

Teaching smart. schwab's four commonplaces, zajac's focus

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Schwab's Four Commonplaces and Zajac's Focus

As any knowledgeable teacher can attest to, teaching is not easy. In fact, it can be a grueling, tiresome task at times, if only because there is so much more to a teacher than merely dispensing facts and educating students about history, math, or reading. A teacher is a motivator, a psychologist, a referee, a decision maker, an organizer, and so much more. To this extent, it can be overwhelming, as a new teacher, to determine what aspect of classroom life demands the most attention. Joseph J. Schwab (1973) sheds light on this problem through his theory of four commonplaces, where he states that there are four things an educator must take into account when teaching: the student, the teacher, the milieu, or the environment in which the child learns and grows, and the curriculum. These four aspects of educational thought are all of equal importance, and one must never overshadow the others. However, not all teachers can achieve this balance, causing their teaching style to unconsciously lean towards one commonplace. This disproportion is reflected in Tracy Kidder's nonfiction work, *Among Schoolchildren*, in which he chronicles a year in the life of Chris Zajac, a fifth-grade teacher, and her rambunctious class. Mrs. Zajac is an extremely talented, effective teacher and a model of inspiration for aspiring educators; however, she displays a tendency to favor her students over the other three commonplaces. Mrs. Zajac's teaching style is greatly enhanced by her unbridled love for her students, yet the question remains: does this passion for children blind her to the other aspects essential for teaching?

Schwab's theory of the four commonplaces does not suggest that each commonplace should be taken individually; rather, "coordination, not superordination-subordination is the proper relation of these four commonplaces" (1973, p. 509). The teacher, student, milieu, and curriculum all intertwine, and none of them should be ignored. When defining these commonplaces, Schwab identifies the milieus that are relevant to teaching as "the school and classroom in which the learning and teaching are supposed to occur [...] the family, the community, the particular groupings of religious, class, or ethnic genus" (1973, p. 503). Each of these environments is essential in understanding the students that are to be taught, their attitudes about education, the influence that their parents have on them, how they relate to their peers and to the teacher, and, ultimately, the person that they can become if only they are properly cultivated. The teacher is equally important, as she "will most often serve in the role of umpire and serve more extensively as the more mature member of the learning community" (Schwab, 1973, p. 509). She becomes a role in teaching herself, not just the one who teaches the children, but only one part of the larger whole of the educational process. Likewise, curriculum and the subject matter taught is a necessary component of educational thought. It is "the source from which and by which selection is made of the provocative objects and events which serve as catalysts of curricular activity" (Schwab, 1973, p. 509). Without a curriculum to be taught, teaching simply cannot exist. But despite its extreme importance, the teacher must be aware that it should not be placed over the other commonplaces because it alone is not all-encompassing; it coexists with the teacher, the students, and the milieus

which surround them. Schwab's final commonplace is that of the learner and the student. Schwab explains that teaching " must include general knowledge of the age group under consideration: what it already knows, what it is ready to learn, what will come easy, what will be difficult" (1973, p. 502) and much more. The students are a central, indispensable part of teaching and learning, and a good teacher knows her students strengths, weaknesses, and limits and works together with them to help them learn and grow. Without this love and dedication to her students and a desire to help them reach their full potential, a teacher cannot succeed.

Mrs. Zajac focuses her attention primarily on this aspect of the student, embodying a child-centered philosophy of education. Everything she does is done with the good of her children in mind. Even when thinking about her curriculum and assigning tasks in the classroom, the well-being of her students is first and foremost. When dividing the children into pairs to practice their spelling, " Chris paired up good spellers with poor ones. She also made spelling an exercise in socialization, by putting together children who did not seem predisposed to like each other" (Kidder, 1989, p. 29). She works hard to establish harmony in her classroom and brings together two radically different students in the hopes of helping them overcome their differences, showing them that they aren't as unlike as they think they are, and establishing bonds of support. She intuitively senses the mood of her class and on long, exhausting days where the kids are sleepy and unmotivated, she takes their disposition and adapts to it, playing up her comical side and rejuvenating them: " There was a lot more light in the room

now. It came from smiles" (Kidder, 1989, p. 43). Her enthusiasm and dedication, coupled with her focus on the commonplace of the student, contributes to her success as an engaging teacher. Schwab also states that this commonplace " should include intimate knowledge of the children under consideration - knowledge achieved by direct involvement with them" (1973, p. 502). Chris perfectly exemplifies this, as she develops close, intimate bonds with each of her students. After a long day at school, she settles into her dining hall and begins correcting papers, taking the time to reflect on each student individually. She doesn't simply scan the tests, look for the right answers, count the number of wrong answers, and scribble down a grade in red, branding ink; rather, she uses the opportunity to pay attention to each and every one of her students, taking into consideration the knowledge she's garnered from personal experiences in her classroom where she gets to know each individual. In her dining room, " one by one, her class would file into this quiet, orderly room. Here, many problems seemed manageable, or at least she could imagine that she had time to work on every child's problems" (Kidder, 1989, p. 72). Mrs. Zajac observes her children, taking note of their strengths and weaknesses and always doing her best to help them improve. Her faith in them, even in the troublesome ones like Claude and Robert, is unshakeable. Through her involvement with her students and the close bonds she forms with them, she learns about what is right for each individual, and she knows that taking Juanita or Clarence away from the class is the worst thing that could be done to them. Unfortunately, Chris herself learns that there are uncontrollable circumstances in life and, no matter how hard she works or how strong her

focus is, she cannot fix everything. " But," she reflects, " It wasn't for lack of trying. She hadn't given up. She had run out of time" (Kidder, 1989, p. 331).

However, there are drawbacks to her child-centered approach to teaching. By placing the majority of focus on the student, Mrs. Zajac unintentionally neglects the other commonplaces, which results in Robert's downfall. After several frustrating encounters, Chris places Robert into a predefined role, thinking that she has figured him out and leaving it at that. She assumes, " Robert wanted her to yell at him. He wanted her attention" (Kidder, 1989, p. 214). Yet, this perception blinds her to the truth behind Robert's behavior, and she lets her general knowledge of troublemaking students like him overshadow the lost little boy seeking help that he is on the inside. She ignores the role that Robert's home environment, or milieu, plays and doesn't catch on to the hints that he drops about his broken family that affect him so deeply. When she realizes her mistake, Mrs. Zajac feels her heart sink and she berates herself:

" How many times had something like this happened to him in his life already? Was this the reason Robert behaved as he did? Is self-inflicted pain better than sadness and despair? [...] He had no one at home to help him make an electric light. That was why he'd said he didn't want to do a project. He wasn't just being perverse. ' How stupid I am!' she thought" (Kidder, 1989, p. 283).

She also falls prey to the same error of overlooking Schwab's (1973) milieu commonplace with Blanca, who is unfortunately whisked away before she

can correct her mistake: “ She remembered Blanca’s frightened eyes, and reproached herself: That girl was probably a victim of sexual abuse, Chris decided. She hadn’t done enough, she thought” (Kidder, 1989, p. 312). Mrs. Zajac initially dismissed her as a quiet, easily-frightened girl whom she needed to “ get into” (Kidder, 1989, p. 78) at some point in the future, failing to notice the warning signs until it was too late.

Chris Zajac’s love for her students gives her great insight and guides her teaching spectacularly. Of Schwab’s four commonplaces, her teaching style clearly focuses prominently on the student, which enables her to identify with the children and create a well-rounded, rich learning experience for them. However, she, like all teachers, must be careful to keep this passion from blocking out other, equally important aspects essential to teaching. There is more to teaching than simply loving children; as Schwab asserts, one must strike a balance between the four commonplaces of the student, the teacher, the curriculum, and the milieus of both the classroom and the home. Only after equalizing these four aspects can a teacher truly excel.