

Large Purposes in the Classroom: Doing Tai Chi Together

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To lose a focus on democracy—not to be closely connected in our practice to the world, its problems, and its promise—is to lose the moral base of our work.

Vito Perrone (Jervis, 1991, p. 9)

Without Vito Perrone's support and advice, my professional life might have been very different. In 1977 when Vito accepted my Pacific Oaks master's thesis "Children's Thinking in the Classroom" as a North Dakota Study Group monograph, I was invited to attend the NDSG meetings. In 1986, at Vito's invitation, I founded and edited *Pathways: A Forum for Progressive Educators*. Vito included my article "Closed Gates in New York City" (Jervis, 1991), describing citywide testing in Diane Mullins' classroom, in his volume *Expanding Assessment*. Those connections shaped the direction of my work, but more importantly, exposed me to Vito's values. Vito influenced the way I see teachers' and children's relationships with each other and the world.

The story I tell below is part of an ethnographic study on "Cultural Interchange" in which my colleagues and I explored the kinds of questions Vito asked: Whose values were accorded respect? Whose values went unrecognized or were unconsciously ignored? Which students and families were included and participated? Which students and families were excluded or denied full participation? Vito influenced my description of Diane Mullins' classroom as I explored the way she connected practice and the world.

Living Together and Sharing Perspectives

When I began this study of Diane Mullins' 2nd/3rd grade, Diane and I had a history together. We met at the 1978 North Dakota Study Group (NDSG) meeting, and when I moved to New York City in 1980 she invited me to take a Teachers & Writers residency in her PS 3 classroom. After it ended, I was still intrigued. I spent the entire next year observing her classroom. Children in Diane's classroom were emotionally and intellectually engaged; they and Diane were "visible" (her word) to each other and to me, which made it a good place to observe, to explore my questions, and to write about them.

In September 1996, I returned to Diane's classroom with the same "luxurious perspective of the undistracted eye" we had agreed on in 1981: I would write and she would teach. Diane welcomed me back. Now a world class explainer, she had gained the ability to articulate exactly why she decides as she does in the classroom. "Large purposes" permeate her classroom.

Diane believes that the quality of classroom life depends on everyone belonging to a psychologically safe community, using the classroom to open up a space for children to be themselves at the same time they learn to belong to a community. The classroom atmosphere is not wound tight because Diane regulates it carefully. Freedom from large numbers of teacher-imposed assignments gives children time to get to know each other, to teach each other, to be helpful, and to be helped. Underlying Diane's philosophical stance is a fundamental regard for human variety which, in her view, requires her to expand the classroom by making a public, formal place for every child's perspective, to give children a place to become visible to themselves and each other. She exercises a thin layer of imposition—that is, she attempts to relieve pressure to compete and instead she works to propose possibilities for children. She values the child's participation in the class at the level and pace that the child chooses—what she calls the "child's present contribution"—rather than exclusively valuing the verbal and logical mathematical skills that school traditionally demands. Diane contextualizes content to a striking degree so that curriculum she introduces is exceptionally close to children's interests and tied to their own initiative. In summary, she translates into practice what Vito

wrote in 1988: “Knowledge, whatever it is, can’t stand apart from individual persons and their experience within particular communities. Personal and intentional qualities are omnipresent” (Perrone, 1988, p. 3).

These philosophical tenets of Diane’s teaching require a classroom where, as she said in her early journal entry (12/16/80), “The central theme of my class is children living together and sharing perspectives.” Absent is a notion of learning based on predetermined curriculum with sequenced skills and specified, measurable outcomes. She welcomes whoever is there in whatever state they arrive. It is enough that they are present. Growing out of this position is Diane’s visceral distaste for the distant, yet ever present expectations imposed variously by society; upper-grade teachers; parents; standardized tests; and district, state, and national standards. For her, these external measures provoke ranking, competition, and elitism. They contradict the human variety she recognizes each day.

Yet classrooms fueled by external expectations predominate in United States schools. Diane’s pedagogy goes against the conventional wisdom that children need predictable rules and discipline and carefully crafted, sequenced curriculum, which can be measured by standardized test scores. Diane is after something deeper. Her classroom is controversial. “Wild and woolly,” says the teacher across the hall, who chose Diane’s classroom for her own child. Not everyone agrees with Diane’s values or her methods, but no one denies she has a powerful influence on the children in her charge.

Energy and Flow: Doing Tai Chi Together

But for all the pedagogical underpinnings that I describe above, not every activity in Diane’s classroom began with children’s vital interests. Sometimes, she had a different “large purpose.” Tai Chi—the year’s most imposed formal daily activity—showed Diane at her most insistent. That Tai Chi happened at all was a serendipitous accident that Jing Xu was assigned to this classroom for student teaching. She was a political emigre from China, a much-published professor of physical education and dance who had coached the Chinese Olympic rhythmic gymnastic team. She needed to gain fluency in English and

thought an elementary education credential would give her the best chance to improve her language skills. It was an inspired student teaching assignment to put Jing in Diane's class, where children's and adult's conversations were so highly valued.

On the third day of school, for the purpose of enlarging the classroom community to include Jing, Diane invited her to do "something." Diane did not know what possibilities existed; communication was primarily non-verbal, but Jing was present and therefore Diane gave Jing a forum to participate. Silently, Jing got up in front of the children on the rug, signaled them to stand and copy her movements. She continued this activity every day. So subtle was this nonverbal interlude that I did not recognize for a week that Jing was leading the class into Tai Chi. Some children were instantly engaged. Pei-yee was mesmerized (the music of her native China?), but not everyone was interested in this group movement: Omar used the long arm movements to physically touch (read bother) whoever stood next to him; Jinny thought the music was "annoying"; Connie volunteered, "The music is nice but the dance stinks"; blond, blue-eyed Allison, newly arrived from rural Pennsylvania, said, "Why should I do Jing's Tai Chi? That's Chinese."

Diane persisted for Jing's benefit to give her a chance to contribute. But Diane also values a classroom atmosphere regulated to achieve low-key group energy and Tai Chi supported that crucial element in her classroom. The rhythm established itself sufficiently so that by early October Diane could say: "Yesterday we didn't do Tai Chi and we were a *wreck*." She told the children and me: "The goal is not dance, but the quiet."

Sometimes children worked hard at Tai Chi, extending real effort. On other days (the same) children burped, lost concentration, or "were in the way" (Diane's phrase for noncompliance that becomes a nuisance). Diane continued to remind the class: "I think it is important that everyone do Tai Chi. Together. We are all trying something new." Diane enticed (even required) any nearby parent or visitor to join in. It was easy enough to tuck oneself in the back of the room and follow along; no one ever refused.

Direct Instruction?

Very infrequently did Diane hold up a standard of correctness, so I was startled one day when Diane began a rare moment of teacher talk. The kids had already done their familiar Tai Chi sequence once and were sitting on the floor. Diane, from her perch on a table, delivered a speech. She spoke loudly, passionately, from the heart, in contrast to her quiet tone in circle when kids sometimes strained to hear her.

There has been a lot of research about how kids learn and what kind of learning helps them to do good work as adults. Jack talked in his reflection on family about how smart his parents are—they are not the only smart parents, but his parents are artists, they do music. They are disciplined. Arkash, Michael, and others of you put energy into your mind and your body. This is very important work Jing does with you. We are going to do Tai Chi now. Take off your sweatshirts. If you have something in your hands, put it down. And be silent. I want to enjoy this, and I do not have a good time when I can't concentrate.

Jing, who had already put her street pants back on over her leotard, took them off again and began to lead the group in another sequence. When this second sequence was finished, it was time for half the class to go to art. Diane announced that the remaining 13 kids would do Tai Chi for the third time. While Jing led, Diane moved around, correcting each child individually by touch. Her non-verbal message was: "Work at this and do it right." No choice was permitted. Kids were serious and silent. At the end, Diane asked each child and adult in the room to answer her question, "How did that feel?"

A parent of a former student had been watching from the doorway. After Diane greeted her, this mother said she had just moved to a new apartment, which was stressful, but even watching the Tai Chi made her feel better. "Here's the connection," this parent continued in front of the class. "When you are moving, you don't know where the ground is (demonstrated with her hand on the floor). But now I feel centered. I breathe more evenly. Just from watching." Diane said softly, "I'm glad you came."

But the emphasis on correctness for the whole group didn't stick. That day was the sum total of overt teaching beyond the message that, "We are all new at this and we are all doing this TOGETHER." Diane requested no direct instruction and so Jing offered none. Jing's breathing, her every motion, were exact and visible, but perfecting Tai Chi was not Diane's purpose. Jing accommodated to Diane's standards without visible chafing, although it is a classic situation that student teachers and teachers frequently resist each other's methods. Jing told me that she didn't have the authority to discuss with Diane how she might have preferred to organize Tai Chi. When Jing said, "Diane is the teacher and I am the student," her highly skilled professional self had 3000 years of Chinese respect for the teacher behind her. She would never, she said, bring her Chinese pedagogy into this American classroom, nor expect, as she would in China, children to learn the movements perfectly and practice them for homework. After a discussion with Diane (begun by me), Jing began occasionally to perform an action correctly, "Yes." Then incorrectly, "No." But the emphasis remained on calm togetherness. Jing's Tai Chi continued daily until her student teaching ended in mid-January.

Did all kids like Tai Chi? Not necessarily. Some children got interested in different forms or practiced at home with a tape Diane distributed to those who asked. Other children resisted. Virginia said astutely, "Only grown ups like Tai Chi." Sometimes kids groaned, especially on the third repetition. But then something amazing happened.

When Children Take Control

On January 18, three days after Jing left, the following happened:

It is pouring rain. There is the opening of the Computer Museum, a sixth grade activity to which Diane's class is invited. There is a bake sale that Diane hates for the sugar, for the hyper-anticipation, for the crumbs. I am videotaping that day, which she may hate as well, but she leaves me alone. An old wooden chair she has had since 1972 was

broken by accident—in truth it was already too shaky to sit on. Mid-morning, the room is not calm. Daniel asks her if she is MAD. “Yes.” This is Diane’s notion of *being a wreck*.

But then . . . wordlessly, Diane put on the Tai Chi tape and four self-selected children emerged to face the group to lead Tai Chi. Silently, 23 children concentrated on following four peers TWICE through the sequence. Diane said afterwards: “That was terrific. This is the second maddest I’ve been all year and now all the mad has gone out of my body because (strong accent is on every syllable) WE DID TAI CHI TOGETHER.”

And so it was the rest of the year. Children (sometimes one, sometimes as many as six) came forward in no particular order to lead Tai Chi. Ad hoc discussion determined the standard of correctness. Children had to think through mirror images and pacing. “You’re going too slow,” a follower would coach. Or “That’s not right, you have to move your hand the other way, and circle four times—not three.” Diane decided the timing, an improvement she preferred to bending to the external constraints of a student teaching schedule, but the children owned this Tai Chi.

Children did Tai Chi almost every day: in the public library, to show the new dance teacher their movement work, with their parents on the last day of school. Diane never led. Tai Chi became part of this classroom—not for polish, not for performance, not for the overt teaching of another culture. The ritual of Tai Chi came into being because Jing was present and because Tai Chi helped Diane execute a central piece of her teaching: “The flow of the day comes from the energy of the kids and my reading of them.” But, ultimately, it belonged to the children.

Large Purposes in a Small Activity

Diane’s classroom is predicated on respect for human capacity. She asked the children to participate in a foreign activity with a non-English speaking student teacher without knowing where it would lead. She trusted Jing; she trusted the children; she trusted herself. Tai Chi

was not as obvious a good as bringing food to the hungry or doing errands for the elderly, but it was a quiet, unself-conscious activity. Nor did it have an ostensible academic focus. The point was not to make a statement or create measurable results, but to be together “in whatever we are doing.” Diane saw that the serendipitous opportunity Jing brought to the classroom offered a different quality of wholeness to the group that was worth supporting.

In this era of No Child Left Behind, adults who set and legitimize boundaries of knowledge and behavior have tremendous power over children’s lives. The interplay between institutional norms, individual adults’ attitudes, and children’s cultural backgrounds determines what happens in school and influences what children absorb. Diane wants children to be active, to feel efficacious, and to be in charge and responsible for themselves. She hopes that, over time, children in her class will learn “not to be afraid” and come to value the ability to express themselves, feel more powerful, and become more confident in this world. Diane operates as if she is trusted with total authority and in turn she wants the children to feel the same.

Current classrooms narrow learning to test preparation—but these classrooms, too, shall pass. Diane’s teaching embodies Vito’s values. We have to keep his values at the forefront of our practice, so as not “to lose the moral base of our work.”

References

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Endnote

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For over 25 years before Kathe Jervis came to NCREST, she taught kindergarten through twelfth grades and college courses in Massachusetts, California, and New York. Most recently, she has been coordinating a program, Columbia Urban Educators (CUE), that supports Columbia graduates who teach in New York City public schools and working as a consultant for a new program—Math for America—that prepares high school math teachers.