3

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS ARE THE FOUNDATION OF ALL LEARNING

"The school must represent life—life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground."

John Dewey (1897, p. 430)

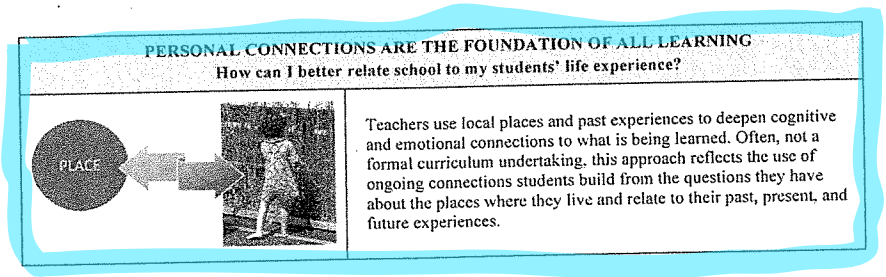

FIGURE 3.2

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The need to make learning a more relevant experience is endorsed daily by the numbers of American students who "vote with their feet" to disengage or drop out of school. For many, the bland menu of curricular offerings fails to engage them on a personal, emotional, or spiritual level. While policy pundits carry on about high achievement, students are searching for a spark of human interest in the schoolhouse. This chapter examines the many ways a student's life experiences influence the nature and quality of the learning time spent in school (see Figure 3.2).

Considering local learning from this perspective acknowledges the wisdom of the "anticipatory set" or "hook" that advises teachers to seek an initial cognitive spark to get students involved. It is not so much about the standard as getting ready for the standard. One spring, in anticipation of a unit on interdependence, when students

would be studying insects, birds, and habitats on a global scale, I assigned a bird watch as the weather was warming. I asked students to look out for different kinds of birds as they arrived in northern Vermont. No credit, no grades, just an invitation. "*Blue Jays! Cardinals! I saw this little yellow bird this morning but I don't know what it was. You should have seen the size of that crow!*" Every morning, I was stampeded by an unleashed birding energy as we recorded sightings on a chart. What they saw primed them to consider migration and global interdependence with "new eyes."

Experience is the impetus for all education. The phenomenon of learning is an active process and involves a change in thinking in the mind of the learner. To learn, students need a personal incentive to connect their existing ideas and perceptions to new information. While this is fundamental to all teaching, it is a distinct way teachers use local investigations.

Experience Is the Foundation of Learning

When I visited the Martin Luther King Middle School in Berkeley, California, a class of sixth-graders was making homegrown pizza and cooking it in a wood-fired oven that sat next to their garden. They used the tomatoes and other veggies to make the sauce. What was most impressive about this endeavor was not the beautifully tended garden or the quantities of food that spilled from it, but the energy that was generated around the meal. In the Kitchen Classroom, students set tables with tablecloths, made lemonade from the nearby lemon tree, and created a centerpiece of freshly cut flowers. When everything was ready, we all gathered at the different tables with the expectation that we would engage in friendly conversation—dinner table talk : . . slow food. I spoke with a young man who was bursting with pride as he described how he cooked most of the meals for his family—three siblings and his mother: "My moms likes just about everything I fix—and she likes it when I have dinner ready when she comes home from work." A teacher reflecting on the happy energy of the day as we cleaned up said, "Students smile more when they are in the garden . . . why aren't we doing more things that make kids smile?"

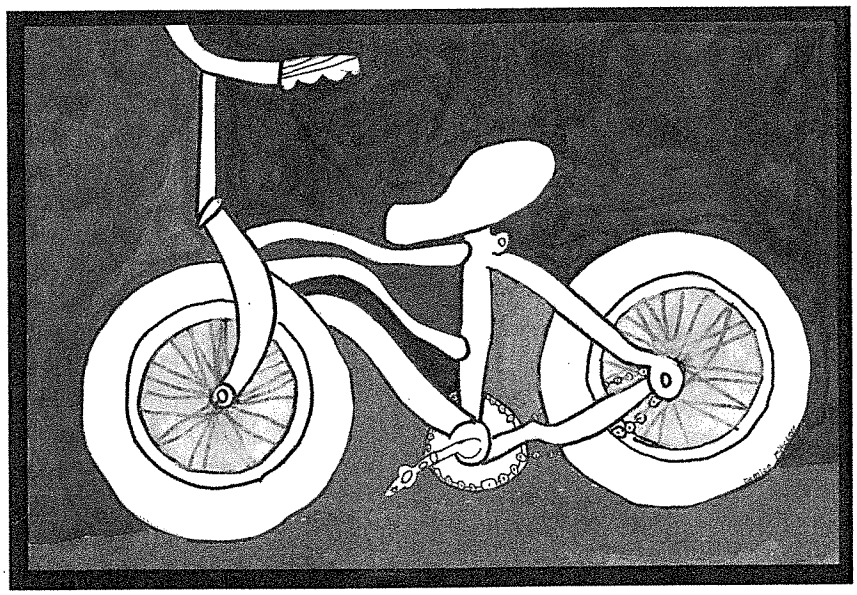
"Making it relevant is a lot about making it local."

This element is the foundation on which the big ideas of the standards can come alive. It is the canvas on which art is created! A math teacher might refer to how fractions are used in recipes, a language arts teacher could ask students to think about love and loss while reading Shakespeare, or an art teacher could ask her students to draw bicycles instead of flower vases. Ongoing connections to the world outside the classroom are already at work in students' thinking and can be used to make school a more authentic experience.

> "When place is incorporated into the act of curriculum development, children's everyday experiences become one of the foundations upon which learning is constructed."
>
> Greg Smith (2013, p. 213)

Teachers who seek to bridge their content to the social and emotional world of their students ground the learning experience in what students know and who they are. Dewey explains the physiological rationale of this allegiance when he describes that "learning is active. It involves the reaching out of the mind . . . the organic assimilation starting from within. Literally we must *take our stand* [emphasis added] with the child and our departure from him (Dewey, 1902, p. 343).

Taking a stand with the learner is about establishing a partnership that guides the educational process. Teachers can build an intellectual as well as a more personal, emotional bridge to the content that makes learning "very real, very right now." This view is both student-centered in terms of what the learner knows and thinks, as well as place-centered in terms of what the learner experiences.



Damion Mitchell. Used with permission.

Taking a stand also means to stand by the learner in terms of what is valuable and useful. New teachers are not asked to take a vow to never bore a student, to never teach information that is useless, outdated, or so far afield from the learner's experience that there is no way for the material to be processed. However, good teachers take their obligations to young people seriously because they know the many ways that learning *requires* an emotional connection. Posing academic questions in the abstract misses what students already *know* about their world, as well as how students feel about their world. Linking to students' emotions involves paying attention to the geographical places of students—in the very largest meaning of the word.

"I like live experiences. I feel like that's what works."

Paying attention to how students feel reflects a more empathetic view toward how students experience their education. It means that teachers should also attend to students' expressions of apathy. Schoolwork can become a small act of hope that gives a student a stronger sense of efficacy. Researching recipes to share at a food shelf, building a ramp, shoveling a sidewalk, or sharing a story all can ease a feeling of hopelessness. Attending to their concerns and questions makes it more likely that they will be engaged. Gay reflects:

> . . . after all, they are teenagers. It's all about them. They're so there. You know it's only going to stay with them any length of time if it's related to them. If it's not related to them it's in one ear and out the other. It doesn't even stop to rest.

Teachers Seek Connections to Student Experience

"If I fail to make that connection, then I lose them more often than not."

Ellen states that providing a concrete connection is key: "When you can use the places they've seen . . . it draws on their experience and their fund of information so that they can make connections to the bigger ideas. . . . It's because of this connection that they have to make sense of it." She says she works to make these "connections in writing, in reading, and across the board as much as I can." Ellen reflects that even though we offer the connections to deepen learning, it does not mean that the process is easier for students: "It actually makes it harder because they have to resolve what they know with new information." When Jean seeks to "deepen the connection," he asks, "How can I reach out to where kids come from and their experiences to enrich the particular curriculum?":

> Things become less abstract. Meaning is more rich. I think that students find more interest, because it's not something that happened a long time ago or far away or in a theoretical sense. But it's happening . . . [it] has relevance to the environment today.

Jean maintains ways that a student's personal connection to the material underlines the worth of any intellectual inquiry: "Here's Mesopotamia and what happened there—devoid of a connection to self—what is the value in that? History helps us understand who we are and who we're not." In framing a more critical view, Jean wants his students to ask the big questions that he feels frame the study of history and prompts students to inquire: "What questions aren't being asked? What's not being told? Whose voice is not being heard?"

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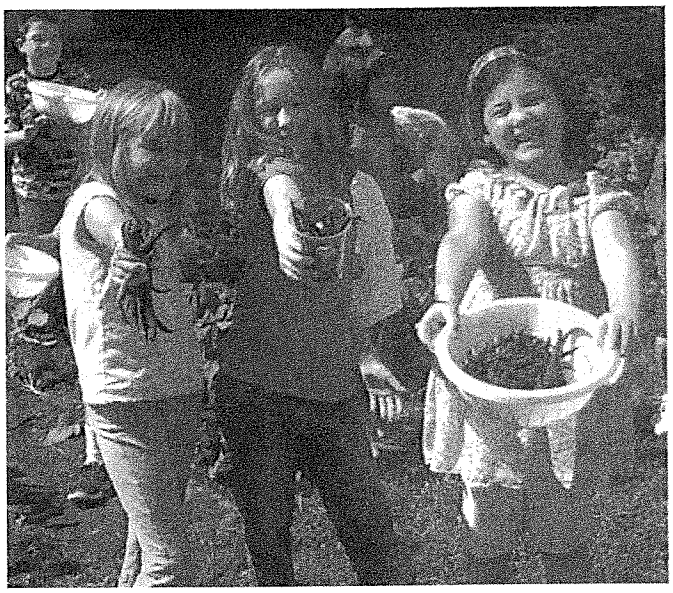

Steven Schmidt. Used with permission.

When I first started teaching about the Lake Champlain Basin, I was bowled over by the many personal connections that students had to the lake where most of them had grown up. It was an unanticipated energy that poured into the classroom, and, as a new teacher, I found it exciting—and a complication! For any "lesson" undertaken, there was a childhood memory, a relative, a memorable bike ride, and other experiences that a student retrieved to enrich our understanding of the topic. These vibrant connections were a bridge back home; students more often shared their learning with family members and neighbors, coming up with a better answer to the question, *What did you do in school today?*

"When they don't care about it, they don't learn it."

I once gave a guest presentation on reading strategies to a fifth-grade class using a selection from *Wind in the Willows.* A student asked a question that made me realize I had glossed over the title of the book assuming it was familiar to them. I backed up and showed them the cover, and, all of a sudden, a boy who had been sitting in the back of the room with his arms crossed jumped up and exclaimed: "My grandma has a willow tree in her backyard." This connection totally changed his attitude, and he actively took part for the rest of the lesson. While his experience with willow trees did not lend itself directly to the lesson underway, it did offer him a genuine reason to connect. Students always need a reason, and the local context provides so many.

One way that teachers can connect to students' lives outside of school is to inquire into their experience of work. Do they have jobs at home or in the

workplace? What values and skills do they use in work that can be useful in school? While many links to work are formalized (school-to-work, internships, and career building), there is a value in informally integrating students' experience of work. It might be a discussion of chores done at home or an artistic exploration of what worthwhile work looks like. Students of any age may be proud of the trust their family puts in them to cook, clean, take care of siblings, hunt, or care for an elder. Older students, many of whom have jobs, may excel at their work and not be able to transfer this success at school. Teachers can tap into their feelings of pride and competence.

Honoring Diverse Experience

Due to the varied background of our students and their constant need for connections, common experience becomes a critical foundation for learning and fundamental to creating community. How students filter, perceive, and experience their lived environment comes in to play when they learn. I once had a student whose family was not able to take him to many cultural or educational events, but he watched a lot of science programs on television. He regularly contributed important background information from a very impressive bank of scientific knowledge. As a learner, he sought ways to make sense of new material in relation to what he already knew, which, for him, was gathered from television.

> "We must look unblinkingly at the way children really are, and struggle to make sense of everything that we see in order to teach them."
>
> William Ayers (2001, p. 33)

Teachers need to stop and ask: "What different assumptions are students bringing to this material that warrant closer examination?" and "What do we need to know together as common context?" When teachers turn to their community, they realize the importance of this common experience.

"We become a community by the nature of the work that we do."

Local learning has the potential to be more inclusive. Investigations that are collaborative in nature invite the sharing of stories. Students from varied backgrounds all benefit from experiencing questions together. Learning can revolve around these *common reference points.* If students have traveled from another country, these experiences become the cornerstone of a growing understanding of where they now live. The stories and experiences they bring with them can be part of the narrative they use to build awareness of their new home.

Issues discussed in class resonate differently for students with diverse life experiences. If a teacher is not familiar with the background of her students, not only may she be insensitive, she might also miss an opportunity to use student experiences as a bridge to deepen learning. When Kate asks the question "what is war?" she includes the experience of her students who come from war-torn countries. She asks "How can you talk about Civil War and not acknowledge that [war] is a huge part of some students' lives?" She believes that their collective experiences need to be shared in order to build a learning community. The strength of this community becomes critical when students can share painful realities.

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When students are immersed in local learning, they constantly have points of intersection with what they already know, where their learning is either affirmed or questioned. When teachers open up the classroom to the complicated lives of students, they need to be ready for the questions that emerge. In an iterative process, the student refers new knowledge to the world that is familiar. While not always linked to specific subjects or organized as formal curriculum, the ways that teachers seek to link learning to a student's existing knowledge, experience, and emotional world are essential aspects to learning in a local context. The next approach to structuring curriculum describes ways that teachers intentionally seek to deepen content acquisition and formally organize it as curricular goals.

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PLACE-BASED CURRICULUM DESIGN

Exceeding Standards through Local Investigations

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2015

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON