

From the Editor—Critical Explorations: The Road to Understanding

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It is an honor for me to introduce this issue of *The New Educator*, which is devoted to a discussion of “critical explorations”—a teaching approach articulated by Eleanor Duckworth. Although I was first introduced to the ideas of Eleanor and other constructivists in my educator preparation program, her ground-breaking book *The Having of Wonderful Ideas and Other Essays on Teaching and Learning* (1986/2006) had (and continues to have) a profound influence on my thinking about teaching and learning as well as on my own practice as an educator. What Eleanor wrote about in this book resonated with my own experiences as a learner and brought coherence to what was my still, at that time, somewhat intuitive and nascent understandings of the differences between constructivist and transmission approaches to teaching. Eleanor’s stories of hers and her students’ learning have helped bring to life for me and for many others what it means to have “wonderful ideas” that arise from one’s own questioning. And they provided vivid images, as well as clear explanations, of what it means for teachers to support their students’ learning by offering them opportunities to encounter complex materials, experience confusion, and consider multiple possibilities in the process of constructing their own understandings.

For me, Eleanor’s work confirmed what I had experienced in my own learning life: that the transmission of knowledge approach to teaching, with its fixed sequences and right/wrong answers, discourages the kind of risk-taking that is needed to foster knowledge building based on genuine understanding. She inspired me as an educator to create learning environments where curiosity, questioning, spontaneity, noticing, wondering, and discussing one’s ideas are valued. She helped me understand that interest is a powerful motivator for learning and that teaching the way learners learn requires a teacher/student relationship that is a triad with the content under investigation, in which both teacher and student learn from as well as teach each other by following the logic of their own questions.

In this era of high stakes testing, the kind of teaching that Eleanor Duckworth describes is not easy to do. The pressures on educators and schools to produce “acceptable” student outcomes on standardized tests drive the curriculum. Mandated, scripted, standards-based lessons dominate many classrooms, leaving

little, if any, room for inquiry-oriented teaching. And the plethora of inexperienced teachers now entering the profession, often without any prior preparation, rarely has the skills and knowledge needed to initiate the process of critical explorations.

It is my hope that this special issue of *The New Educator* will offer an antidote, however small, to practices driven by this current education policy context and add to peoples' images of possibility of what effective, exciting, deep teaching and learning can be. Additionally, I hope that what is described here will encourage a widening of opportunities for teachers to include research, exploration, and innovation in their teaching. The authors of the articles to follow offer detailed documentation of inquiry learning. Ranging across subject matter and type of learner—whether in K-12, college, or educator preparation courses—their experiences provide models for how learners can engage with content, each other, and their teachers to acquire genuine understanding and invent/reinvent their own knowledge about the world. Many thanks are extended to Elizabeth Cavicchi, Son-Mey Chiu, and Fiona Hughes-McDonnell for sharing their work and for providing such clear explanations of the ideas that drive it. I am sure that they join me in expressing our deepest gratitude to Eleanor Duckworth for helping us, along with countless others, to understand the ideas that undergird critical explorations, for giving us guidance on how to support others on their learning journeys, and for inspiring us to keep these ideas and practices alive.