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A Qualitative Investigation of Primary Teachers' Intentional Strategies for Promoting
Development in Early Childhood

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from a qualitative, exploratory study that was designed to describe the intentional strategies that primary teachers, in a single northeast state, reported they used to promote students' academic, social, and behavioral development. The conceptual framework that guided this investigation was derived from the works of La Paro, Pianta, and Stuhlman (2004), La Paro and Pianta (2003), and Pianta et al. (2005). Through their research, they identified three dimensions that define quality emotional and instructional elements in early childhood classroom settings: emotional climate, classroom management, and instructional support. Data were collected using an interview guide based on this conceptual framework and Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique. The sample was 14 primary grade teachers. In recounting memorable classroom situations, all of the interviewees provided rich and specific examples of intentional strategies that encompassed each of the descriptors and dimensions of the conceptual framework. Further, they each described how they made deliberate efforts to create a classroom climate that supported the overall development of their students.

Background and Rationale

Key provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 have “underlined the importance of excellence in early childhood education classrooms and promoted accountability and the use of evidence-based practices that will lead to positive student outcomes” (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004, p. 410). Furthermore, the view that students’ early educational experiences have a significant and lasting impact on their overall development and their success in school and beyond has both theoretical and empirical support (Barnett, 2003; Check, 2001; Haycock, 1998; Laosa, 2005; Pianta, 1999; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002; Shonkoff & Philips, 2000; Shultz & Lombardi, 1988).

Pianta (1999) contended that an essential part of the classroom experience is students’ interactions with their teachers. He further suggested that the qualities of these interactions play a formative role in students’ emotional and academic skills development. In particular, Pianta and La Paro (2003) emphasized the need for teachers to use practices that create supportive learning environments, or quality classrooms, that promote students’ academic achievement and overall development. La Paro et al. (2004) defined quality classrooms as:

the nature and form of specific practices related to the qualities of interactions teachers have with children (e.g., how sensitive the teacher’s behavior is in interactions with children, the overall classroom climate); the management of time and activities (e.g., how much instruction occurs); and the quality of instruction and feedback to students (e.g., how the teacher facilitates children’s engagement and promotes learning.). (p. 412)

Several researchers have examined the qualities of teachers’ interactions and classroom practices and the affect they have on students’ academic, social, and emotional development. In an investigation of third through fifth grade students’ perceptions of teacher-student relationships

and teacher-student interactions, Baker (1999) found that the social setting of the classroom influenced students' perceptions of school as a "likeable and satisfying environment by as early as third grade" (p. 65). Likewise, Check (2001) reported the ways in which teachers behave in the classroom could affect teacher-student interactions. The author identified teachers' demonstration of enthusiasm and respect for their students during instruction and social interactions as important components of a quality classroom from the student perspective.

Vogt (2002) conducted a study to explore how primary school teachers conceptualized caring in teaching and the importance of "an ethic of care for teaching" (p. 251). This author found that participants characterized a caring teacher as one who provided a positive and safe atmosphere for students and took responsibility for students' learning. Participants perceived that caring teachers not only attended to students' academic needs but also to their personal needs. Similarly, Burnett (2002) found that teachers' actions and remarks affected third through sixth grade students' perceptions of their classroom experiences and their emotional and academic growth. Students who indicated that they had positive interactions with their teachers also indicated that the classroom environment was positive

In sum, there is mounting empirical evidence that points to the ways in which the qualities of teachers' interactions and practices can affect a number of different student outcomes. Nevertheless, few studies have expressly focused on primary grade (i.e., pre-kindergarten through third grade) teachers' reports of the intentional practices (hereafter also referred to as strategies) they use to promote positive student outcomes. Since the first measure of student progress under NCLB is in third grade, by extension primary teachers are in a unique position to reflect upon the deliberate strategies that they use to support students' early development and later success in school. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative, exploratory

study was to explore and describe the strategies that primary teachers, in a single northeast state, reported that they intentionally used to promote students' academic, social, and behavioral development.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that guided this study was drawn from the work of La Paro et al. (2004), La Paro and Pianta (2003), and Pianta et al. (2005). Through their research, they identified three dimensions that define quality emotional and instructional elements in early childhood classroom settings: emotional climate, classroom management, and instructional support.

In the study described here, emotional climate encompasses “specific teacher practices related to the qualities of interactions teachers have with children” (La Paro et al., 2004, p. 412). Practices include verbal and non-verbal interaction strategies that teachers consciously use with and model for students in their efforts to set a positive emotional and social tone in their classrooms. Classroom management includes strategies that teachers intentionally use to control the class as a whole and to anticipate and respond to disruptive behaviors. These practices include establishing guidelines for student behavior and redirecting or providing consequences for student misbehavior. Productivity includes teachers purposely creating teacher and student routines to maximize instructional time. Finally, instructional support consists of the facilitative strategies that teachers use to promote student learning and understanding. These encompass teachers deliberately promoting higher order thinking (concept development), selecting instructional methods and materials in order to maximize students' engagement and ability to learn, and providing feedback that focuses on the process of student learning and understanding.

These three dimensions served as the lens through which teachers' reports of the strategies they intentionally used to promote students' academic, social, and behavioral development were examined. As such, the following research questions guided the study.

1. What emotional climate strategies do primary teachers report that they intentionally use to promote students' academic, social, and behavioral development?
2. What classroom management strategies do primary teachers report that they intentionally use to promote students' academic, social, and behavioral development?
3. What instructional support strategies do primary teachers report that they intentionally use to promote students' academic, social, and behavioral development?

Method

A qualitative approach, using an individual interview strategy, was the design selected to answer the research questions. Rubin and Rubin (2005) proposed that qualitative interviews are a means for “understand[ing] experiences and reconstruct[ing] events in which you do not participate” (p. 3). Because the intent of this exploratory investigation was to have participants reflect on their work and describe significant or memorable instructional experiences in their own terms, an interview strategy was deemed appropriate. Specifically, Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was the procedure used to draw out teachers' descriptions.

Procedures

The sample for this exploratory study was drawn from 8,601 primary teachers who were teaching pre-kindergarten through third grade in the 658 elementary schools within a single northeastern state. To take part, participants needed to have passed a comprehensive portfolio

induction program of support and assessment for beginning teachers. Using a snowball sampling technique (Creswell, 2002), 14 primary teachers from 9 schools in 7 different districts, representing suburban and urban settings, were recruited to participate.

Individual in-person interviews, lasting approximately 60-90 minutes, were conducted with each teacher. All sessions were audio taped, and field notes were taken. Following Flanagan's (1954) CIT procedures, interviewees were asked to respond to a statement inviting them to recall their behaviors in self-identified situations (i.e., lessons or activities) and then respond to five questions that prompted them to make judgments about their effectiveness (see Table 1). This process was repeated for each dimension of the framework.

Table 1

Interview Guide Sample: Emotional Climate

Think about a specific situation in which you intentionally used strategies that you feel were particularly effective in creating a positive emotional climate for promoting the academic, social, or behavioral development of the students in your class. Tell me about the situation you have in mind.

1. What led up to this particular situation?
 2. What did you intentionally do that was effective in this situation?
 3. Describe the outcome of or result of your actions.
 4. Why were your actions particularly effective?
 5. What more effective actions might you have used?
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Member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1989), a form of summarizing and confirming participants' responses to ensure accuracy and obtain a more complete understanding of

participant meaning, was used during each interview. The interviewer periodically summarized participants' statements and they were asked to confirm the accuracy. This process gave them an opportunity to validate the interview data. It also allowed the researcher to complete a preliminary analysis while the interviews were in progress.

Data Analysis

Procedures associated with qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994) were used to analyze the interview data, which consisted of verbatim transcripts and field notes. Transcripts were physically organized and divided into meaningful segments. Each transcript was read several times to generate categories, themes, and patterns. With each reading, these were compared to the conceptual framework, modified, and refined. Finally, occurrences of major themes were counted (Miles & Huberman, 1994; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

Sample Description

Table 2 contains summary information and pseudonyms for the 14 primary teachers. There were 2 males and 12 females ranging between 23 to 59 years of age. They worked in 9 schools in 7 different districts, representing suburban and urban settings. Thirteen of the interviewees indicated that the primary designation for their classroom was regular education; one class was designated as special education. Three teachers had earned a Bachelor's Degree, 7 had earned a Master's degree, and 4 had earned a Sixth Year degree. Two participants held initial certification, 4 held provisional certification, and 9 held professional certification. One participant also held National Board Certification.

Table 2

Sample Characteristics Summary

| Pseudonym | Grade Taught | Years of Experience |
|---------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Kathy Newton | Pre-kindergarten | 3 |
| Donna Shea | Pre-kindergarten | 26 |
| Karen Evans | Kindergarten | 14 |
| Dolores Lane | Kindergarten | 28 |
| Jan Umbria | Kindergarten | 8 |
| Grace Gibbins | First | 23 |
| Sandy King | First | 18 |
| Bonnie Smith | First | 22 |
| Jill Carson | Second | 10 |
| Diane Meadows | Second | 31 |
| Stacey Reed | Second | 11 |
| Joanne Keys | Third | 8 |
| Jim Myers | Third | 2 |
| Jake Noble | Third | 3 |

Results

The presentation of the results is organized according to the dimensions of the conceptual framework, emotional climate, classroom management, and instructional support. The interviewee quotes are representative of participants' responses. Pseudonyms are used and personal information that might suggest who they are or where they are employed has been deleted from quotations to protect participant confidentiality.

Emotional Climate

All of the interviewees reported using intentional strategies that could be categorized as positive verbal interactions. Their descriptions of the strategies they perceived to be particularly effective included giving students compliments, acknowledging when students displayed appropriate behaviors, and affirming a child's self worth. In recalling how she created a positive emotional climate for her students, Karen described giving her students "compliments all the time", as she encouraged them to meet her expectations:

I compliment them on their trying. I encourage them to work a little harder, think a little bit more, and never give up on themselves. . . . Just modeling the behavior that I expect and the need to respect themselves and people's property. . . . I'll say to them a lot, "I love how you are helping your friends".

Nine of the interviewees also reported purposely using social conversations with their students as they aimed to create a positive emotional climate in their classrooms. Teachers described how they engaged students in conversations about themselves and their families. Stacey provided an example of how she used social conversations during an afternoon class meeting block:

We start on the rug. We'll do three shares. . . . exciting news; if it's their birthday or if they did something fun over the weekend. . . . if they got a new puppy, if they went to the beach this weekend, just anything that they want to share.

The teachers in this study also indicated that, by design, they used strategies that they perceived demonstrated their sensitivity to and consideration of students' academic and personal needs. Eight interviewees described actively listening and responding to students' expressions of emotions (positive or negative) as their way of being sensitive. Jill chose to describe how she

would listen to and respond to students who had a difficult time adapting to having a new baby in their homes as her way of letting them know she understood their feelings:

It's meaningful to them that I mean what I say and to show them that I sort of back up the things that I say. I know you and I care about you. I can't just say that to them. But by listening attentively and by giving them the opportunity to air their feelings . . . when I think they're feeling down and just talk about it, then all those things show them that I do know them and I do care about them. . . . A couple of the kids have new babies at home. "Boy it must be hard to get your homework done at night when there's a new baby around. I bet your parents are pretty busy." It's putting out a connection that seems to make them understand that I understand them.

Concerning teacher sensitivity to students' academic needs, Karen shared how she reassured her kindergarten students that making academic mistakes was acceptable:

I don't want them to ever be afraid to try. . . . I tell them all the time we learn through mistakes. We turn our mistakes into masterpieces. If I make a mistake while I'm writing or drawing, I'll ask them how I can change this into a masterpiece. It's modeling. . . . In kindergarten, it's all new to them and they're so worried about doing everything right when they first walk in the door. I don't want them uptight at five years old. I think their learning goes a lot further because they're just more relaxed.

Classroom Management

In describing the strategies that they felt were particularly effective in managing their classrooms, 13 of the interviewees shared stories about how they deliberately set clear expectations as a means to supporting students' prosocial behavior. One strategy that was

consistently reported by teachers was the creation of classroom rules, either independently or in consultation with students. Donna recalled how she set clear behavioral expectations for her pre-kindergarten students and discussed them during circle time, early in the year:

At the very beginning of each school year, expectations for behavior . . . are developed. We talk about the different things that we need to remember . . . and we routinely refer to them at circle time. . . . They do need to sit, use a quiet voice, and body still. If they want to talk, they raise their hand. They also need to listen.

In addition to teachers consciously setting clear expectations, 11 of the interviewees described intentionally having materials for lessons and activities ready in advance so they could effectively use instructional time. Jan chose to talk about how she purposely organized her materials for an entire week:

I have my Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday bins. Everything I need for that day is in my bin so that I don't have to go looking for anything. . . . Everything is done come Monday. . . . I think for the student's sake and for my sake it's nice to just have everything done. I can focus on them, the task at hand, and what we're doing. . . . I try never to let them sit and wait.

Twelve of the interviewees also described intentionally using verbal and non-verbal redirection as a means of promoting students' positive behaviors. An illustration comes from Joanne's description of redirecting her third grade students by verbally reminding them of expected behaviors:

I'm always listening and reminding students about positive behavior and how to speak to each other. . . . I redirect them in a positive way. . . . The responsive classroom language is making sure that you redirect students and give them the responsibility of knowing

what their job is as opposed to telling them. This is what you need to be doing . . . what's your job right now? They need to tell me what their job is and show me how to walk down the hallway. . . . It's always redirecting in a positive way.

Instructional Support

As they recalled lessons or activities that they perceived to be particularly effective in promoting student learning and understanding, 11 of the interviewees reported creating, by design, situations in which students were guided through the process of forming their own solutions. In particular, these interviewees talked about how they often used hands-on, concrete experiences or had students explain verbally or in writing how they solved the problems at hand.

An example of teachers creating hands-on, concrete experiences comes from Jill and her story about using a pumpkin and a tape measure to help her second grade students understand the mathematical concept of circumference:

They were able to show me what circumference was, how they would measure circumference, and the proper way to use the tape measure. They were able to show me that you have to start at the beginning of the tape measure. It has to be done from one end to exactly where the other end would be where you are measuring to. They were able to demonstrate that they understood the skills when I went from group to group.

Jake recounted how he deliberately focused on the process of student learning and understanding by having his third graders write about their observations regarding physical and chemical changes:

I wanted them to be able to identify properties of a solid and a liquid. . . . Observe whether or not it was going to be a chemical change or not. . . . Write a descriptive

sentence about that change. Then tell me whether or not the change was a chemical change or a physical change based on what they witnessed. The reason why I liked it is because I don't think any of the students expected that type of chemical reaction to occur.

Nine of the study participants indicated that they presented lessons through various modalities as a way of promoting student engagement and addressing their diverse learning styles. Teachers described using visual, auditory, and kinesthetic approaches. An example of using a visual approach to help students with writing comes from Diane who recounted using a cognitive construct, a picture of a hamburger, to help her students write a story:

I use a hamburger and a hamburger roll as one of my cognitive constructs for writing a story. I tell them the top roll is the topic sentence or the beginning sentence. The bottom roll is a closing sentence. Inside you have your hamburger, cheese, maybe lettuce, tomato, and ketchup. All those are your details. I will tell them specifically I want at least three or four sentences that are going to describe the characters and setting.

An illustration of teachers using the kinesthetic approach for addressing students' learning styles comes from Jan. She shared how she taught her kindergarten students various math concepts, such as on top of, underneath, and next to by using movement:

We did a math lesson about on top of, underneath, and next to. There's a song about monkeys on our math tape. We used our chairs and we pretended we were monkeys so they weren't sitting for the hour math lesson. We stood on our chairs. We stood next to our chairs. We crawled underneath our chairs. . . . They thought it was the greatest thing.

With regard to formative verbal feedback, 12 of the teachers reported intentionally using this strategy in their efforts to focus on the process of student learning and understanding. Their

stories included descriptions of commenting on students' academic (e.g., acquiring skills or understanding concepts) and behavioral progress.

An example of the use of verbal formative feedback to comment on students' academic progress comes from Grace in her description of how she praised her first grade students for persistence in decoding unknown words on their own, during reading:

I especially praise them when they've done it on their own without me prompting them. 'I love the way you looked at that picture. You went back and re-read. That was fantastic.' I might say to them, 'Tell me how you figured out that really big word.' Then I try to restate what I saw them do: 'I saw you look at the picture. I heard you use the beginning sound. That was really great. That's what I want to see good readers do.'

Discussion

The aim of this investigation was to explore and describe primary teachers' reports of the intentional strategies they used to promote students' academic, social, and behavioral development. Specifically, teachers' descriptions were examined through the lens of three dimensions, emotional climate, classroom management, and instructional support that define quality emotional and instructional elements in early childhood classroom settings (La Paro et al., 2004; La Paro & Pianta, 2003; Pianta et al., 2005). These dimensions focus on qualities of interactions among teachers and students (i.e., what teachers do), a key method for promoting student achievement and development.

In recalling and describing their deliberated efforts to promote students' academic, social, and behavioral development, the primary teachers in this study reported using strategies that touched on all the dimensions and descriptors of the conceptual framework (La Paro & Pianta,

2003). Furthermore, interviewees often talked about the dimensions of the framework, as a set of interrelated strategies. The data suggests, therefore, that the dimensions of this model are best understood as a connected set of strategies for promoting quality classroom settings.

In their efforts to create a positive emotional climate and promote students' early development, the teachers in this study purposefully used a variety of strategies that have previously been identified as affecting students' relationships with adults and peers, motivation to learn, and overall development (Baker, 1999; Check, 2001; Davis et al., 2001; (NAEYC, 1997; Stuhlman & Pianta, 2001). As Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) stated: "children grow and thrive in the context of close and dependable relationships that provide love and nurturance, security, responsive interaction, and encouragement and exploration" (p. 389). The responses of the 14 teachers in the study suggest that they fully understand this. Through their stories, they confirmed the belief that when children experience supportive and stable environments early in life, they are more likely to exhibit healthy development later on.

Concerning, classroom management and the goals of supporting students' positive behavior in the classroom and maximizing instructional time, the primary teachers in this study provided many rich examples of using strategies for managing their classroom that have been identified as recommended practice (Martin et al., 1999; NAEYC, 1997; Noell et al., 2002; Tidwell et al., 2003; Traynor, 2003). The study participants reported setting clear expectations, creating routines, and using positive reinforcement, redirection, and consequences as the primary means for managing student behaviors. Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) noted that the early years of schooling and the ways in which teachers support students' positive behavior helps to advance their development in the area of conduct. Moreover, research has shown that teachers' use of classroom management strategies has the potential to affect students' overall behavior in the

classroom (Martin et al., 1999; Noell et al., 2002; Tidwell et al., 2003; Traynor, 2003). For example, setting clear expectations for students and establishing classroom routines has been proven to help students to stay on task and regulate their behaviors (Kishor & Godfrey, 1999; Martin & Baldwin, 1996). It is apparent that the teachers in this investigation confirm our understanding that classroom management is vital to the promotion of students' behavioral development and in turn, their academic and social development.

Finally, the study participants indicated that they intentionally used a variety of facilitative strategies that they believed were particularly effective in promoting student learning and understanding. By design, they used instructional strategies that supported their students in forming their own solutions and guiding them through the process of learning. These teachers described how they addressed diverse leaning styles by presenting lessons and activities that incorporated various modalities including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

Findings from previous research have shown that teachers should use instructional strategies that scaffold and support students' independent problem solving and provide them with opportunities to initiate their own ideas (Chinn et al., 2000; Stright & Supplee, 2002; Wade, 1995). Moreover, teachers providing feedback that focuses on the process of student learning and understanding has been recognized as an instructional strategy that positively affects student learning (Burnett, 2002; Lambert, 2000; Matsumura et al., 2002; Ruiz-Primo et al., 2002).

Limitations of the Study

The small number of primary teachers in this qualitative, exploratory study and the collection of data through an individual interview are major limitations of this research. Additionally, participants were drawn from a single state representing a variety of grades, school

districts, years of experiences, and certifications. Moreover, interviewees volunteered, self-selected, to participate in the investigation. Finally, the instrument had not been used in other studies and, therefore, it constituted a limitation of this study.

Concluding Remarks

In sharing their stories about their deliberate classroom practices and real-life experiences, the teachers in the exploratory study brought to life current thinking about the recommended practices that define quality emotional and instructional elements in early childhood classroom settings. They were thoughtful in selecting and describing specific situations, such as activities, lessons, or student interactions, in which they believed that they were particularly effective in creating a positive emotional climate, establishing classroom management, and providing instructional support for the students in their classrooms. Moreover, they clearly articulated the “what”, “how” and “why” of these deliberate strategies. Future research is needed to better understand how such strategies support students' early development and later success in school.

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