

## Children's Perspectives on their Experiences in SAGE Classrooms

Elizabeth Graue<sup>1</sup>  
Denise Oen

Education reformers attempt to change teaching practices and student outcomes by tinkering with key elements in schools – they change class sizes, they increase or decrease the amount of time spent in certain activities, they specify curriculum and they work to upgrade teacher knowledge – all to make learning more effective. In the current reform context, the metric used for efficacy is student achievement on measures of knowledge. For example, increases in the proportion of students performing at or above grade level proficiency level are used as markers of the effectiveness of particular literacy practices, of investments in staffing for class size reduction, of special summer programs. Increasingly, our understandings of schooling and children are confined to these measures of student outcomes. These measures are important, much as mile markers tell us how far we've gone on a road trip. However, they tell only one part of the story and could be complemented by other ways of knowing.

We found this particularly true in our evaluation work related to the SAGE program. As we've worked to understand the processes that shape learning and teaching in SAGE classrooms, we were captured by the wisdom of children – by their ability to talk about their lives, about their knowledge and learning. For this reason we did something relatively unusual in research on policy implementation or even in evaluation research – we decided to talk with students, directly, about their experience. We were interested in how being in a SAGE classroom shapes student ideas about their role as a learner, how they conceptualize the teacher's role and how the

---

<sup>1</sup> Wisconsin Center for Education Research, 1025 W. Johnson, Madison, WI 53706

We are grateful to Kalpana Rao and Kelly Hatch for their fieldwork on this project. This work was supported by a grant from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

classroom environment works as a tool in their learning. Across the voluminous literature on class size reduction policy, children had been tested and observed but no one had talked with them. Given that they are at the center of this important reform, we thought it was time to examine their perspectives on how it shapes their educational experience. This paper reflects some of what we learned from these conversations.

### Why Consult Children?

In the human organism, there is no such thing as an independent part, all parts are interconnected. We need to recognize these connections when we teach, when we design educational environments, when we provide incentives and when we grade students.

Attention to such complex matters will not simplify our task as teachers, but it will bring education closer to the heart of what really matters. (Eisner, 2005)

A recent issue of *Educational Leadership* highlighted the need to focus on the whole child, not just what is measurable in schools. Elliot Eisner's attention to the interconnected nature of education helps us see the problems with attending to only instructional specifications or to simple measures of outcomes—the process of education is more complex than that.

What an input-output mentality misses is the degree to which classrooms, teachers, and students are embedded in knotty social, economic, cultural and political contexts. These contexts carry with them images, meanings, practices that we fill with our own experience. We recognize who we are in relation to the local social and cultural images that we are slotted into and play out in daily life. More than just a score, a student is becoming a student, is already a learner, and is a competent social actor who is part of multiple social groups (family, neighborhood, race/ethnic group, gender among others).

A central part of reforms like class size reduction (and its particular enactment in the SAGE program) is the formation of students and families well-affiliated with schools, making more likely their ability to access the resources for success. Key to this process is the development of an identity as a student, a learner who has the tools to work in the school context. How a child sees him/herself as a student is a complex combination of previous experience with schooling, the global constructions of “best practices” (Apple, 2000; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Cannella, 1997) and the local teaching and learning influenced by the unique makeup of a specific class room at a particular moment (Graue, 1993; Holland & Quinn, 1987). Schools and society provide frameworks within which children become students, those frameworks provide boundaries of educational opportunities as much as the specific educational activities and policies.

At the same time, students are hardly passive recipients a student identity – they use the tools of culture to create collective and individual responses to the characters they are posed to play in school. They improvise with the script in ways that are creative, full of resistance, and agency. We approached this project using a social constructivist perspective, situating individuals in cultural histories that shape the meanings and tools available for activity (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). For the purposes of this project, children are conceptualized as important social actors in the implementation of class size reduction.

### Methods

The data on which we rely for this paper come out of an evaluation of Wisconsin's *Student Achievement Guarantee for Education*, better known as the SAGE program. A multidimensional reform initially targeted for schools working with children living in poverty, SAGE has four basic tenets: reduce class size, rigorous curriculum, professional development, and strengthening

home-school collaboration. Initially piloted in 1996 in x high poverty schools, SAGE now serves more than 500 schools around the state, providing \$2000 per low-income child to offset the costs of staffing. During the 2004-5 school year, we were engaged in a multisite evaluation study to examine the administrative and instructional processes in SAGE schools. We did fieldwork in 9 SAGE schools located in urban, semiurban and rural contexts doing eight 1/2 day observations in a total of 27 classrooms K-3. More than 600 hours of observation were paired with multiple interviews with administrators, classroom teachers, surveys of school staff and families. At the end of the school year, we asked teachers to recommend students for short small group interviews. The interviews were designed to get a sense of children's perspectives on their classroom space, their feelings about classroom tasks, their understandings of teaching and learning, and their conceptions of problems solving in classroom contexts.

We notified all families of our work in the classroom at the start of the year and they were given the option to exclude their child from ongoing observation. In the late spring, we asked teachers to identify a sample of their students that represented the class and we sent letters out to families asking permission to do the group interviews. There was incredible variability in the responses to the request, but it was typical for us to send out multiple letters asking for participation before we got a group for the interview. In some schools we had interview groups in all 3 grades, in others one, in some we had groups of 5 students, some had a single participant.

The interviews took place outside the classroom in spaces such as the library or a support person's office and lasted from 10 to 35 minutes. We did the interviews in small groups so that children would have the support of their classmates. The questions were descriptive in nature and dealt with five major areas:

1. all about me
2. classroom space (where do you work, play)
3. emotions (what makes you mad, confused, happy at school)
4. problem solving (how would you get help from your teacher, how would you share something important, what if you didn't figure out the directions to an activity)
5. teachers (who, what do they teach, how do they know what to teach, how do you show them what you know).

Students were free to pass on any question and we told them that there were no right answers. At the end of the interview we asked them to draw a picture of their classroom.

We audiotaped and transcribed the interviews, then read and re-read them to begin to build an understanding of their perspectives. We initially attempted to read the interviews with particular characteristics in mind – were there patterns related to school achievement level, classroom configuration, teaching approach, geographic type? Nothing stunning stood out. We then read the interviews in relation to both the teacher interviews and the observations—it was then that we began to have an inkling of analytic themes that could be helpful in interpreting the students' words.

#### Children's views on teaching and learning

We came to our analysis with the sense that children are active participants in their classrooms, that they have education done to them but they also create spaces and senses of learning within an institutional context. With this in mind, we focused on what they thought about their role as students. Given the centrality of the teacher in the life of the classroom, the focus on the teacher seemed key. We expected the students to tell us complex stories of teaching and learning, mirroring the many interesting educational activities we observed over the course

of our study. When we asked where important teaching happens in their classroom, students' answers were amazing coherent – children were in certain spots in the classroom (their desks, tables or in assigned spots on the carpet) and their teacher was the focal point, giving a lecture. Jaron & Mattia, two first graders at McMahon, clearly described a narrowly didactic teaching context representative of the responses:

Jaron: She'll tell you on the screen.

Interviewer: What kinds of things does she show on the screen?

Jaron: Like she writes words and she shows us how to write our perfect writing.  
And sometimes she gives us a problem or sometimes she gets it wrong.

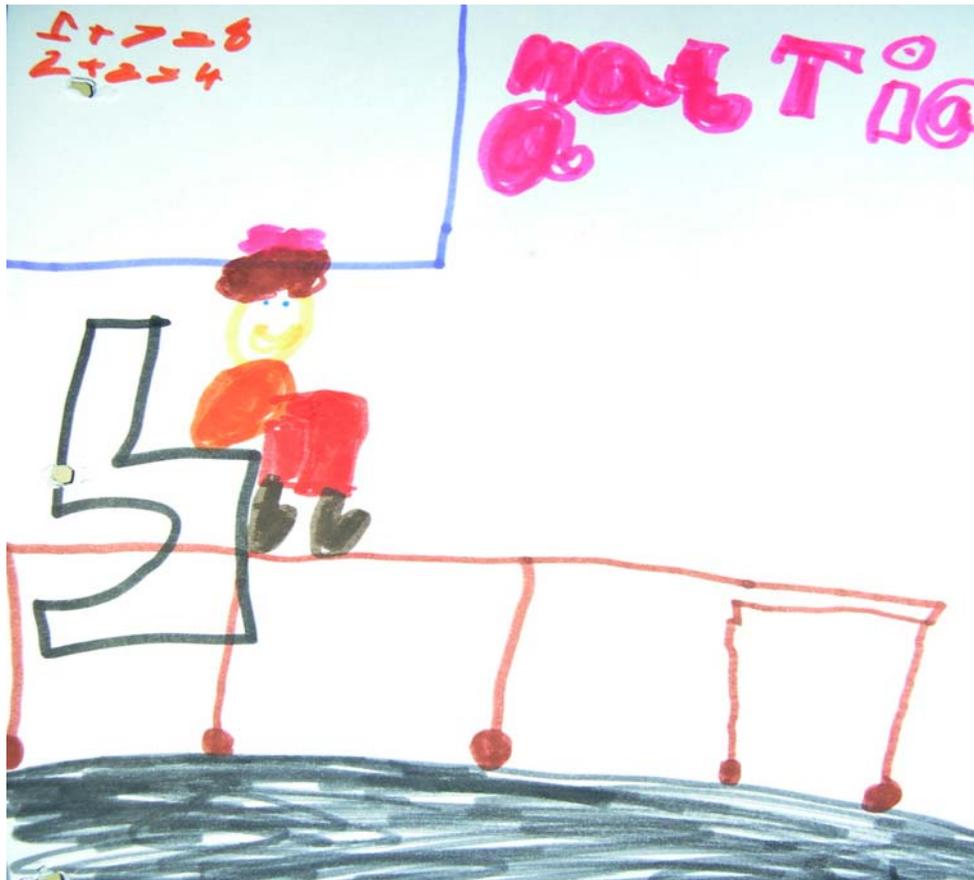
Mattia: She would sit on her chair – not show us on the screen – she would read it.

Interviewer: What would she read?

Mattia: She would read the directions. So if we do math, she'll help us like add on.

Mattia and Jaron illustrated these ideas when they drew pictures of learning in their classroom.

Mattia's focuses on their teacher, Mrs. Ludwig, sitting on her chair, while Jaron's has both Mrs. Ludwig, sitting at the overhead projector and himself answering a math question.



These static images of lectures and the IRE sequence (initiation, Response, Evaluation) (Mehan, 1979) were threaded through almost every other student response. Children told of sitting at desks, tables or on the carpet, with their listening ears open, quiet, in whole-class instruction with a teacher in front of the chalkboard, by the overhead projector or sitting in her chair talking and telling them what they need to learn. This was quite different from most of the classrooms in our study, places teeming with activity and life, noise and energy. The teacher at the front of the room was, in most classes, only a small fraction of the time the classroom day.

The teachers described by the students were very much in this mode – with the teacher at the center of learning. This seemed surprising given the logic of class size reduction – many frame smaller classes as more interactive and social in their activities to engage young learners. To understand how this image developed, we ended up doing what felt like archeology, slowly uncovering layers of meaning that represented years of instructional sediment. We begin by listening to the words the kids used when they described their classroom contexts.

### *What do teachers teach?*

Students recognized two kinds of teaching in their classrooms. Teachers inculcate behavior and they teach content. In terms of behavior, children learned both the do's and the don'ts of school life. The do's were positive things – the things that promoted a good self image and action. Many of the children, particularly the younger ones, focused on things like doing what is good or believing in yourself if you make a mistake. Kyle, a first grader at Gallows Elementary, had an elaborated sense of how his teachers help him know what to do when he told us “How to be nice to each other, solve our problems without fists or feet. . . she be teaching us like how to read and how to be smarter and especially how to go to college without getting fired

or flunking.” They also were clear on the don'ts – the many rules that are part of being in a school. The kindergartners at Wellstone Boulevard had the following list:

Isaiah: OK. She teach me don't hit nobody, don't punch, don't punch nobody, don't kick nobody.

Brittany: Don't whoop no one.

Isaiah: He said don't whoop nobody.

Rao: Do you guys have any other teachers besides Ms. Manchester and Ms. Liston? Any other teachers in this school that are yours (heads shaking no)

Brittany: Don't kick nobody!

When asked when he was happy at school Augusto, a kindergartner from Earhart, told us that he was happy when he got stars on the board, not numbers. Numbers indicated that you were bad – like when you threw something at someone while stars were signs of being good. Interestingly, Augusto noted that you were good if the teachers didn't talk to you. All too often we found that the most rigorous enactment of the curriculum was instruction on how to keep one's bottom on the floor, legs crossed (criss cross applesauce) and one's hand in the air.

Everyone talked about content – but in different ways. Most of the children, particularly the older ones, talked in terms of traditional content areas – reading, math, science, social studies. This could reflect the segmentation of the school day into content areas – virtually every classroom we worked in had daily schedules labeled by content area and children came to identify the time and their activity by content. The younger students talked more about things they learned – they focused on the ideas rather than the discipline. Tremaine at Bethany told us that teachers taught them another name for a rainbow, that all the colors are in the same order,

how to make words, questions and marks and that when you want to shout you make a dot and a line down (an exclamation mark).

We were interested in how students thought their teachers knew what to do – the source of their authority and knowledge. Some kids thought teachers learned to teach when they were students. Ed, a first grader at West Canton, explained “they used to be in grades like us and learned and when they got done they maybe got to be teachers.” Others thought parents were major players. Paris, a first grader from Bethany thought that “When they was little, maybe their moms and dads teach them how to be a teacher someday.” There may be something to this idea, with students learning to be teachers as they work daily in school.

Others thought that knowing what to teach was a kind of natural condition – it was something that came out of being a grownup or being smart. Cameron, a kindergartner at Bethany, told us that that his teachers knew how to teach reading “because, he’s a grown up – they know everything.” Wendy an x at y was quite certain about her response – “They’re smart. They’re teachers, why wouldn’t they be smart?”

A more playful and professional approach saw teaching as something informed by resources outside the teacher. For some, teaching was guided by written documents:

Alazay (Bethany, Gr3): She have a big book

Alexis (Bethany, Gr 3): Yeah and it tells what will I do for the day and she teaches the class

Alazay: The books. She writes it down on the book and then she knows what’s she gonna do.

- Chester (Earhart, Gr 1)      By looking in a book and she sees math problems and she like taps it out and then she'll go 13, 14 and gives the class those to do.
- Interviewer:                      So you finds it in a book. Where does she get those books?
- Chester:                              In her basket.
- Maya (McMahon, K)              They have instruction on the top.
- Interviewer:                      They have instructions on top of what?
- Jacel:                                The paper.
- Maya:                                She's just really good at reading the instructions.

Some saw teachers learning to teach at various kinds of meetings. A number of students linked the presence of substitutes to their teacher's learning – substitutes provided an opportunity for teachers to go to meetings where they learned new things. Other kids thought that the principal was the teacher of the teachers. As the boss of the school, it made sense that he was also the head teacher. A few students had the idea that teachers planned their work – they thought about what they wanted to do and usually they wrote it down. Ariel was very clear about how they went about planning – a kindergartner at Earhart, she told me that “that's why they work with you. They know, they teach us what we don't know.” These children, most of whom focused on teachers evaluating work that students had done, had a clear sense of the role that assessment played in their teachers work – it helped them know what to do.

If we try to summarize how the children talked about their teachers and therefore their roles as students, teachers were the focal point of the classroom, directing student activities and learning in concrete ways. Regardless of their authority in these portrayals, teacher professional status was underplayed, with students assuming they learned their job as students themselves or

just as a matter of growing up. Aliyah's picture captures much of the image of the teacher as the one who has the *ansar* (sic):



### *Learning to look beyond interviews*

Probably more interesting than children's answers to our questions were their answers to questions we DIDN'T ask. The interview sessions were carnivalesque, with students exhibiting their knowledge, sharing information from home, and displaying underground cultures that might not typically be acknowledged in the classroom. Students were hungry to display their competence. We had children spell, count to 100, and perform other daring deeds of intellect, all without prompting. We also witnessed cartwheels, singing, and comparisons of height. They loved the audience and a chance to be in charge of showing how smart they are. One student told us that his mother expressly told him not to tell us something and then spilled the beans despite the fact that the interviewer worked to deflect the story. We heard about friends and relatives in jail, about teachers jokingly charging each other for borrowed construction paper,

and lots of bathroom humor. In other interviews we heard about how a boy was a champion pickle eater or about a mom who made a wedding present for the teacher. Tremaine from Bethany recounted how his teacher had told him that “when he was little he came out with school, out with his friends, they grabbed some tissue from the bathroom and they made the whole school full of tissue. And they covered it. They went outside and covered the whole school with tissue!” This fabulous image came out of nowhere and unfortunately, went nowhere in the interview. It didn't quite fit the contours of the discussion and was dropped.

We puzzled through why these interviews had such a surreal feel to them. Were we ineffective interviewers, unable to control the flow of conversation? Or were we in fact, really great interviewers, setting up spaces that children felt were theirs to fill with accounts of their experience? Later, as we analyzed the data we listened carefully to their words, trying to make sense of their responses to our questions. Initial passes were frustratingly flat. We waited for ah-hahs, for themes to emerge that could easily be connected with class size reduction policy or with our remembrance of observations. As these didn't come, we started listening for the absence of things we didn't know we expected and for connections to things outside the classroom. It was at that point that the interviews and the connections to our fieldwork began to make more sense.

Our difficulty might be seen as an indicator of why so few people ask students to contribute to research – children don't play by the rules that adults use in communication. Their agendas are different and making sense of their meaning takes more work than is available in many projects. We don't assume that we have a direct line to these students' conceptions of school, but we are working on trying to connect as many sources of knowing together as we can.

In the next section we make a stab at connecting the disparate images provided in these interviews.

### Classroom as Circus

For every Soul is a circus.  
And every mind is a tent,  
And every heart is a sawdust ring  
Where the circling race is spent.  
*(Lindsay, 1929)*

As we worked to put together our understanding of the student interviews, the observations and our conversations with the teachers, we found ourselves thinking of the metaphor of a circus. The classrooms were active, colorful, and often entertaining places run by the teacher/ringmaster. According to the students, we see the teacher running the three ring classroom circus – calling attention to the performers, keeping the flow of action at the right pace, making sure that the audiences are pleased with the performance. The kids in this metaphor are the varied performers in the circus, presenting their acts when called upon by the ringleader. All of the children have been to other places where the script for the event provided roles and roles for the performers and the audience - church services, professional wrestling matches, monster truck shows - all spaces where the children quickly learn the ritualized routine. And just as happens in the circus, they came with knowledge and skills, developed and honed in their families that could be used as a foundation for their acts in this particular circus. What does the SAGE circus look like from the students' perspective?



“Ladies & gentlemen, children of all ages, the circus is about to begin!” Or as Becky says in this classroom: *“All right first graders. It is time to get started.”*

The spotlight comes on and the show begins on time - 8:30 a.m.

But “three rings” in this tent have been alive with action since 8:00. Becky is a master at classroom organization and has incorporated “soft landing” into the beginning of each day. In this rural school outside of town, far from many of the farms and outlying communities where many of the children live, almost all the children come in on buses. Many children eat breakfast at school and “soft landing” allows them a friendly transition into the classroom, eating breakfast then coming in to join a classroom alive with activities. One morning in April the following acts were simultaneously going on under the big top of Becky’s class:

Juan is sitting at his desk preparing his sharing report. He carefully fills in the simple form that Becky has developed to guide children through the process of presenting information to friends. (He later shares a truck his family had bought at the local Wal-Mart and proudly points out the stickers that he and his brothers added onto it).

Abby and Wendy are building a huge Lego cube. They have been working on this all week, leaving it on the “saving shelf” during off construction times. Today they are joined by two kindergartens that drifted in. “This is huge!” Becky comments.

Dean is building with small wooden blocks. Caleb and Blake are playing Candyland. Jean is sitting next to them and reading the brightly colored game box. (Jean is a child with Down’s syndrome. She is in the classroom for most of the day and usually interacts with her classmates and their activities on her own terms)

Rob, Ed, Josh and Alice are working at the computer using Jump Start First Grade Reading software.

Becky speaks with Kyle. He called Wendy a bitch this morning on the way to class. She calls Wendy over and they all discuss the situation and try to find resolution.

*Let’s get started?*

This vignette is a wonderful example of how “official learning” is separated from “the side show.” Becky has thoughtfully organized resources (both materials and time) in ways that meet the complex needs her students. The performers are engaged in death defying acts like reading, writing, increasing spatial awareness and small motor control, counting, and navigating social and emotional interactions. And for some children, this “before the curtain” means having a chance to bridge the rhythms of the home with the schedule of school while eating something warm with friends in the cafeteria. But because these performances are outside of the ring they are not included in what the students learn and what the teacher taught. It’s not surprising then that the students’ image of the ringleader was so prominent. If the teacher is not teaching in these moments, does that mean the students are not learning? This might seem like a minor point – that teachers and learners only label certain activities in the classroom as teaching. But it is worth noting when we think about the logic on which SAGE is based and the processes that make it an effective reform.

The teachers were clear about the intentions of SAGE – they felt that with fewer students they knew more about their kids, they could manage the group more easily and they could finetune instruction in child specific ways. Their discussions of how SAGE supported their work was parallel in many ways to the statements of the Urban Taskforce that catalyzed the initial development of the program:

<p>Pauline: I am a much better teacher because I can work with children individually. And with 25-28 five year olds, that's not possible. Also, I think expectations become higher, both the teaching and the children. If you have 28 children, sometimes all you are doing is keeping them from popping up and running around the room but when you have the responsibility of teaching 15 children, you also get to assess much more carefully as to not only what they know but how they do things and how they think so that you can do a better job of teaching them because obviously that don't all learn the same way.</p> <p>(Kindergarten teacher at Gallows)</p>	<p>We believe that state and local policies can and should ensure that teachers have the time and resources to get to know their students and parents and to give each child sufficient attention, ensuring academic achievement at the highest possible level. (Molnar &amp; Zmrazek, 1994)</p>
--	--

But much like a ringmaster, there wasn't much time to talk with the performers. The teachers were so busy teaching that they had little time to get to know their students, what acts the kids were most prepared to perform and what they were most likely to succeed at. A number of the teachers assumed that children came to school without much foundation for being a student. The discourse of poverty, so prevalent in the justification of supplementary education programming, suggests students who come to school worse than unfinished, but unstated. Mrs. Ludwig, a first grade teacher at McMahan explained:

No matter how hard we try, we're not going to get to every single kid. We'll do the best we can but let's be honest. Some of these children were conceived and born and kind of untouched since then. . . I have never felt that I have had a lot of parents that have really supported their children this year. I saw that the night before I met my class with no one

coming for Open House—literally *no one*. . . . I haven't felt that when I send things home as suggestions that they're really being followed or used. I don't see, in many cases, that the child's a priority of the family.

This model of empty student resources was paired with controlled social settings in which children were rarely allowed to share their interests and experience (show and tell on Friday only, no questions during instructional conversations). Finally, teachers had increasing demands on their time for covering particular content that squelched what was seen as off task discussion and sharing. In the following example from Allerton-Farwell, a low achieving rural school, we see a teacher so focused on getting through a lesson that little attention to learning can be found:

#### Running through a picture walk

Reading time is winding down. Maureen checks the clock and calls Haylie, Allie, Nevada, Trent and Mariah to join her at the reading table.

When they are all seated, Maureen holds up a book, and they begin a picture walk with the cover of the book *Storm Watch*.

As she starts, she is interrupted by Trent who launches into an explanation about thunder and lightening storms. Maureen looks at him and appears to listen but says nothing in response.

Maureen: What's going on with this page?

Allie: There's a tsunami.

Maureen turns the page.

Allie: Ooh, look at the tsunami.

Haylie: It might have killed a billion people.

Nevada: What's a tsunami?

Maureen: We'll have to talk about that later. It's time for recess.

The group gets up and moves to the door.

This need to maintain the momentum of the lesson, with its particular content focus (Kennedy, 2005) often means that children's contributions to educational activities are seen as distractions rather than resources. The students were clearly engaged in this book, the very point of a picture

walk. But their teacher does not capitalize on either their contributions or their questions about its content. Missed opportunities in the moment, building a sense of student absent teaching in the classroom.

We found teachers focused on managing their performers' acts – they had behavioral and intellectual goals in mind for their teaching –and those goals determined the teacher's actions. In some classrooms (particularly the low achieving schools) the focus was primarily on behavior, requiring students to sit on their bottoms, to listen to the chosen speaker, to keep their hands to themselves, to avoid the sanctions that were connected with NOT doing these things. The constant need to control behavior squeezed out attention to intellectual goals as in this example:

#### Nothing but Don'ts

It is a mid winter morning in a kindergarten at Wellstone Elementary School. It is time to begin Direct Instruction. The kindergartners are in their assigned spots on the carpet.

Ms. Grant: Believe me, if you're talking and not paying attention now, when you are supposed to go down to the gym to have free time, you'll be sitting on the wall. Believe me!

Antwon: Hey Daddy! (He calls this to an African-American man who enters the room. The man is affiliated with the school but is not Antwon's father)

Ms. Grant: Hey, eyes on me!

Antwon starts making grunting noises. Someone has passed gas and the children are holding their noses.

Ms. Grant: Antwon, get ready. I'm going to send you to Ms. Johnson in the office. Put your shirt down. . . Ok, stop it! We will do this now or we will do it at 10:00 a.m. when you want to have your free time. Now get it together. (Dominique has her shirt over her nose.) Pull your shirt down. I don't want to see it over your nose!

There is a loud noise from Eileen's side (the other teacher in this 30:2 classroom) and the kids all turn around and stare.

Ms. Grant: (to Dominique) I'm giving you a time out at gym time. Get your shirt down! They resume the lesson.

The disarray in this lesson is obvious but difficult to pin down—some might say that the lack of intellectual content comes out of the problems with student behavior. It could be as easily asserted that the student behavior problems resulted from lack of intellectual engagement or lack of respectful teacher action. The absence of productive interchange makes it unlikely that

much learning will come out of this beyond the Wellstone kindergartner list of don'ts we shared earlier in the paper.

We want to be clear that we are not advocating pedagogy that *only* follows children's interests and experiences. That wouldn't be much of a circus or education. There is a reason that the teacher is a key actor in the classroom and that is to guide learning. And this is why the metaphor of classroom as circus is so problematically apt for us. When the teacher is a ringleader, s/he is only managing or announcing performances – she is not *teaching*. Teachers are so much *more* than ringleaders.

In pointing out these empty moments in these classrooms we hope to illustrate our conviction that content without knowledge of children is probably as impoverished as children without knowledge of content. As is the case so often in education, the pendulum seems to have swung away from knowledge of students and their families and toward a focus on specific content knowledge just as psychologists have noted the importance of the social in learning. Teachers need to know students as much as students need to be known. And the reasons go beyond the social/emotional attachment that a student-teacher relationship provides. To more effectively attune teaching to student current functioning, teachers need to know about that functioning in all of its messy social, historical, relational, personal, biographical context. The result is a child who feels heard but who also sees him/herself in teaching activities and who just might buy into the intellectual goals of the classroom.

We saw many examples of this in our observations in SAGE classrooms —teachers who linked their practice to the experiences and intellectual interests of their students. Ironically, taking up children's interests requires a combination of spontaneity and planful action—setting up ongoing opportunities for children to contribute to instruction, providing spaces to share

personal experience, and being open enough to change plans when a teachable moment presented itself. In the following example, students in a high achieving rural school reshape the content of their curriculum through a single question that is taken up by the teacher:

### Cleaning a Quarter

After recess, Niles comes to the rug cradling a corroded quarter from the playground. "How can we clean this?" he asks. Looking around the room, Jenny says she will count to ten to give everyone a chance to find a seat on the rug. When they are settled, she announces, "Thanks to Niles, we have a new science project! Let's design an experiment to see what will clean the quarter."

*During this discussion Colin throws a wood chip at Bette. Jenny talks to the class as a whole about making good choices.*

"What does a scientist look like?" After a number of white coat replies, Jenny tells them being a scientist doesn't mean wearing a white lab coat...that everyone can be a scientist. She cautions them that they shouldn't go crazy with science --they have to be safe and careful. The group brainstorms ideas about how to be safe with science, including not tasting or smelling things you don't know.

She then poses the question, "What will clean Niles's quarter?" The children come up with lots of idea and Jenny writes them *all* down on the board.

Vinegar	Baking soda	Soda
Water	Bleach	Chlorine
Peroxide	Alcohol	Basic G
Basic H	Oil	

*The boys in back of Colin keep pulling him but when they stop he pushes back. Jenny calls him to the front and asks him to be her assistant. He seems reluctant to stay with her but also reluctant to sit back down. He remains with her until all the ideas are listed.*

"How will we come up with ideas to find out which solutions will clean the quarter the best?" They talk about varied strategies and then Jenny tells them that sometimes you find out things by mistake. She shows them her post-it note pack and explains that the creator of post-it notes was really trying to find out a substance that would really be strong and instead created a solution that stuck things together only a little and then could be reused to stick again and again.

The children are beginning to lose focus again and Jenny says, "It looks like you could use a break." Colin says, "Yea, I want to go home." The children go out for recess (again) from 2:35 – 2:55 and return for a snack of milk and cereal, the children serve themselves. Jenny understands that school works up an appetite!

After snack, the children do their end of the day chores. Some children go outside to clean the erasers, others water the plants. They put up their chairs and collect their book bags. Jenny stands at the door and shakes each child's hand as they leave.

*Jenny tells me the next day that Natalie told her father about the experiment and Natalie's father sent two quarters to buy a soda to clean the quarter. Nick brought in some Basic G.*

This lesson continues over several days as the children find out which solutions worked and which didn't using scientific methods of collecting and analyzing data.

Rather than being a side show, Jenny pulled this opportunity into the center ring so that it not only built on a opportunity for teaching but fully connected it to Niles' interests and those of his classmates. Shifting from her planned activities, Jenny attended to Niles' question and made it publicly important. This project connects with them and their families in ways that might not happen in a different context. As part of an agricultural and industrial community, the children and families in this class have much experience with cleaning solutions. The children could identify a number of potential solutions to the problem and they extended the experience by talking about it at home. Many families responded by sending in materials or suggestions as the class worked through answers to Niles' initial question. This activity was like ripples on a pond, with concentric circles emanating out so that the ideas grew and grew. The richness of this activity surpassed many of the standards based lessons designed by teachers.

A less public but no less important way to connect with students was shown in Miss Sellers' third grade class at high achieving McMahan Elementary. Miss Sellers built quiet private relationships with her students by being a good listener and setting up spaces that valued student voices. An important part of these third graders' day was a 15 minute break that gave down time to clear their minds. Instead of going outside to physically blow off steam, Miss Sellers' class stayed together in the classroom where they could read, play games, draw, or just chat. Miss Sellers sat at her desk during this time and though ostensibly doing work, she most

frequently had one-on-one conversations with students who sought her out. Students mentioned this time in our interviews:

Tiffany: If you wanted to talk to her or something personal like that you can do it at break time when no one's looking.

Kay: That's what I do, I go to her desk and talk to her all about my weekends and stuff.

Tiffany: I wrote about her in my journal thing. We had to write about some friends and I wrote about her. She didn't find out until the end of the story when she corrected it. (smiling with glee)

Tiffany alludes to the second piece of Miss Sellers' relationship building—her use of student writing. These students wrote every day and the assignments were provocative, meaningful, and shared among the students. As a result, the students felt that their voices mattered—that they had important things to say. Her writing instruction was full of content. They learned about genre, grammar, punctuation, voice, and editing so by the end of the year, even the most reluctant writers produced strong texts that were often posted around the room. Her teaching was mindful of the students' interests, of their emerging skills, and the role that their identities as learners played in the process. It was this balance of intention and serendipity that made these teachers work so responsive and more likely to meet the needs of their students.

### Conclusion

SAGE has provided an immense opportunity to schools – through its multi-dimensional approach to school reform, it connects class size reduction to teacher development, family connections to school, and rigorous curriculum, thereby strengthening the potential contribution of any one element. The ultimate beneficiaries of this approach are the students, who through

more intensive and calibrated instruction, typically have in increased achievement. We found however, that the implementation of SAGE was not always as complex as it was intended.

The lack of attention to students, their needs, and interests created missed opportunities in many of these classrooms and left students outside the act of learning. The positive moments of teaching practice that connected with students came not from the mechanisms provided by SAGE but as by products of other reforms and the commitment of wise teachers. As we've noted in other papers (Graue, Hatch, Rao, & Oen, 2005), more systematic approaches to SAGE would make more likely the realization of its potential. For students to reap the benefits, SAGE teachers need support in putting them front and center in their teaching.

And this placement of students is not just pedagogical, it is relational. It is not lost on us that the children SAGE serves are some of our most vulnerable—they are embedded in economic, race and gender challenges that cloud the school's connection to them. Their teachers were rarely of the same community or culture and this seemed to exacerbate their separation from students and their families.

Reconnecting teachers and students through relationships and real content is not something that comes naturally to most teachers – our hunch is that it requires skillful professional development, mindful connections with children and those who care for them, and curriculum that is rich and relevant. Those elements are already part of the SAGE design, they just haven't been used as effectively as they might.

We have struggled with maintaining our wish for the children's voices to be heard throughout this paper. We have argued that teachers need support to realize the opportunity that SAGE provides for really "knowing the students better." We would like one of the students to second that call. When asked how he would share something really important at school, David

told us "I would run to the room and I'd scream as loud as I could." The children know what is important. They are asking teachers to listen to their lives. Some whisper, others scream. Let's hope we can begin to listen more using the resources that this reform has given them.

## References

- Apple, M. W. (2000). *Official Knowledge: Democratic Knowledge in a Conservative Age*. New York: Routledge.
- Bredekamp, S., & Copple, C. (Eds.). (1997). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood program - Revised edition*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Cannella, G. S. (1997). *Deconstructing Early Childhood Education: social justice and revolution*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Eisner, E. (2005). Back to the whole. *Educational Leadership*, 63(1), 14-18.
- Graue, M. E. (1993). *Ready for what? Constructing meanings of readiness for kindergarten*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Graue, M. E., Hatch, K., Rao, K., & Oen, D. (2005). *The wisdom of class size reduction*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research.
- Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Holland, D., & Quinn, N. (1987). *Cultural models in language and thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kennedy, M. M. (2005). *Inside teaching: How classroom life undermines reform*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lindsay, V. (1929). *Every soul is a circus*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Mehan, H. (1979). *Learning lessons: Social organization in the classroom*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Molnar, A., & Zmrazek, J. (1994). *Improving the Achievement of Wisconsin's Students. Urban Initiative Task Force Recommendations and Action Plan. Bulletin No. 95079*. Wisconsin: Wisconsin State Dept. of Public Instruction, Madison. Bureau for Policy and Budget.