

Excerpt from "An Elementary Classroom and Grad School: What's in Between?"

by Brooke Landers,
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Mr. Gerber, the teacher of the "Salmon" class at Whatcom Day Academy, verbally acknowledges helpful behavior within a classroom where seven and eight year-olds come to learn with diverse needs and diverse ways of thinking. "And Peter has something in his hand, and he's going to be drawing," he states, smoothly maintaining a productive atmosphere. "John...with all the stuff that's coming into his brain all the time, I couldn't do it better myself."

His teaching is transparent. Rather than scrambling to solve issues on his own without the children knowing, he shares his thoughts and asks for help. He offers ideas prefaced by the disclaimer: "in my opinion." Pairs of children find niches around the room. Mr. Gerber focuses on the student next to him while maintaining awareness of what's going on in every corner. He reads the noise level and the movements, calling the class back to the carpet to regroup when necessary. The song, "I'm a Believer," vibrates through the walls from the music room. Peter moves to the beat while recording the sentence of the day in his agenda book. Mr. Gerber lets out a few lines before landing next to a pair of kids to practice spelling. John and I sing to each other before refocusing on our word list. Life with the "Salmon" moves to a rhythm. Guided by their teacher, children, come together, to the center, the hub of the classroom, and then disperse as if following spokes in different directions to engage in differentiated tasks. Directed by whistles, echoes, and song, children follow Mr. Gerber's lead in a dynamic, exploratory learning dance.

More than just "know-how" and "rules," as [Western Washington University Professor [Bill Lyne](#)] defines the content that students learn at most schools, children in Mr. Gerber's class learn to listen to one another, vote, ask questions, and present suggestions; they learn the fundamentals of democracy. He opens the discussion to the little people by saying, "I've noticed it's been getting louder and louder in here. What can we do to make this a better place for us to work?" I call them little people because that's how he treats them. They may be less than half his height, but they are people, capable of taking on responsibilities, holding discussions, offering suggestions, and asking questions. They rise to a challenge. I couldn't do it better myself.

Each week I move between elementary classrooms at Whatcom Day Academy, Middle school and High School classrooms, and Graduate classes at Western. After observing this spectrum of learning environments for two quarters, I've come to one ironic conclusion: my graduate level classes have more in common with the elementary classrooms than any other class I'm a part of throughout the week. Both involve discussion, promote speculation and questioning, jump start the imagination and require responsibility. Mr. Gerber asks his students to imagine a world where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Big Words," such as *love*, *courage*, and *freedom* matter. Lorraine Kasprisin, the editor of the [Journal of Educational Controversy](#) asks her graduate students to imagine a school system that does not exist so that we might bring it into being. Why at the middle and high school level do the students

sit and listen and fill out worksheets and regurgitate information? Based on my experiences this year, there is something beautiful about the elementary school environment I've had the opportunity to be a part of and the community one experiences at the graduate level that is missing at the levels in between.