

Promoting Authentic Learning through a Peaceful and Positive Perspective

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This editorial discusses positivism, constructivism, and authentic learning from both the psychological and educational fields in an effort to understand the relationship between the internal and external events experienced by individuals as they strive to create their own reality and explore real-life issues and situations. Positive psychologists believe individuals should focus on the construction of a positive perspective through authentic learning experiences where the learner can bring meaning, understanding, and potential positive and peaceful actions/resolutions to real-life situations and events.

Keywords: authentic learning, constructivism, positivism, peace.

Introduction

Although there has been a gradual decline in violent crimes over the last 10 years, there were still over six million violent crimes reported in 2004 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004). The public school system also saw a decline in trends of victimization from 1992 to 2002; however, from 2002 to 2003, the incidences of nonfatal crimes against students at school and away from school have started to increase (Context of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2005). Nonfatal crimes included theft, rape, sexual assault, robbery, simple assault, and aggravated assault. Almost three percent of teenagers reported crimes at school, with many of those serious violent crimes. More than three percent of teenagers reported violent crimes occurring away from school, with over one percent of those labeled serious violent crimes (*Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2005* as cited in the Context of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2005).

With these continuing incidents of aggressive behavior, the need for authentic learning couched in a peaceful and positive perspective becomes progressively more

apparent. However, with such overwhelming statistics, the individual educator may feel at a loss as to what extent he or she can influence a stronger de-escalation in the number of violent crimes being committed in educational settings.

Could it be that rather than looking outside the classroom at externally developed programs and trainings to resolve the issue of aggression among school age children, educators may promote peaceful coexistence through actions taken in their own classrooms through their teaching practices, behaviors, and beliefs? Educators promoting authentic learning may have a greater opportunity to influence student perceptions and behaviors if the educators reflected on their own perceptions and behaviors, including how those perceptions and behaviors inhibit or enhance the authentic learning opportunities in the classroom.

According to Rule (2006), authentic learning involves real-world problems that engage learners in the work of professionals; inquiry activities that practice thinking skills and metacognition; discourse among a community of learners; and student empowerment through choice. At the heart of the concept of authentic learning, is the

belief that all students have the ability to understand complex issues, develop new and unique solutions to problems/issues through the application of critical and creative thinking, and appreciate and benefit from the ideas and views of their fellow students. So, the question becomes, how are the attitudes and beliefs of educators and students altered so each group embraces authentic learning from a peaceful and positive perspective?

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore this question from a scientific, humanistic, and educational approach. We delve into positive psychology and quantum physics to construct knowledge as a foundational perspective to authentic learning. Finally, authentic learning will be explored as a means of deconstructing and then reconstructing beliefs and behaviors within real-life avenues for promoting authentic learning through a positive perspective in the educational world. Suggestions for teachers wanting to apply these authentic learning principles to make their classrooms centers of a peaceful and positive perspective follow, continuing with an exploration of how the articles in this issue address this goal.

Wolf (2001), in his portrayal of a *new alchemy*, describes the “in here” world of knowledge, thoughts, dreams, beliefs, and feelings which interacts with the “out there” world of the physical and material domain. It seems the link between the *in here* and *out there* worlds may be the place to embark on the journey of developing a positive perspective with the hopes of influencing children who are the future. This may be accomplished through authentic learning experiences.

A Positive Vision

Throughout the ages, individuals and collective groups have espoused the power of believing and the capacity of the spoken word. In the early 1900’s, metaphysical teacher and lecturer, Florence Scovel Shinn (1871-1940) expressed her philosophy, “the invisible forces are ever working for man who is always ‘pulling the strings’ himself, though he does not know it. Owing to the vibratory power of words, whatever man voices, he begins to attract” (1925, p. 21). Shinn goes on to proclaim, “People who continually speak of disease, invariably attract it” (p. 21). Following this logic, can a concentrated focus on authentic learning and peaceful relationships ultimately create a harmonious environment and result in increased student achievement? Throughout her writing, Shinn documents numerous incidents where individuals embrace a productive vision of their future and the vision came to fruition. Shinn attributed the phenomena to an infinite spirit or being.

Transferring this concept to the educational world, how many teachers view all of their students as bright, intelligent individuals capable of creating a harmonious climate where all students can experience success and enjoy the diversity of backgrounds, cultures, and experiences their peers bring to the setting? Too often, issues of poverty, ethnicity, broken homes, and previous failures become the focus and teachers fail to approach students with a *positive vision* of what they can be.

A Different Perspective

Addressing the phenomena from a different perspective, positive psychologists, contemporary quantum physicists, and biologists (Lipton, 2005; Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; & Wolf, 2001.) explore the relationship between the consciousness and

external events from the viewpoint of psychology, physics, and biology. Although, each theorist/scientist approaches the phenomena from a different avenue, they all agree on the individual's ability to create and navigate his/her own behaviors and providence. Can this relationship also extend to the teacher and the teacher's classroom?

These three fields of thought came together in the *National Demonstration Project to Reduce Violent Crime and Improve Governmental Effectiveness* in Washington, D.C. (Hagelin et al, 1999). In the two-month experiment, 4,000 participants from the Transcendental Meditation and TM-Sidhi programs focused on increased coherence and reduced stress in the District. The study sought to explore the extent to which positive energy from the participants would reduce the level of violent crimes in Washington, D.C. During the time of the study, there was a 48% reduction in crimes as measured by the Uniform Crime Report program of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The National Demonstration Project supported the premises expounded upon by positive psychologists and quantum physicists. It would be interesting to explore these fields to see if this relationship/energy also extends to the teacher and the teacher's classroom.

Positive Psychology

Seligman (one time president of the American Psychological Association) introduced the concept of positive psychology into the field of psychology. He encouraged his peers to devote their energies on what is working right and "building on the best in life" (Cameron, et.al., 2003, p. 7) rather than devoting all of their time to finding cures for ailments and psychological illnesses. Seligman's ideas generated the assumption "that goodness and excellence are not illusions but are authentic states and

modes of being that can be analyzed and achieved" (p. 7).

Building on the best in life (p. 7) can start with the teacher's approach to student achievement through authentic learning, building on what the student knows and is successful at rather than identifying failures and focusing on gaps. Students construct new knowledge and understanding through a process of connections and extensions of their existing understanding of concepts and beliefs.

Quantum Physics

In his work in the field of consciousness, Wolf (2001) explains life events from the view of a quantum physicist where "Quantum possibilities transform into actualities" (p. 115). He strives to build a bridge between mysticisms and physics to explain how thoughts can materialize into realities. In contrast, Lipton (2005) investigated the mind-body connection from a biological aspect. Through his investigations in cellular biology, Lipton theorized the mind's thoughts affected the physical body. He concluded there should be a shift of the "mind's energy toward positive, life-generating thoughts and eliminating every-present, energy-draining and debilitating negative thoughts" (2005, p. 127).

Self-fulfilling prophecies are a reality of American classrooms. If teachers believe a student can succeed, they generate that belief in the student, and the student rises to the expectations and beliefs of the teacher.

Positive Attitude

If in fact, "...we are not victims of our genes, but masters of our fates, able to create lives overflowing with peace, happiness, and love" (Lipton, 2005, p. 48), it would be essential to explore what may

enhance or inhibit the construction of a positive perspective of life. Kirby and Goodpaster (2002) present several personal impediments that may interfere with the individual's capacity for rewiring their thinking and beliefs about their environment and how they interact in that environment. Some of the key impediments or personal barriers listed by Kirby and Goodpaster are enculturation, self-concept, ego defenses, and emotional intelligence. Enculturation refers to the values and beliefs acquired from family interactions, spiritual ideals, and peer/colleague/work expectations. Self-concept is the individual's understanding or beliefs about himself or herself, developed through external messages delivered by vehicles of enculturation, ultimately shaping who an individual believes he/she is and what he or she can accomplish. Ego defenses are mechanisms, such as rationalization or intellectualization, used to protect the individual's view of his or her external reality. Emotional intelligence is the extent to which the individual understands and controls his or her emotions.

For authentic learning to occur there is a need to explore how personal barriers can be overcome so energy can be focused on constructing new knowledge and beliefs geared toward a positive perspective. Essential to overcoming these barriers and redirecting energy is a foundational understanding of how the individual constructs knowledge.

Constructed Knowledge

Constructed knowledge is the common property of a social group and understanding that knowledge comes from reviewing the characteristics and experiences of the individuals that comprise the group. A place to begin in creating a positive perspective for authentic learning and promoting peace is through the belief

system of each learner and the schemas that are already in place for the learner.

Leslie Steffe (1995) reminds us that the environment of the learner includes, among other components, home life, curricula, tasks, micro worlds, teachers, and opportunities, which are often very disparate from that of the educator. Therefore, educators should "construct a hypothetical model of the particular conceptual worlds of the students they are facing" (Fosnot, 1996, p.7) to bring about true conceptual understanding for the student. Consider teaching the properties of water to a student whose only experience has been in a bathtub and a swimming pool as opposed to a student whose daily environment is the beach. The properties of water each learner understands are not the same for both students and therefore, the preexisting constructs about water are different. These differences in these cognitive constructs should inform the practice of the teacher and individualize the delivery of instruction.

From this perspective, it can be noted that the construction of knowledge is an extension of experiential reality. Learners come to know and understand what they have lived and what makes sense to them. Thus, in promoting a positive perspective that enhances authentic learning, one must begin with the construction of reality that builds individual experience. Leaning on the works of Piaget (1976), we note that even new behaviors of individuals are couched within the context of previously developed schema. To facilitate authentic learning the educator must assume the first order in the instruction is to reveal the learner's misconceptions and deconstruct them. Thomas Kuhn posits that the assimilation of any new idea or theory "requires the reconstruction of prior theory and the re-evaluation of prior fact, in an intrinsically revolutionary process that is seldom completed by a single [person] and never

overnight” (Kuhn, 1996, p.7). Misconceptions are the fundamental schema that individuals may hold counter to peace curricula, ideas and values. Once the alternative conceptions are revealed and understood by the educator, the starting point becomes quite different from the traditional one, which allowed the teacher to transfer information believing the desired message would be perceived and understood as intended.

This cognitive theory of Constructivism breaks away from Behaviorism. Learning models such as Master Learning (Block, Eftim & Burns, 1989) are grounded in Behaviorist Theory which assumes knowledge is a finite body of information that can be broken down into measurable skills and taught in bites from simple to more complex. Likewise, models grounded in the theory of Maturationism (Berger, 2001) posit that conceptual knowledge is dependent upon the developmental stage of the learner.

Constructivism as a theory of cognition opposes common learning theories because constructivist informed pedagogy focuses on deep understanding, concept development and authentic learning. Teaching from this paradigm empowers the learner to make decisions based on information that makes sense and is socially grounded and accepted. Constructivism has been defined by Ernst von Glasersfeld’s (1995) by the following principles:

- “Knowledge is not passively received either through the senses or by way of communication;
- The cognizing subject actively builds knowledge;
- The function of cognition is adaptive, in the biological sense of the term, tending towards fit or viability;
- Cognition serves the subject’s organization of the experiential

world, not the discovery on an objective ontological reality” (p. 51).

The process of constructing knowledge as a means of deconstructing and then reconstructing beliefs and behaviors through a positive perspective is one that classroom teachers can embrace through a simple constructivist approach relying on the work of Brooks and Brooks (1999). Constructivist informed pedagogy presents curriculum whole to part with an emphasis on concepts rather than details. The classroom environment is student-centered when questions and thinking are highly valued. Students are pushed to use primary sources and work collaboratively in groups. Student dialogue is promoted allowing the teacher to understand the students’ present mental constructs and understanding which then informs subsequent lessons and learning activities.

How does this apply to the K-12 classroom teacher? This strategy can be easily implemented in the classroom without requiring extra time or money in relationship to preparation and/or planning. Simple lessons can be developed using constructivist theory if the classroom environment had a positive perspective mindset from the beginning of the school year. Simply put, the constructivist classroom is one where students are guided to develop meaning from their experiences on their own. Scenarios are created that allow for freedom of expression and free flow of ideas that actively engage students into conscious thought that encourages appropriate conclusions.

Applications for Teachers

Informing pedagogy with the tenets of Constructivism as a theory of cognition provides guiding principals. First, the curriculum must be presented as problems with emerging relevance to students. Secondly, students must gain conceptual understanding of primary concepts that can be applied to interdisciplinary situations. As a third consideration teachers must seek and value students' points of view so misconceptions can be identified and students can learn from one another. Lastly, assessing learning must be formative and in the context of teaching so that the assessment data can inform practice. Constructivist teachers 1) provide choices for students, 2) allow students to use primary resources, 3) present the curriculum whole to part, and 4) allow students to work in groups.

Peaceful and Positive Perspective Applied to Papers in this Issue

Cashman (2007) argues for issues-centered projects, which in addition to producing measurable and authentic learning outcomes, provide an effective way to promote peace across international borders. Cashman states, "when content is presented in issues, conflict is addressed, and an open classroom discourse are combined, more students participate in class discussions, and express more reflective thinking and in-depth understanding than they would otherwise." (p.) Reducing violence in schools could begin with integrating issues-centered projects identified by the learners. Designing, planning and orchestrating issues-based curriculum that addresses national standards also demands the collaboration between many stakeholders in education and requires shared resources for better student outcomes.

In promoting self-directed learning, Brouse (2007) suggests a possible link between online self-directed learning and the developing learner autonomy that considers the needs and wants of others. Self-directed learning facilitates dialogue (defined as continuous interaction between all members of a course). Developing a learning community also provides additional resources for peaceful communication within the learning environment.

Action Research is a vehicle that improves the practice of educators and paves the way for increased student success through authentic learning. Elliot (2007) describes the effects of action research in terms of solving specific classroom questions the teacher wishes to explore. In promoting the peaceful, non-violent classroom, questions that address inappropriate student behaviors and/or communications can be examined as solutions emerge.

When preservice elementary teachers reflect on their lesson delivery and the motivation of students participating in their lessons to study mathematics in authentic ways (Rule, Arthur, Dunham, Miller, Stoker, & Thibado, 2007), they consider the effects of their teaching approaches on children. Reflection on ways to promote a peaceful and positive perspective during mathematics teaching enhances learning.

Promoting Peacemaking Skills

Reducing school violence can be a reality when conflicts are resolved by reaching agreements using peaceful strategies. Less time spent resolving conflict through the prevention of violence provides more opportunities for on-task learning by students. Additionally, a safe and calm learning environment is a prerequisite to meaningful and authentic learning. Educators could begin this process by

developing a peaceful prospective within the classroom and the school community.

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