

Leah Zimmerman

Seminar 3 Assignment – Observing and Talking to a Teacher

I observed Ms. P teaching the older group of children in our small Family Shabbat school at BCC. Ms. P and I have been working together for 4 years, and already have a trusting mentoring relationship. She knew that I was looking for opportunities to do this assignment. Luckily, students who require extra hands were absent that day, and I had the luxury of sitting back, observing, recording, and writing notes about her teaching. She was teaching the Exodus story in preparation for Pesach. She had a picture book with large illustrated pictures of the characters. Generally her lesson was constructed around reading and stopping to check for understanding as well as to elicit interpretations. She asked open-ended questions, and included some dramatizing from the students that revealed more of their thinking. It was easy to talk about these strategies together because they are ones that I have modeled over the years, and that she has already told me about how she uses them in her teaching. Our post observation conversation was a great way to take our established conversation to a different level and to make both of us more aware of the specific moves she made and how they interacted with her goals for the lesson.

Unfortunately, because of our schedule, more pressing issues relating to students, parents and programming, and geographically, Ms. P and I live quite far, quite a bit of time passed between the observation and the conversation. She and I eventually found time on the phone. In the interim, neither of us had the lesson fresh in our minds, though I had some notes. Since I had recorded the session, I decided to use the recording as our text. I was able to hold the recording to the phone receiver so that she could hear it as well. I asked her why she had chosen that book, and what she had thought her goals would be for the lesson. This prompted a conversation about the balance of pre-planned content and room for student discovery and interpretation. She reflected having been deliberate in choosing a book that left out details and didn't tell the full story because that gave her opportunities to ask the students what they thought and else they knew. This was true of the lesson, and I could ask her about which questions she had anticipated and which surprised her. Listening together just to the first five minutes of the recording prompted enough conversation for half an hour. We could tell where in the lesson she looked for raised hands, and where she responded to an interjection. This reflection prompted her to think about how being more consistent in requiring raised hands might help with some other management issues in the younger class. I loved getting to ask her about the dramatization move. She had planned it and included it as a short piece of the otherwise verbal conversation. She reflected on how it revealed more details about how the students were interpreting the text.

It didn't feel very natural to me to use the language of supporting or challenging, but I tried it a couple of times. "D—'s comment, seems to really support your

perception that students brought their own interpretations to the conversation.” I also challenged a perception she shared of where she had fallen short by showing how she had incorporated a child’s comment into the lesson. The language did not feel natural or easy. It will take time to get used to trying it.

When I asked her what she had gained from this process and conversation, she had some specific things she had been considering in the conversation and wanted to take with her. One was more specific planning of some of the questions that she would ask to make sure that she included the ones she really wanted to include. Another was the management of choosing students to speak. She also articulated that in reflecting on the lesson together, she had thought more deeply about the way she chose the book, how it determined the trajectory of the lesson, and the importance of including the open ended questions in order to get students sharing their own ideas. I actually was surprised at what and how much she took away from the conversation because quite a bit of it were her own thoughts during the conversation just having had time to reflect, and not necessarily direct outcomes of questions I had asked.