



Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter, September 2024

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

The Child Whisperer

A few years ago, I (Dana) was asked to help run a summer science camp. The director was a high school science teacher, and the camp served children ages 5 to 12. Doc, as we affectionately called him to respect his Ph.D. in science, admitted he knew very little about elementary-age school children. He told me, "I need a **child whisperer**." He meant someone who can understand what the child is trying to say to us even when they don't have the words. Children often need someone who can give a voice to their feelings even before they know what they are trying to say.

I would amaze Doc when a cranky child, brought to me by one of the teaching assistants, was having a challenging start to their morning. My first question would always be, "Did you eat breakfast this morning?" Getting up and out the door on a summer morning often derailed the usual routine families follow during the school year when the school provides breakfast. If the answer was no, I would get the child a granola bar, some juice, and a quiet place where they could eat away from the group.



Most primary teachers know that young children often show you in their behavior that they need help, but they don't always know how to ask for it. During the school year, if a child is late to school for whatever reason and misses breakfast, we keep a box of simple foods we can provide them. We aren't going to get into the debate about why the family didn't get to school on time because that is usually not in our control. **A child whisperer does what is necessary to help the child get on with the learning as quickly as possible.**

When discussing similar situations with teachers, naps often come up. Another question I ask students who appear to be having difficulty is, "What time did you go to bed last night?" or "Did you get enough rest last night?" Even young children know when they stay up too late or don't sleep well. I have learned from experience that children who are tired (or hungry) will not be able to concentrate, keep focus, or learn. I know that I am not at my best when I'm tired (or hungry) either!

We had bean bag chairs at the science camp for just this purpose. We found that if children who didn't get enough sleep are given some time to rest—usually 20 or 30 minutes is enough—they can get back to learning and function much better than if they are disciplined for not attending to the lesson. (If the child falls asleep immediately, you'll know this is the best course of action.)

The same is true for school. Let's not get wrapped up in why the child is tired. Or that all the other students will want to lie down, too. Let's, as *child whisperers*, meet the child's needs. If your school routine employs many engaging activities, that is what the students will want to do. And later, privately, you can speak to the parents about the child's need for more sleep and possibly an earlier bedtime.

Child whisperers work to find out what is behind the child's behavior. One year, I consulted at a school when a student was sent from the room because he was very angry. I found him sitting in the hallway, fists balled up in anger, and shaking. I sat quietly with him for a minute and then said I could see he was angry because of his "angry hands." I then asked him what his hands were angry about.

Approaching the little boy in this way helped him also notice that he was angry and feel justified in his anger because a teacher validated it by acknowledging how he was feeling. The boy soon relaxed his fists a bit and was able to talk with me about why he was angry. He was now seen and heard. His problem was something neither he nor I could solve, but we could talk about it, and he was soon back in class.

For every child, there is another reason to be a child whisperer. Constructivist teachers value a child-centered classroom and are in tune with the students' basic needs and learning needs so that they have the best chance to grow each day. How are you a ***child whisperer***?

The Child Whisperer REFLECTION QUESTIONS:



What are some instances when a child appears to be struggling with their behavior and you have figured out what was causing it?



What do you do when you have hungry, tired, or angry children in your classroom?

*We want to hear from you! Share your comments about this newsletter topic,
The Courage to Be a Constructivist, [here](#).*



PONDER BOX: *An excerpt from Constructivist Teaching by Heart*

There's a much-loved quote by Teddy Roosevelt that can be applied to children's learning: "No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care." I believe it's true that children have a harder time learning if they don't think that we care about them (p. 14).

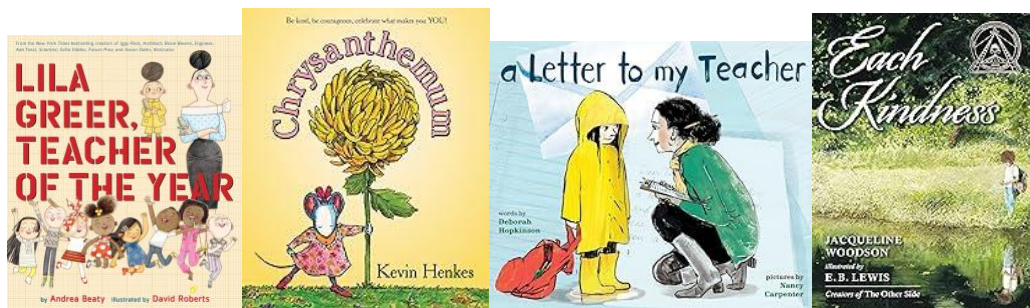
Teaching with High-quality Children's Books

Theme: Making a Difference

Titles featured in *Constructivist Teaching By Heart: A Child-Centered Approach for Educators, PreK-3*, with teachers (fictional characters) who portray traits of being a **child whisperer**.

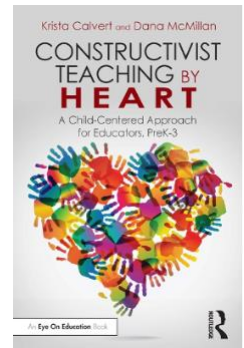


Additional “can’t miss” children’s books that depict a **child whisperer** teacher who makes a difference in children’s lives.



Q & A: Ask Krista & Dana...

Q: I am a new teacher taking over the room of someone who has had a lot of materials and has been at this school for a very long time. *What should I consider first as I begin the new school year?*



A: It sounds like you are having what I called my beginning-of-the-school-year dreams, where you wake yourself up at night planning your classroom. It is very fun to make plans for how you want your classroom to look and feel. But it can be stressful to feel unsure about how the room will set up when you may have inherited someone else's materials.



I would encourage you to begin with a thorough “clean out” of the room. We teachers fear discarding something we might find useful in the future. We stick it in a storage bin and forget we even have it. It all begins to add to clutter, which takes away valuable storage space for materials we use frequently.

Pull everything out of storage and evaluate what you find. If the materials are not in good shape, have missing pieces, or are outdated, discard them. Don't be afraid to eliminate materials you have no use for. Living with too much unused stuff is stressful. Once you have paired down to the useful materials, you can think about where it makes most sense to be located. Materials you use frequently should be labeled and placed where they are most likely to be used. Materials for small group instruction should be stored near that area. Store materials for learning centers in their area.

Place playground equipment near the door where you go for recess. Put your books and resources up higher and near where you will use them.



Constructivist teachers keep children at the center of the learning day. Use this lens to decide on materials, room arrangements, and children's workspaces. I advise teachers to use their schedule as a guide to where to place learning areas. For example, if children will only be working at individual desks or tables for a short period of each day, then consider getting rid of them or making them serve double duty. They shouldn't take up more space than the amount of time that they are used. Get the most out of your storage shelves by turning them perpendicular to the wall. This allows you to create two spaces with one storage unit.

Make sure your room arrangement fits a good mixture of small group, whole group, and individual learning times. Students should be able to move freely about your room. Have a schedule for each child to see the flow of the day.

How you think about utilizing the classroom's physical space reflects your beliefs about how children learn.

Let's try it out: ***What appears to be valued in the classroom pictured?***



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!](#)

