

SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

The Words Every Young Child Should Hear at School

Lauren Berman

September 20, 2017

It's the second week of school at the Early Childhood Center at Sarah Lawrence College. I'm there with our almost 3 year-old son, Calvin, and I say good-bye to him as he walks steadily toward the intrigue of the water table. It being his third day in his classroom, I've transitioned from a chair in the classroom, to a chair in the hall, and now to a spot in the school's lobby. I'm not surprised when after a few minutes pass, Calvin looks a little dazed and walks a bit more wobbly now, over to me with a teacher at his side.

"I was catching fish at the water table," Calvin shares. I bend down and tell him I love knowing what he does at school, and walk back into the classroom with him and his teacher. He asks the teacher to read him a book, and I tell Calvin I will wait in the lobby.

It being the third day, Calvin and his new friends have graduated to an hour in their classroom. I settle into a loveseat and pull out a book from my bag that I've been meaning to read since I received it for my birthday last year. With this luxurious gift of independent time, I lean over to another parent and comment on how I've been meaning to read this book for so long. She nods and smiles at me from the articles she's also prepared to be swept into.

I'm only a few pages into the book, and I look up. Another classroom has their door open wide, and I'm transfixed, and not for the obvious reasons. It's not because 25 years ago, I was a college student working in the same room with 4 year-olds, gathering a sense that I would continue to work in classrooms and schools for the decades afterward. It's not because 5 years ago, our daughter, Sophie, was a child in that room, with the same teacher. It's because the classroom door was completely open, and all children are so busy at work, and I can't even see or hear the teachers.

I stare in the room from where I am sitting, and close my book. The sun is pouring in through the windows, and I see a table of children with various papers and scissors. They're cutting and drawing, considering, and chatting. They're talking and listening, and while I can't hear what they're saying, I hear the rhythm of conversation, some laughter, and see their concentration on the materials in front of them.

Just beyond the paper and scissor table, hollow blocks are being stacked high. Other children there are moving freely, at their pace to get their work done, to put blocks where they're meant to be. Block builders are climbing and carrying, and talking to each other and listening to each other. I don't know what they are working on, but they clearly do, and that's all that really matters.

This goes on for some time. There's more activity in the room that I can't see from where I am, but I hear it, and I still hear only the children.

Smoothly appearing from what seems to be out of nowhere, their head teacher steps out into the lobby where I am. The teacher walks over to the cubbies against the wall and speaks to a girl who is squeezing herself into the space meant for a sweatshirt jacket. I didn't even notice the girl was there.

The teacher looks into the cubby and says in an even tone, “I see you there. There’s work in the classroom and your friends need you. Do you need more time?” The girl is silent. The teacher waits a moment, and then says in a calm way, “I’ll come and check on you.” But, before the teacher can turn and head back into the classroom, a late-arriving parent begins talking to her. The teacher talks to the parent, glancing a few times down to the girl curled up in her cubby, and then the parent is on her way. Without missing a beat, the teacher says to her student, “Let’s go see what’s happening together.” The girl holds a small toy and quietly tells her teacher it’s from Disney World. The teacher holds her hand, and they walk into the classroom together, and I hear the teacher say, “I didn’t know you went to Disney World,” as they fade into the activity around them.

The teacher’s words hang in the air, and I urgently write them down, I SEE YOU THERE. THERE’S WORK IN THE CLASSROOM AND YOUR FRIENDS NEED YOU. DO YOU NEED MORE TIME?

At first I think there’s more drama to the teacher’s statements and question, perhaps, because the only voices emanating from the classroom for so long, were just the children’s. But, the teacher’s words follow me all day. The words stick with me because they are *the words every young child should hear at school*.

The teacher’s specific words acknowledge the child and make her feel safe: I SEE YOU THERE. For a young child, to be seen by a caring adult in a time of transition, gives her the strength to trust she can be herself. The child’s autonomy is valued, and her choice to temporarily shield herself from her new classroom is not shamed.

The teacher’s words inform the child that school is her own space to work and get things done, and they give her purpose: THERE’S WORK IN THE CLASSROOM. Notice that the teacher is not saying, “You have to do some work,” or, “I need you to get work done.” Notice also that she doesn’t call this “choice time” or say, “Go play” (Not that there’s anything wrong with play! Just the way some adults flippantly command children to “go play” it is code for, “leave me alone.”) In fact, the teacher doesn’t direct the child in any way. She simply states that there is work, and that in and of itself, is the enticement.

The teacher connects the child to other children and suggests working together is valued: ...AND YOUR FRIENDS NEED YOU. The classroom is a social environment, and the value emphasized here is interdependence. The underlying idea is that everyone’s work is better in the process of sharing the experience together. It must have been easier to leave the protection of the cubby to feel so essential to others and their work.

Last, the teacher’s words reassure the child that she can accomplish all of this at her own pace. The teacher asks, “Do you need more time?” The teacher doesn’t pump the child to express her feelings in the moment, and respectfully acknowledges that people (especially young ones) need to process challenges at their own pace. Independence doesn’t happen by timetable, nor do other various skills that give children a sense of success at school.

Not so far outside of this space, there are so many wheels spinning to make the foundation of “college-readiness” begin at earlier and earlier ages. The Common Core (now Next Generation) Standards expect our youngest to turn off their voices so that they can hear

teachers direct activity and impart lessons for skill development. The standardization of educational outcomes for our youngest children neglects the fact that at different points, all children need more time. How fortunate are our children who can learn together at the Early Childhood Center? How fortunate are the college students who can experience classrooms at the Early Childhood Center, and can carry its model into their future work with children?

I thought I wanted time today to read my book. Turns out, I will make time for that. Listening to the children working together was a balm to my soul, not just as a former teacher might feel upon returning to a classroom, but rather because the children were the embodiment of democracy. John Dewey explains, “Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a form of associated living, of conjoint communicated experiences” (Democracy and Education). Hearing the children empowered to use their own voices, and for those voices to be allowed as the predominant chorus, gives me hope that American institutions such as the Early Childhood Center can continue to be the collective chorus for democracy in the face of our present national climate. In our own communities, we make conscious choices, and lead our children toward democracy.

One last thought on the hour that I had penciled in as some me-time: When the teacher stood outside the classroom, not a single child could be seen or heard missing the teacher’s presence. The other teachers didn’t scramble into view, seeking her reassurance. No child looked up from their work. Everything worked just fine without her because the environment made sense and made room for each child. I thought I had learned so much 25 years ago, as a participant observer at the Early Childhood Center. Seems that there is still more for me to learn.