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# Constructivist Teaching by Heart

*Newsletter, October 2024*

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

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## Constructivists, Silver Bullets, and Unicorns

I (Krista) am often struck by how complex it is to produce an effective school. When I look at the school day from a child's perspective, they have many transitions, relationships, expectations, problems, and information to navigate. As teachers, we are focused on many priorities as we strive to make it all work for our children. Carrying this out at school is complex, and all the while, we are bombarded with multiple "silver bullet" innovations proposed each year by many outside businesses in our field, whispering *"this could be easier"* in our ears.



A silver bullet is a metaphor for something that offers an easy solution to a serious issue. In education, this is often a new program that promises the moon if we buy it. For example, silver bullets are often advertised as the **one thing** that will improve student achievement, teacher retention, assessment, or school culture. Sometimes, I call them 'unicorns' –the unicorn is another metaphor that means a miracle solution, something never seen before.



There have been so many silver bullets or unicorns in my long career that I wonder if there is an old warehouse somewhere containing the many initiatives that were supposed to change everything. The unicorns are there, too - put out to pasture.

Another way to consider this is like a pendulum– ideas put high on the pedestal twenty years ago, then knocked off that same pedestal for a somewhat opposite or better idea, and finally reimagined and back on the pedestal in generally the original form. For example, let's look at classroom management. Positive discipline was popular when I started teaching over thirty years ago. Then, we saw teaching practices shift to more use of classroom behavior charts and token economies. Now, it appears we have moved away from those behaviorist systems and back to more responsive discipline with natural consequences.

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Developing a successful school requires a multi-layered approach. This is the complicated business of running a school with a large number of priorities and moving parts – bus, lunch, and bell schedules, special teachers and classes, meeting expected curricular minutes, supporting students who need additional time or instruction, and helping students learn to be a friend *and* a member of society. We are keeping students safe and healthy, managing multiple assessment programs, communicating with parents and the community, and helping students understand and regulate their feelings and life events.

Promised silver bullets or unicorns can put educators' heads on a swivel as we jump on the bandwagon of each new initiative. Each year, millions of dollars of education funding are spent on these latest innovations. Yet, even when the new practice is worthwhile, often the latest “silver bullet” practice isn’t implemented for long enough for school staff to understand and integrate into their practice. These strategies are regularly abandoned for the next promising idea- the next silver bullet.



An example of this I've noticed over the recent few years has been the many different and challenging math programs that are being implemented in schools across America. As schools adopt the new curriculums, many resources and time are devoted to learning this different approach to math instruction. Of course, I believe it's helpful to discover new and effective ways to teach math. However, I am worried that these programs are often deemed unsuccessful and abandoned after a short time. Meanwhile, the many other essential aspects of learning at the school are put on the back burner.

What if we tried staying the course and going deep, giving worthwhile, evidence-based initiatives time to understand and implement, which could create strong learning cultures and successful schools? As constructivist teachers and leaders, this is when we can lean on our foundational belief that learning requires building on existing knowledge to understand and apply new learning. When considering new initiatives, we can ask ourselves;

- *What is most needed for the situation at hand- today, next month, next year?*
- *What is the next right step to build upon where we were before?*
- *How can we utilize our strengths to develop our areas of need?*
- *What is required from teachers and leaders to meet our goals?*



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New initiatives require deep study, conversation, and opportunities to make them our own. Constructivist educators consider the many complex aspects of creating a school where children learn and thrive.

Effective schools require a multi-pronged approach to school change. We could all list the many silver bullet initiatives currently “hot” in education. Some that I hope will stay the course, and some that seem like “quick fix” offers distracting from what is important. When educators are polarized or taking sides, the argument becomes the focus, taking up valuable discussion time that could be spent on our teaching and student learning.

As constructivists, we adapt, change, keep what is working for children, and let some things go. Constructivist teachers meet students where they are and build from there. In our multi-layered, complex profession, we take a common sense, evidence-based perspective that addresses the needs of the students. **When we know better, we do better.**

### **Constructivists, Silver Bullets, and Unicorns REFLECTION QUESTIONS:**



What silver bullets or unicorns have you encountered in teaching, and what did you notice about the process or the result?



What are the best ways to manage education's changes and “pendulum” and keep children at the center of your work?

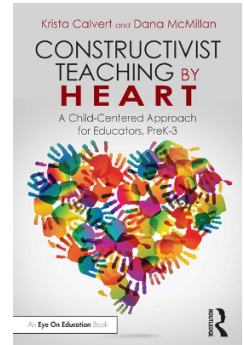
*We want to hear from you! Share your comments about this newsletter topic, Constructivists, Silver Bullets, and Unicorns, [here](#).*



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## Q & A: Ask Krista & Dana...

**Q:** The presidential election only happens every four years, and my students are interested and have many election questions for me. Also, my social studies curriculum includes the United States government, so I can use the current events of the election to meet those teaching standards. How do I teach about the election process without getting into divisive politics?



**A:** Great idea! Teaching government at election time is a meaningful way to teach children how elections are a keystone to living in a democracy. Rather than getting into the details of current politicians and polarizing issues, one way to do this can be to use children's literature to examine the election process. Then, students react to their comprehension of a text chosen to teach your objectives. Some books directly teach how elections work and why they are essential to democracy. Other books share fictional class presidents or student council school election stories depicting the election process in an interesting story where kids can connect to the characters' experiences of the democratic process. They learn that this is how, in the U.S., we honor the rights of American citizens to participate in elections, making their voices heard through voting.

**Here is a TEXT SET of books that can help you teach American citizenship and the election process without getting into politics. You can encourage your class to debate the merits of each text and how it helps us learn about how our democratic republic works!**



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**Q:** What are some tips for parent-teacher conferences for constructivist teachers?

**A:** Constructivist teachers approach parent conferences by building on strengths to meet students' learning needs. We share the student's strengths and progress. We also share students' areas needing improvement as feedback the child can use to move forward with the teacher's scaffolding and support. Constructivist teachers view the whole child as essential and share the child's social and emotional development in parent-teacher conferences. We use our conferences as a way to learn about the child's family, culture, and interests. We build a bridge between school and home by suggesting ways the parents can support the child's growth and development.

Student-led conferences are another constructivist practice where students lead, sharing their strengths, needs, achievements, and goals with their parents. At the same time, the classroom teacher supports the student's report with artifacts and examples, clarifying where needed. This puts the child squarely at the center of the parent-teacher conference.



*Thanks for reading!*

*Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? We'd love to see a picture of your classroom. Submit [here!](#)*

