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The Principle of Praxis

The practicing teacher understands and acts on the understanding that education has the power to transform individuals and society (for the better, or sometimes for the worse).

According to Paulo Freire, *praxis* is “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (1970, p. 36). Like Dewey, Freire was a pragmatist who believed in the power of democracy and a curriculum grounded in experience. According to Glass (2001), Dewey’s and Freire’s views on teaching and learning are quite parallel. Dewey’s views are framed in terms of a biological-organic conception of human existence and growth with emphasis on intelligent adaptation to the environment through problem solving. Dewey argued that the conditions that “maximize this evolutionary adaptive potential are precisely those linked to the formation of the ideal society: full participation, open communication with minimal barriers, critical experimental practice aimed at overcoming problems, and close attention to the consequences of actions” (Glass, 2001, p. 17). Freire situates his philosophy in the context of social structures and in the ways in which societies can potentially oppress some while privileging others. Freire warned that a system of education that is not critically minded may fall into the trap of perpetuating inequality rather than promoting opportunity. For Freire, education should be directed toward promoting freedom of thought and action

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for the individual and for the society through critical self-reflection and action. In the end, education must be directed toward something, and if not freedom of thought and action, what else? In assuming the role of teacher, the individual has taken on a responsibility to his or her students and to his or her society that is far beyond that of an individual citizen.

The Principle of Purpose

The practicing teacher always operates in the moment with a clear understanding of purpose.

While the principle of praxis operates at the broadest level of a practicing teacher’s professional life, the principle of purpose operates

at the most specific level of daily teaching. Teachers are, at any given moment, forced to make choices. Practicing teachers make these choices based on their learners' knowledge and their own knowledge of the important intermediate and long-term learning goals they hold for their students. A pragmatic philosophy focuses attention on the relationship between actions (the results of these choices) and outcomes (what students know, sense, or feel as a consequence of pedagogy and experience). The teacher's critical examination of teaching events in relation to purpose is at the very heart of learning through practice. Whether the teacher engages in cooperative learning, inquiry learning, or direct instruction, there is always purpose.

In particular, teacher clarity on the outcomes for teaching optimizes the critical examination of the action/outcome relationship that shapes teacher learning. A shared understanding of these purposes and outcomes that both teacher and learner can articulate enhances the possibilities for both teacher and student learning. When teacher and learner have co-constructed and jointly committed to the learning outcomes, learning for both is enhanced even more. Learners in classrooms are offered choices. Learners make these choices, supported by a practicing teacher, through a careful consideration of and conversation around the desired outcomes, potential obstacles along the path, and strategies for working around these. One way to think about the student role in settings where purposes and outcomes are tightly linked is that when students are given both voice and choice in the process, they are likely to be more motivated participants in the learning process.

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The Principle of Serendipity

The practicing teacher, aware of the dangers of routine, is open to opportunities of the moment.

Teaching can become so bound up in comfortable routines (as in Elbaz's rules of practice) that there is hardly space left for the unexpected. As important as it is in everyday learning, purpose and routine can become the enemy of learning. It is the unexpected that opens doors to transformative learning opportunities. James

doing whole-group instruction first, small-group instruction next, and then buddy reading, for example). A comprehensive perspective

This comprehensive perspective is not a random combination of strategies or a broad and orderly sequence of strategies. . . . A comprehensive perspective includes careful selection from the best theories available and the use of different learning strategies to match the learning styles of individual children.

includes careful selection from the best theories available and the use of different learning strategies to match the learning styles of individual children. In a comprehensive approach, a teacher might select strategies from different learning theories to provide the appropriate instruction for each child. One child, for example, may be a visual learner and will have a hard time mastering phonics. The teacher must find other routes for this student to become an independent reader. Alternately, a student whose strength is auditory learning will learn best with phonics instruction.

The classroom characteristics of a comprehensive program are based on sociocultural theory. According to this theory, student learning is dependent upon what a teacher knows, how students come to understand that knowledge, and the context in which the learning takes place (Vygotsky, 1978). In a setting based on sociocultural theory, schools are considered collaborative communities in which more capable adults or peers assist students. Teaching and the learning environment, or the culture of the classroom, are inextricably linked. A sociocultural concept of learning considers multiple contexts:

- The relationship between teacher and student
- The community of the classroom
- The larger community of the school
- How all of these are organized and managed together, and how they affect each other

Characteristics of Effective and Comprehensive Classrooms

The research provides a strong framework for what constitutes an effective and comprehensive approach to early literacy. But what does this framework look like in action? How are the classrooms of effective beginning and primary teachers organized? What materials

do they include? How do teachers implement strategies to form an effective reading curriculum?

This section describes in detail what effective and comprehensive classrooms look like—what materials they contain, how they are organized, and so on. The case study section on pages 100–106 describes how teachers use the materials in a typical day to form an effective reading curriculum. The exemplary literacy-rich preK through third-grade classrooms described in the research looked very much alike. The major difference between grade levels was the difficulty of classroom materials and how teachers used them.

Kindergarten and First-Grade Classrooms

The classrooms of excellent kindergarten and first-grade teachers are inviting and organized into well-defined centers. Wall displays reflect the theme being studied and show evidence of students' growing literacy development. Displays include charts and samples of student writing. In the whole-group learning area is an easel with chart paper for the morning message, a calendar, a weather chart, a temperature graph, a helper chart, a daily schedule, classroom rules, a pocket chart, and a word wall. The teacher also has an interactive whiteboard, computers, and access to the Internet.

Literacy center. The largest center is the literacy center, which has a rug for independent reading and is also used for whole-class meetings. The area includes lots of space for storing books. One set of shelves holds books organized in two different ways: baskets of books leveled for difficulty that coordinate with the teachers' small-group reading instruction, and baskets organized by themes, such as dinosaurs, sports, and weather. The teacher rotates books in the baskets monthly. Colored stickers on the books and baskets assist students in returning them to the correct spot. Student-made class books and stories are in another basket. Books about the current theme are arranged on a display shelf.

The literacy center has a flannel board with flannel characters, puppets, and props for storytelling. There is a rocking chair for the teacher and other adults to use as they read to the class, and children use the rocking chair to read independently and to read to each