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ABSTRACT

In recent years, teacher education curriculum has become more focused on the "back to basics" issue of teaching, encouraging teachers to manipulate students and classroom environments to attain one goal: academic learning. Critics claim this narrowing of the teacher education process has led to negative social consequences where children are represented as things or raw material to be made into finished products. Following Urie Bronfenbrenner's suggestion that preservice teachers should have opportunities to enter into relationships with their students, and school curriculum should integrate academic learning with prosocial or altruistic development, the elementary teacher education program at the University of Georgia assigned daily dialogue journals to be written between each student teacher and a young student to provide the student teacher with a vehicle for entering into and developing a relationship with a student in a limited period of time. Daily entries were made in the journal (notebook) by both the student teacher and the child, with the student teacher instructed not to correct the entry or use it for didactic purposes. Although early entries tended to be superficial in many respects, later journal entries indicated that a sense of trust and rapport was beginning to emerge between journal partners at the same time skills in written communication were being promoted. (NH)

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# Literacy Learning and Relationship Building Through Dialogue Journals

Running Head: Relationship

Building Relationship Through Dialogue Journals

In recent years, American education has suffered from an increasingly myopic vision of what schooling should be. Schools have become places where students are trained in the academic disciplines in preparation for becoming productive members of society. The notion that schools should also be places for teaching students to become caring members of society has been lost somewhat. Today, evidence of citizenship or prosocial education, traditional goals of schooling in this country (Wynne, 1985), is difficult to find in America's schools. It can also be argued that a similar state of affairs exists in teacher education. In many ways the teacher education curriculum has become more focused on to the "back to basics" issues of teaching. Pre-service teachers often get little more than "how to's" or mechanical and systematized methods of teaching in their coursework. In this sense, teacher education has become a form of technical training.

The technical/methodological orientation to teacher education can often be seen in students' field training experiences. The focus of these experiences is the application of teaching techniques learned in the methods coursework. Prospective teachers are instructed to try out these techniques under the supervision of school and university personnel. Student teachers are encouraged to look for signs of academic

gains in students. Little if any effort, however, is directed toward the affective and social development of students. Often these issues are addressed under the rubric of discipline. Student teachers are discouraged from promoting social interaction among students as it supposedly leads to cheating or, at the very least, promotes off-task behavior. Similarly, affective development is only observed within the context of how well the students "liked" or responded to the academic lesson.

Student teachers' concern for the technical and their naivete for the social and affective is evident in their descriptions of their lessons. Comments from students such as the following are not uncommon. "I just can't seem to motivate Josh to do anything in reading" or "My lesson would have gone much better if I could have gotten Sara and Robyn to stop talking to each other. I think I'll have to separate them." Such responses indicate a concern with the social and affective domain only to the extent to which the social and affective characteristics can be manipulated to improve the academic outcomes of lessons. Very seldom do student teachers express concern for why Josh is unmotivated or what Sara and Robyn have to say to each other that is so compelling that they share it during the lesson.

Martin Buber (1958) provides an intriguing dichotomy of the kinds of relationships found among humans. On the one hand we

can treat others as objects to be manipulated and exploited. People are seen as nothing more than instruments to some end or goal. Regardless of the intrinsic value of the goal, the process of inter-personal manipulation represents what Buber terms an I-It orientation to others. On the other hand, when a person enters into a true relationship with another an I-Thou orientation is manifested. The I-Thou orientation can be characterized by a sense of interpersonal concern and caring without regard to a goal structure.

Many teacher education programs have come to embrace the I-It orientation. Children are often represented as things or raw materials to be made into finished products. Student teachers are encouraged to manipulate students and classroom environments to maximize one goal of education--academic learning, or in its more corrupt form, test scores. Social and affective consequences of what neophyte teachers do to or with their charges are often ignored.

This refocusing and narrowing of the teacher education process is symptomatic of a larger phenomena in this country. Commentators on schools have noted that an increased emphasis on academic achievement, test scores, abstracted knowledge, and individualism has led to negative social consequences (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; 1979; 1986; Oldenquist, 1983). Indeed,

Bronfenbrenner (1974) suggests that schools have created environments that alienate young people from others in society. Bronfenbrenner argues that a wide range of social problems can be traced to a school orientation that disregards that development of social responsibility and caring in students. He calls for a school curriculum that integrates academic learning with prosocial or altruistic development. He calls such a curriculum a curriculum for caring. Similarly, philosopher Andrew Oldenquist (1983) has written that a hyper-individualistic attitude has come to pervade the American consciousness. People have taken on a "what's in it for me attitude." Such concern with self interest inevitably leads to a disinterest in and disengagement from the concerns of others. Indeed, it leads to an orientation in which others are viewed as instruments that can be used to achieve one's own ends.

Partners

The field experience is critical to the development of teachers. It is an opportune time for preservice teachers to observe children and practice teaching. It can also provide opportunities for student teachers to enter into relationships with their students.

Prior to student teaching students in the elementary teacher education program at the University of Georgia spend the final three weeks of the preceding two quarters in a supervised

field experience. During these periods instructors in the education courses in which students are enrolled make field based assignments which are designed to provide practice in applying skills and methods learned in the classroom.

One task I have come to assign students in the field based reading education courses I teach is for them to select one student in the class and do a daily dialogue journal with that student. I make such an assignment for several reasons. First, dialogue journal writing allows the student teachers to observe the natural writing of their students. Second, it provides student teachers opportunities to observe growth in students writing and reading. Third, it is a way of demonstrating for our students a purposeful context for literacy instruction. And finally, dialogue journal writing provides student teachers with a vehicle for entering into and developing a relationship with a student in a limited period of time.

The goal of this paper relates to this last purpose. The literacy learning potential for dialogue journals has already been well-documented (Gambrell, 1985; Kreeft, 1984). The entries made by student teachers and their dialogue journal partners suggest that dialogue journals, vehicles for literacy development, are also a promising way to promote I-Thou relationships between teachers and their students. Roderick (1986), for example, sees the possibilities of personal sharing

> in relationship accompanied by the giving of comfort and consolation. . . also characterize people. (p. 310-311)

More recently Albertini and Meath-Lang (1987) report on a project in which dialogue journals were kept over a ten week college English course between the teacher and deaf college students. Over time the authors noted increased use by both journal partners of functions related to relationship building and maintenance.

The purpose of the present study, then, was to determine if dialogue journals could be used as vehicles for developing relationships between adults and elementary school children. Moreover, I hoped to see if, over time, changes would occur in the qualitative nature of the journals.

The rules for the dialogue journals as employed in the field experience were simple. Student teachers were instructed to obtain a notebook to use as a dialogue journal. Student teachers were to pick any child in the classroom as a dialogue journal partner. Entries were to be made daily over the course of the three week period. In cases where the children could not or would not write in the journal, the student teacher would take dictation from the child. Student teachers were instructed not to correct or in any way change the children's entries or to use the entries for didactic purposes.

Tentative beginnings

The first entries into the journals demonstrated an uneasiness in both student teachers and their partners. Both were unaccustomed to initiating personal relationships so quickly. Surface level inquiries and responses dominated the first entries. One student teacher wrote to her first-grade partner:

> Hi Lakesha, I would like to know more about you. How old are you? When is your birthday? How many brothers and sisters do you have? What are their names? Write me back and you can ask me questions?

The child responded in list format:

> I am 7 years old.
> My birthday is January 3, 1980.
> I do not have a brother or a sister.
> Just my doll.

Another student teacher initiated her dialogue journal to her second grade partner with:

> Dear Angela:
> Hello! How are you? Have you had a good morning? I have. I like coming

to school. Do you? What are some of your favorite things to do? I like jogging, exercising and being outdoors.

Angela replied thus:

I am fine. I have had a good day. No, I don't like coming to school. I like spelling and reading. I like being outdoors, too.

Love, Angela

Many of the early entries were characterized as undirectional, teacher query, student response, not unlike many of the school activities that teachers knew and students were learning the rules for. Such a format does not resemble the type of relationship that was the hope of the dialogue journal assignment. Suprisingly, though, a few children took the lead in establishing more than a proforma relationship. One student teacher began her journal entry with:

My name is Miss W. I have four brothers and one sister. I like to sing and read. My favorite thing to do is read. What do you like to do?

The entry sounds more like an essay than a communication to another person. Nevertheless, the child responded:

Dear Miss W.

I like to do is sing. My Mother and Daddy are going to get married and I will be their kid, OK! I love you! And I wish you can be mine, ok.

Another first-grade child was obviously delighted to do a dialogue journal with her student teacher and expressed those feelings in words:

Dear Miss D,

Thank you for the letter. I hope you love my letter. I am glad you are here for the next three weeks. I love you! I like it! I will do my best on the letter. I have somthing super to write and this is it. I am glad we are doing this.

Love, Jolly.

Despite such exuberance the first entries by both student teachers and children could generally be described as "testing the waters" or attempting to develop a sense of trust between partners. The student teachers began by introducing themselves and stating a list of superficial questions to their partners. The children, for their part, tended only to respond to the questions posed by the student teacher. In general, the early

entries pointed to the impossibility of immediate relationship but suggested that the children desired such an arrangement.

Toward Relationship

It wasn't long before the student teachers and the children were near the end of their dialogue journal partnership. Over time a qualitative change was observed in the nature of the dialogue journal entries. Although the journals were still superficial in many respects, a sense of trust and self investment seemed more to characterize the journals. The children began to ask questions of their partners and the questions and responses of both tended to become more personal.

After a student teacher had been ill for two days a kindergarten child dictated the following to her:

> You took too many days to get to school. I wanted you to get here sooner. I have been feeling very sick. Mandy.

The next day, after the student teacher volunteered to help this same child write a letter to her grandmother who had had an accident Mandy replied:

> Dear Mrs. E,
>
> You can help me write a letter if you like. You have been nice. You said you will give me a hug. Do you have a husband? Got any kids? I love Mrs. E. Mandy.

A first-grade boy wrote this to his partner:

> Dear Mrs. M:
>
> Where do your parents live? I don't mean to be nosey but I just want to know. You know how kids are. And the pizza bingo night was not a blast. Were you there?

For another first-grade child the first week of the dialogue journal was a series of responses to questions posed by the student teacher. After a week of this the child took the initiative in asking:

> What is your favorite color?

Two days later this child's questions were more numerous if not more complex:

> Do you like summer?
>
> Do you like fall?
>
> Do you like spring?
>
> And do you like winter?

A child in fifth-grade had been corresponding with her partner about the student teacher's field experience itself. She expressed concern over a recent observation by a university person:

> Did we do good today for your teacher, Dr. G.? I hope we do good for your math teacher.

Later that same child confided a fear of making a speech:

> Dear Laura B.
>
> I hope that you feel better soon so you can teach our class. DPA (my speech) is tomorrow and I am getting very scared. I hope that my voice is like you say it is. There is so much to get together. It is getting so close I feel like I could just faint.

A third grade girl also expressed a fear after she had been ill:

> . . . But anyways the head nurse looked at my mouth. She said I had very bad tonsils and if they don't get any better then I will have to take them out. I am scared. Did you get your tonsils out? It was probably my screaming at my bratty little brother that caused it.

A child and his student teacher in a fourth-grade class shared the loss of a sibling. Bryan wrote:

> . . . I have two brothers Brad and Scott, but Scott is dead. He died when he was 4 years old. He is twelve now. Your brother is 29 years old.

The student teacher replied:

> Well Bryan my roommate is from the North Georgia Mountains. I also had a sister Vickie, but she got killed almost two years ago. She would have been 25 years old this month.

Finally, a first-grader expressed her feelings about the partnership that developed in her final journal entry:

> Dear Miss D:
> What will you do with our letters? I will miss you a lot. I will send letters to you when you are gone. I love you. Please think of me and the boys and girls. Why are you going? Please write back to me. Love Jolly

In her last entry, the student teacher gave Jolly her home address so that they could continue to correspond.

These later journal entries are indicative of a sense of trust and rapport that was beginning to emerge between the journal partners. In only a short period of time these partnerships had gained considerable momentum. Interestingly, the student teachers seemed less inclined to use the dialogue journals to develop a relationship than were the children. The student teachers tended to be question askers and to respond to the children in a cursory manner. This may be due to the student teachers not feeling totally comfortable with the children,

being cognizant of the limited duration of the field experience, sensing that someone else might read the journals, and feeling the need to be the sustainers of the dialogue and doing this almost solely through question asking.

Nevertheless almost every student teacher found the dialogue journal activity to be important and worthwhile, not only from a pedagogical standpoint, but also from the perspective of personal relationships.

In a response to the dialogue journal activity at the end of the experience one student teacher wrote:

> The dialogue journal. . . was one of the most rewarding projects I did while at Fowler School. I enjoyed writing to her and I loved reading her responses. I was always anxious to see what she would write next. By doing the journal I was able to learn a lot about first-graders--the way they think and write.

The young man who kept dialogue journals with all his first-graders noted the specialness and genuineness of communicating in writing:

> Of all my experiences in school, this one was among my two favorites. There is something special about seeing in print "You are a good helper" or "You are smart." There is a

> sense of it being genuine and not some "psyche" job to get something out of the student. I know it worked on me when they wrote encouraging things to me.

Several student teachers wrote about how delighted and special the children felt to receive messages from the student teachers. One wrote:

> Kristy is from a broken family. The extra attention she got from me really did a lot for her. It also made me feel attached to her. She told me last Friday that she enjoyed being my pen-pal! This really made me feel good.

Another indicated how the journal led to other sharing:

> Sometimes we would finish reading each other our entries and then just continue talking to each other about things in our lives and about what we like to read

Conclusions

Obviously the journal activity was a positive one for a number of reasons, pedagogic as well as personal. Three weeks is a rather brief period in which to develop a relationship, especially when during that period student teachers are placed in unfamiliar settings with a number of tasks to complete upon which they will be evaluated. Still, it is incumbent upon

teachers to develop relationships of trust and caring with their students as soon as possible. Dialogue journals are one way to foster such relationships and, at the same time, promote skills in written communication. As one student teacher put it:

> . . . I feel this activity developed a trusting friendship between us that may not otherwise been developed through a teacher-student relationship.

The intimacy and permanence of the dialogue journal communications provides an ideal opportunity to develop the I-Thou relationship that Buber claims is essential to becoming fully human.

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