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Can Good Become Better?: The Progression of an Exemplary Teacher

Suzanne Davis

Lakesia's planning for college began in March of her sophomore year in high school. Her first task was to collect information about available scholarships. She knew the perfect person to ask — Mrs. Waddell, her second grade teacher. Of all the teachers she had, Mrs. Waddell had impacted her life most. She had been caring, dedicated, knowledgeable and encouraging. Lakesia sat down to write her best teacher.

Mrs. Waddell is a tall, graceful African American woman who was an elementary teacher for nearly 20 years in an inner-city school. From 1965 to 1977 she taught second grade. In 1978 she took a sabbatical to complete graduate studies. She received her MA in Educational Leadership in 1978. Mrs. Waddell was promoted to teacher-consultant in the fall of the same year and remained in this capacity until 1982. She completed a specialist degree in 1981, attending part-time. In the summer of 1982 she enrolled in Montessori teacher preparation courses, and she initiated and taught Montessori kindergarten classes in her district. From 1983 to 1986, Mrs. Waddell taught primary classes at a Montessori magnet school. In 1986 she was made administrator of the Montessori preschool program in her public school district.

In the fall of 1989 she became principal of the magnet school where she formerly taught.

While she was a novice teacher, Mrs. Waddell's first effort to improve instruction was to adopt the instructional materials to reflect the learning styles of her students. Her approach involved, first, evaluation of both diagnostic and prescriptive materials and, second, careful modification to remove barriers to the learning process. During the mid 60s, Mrs. Waddell was teaching second grade in the inner-city. She found many of her students to be unmotivated, disinterested or bored. Test scores were at unacceptably low levels. Children with little exposure to standard middle-class practices were being given achievement tests based on middle-class norms. By this time federal funds were being funnelled into the public school system. Teacher workshops offered new techniques and resource manuals to be used in the classroom.

Mrs. Waddell took advantage of the innovations presented to help her second grade students, many of whom were from low-income families. She recognized the deficiencies in available instructional materials. Her decision in this case was to supplement the texts with vocabulary building exercises. Mrs. Waddell expected her students all to be readers — even the ones other educators had given up on. She developed word games derived from a popular TV show and familiar games. She began by introducing children to new concepts, words and experiences through field trips, classroom visitors, books, films and stories. The dictionary was used as a tool to build comprehension.

On designated activity days, Mrs. Waddell divided her classroom into groups of two to play team concentration. Partners were given words related to cultural events such

as symphony orchestra performances or the ballet. They took turns in matching pictures with words and meanings. Points were allotted if they could match them correctly. Such games motivated the children, helped to build vocabulary and comprehension, and the children enjoyed them. The games became the highlight of the week. At this point in her career Mrs. Waddell was convinced that stimulating activities and materials facilitate effective learning. She believed in her students regardless of background — and that education can change any life for the better. Gradually, Mrs. Waddell began to refine the diagnostic prescriptive teaching style that she would reshape and restructure for the rest of her career.

By 1977, and after many years in the classroom, she was confident that her students' potential for learning was greater than their test scores indicated. Although there was steady progress, she knew more could be achieved. The need to better serve her students fueled Mrs. Waddell's desire to increase her base of instructional methodology. In 1978 she took a sabbatical leave to obtain an MA in Education. When she returned to her school district in the fall of the same year, she was promoted to teacher-consultant. Over the course of the next two years Mrs. Waddell functioned as a trouble-shooter, coaching teachers with classroom problems. As a teacher-consultant Mrs. Waddell was shocked and discouraged to find that so many children were not learning and so many teachers had difficulty teaching.

Through her classroom teaching experience, Mrs. Waddell discovered the natural ability of children to learn through observation. She made this a principle to live by and passed that on to colleagues. In her role as peer coach, Mrs. Waddell often tells of an experience which accurately

conveys this point. She and Jimmy, a student, were seated at a child-sized table. Despite the length of her legs, Mrs. Waddell was able to reach forward with her long arms across the 10" tabletop and arrange the materials. She finished the demonstration and said, "Now, Jimmy, would you like to try?" The child nodded and immediately got up and moved his chair back, right next to his teacher's chair, and then attempted to reach the table to work with the manipulative as she had done — even though he was too small to complete the task from this position. Mrs. Waddell saw this as proof that children learn much more from watching educators in practice than teachers themselves realize. Therefore, teachers must remember that they are constant models for what their students are learning. An important function of her assistance to teachers is to stress positive modeling for impressionable observers.

In 1980 Mrs. Waddell was placed on a committee to help select programs for the magnet schools in her district. The magnet school committee work required visits to many schools across the country. This was her introduction to Montessori education. Mrs. Waddell found Montessori philosophy to be founded on respect for the self, others and the environment. Children in the schools she visited were being taught conflict/resolution tactics to promote peaceful coexistence. One very practical component of Montessori education taught children responsibility by giving them ownership of the classroom. They were expected to preserve order in their surroundings through maintenance of cleanliness, watering plants and feeding animals. The Montessori method involves promoting independent learning through the use of hands on manipulative materials for all subject matter, using a broad-based curriculum covering fine arts, social studies, sciences, and an exceptional math program

even for preschool children. Teachers, presenting precise details, model lessons to small groups or individuals.

Mrs. Waddell was so impressed with the level of learning and the ease with which the children seemed to progress that she acquired Montessori Teacher Education at her own expense. In 1982, after initial preparation to become a Montessori teacher, Mrs. Waddell was assigned to an inner city kindergarten classroom with a large number of students who had been retained. She had completed her initial preparation to be a Montessori teacher. Having no funds to purchase the necessary Montessori materials, nonetheless Mrs. Waddell began the year with new ideas, enthusiasm and determination that her children would learn. Armed with many teacher made materials — including the shelves she made for storage and a collection of reference books — Mrs. Waddell was able to help the majority of the students achieve at grade level and above.

From 1983 through 1986 Mrs. Waddell joined the public Montessori magnet school where I was principal. The staff was in transition at that time. Nearly all of the teachers were traditional teachers who had volunteered for additional training in Montessori education. They were familiar with the proven methods that had worked for years, as well as non-traditional teaching styles and innovations in education. Therefore, Mrs. Waddell and others found themselves teaching many subjects by combining traditional and Montessori methods.

She valued her broad knowledge base in the sciences, and promoted this among her students. She insisted that students learn biology, botany, and especially chemistry. For a combined first and second grade class, she collected 10th grade textbooks for chemistry experiments.

Committed to teaching children higher level thinking and advanced subject matter in interesting ways, and insistent that vocabulary be learned, Mrs. Waddell fused lessons in the basal reader with the hands-on experimental approach of Montessori reading. Her instruction focused on sound-symbol association and creative writing with invented spelling. She collected reading materials related to science and cultural subjects that matched the reading levels of her young students.

The children were given an array of the Montessori manipulative materials. A fertile environment with exercises in interactive group activity, sound spelling, and a science corner filled with pictures and printed labels was created. Mrs. Waddell's objective was to remove elementary children's fear of difficult subjects, such as science. By integrating meaningful sound/symbol pronunciation associations with complicated scientific words and phrases she was able to help her students simultaneously learn to read, and learn science and social studies.

Adjusting science experiments to a developmentally appropriate level allowed students to learn scientific concepts readily. They also learned the valuable technique of recording information. Using this method, the students were able to proceed with their work without the anxiety normally associated with reading difficult scientific terminology. To complete the science projects the students were taught to pull a card from the special box and read and follow the directions. The first and second graders worked together to complete experiments usually tackled in middle school. The students were able to read their science cards and do the work independently. This system was such a tremendous success that her class astounded a classroom visitor. Mrs. Waddell invited an African biochemist for a

discussion of careers in the field of science. When he listed the career offerings in this area — physician, pharmacist, biologist, botanist, scientist — he was amazed at the ability of such young students to read in chorus the polysyllabic words. Moreover, hands of many students were eagerly raised when he asked for definitions to the words — and they responded correctly.

Mrs. Waddell distinguished herself as a role model for her students and a model for other teachers to emulate. She won the appreciation and admiration of her peers, and the love and gratitude of her many students. After three years of positive feedback, Mrs. Waddell left the magnet school. In 1986, Mrs. Waddell was offered a position as coordinator of a Montessori preschool in her district. Provided with the opportunity to use her educational leadership experience, she assisted teachers in perfecting their own diagnostic prescriptive teaching techniques. Her experiences, innovative methods and teacher-coaching were well accepted. She left the preschool in 1989 to accept a position as principal in the magnet school where she formerly taught. Currently Mrs. Waddell is principal and instructional leader of that same magnet school. Her most recent accomplishment has been to secure a large grant to add a library, filled with hundreds of books, to the school. She is one of the few public school educators who has completed training in three levels of Montessori. Her leadership, creativity, experience and innovations have become a catalyst for a barrage of varied methodologies.

Even when she was a novice teacher, her colleagues consistently rated Mrs. Waddell among the most outstanding teachers in the school district. As a principal, she continues her search for creative and innovative vehicles to promote success for students. Mrs. Waddell still believes all

children must learn to read, and read well. She remains steadfast in her commitment to teaching science. She also encourages her entire staff to uphold these standards. Mrs. Waddell continues to be an innovator in education, a role model for students, and an inspiration to fellow educators.

In reflecting on her career, she often says that she was embarrassed by how little she taught her students in her early years of teaching. She says she sometimes thinks that she owes the tax money back to parents of her former students because now she understands how much more they were capable of learning. However, her impact continues to be evident. A recent letter from a high school student whom she taught in second grade states *I feel sure I could qualify for college because of you, Mrs. Waddell. You made me become a good student. Love, Lakesia.*

After years of teaching, Mrs. Waddell is recognized as an exemplary teacher. Although she looks back at her earliest years with some regret at all she didn't know about teaching then, she was recognized even as a novice for her fine teaching. Like many teachers she has learned and grown and changed over the years — moving from excellence to excellence.

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