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Getting Dirty

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Getting Dirty

Cover Page Footnote

Renee is a 4th grade teacher at Yarmouth Elementary School and an avid gardener. She lives in Falmouth with her husband and three dogs.

Getting Dirty

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As we walked around my small vinyl-sided ranch, discussing the garden beds scattered over half of the front and back yard, my neighbor asked, “How do you keep it so beautiful?”

“Well, if you mean perfect, it’s certainly not,” I replied, taking in a deep breath of sweet honeysuckle cascading on our shared fence.

“I love this botanical garden you have created,” he paused for a moment, “and we shouldn’t confuse beauty with perfection.”

We silently admired a hummingbird that floated around the honeysuckle vines.

“Then, thank you,” I hesitantly conceded. I am honestly just learning how to take a compliment after fifty years on the planet.

I thought more about our conversation and wondered what a sincere, more elaborate response would be to my neighbor’s question. It would have felt coarse to answer that much of it is doing the dirty work right from the beginning- even before the beginning, and that meditative vigilance is required.

Folks wonder the same thing about my elementary classroom, and I also immediately think, *I don’t know how beautiful it is- at least not every day*. It is the heavy lifting and dirty work from the start- even before the beginning. You don’t start out with a lush unique garden straight away, and it’s the same with a classroom. And, it won’t stay productive and glorious without constant tending. Similarly to learning to accept compliments, I am beginning to give honest teaching advice though my woes with imposter syndrome never seem to wane.

It can be hard to get started- growing spaces for flowers, vegetables and children need careful consideration. If you have begun with a space that was once a garden, you are lucky. It will feel like inheriting a classroom from an organized, thoughtful retiree. In both cases, you have something to work with. If you must dig new beds, it’s like setting up a classroom from scratch. It can be done, and in some ways it’s more exciting, but be prepared to get muddy. Your neighbors and colleagues may have contradictory ideas and opinions for you. Listen to them, but you must ultimately trust your own intuition- even if it turns out to be wrong, as that’s when the deepest learning can happen.

What tools will you need? Some folks think that the more tools and gadgets at their disposal, the easier and more beautiful it will be. This is simply not true- neither for a garden nor a classroom. Don't get me wrong- the tools help, but they won't solve all of your problems. A shovel, hand trowel, garden knife, and bucket are essentials. Writing utensils, notebooks, tables/desks, a gathering space, and a laptop/projector are your school essentials. Thinking you need more supplies -as long as you have a functional minimum- is foolish and will distract you from your real work. Remember that it is your attention and reflection that inspires progress, not the latest gadget. You may own every weed pulling gadget, but you'll still need to identify the weeds, remove the weeds and be sure to get those roots!

What seeds will you plant? How will you figure out what's appropriate? What kind of sun does your garden have, and what kinds of books does your school provide? What's the climate of your area, and the climate of your community and school? You could hire a professional landscaper to come in and do all the work for you, much the way guides for teachers try to pigeonhole your planning and thinking, but that's not very satisfying. With careful consideration, you will pick seeds that match your situation just as you will find books and activities that are developmentally appropriate and engaging for your students. You will be rather frustrated if you plant tomatoes too early, or in a less than 95% sunny spot. If you put Harry Potter into the hands of a struggling reader, they will not grow and you'll both be frustrated. Certainly have high expectations for your plants and students, but situate them where they will experience success.

The seeds you select will be stamped with detailed, reliable instructions. On the other hand, your students are arriving from many different seed propagators, so you're not dealing with one preferred seed company. For example, you may have parents or caregivers who carefully compost every scrap of food waste at home, and tenderly sprinkle the nutrients around. You may have parents who rely on Miracle Grow for support. Although tutors and apps are fine additions for learning, conversations, games and enriching reading is optimal. Warning- you may be tempted to find a quick fix for your garden, just as caregivers may want one for their child. Additionally, be prepared for folks who want earlier development, but just because an eight year old is able to read young adult fiction, that doesn't mean they should. Sadly, I put my dahlia bulbs in too early this spring, and most of them rotted in the soil. There's a difference between unreasonable pressure and true grit.

Have you seen the ridiculously decorated classrooms on social media lately? Please do not be tempted by their colorful abundance. When you start the year, your classroom should be mostly empty, as your students are the creators. While you may pick up a Martha Stewart magazine and drool over the lush photos of gardens, they did not start out that way. It can be

hard to accept the vast emptiness of a spring garden, or a new perennial bed. Give your students and flowers room to grow and share their own beauty. I have heard of folks spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to have a landscape architect create an instant garden, but the owner will not have the satisfaction of seeing organic, slow growth. A premade classroom might feel welcoming, but may inadvertently send a message of conformity and compliance.

A few things folks don't prepare for are the need for succession planting and the less exciting vegetables. Some are surprised to learn that when you plant peas, you don't just regularly harvest them until the fall. This is similar to when a teacher may think they have an activity or protocol done and down- what gardens and classes need is succession planting. You must change it up- pull up the past-harvesting peas and sow some carrots. When your radishes are done, maybe plant cucumbers. It's a constant sow, tend, harvest- it can be exhausting, but also invigorating. It would be easier to have a set plan/curriculum that dictates each day, but you simply cannot predict the troubles that will call for flexibility, creativity and a change of plans.

Will you start your seeds inside or direct sow? Will your students come from free-range parents, helicopter parents, or, possibly, the dreaded snowplow parents? You will probably have a bit of everything in both your garden and teaching practice. And, while I prefer to directly sow my seeds, much the way I prefer free-range parents, you probably won't have an eggplant (or astronaut) from Maine without some indoor, highly specific regimens, so be a cheerleader for every type of plant and family. Some situations require more enthusiastic watering, while others need to be slowly and carefully pruned.

When you start seeds indoors, you need to slowly acclimate your seedlings to the outdoors. Just as a child who attends a precious, small-group art program as a preschooler may struggle with a kindergarten group art project in a public school, we must teach them to be independent and productive. The good news is that many seedlings and young folks can bounce back from a thunderstorm- which could be wind, rain and lightning, or arguments, hitting and tears. Neither method is perfect, although hothouse veggies never taste as delightful as the kind grown in the wild.

Once your seedlings and students are settled and established in their growing space, we can't expect them to take care of themselves. And, there is no perfect recipe- watering, pruning, mulching and weeding is its own symphony, and it is an art. When does a child need a hug, nourishment, redirection, constructive criticism, positive feedback, or independence? You will only know when you listen to your heart and mind, try something, and carefully observe the reaction. The reaction of the living organism informs your next steps. Look with your full attention and trust yourself. Are the leaves of your hydrangea sagging? Is a student walking

with shoulders forward and dragging their feet? A check-in is required for both of these creatures.

Although your full attention is required, sometimes splitting your attention is useful, too. You may find that you can multi-task with intention and success. For example, although teachers are taught to shower students with constant attention, they need independent time, and if you don't want to be working fifteen hours a day, there is classroom-keeping that needs to be done. So while you're organizing a bookshelf, or checking in permission slips, you are always eavesdropping, learning and making a plan. Just as while mowing the lawn, you are spying on your flowers and veggies. You might see a hidden cherry tomato that needs to be harvested, or you may decide that there is a group that should eat lunch with you so you can help them work through their friendship issues. You may see an insanely tall weed that for some unknown reason hadn't been detected. The mowing will need to stop as it has gone to seed and needs immediate extraction. You may hear a reading group holding a senseless discussion, so you pop in and take charge to get them back on track.

I want to get back to that weed that has gone to seed that needed instant eradication, as it related to the common teaching saying "nipping in the bud." There are times when you want to nip the bud, for example when your bachelor's button is clearly starting to overtake a once harmonious area. That said, sometimes you need to let that bud blossom and see where it leads. For instance, you may see a child reading a book that is too challenging and be tempted to quickly counsel them into something easier, but wait to see how the child progresses. At the end of the book, you could have a conference, process the child's experience, help them to find a more appropriate book that will be more meaningful to the student. You will have almost let it go to seed. The child needed that experience to truly understand the purpose of reading.

I am sad to say, but disappointment and monotony are both part of gardening and teaching. Ungodly amounts of patience are also required. When planting wisteria, one must wait years for its lovely scent to arrive. Likewise, tender and delicious asparagus needs a few years before it can be enjoyed. And while kale may not be very exciting from an observational and dietary perspective, it is much like spelling, grammar, punctuation and math facts. These can be boring, but we need these nutrients to keep things progressing smoothly. You may have put blood-draining effort into a student, only to have to wait three years to hear about a bud, never mind a blossom.

Then, of course, is the seed that germinated, only to get ripped up and dragged around by a furry friend. You may think it is a lost cause as you survey the withered leaves, but if you can make the time and summon hope, it is probably salvageable. Plant it in a special pot with your

best soil, just as you might place a traumatized student with the most skilled teacher. Do not allow anyone to discourage you. A family member may tell you that it is ridiculous that you are talking to a tiny, drooping stem, but with a little water every day, and finding a spot that provides the perfect amount of sun, it will revive. Just as forming a strong relationship, day by day, with your neediest student and paying mind to the “just right” assignments, partners, and seats will help the most challenged student grow. There may be a colleague or two who tells you to give up, but try not to listen. Your rescued plant will grow, and while it may not be as large or bright as the others of its kind, it is still beautiful. This is true for the student who arrives in class a victim of their environment.

One of the best parts of gardening and teaching is the variety of living creatures. The endless types of vegetation are equally matched by the children who will be in your class. Every single growing miracle is unique- personalities, colors, characteristics, growth rates, amount of attention required- to name a few. You may have a shy, thoughtful, calm child reminiscent of chamomile. You may have a poppy who is fragile and dramatic, or a peony who is gregarious and the center of attention. Hopefully you will have plenty of black-eyed Susans who are all-around positive, productive and unflappable. Steadfast and protective marigold types are solid, and Russian sage affords a late start, but truly comes out of its shell and dazzles. There is never a dull moment with diversity of plants and people, and you will get to place them in endless bouquets of partners, activities and books.

While this may sound contradictory, there will be times when you must accept defeat even after laborious perseverance. For example, you may have a seed potato that is, unbeknownst to you, infected with fusarium fungus. You diligently dig and plant your seed potato, and maybe you get some sprouted, but by harvest time, you dig up rotten potatoes. It’s okay- it was not your fault. Some seeds, or seed potatoes in this case, are simply bad seeds. When I read about a tragedy involving a young person, whether violent or hidden, I wonder what they were like as a student. By definition, a bad seed implies that nurture could not overcome nature. Just as you might have devoted attention to your potato plant with nothing to show for it in the end, you will, on rare occasions, have a student that may have the internal underpinnings of an antisocial, problematic personality. Gardeners must not internalize these defeats, and teachers might need to come to terms that occasionally students are not going to come around, and may actually grow to be dangerous. As a gardener, every year will bring this challenge with different plants and veggies. Hopefully as a teacher, you will not have more than one student who leaves you in complete surrender.

Despite late bloomers and bad seeds, staying positive should be your priority. Recently, while watering a dense patch of garden, I was shocked to find many hidden, short weeds. In fact, one

type was a pest I thought I had steadfastly eradicated a few years prior. I felt completely embarrassed, as if the garden fairy was tsk-tsking me from the nearby hummingbird feeder. Last spring, during a parent-teacher conference, a student's mother asked if I noticed that her child was copying the same entry night after night in his journal. While I spot check these journals weekly, no, I did not notice this. So, yes, the parent needed to point this out, and that feels icky, but really it is okay. In general, the child was doing well, and the overall conversation was encouraging, so we addressed the problem and I tried not to dwell on it. Just as I had no idea how the long-gone weed reappeared, I had no idea how a child in my class could be writing the same exact entry night after night- just fix it and move on. Your garden will continue to grow, with fewer weeds now, and your students will continue to learn and probably not even notice that you are checking their journals more frequently.

Alas, your garden will never be perfect, and neither will your classroom, but it will always be exciting. One year, your garden may be overrun with chamomile and forget-me-nots, and the next it is borage and violets. In school, you'll learn the new dance moves and music every year, and discover fidget spinners one semester and slime in another. These seemingly meaningless surprises are just plain fun, so embrace them rather than resist them- it will keep you young at heart.

Gardening and teaching are inseparably intertwined for me. And although the work for both is seemingly endless, it's worth the beauty. Don't be afraid of the weeds, mud and pests- get dirty, and be sure to sit back, breathe and admire the growth.