

An Inspirational Message from Erin Ellington 2021 Burroughs Wellcome Fund Northwest Region Teacher of the Year



If you are reading this, I have so many questions. I wonder what kind of day you've had. Busy? Full? Whirlwind? Maybe you were able to do a little bit of something you enjoy and maybe catch up on your to-do list? Whatever your answers, I hope you will engage in some sort of relaxation- you deserve it!

If you are reading this I also wonder if you, a BT, already know what I'm about to share with you? It sure seems like the pre-service teachers that I host in my classroom are FAR more prepared for teaching than I was as a new teacher. In fact, I should have been paying *them* my first years of teaching!

Final question: I wonder if any of the tidbits below will help you? These come from my learning through the years and I hope something, if small, benefits you as you continue in this very important work because you show up for our students EVERY. SINGLE. DAY.

Questions aside, here are a few things I've learned as a music educator for nearly two decades (yes, I'm old). Here goes: 1) the learning process (vs. product) is most indicative of our students' growth and development, 2) education leader, Dr. Brad Johnson, says it well: "Relationships before rigor. Grace before grades. Patience before programs. Love before lessons." and related, 3) kids will remember not what you taught them but how you made them feel.

Process vs. Product

Process, process, process! As a beginning music teacher, I believed it best for my students to show me their learning *products*. The story I told myself was that winning awards at a music contest or having flawless concerts reflected my effectiveness as an educator. I spent so much time fixing kids' musical mistakes to achieve the "perfect performance." Looking back, I see why this was far from effective and why my poor students were so disengaged!

Thankfully I had some exemplary mentor teachers who helped change my mindset. These amazing educators highlighted that test results and flawless performances will NEVER capture the full story. Focus on product promotes "teaching to the test" thus stifling inquiry and creativity. Aren't inquiry and creativity some of the moments when we see our students shine most? Shouldn't they have more of this interwoven into ALL of their learning EVERY day? Umm, yes.

Is *process*-driven learning and teaching challenging? Tricky? Yes! Of course, providing opportunities for creativity and inquiry takes time and is often misaligned with our outcome-driven education culture. Nonetheless, it is up to us, the educators, to balance the product-driven culture with what is best and most meaningful for students.

Another challenge: don't look for instant gratification. *Process*-driven learning and teaching takes patience and time. It is likely that the benefits of *process*-focused teaching will surface only when our students move on to new learning or even a new grade level. But stay the course! Repeated in each lesson, the focus on *process* develops independent learners who are unafraid to become risk-takers. They will collaborate with others and become owners of their learning. Best of all, this *process*-oriented approach naturally leads to authentic learning outcomes that are rich, organic, and meaningful to our students. No test or statistic can measure the complete story of our students' authentic learning (or your teaching)! Okay enough theoreticals, let's get specific here. What are the benefits of *process*-driven learning and teaching that may not show up on a test for performance? Read on.

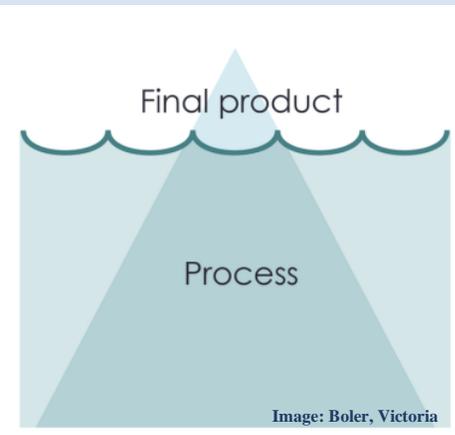


Image: Boler, Victoria

“Soft” Skills

Authentic learning is a perfect segue to my next light-bulb moment that took way too many years for me to understand. Many of you teach in trauma-informed schools. Many of you know that our students need food, sleep, and social-emotional needs met before they are able to access content such as music, reading, or math. Teacher confession: it took over ten years in the classroom for me to finally reach an understanding of what students need most: *to grow as human beings*.

Sure, our process-oriented lessons are full of standards-based content. For me, that looks like singing technique, keeping a beat, and rhythm. For you, that might look like, skip counting, essay writing, or text analysis. Regardless of the content, education advocate Dr. Brad Johnson reminds us of what our students need first: “Relationships before rigor. Grace before grades. Patience before programs. Love before lessons.”

I *finally* realized that our content knowledge is the vehicle to developing “soft skills.” Communication. Kindness. Empathy. Cooperation. I *finally* realized that the content in our classrooms is simply the path leading us to become better human beings, myself included! With social-emotional skills as our focal point, our music/math/social studies lessons reach a heightened aesthetic. The discovery that I am teaching more than music knowledge has made time with my students *the most* enjoyable yet and I am excited to discover how we will grow together in our “how to be a better human” skills. These “soft skills” transfer beyond our four walls to benefit learning in all of our content areas and in life.



Image: Johnson, Brad

What will our students remember most?

Quick story for you: As a beginning music teacher, I had a particularly tough Kindergarten class. No exaggerations: during a formal observation with this class, several students walked across the top of the xylophones, one student threw materials from the calm corner, and, in general, it was chaos. Following the observation, the school administration likened working with this group to “herding cats.” Quite the humbling, no, mortifying, feedback after an observation.

They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.

-Carl W. Buechner

Interestingly, when the amazing classroom teacher walked into my room, calm completely took over. Ms. Flaten was mama bear! She had relationships with each student and their families and as a result, in her presence, each child wanted to meet her high expectations and their music-room behaviors transformed. No more chaos. Thank goodness for Ms. Flaten. She is one of the greatest teachers I know - and not just for students!

Like my chaotic Kindergarteners, maybe you envision the faces of one or several students who transform academically and socially when they are seen beyond their school identities. Maybe these students exhibit specific behaviors for various adults in the school according to how they are valued (or not) as individuals. Student actions and academic performance

may not be a reflection of their engagement with content but a result of how we make them *feel*. Remember this. Our students will remember, too.

In summary, be aware that throughout the teaching process we have huge opportunities to help our students develop lifelong skills that have benefits far beyond the classroom. Further, we have the important opportunity to help each of our students feel loved, valued, and challenged. Please know that these are reminders not just for beginning teachers--this is a beneficial refresher for us veteran teachers as well. Thank you for all you are doing for our students!

Looking Forward!
~ Erin

The 2022 NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey is Here!

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction will provide this anonymous, online teaching conditions survey from **March 1-31, 2022**. Learn more about how your voice matters by visiting nctwcs.org and prepare to complete your survey today.

