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### THE BENSON KIDS: TEACHING IS LEARNING

The truth is that much of what I know about teaching and learning, I learned when I was teaching Spanish and English to junior and senior high school students in Benson, Arizona, a rural community in the desert Southwest. Initially, I thought, “I will teach, and they will learn.” Gradually and painfully, I began to recognize that my assumptions were wrong. In fact, much of the teaching methodology that I had learned previously just didn’t seem to work.

Within the first twenty-four hours, the students started teaching, and I started learning. I learned all twenty-eight eighth graders’ names and faces only to discover that they had—yes—told me the wrong names. I had other classes, but this group was my homeroom class, and I would be spending the majority of my day with them. My new colleagues were quick to warn me about all the “problems” that I had received. The students had many labels, which I have since learned to hate: *at risk*, *troublemaker*, *problem child*, *minority*, *limited English proficient*, and so on. Many of the families lived in areas that we would today call low-socioeconomic communities. It seemed to me that they were just families that were working as hard as they could, doing the best they could, and trying to enjoy their life a little.

I was hired to teach language arts. When they asked me whether I could teach language arts, I thought, “Sure, what could be so difficult? I know about languages and literature, so I certainly must know about language arts.” When I walked into the classroom the first day, I soon learned what could be so difficult. There, lined up on a shelf that ran the length of one wall, were all the texts: twenty-eight light-blue spelling books, twenty-eight royal blue basal readers, twenty-eight tan penmanship books, twenty-eight large burgundy grammar books (at last, something I recognized—in fact, I had used that book when I was their age), and twenty-eight yellow language arts workbooks. Let’s see:  $5 \sim 28 = 140$  texts for my eighth graders, and I would have other books for my sixth and seventh graders. I knew that I would never be able to keep track of all these books, so my first decision was one of the best I ever made: Toss the texts. At that time, I did it out of desperation, but doing so taught me more than several teacher education courses had ever done. The truth is that we didn’t really toss the texts; we just left them in nice visible stacks on the shelf in case anyone ever wanted to use them (or see us using them).

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On the second day, one of the boys who was considered by his peers to be among the biggest and baddest asked a really good question: “If we aren’t going to use them books, what are we going to do until June?” Danny, spokesperson of the eighth graders, asked with a hint of challenge in his voice.

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“Let’s just read and write,” I responded.

“Read and write?” they said in unison. “What?”

“Whatever we want,” my mouth answered. I can assure you that no one in the room was more surprised than I by my response. But you must remember that I was just trying to get through the day.

“Anything?” they pushed.

“Anything,” I innocently answered.

That day after school, I drove to Tucson to explore the used book stores. There, on the floor in the back of one store by the gardening books, I found a little worn paperback entitled *Hooked on Books*, by D. N. Fader and E. B. McNeil, which was published in 1966. I had never heard of Fader, or McNeil, or this book, but it seemed right for the moment. I took the book home and read it from cover to cover.

Fader and McNeil had some unusual ideas for the time. They said that students should read and then write about their reading in journals. They said that teachers should not correct errors but that I should respond meaningfully to what the students wrote. Not correct grammar and spelling errors? Heresy! Fader and McNeil also said that students could write anything they wanted, and I was to assign only a specific number of pages, which would increase with each passing week. Quantity over quality, I thought. But, remember, I was desperate. I had twenty-eight students to face the next day, and they were probably expecting me to have some answers.

On the third day with my students, I told them what I had found, and we discussed their ideas. They agreed to go along with me. During this discussion, I also mentioned to the class that I had just read a journal article that said it really didn’t matter if I corrected all their errors. The article said that they wouldn’t learn from my corrections. I vividly recall Albert, who already had a reputation for his behavior, mumbling for me to hear, “I could have told you that.” These were disturbing ideas for me because all I could think about was the enormous amount of time I had wasted correcting students’ papers with the mighty red pen.

In those days, we had no idea what a journal was, so we just used the school-supplied lined paper, which we placed inside school-supplied construction paper. The first week, I assigned five full pages, both sides, every line filled. The students were shocked and sure that they couldn’t do it.

My actions in the classroom now ran counter to anything I had ever been taught, but I had gone too far to turn back. The students slowly began to find materials to read; even more slowly, they began to write. Danny, of course, was the first to issue a challenge. I noticed the magazine, which in those days we called a girly magazine, and knew that every eye in the class was watching.

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However, my parenting had prepared me for this, and I shot him the old “Mom eye.” Today, I would not be so gentle. Today I would grab the magazine and use it for curriculum to demonstrate how little girls and little boys are socialized in different ways in our culture. Danny was lucky; he knew me before I knew about gender biasing.

José was the next to issue a quiet, but direct, challenge. The entire class was busily reading and writing. I was quietly walking among the desks and responding to students. When I came to José, I noticed that he was writing rapidly. He had a large book, the Tucson phone book, and he was copying names. Long lists of names filled his blank papers. *Hooked on Books* had prepared me for this. Fader and McNeil told me that this would happen. They told me that the student would soon tire of this and would want to move to something that interested him.

“What are you writing, José?” I asked.

“I’m copying the phone book,” he replied.

“Where are you in the alphabet?” I asked.

“I’m still on the A’s,” he answered.

“Okay,” I said and moved on to the next student.

José never made it to the B’s. From the Tucson phone book, he went right to reading about geography and writing about places he found in the almanac. José eventually graduated with honors in English and in Spanish and is now a pilot in the U.S. military. He has visited most of those places he used to write about.

Each Monday, I assigned more pages. Each Friday, I went home with a huge stack of messy, dirty construction paper journals, each filled with treasures and literacy. The next Monday, the students got their journals back with my comments, thoughts, questions, and stickers. I remember the absolute joy and delight I saw on the faces of those “problems” when they read my responses on Monday. I finally quit adding more pages when we hit thirty per week simply because I couldn’t carry everything. I knew that Fader and McNeil were onto something powerful when the kids groaned and complained when our free reading and writing time was over.

Remember the blue basals that had been left on the shelf with the other texts? Eventually, they were used by one boy, Gilbert, who read every single story in the blue basal. He not only read every story; he thoroughly enjoyed them. Gilbert had been considered a nonreader who had resisted every basal to date. During the spring months, he continued to explore the texts stacked on the shelf and shared his discoveries with me. I think he thought I should have this information. On reflection, I think I was not fooling Gilbert; he knew that I needed all the help I could get. In late spring, the students took the annual achievement test. As with several other students, Gilbert’s reading scores jumped three grade levels.

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“What did you do for Gilbert?” the principal asked me.

“What did I do? What did Gilbert do for himself and for me!” I thought to myself.

The other twenty-seven students and I completely enjoyed the freedom of reading and writing. As the students took control of their own learning, their reading and language scores soared. Gilbert read his texts; the other students read science fiction, history, novels, texts from other classes, and even poetry. I read educational journals. I didn't understand it then, but I do now. From these students, I learned the following:

- Reading improves writing.
- Choice matters.
- We get smarter when we write.
- We love it when someone responds to our writing.
- Flexibility and a sense of humor help.

All my teaching and learning since those years has been directly related to my experiences teaching and learning with the Benson kids. We discovered by reading, talking, writing, hearing, experiencing, risking, and musing, and we learned together. We learned that it all takes time—the great enemy of public education! Every time I read books about critical pedagogy, I see their faces, I hear their questions, and I remember their laughter and tears.

What can be learned from this today? The Benson kids gave me the pedagogical principles, or “Benson basics,” that have sustained me through three decades of teaching. I was lucky enough to come of age in teaching when we were expected to teach children and not just the curriculum and the standards. The following words resonate with me: “In my 35 years of teaching and my 6 decades of living, I have never met a *standard* child” (J. Yatvin, personal communication, September 5, 2002).

Teachers tell me that today, real reading, writing, and responding have too often been replaced with one-word-right-or-wrong blanks to fill in. Choice is vanishing; flexibility has been transformed into rigidity; and even the thought of a sense of humor is no longer funny.

Teachers tell me that cynicism and silence are pervasive in schools today. It is painfully clear that the real world of teaching and learning today is vastly different from when I learned my Benson basics. Could I make it today if I were just starting my career? I do not know, but I am sure that I could not make it without critical pedagogy: to name, to reflect critically, to act.

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The most challenging question I am asked today is “How can teachers survive during this era of prescribed pedagogy?” We begin the search for that answer together; critical pedagogy will guide us. First, we *name* as we experience it, and I am doing that right now. Second, we will *reflect critically* together throughout the pages of this book. Third, we *act*. The answers do not lie in cynicism or in silence.