

Everything I Need To Know (About Teaching and Assessment) I Learned in Kindergarten

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Picture it:

Suburban Ontario, late August 2020. A global pandemic is wreaking havoc on a notably world class education system. An elementary music specialist, normally responsible for teaching music to as much of the school as timetabling allows, is presented with a conundrum: work with all 450+ students across 15+ classes OR teach more subjects to fewer classes.

In an effort to reduce the number of potential viral exposures for said specialist and her students, she mutually agrees with administration that working with a smaller number of students is a safe and responsible fix. After all, she is P/J/I/S certified and “qualified” to teach just about everything.

She receives her timetable. Three classes of intermediate music, two classes of junior music. Expected. Several additional periods with one junior class. Understandable. Visual Arts and Drama it is! Eight periods of coverage in the JR/INT PLP class. Spectacular! Those students are always a bright spot in this teacher’s week.

But what’s this? Eight periods in FDK? To each of two classes? Excuse me, but there must be a mistake.

Nope. Not a mistake. “Principal? What shall a music specialist teach for eight periods in FDK?”

“Probably one of the four frames. Speak with the teachers and find out what they need.”

Right.

That specialist was me and what follows is my story of the most demanding, yet enlightening and entertaining year of my career (thus far).

If you’re not familiar with The Kindergarten Program, the curriculum is not divided into subjects, as it is for Grades 1-12. Rather, all learning in FDK is considered under one of four frames: **Belonging and Contributing, Self-Regulation and Well-Being, Demonstrating Literacy and Mathematics Behaviours, and Problem Solving and Innovating.** The homeroom teachers and I agreed that, if I am to cover all eight periods of their prep, I should be teaching something that can be reported on. This essentially meant taking over one of the four boxes on the Communication of Learning. The only one that made sense was Problem Solving and Innovating, or the Inquiry frame, as it’s come to be known.

“I can do this,” I said to myself. Like many of you, *I teach students problem-solving skills every day.* We teach our students

to approach musical problems, (e.g. how to make a recorder sound better, how to add a feeling of intensity to a piece of music) using creative solutions. Sometimes those are through tried and tested means, (e.g. tools and techniques of musicianship, standard musical notation) and other times those are through exploration and experimentation, (e.g. watching and listening to someone else’s interpretation and inferring what solutions they used to achieve the desired result). But can I do this with 4-year-olds?

This is where Robert Fulghum’s credo from his highly acclaimed *All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten* comes into play. In his book, Fulghum details what’s necessary to live a meaningful life is not all that complicated. Here are some of his insights, as they apply to *The Year I Survived Grew as an Educator in Kindergarten*, in my own particular order.

When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together

If I was going to do this kindergarten thing and do it as well as I have to do everything else in life, I was going to need some help. Four-year olds are scary. They’re little, but wowzers, they move fast! I needed to find people to hold hands with, so to speak, to protect me from the overwhelming traffic jam that is an FDK classroom. I didn’t have anything at my immediate disposal that I could use so I looked for people to stick together with. For safety.

The experts - other FDK teachers - were ready to help. These wonderful humans shared online resources (e.g. mysterydoug.com and PebbleGo) and teaching strategies (e.g. learning centres) that were so outside of my music-teaching universe that I could not have discovered them without their road map. They steered me away from teaching with subject-based content and adjusted my compass toward a world of learning through discovery, a world that only existed for me in theory, never in practice. This world led me to realize another of Fulghum’s principles.

Wonder

At home and in school growing up, I was taught that the adults know everything I will need to know in life. If they don’t know it, it’s probably not that important for me to learn. Despite the fact that I was a strong-willed child who often had to learn life’s lessons the hard way, when it came to facts, I only gorged on the informational buffet I was served.

My new FDK homeroom teacher-friends advised me to let the students guide my instruction; if I put them into interesting situations and listened to the questions they asked and

the conclusions they shared with each other, I would get clues as to where to lead them next.

But how can I let students direct instruction when the ministry tells me in *Growing Success* that assessments should be “carefully planned to relate to the curriculum expectations?” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p.6) The answer to this, I would learn, was surprising. (stay tuned for my findings!)

On a beautiful, sunny fall day during the 2nd week of “Ms. Pindar in Kindergarten,” I took each class outside. We walked around the front of the school looking at the trees, at the leaves that had fallen to the grass, and at the insects crawling on the fallen leaves.

Suddenly, one student shouted, “Look! There’s the moon!” Sure enough, the moon was high up in the bright, blue sky. As if scripted, another student commented, “But it’s not nighttime. How can we see the moon in the day?” (Thankfully, a student in the second class made a similar observation, thereby alleviating the plan-two-different-inquiry-lessons connotation my type-A-teacher brain had nearly worked itself into.)

Over the next five weeks, I learned more about the moon with three- and four-year olds than I did in a first-year Intro to Astronomy class. Each day’s class was filled with activities and discussions guiding the students toward possible answers to the previous day’s questions, and stories and videos that inspired new questions and connections we would unpack in the next day’s experiences.

The curiosity and keenness were contagious. My family soon began to request more and more “stories from kindergarten” over dinner. My husband learned about chlorophyll; my teenage bonus kids learned about plant reproduction; and we all delighted over tales of the bouncing egg experiment that had one of my tiny tots in stitches because we just couldn’t break it until he sat on it.

The sense of excitement and wonder my FDK students and I felt during our first pie-in-the-sky unit continued throughout the year. So much so I knew I had to try to bring this style of teaching and learning into my other classes. But how can I let intermediate students direct instruction and ensure the “right” parts of the curriculum would be covered? (I told you I would share my solution!)

As Fulghum reminds us about...the little seed in the Styro-foam cup - the roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that... All of us, even intermediates who are often “too cool for school”, have a sense of wonder. After realizing how successful the moon unit was in kindergarten, I tried something similar with the intermediates. I played a variety of pieces of music from as many genres as I could cram into one class. (So many that homework was optioned in the event they wanted to listen to more than we could during class time.) I asked them what sounds, if any, they prefer while reading and/or doing homework. While the responses were varied, it became clear that the majority was

split between silence and “background music.”

Teaching intermediates for most of my career has me often asking myself “but how can I assess this?” Enter *Growing Success, The Kindergarten Addendum*. While learning about assessment in FDK, I was reminded that assignments should be connected “to the interests, learning styles and preferences” of all students. I decided to re-centre our learning around the Creative Process, and intentionally instruct and direct students in the use of descriptive feedback in order to make refinements to achieve student-crafted learning goals.

This was the first time I knowingly and intentionally put the FDK principle of “noticing and naming the learning” into effect in a non-FDK class, (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p.7). Because we noticed students enjoyed background music, we unpacked what that term meant for the students. We were then able to name lo-fi music as a genre that met all of their criteria.

So began a student-led inquiry unit where learners uncovered how and why lo-fi became a genre unto its own, and what elements of music separated it from other electronic music forms. Students created their own lo-fi music, developing music production skills using online DAW (digital audio workstation) software such as Soundtrap. They used each other’s descriptive feedback to make improvements to their own pieces and shared those pieces and the justifications for their choices with others. Some opted to share with families and have parents and/or siblings provide feedback that they acted upon. I can’t imagine any other musical project where children might actively seek anything other than praise and validation from a family audience.

[Side note: this project allowed us to seamlessly transition to online learning when the whole system had to pivot to the virtual world in January, 2021].

Though the idea of co-constructing learning goals with students was familiar to me through my work with older kids, I had never considered it with my youngest students. If this approach was going to work in FDK, the learning goals would need to be broad enough to be achievable through a variety of activities, but narrow enough to be easily observable and recordable; I was not going to be able to keep track of a clipboard or keep a binder of class lists at-the-ready in kindergarten.

I’m a music teacher: I use coded checklists to record observations and evaluations of performance tasks. Until last year, I didn’t know how to translate this practice into something effective and efficient enough to keep up with the pace of 22 three and four-year-olds. Though I was walking the intermediate streets all by myself, thankfully, I was still holding hands with the FDK experts. When a colleague suggested **Google Keep**, she practically saved me, and has since helped to transform my teaching life.

With “larger-than-I-was-used-to reporting obligations”, I

approached my FDK classes as if I was a homeroom teacher. Google Keep allowed me to take photos of student work, record audio of their responses, and write notes, including direct quotations for when I hadn't pressed record in anticipation of kindergarten brilliance. Using Keep as a digital file cabinet, I created tags for each student. Those tags served as binder tabs or file folders, allowing me to effortlessly sort each photo/audio clip/written note and keep them attached to the appropriate student. Keep empowered me to have a clear vision of each student, essentially showcasing the narrative I wanted to write to communicate students' successes with their families.

One of the most fascinating and enlightening aspects of *The Kindergarten Addendum* is the emphasis on ensuring educators "focus on what children have learned, describe significant strengths, [and] recognize children's growth" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016, p.12). Previously, I had the understanding that report card comments were to contain a descriptor (e.g. some, considerable, high degree of effectiveness) which communicated a person's ability to achieve an overall expectation. Never did I think I should be noting what students were capable of if it fell outside of my predetermined parameters. I only recorded that they could or couldn't (and to what degree) achieve the goals we'd devised together.

Teaching and reporting on learning in FDK, I discovered I could accurately convey what students had learned, what their strengths were, and comment on their growth by focusing on the positives. Families and administration commented that using the student's own words made the narrative all the more personal.

Because *The Arts* curriculum tells us that "students are required to be actively engaged in the stages of the creative process," and that they "should be given opportunities to be inventive and imaginative in their thinking, rather than merely to find a prescribed answer," I decided my learning goals and report card comments for intermediate would focus on students' use of descriptive feedback, and of which elements of music and under what circumstances they showed understanding (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p.13). If a student in grade 6 could not show understanding of notation at grade level, I wouldn't comment that they couldn't perform triplets or read rhythms in 5/4 time, but rather that they used descriptive feedback to build understanding of simple notation such as quarter and eighth notes in common time. I might use a next step to encourage the student to work toward playing more complicated rhythms in unfamiliar time signatures. By sharing successes, no matter the size or scope, I was able to steer the focus away from musical ability. This permitted all of us - students, teacher, and parents - to celebrate growth.

Reflecting on this as I write, I realize this aligns with another of Fulghum's principles.

Play Fair

As elementary music educators, we are not out to craft and

mould a world full of musicians; we encourage our students to be reflective and creative problem solvers, thoughtful and observant of the world around them. If I am only commenting and reporting on what I student can't do, then I am not showcasing what they can do, only what they have yet to learn.

While growing up, I was captain of team "If I Can't Win, I Don't Want to Play", dropping courses and leaving activities at the first sign of sub-par ability. Kindergarten Ms. Pindar recognized this is not a fair game for anyone to play; it is not fair of us to put students into the box of a predetermined aesthetic. I have to let students see their own version of themselves in this world. If that means they have to learn how to build a box that fits them better, then I, as the lead learner, will discover with them the materials and skills they will need to build that box.

Is it glib of me to suggest that everything in life can be taught and explained using Fulghum's lessons? Yes. If that was actually the case, but I'm admitting to you I wholeheartedly agree that there are times where the ideas in his essays don't apply:

Sometimes it's helpful to take things that aren't yours... if you have permission. Surely you don't always have to put things back where you found them; sometimes they didn't belong there in the first place.

Though most of us would like to, and might even be better for it, it's simply not advisable to take a nap every afternoon if you hope to remain gainfully employed.

Let me conclude by sharing perhaps my favourite of Fulghum's suggestions:

Live a balanced life - learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.

For those of you wondering if that means I'll ever have my own FDK homeroom...

The answer is this: I'm lactose intolerant and there are not enough cookies in the world to fuel my aging body beyond eight periods a week.

References

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