Does It Really Matter?
Redefining Mattering Zones in the Classroom

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this chapter, the author ponders the intrinsic feature of being human—mattering. She searches through her experiences as a teacher to uncover how mattering has played a role in the lives of her students and herself. At the center of her pondering is Rebecca Goldstein's mattering theory. The author moves through this work sharing three different experiences she had as a classroom teacher in which what mattered most was challenged—beginning with a challenging student, to her experience of being taught to dance by one of her students, and finally by challenging the ubiquitous practice of using competition within learning environments. In conclusion, she suggests reasons for and ways to redefine the mattering zone boundaries of the map of her teaching and her students' learning.

INTRODUCTION

"People occupy the mattering map…The map in fact is a projection of its inhabitants' perceptions. [Our] location on it is determined by what matters to [us], matters overwhelmingly, the kind of mattering that produces [our] perceptions of people, of [ourselves] and others…And then some of us do an awful lot of moving around from region to region." (Philosopher, Rebecca Goldstein, 1983, p. 22)

I was in my zone. I looked around the room that would hold my first classroom learning community and saw them—22 small humans. In this kindergarten world, some were huddled around Legos all spread out on the floor. Another group of children were busy at the serious work of planning and preparing dinner for their make-shift family in the "kitchen." And the rest were scattered about the room making stuff—making stuff that *mattered* to them.

In this essay, I reflect upon key memories over my 15 years of experience as an educator in elementary settings to uncover how mattering has played a role in the lives of my students and in me. At the center of my reflection is Rebecca Goldstein's (1983, 2016, 2019) *mattering theory.* As she explained, "we no sooner discover that we are than we want that which we are to matter" (1983, p. 191). She posited the metaphoric *mattering map* as a way to explain how people occupy *mattering zones* on a social map driven by affect. These zones are defined by what matters most to us and how such mattering aligns with those in our zone or not. For example, a friend of mine who is a new mother recently shared with me her feelings of "not fitting in" within a working mom's support group. The majority of the mothers sharing in this group expressed their desire to not work as much and just focus on being home with their babies. She felt embarrassed to admit that she was excited about an upcoming promotion that she had worked hard for and that she felt at ease about her child's daycare and her continued pursuit of advancement in her profession. She found herself in a zone in which what matters most to her was different than what mattered to those around her. This is what Goldstein speaks of as a mattering zone in which there may be alignment or misalignment with what matters most to us and others in our zone on our social map. And when we find ourselves with such misalignment, we experience frustration, even despair because our perception may be, *we don't matter*. We are then faced with a decision to either adopt what matters to those around us, adapt what matters to us to what matters to others, or leave that zone of the map and find a new address.

What follows are stories of intertwining movement on the Mattering Map for my students (all names are pseudonyms) and me. These stories centralized our affective domains because affect permeates every aspect of our cognitive and social lives. You will experience dialogue in these stories that have become solidified in my memories as I have curated them and retold them to myself and others over the years. They aren't exact; but they are what exists in my memory and as such, help situate me and my students on the Mattering Map.

MATTERING ZONE: ARDYN'S WORLD

I knew I was in for a whirlwind of a year the day Ardyn walked through the door of my kindergarten classroom. At age five, his stocky build and crewcut hair style bespoke his unique ways of striving to matter. During our first week of school, I glanced over to a table where Ardyn was working with geometric shapes that he could link together to build things—his face red, I watch him repeatedly try to link two pieces together with no success time and again. Wrapping up my interaction with Susan, who was making a birthday card for her mother, I slid into an empty chair next to Ardyn's and said, "Can I help?"

"I doubt it"—he continued trying to force pieces together.
"I can teach you some tricks to putting these together if you like."

With a now deep crimson freckled face he looked up at me and declared, "My dad says teachers don't teach nuttin' no more!"

I could see that in this moment, Ardyn didn't see me as someone who could or would teach him anything that year. I must have implicitly understood this because I responded with, "Well, I've learned some tricks from other students like you and I could show you those for sure!" I had removed me as the

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