

Dear Fellow Mosaic Teachers,

As a fifth grade teacher at Blue Oak School, I have had the pleasure of taking four classes to The Mosaic Project's Outdoor School. I have seen that the largest predictor of a successful Mosaic experience for students is the enthusiasm of their teachers. Like in the classroom, our energy and passion for what we do and how we do it directly affects our students.

Education is a sum of one's experiences. Though students learn primarily in classrooms, vital life-long learning can take place while laughing on the field, singing in the woods, and playing games together in groups. Wherever the learning environment, when students feel invited to participate in their own experiences, they begin to feel a sense of ownership, which gives them a built-in incentive to want to succeed.

And what an experience it is! Each year I have witnessed the transformation of my students as they become more aware of themselves, more confident as communicators, and more empathetic classmates to each other. Perhaps the greatest benefit of a week in the Mosaic Woods is the number of conflict resolution tools that students learn together in groups. This anchored experience allows us to use a shared language that enables us to look for peaceful solutions to common problems. We can be proactive and not reactive. We can work together. For the rest of the school year, we can be Assertive, Empathetic, Peaceful.

In fact, many of the skills that are incorporated in Mosaic games and activities are important for success not only in the classroom, but after school as well. Look at the five most important skills desired by Fortune 500 companies (in order of importance):

1. Teamwork
2. Problem Solving
3. Interpersonal Skills
4. Oral Communications
5. Listening

(From *Creativity in Action*, Creative Education Foundation, 1990)

The Mosaic Project is exciting and revolutionary because it not only asks children to be more peaceful, it gives them tangible and useful tools to use to make peace on the playground, in the classroom, eventually the workplace, and even at home. If the students remember just a few of these "tools," they can be used to help make a lasting difference and a more peaceful world.

If we as teachers offer small but meaningful ways for children to make connections with The Mosaic Project before, during, and after they go to the week-long outdoor experience, we are inviting them to be active participants in their own success.

I find it helpful to think of the Mosaic experience in three parts:

1. Educating and preparing parents and students BEFORE the week-long Outdoor School.
2. Supporting parents and students DURING the week the Outdoor School experience.
3. Following up AFTER returning to school, to keep the Mosaic concepts alive throughout the rest of the year.

BEFORE

Communication is the key for successful preparation, for both students and parents. A few months before we go, I like to schedule both a parent and a student gathering. These are separate events, with the exhilaration of the students' excitement and the testimonials of students from previous years helping to ease parents' worries!

For Students:

I invite previous Mosaic attendees to come back and visit the current group of students who are getting ready to attend the program. Even if it's just a 30 minute chat, hearing about some of the activities, being able to ask questions to those who have been to the Outdoor School, and seeing Power Points and quotes from previous students' experiences help set up a successful visualization of the week to come.

After the meeting with Mosaic student vets, I give each student a journal in which to record his or her thoughts and feelings, in anticipation of going at least a week in advance so they can begin to think of themselves in a new experience. The students may write in the way they prefer, even if it is just listing questions or explaining worries. I use the following questions to guide their responses:

- What questions do you have?
- How do you feel?
- What are you unsure of?
- Which song do you enjoy the most so far, and why?

We listen to a song or two, have a short discussion, and then spend 10-15 minutes writing in a journal. We then share the entries with a partner or two, or with the whole group.

By talking and sharing about the experience that is awaiting us, and listening to some of the songs that help address these concerns, we can begin to bond through our shared discussions. Fears get labeled, problems can become vocalized, and allies can begin to empathize with each other. "You're scared, too?" "I'm excited!" "I can't wait to make new friends!"

I also like to go over certain parts of the info packet with the students and allow them to think through what they are hearing. The "To Bring or Not to Bring" Checklist is a great lead-in for this discussion. I make an overhead and we check off our items together. It allows the students to think of what they should bring and why. Worries can disappear when children start to see a checklist, as the abstract becomes more concrete. This review of important information invites them to see more about what to expect and they can begin to prepare for the experience by going through the steps of packing.

After we go through the list, I also like to ask them questions, such as:

- Why do we need our names in everything?
- What item on the list surprised you?
- Why should we not bring money or electronic items?

Perhaps pass out rolls of masking tape and permanent markers and have a name-writing party. Write each other's names on belongings. Maybe have an "Advice for Each Other" session. The first lesson of "You bring, you carry" is also relevant here. Don't pack too much!

My favorite journal entry of them all is the day of leaving. Right before we board the bus, it is interesting to see how descriptive the students capture the emotions they are feeling! A quick share reminds others that we are embarking on a shared adventure. We're in it together! Songs on the bus help build community, even if the singing gets loud!

For Parents:

When you are preparing your class to go to The Mosaic Project's Outdoor School, it is important to comfort parents and educate them as much as you can. Ignorance is not a lack of intelligence; it is a lack of experience. What parents do not know can manifest itself in fear. It is our job to help dispel that fear and explain the merits and proven results of the program. Questions and concerns should be expected and welcomed!

Host a parent session with a Mosaic representative, including a Question & Answer session before the paperwork is passed out. This meeting helps to explain the big picture. Power Points, videos, photos, and student testimonials from prior years are especially helpful to help give parents an important visual understanding and sense of the program's purpose and impact.

If possible, again before the week-long experience, offer a shorter meeting to review the "To Bring or Not to Bring" list and to answer last-minute questions. This helps to invite the parents to be more involved in an experience in which they will not participate directly with their children. With both of these meetings, I have invited parents from previous years whose children attended the week-long experience. They are allies who can answer questions from a parent's perspective. Many parents have commented that it is helpful to hear from veteran parents.

Here are a few tips for being proactive and prepared for supporting parents:

- Set up call lists and possibly have a parent coordinator disseminate Mosaic information.
- First time? Make a list of questions to email Mosaic staff and other teachers who have participated in the program.
- Encourage parents to let their children know that it's okay to have a good time without them, and emphasize the importance of parents giving their child their blessing to have a good time.
- Use proactive Mosaic updates on blogs, newsletters, and hand-outs.
- Share photographs of your classes at Mosaic in previous years. Be sure that some photos include children from other schools. Show a map of The Mosaic Project Outdoor School in Napa. (The Mosaic Project staff can easily provide you with one if you want!) Show a map of where your partner schools are located.
- Until you see the program firsthand, the magic may translate as an abstract experience for parents and students. Examples of how things will be help to take the onus off of the unknown. Showing videos from The Mosaic website and playing the CD helps with this as well.
- Remind parents that they should *NEVER* say to their children that they will pick them up on Monday night if they don't like it or don't feel comfortable. This will absolutely set their children up for failure as it will prevent them from even giving the experience a chance.

Any social justice work, such as that of The Mosaic Project, which brings together people who have been segregated, challenges the status quo, and inspires self-examination can bring up fear and anxiety. Occasionally, some parents may choose not to send their children to Mosaic because of this fear and anxiety. Sometimes when this happens, they may try to attack the validity and the value of The Mosaic Project and try to convince other parents to also keep their children at home. Please know this is a fairly common response and do not be alarmed; however, I have learned that when this situation arises, it is crucial to address it as swiftly and firmly as possible. One effective guideline to put in place before any concerns arise is to agree to have conversations based on facts, not rumors, speculation, or untruths. This goes for students as well as parents.

Let these parents know that, while you disagree with their decision not to send their children, you respect it. Let them know that this is a private matter, and insist that they keep this decision to themselves. Politely, yet firmly, let them know that one person or one family's viewpoint should not sabotage a program for other students.

DURING

For Students:

The Zone for Proximal Development, by Lev Vygotsky, is an educational model that suggests the greatest potential for learning happens when students step outside their comfort zones. When we help our students to step out a bit from the routine of their lives and into their stretch zone, we can help them to maximize their potential as learners. This is our job while we are at The Mosaic Project's Outdoor School – to support our students through this stretching opportunity.

Though the Mosaic staffers lead and facilitate the week's activities, teachers are encouraged to participate as much as possible. Joining in groups as a participant allows you to consider other perspectives; you get to join the children in merriment and wonder. Be present and share in the journey as you see fit. Observe the activities and be aware of how your students are doing. Think ahead to curricular tie-ins and other opportunities to help your students to cultivate peaceful habits of mind and heart. If you are new, I recommend asking the other teachers for their perspectives. This has proved invaluable for me, and I have made some good friends over the years!

Make yourself available to help out with any problems and provide space for students to seek you out for check-ins. Allow students to speak their minds, but always accentuate the positive and help them focus on solutions.

The one time every day when we directly see our whole group of students is during Teacher Time. It is a wonderful time to gauge how your students are faring. During this time, some classes play games, have read-alouds, share sessions, or "chill-out" time. I have used a combination of them all, as well as a time for students to reflect in their journals.

Every day during Teacher Time, we write in our journals for 10-15 minutes. The students have the freedom to choose how they write and what they would like to say, but I ask them to be honest in their reflections. By reading their journals, you can keep a close eye on how your students are doing and learn about issues they may not be comfortable bringing up in person.

We then talk about the day's happenings and the night schedule, and have a read-aloud if we have time. Perhaps choose a book that helps frame a part of the Mosaic experience for your students. Maybe it includes a character of a similar age, with similar issues. Continue to remind them of the benefits of the experience, including the challenges, and how much they are learning and growing. The students will take your lead, so be sure to accentuate the positive!

I am always amazed at how well the Mosaic staff gets to know my students, and I enjoy being around if needed. I trust them to help the children work through any problems. I have learned many ways to help my own students through issues by overhearing Mosaic staffers help students. The Mosaic language is quite adept at identifying the problem, dealing positively with it, and letting the students get back into the action refreshed and uplifted.

If you have questions, be sure to write them down and offer them to the senior Mosaic staff. Check-ins occur throughout the day, and despite the business of each day at the Outdoor School, there is always time to talk. Questions, feedback, concerns, and opinions are important for the dialog of continuing to strengthen Mosaic's programs. The evaluation forms are also an important source of feedback for the staff. The Mosaic Project is always looking to improve the experience for our students. As teachers, we are perhaps the most important partners in helping them to develop the best peacemaking program possible.

For Parents:

Make yourself available to parents during the week. That can greatly reduce their anxiety. If they call to see how their children are doing, return their calls immediately. Send them daily email updates (Mosaic will provide you templates to do this) and include photos. Contact your principal or director and have them disseminate information for the whole parent group.

AFTER

For Students:

When we are on the bus on the last day, riding past waving and cheering Mosaic staffers and cabin leaders, the sound of song and laughter is palpable. One of my students recently wrote that as we left on the bus from the Outdoor School, "We were louder than a herd of elephants being tickled." We had a positive experience and were so enthused to go back to school and take our Mosaic magic with us.

I make sure to discuss the importance of explaining parts of Mosaic to their parents. Again, it is important to be honest, and accentuate the positive! Remind students to speak about their personal achievements, their goals, favorite activities, stories about new friends. If parents only hear the negative stories, they will begin to form impressions of what did not work. I explain to parents in my classes that we have many stories to tell. Give us time to tell them! Like the layers of an onion, the experience begins to unfold. If parents are provided with a list of types of suggested questions, they might be proactive tools for hearing about the trip!

Remind the students to protect the Mosaic surprises and not spoil them for students who will be attending the Outdoor School one day. Remind them to tell the truth and not try to scare other students. (Look out for the scary bizarre rumors that students may create for the shock value.) The amazing week at The Mosaic Project is a rite of passage for students. This experience can positively change their lives. Negative or untrue comments from one group of students to the next, as a part of a “come-uppance” can, and should, be avoided!

After the Mosaic experience, it is important to extend, reinvigorate and remind students about the Mosaic experience. Be sure to:

- Contact Cherine Badawi (Mosaic’s Curriculum and Training Director) to organize a Mosaic follow-up visit.
- Use the follow-up activities provided by The Mosaic Project. (Invest in their new curriculum guide if possible!) Make explicit connections to your curriculum and create your own new lesson plans for continuing the learning.
- Do additional follow up activities such as:
 - Write thank you letters to staff.
 - Write letters to students from the partner schools (pen pals).
 - Draw a cartoon of their three favorite parts of the week, as well as a written explanation for each.
 - Describe the experience so that a person with a visual impairment could see it and share the descriptions in a writer’s workshop.
 - Choose a character in book who embodies a Mosaic attribute. Who? How? Why?
 - Do a “Memory Blast.” Play a Mosaic song and have the students write a Mosaic memory on an index card. Share a few.
 - Share photos from the week.
 - Do skits and facilitate games for other classes.
 - Make Mosaic posters to post outside depicting concepts such as empathy, it’s not you and me against each other, but rather you and me against the problem, and the five tools for conflict resolution.
 - Tie in lessons with the Mosaic quotes of the day.
 - Encourage put ups.
 - MMMMMMMix it up!
 - Use Mosaic-type books to thread important themes in your Reading and Writing curriculum, such as *Loser*, *Kira Kira*, *Stargirl*, *Number the Stars*, *Joey Pigza*, *Walk Two Moons*, *The Liberation of Gabriel King*, *Holes*, and *Pictures of Hollis Woods*.

For Parents:

If you are able, organize a Mosaic parent workshop in which Mosaic staffers give parents a taste of what their children have experienced. (You can organize this while the children are at the Outdoor School if you wish.)

Share details with the parents about their children’s experiences and successes. Encourage your students to do so as well. Beware that sometimes children’s stories become exaggerated or strangely modified when they come home. Be prepared to do some rumor control to help ensure that students relate truthful experiences and not wild tales intended for a shock factor.

Again, remember that any social justice work, such as that of The Mosaic Project, which brings together people who have been segregated and challenges the status quo, inspires self-examination and can bring up fear and anxiety. This fear and anxiety can fan the rumor flames. Be prepared to be very firm to halt the spread of rumors.

This is as important a part of supporting this peace work as is successfully preparing your students and parents for the Mosaic experience.

Our students can leave a positive and lasting legacy in this world. As teachers, it is our challenge to invite them to this transformative learning experience and our duty to continue to remind them of their awesome power to help make peace. Thank you for partnering with The Mosaic Project, with me, and all the Mosaic teachers in this very important work.

Peacing It Together,
Jim Yarborough, 5th-Grade Teacher, Blue Oak School