inspired empathy when further investigated. In a Kindergarten setting, it can be harder to see students as complex people because they are in an early stage of development. However, doing so is instrumental in attempting to do no harm. Miller and Cutshall write, “Healing presence is the condition of being consciously and compassionately in the present moment with another or with others, believing in and affirming their potential for wholeness, wherever they

are in life” (Miller 12). Despite the fact that kindergarteners are at an early stage of life, it is no less important to be *present* with them in a way that accepts their complexity and wholeness.

Another problem that arises when asked to “do no harm” is our position within a cultural framework. Being present relates not only to being sensitive and empathetic towards others, but also includes being conscious of the social forces that impact students’ ability to learn and empower. Working within systems that we knowingly and unknowingly perpetuate, including institutionalized racism, patriarchy, and culturally constructed disability, can anyone be innocent of doing harm? Especially in a kindergarten context, acting in any way that aligns with systems of oppression helps to perpetuate inequality and prejudice.² As we discussed in class, “school has the potential to be where children are taught how to divide the world” (Class Notes 2/11/16). In public elementary and secondary schools, students who have a disability often are put into separate classrooms, and do not have many opportunities to interact with most of their peers. In a discussion of how this approach to difference between students shapes students’ understanding, Dorothy Bossman asks, “What cultural values did this treatment of disability awaken in us? (Bossman). In a world where these frameworks are so pervasive, to do no harm cannot be only to seek to avoid perpetuating prejudice but must be to actively oppose it. This places a large responsibility on educators to draw students’ attention to what might be problematic about systems that we often take for granted.

Working within an imperfect system, to do no harm functions as an idealistic goal rather than as a standard. In Ruiz’s “Four Agreements,” a list of ways to live well, are seemingly conflicting messages. The agreements are:

² Here, I wanted to include an example from a radio podcast, citing a study of the ways teachers in lower elementary school classrooms treat male and female students differently. I was not able to find the podcast or the study to be able to adequately cite the information. However, the study showed that teachers, both male and female, typically waited several seconds longer when they asked questions to male students, while with female students they were more likely to give hints or supply the answer themselves without waiting for as long.

- 1) Be impeccable with your word
- 2) don't take anything personally
- 3) Don't make assumptions
- 4) Always do your best

These four agreements, along with the descriptions of how to approach each one, function as fairly effective guidelines for avoiding doing harm. To *not* follow any of the four would do harm, to oneself or to others or to both. While the first three agreements are concerned with ways in which one acts excellently, the last one acts as a condition under which the others operate. Under the fourth agreement, Ruiz adds, “under any circumstance, simply do your best, and you will avoid self-judgement, self-abuse, and regret.” I am not entirely sure this is true: for example, I think that it is possible to do your best and still make a mistake that you then regret. However, the general idea of what he says about seeking only to do your best and not to be perfect, despite being a fairly obvious piece of advice, carries weight when added to the end of a list of “agreements” that outline such an idealistic view of how to act. The Four Agreements, themselves an imperfect set of guidelines, illustrate both the impossibility of doing no harm and the importance of striving to do no harm. Similarly, Miller and Cutshall urge the reader to, “be completely human and completely you. If you try to make yourself anything other than that, especially if you try to appear especially competent, especially sensitive, or especially “together,” you create a distance between yourself and those you accompany” (Miller 25). They emphasize Ruiz’s fourth point, which recognizes human imperfection, but extend that to be something not only accepted but embraced. This is an interesting dynamic to explore when working with young students, because there is such an inherent, and often necessary, power

dynamic. Being with younger people opens a space to figure out how to balance being a form of “authority” and being fully present, empathetic, and genuine.

The process of coming to understand the implications of the guideline “do no harm” reveal it to be complex in a way that precludes the development of a concrete definition. I think that trying to concretely understand “do no harm” itself does harm to the idea by working under the assumption that knowledge is a thing to be grasped rather than a constantly evolving worldview. In a quote referenced in cinema work by Trinh T. Minh-Ha but originally attributed to French feminist Helene Cixous, “I don’t intend to speak about, only speak nearby.” Working in imperfect systems developed and maintained by imperfect people, it is more effective to approach and complicate the idea of doing no harm than it is to seek to *grasp* it and *own* it.

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Empowering Learners

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Applying Theory

Through this paper, I want to address the seeming disconnect between things that we learn in education classes that are directly applicable to teaching, such as how to structure a syllabus, and things that relate more indirectly. While many of the things we talk about in class are interesting and important, they seem to be necessarily supplemental to more concrete pedagogical tools. Sometimes I worry that moving too far into the realm of the abstract and indirect renders us unable to act. It's like the distinction between reading about racism instead of learning how to teach a multicultural curriculum. To address this discomfort, I will try to connect ideas we have worked with in class to more concrete teaching situations, especially to working at Breakthrough this summer. I will try to tie themes of mindfulness, trauma sensitivity, desire-based frameworks, and positionality into a more concrete narrative to help me to better see their applicability. In this paper, I will explore ways that I anticipate that the course material in Empowering Learners will relate to the coming summer working at Breakthrough in Philadelphia.

In her essay "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," Aleut scholar Dr. Eve Tuck explains the distinctions between a desire-based framework for research and a damage-based framework in the context of the rights of indigenous people. In a damage-based model, researchers and educators attempt to "fix" what's wrong with students and with their community. Tuck references a quote from bell hooks: "only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain" (Tuck 413). A damage-based model denies the complex personhood of those who have been damaged. Contrastingly, a desire-based framework emphasizes the importance of listening to communities and helping to supply what they need to overcome barriers. I would say that Breakthrough runs according to a desire-based framework. On their website, they write,

“Research shows that students from lower-income backgrounds can lose up to two months of math and literacy skills over the summer. Summer after summer, these losses compound, making the journey from middle school to high-school graduation and college much more difficult. At Breakthrough, our students work hard each summer in Common-Core aligned academic classes, leading to intellectual growth and contributing to their long-term academic success.”

The program works to address this specific need by offering supplemental classes during the summer. The fact that desire for this does exist is further validated by the enthusiastic participation of students and their families. In his talk with our Empowering Learners class, Qui Alexander argued for opening up restricted spaces like private colleges by “Using the leverage of privilege to invite those who don’t hold that privilege into that space” and to “find barriers and help to move them” (Alexander 3/31/16). Breakthrough helps provide tools for middle and high school students to succeed academically within set Common Core standards, which helps to remove barriers to a college education.

Breakthrough teaching fellows have the opportunity to teach a “club” class in addition to a Common Core subject. Soon, I will have to submit a proposal for three different clubs I would want to teach this summer. I want to take a desire-based approach both in how I phrase the proposal and hopefully in how I get to implement one of the three club plans if one of them is selected. Here are three potential proposals I have in mind:

- Soccer: the beautiful game. She shoots... she scores! We will be learning ball skills, strategy, and teamwork by running drills and games and competitions, and

forming teams to host our very own world cup. All levels welcome!

- Juggling: The world's most relevant skill! We're all constantly juggling responsibilities, homework, social time, and a thousand other things. Come to juggling club to set down all of those things and pick up some rings and clubs and balls! We'll focus on developing individual skills and teamwork, performing for each other, and putting together a performance for family and friends.
- Problem solving: combining math and logic puzzles with whodunnit mystery stories and real-world problem solving connections. We'll be working individually and in teams, tackling problems creatively and challenging ourselves and each other. The club will end with a team problem solving competition, with teams presenting resolutions as proposals and skits.

Using a desire-based model, this curriculum for a club proposal can and probably will change based on what the students enjoy and want to do.

One prominent theme from our Empowering Learners class has been minding difference. In her short essay "white supremacy," Tema Okun writes about the "characteristics of white supremacy culture" (Okun), which include: perfectionism, sense of urgency, defensiveness, quantity over quality, power hoarding, and individualism. The structure of her essay includes a summary of each characteristic and a list of "antidotes" to each. For example, under 'defensiveness' she writes, "white people spend energy defending against charges of racism instead of examining how racism might actually be happening," and under 'antidotes' she says, "understand the link between defensiveness and fear." Her essay helps to point out

aspects of the culture that shows up in our organizations, notably in our schools, that limit access. She writes,

“One of the purposes of listing characteristics of white supremacy culture is to point out how organizations which unconsciously use these characteristics as their norms and standards make it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards. As a result, many of our organizations, while saying we want to be multicultural, really only allow other people and cultures to come in if they adapt or conform to already existing cultural norms.”

Going into a program that is supposed to help provide access to spaces that are often defined by this type of culture, especially as a white teaching fellow from a predominantly white and fairly wealthy town, being conscious of the elements of “white supremacy culture” is incredibly important. Many of the things Okun names feel to me, by now, to be normal, which is definitely something to be aware of. It also presents a challenge because many of the entries that Okun include, while they are part of a mono-culture, biased system, are also necessary for success within that system. Teaching students to be perfectionists and individualistic will, arguably, help them to “get ahead” in an American school system based around success, competition, and measurable achievement. However, some of the antidotes that Okun offers still promise to be useful: under antidotes to perfectionism she writes, “develop a culture of appreciation” (Okun). In the classroom, this is not to be confused with constant positive feedback from the teacher, but rather making a space where students are able to appreciate the work of others and themselves.

Our class has also spent time reading and talking about minding trauma, and

trauma-sensitive schools. Many students have experienced traumatic experiences that make it difficult to feel safe and be able to focus in a classroom environment. However, since most of the ways in which we saw real change being implemented in trauma-sensitive schools was done from the top in a way that included the whole school community, I'm not sure exactly how this will fit into my time at Breakthrough. In "How Can White Teachers Do Better by Urban Kids of Color?" Christopher Emdin writes, "post-racial tension stress disorder, which derives from youth seeing themselves as powerless in a world that conveys to them the message that race doesn't matter, at the same time subjects them to physical and symbolic violence (at the hands of police and schools) because of their race." (Emdin). Okun's description of the features of white supremacy culture exposes ways in which our school system can be oppressive, contributing to this post-racial tension stress disorder. After learning more about the different forms that trauma can take and how it can affect how students learn, I feel more prepared to try to shape a classroom that feels safe(r) to students who have experienced trauma.

Another theme from the class has been mindfulness in and out of the classroom. At this point, I see our study of mindfulness informing mostly my own personal practice instead of how I facilitate in the classroom. At this point in my own limited understanding of mindfulness and lack of understanding about the environment I will be entering this summer, I want to go in with the general goal to help make a space for learning. Maybe tying mindfulness practice into the curriculum is a way to do that, and maybe not. Further, without knowing more about the classroom culture and the culture of the students at Breakthrough, it would be almost impossible to know how to implement a mindfulness curriculum in the best possible way. Still, Emdin writes, "To be in touch with the community, one has to enter into the physical places where the students live, and work to be invited into the emotion-laden spaces the youth inhabit." (Emdin). To do that, a personal mindfulness practice could be immensely helpful.

While thinking about how theory from class will apply to teaching at Breakthrough this summer has helped me ground my understanding of course material, there are many speculations that won't be resolved until I get there, and maybe not even then. Since the program operates under a desire-based framework, I don't have to come up with a concrete mission statement of my own; a lot of what I'm doing with coursework should feed into my interpretation and ability to work towards the model that the program already has established.

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