

My Teacher Journey During a Pandemic

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Curiouser and curiouser. Uttered by Alice in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, these three words aptly describe the girl's unexpected, fantastical journey. They describe mine, as well. I have carried this phrase with me on my educational journey, for it reminds me to be open-minded and to continue to learn. With the goal of becoming a licensed teacher in Montana, each day provides opportunities to grow as a caring, compassionate, and competent teacher in the Common Core era. Journeys can be direct, but more often, they are circuitous. Mine was the latter. The twists and turns have added dimension to who I am, and I argue, have better prepared me to teach in this virus-riddled epidemic of global proportions. Kimberly, the primary voice in this article, student teaches in kindergarten in Whitefish, Montana, and is in her final semester of graduate coursework. The second author, Ann, Kimberly's English language arts professor and supervisor, is a former PreK-12 English language arts classroom teacher.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Alice says after spotting a plate filled with cookies labeled 'eat me.' She takes a bite of a cookie and begins to grow, her head hitting the ceiling. Surprised, she murmurs, "Curiouser and curiouser." As the girl traverses through Wonderland, she approaches each new situation with curiosity. When she sees something different, she wonders about it. Being curious and filled with wonder describes teachers' work. Instructors, curious as they explore novel pedagogical approaches and observe how students learn best, embrace a questioning mindset. They bring the spark of curiosity to classrooms, so students learn from example that wondering about the unfamiliar can lead to exciting intellectual landscapes.

At this three-decade mark, change, it seems, is the new watchword. Struggling to remain optimistic in a pandemic that sees alarming spikes in cases; shuddering at statistics of national

and global fatalities, absorbing news stories about over-extended health-care providers triaging; and fielding legitimate questions from parents about “How safe is your classroom and the school for my child?” has given me pause. Reflecting on life circumstances that have brought me to 2021 is timely, because if the pandemic has taught me anything, it is about ubiquity of fragility and uncertainties.

The global health crisis dramatically introduced change, forcing a slowing down of all routines. Parents, who hustled to collect their children after school, drive them to activities, and get everyone home for dinner and homework, found themselves halting that routine to adopt another—they became their children’s at-home teacher. Suddenly, the busyness of home-to-school-to-home routines shifted, and our world shrunk. Staying at home 24-7 became the new reality. Interestingly, however, curiosity prompted us to use screens and technology to connect with friends and family in ways we never needed to before. While many were grieving the loss of normalcy and daily routines, I returned to my comfortable habit of finding adventures through reading. Checking out books at the library was restricted, so my devices served to quench my longing. Since I was a child, reading has always been a portal to escape the mundane and to explore. While the pandemic had me physically anchored in one sphere, reading was my mental passport that engaged my curious mind. During these last few challenging months, perhaps I became my own version of Laura Ingalls Wilder. Her first-hand account of spending long weeks in isolation, narrated in *The Long Winter*, has captivated young readers for generations. As a child, I was one of Laura’s admirers, and her family life seemed quite exciting from a ten-year-old’s perspective. However, my recent long months in solitary have given me perspective to understand the Ingalls’ family’s seclusion with a harsh winter backdrop on the South Dakota plains. Since March, even though I have not left my small town, I have sat across from President

Obama in the White House in *A Promised Lane*, used social media to find meaning behind a mysterious robot in *A Beautifully Foolish Endeavor*, and encountered racism and white privilege in *Little Fires Everywhere*.

Now as a student teacher experiencing the realities of a full-time teacher, my students and I journey steadfastly together as we pivot, navigating teaching-learning during Covid-19. One thing that the pandemic has not altered, however, is the enduring commitment to education that teachers carry with them each day, no matter if the teaching context is the traditional classroom or one facilitated by a Web-supported learning platform, such as Zoom or Google Classroom. Regardless of the teaching circumstances, the primary mission, especially for English language arts teachers, centers on empowering students to develop and use literacy skills to explore their world. Notwithstanding the educational complications the pandemic introduced in classrooms across the country, teachers remain vigilant to holding themselves and their learners accountable in the Common Core era. A mindset of “we are in this together” prevails, and while as of this writing, the virus has mutated and still persists, school communities have rallied and responded to students, connecting with learners, individualizing instruction, and acknowledging accomplishments.

So, how did my induction to teaching occur, and more specifically to teaching reading? Like Alice, my adventure included detours and the unexpected: *Curiouser and curiouser*. In this article, the authors spotlight Kimberly’s journey to her present classroom circumstances, tracing the importance of literacy learning, nurtured during her childhood at home and in school, to her current work as a novice teacher.

Art, Math, and Literacy

After completing an undergraduate degree in Communications nearly ten years ago, I felt adrift and uninspired by the job openings. Reflecting on two college internships—one involved working as an after-school reading club director at local elementary school and another at a leadership camp for girls at the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum in New Mexico—reminded me of the positive energy within those environments. These musings generated an a-ha moment: working with children in educational settings. Having not studied education, I sought creative options and applied to Teach for America. Employed with this national group would give me the chance to teach and work in an area of the country where teachers were needed. It felt like the perfect gap experience. Assigned to the Arkansas Delta, I was a bundle of nervous excitement as I packed up my life and moved to an area of the country where I knew no one. Instead of an anticipated elementary placement, a last-minute switch found me teaching art to middle grade and high school students. Now don’t get me wrong. I was excited to be working with tweens and adolescents, but my teaching dream to help young children learn to read was deferred, at least temporarily. For those initial three years as a 7-12 teacher, I taught art, of course, but more than that, I made sure my adolescents were reading and writing all the time. What an awakening: I did not *need* to be an elementary teacher to influence students’ knowledge of the English language or instill in them a passion for reading and writing. Believing language exploration and knowledge undergirds all other subjects, literacy learning became an integral part of my art lessons. Each morning my art students entered our learning space to find the “spark” of the day on the board, either a famous work of art or a paragraph from various literary texts. They knew the routine. When there an artistic image was displayed, students were directed to write a viewer-response paragraph; when short prose was displayed, they were to create an artistic response to the words. Besides providing an opener to my lesson, the “spark” invited students to explore connections

between art and literature. Additionally, as I planned art lessons, I would search for texts that in some way inspired or connected to the visual catalyst. In my middle school classes, we read *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone* and, inspired by storyteller J. K. Rowling, created art pieces in different media. With my advanced students, we read Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* while simultaneously studying the works of art mentioned in the novel. When my Teach for America assignment concluded, I had the opportunity to be a middle school math instructor. I embraced this same mentality: math and literacy co-existed. The seamless integration helped change my students' understanding of core subjects as separate entities; instead, they learned, along with me, that language mediates the comprehension of mathematical concepts. Because of this enriched perspective, we were able to accomplish more. Furthermore, student recall of previously studied concepts remained strong. A favorite lesson, *Lost in Space*, started with me getting lost in space. To rescue me, my sixth graders used mathematical calculations to determine which planet I was stuck on. Since the riddle and problem-solving aspects of *Lost in Space* proved successful, I created subsequent lessons centered on riddles with embedded, scaffolded the problem-solving tasks. My overriding goal was to help students understand that the math we were learning was a skill people use every day, and that math and literacy are subtly intertwined.

Starting Early

Yet however rewarding those early teaching experiences were, I still longed to teach reading and writing with a dedicated focus that self-contained classroom instructors enjoy. Why such a yearning? Those early years growing up in a reading-centered household was my normal. Mom subscribed to *People* and several cooking magazines and was always awaiting the release of Janet Evanovich's latest Stephanie Plum novel. Both my parents actively read the *Havre Daily*

News and the *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*. Dad systematically read the paper each day, cover to cover. At a young age I tried to sneak a peek before he got to it, usually the local community section, and then surreptitiously replaced it, so the paper appeared undisturbed. This little game continued and contributed to my understanding that print communicates. In my early elementary years, I devoured Judy Blume and quoted tidbits from *Superfudge* to my siblings. When I received the boxed collection of *Little House on the Prairie*, my Christmas wish-list had been met; I read about Laura and her family's adventures, finishing all nine books over the summer. With my parents' encouragement I became a member of *The Boxcar Children* series book club, receiving a new story each month. Like many millennials, I dove into the world of Harry Potter and still have not surfaced. Years after the last book was published, I still re-read these wizardly adventures.

Our home environment established a foundation that was further nourished once I entered kindergarten. Kimberly and books were inseparable; reading defined me. In school, teachers wondered at my eagerness to read and noted my willingness to skip recess to visit the school library. Even my elementary peers spotted that love affair with books, giving me the nickname BR, or Book Reader. "Here comes BR," they would tease or "Let's make room for BR at our lunch table." I responded to that moniker with a jaunty grin, nodding appreciably to what I considered a compliment. That intersectionality of home-school reading experiences grounded my literacy self. Research (Lonigan, 2006; Tours & Dennis, 2015) supports the common-sense notion that early exposure to meaningful adult-child conversations about books prepares them for more advanced literacy skills. When parents and caregivers talk about ideas from print, little ones absorb the informal lessons. While they may not fully understand what the adults in their world are discussing, oral discourse lays the foundation for understanding that print carries

meaning. Years later, I sought to develop in my own students a love of reading that mirrored my youthful experiences, knowing that not all my class enjoyed the benefits of language-rich home environments. As their teacher, I aimed to fill those knowledge gaps.

After my Teach for America commitment concluded, I found myself itching to continue learning. My next adventure was to create a YouTube channel where, always eager to share my reading discoveries, I reviewed books and started a blog, my version of a virtual book club. Now nearly four years since those memorable Teach for America experiences, I find myself returning to school because of inconsistencies with state teacher licensing requirements. To be truthful, this portion of my journey was not exactly one I planned; it was, rather, curiouser and curiouser.

Embracing Change

Looking back to my twenties when I started teaching at Cross County High School in Cherry Valley, Arkansas, I considered Teach for America a temporary job while I decided my career path. What I did not anticipate was the draw to education and how those varied classroom experiences fermented my love affair with literacy and learning. Magic happens during the teaching-learning enterprise. Re-immersed in classrooms, but as an employee for Teach for America, my early school memories returned with shocking clarity. Vivid memories transported me to Mrs. Ortman's kindergarten classroom at St. Jude's School in Havre, Montana. I was a child again, eager and pliant to read every book I could acquire. This epiphany clarified my life's mission to return to my home state and teach. However, dreams and goals, like butterflies, can hover close before fluttering away. My apparently simple plan to use present credentials and experience to secure a primary-grade position proved more elusive, complicated by cross-country move and state teacher licensure policies.

Investigating available options, I made a leap of faith to be part of an elementary cohort for a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree program. With my dialed-in focus, I approached classes with a new-found zeal, absorbing evidence-based practices in a brisk, on-line environment with cohort members who ensured our collaborations were respectful, relevant, and rigorous. Keeping my motto of *curiouser and curiouser* at the forefront of my learning, as of this writing, I am now weeks away from realizing my dream of being a fully licensed K-8 Montana teacher. What is truly remarkable, however, is that my immersion into teaching pedagogy occurred during a health crisis. Working with mentor teachers and students in my northern Montana rural school district, I admired how they embraced the difficulties with grace and resilience. Weekly changes necessitated schedule modifications, and the new normal required I remain curious, positive, and adaptable as I sought to mimic their professionalism.

Learning as a Teacher Candidate

My story transitions to pivotal experiences that shaped my teacher identity. Required in the MAT program are several language and literacy courses. Two of my most noteworthy classes, *Language Acquisition: Decoding and Encoding* and *Methods of K-8 Language Arts* have taught me foundational principles that heretofore had been overlooked. As a child who found learning to read an effortless, rewarding task, now as a teacher candidate, I scrutinized the written language acquisition process from a teacher's perspective, gaining valuable insight about struggling students' different realities. I credit the instructor, whose depth of experience—encompassing elementary, secondary, and higher-education—positioned her to be an effective teacher of teachers. Moreover, understanding how elementary instruction lays the groundwork for what happens in middle school and later high school provided a perspective that canvassed all her classes. Research (Hitz, Somers, & Jenlink, 2007; Lemov, 2015) confirms that academic

gains accelerate with intentional teaching, guided by curricular connections to what comes before and after. Students win when education is embedded within a broad framework instead of siloed units. The veracity of our teaching mission—first we teach students, then we teach literacy—solidified as my mantra. Below I distill the essence of this philosophical stance that defines my teaching presence, approach, attitude, and impact.

Lesson 1: Teaching is complex.

Teacher preparation often focuses on knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions. Augmenting required coursework—child development and psychology, assessment and instruction, methods classes, and classroom management—practicum experiences provide teacher candidates with the realities of working with students across a wide spectrum of abilities, so they can apply what they have learned from their college classes (Kavale, 1988). The technical aspects of teaching—for example, the planning, writing, and executing of lesson plans—are ancillary teaching skills that support attitudinal readiness and emotionally responsive teaching; the latter are requisite for student growth. Renown literacy scholar, Richard Allington (2012), posited that it is “teachers who make the difference in children’s school lives” (p. 211). He explained that teacher practitioners are the lynchpin in building trusting relationships that precede academic learning. If students are to engage, they must view their instructor as trustworthy. Teaching-learning requires mutual respect and reciprocity.

Instruction doesn’t occur in a vacuum; rather, it is informed by teachers’ personal school and life experiences as they seek to understand their students’ lived realities and those contexts. Accordingly, teachers own school recollections ought to be examined and analyzed (Lortie, 1975). For example, teachers, if identified as gifted students in grade school, likely viewed school through a positive lens, based on those early school experiences that celebrated their

learning strengths. Nevertheless, for many students, school may represent monotony, boredom, frustration, or even failure. Knowing this reality, teachers, no matter their pre-dispositions, can work to create supportive, positive experiences for all students. Lortie (1975) discussed the “apprenticeship of observation” where teacher candidates, many having selected their career at an early age, enter the college classroom with conceptions that have been influenced by their personal histories. Their experiences have colored—from a student’s perspective—the realities of what teachers do. A naive view may see teaching as glamorous, with teachers standing in front of the room distributing seatwork to attentive students who eagerly dive in to complete the worksheets. Further, many might have role-played being a teacher when they were younger; now, as adults, they do not realize that the role-playing of the past is a poor facsimile of the realities of teachers today, who work with diverse students and families. In keeping relationships as the central focus, Egbert and Rose (2014) underscored the importance of connecting curriculum to students’ lives. While certainly the past informs the present, teachers must be ever ready to adapt to teaching circumstances, seeking to understand where students, place, and culture intersect.

Teacher-administrator Deborah Meier (2002) and founder of Central Park East Secondary School in central Harlem noted core values for her staff. “The relationships the kids built with both their peers and the adults through the school, the school’s respect and nourishing of their personal interests and passions, and finally the strong ties that the school maintained with their families” (p. viii) resulted in a caring community where students’ performance levels increased on district assessments and national tests, such as the SAT. Educators like Meier know that creating strong student relationships advance teaching-learning goals; they also know that teaching is hard work, not a romanticized carry-over visions from youthful perceptions.

Lesson 2: Teaching means bringing your A-game

Effective instructors understand that teaching is an art *and* a science. Teaching is an art because effective educators make it look easy; to the untrained eye, effortless instruction belies deep knowledge of pedagogy, curriculum, and students. Teaching is also a science because pedagogy and other factors critical to teacher success can be studied, modified, and improved. Change-agent and classroom teacher-researcher Doug Lemov (2015) describes the instructional brushstrokes of a master teacher that often go unnoticed or underappreciated. He maintains that eyeing the details of a well-executed lesson matters as does celebrating teachers for their everyday heroic impact on student learning. Accomplished instructors use actionable approaches during the act of teaching, identify targeted learning outcomes, and then meet them. Skilled, artistic instructors masterfully maneuver dynamic variables to orchestrate classroom learning.

Champion teachers employ techniques and embrace a mindset of practicing, adapting, and inventing better instructional approaches that advance student learning. They know that students will rise to the level of what is expected from them. Further, they don't balk at delivering conceptually difficult concepts. A comparison with athletics serves as a fruitful detour. No award-winning sports team shows up to practices with half-effort and expects exceptional results. Additionally, few athletes make it on their own; even professionals have coaches, whose penetrating knowledge of technique and strategy catapult their players to prominence. So, too, high standards and expert leadership apply in classroom settings. Stand-out teachers are always raising the bar for themselves to create a learning environment that maximizes academic rigor (Lemov, 2015). Not satisfied with mere lip-service, top-flight teachers relentlessly pursue lofty goals within a context supported by appropriate scaffolds. Likewise, exceptional educators distinguish themselves when they convey the message that no one gets a

free pass. Importantly, that everyone can and will learn communicates the idea students *are* achievers. In high-performing classrooms, learning is expected, practiced, valued, and celebrated. Additionally, champion teachers embrace the teaching of cognitively complex understandings. Because they believe in their students' ability to reach the next level, they resourcefully scaffold learning opportunities to support advanced tasks. Content rigor matters. No excuses explain insipid or uninspired teaching of lukewarm content. What is taught conflates with how it taught. Both impact student learning.

Lesson 3 Teaching and learning are persistent.

Carol Dweck (2006), noted psychologist and professor at Stanford University, discussed classroom resiliency and its impact on learning. All students, regardless of their abilities or zip code, benefit from academic rigor. Dynamic classrooms, antithetical to passive environments, look busy as students actively use the material presented. Engagement with ideas or skills requires and blooms from feedback. Too often, well-intentioned teachers, pressed for time or responding to a mandate to cover curriculum, hurry through a topic to get to the next one. But, genuine learning flourishes with time, care, and deliberateness. To further complicate the teacher's task, no one best approach exists. Competent instruction draws from a rich reservoir of tools and strategies. Clever reteaching keeps lessons lively and provides students the much-needed chance to practice the content, especially when it is difficult. When students read, write, and discuss ideas in ways that make sense to them, they demonstrate that seeing it, saying it, knowing it, and showing it represent concept attainment.

What makes literacy teaching challenging is that parents and laypersons may not remember learning how to read; reading is something they have always been able to do. Yet some teacher had to unlock the alphabetic code and help them learn to use any number of

literacy skills. In other words, being able to read one fanciful story, *Charlotte's Web*, does not guarantee success with another, for example, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Similarly, reading nonfiction material demands different types of processing than does fiction. While I was in the primary grades, my reading experiences were exclusively fiction. I learned about the grammar of stories, their structure—how the characters, setting, plot sequences work in concert to build to the conclusion. In the intermediate grades, more advanced text processing skills accompanied my foray into nonfiction. The “literacy pillars” (Orzkus, 2014) of identifying key ideas and details, noting craft and structure, integrating knowledge and ideas, and accessing a range of reading levels and text complexity become more sophisticated and complex through the grades. Discovering close reading techniques (Orzkus, 2014) strengthened my existing metacognitive processing skills. Already a strong reader, I shifted to becoming a critical consumer. Rereading and revisiting a portion of the text to mine details were part of my automatic approaches to reading, but now I understood *why* I did them and sought ways to teach my students these strategies. Good readers become better readers with practice.

Discussion

Curiouser and curiouser. As a more thoughtful, reflective, intentional teacher candidate, I confess it sometimes feels like I have been going to school non-stop. But what transformation! When I apply for jobs this spring, I know I am a better-prepared teacher candidate than without those life experiences. A growth mindset is one I hope to pass on and model for my students. Some of our topics of inquiry will be more difficult than others, but “intelligence is not a fixed quantity” assigned at birth and permanent (Doyle & Zakrajsel, 2013). When I was younger, I learned alphabetic fundamentals and basic linguistic understandings; as an adult learner, I re-examine this core knowledge within the framework of high-leverage practices in alignment with

Common Core standards. As a result, I now appreciate the beauty and complexity of the English language in a way that leaves me breathless. From my mother's stories of my early years, I relived that little girl's experiences, a mini-me who learned her letters and sounds and completed all those worksheets with near-perfect manuscript until one day, everything clicked. I went from discrete alphabetic knowledge to full-on reading, a giant literacy step that made me bonified part of the reading world. In a parallel fashion, as a student of education, I have transitioned from being an outsider looking into the teaching realm to becoming a pivotal player in the teaching-learning dynamic.

Conclusion

With the insight that comes from having studied a subject and then applied those learnings to a meaningful context, I now appreciate the efforts of my parents and teachers who supported me and cheered my fledgling attempts. As a soon-to-be licensed teacher, I know the herculean work of primary-grade teachers that produces readers; that hard work, exacerbated during a pandemic, makes teachers everyday heroes. From my own experiences, I also know that once a reader, always a reader. Reading, unlike crocheting or playing a musical instrument, never diminishes or atrophies. Learning to read is one of the most monumental tasks a human being undertakes, and amazingly, by the age of seven most children have learned to make sense of abstract symbols on a page. Teachers create the bridge that transitions students from illiteracy to literacy. But more than that, reading is not a destination where one arrives by completing x-number of exercises or checking off titles from a must-read list. Poet and retired teacher educator Richard Smith (1995) astutely observed that a fondness for reading is much like catching the flu: exposure. Perhaps that is what makes it exciting; we are never finished learning. Like Alice, if

we find the world of literacy to be curiouser and curiouser; there is no telling where we may end up. Perhaps in literacy wonderland.

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