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## Centering Joy in the Classroom: Authentic Pedagogy Through Mindfulness and Purpose

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Authenticity is the linchpin for creating meaningful, equitable, and joyful learning experiences. Genuine face-to-face interactions between teachers and students are crucial for our collective recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating a shift from computer screens to real-time interactions. As educators, we must intentionally model authentic engagement with our students and course content, thereby fostering joy in the learning experience. This paper explores how authentic pedagogy, grounded in mindfulness and purpose, can increase joy in the classroom and enhance the sustainability of the teaching profession. It targets secondary and post-secondary educators, pre-service teachers, and teacher education programs, emphasizing that key literacy skills are fundamental to a free and civil society.<sup>1</sup> Such skills, while essential, need not come at the expense of joy. Fortunately, as demonstrated by educators like Linda Christensen, Zaretta Hammond, and Gholdy Muhammad, it is possible to experience such joy without sacrificing rigor.<sup>2</sup>

The link connecting authenticity and joy can be found in authenticity's transformative power to create meaningful, genuine

connections between educators and learners. In the educational context, authenticity involves being true to oneself and transparent about pedagogy, while meaningfully connecting with students to create a safe, inclusive, and enriching learning environment. In such an environment, trust, positivity, and curiosity thrive. Authentic teachers can then use this positive momentum to overcome barriers impeding communication and understanding in the student/teacher relationship, thus setting the stage for creative risk-taking and productive struggle within the classroom (Christensen 1). We do so by modeling purpose and mindfulness for students daily. Essentially, when students are uninhibited by the fear of failure, they are open to experiencing joy. This joy leads them down a path toward lifelong learning, and that lifelong learning benefits us all.

### **Finding Purpose**

By seeking an authentic purpose in learning, we establish the groundwork for a more joyful classroom. The social psychologist Michael Argyle demonstrates a clear correlation between purpose—our reasons for waking up each morning and

practicing and pre-service teachers. These diverse teaching experiences have reinforced my belief that joy is a crucial element of any effective learning environment. This essay is thus written with the intention of addressing the varied needs and perspectives of a broad audience of educators.

<sup>2</sup> The definition of "rigor" in education has been debated for decades. See Tony Wagner's opinion piece in *Education Week* for a thoughtful description of how school leaders have asked the question, "What is rigor?" since the early twenty-first century.

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<sup>1</sup> Over the course of my fourteen-year career in education, I have had the privilege of working with students from middle school to postgraduate levels. My journey began teaching upper-level English courses at a suburban high school. Subsequently, I transitioned to a low-SES K-8 school, where I taught reading and language arts to skill-banded 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. For the past eight years, I have been dedicated to higher education, currently overseeing an educator licensure program at a state university and teaching theory and methods courses to

engaging in daily activities—and the amount of satisfaction and happiness we feel or experience (157). When infusing the classroom with joy, this means both the teacher and the students need to see a purpose for their learning (*Unearthing* 16). Gholdy Muhammad offers five pursuits as a means of focusing classroom purpose in a just and equitable way. These pursuits show us that the development of skills can be greatly augmented by identity development, including ways to help students view themselves as intellectuals and their world with criticality. This informs my purpose as an educator, which is to empower students and help them navigate a complex, technology-saturated world. I tell them I can do so by fostering curiosity and a sense of playfulness in the classroom. By the end of the semester, nearly all of them believe me.

One way that teachers can help students discover and maintain a sense of purpose is by asking students to set their own learning goals in the classroom. For example, in the “WOOP” model, students create “wish statements,” identify “outcomes” and “obstacles,” and then make a “plan” to “defeat” said obstacles (Oettinger; cited in Piccoli). This includes students as co-creators in the classroom and gives them a say in how they spend their time each day. In my classroom, this looks different depending on the age and developmental stage of my learners. For example, at the middle school level, I begin by presenting students with a menu of literacy skills connected to diverse personal and professional pursuits. We discuss the value and transferability of such skills in the broader world, then I ask students to reflect on their identities and interests beyond the classroom.<sup>3</sup> In small groups, they share these interests and brainstorm connections to one

or more of the previewed literacy skills. With scaffolding and support, each student develops their own achievable learning goals, which subsequently become the focal point and primary purpose of their learning journey in my classroom.

To illustrate, I worked with a group of middle school students facing challenges in both academic confidence and essential literacy skills. In the initial weeks of the semester, I dedicated time to getting to know these students through a series of activities focused on fostering self-awareness, building a sense of community, and promoting reflection. These activities included interest surveys, free writes, “I Am” poems, small and whole group discussions, and brief presentations where students taught each other various skills and ideas. Throughout these activities, I encouraged students to draw on their strengths, urging them to identify their existing interests and talents. As I gained a deeper understanding of the individuals in my classroom, we shifted to a review of age-appropriate literacy skills. Together, we discussed how individual skills might be applied beyond the classroom setting. In a particularly impactful conversation, students identified various professions they were interested in, ranging from NBA players and rap artists to graphic novelists, doctors, missionaries, and teachers. While it was straightforward to link professions requiring a college education to the work in my ELA classroom, the connections to other pursuits required a bit more work to clarify.

Inquiring into the perspectives of my aspiring athletes, I sought authentic insights into the most crucial traits defining a successful basketball player. Student responses painted a diverse picture, highlighting attributes such as

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<sup>3</sup> I define the concept of “transferability” for students using the text, *Understanding by Design*: “The ability to transfer our knowledge and skill effectively

involves the capacity to take what we know and use it creatively, flexibly, fluently, in different settings or problems, on our own” (Wiggins and McTighe 40).

determination, talent, and grit, which laid the groundwork for introducing the concept of "productive struggle" (Hammond 12; see also Ritchhart, Means, and Knapp). Productive struggle acknowledges the positive learning outcomes that occur when students engage in challenging tasks. It also foregrounds confidence and resilience as integral components of "grit" (Sririam 1). With this foundation, I then asked students to identify and discuss recent challenges they had experienced. As might be expected, many of these challenges were academic in nature. Centered around the importance of persistence and resilience, I helped students draw connections between the dedication required for athletic excellence and the process of honing academic skills. These connections became particularly evident as students noted struggles with reading comprehension, writing stamina, and vocabulary acquisition. Focused on these necessary but elusive literacy skills, each student set 1-2 learning goals with various checkpoints throughout the semester. As learners progressed in their skills acquisition, I made it a point to celebrate their successes. And more importantly, during moments of struggle, we collectively acknowledged and honored the grit and persistence demonstrated and developed by students as they worked through challenges. While minimizing the fear of failure, this approach enabled me to effectively engage my middle school learners in the authentic pursuit of literacy skills, anchored to a greater purpose.

By way of further example, in my high school English classroom, I had a student named Derek who faced significant challenges with vocabulary acquisition.<sup>4</sup> Despite his struggles, Derek's dream was to become a professional athlete, specifically a football player. Understanding the

importance of effective communication both on and off the field, Derek and I worked together to set meaningful goals using a modified version of the WOOP model. His wish was to enhance his vocabulary to articulate his thoughts clearly during interviews and team discussions. Together, we identified the outcome of being able to confidently use a diverse range of words, and the obstacle of his limited vocabulary base. Derek's plan involved incorporating daily reading of sports articles and using a vocabulary-building app on his phone. Over the semester, Derek's dedication and resilience grew palpable. He diligently practiced new words, integrating them into class discussions and written assignments. During a class presentation, where Derek eloquently analyzed a sports commentary article, his classmates and I celebrated his progress with a round of applause to which he bowed with flourish. We recognized not only his expanding vocabulary but also his unwavering grit. This recognition not only highlighted his expanding vocabulary but also his intrinsic joy and sense of fulfillment in mastering new skills. By connecting his academic endeavors to his athletic aspirations, we underscored the transferability of these skills, reinforcing his sense of purpose and joy in our ELA classroom.

### **Practicing Mindfulness**

While purpose is crucial for fostering an authentic, productive, and joyful learning environment, mindfulness holds equal, if not greater, significance. When referring to mindfulness, I draw on three interrelated concepts: self-awareness, presence, and grace. A teacher's self-awareness directly informs their ability to create a safe and inclusive learning environment, as well as to engage in socially just and culturally

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<sup>4</sup> All student names are pseudonyms.

responsive teaching (*Unearthing* 55, 85). An individual's situated perspective, or cultural frame of reference, informs the relationships we build, the pedagogical approaches we take, and the assumptions or biases we carry (Hammond 56-58; *Unearthing* 91-93). In my role as a university professor, I often work with pre-service teachers to reflect on and identify the cultural frames of reference they bring to the classroom. Such reflective work can be greatly supplemented by drawing on readings by researcher-educators such as Hammond, Muhammad, Danielle Lillge, and Ashley Boyd. Equipped with a robust theoretical framework for self-reflection, pre-service teachers can more effectively engage in activities focused on recognizing and uncovering implicit values and biases, which ultimately enables them to bring a more authentic self to the learning space.

Identity should be introduced as a nuanced and complicated combination of positionalities, and both students and pre-service teachers should be encouraged to recognize and investigate numerous elements of their identity to develop self-awareness. In addition to engaging in reflective free writes aimed at prompting individuals to identify and articulate meaningful experiences related to culture, religion, race, language, class, sexuality, and gender identity, pre-service teachers also benefit from being paired with peers whose identities differ from their own. This can be done while avoiding tokenism or the exploitation of minority identities by using identity markers that are not connected to

race, ethnicity, religion, or sexuality. For instance, I have had students fill out interest and identity surveys at the beginning of the semester that include low-stakes identity markers such as their favorite music genre, ice cream flavor, or sports team. We then dig into the more loaded aspects of identity as the semester continues, beginning with the premise that no individual should ever be asked to serve as a representative of an entire demographic. Implemented as a type of academic buddy system, these diverse pairs then progress through coursework together, serving as study partners and participating in various relationship-building activities, including a Socratic podcast assignment in which they interview each other by asking a series of increasingly reflective and critical questions. Throughout this collaborative work, I encourage pre-service teachers to confront their biases and assumptions.<sup>5</sup> At the semester's end, each learner reflects on the process, identifying ways they have learned and grown. As a part of this, the pre-service teacher gains insight into their own situated perspective and makes meaningful connections to their future as an educator. While this focused social, emotional, and relational work can be adapted for younger students, meticulous preparation and thoughtful framing become even more crucial in this context. Beginning with a simple "I Am" discussion prompt that involves repeated rounds of sharing with a partner can help underscore the complexity of identity and lay the groundwork for celebrating pluralism in the classroom.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For ways to support mindfulness practices in a multicultural classroom, see David Rodgers.

<sup>6</sup> This type of activity can be used productively at any point in a semester or school year. Pair students and provide them with instructions. Ask students to answer the question, "Who am I?" by speaking continuously for one minute while their partner listens. At the end of the minute, switch roles and

have the other person share. Repeat this process three or more times—depending on the age and maturity of students—with the prompt that participants cannot repeat information they have already shared. At the end, have students reflect on the diversity of their identities and experiences. Encourage them to consider how sharing and listening to their peers' stories fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of the multicultural dynamics within the

Presence is another key aspect of mindfulness, which can increase the levels of joy and fulfillment in learning. In my conversations with pre-service teachers about the significance of presence, I often refer to the work of the activist-educator and author Jerry Farber. In “Teaching and Presence,” Farber addresses concerns about classroom management and explores what happens when we fully immerse ourselves in the current moment. The educator who is truly present can respond meaningfully to what takes place in real time. And by recognizing, acknowledging, and communicating with the myriad physical, emotional, and intellectual identities in the classroom, we can maximize the effectiveness and relevance of our instruction. All moments are teachable, and a teacher who is fully present makes every moment matter. This immersive approach extends beyond mere presence; it involves skillfully crafting authentic and purposeful interactions with students, thereby constructing a rich tapestry of engagement and mutual understanding. Conversely, we know a distracted or bored educator can lead to dissatisfactory outcomes, including making students feel alienated, unmotivated, or apathetic (Farber 216). Such apathy in turn stifles the pursuit of joy, diminishes the likelihood of creative risk-taking, and hinders profound, transferable learning experiences. Farber tells us that to be fully present is to remember that the classroom is

a place where individual worlds,  
individual universes converge in real  
time and real space. Each person there is  
an absolute center, and yet, with respect  
to the classroom itself, each person is

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classroom. This activity not only enhances students' self-awareness and communication skills but also promotes joy in discovering commonalities and differences, reinforcing a sense of belonging and community in the multicultural classroom. For further context and information for using this activity in pursuit of identity development, see Muhammad's

also an emissary: from a family, a set of locales, a set of social contexts, a long history of nights and days. (Farber 216)

Approaching the classroom as a profoundly pluralistic and intersectional nexus empowers us to build relationships with all students, to recognize the intricacies of identity, and to ground ourselves in the precise space and moment at hand. A spectrum of mindfulness practices, encompassing breathing techniques, in-class yoga, guided meditations, visualizations, and focused personal writings, collectively serve to align both our students and us within a shared learning space. Engaging in these practices fosters relationship building, while enhancing teacher uptake and the ability to respond meaningfully in real-time to the unfolding dynamics in the classroom.

Grace is the final element of mindfulness I use when fostering joyful learning. In this context, grace represents a cultivated form of civil goodwill, characterized by giving individuals the benefit of the doubt. Extending grace, both to oneself and to others, is indispensable for building robust positive relationships, persuading students to embrace productive struggle, and establishing an environment where all learners feel secure to experiment, explore, and take creative risks. This approach aligns with the shift towards strength-based pedagogy and has personally helped me avoid deficit thinking (Hammond 59).<sup>7</sup> Author and professor Sharon Shelton-Colangelo further articulates this concept of grace, when they assert, "In order to create joy in our classrooms [...] we must cultivate our own compassion and love, especially for those students who are most in need" (110).

*Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*

<sup>7</sup> For more on implementing a growth mindset in your classroom, see Annie Brock and Heather Hundley.

A simple but tangible illustration of this compassionate approach, or extension of grace, is evident in how a teacher handles a student who has fallen asleep in class. Instead of resorting to startling methods like throwing objects or banging on desks, a teacher practicing grace might gently touch the student's shoulder, acknowledge their drowsiness discreetly, and suggest they take a break for a drink of water. Rather than reading the student's behavior as disrespectful, the teacher gives them the benefit of the doubt by recognizing that there are many valid causes for fatigue. The student may have worked a late shift or been caring for younger siblings, etc. And even if the student is only tired because they stayed up late playing video games, approaching them with grace costs me nothing. It does, however, signal to the student that I prioritize their well-being and value an environment conducive to creative and intellectual risk-taking.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, centering joy in the classroom through authentic pedagogy, mindfulness, and purpose is essential for creating meaningful, equitable, and fulfilling learning experiences. By fostering genuine connections, educators can move beyond the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and prioritize real-time interactions that nurture student engagement and joy. Authentic pedagogy, grounded in mindfulness and purpose, enhances the sustainability of the teaching profession by promoting self-awareness, presence, and grace. These practices not only support academic achievement but also cultivate a sense of purpose and intrinsic joy in students, encouraging lifelong learning. As demonstrated by educators like Christensen, Hammond, and Muhammad, rigorous academic standards can coexist with a joyful learning environment. By embracing these

principles, educators can empower students to navigate the complexities of a diverse and technology-driven world, ultimately contributing to a more just and joyful society.

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