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Ballenger, Cynthia. (2009). *Puzzling Moments, Teachable Moments: Practicing Teacher Research in Urban Classrooms*. New York, New York: Teachers College Press.

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We must challenge ourselves to see beyond what we assume, beyond what we see at first. Our questions are not classroom questions. They are not simple questions. They are human questions and involve us, the wider world, and all that our students can bring to the pleasure of learning. (Ballenger, 2009, p. 105)

Cynthia Ballenger (2009) draws on her experiences as part of the Brookline Teacher Research Seminar and the Cheche Konnen Center, and as a reading specialist in a large urban school system to explore how understanding students' culture and rethinking puzzling moments in the classroom can broaden research opportunities for teacher-researchers. Filled with narratives gleaned from her 10 years of working with the Brookline Teacher Research Seminar, *Puzzling*

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Moments, *Teachable Moments* combines practical suggestions for teaching and researching. She is especially interested in students whose cultural knowledge exists outside the usual realm of schooling: “poor, urban, immigrant and bilingual children” who often find themselves, and their ways of learning, devalued by current educational practices (p. 1). Ballenger explores the possibilities that arise when teachers take a second look at those puzzling moments, and puzzling students, and reframe them within the context of literacy. She dares us to ask, what kind of learning would occur if we took those puzzling moments and ran *with* them instead of *from* them?

Chapter 1, enticingly titled *If the Sun Wasn't Alive: A Study of Puzzling Moments*, begins with an anecdote from the author's teaching experience in which Ruebens, during a class discussion about living things, declares that “[i]f [the sun] wasn't alive, then the sun wouldn't light and we wouldn't have no light and all we'd have is dark nighttime and all we'd do is dreaming, dreaming, dreaming” (p. 10). Ballenger builds on this initially puzzling moment to elucidate how students often view concepts differently than adults do, but that these views are not necessarily *wrong*. She introduces her concepts of “Real Time” and “Stopping Time” as ways in which teachers can reflect upon both teaching practices and events that occur in the classroom (p. 11). As Ballenger shows with her experience with Ruebens, during “real time,” teachers often find comments such as Ruebens's problematic and “random” (p. 14); however, by “stopping time,” or reflecting back on the taped conversation, Ballenger is able to better understand Ruebens's argument, realizing that he is simply “using a version of the term *living thing* that was different from [hers]” (p. 19). By sharing her personal account and providing an example of the process of stopping time, Ballenger makes a valid argument for valuing students' opinions and connections during discussions. As she points out, “[t]he idea that something is a random association is almost never accurate in my experience” (p. 23). The task for teacher-researchers is to ask *why* students made that connection and to explore it further.

In Chapter 2, *Expanding the Talk*, Ballenger focuses on how to engage students in class discussion. She challenges the age-old practice of “Initiation-Reply-Evaluation (IRE): the teacher initiates with a question, the child replies, the teacher evaluates the reply as adequate or not” as the only way of conducting class discussion (p. 30). She begins by posing difficult questions to teachers:

1. Are all the children participating in thoughtful and reflective discussion in some aspect of the curriculum?
2. For the children I am most concerned about, what is characteristic of the discussions in which they in particular participate most thoughtfully?
3. What works as support and encouragement to promote thoughtful discussions of all kinds? (p. 30)

While Ballenger acknowledges that there are no definitive answers to these questions, she argues the importance of “allow[ing] children more room to explain themselves” (p. 31), hence the deviation from the practice of IRE. She cites Barnes (1976) in discussing the “‘first draft’ quality” inherent in thoughtful classroom conversations (p. 31). She cautions teachers to not doubt children who speak slowly, as this is often a sign of them feeling out their thoughts and ideas. As both a teacher and a researcher, Ballenger here offers practical advice for teachers in the classroom: “if you tape-record or take notes you can return to the conversation later and determine to your satisfaction if it was a useful intellectual activity. You can also make order of the ideas introduced and plan the next activity or discussion from what you see there” (p.32). Ballenger here introduces her belief, which she returns to several times in the book, that “children are always making sense” (p. 33). If one takes that view of comments and questions posed by students, then those frustrating moments become puzzling moments that potentially lead students “to learn from each other” (p. 40). Ballenger’s overall positive stance on what occurs in the classroom, even when it comes to the questions posed by students to which “the teacher does not always know the answers” (p. 35), provides a refreshing look at the discussions that occur in classrooms. By taking into account student comments and further examining even challenging

student questions, teachers can engage all students in dialogue in the classroom.

Ballenger takes a break from her proscription of how to conduct research in the classroom with Chapter 3, *Learning about Whales: Stories of Migration and Immigration*, which provides an example of a puzzling moment from her teaching experience and how it led to a richer learning experience for both the students and Ballenger. She uses this experience, in which a student questions a science text with the pointed question, “Is this fiction?” (p. 41), to detail how “funny” (p. 42), or puzzling, moments can lead to research questions. As Ballenger did the first year this question was posed to her, many of us ignore questions that seem to have “obvious” (p. 41) answers; however, Ballenger argues for delving deeper into why it is not obvious to our students. While her first argument about the students’ distrust of the material is linked to the fact that they “grant little authority to texts” (p. 46), by searching further into *why* the students discounted the information in the text and how they came to their assumptions, Ballenger realized that “[t]hese students see details I don’t see or haven’t wondered about...[t]hey are the details that constitute the classification system” (p. 49). Additionally, while she initially believes that the students were challenging the ideas in the text because “Haitian culture values challenge and skepticism in many ways” (p. 53), she later comes to the conclusion that “they had higher standards of belief than [she] expected” (p. 54). In sharing this personal anecdote, the author provides further rationale for conducting research in one’s classroom. By taking a second look at the ideas offered by her students, Ballenger realizes the value of the students’ culture and experiences, a concept she returns to later in the book.

Throughout the book, Ballenger makes reference to her experiences with the Brookline Teacher Research Seminar (BTRS). In Chapter 4, *Stopping Time: The Data of Teacher Research*, she specifically details how important it is to tape one’s classroom, which she realized while participating in BTRS. As she points out, “one of the first things we noticed was how much we all talked and how little our students did by comparison” (p. 56). Never criticizing, Ballenger relates

an anecdote meant to make the reader question his or her practices: Do we allow our students time to talk, or do we monopolize the classroom discussions? Although she mentions note-taking earlier in the book as a viable possibility for recording what occurs in the classroom, Ballenger makes a strong argument for tape-recording in this chapter. She argues that a recording shows “when children are more or less engaged because it preserves the tone of voice and the overlapping talk and other signs of excitement” (p. 57). It also provides an accurate account of when a child is formulating an idea or theory. The pauses, as well as the rush of words, provide teachers with better representation of engagement and understanding. For most new teacher-researchers, the big question is this: “When should you turn the tape recorder or video recorder on?” (p. 59). According to Ballenger, the recorder should be running whenever there is dialogue in the classroom, though “small-group discussions” are an easy place to start for beginners (p. 59). She offers plenty of practical advice from her personal experience. She suggests listening to the tapes “in the car or while doing something else” (p. 60). She also suggests that “[y]ou don’t have to listen to the entire tape to find something useful” (p. 60). For teacher-researchers who are trying to balance the burdens of being both a teacher and a researcher, these suggestions make a daunting task doable. Her main point, however, is that these recorded conversations “reveal things you would not hear otherwise” (p. 60). She sees these notes as a jumping off point for engaging students in what they are learning.

Chapter 5, *Who Gets to Feel Scientific?*, begins by posing the question, “Can very different children learn from each other?” (p. 69). For this chapter, Ballenger takes us into Marcia Pertuz’s third-grade classroom, which includes students with English as their first language and students with Spanish as their first language. In this anecdote, Ballenger looks at how two different students, Serena and Elena, explore the concept of growth and the power behind their approaches. While Serena’s contributions to the discussion were more in line with “the goals many educators would have for such a conversation,” Ballenger argues that there is “intellectual power in Elena’s approach” as well,

though it may only be seen in hindsight (p. 71). By expanding their definition of growth to go beyond what one can see, the students come to understand “that growth includes ideas of volume, constant versus intermittent rates of growth, as well as the development of important new parts” (p. 77). Without Elena’s initially challenging comments about growth, including when the plant is “getting stronger” and her observations about the “little teeny, teeny, teeny [piece]—now it’s fat” (p. 72), the students would not have developed such a complex definition and understanding of growth. Thus, Ballenger supports her point that puzzling moments such as these are worth taking a second look at. Instead of discounting Elena’s concept of growth, Ballenger allowed the conversation to continue, thus providing evidence of “the importance of their own experience” (p. 79). These children already knew a great deal about growth—they are growing every day—and the inclusion of this evidence in the scientific discussion allowed them to “feel scientific,” as the title to this chapter proposes. Ballenger realizes that we must “develop enough distance from this familiar material to challenge our understanding of teaching and learning” (p. 80). Accordingly, she titles chapter 6 *Making the Familiar Strange*.

Her argument in chapter 6 is for teacher-researchers to put aside our assumptions in order to better understand children and how they learn. Drawing from her experience with the CKC, she advocates sharing data with like-minded individuals as a way to see information in a new light. Ballenger takes teacher assumptions to task in this chapter as well. Fittingly, she offers the example of the Whittier Inquiry Group’s group talk protocol as a way to avoid “making inferences before they have carefully observed” (p. 82). She outlines the six-step process, which includes choosing a facilitator, describing the data, raising questions, seeing the world through the students’ eyes (described as wonderment by Ballenger), sharing thoughts and questions, and discussing implications for teaching and learning (p. 82-83). She builds from the Whittier Inquiry Group’s process in delineating a three-step process for analyzing the *data* collected in the classroom—restating the child’s ideas, looking at the transcript for how ideas are presented, and

focusing on what is puzzling (p. 83-84). This information then leads the researcher to deeper questions: “How is this talk and activity similar to or different from what would count as a literate or academic understanding of the material? Have the students noticed something or done something that a professional writer, scientist, historian, and so on, would?” (p. 84).

In Chapter 7, “*Vloop Vloop*”: *Children Talk About Metamorphosis*, Ballenger draws on her experience with CKC to discuss the importance of engagement and interaction in the classroom. She uses the example of a group of Haitian students’ discussion about snails as evidence of “how Haitian people often talk in social situations” were being used to “[construct] a good critique of the first students’ methodology” (p. 87). Although the students’ discussion was reminiscent of the “cheerful wrangling that their own students engaged in over soccer games and other playground activities” (p. 87), Ballenger and the other researchers found that by taking a second look at the methodology of the students’ arguments, there was a purpose to it. Additionally, two teachers added this technique of informal discussion, in the form of a “science circle,” into their classrooms as a means of engaging ordinarily quiet students in curriculum-related discussion (p. 88). Expanding on the idea that what students bring to the classroom is important, Ballenger mentions Pat, a CKC teacher, who advocates for allowing students to discuss curriculum in “whatever language they chose” (p. 88) as a means of not hindering the flow of ideas in a science class. She then provides a transcript of a class discussion on metamorphosis that seems to get off topic, leading all the way to playing basketball, but is really a much deeper discussion of change. Ballenger walks the reader back through the discussion, dissecting the students’ comments and showing how her process of “stopping time” (mentioned in detail in Chapter 4) can provide the teacher-researcher with the ability to analyze what might first appear to be a puzzling moment. She admits that the class discussion shared in this chapter initially “seemed mainly full of jokes and challenges” (p. 96); only after looking back at the transcript was she able to see the students’ thought processes. She also highlights key strategies that Pat used

which were helpful in fostering the flow of discussion by the students: She “waited for the children to make themselves clear. She ignored no idea. She recognized that there was more than one way of constructing the topic” (p. 96).

Ballenger addresses the quandary of all teacher researchers in Chapter 8, *Keeping It Real*—research questions. While she admits to not identifying a research question before beginning data collection, she does “collect anything that might be considered thinking or anything that will help [her] to understand what the children’s ideas are” (p. 98). These data might include “all instances of engaged talk, questions [she is] asked, stories [she is] told, comments about home, anything that strikes [her] as odd and serious” (p. 98). In doing so, she refuses to limit the scope of her research, leaving the possibilities open-ended. This process of researching comes after determining that most researchers create questions “too embedded in our own assumptions” (p. 98), which allows them to answer their question “without seeing anything really new” (p. 99). Ballenger’s goal is just the opposite. She provides the reader with Jim Swaim’s experience, shared during the BTRS, and his frustration with getting his students to revise. Swaim began his research with the question, “How can I teach them to revise or what happens when they revise?”, but quickly realized that the students were “unable to appreciate the playfulness in a story” (p. 100). For Swaim, changing the focus of his research based on what he observed in his classroom made for a more productive line of questioning. While his revised question, “Where do I see an honest response to literature among my students?” may seem very distant from his original question, it provided him with a better understanding of what his students were learning from the writers’ workshop process (p. 100). Using Swaim’s experience as a cautionary tale, Ballenger warns researchers to not “make the mistake of defining what they are looking for before they have carefully observed” (p. 103). She also provides anecdotes from Cindy Beseler’s experience with special education students to show the importance of asking ourselves, “What do my students know how to do already?” (p. 105). While Beseler’s students may have needed guidance on whom to talk to and how to behave on the subway, they

showed that they were capable of language that “is both clever and inclusive, socially sensitive” (p. 104).

Ballenger begins Chapter 9, *Djeissen’s Question*, with the idea that “[c]urriculum is always a work in progress, shaped by interaction with particular students, by other events, and by one’s own always changing understanding” (p. 107). As such, teacher researchers stand to learn as much from the students as the students are poised to learn from us. Ballenger uses her experience with Djeissen’s question about the roads in Cape Verde to explain how questions that pertain to students’ lives can promote a deeper interest in learning and help lead to deeper learning. By following Djeissen’s question, “Why do the roads in Cape Verde fall in and become ruined?” (p. 106), Ballenger was able to lead her students on a journey through the process of erosion that involved discussion, experimentation, more discussion, and reflection. Students were able to “challenge generalizations and refine models to suit specific situations” (p. 108), such as when their ideas for how to prevent erosion did not work. In this example, Ballenger shows how allowing students to guide learning can provide for even deeper questions as well as an enthusiasm for learning that is often lacking for students.

In Chapter 10, *Conclusion*, Ballenger impresses upon the reader the importance of believing that “children from underachieving groups [can do] exceptional work” (p. 124). As she shows throughout her book, students whose native language is not English are not at a disadvantage in the classroom. Rather, they bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experiences for the teacher to draw from. We just have to be open to seeing that “children have plenty of knowledge” and know how to use it (p. 124).

At a time when many educators are worrying about testing, Ballenger’s book provides a rejuvenating look at education. She offers a reminder about why many of us became teachers in the first place: to teach students. However, *Puzzling Moments, Teachable Moments* offers more than just interesting anecdotes from Ballenger’s time in the classroom; she presents the reader with detailed accounts of how tested

techniques can be used to probe deeper into those moments, providing the teacher-researcher with a better understanding of how students learn and how teachers teach “puzzling students.” Ballenger’s book becomes a reminder that *all* students come to school with knowledge, and if we take the time to listen to our students, we too can turn those *puzzling* moments into *teachable* moments.

About the Reviewer

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