Natural Learning:

An Educational Philosophy

By: Jena Parsons

From the moment a baby is born, they immediately start taking in things from the world around them. It’s easy to see how quickly, and seemingly effortlessly, babies take in information from the world around them. They learn how to get their caregivers’ attention, how to coordinate their muscles to grab hold of something or roll over onto their stomach, how to make sounds and eventually how to form words. No parent is required to take seminars on infant verbal development and given a packet of flashcards to go over with their fourteen month old. They simply talk to the baby and enthusiastically encourage sounds that are even remotely near to a familiar word. The child’s innate curiosity about the world around them and parents’ natural desire to be able to communicate with their child couples to create a natural learning process.

Learning is not something that is restricted to formal instruction in the classroom. It’s a natural process that occurs as we engage with the world around us. This process does not stop when a student enters their school-aged years. How is it that a student who has a hard time memorizing facts for their history test can sing you every single word of a song they like? Or a student who struggles in math class can tell you all about the stats of their favorite football team? It is because the learning is natural. It relates to the student’s life and thus becomes more personal and easier to remember and understand.

A teacher’s main goal is not to teach math, science, language arts, or social studies. Their primary purpose is to further their students’ innate curiosity, to develop their creative, logical and analytical thinking, and to encourage students to wonder, challenge, and form their own ideas, beliefs and opinions. The primary purpose of teaching is to help to connect students to the world around them. Although it may seem daunting, this task is much simpler than it seems. It is simply about creating a more personal classroom atmosphere.

In my opinion, the best way to illustrate this idea is to portray a practical classroom application. The following is my personal interpretation of this theory:

The fist task in creating a personal atmosphere is to fade the line between school and the rest of a child’s life by creating a sense of continuity from their home life to their life at school. This should be established at the very beginning of the school year or if possible before the school year even starts. The best way to do this is by doing home visits. Take pictures or video clips of the family. Ask questions about the life of the students and their families and give personal information about your own life and family. When the school year begins have each student work to write a script and narrate the pictures and video clips taken (along with any other pictures they want to share from home) to create a personal narrative. Edit the clips together and add your own to create a cohesive story about your classroom. Send a formal invitation home to the families of all of your students. Invite each family to come after school to watch the screening of your class movie. Invite the families to bring food and make a celebration out of it. Within the first week of classes you will have created a personal connection with your students and their families and created an atmosphere of open communication and excitement in learning while fostering parent involvement and showing the students that their home, personal lives and cultures are valued.

It is also important to create an element of excitement and importance for everything you teach. The best way to do that is for you yourself to be excited about the lesson and believe it is important. Create a lesson that interests and excites you and keep your students interests and personal experiences in mind. Use videos, first hand accounts, speakers, experiments, hands on projects and activities, and interesting information to try to make connections to the students’ lives and interests. Encourage discussions and find additional ways for students to “dig deeper”. For example, in introducing a unit on weather let the class watch an interesting Discovery Channel video or a online video clip where a meteorologist explains why he is so passionate about his job. Then allow your students to spend a few minutes to discuss the video and provide them with ten minutes to go off on their own or with a group of friends to look up information on something they found interesting or wanted to know more about by using resources such as books, the internet, youtube or any other sources. Then use their interest and base knowledge to propel the teaching of the unit.

My last suggestion would be to make the classroom an inviting and interesting place. There is no rulebook saying a classroom has to look a specific way. Section off wall space in your classroom: one for each different subject matter. In the social studies section put up pictures of historical figures, places, archeological diggings, quotes from famous persons, letters written from the time period, diagrams of the machinery used, etc. In the library place framed biographies of authors or illustrations from books. Include bilingual texts, newspapers, English and Braille texts, comic books, magazines, picture books, novels, coffee table books, student created books, or anything else of interest. Make it interesting.

In capturing student interest and providing hands on, personal experiences students will connect with the information in a more meaningful way, allowing a more natural learning process. “People never learn anything by being told, they have to find out for themselves.” (Paulo Coelho)