



Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter, August 2025, Vol. 2

"Putting the child at the center of their learning."

It's Not Easy Being Constructivist

Kermit the Frog says it's not easy to be green. Krista and I (Dana) say it's not easy to be a constructivist teacher. When we wrote our book, *Constructivist Teaching by Heart: A Child-Centered Approach for Educators, PreK-3*, one of our goals was to share the many conversations about teaching we have had over the years to encourage other like-minded educators to do the same.

Krista and I have spent hours discussing, debating, and challenging ourselves to improve our thinking about teaching and learning. We don't always agree. We don't solve every issue. We sometimes laugh and say, "We'll have to revisit this topic at a later date." This school year, we have chosen the theme "**Why Be a Constructivist Teacher?**" for our monthly newsletters to continue to explore the many issues that make this educational philosophy both rewarding and challenging.



Back to School!

What do you do when you disagree with a colleague on an educational practice? How do you navigate experiences where you may disagree with the instructional approach, such as an approach that isn't child-centered or possibly one that feels "one-size-fits-all" with little room for exploration? Sometimes you may be asked to implement instructional practices that you think are not in the students' best interest. It's not easy to be a constructivist.

I recently met with a first-year teacher who, after completing her bachelor's degree in education last spring, will begin her teaching career as a kindergarten teacher in an urban school district. She is full of anticipation, excitement, and anxiety as she thinks about her new role. Before school started, she had the chance to meet with the other kindergarten teachers to get to know them and her new school.

At this meeting, one of the teachers made her an offer that she didn't know how to respond to. This teacher told my friend that she was making copies of all the worksheets she plans to use with her students this fall, and she offered to make additional copies for her. My new friend doesn't plan to use many worksheets. She doesn't even know her students yet, and doesn't believe worksheets are always the best method for teaching young children. She has other plans for her classroom, including read-alouds, implementing instruction in small, flexible learning groups, utilizing learning

centers to allow her students to explore their learning through a hands-on approach, and, of course, lots of open-ended types of paper/pencil writing, drawing, planning, and creating.

So what should my friend say to this new colleague? Should she say “thanks” and hide the piles of worksheets in a back closet to keep the peace? Maybe she should use the worksheets on occasion to show her she is willing to be a team player. Or, better yet, I suggested, tell this well-meaning person that she appreciates the offer, but she does not plan to use many worksheets with her students.

I suggested using an honest, kind, and direct approach early on with this co-teacher, or she may continue to attempt to dictate what this new teacher does in her classroom. The issue may not even really be about worksheets. I told my friend that she would need to clarify her philosophy, while also working together and finding common ground with her team.



This interaction reminded me of a colleague of mine from early in my career. The summer before my first year of teaching, a new Superman movie was being released with great fanfare. I created a “Superman” bulletin board to show my children other superhero-based books they could read. In the middle of putting up my bulletin board, the veteran teacher from across the hallway approached me and announced, “I do Superman.” The message was clear - I have more years of seniority than you, and Superman

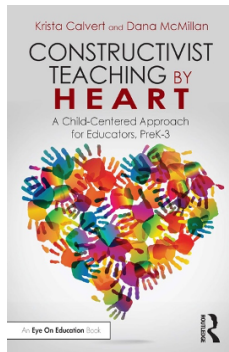
is mine and mine alone.

I took down my Superman bulletin board, and I have regretted it ever since. This teacher continued to attempt to intimidate me and my teaching approaches for the rest of the year. She consistently reminded me about how many years she had been teaching. She often passed along “insider” information about families that I didn’t want to know. She told me my children were too loud and too messy, and I should put more effort into preparing them to be compliant rule followers rather than the independent thinkers that I wanted them to be.

“Don’t spend too long with each family,” she told me before the first fall parent-teacher conference. “Otherwise, they will expect the rest of us to spend that much time, too.” I think that was when I began to realize that I needed to clarify my philosophy for everyone in the school. Gradually, I found my voice. I learned that I had to stay true to my beliefs, or I would never last in education.



Realizing that I had to find my community, I found other child-centered educators who shared my beliefs about how children learn and grow. Eventually, my community grew to include others in many fields of education. I have friends in education who teach at the university level, work as instructional coaches, run literacy programs, and work at school district central offices. We text websites and articles that give us new things to discuss. I read and reread some of my favorite thought leaders, including John Dewey and David Elkind. I love to watch Bank Street School's videos to see constructivist classrooms working. And Krista and I meet regularly to continue our discussions.



In our book, *Constructivist Teaching by Heart: A Child-centered Approach for Educators, PreK-3*, we include a set of questions for each topic we explore. Those questions are designed to provide you with a starting point for discussions that will help you in your constructivist journey. They may be used during informal conversations with colleagues, during grade-level team meetings, or for professional development. Some of you have professional development plans that ask you to research your own topics to explore this year. Some of our questions may help with your plan. And, if you haven't signed up for our website,

constructivistteachingbyheart.com, you will find our monthly newsletter and additional questions there.

No, it is not easy being constructivist, but it is so rewarding to own a child-centered philosophy in a time where it can feel as if many have forgotten the purpose of education. We would love to hear from you and be a part of your community, too!

Reflection Questions for “It’s Not Easy Being Constructivist”?



When have you felt challenged about your beliefs or practices? What did you do about it? Or what do you wish you had done?



Has your philosophy changed since you began your journey in education? What caused your change in thinking?



Who are your favorite thought leaders who help keep you focused on your fundamental beliefs?

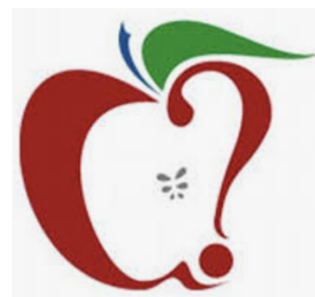


*We want to hear from you! Share your comments about this newsletter topic, **It's Not Easy Being Constructivist**, [here](#).*

Q & A: Ask Krista & Dana...

Q: I've noticed my students have trouble talking or interacting with each other. Is this just normal for the beginning of the year, or should I do more to address it now?

A: Social skills like talking and listening do need to be taught, and the beginning of the year is the perfect time. Plan activities that encourage your children to speak in whole and small group settings and label what active listening and speaking publicly look like. A class meeting at the beginning of the day may be one place to start. Choose a topic the students can all relate to with no right or wrong answer, such as "let's talk about how to make a new friend". Gently remind the group that when someone else is speaking, we give them our attention. A soft touch on the arm of a child who has lost focus may be enough to remind them of the goal.



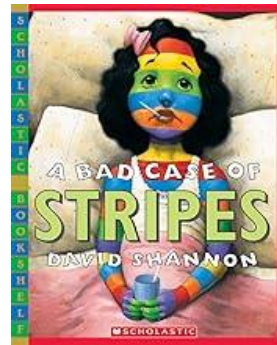
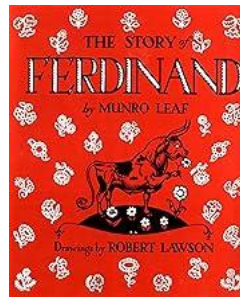
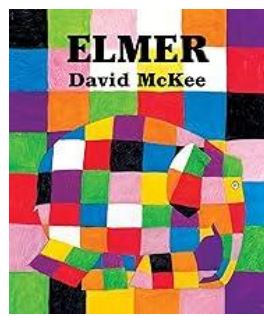
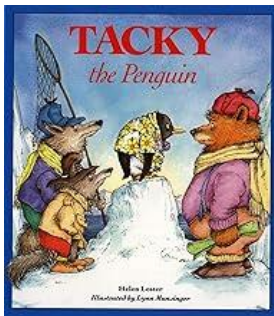
Move your position in the circle to sit next to a couple of children who are not paying attention to the speaker. Ask the speaker a couple of questions about their topic to model what active listening looks like. Encourage others to ask questions. Keep this time short, leaving the students excited for the next day's class discussion.

Find informal times when you can model speaking and listening. If a child falls when playing at recess, use this time to ask them to tell you what happened and model concern. Stand at the doorway as the children enter at the beginning of the day (also do this at the end of recess, after lunch, or anytime they are returning to the classroom) and greet each child with a couple of encouraging words that are personal to them. Show active listening when a child is speaking by nodding your head, changing expressions to mimic the emotions being demonstrated, and laughing at the funny parts of the story.

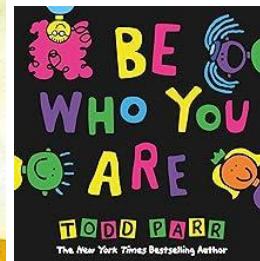
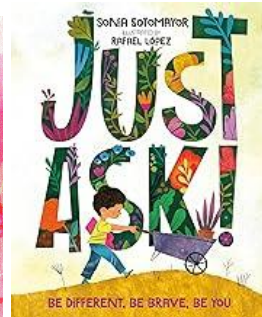
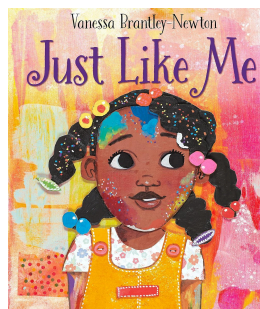
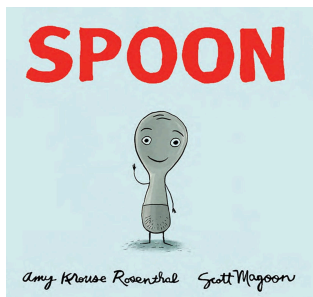


Teaching with High-Quality Children's Books

Just as we strive to be ourselves as constructivist teachers, children love to be reminded that there is no one like them. They are enough, and each child is unique and special in their own way. Here are some great titles to start the school year with the theme of Being Yourself. Some classics...



And some more recent titles...



Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit [here](#)!

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