THE USE OF DIALOGUE IN EDUCATION: RESEARCH, IMPLEMENTATION
AND PERSONAL/PROFESSIONAL EVALUATION

A Synthesis Project Presented

By

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Critical and Creative Thinking Program

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ABSTRACT
THE USE OF DIALOGUE IN EDUCATION: RESEARCH, IMPLEMENTATION AND
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June 2004
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As I reflect back on my learning through the Program in Critical and Creative Thinking
(CCT), The Dialogue Process course (CCT 616) has been the pivotal experience for my current
research and future career direction. Research and observations I have made in my work show
that dialogue practice in elementary classrooms leads to overall learning through community
building in the classroom, and to more effective student thinking and meta-cognitive strategies.
Although I believe in the importance of dialogue in education, I have struggled with
implementing it into my own teaching. The struggle itself has stimulated a deeper examination of
the obstacles as I see them. It has also required personal and professional reflection on my
process through CCT, and communicating my ideal vision of dialogue in the larger scheme of
my work and life.

My synthesis highlights my learning experiences through the CCT program and the
influences it had on my career. It discusses some of the critical points of my experiences in
connection to my specific interest in Dialogue. Without this reflection on past learning, my
current reflection would be impossible. Naming those skills and ideals that I have drawn from
my coursework, has enabled me to reconnect with my passion for education itself, as well as the

value the dialogue process holds for learning and teaching. By asking myself the question of why

I am finding implementation of dialogue so difficult, I've been able to answer this and other

questions relating to the question of where I am headed with my professional life and why.

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CHAPTER 1

IMPACT AND POTENTIAL OF DIALOGUE AS I SEE IT

"Dialogue" created an entirely new learning path in my life. When I began meeting each week in the spring of 2002 for a course on The Dialogue Process, I was unaware of the subtle, yet eventually profound connections I would be making in my own personal life and career. My participation with seven other adults in the dialogue process was one of the most critical phases in my journey through the Critical and Creative Thinking (CCT) Program. Practicing dialogue would lead me much closer to personal insight on what I am passionate about, and what I envisioned for my life and work.

The utilization of critical and creative thinking by others and myself was possible in a dialogue session. I found dialogue to be the connecting piece between having strategies and a knowledge base for creative and critical thinking, and a reflective and safe context in which to practice this thinking. The dialogue process uses five basic elements that are necessary to its practice. I felt that these same elements were also inherent in my own ideal of teaching and learning. In short, it was the tool that I felt could transform a classroom.

Based on the work of William Isaacs (1999), there are five elements necessary for a container to use dialogue. These are:

1. Respect- Assume that you are among equals; that they are legitimate and important to the learning process, regardless of whether or not you agree with them.

2. Listen-Listen for understanding and learning, not correctness. Be aware of your own listening to others. Do this by being aware of "mental models" and obstacles that get in the way of what's being said and hear. Do not listen in order to respond or advocate, listen to understand.

3. <u>Suspend Judgment</u> –Be aware of assumptions and certainties and learn to hold them apart or to the side without feeling the compulsion to act upon them.

4. <u>Free Yourself</u>-Balance inquiry and advocacy. Free yourself up from a rigid mindset. In inquiry, seek clarification and a deeper level of understanding, not the exposure of weakness.

5. <u>Communicate Your Reasoning Process</u>-Talk about your assumptions and how you arrived at what you believe. Seek out the data on which assumptions are based (your own and others).

These five elements were to me the essentials in transforming a successful learning environment in the classroom. Not only did I believe these elements to be essential in building relationships with and among students; I felt they could promote a way of thinking and approaching learning that would promote critical thinking, reflection and change.

This year I began thinking about implementing dialogue in my own classroom. However, the struggle I'm having with this implementation has led me to take a closer look at others' experiences with implementing dialogue in the classroom. It has also brought me to a re-evaluation point on a personal level.

I realize that in order to dig deeper into the obstacles of implementing dialogue, I may have to address a larger obstacle or problem in my life. Identifying the specifics of my struggles may help me answer the question of where it is I see myself headed. It may also help me explain why. This synthesis is an attempt to succinctly discuss my learning and transformations throughout CCT, my research on dialogue specifically in relation to learning and change in education, and my connection of my reflection to my larger career dissatisfaction and where to go from here.

Chapter two of this synthesis focuses on my development and learning through the CCT program. I explain the highlights of my learning in the program and how I related it to my

teaching and where I am today. In chapter three of this synthesis, I discuss my research on dialogue and its use in elementary education. I discuss what I saw in dialogue as relevant to community building and meta-cognition as well as how I envisioned it in my future. In chapter four of my synthesis I examine my career dissatisfaction at present, and my overall reflection to clarifying my personal and professional goals and direction from here.

CHAPTER 2

LEARNING HIGHLIGHTS AND "AHAS"-MY PERSONAL
CONNECTIONS AND EXTRACTIONS FROM CCT COURSES

In September of 2000, I decided to move beyond the walls of my work as a teacher, to better access a culture and personal process of thinking for change that I had felt was stagnant in my life. I was teaching fifth grade at a parochial suburban school at the time. I enjoyed working with this particular age group, facilitating their learning, and being able to guide them in seeing their own potential. Some of the obstacles I was facing at the time were a need for other teaching strategies, a feeling of discouragement with administration, and a lack of time for teacher collaboration. As a relatively new teacher, I knew that my own strategies were limited. I was excited to learn more about teaching. I felt a rapport and support among my coworkers, but I felt frustrated that the final say often went to an outside pastor rather than us as a faculty. And lastly, there was little opportunity for teachers to take part in the actual design or revision of curriculum, administrative policies, reflection and general sharing of ideas. This was something I felt very strongly about. Staff meetings often turned up being venting sessions or time to decide upon logistical questions and concerns. Overall, I felt like my work environment that was not effectively helping me make meaningful changes in my educating. What I connected with in joining the CCT program was its inherent belief in the possibility to change one's environment for the better. Later, I would learn just how much this program required in genuine self-examination and commitment to bringing forth positive change.

Creative Potential Within

In order to communicate my personal process up to the present day I must also include the research and works that inspired and affected my journey. The Creative Thinking Course (CCT 602) was my first step in beginning to "unlearn" fixed patterns of thinking and defining things and begin to entertain many perspectives on one issue or question. In beginning to redefine the term "creativity" for myself, the examples in <u>Uncommon Genius,</u> by Denise Shekerjian (1990), gave me a deeper appreciation for a wide variety of dispositions commonly utilized in creative thinking. One of the many interviews that struck me in the book was that of Central Park East Secondary School founder, Deborah Meier. During her interview she discussed her focus on "small d-democratic values, by which I mean a respect for diversity, a respect for the possibilities of what every person is capable of, a respect for another person's point of view, and a respect for considerable intellectual rigor" (Shekerjian 1990, p.23). This notion of democratic values stuck in my mind with other themes I was detecting from my new understanding of creativity.

While working on my final project of creating a curriculum unit on the reading of Charles Dickens' <u>A Christmas Carol</u>, I began to tie in those skills I extracted from our readings and incorporate them into a series of lessons and activities for my fifth-graders.

> I have decided to center on five skills I have discovered through the Creative Thinking Course as those conducive and intrinsic in creativity and the creative process in eight lesson plans from a Christmas Carol. The five skills that I have extracted from this course to explain as part of creative thinking are intrinsic motivation (corrected as "disposition" by my teacher), brainstorming/deferred judgment, divergent thinking/flexibility, multiple intelligence, and risk taking. (Kenefick J. unpublished work, 2000)

While I applied these five areas of skill to the design of my lessons, I became aware that all of them involved more decision making and thinking on the part of my students. I began

focusing in on their "ownership" in the learning as well as how their input would be a part of the lesson itself.

Another dimension to my new definition of creativity included the belief in one's self as a creative individual. I was a person who tended to say little unless extremely comfortable in a class of peers. I recognized this as a fear of being "wrong" as well as a belief or lack thereof in the validity of my own ideas. The biography portrayal we were each required to do was a project that asked us to represent those characteristics of our chosen person which we perceived as the essence of what made him/her creative. This project forced me to take a leap in putting myself "out there" for others to see. It also allowed me room to create something personal without restriction. Though we were required to convey the essence of this person as we saw it in any medium, we could not use third person. This left the assignment wide open to our choice as well as "creativity".

I decided to write a play or short dialogue between two of Sinead O'Connor's estranged family members on their way to meet her. I had always admired her voice as one that stood apart from other musicians, and her lyrics although often controversial or sad, to be captivating. Along with the dialogue I had compiled a mix of selected verses from various songs by Sinead that I felt represented the phase of her life being discussed. I remember feeling completely nervous yet excited about doing something that was personally very difficult. It was later that I realized how much of a risk was involved in giving up the control in my teaching to elicit more genuine learning from my students. As I began a new look at myself as a creative person, the projects and topics I focused on remained those I was passionate about in education. Always feeling like my own teaching could be more democratic, I consistently experimented with the techniques and ideas I was grabbing onto in the program.

Reflective Thought

The introduction to the concept of "meta-cognition" got me thinking differently about what it is to teach more democratically and allow more student directed learning. Meta-cognition is defined as "The ability to plan a strategy for producing what is needed, to be conscious of our own steps and strategies during the act of problem solving, and to reflect on and evaluate the productiveness of our own thinking." (Costa, 1984) The Thinking Classroom, by Shari Tishman et. al (1995) assisted me in moving toward a different kind of facilitation. The process of meta-cognition was one that I would later realize was inherent in dialogue itself. One reading that particularly stuck out in my mind came from this book. It dealt with the concept of mental-management. The chapter "Mental-Management: Pictures of Practice" (73) used a scenario of making "thinking caps" with students illustrating strategies they could use for better individual thinking in their work. The steps involved in this mental-management involved four phases of students' thinking. "Before Thinking," (78) lighted the preparation for thinking in one's mind, for example, visualizing the upcoming topic. "During Thinking" (79) covered setting goals and standards of thinking as well as keeping track of one's thinking by referring back to original goals and standards. An example of this was a student reminding himself to take his time with the questions and use "time to give good answers". Questions like "How am I doing? Am I meeting my goals? Am I meeting my standards?" would then allow the student to check back on his work and assess his thinking as it was happening. The last phase "After Thinking" (81) requires the thinker to review and evaluate his or her thinking and look for improvements for later thinking. The desire to see my students own their learning was now connecting to making them aware of their thinking during learning.

I had never before been given any information on how to teach thinking strategies to students. And yet, essentially that was what was presumed in every lesson I taught, and all those I had been taught myself. I was assuming that the students would process information themselves and ultimately "grasp" what was being taught. Now I could recognize how this very assumption would not enable my students as thinkers, nor did it correlate with the idea of modeling strategies to students, something all teachers are taught to do. In other words, I needed not only to teach the concept I was trying to get across to my students. I also needed to model my thought processes and allow for them to share their own as they were receiving this new information. After all, I wanted them to not only remember; but also learn and make this new knowledge their own. Now I was seeing how not only might the learning I intended for my students be different for each of them, but that it could be happening on many levels. They would not just be receiving information to sit passively in their brains; they would be active in their digestion of this information. They would look at it from different angles and perspectives, they could decide what they wanted to know more about it, what they found confusing or lacking in it, and how it applied and or connected to their other learning. And they could do all of these things while maintaining an awareness of their thinking. The skills and dispositions I saw as inherent in critical and creative thinking could now be practiced and reflected upon. Meta-cognition became a new focal point for me in looking at effective teaching and learning.

The Dialogue Process

Taking the Dialogue Process in the spring of 2001 gave me the space to utilize and appreciate creative and critical thinking in a context of trust and openness. This was the concept of "thinking together" through dialogue. In conjunction with reading the work of William Isaacs' (1999) Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together, dialogue would provide the ultimate

tool for me in seeing where the individual contribution and collective meaning could simultaneously produce new ideas and collaborative, democratic change. The dialogue process I experienced began with a "check-in" system of sharing our feelings or thoughts at that exact moment. Some people would state that things are going well, others would might share a bad day or week, and still others would just reflect on an issue or question that's been bothering or occupying them. As we listened to this check-in system, the facilitator would find collective meaning in everyone's sharing. Then he chose a topic or question to discuss based on this. As I thought about my teaching job, I considered using something more focused. Perhaps it could be a question or topic of the day designated for the students to focus on. I could even gear the discussion topic toward something in the curriculum, or to what was happening in school or the classroom.

As I worked on my final paper for the course, I began to seize upon the way dialogue could really apply to my classroom, my administration and the school community overall. I left my job of teaching that June. I had decided that I needed to focus more intently on my Masters and seek out other opportunities for a different teaching experience. I felt that I needed to explore other school environments besides the one I had started in to really help clarify the possibilities of my new ideas. I also felt that additional experience would enable my observations to evolve as my context changed.

I began working part-time by substitute teaching in Westwood Public Schools and working at an extended day program once a week. Being away from my classroom allowed for observational time to see what kinds of techniques were being used by different teachers as well as what their curriculum was like. This would have been impossible to do working full-time and

taking a night class. This way I was able to mull over what I was seeing and reflect on how it connected to my various coursework. I was also able to take more courses as a result.

Practicum Helps the Connections

During "Practicum Processes of Research and Engagement" (CCT 698), in Fall 2002, I was able to better identify what moved me about dialogue, and how I could translate it to my work experience. Using the tools outlined in the Phases of Research and Engagement (http://www.cct.umb.edu/peter_taylor/698-02.html), I was able to specify the potential values inherent in dialogue and results for its use in the classroom. These specifics were community building and meta-cognition. Tying in my observations with research by Vivian Gussin Paley's You Can't Say You Can't Play, (1992) Jane Bluestein's Creating Emotionally Safe Schools, (2001) and Thomas Sergiovanni's, Building Community in Schools (1994), I was closer to my visual of dialogue at the elementary level.

Creating a sense of community as well as providing time for genuine reflection on learning was my focus at the start of the course. I wanted to examine the two areas in connection to using the dialogue process in an elementary classroom. Originally, I was envisioning the class sitting around using dialogue and beginning to feel more connected to each other and respectful towards one another as a result. I also envisioned students sitting in a dialogue session discussing how their own learning progressed during the week, or highlighting positive and negative learning experiences.

Connecting the critical thinking part of my research, however, began to seem as if it were separate from building community. Thus, I was having a hard time making them simultaneous qualities of dialogue. Through the sharing we did in class and the feedback we received on our work, I began to find the missing connector. The critical thinking was an indirect effect of

dialogue, which could be used to build community in a classroom. Specifically, I was looking at meta-cognition in critical thinking. I was now able to see how the thinking and reflecting individuals must use during dialogue was actually critical thinking or meta-cognitive practice in and of itself.

Work Change and Observations

While I was finishing up my research with dialogue and my final paper, I was also finishing some work with another course, called "Designing Instruction Mathematics and Science" in the Teacher Education Program (EDCG 625). It was in this course that I was seeing how Math curriculum could be game centered while also providing opportunities for dialogue regarding student explanations or discussion of problem solving approaches. Upon a reference from one of the teachers of the course, I applied to a teaching assistant position in Sudbury with the desire to gain more experience in a progressive school. Again I felt like it was another chance to learn and observe while not having my own classroom. Being in this school made me realize what elementary education could look like when new ideas were welcomed and tried, and reflection was used often to assess results but also revise or redefine direction.

It was easy to recognize right away that the very core of the school philosophy was different from my previous teaching environment. Although it emphasized a love for children, as any school ought to, there was a visibly different approach to learning than there was where I first taught. From the teachers to the administration there was a genuine interest in learning for the teachers as well as the students. I would hear questions such as "Is there a way that we could work on the current Math evaluation in teams?" to "I'd really like to freshen up on my Open Circle training, is there a way some teachers who have missed the last few could go again?" To

me, these questions signified a genuine belief in the importance of growing as a learner rather than doing something because it was "required".

I also noticed that the strategies that teachers used with their students focused more on discussion and feedback during the lesson. This had to do with the style of facilitation among teachers in conjunction with using a curriculum that emphasized hands-on games and techniques to both develop and explain a concept. Now I was beginning to recognize how schools individually could provide a culture that was not only conducive to implementing dialogue, but also a reflection of what dialogue is.

I remember going every Monday at the school, to a twice-weekly event known as "School Meeting." The entire student and staff body gathered to start off the week with a meeting run by students themselves. It would include a brief discussion of new programs, or upcoming school events as well as other thoughts or reflections for the week. Students and teachers also went up to the front if they were having a birthday that week. Then they introduced themselves with names and ages and when their birthdays would occur. Though it seemed simple enough, this half hour enabled the students to see each other and listen to other students. They also were receiving a message that each member of the school was important to the school itself. On Friday afternoons the school would return to end their week with School Meeting, this time featuring any students who wanted to perform in some way for the school. It might include a group dance, reciting a poem, playing an instrument and more. Reflecting on my practicum research and seeing the approaches that existed in this school, I was re-discovering an excitement about education and qualities of dialogue in many contexts.

Diversity, Team-Building and Facilitation

As I worked through the summer babysitting and thinking about my work, I became excited about returning to the classroom as a teacher, and being able to put my research to work. I enrolled in two courses, one being Creativity, Collaboration and Organizational Change (CCT 618). This course brought a new clarity to another piece of my vision in education and life.

Each of the three components of the course Diversity Awareness, Teambuilding, and Facilitation and Change prompted a perceptual awareness in myself that I was able to identify and incorporate into my future goals. For me, the diversity awareness workshop provoked a closer look at what it means to be white. It also provided a forum in which I could appreciate each workshop member's personal history. As we first shared our histories with the group, I realized how important bringing it forth in a learning situation is. I valued it as a tool that I would use in my own teaching. I began to see how getting to know each other first on that morning we met, helped create a space for sharing and working together with less inhibition and more openness. I also valued the connection it had to a larger question of how we identify ourselves and relate to each other with awareness.

> I do not have the answers and I still feel like I am speaking from such a limited perception. Yet I do know that thinking about acting locally, I am encouraged that within myself it can start in educating others, and doing things with a deeper awareness. I am hopeful that with more resources and more learning, there will be a desire for dialogues that could talk to the undiscussables and break down issues for smaller ones to attack one by one. (Kenefick J. unpublished work, 2003).

The personal vision exercises in the Teambuilding Workshop provided me with a framework in which I could articulate my "ideals" or dreams for how I wanted to live and work. With one exercise we were asked individually to rank a list of work values by marking five listed values out of a total of 15 that were most significant to us. The five items that I checked were:

1.Develop a sense of partnership with others.

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2.Be candid about your mistakes.

3.Each person is responsible for the success of all.

4.Demonstrate by your action what you believe.

5.Be a helpful resource to others.

I had also written next to the last item marked other "strive to be in a learning organization, believe in the pursuit of life long learning."

The next step in this activity was to share with a partner our lists and explain our reasoning behind choosing the items or values we did. Then we switched and had our partners do the same with us. This was an adaptation of a technique called Cooperative Response we had discussed. Cooperative Response is a technique of listening where the listener sees the value in an idea without judgment or focus on the negative, and then responds to the speaker with feedback. As I listened to the feedback I was given by my partner, what I learned was that she saw a distinct pattern in my choices and reasoning of work environments. She noted that I chose qualities that indicated honesty was a priority. She also saw that group collaboration was equally important to recognizing individual potential. In other words, each member was truly valued. As I look this over now, I also see that there needs to be a sense of authenticity in what I do and what others do where I work. Hearing an objective perspective on what we chose had actually made me see more clearly what must exist in my work environment for me to be happy or fulfilled.

The second exercise that stood out for me during this Teambuilding Workshop was the second piece to this Vision for Change activity. In this activity we had to describe how we were currently discontented our situation at work which amplified or referenced the work problem we identified during the introduction.

Potential discontent is finding a teaching position in a school that demonstrates and embodies same values that I do. It is often hard to decipher this from a help wanted ad, despite what one can learn in the interview. I'd also like to some day build my own school with the resources to make it great but also make it accessible to low income families. (Kenefick J. unpublished work, 2003)

The second step in this exercise asked us to imagine a better future. We had to write a description of the future we would like to create for ourselves, or our groups at work. We also had to state what should be happening, or what new behaviors would be needed and what processes should be in place.

My future would include or be teaching in an environment that has a grasp on and considers all facets of a school community-parents, students, teachers, administrators, and understands the need to have a shared vision. I want to be a part of a school where mistakes can be made, acknowledged, evaluated and where progress continues. I would be able to take a sabbatical just like any other professor in order to enhance my own teaching and learning. I would also be encouraged to share with my team at work. We would be models for each other, support systems and resources in providing an outstanding education for our students. (Kenefick J. unpublished work, 2003)

The third piece of this activity involved sharing again and getting feedback. Then we wrote statements of purpose for our life and work. This also included listing goals that would be a means of achieving our purpose.

My purpose in life and work should evolve over time like myself. Purpose is to facilitate, educate and be an active learner and reflective practitioner, Purpose is to love and be loved-have a human component." "I want the values true to my person in life to correlate to those in my work-my purpose throughout is to teach and learn always and do what makes me happy and fulfilled." (Kenefick J. unpublished work, 2003)

Next came the goals listing component and then an overall reflection of our learning from the exercises.

1.Participate in academics that add value to work and life. 2.To reflect on my teaching and be a resource to others. 3.To learn and explore and use innovative tools to teach from my coursework, etc. 4.Make current work situation one to learn from and get a teaching position for fall to grow from as well. (Kenefick J. unpublished work, 2003)

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As I looked back on the page of writing, I realized how I never really wrote down what I wanted for my ideal work situation. I had thought about it from time to time, or thought about what I might do with my Masters degree. However, it was always done with the cloudiness of worry or and other obligations and obstacles. It was refreshing and enlightening to voice my dream work situation and begin to make steps for achieving it. As we discussed during the dialogue session, our teacher, Allyn Bradford, had facilitated that day, the idea of a vision may or may not be entirely possible if it is ever-changing and growing. Yet without one, it is harder to strive toward something we haven't begun to define.

> I learned from discussion with Sarah that I do look at the larger whole or system before the individual more than I thought I did. Honesty is a major part of my value system- something that was a new revelation. In talking with John I learned that I view teaching as relationship centered -as I do my family. I hadn't put those two areas together like that. My goals are/can be more specific than I first anticipated. (Kenefick J. unpublished work, 2003)

In the third and final weekend entitled Facilitating Participation and Collaboration in Groups, we focused on various techniques used for facilitation and change. This was my favorite weekend of the three. Some of the most enlightening exercises we did were both different forms of group collaboration such as World Café and Open Space. "Open Space" is a group participation process in which the participants set the agenda. It is a format in which the participants generate topic and then time slots are designated for each topic. Then the participants move to the discussion topic that most interests them. There are four principles of Open Space and one law. The principles are: "1.Whoever comes is the right people. 2. Whatever happens is the only thing that could have. 3.Whenever is the right time. 4.When it's over, it's over. (Owen, 95) The "One Law" of Open Space is that known as the Law of Two Feet. It states that "If during the course of the gathering, any person finds him or herself in a situation where

they are neither learning nor contributing, they must use their two feet and go to some more productive place." (Owen, 98)

The way Open Space is formatted is in cycles. First the cycle with all of the "stakeholders" or those invested in the discussion gather. Then the cycle reveals leadership and diversity present. From the discussion there should manifest practical outcomes in day-to-day work. Participants are also asked to suppose leadership in oneself and others to respond to emerging possibilities. Afterwards, the participants share their learning through reflection and storytelling. What I remembered from the Open Space discussions was how there was a distinct flow and connectedness of discussion, despite the openness of its principles. In fact, it reminded me much of dialogue and how the meaning or collective learning is often spontaneous. The recommendations we were given for using Open Space were for resolving major issues, when issues have high levels of complexity, when there are high levels of diversity of people involved, when the presence of potential or actual conflict exists, and when it deals with decision time of the previous day.

In "World Café" another group collaboration process, we proceeded much like Open Space. One difference however, was that individuals after being at a table of discussion they chose moved to different tables rather than proceeding to another in the same group they were in first. What I liked about these exercises was the allowance for multiple perspectives again on an issue and then the practical solutions that evolved.

An activity called "Whole Systems Change" also struck me as a great tool for identifying problems and solutions in school policy and classroom decisions. The topic or question was on Standardized Testing and College or Post Graduation Guidance for students. First we identified the stakeholders of this question. Then we moved to these groups and worked out suggestions

representative to that stakeholder group. Next the suggestions that were generated were put together or categorized into what larger theme or question they related to. Once these were posted up for others to see, groups walked around the various walls of suggestions and then prioritized those suggestions and looked for solutions that met or connected between what was posted. It was amazing to see how possible compromise and even similar interests could be discovered by the collaboration of ideas generated from different stakeholder perspectives.

Through all of these exercises I was reminded of how I excited I am by group processes and problem solving. The possibility of change was evident with all that I learned this particular weekend and I was feeling genuinely alive while being a part of the discussions and idea generating taking place. With these two exercises I felt myself getting again re-examining what I love about facilitation and learning. I was happiest in an environment where all participants were utilized and there was a practical tool for all to use in moving ahead toward positive change not just in education; but also in community issues and state issues.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH ON DIALOGUE AND ITS APPLICATION

IN EDUCATION

Dialogue Research and Self-Application

Because Dialogue was the crucial connector for me in reflection upon my coursework and my personal interests of education, I feel it's necessary for me to explain to what point I had taken my learning from dialogue and began applying it differently in theory to teaching. My own ideas for the potential to dialogue during the final weeks of the course in spring of 2002 were both classroom centered and school centered. In other words, I saw its applicability to both relationships with students and teachers as well as overall school culture. As I began to map out my original thesis question in Practicum began as "How can I devise a practical application for dialogue to be used by educators as a means for better development of student-teacher relationships, honest and accurate feedback for self-assessment of both teachers and students, and reflection for more meaningful learning?" (Kenefick J. unpublished work, 2002) Initially overwhelmed but eventually aided by the various directions that this question was taking, I revised my question later in the course. It became "How does dialogue centered on meta-cognition and reflection build more effective thinking skills as well as enhance student-teacher relationships for more effective learning in the elementary classroom." (Kenefick J. unpublished work, 2002) I began to narrow down my focus to what interested me most which was the learning environment and thinking of my students. What follows is my research on dialogue and its relationship to community building and meta-cognitive practice.

Community and Learning

The elements practiced in dialogue are also useful for teachers in the development of their own use of language, behavior, and teaching strategies that build relationships and a sense of community, rather than create a feeling of insecurity and division in the classroom. The reason and need for this sense of community is central to the theory of learning: that a positive and safe environment must exist for each student in order for learning to occur. As teachers we need to be aware and active about promoting a safe culture in our own classes. This might be as basic as reflecting on how we speak to our students as individuals, and whether or not we make a genuine attempt to assume good intent on each individual's part, through our own thinking and behavior. Just through the subtleties of language alone we can alienate a student and ultimately turn off his/her motivation for whatever learning would ensue. As teachers we have the power to model a culture we want to exist in our classrooms. If we are aware of our own thinking and behavior first, we will be able to ensure positive examples of those elements necessary for the dialogue "container."

My belief in the importance of community and safety in the classroom intensified after taking a professional development course in "Dimensions of Learning Teaching Strategies". In the <u>Dimensions Of Learning Manual</u>, by Robert J. Marzano and Debra J. Pickering (1997), there are five areas of thinking that are essential to effective learning. These dimensions are illustrated in a bull's eye format, making the first dimension the parameter outside the four remaining dimensions. The first dimension explained as necessary for learning is known as "Attitudes and Perceptions"(13). Put plainly, what the attitudes and perceptions dimension states is that negative attitudes and perceptions decrease learning, and positive attitudes and perceptions increase learning.

The two areas that this dimension looks at are helping students develop positive attitudes and perceptions about classroom climate, and helping students develop positive attitudes and perceptions about classroom tasks. "Educators recognize the influence that the climate of the classroom has on learning. A primary objective for a teacher is to establish a climate in which students 1-feel accepted by teachers and peers and 2-experience a sense of comfort and order." (Marzano et. al, p.15) One method of doing so as stated in the book is to help students feel accepted by teachers and peers. Other methods described are structuring opportunities for students to work with peers, as well as provide opportunities for students to get to know and accept each other.

Unfortunately, even with cooperative learning tasks, good intention is not enough. I have seen how many students have already been given a specific social role from first grade on, and when it comes time to work in his/her group, the role is not easily abandoned. (Paley 1992) Using dialogue in addition to these strategies creates a foundation for connection before the group work even begins.

Genuine acceptance, despite differences in individuals and working towards a common goal gives the classroom an identity of community. In other words, if one thinks of the students and teacher as a community to achieve this first dimension of learning, they are going to need to get over the barriers of intolerance, and disrespect in behavior or perceptions first. I was also thinking about how if students were free to speak in dialogue without judgment, they would most likely take more risks in learning activities, as well as be more willing to question concepts or ideas to gain understanding without hesitation.

As I noted earlier, the idea of community as necessity for learning is evident in other educational sources. However, how a teacher defines community may differ from the next

teacher. I believed dialogue could help establish a sense of continuity and progression to maintaining one "community" ideal throughout a school. Thomas J. Sergiovanni (1994) examines the definition of community and derives a new one from a combination of similar threads taken from many.

Communities are collections of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together bound by a set of shared ideas and ideals. This bonding and binding is tight enough to transform a collection of "I's", into a collective "We." As a "we" members are part of a tightly knit web of meaningful relationships. …. "The quality of relationships that administrators, teachers, and students experience is key." (Sergiovanni,1994, p.xvi)

Now we are again looking back to the elements of dialogue. These relationships begin with the necessary element of respect. William Isaacs defines respect as one of the first dimensions of building the container for dialogue. "Respect is in this sense, looking for what is highest and best in a person and treating them as a mystery that you can never fully comprehend. They are a part of the whole, and in a very particular sense, a part of us." (Isaacs 1999, p.117) It can be assumed from the Dimensions of Learning preview that if a student feels and witnessed this kind of respect permeating all behaviors of the classroom, he or she would be comfortable and more invested in all activities and areas of learning. This element of respect would also include a sense of trust in one's self and others, especially when taking a perceived or actual risk in any learning activity. This trust needs to exist between teacher and students; but also between students and peers for fostering positive learning attitudes.

It can also be assumed that the lack of respect or security in a classroom renders the opposite results of student attitudes and motivation. I remember the same student that was often emotional, returning from a special in distemper. He remained despondent to all the work we

proceeded with for the next half hour, despite attempts to coax him into trying to put it outside, and focus on what was in front of him. He had just before this been teased in the music class by other students, and responded to by the teacher with the message that he himself was the problem, and rather a nuisance, which resulted in additional teasing. Asking this student to find value in the learning task that followed was impossible, because his emotions and poor self-image were his only focus now. What he had experienced perpetuated a feeling of being unsafe not only now among classmates, but among teachers. He hadn't received any message in the previous hour that he was a contributor to the learning at all.

 Here was my thinking of dialogue as the opportunity to create a belonging for him earlier on. Perhaps he and others like him would have made better connections to others through consistent participant in dialogue from an early age on. It seems that if I could do so as an adult, a student who was practicing dialogue from the beginning, would have even greater possibilities.

This is where I began considering the need for early modeling and utilization of dialogue for maximum effect. In the book entitled <u>You Can't Say You Can't Play</u>, Vivian Gussin Paley (1992) discusses rule implementing a new rule promoting inclusion with students in kindergarten through fifth grade. One student skeptically criticizes the success of the rule at her own grade level, yet states that if it were installed earlier it might be more successful. "I don't mean they act that nice to each other. But they're nice enough to follow a new rule. They trust you. They'll do what you say. It's too late to give us a new rule." (63) I saw dialogue as needing the same early implementation.

As mentioned before, listening is another element necessary for the container of dialogue. It is also a contributing factor to building community. "One of the most effective tools for creating classroom climate and connections in which a healthy sense of community can emerge is simply listening to the people in the community and valuing what they have to say." (Bluestein

2001, p.111). If I were sincere about wanting to create a sense of community in my own classroom, then I would need to ask myself if I was truly behaving in a way that showed that I assumed I have something to learn from my students. I began paying better attention to my listening after the dialogue course. It was a great help to becoming more aware of my own preconceptions and what my students were really asking for.

In order to determine if students truly feel a sense of belonging and acceptance in a school we need simply to observe how they behave. I was able to detect something wrong with simple observation of my student returning from his Music class. Segiovanni (1994, p.11) described data by Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Brockern in the characteristics of a child who belongs, from one who does not and uses other methods to do compensate in the following:

Characteristics of one who feels a <u>normal</u> sense of belonging are: attached, loving, friendly, intimate, gregarious, cooperative, trusting. Characteristics of a <u>distorted</u> sense of belonging are: gang loyalty, craves affection, craves acceptance, promiscuous, clinging, cult vulnerable, overly dependent; and those of an <u>absence</u> of belonging are: Unattached, guarded, rejected, lonely, aloof, isolated, distrustful. When we teach, we see the signs daily in the attitudes and perceptions of our students of whether or not they "belong."

The practice of the dialogue process in the classroom is a way to create a container for effective communication that will lead to a more solid sense of community overall. In my experience, reaching out to the students who are not feeling this belonging, in order to understand why is the first step in getting beyond it.

Observations

My friend Kathleen teaches music to kindergarten students. She finds that this basic check-in actually saves time. This is because it allows the students who are still developmentally

young to have acquired all of the classroom control or focus, share what's on their minds right away. This makes it much easier to focus on what she needs to teach and work with them on later. In fact, when I observed her classes, I noticed that every time check-in occurred, only one or less student did not want to share. It seemed to me that they had grown accustomed to the practice, and were eager for it to begin.

She stated that once when she did not use the check-in, many students were interrupting class to share things such as losing a tooth, or birthday party, during other learning tasks. They did not have the space to share this, and so did it when it was less appropriate and effective.

Interestingly, in three classes where I observed different forms of dialogue used (Open Circle and Responsive Classroom Morning Meeting), I noticed that the students were accustomed to the format being used, as well as the guidelines and rules of the process. I also noticed that they all went into the process with eagerness.

Open Circle

Open Circle contains a "Social Competencies" component, as part of a "Reach Out to Schools" program that began in 1987 and is directed by Pamela Siegel of the Stone Center. "Reach out to schools is a school-based, primary prevention program. The goals of the program are to improve students' social skills, relationships, and sense of community within the classroom and school environment." (http://www.wellesley.edu/OpenCircle/,2001) program also focuses on developing students' skills in solving interpersonal problems.

The way it is carried out is within a time slot of 30 minutes per week, on Fridays. It centers around one topic or question that is designated from the Curriculum handbook. Students sit in a circle with the teacher. The teacher introduces the topic or question, and then facilitates discussion through questions directed toward students.

Assessment of this program found positive results in enhancing overall classroom climate. Out of surveys completed by 277 students, 166 parents, and all 13 homeroom teachers findings stated that "overall, students who had at least two years of the program (Program group) had more favorable outcomes than those students who had less than two years (No Program group). The composite scores from the student version of SSRS (Social Skills Rating System) were significantly higher for program students than no program students. This score is a measure of overall social skills as it included all SSRS subscales: cooperation, assertion, empathy, and self-control." (2001)

Another item noted was that students who were a part of the program also adjusted better to middle school and reported fewer incidents of fighting and/or violence than those in the no program group. When asked about how she would characterize the program, its director responded with "A sense of connection. Teachers report changes in the teacher-child relationship and in relationships among children. There is more cooperation and a sense of responsibility that children contribute to the classroom with much fewer management issues. In schools in which a critical number of teachers have been trained and where principals are committed to the program, there is a sense of community and collegiality that has carried over beyond just the classroom. It has permeated throughout the school." (http://www.wellesley.edu/OpenCircle/, 2001).

I observed the Open Circle program in the month of November at the Cleveland School in Norwood, in a fourth grade classroom. I should note that the school had just adopted the program this past September. Therefore it had been the first experience for most of the students in the class to be a part of it. Students would offer suggestions or thoughts and then a wrap up of what emerged would follow. Students appeared invested in the topic, and eager to hear about suggestions for dealing with teasing in their own lives. I also noticed that before the program

began, there was an excitement in students when Erica, the teacher announced that it was almost time for Open Circle. It seems as if it is perceived as a break the long day of learning, which allows students to think out loud. I noticed that students raised hands if they wanted to speak. They were not required to speak.

I noticed that despite the flow of discussion, there were several students not sharing. When I thought about who was sharing and who was not, I noticed similarities between the earlier classroom activities. Those sharing tended to be those who were vocal during other activities of the day. This made me wonder about social roles still being somewhat in effect despite the switch in gears of classroom set up. The teacher whom I observed stated in her responses that overall, she saw students finding similarities among those they would not necessarily expect to. She also stated that although respect is modeled and displayed, she felt that the students did not know themselves enough to completely respect other members as a genuine and equal member to themselves. She saw this as a goal of the program, rather than something that children brought themselves to dialogue.

Responsive Classroom-Morning Meeting

The second form of dialogue I researched was what's known as "Morning Meeting" a component of the "Responsive Classroom" movement that began in 1981. The purposes of the Morning Meeting are "to create community-providing a sense of belonging, significance and fun/investment; to foster responsive interactions-sharing, listening, inclusion and participation, and to teach the skills needed to be a responsive member of a classroom and school through daily rituals and patterns." (Northeast Foundation for Children, p.6)

I observed two classes at the Arnone School in Brockton, MA that use Morning Meeting. These were a third grade class as well a sixth grade classroom. Both classes were bi-lingual.

What I noticed in my observations, was that after some quiet morning work where students got settled and teacher took attendance, the morning meeting indicated the official start of the day. The meeting consists of 15-30 minutes daily for meeting time, and begins with students greeting one another in the circle with direct eye-contact and a handshake. I noticed that the third grade classroom did this, while the sixth grade classroom used a game with an inflatable globe saying "Good morning, (name)" from the country their left thumb landed on. After the greeting, the students shared, starting with those students who are on the sign-up sheet. I noticed this seemed to be about three per class. The sharing included mostly weekend stories or upcoming plans the students had. Some students could read from their journals, and had the option to speak Spanish if necessary. Other students could share afterwards if time was left. During sharing there was no interruption. Then students called upon others for questions regarding their sharing or comments pertaining to what they said.

A group activity followed with some form of writing or greeting from the teacher on an easel. The students worked to correct the grammatical errors together. The teacher then wrapped up the meeting with news or announcements of the day and students returned to their seats.

As I observed the students I noticed that they were very respectful to one another's sharing and asked questions that related to the sharing easily. I noticed especially that other students were helping those who were stuck. For example if a student were confused on a particular English word or term, another student would speak in Spanish offering the English translation.

The third grade teacher indicated that the students had been meeting since first grade, so they were adapted to the format and guidelines at the start of the school year. The sixth grade teacher noted that many of her students are transient and move frequently to other states to live

with family, or to other countries. She noticed a genuine caring for one another in her classroom. She also noted that despite thinking her sixth-graders might be "too old for morning meeting, the atmosphere in her classroom has completely changed from using it; and her students are more confident at speaking in public and ask very thoughtful questions throughout the day."

On the Responsive Classroom website there are many interviews to teachers who have been using the program for a consistent number of years. Here's an excerpt of Barbara Knoblock, a second grade teacher at New Sarpy Elementary School in Destrehan, Louisiana, who has been teaching for 12 years**:**

> I began implementing Morning Meeting in my classroom three years ago and I can honestly say that since that time the classroom environment has become a warm and caring place where the students and I are happy to spend the day.
> I think the biggest impact has been on my students' attitudes toward one another. Morning Meeting has made my students much more aware of their verbal and body language and how they affect others. Because of this increased awareness, cooperative group activities are more successful in my classroom now than in the past. The children help each other more willingly, share materials more easily, talk more nicely, and work together more cooperatively to complete an activity. They also like working together. As a result, I find that I plan for group work more often.
> I also notice that the positive and caring atmosphere created by Morning Meeting has given my students the courage to become risk takers. Because they feel safe and known, they are taking more risks in their learning. What more could a teacher want for her students, but to be positive learners and willing to try new experiences!"
> (www.responsiveclassroom.org, 1999)

My Experience of Dialogue and Others' Insights

What I have been thinking about in my current research is how these programs such as Open Circle and Morning Meeting have been successful and how they might be improved. Specifically, I envision something more like Morning Meeting that is held daily and establishes a positive mood at the outset for the day's learning. I also envision it including some openness for the examination of classroom policies, discussion of desired learning and topics to include in class. I see the elements that are inherent in the dialogue process as being interwoven into the

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modeling and practice of these forms so that social roles and exclusion is better prevented. As the sixth-grade teacher indicated, "My students are very respectful of one another. I would like to see them carry this respect for themselves and their teachers to the outside world. When they leave my classroom, they often leave the skills behind as well."

Dialogue and Meta-cognition

Every element necessary for dialogue involves higher-level thinking. Because these elements encourage reflection on what's being said, simultaneous reflection on what is being heard, and reflection on what one's own reasoning process throughout the dialogue; students are modeling and using effective thinking. Unless one is aware of his/her own thought process and those of others, he or she isn't really going beyond a basic inference of surface information.

As described earlier, there are many levels necessary to the contribution as a whole that involve becoming aware of present or existing knowledge during the dialogue process. Participants must recognize mental models one holds, step away from previous mental models, listen to what is being spoken and inquire for meaning to gain understanding. By doing so, there is much more to one's thinking then preparing to state his or her opinion or thought. In dialogue it is necessary that participants do so by communicating their reasoning process in order to explain how they arrived at this thought in the first place. They must also explain how they relate this reasoning to what they have heard.

Clearly dialogue does beyond a surface level of conversation. Words are more than mere words. Their meaning requires the coalescence of thinking of all in the group to help its discovery. Maintaining an awareness of ourselves, our thoughts, others and their thoughts and the direction this brings us in is part of the meta-cognitive process. This critical thinking is essential to learning.

Researchers of meta-cognition suggest that question generating, posing problems, modeling and evaluation can be useful in assessing critical thinking with students. In his chapter "Teaching For, Of and About Thinking", Arthur Costa discusses the importance of using teaching strategies that both model various thinking strategies and elicits them from students. He gives four basic guidelines to teach for thinking.

> 1.Teachers prose problems, raise questions, and intervene with paradoxes, dilemmas, and discrepancies that students can try to resolve. 2.Teachers and administrators structure the school environment for thinking-value it, make time for it, secure support materials, and evaluate growth in it. 3.Teachers and administrators respond to students' ideas in such a way as to maintain a school and classroom climate that creates trust, allows risk-taking, and is experimental, creative, and positive. This requires listening to students and each other's ideas, remaining nonjudgmental, and having rich data sources. 4. Teachers, administrators, and other adults in the school environment model the behaviors of thinking that are desired in students. (Costa, 1985, 56)

Using only objective questions to measure learning, does not necessarily make them aware of their own thinking strategies, nor help them access them later for other problems or questions. Instead, they promote students to come up with what is the "right answer" without reflection upon how they arrive at this answer and the consideration that there are others possible. When we encourage students to have one-dimensional thinking, we cannot blame them for lacking the effective thinking skills that will help them function in a multi-dimensional world. Dialogue, and its many dimensions of thinking practices in its container can help students get practice of this critical thinking. This way using these thinking skills and strategies will be more natural and instinctive. Often teachers feel a need to maintain a sense of control and order in a classroom. However, what we do ideally is to teach our students to teach themselves. As a teacher I want my students to develop independent thinking skills that will help them learn in any context.

When teachers prioritize control of a learning situation rather than taking a step away to allow students to develop their own strategies and ideas, they are not practicing dialogue. Often times as teachers we are so fixed upon what we want students to take from a learning activity, that we can hinder additional and spontaneous discovery (as well as ownership of this discovery) with the subtleties of language. Dialogue centers on this spontaneous learning, because we create it ourselves through collective thinking. Dialogue, is also an essential piece of the meta-cognitive process. A question from an educator might be however, "Are students capable of either dialogue or meta-cognition?"

As noted in the observations of dialogue use in classrooms, it is possible to implement dialogue at an early level with a basic format. Remember the situation of discussing the problem of exclusion in schools in <u>You Can't Say You Can't Play</u>. When students were asked to think about the idea of inclusion, and its potential to work or not, they also planned ahead for possible consequences. This process of thinking allowed them to share in the decision making process of the very rules that would be followed by themselves as well as their teacher. Dialogue could do the same. It is a forum in which ownership and meaning of something new is created for the students through their discussion. This idea of the new meaning created through this collective thinking is described in the "Principle of Unfoldment" in Isaac's book. " This principle reminds us of not just the importance of speaking one's own voice, but the importance of being aware of the potential it holds as it unfolds into deeper meaning as an integral part of the whole in the overall discussion. "Reality consists both of a surface level "explicate order" which has a relative independence, like the individual notes in a piece of music, and a deeper implicate order out of which the explicate flows." (Isaacs p.166)

Looking Back

I had learned a tremendous amount during the months I was observing other teachers. I am reminded of how little opportunity there is to observe and learn from others when we are teachers ourselves because of the lack of time. Not teaching full-time that year enabled me to explore and take in as much as I could from others. My observations were still just a first step to actualizing the goal I have for a new form of dialogue to be used in all classrooms. I realize that my observations and other teachers' observations may have conflicted with one another in some ways. However, my initial excitement for the importance of effective communication and community building through dialogue has not waned. I am eager to continue with the exploration of dialogue through the formulation of a curriculum and handbook that expresses my work so far in tangible and practical tool for teachers. I had hoped to design this application or curriculum with clear and useful guidelines for the dialogue process to be used in conjunction with components of the processes I observed. Ultimately, I still want to see my own process implemented and successfully continued for all students at the elementary level.

CHAPTER 4

CONNECTING THE PIECES: RE-EVALUATION FOR FUTURE PLANS

My coursework through the CCT program has been a direct cause for a gradual and shifting career path. It has also provided a structure that enabled personal discovery of qualities and skills that I hadn't acknowledged, nor utilized satisfactorily. In finding a passion for dialogue and the learning process inherent in it, I have again come to a shift in thinking for my work and where I am headed.

As I moved through the summer of 2003 taking courses, attending and participating in weddings and babysitting, I was putting much of my efforts into getting my work done and filling social events. I was not devoting much time to an effective job search. I had used some of the problem solving strategies I had gathered from CCT 618 to ask the advice of some former teachers about getting to know the culture of an organization when looking for a job. One teacher wrote that he was "Always surprised that people who want to find something unconventional do it in the most conventional of ways." He was right. I was looking at websites and help wanted ads with little information to help get a solid grasp on what the school environment was really like. Instead, he suggested that I go to the organization itself, rather than wait for it to come to me through a job interview. Finding organizations that hold values true to my own vision is something I do believe would be much more effective for my career. Though I found tremendous value in this suggestion, I was not quite ready to follow through with it.

My summer passed as a whirlwind of months in which I was learning a great deal more about facilitation, teambuilding, child development and other topics of interest. Though stimulated by all of the new techniques and tools I was experiencing through my coursework, I was unable to transcend this excitement into a practical step toward genuine career change.

I did however decide that gaining new experience in teaching was something that I would try. I determined that I would look for work experience a city school. Previously, my teaching experiences though very different in nature and context, were limited to the suburbs where the student makeup was rather homogeneous. I felt that teaching in the city might provide me with an environment where I'd gain more experience working with minorities. It would also add another dimension to my teaching experience and credentials. Teaching minority students was a skill and an awareness I felt I was lacking. I was also facing the reality that I was still only provisionally certified and financially, I needed a job soon. So I took a job teaching fifth grade at a parochial school in Roxbury. Soon after accepting the position, I had to leave town for my sister's wedding. My first day was two days after my return.

Present Work Environment

As I began my first few weeks at the school, it was clear that there was a rich sense of culture, but a fluctuating sense of structure in the school for both students and teachers. Some examples include teacher planning time, room placement, and student supervision. The staff and administration is constantly left to its own devices to come up with solutions and make do with growing changes and needs without outside help or support. One example of this is that specials like gym and music are cancelled or changed last minute. Before we had a consistent Physical Education teacher, I conducted Gym time with my students. One week, the fourth grade teacher ran relay races, while I took only 12 students which was all that would fit in the van) to the community center that was supposed to be open as possible space for gym. It was not opened until 30 minutes after the gym period was over. This is something I see as unfair to a group of students who have waited all week to have the class.

Another example is the numbers of students to adult supervision. Often when I arrive at school around 7:15, there are already several students in the cafeteria despite the fact that school is not officially "opened" until 7:45. I have also had students dropped off as early as 6:00 where they must sit in the local donut shop until someone has arrived to open the building. To me this raises an issue of a need for support staff and supervision for the students before and during school hours.

Curriculum supplies and books are limited and outdated, and thus outside resources and supplies are the teacher's responsibility. Our geographic location is also an obstacle in the everyday running of things. The play area is a concrete parking lot about the size of two classrooms at UMASS. It is surrounded by three abandoned buildings, which are pending sale or demolition. Lately, the heavy amounts of snow that have fallen have remained only partially plowed on the main street we use for parent pick-up, and students had to climb over snow banks halfway out to the middle lane to get to their cars. I am constantly amazed at how basic services such as plowing are ignored in the area.

The student body consists of students who come from different areas. Some of these are Roslindale, Mattapan, Roxbury, Jamaica Plain, and Dorchester. Because parents have other children in different schools, work during the day, or are coming from another area, students in my own homeroom are not in my class until 8:30 or 8:45. Thus every morning, I have about one third of my actual class until school has already been in session for 40 minutes.

The constant changes and cancellations at this school are only part of the constant need to be ready at a moment's notice and assume it is up to the teacher, regardless of the situation. The staff and administration are not ignorant to these issues. In fact, they often brace the environment well, with cautious optimism and dedication. I am always impressed by how everyone on the

staff pulls together to work through obstacles. I am equally impressed with how adapting my students are whenever the schedule changes and/or something is changed for their day. However, the principal and teachers are pulled in many directions, working with large student populations, one teacher per grade, low parental involvement, and no aids or support staff to assist with the growing needs of the students. The mission of the school itself is to maintain affordable Catholic Education to low income families, so tuition is minimal.

The needs of students that I find difficult to meet include bilingual support, daily counseling (currently we have a counselor two days a week), special education services and others. I enjoy working with each student. I get excited with them toward achieving their individual academic and personal goals. I like their senses of humor and their questions. I also enjoy working with the students in their collective teams or groups. However in these first months, I've noticed that it is difficult for many of them to do so without conflict or distraction. This is one area where I have been focusing in order to get them accustomed to compromise, waiting their turns, and trying to use positive support rather than negative support to group members who tend to lose track or are slow to organize etc. This is not something I think they cannot do. I suspect that they haven't had much practice with working in groups like this with such a large class.

One of the main reasons I am feeling tired and frustrated is that I am focusing much more on basic expectations and behavior in a classroom rather than creative and critical thinking activities. I've found that many of my students do not have much structure at home. Sometimes it is due to taking care of siblings while parents are working. Other times it is that their parents are unable to give them the extra support at home with reading and work assignments. Many of my students' families are coming and going in many directions in the morning too. They often drop

off other family members and siblings who go to other schools causing them to arrive late to class. I have spoken to my students who are late about what their morning is like, but I do not feel it's fair to move forward in the morning without all of my students present.

All of these factors contribute to a challenging effort at order and consistency in my classroom. These are all reasons why I feel dialogue would be helpful in slowing us down a bit. I am eager to try implementation of dialogue with my class, yet I am also feeling that they are not ready for it. In many ways, what I sense is that structure is what they need more than anything. Therefore, I try to focus on small steps each day that might help them with collaborative work and other life skills. It sounds very basic, yet I think if someone were to observe my 28 students at any point during the day, they would see how much they need on an emotional level besides the academic.

Reflections on Obstacles and Subsequent Realizations

As I sit here and assess my current teaching situation I am aware that I am alone in my assessment and reflection. This is one area that I discussed in my vision statement from CCT 618. Although I do feel very comfortable asking some of the staff members and my principal for help, it often tends to be manual or behavioral, rather than academic or curriculum centered.

I also feel as if I am not in an environment where there is much time for assessment in teams on progress and strategies for better learning and attitudes toward learning. Because we have one teacher per grade level, and extra hands are unavailable, sitting down as a group happens at staff meetings only. And this deals mostly with logistics and upcoming events. I also realize that because money is limited we tend to deal with the present and what to do with our current teaching materials and resources. Yet this is what I feel we'd also have to change in order to follow through with better assessments and tools. That again is a money issue.

I think self-evaluation and reflection can be very useful. Presently however, I lack the balance of being able to slow down myself in order to make effective change. I'd like to be able to follow through with day-to-day assessment and still have the time to create with my students and plan more activities with my peers. What I have done is taken a step back to re-evaluate the needs I'm seeing in my classroom and where realistically we are headed. I don't intend to sound negative. I want to be fair in how much we can accomplish with the other issues being so pervasive. I feel that this and meeting each individual's goals and academic interests is my hardest obstacle. I have broken up about four fights since the start of school, and I've noticed that while so many of the students act so old, they are also very young in terms of how they approach situations and handle different problems. This is where I find some discontent in my work. Although I genuinely want to help my students, and want better futures for them, I am also feeling like many of the skills that I enjoy so much are left unused at the end of the day. Another reason this is frustrating is because I feel like I am failing them by not devoting as much time to the same skills I valued in my learning through CCT.

Synthesizing my research for Practicum on dialogue and its implications for education was another tool that allowed me to observe and learn from educators. I realize as I write this that ownership of my learning is just as crucial as I see it for my students. The ability to reflect on what I am observing and learning is what I recognize as lacking in my work today.

In order to better evaluate my own progress and/or lack thereof of implementation of dialogue in my teaching, I feel as if I need to revisit some of these highlights that I've mentioned. I now know that as a teacher I have personally viewed myself as a facilitator of my classroom. What appeals to me in being a facilitator is the ability to bring forth others' potential in a democratic and safe container, or environment. I love being able to help my students tap into

their own skills and strengths as well as acknowledge their own individual learning. I also love that this can happen in the most random of situations. I remember from past college courses that those in which my professors allowed much student participation and consistently remained observant and attentive to us were my most interesting. I appreciated how adeptly they led us in gauging and evaluating our thinking. In essence, those courses that essentially taught us to teach ourselves and allowed us to evolve spontaneously were invaluable to me.

I have come to recognize that besides being able to bring forth the potential of others, fostering my own skills of facilitation and thinking is where I find the connection missing. As I recall all the brainstorming, discussion, group problem solving and idea generating and sharing that so stimulates me in my own coursework, I see how I do not do much of this with my peers in my current position. This is not because they are unwilling. I do get to do this with my students. Yet, I am often more isolated and working alone to examine issues in my classroom, or in the school and problem solve myself or with one or two other staff members. The shared issues are addressed at meetings, but again the time we have during these meetings is limited.

Another issue that I have come to recognize is my enjoyment of working with older age groups and even peers. I love kids, but I also love connecting and working with adults. As I look back on my purpose statement from CCT 618, "My purpose is to facilitate, educate, and be an active learner and reflective practitioner" (Kenefick J. unpublished work, 2003), I am aware that my learning and educating can also happen in other mediums and contexts. For example, I have considered education consulting and facilitation of groups that deal specifically with school change for teachers and older students. I have learned from my positive experiences that it does not need to be limited to elementary students only.

As I think of the being a reflective practitioner piece of this statement, I think of how I am reflecting but perhaps not in a way in which I am changing things for myself as well as my students. I have been enlisted on the "Small Schools" listserv for some time where I've discovered interesting news about programs and job opportunities that are facilitation and workshop developing related to educational change. Not only are the articles, stories, research and other resources for educators and other interested members informative of how much is out there in terms of whole school change. There is also an indication for me personally that classroom teaching is not the only avenue to utilize strategies to make a positive difference in how students learn and are educated. In fact, lately writing this paper, I have been aware that it is the planning and discipline behavior area that I find most mundane rather than the actual group work facilitation, and reflection on what's working and what is not.

As I see in my reflection and remembering of learning highlights I recognize how those skills and techniques in dialogue are representative of both individual and system connections and thinking. Examining issues on both an individual and institutional scale was what I found so interesting in both my undergraduate and graduate coursework. I love looking at how people and areas in organizations connect to one another and the larger issue at hand. I also know that being an integral agent of change in something larger than myself, or a cause that is affecting people's lives in a positive way is crucial to what I do. That larger part also needs to be an organization or place where learning and thinking are constants and truthfulness is present in those actions.   In many ways, finding an outside organization that works with schools is potentially the way to bridge the connection to the facilitation and educating others with self-development and reflection. Although I really do enjoy it, I feel as if it has been safe in some ways to teach because I've done it already. I haven't quite risked going outside to organizations that I truly find

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fascinating and authentic at the same time. One of the ideas that I kept going back to during the workshops was that these people get to do this for a living. They not only facilitate groups like us, they work and process and are facilitated as an organization. It is their basic belief or philosophy in the process of facilitation and change that I desire.

When I said in my statement that my purpose was also "To participate in academics that add value to work and life" I was not thinking enough about how helping others in a classroom might not necessarily be helping myself to grow to my full potential. I stated that I wanted "to learn and explore and use innovative tools to teach from my coursework etc." This could be my implementation of dialogue at work. I am not closed to the possibility for dialogue in my classroom. However, I am open to the idea that I may use it elsewhere as well.

All of the elements that I seek in an organization are clearer as I have reflected back on my learning and experiences through CCT. I realized that in order to compare these elements to my teaching the question "Why do I teach? " arises. I realize that I teach because education is a topic that I always find exciting and interesting. I feel very strongly about its ability to change a person and the world around us. My own education and the impact it has had on my personal growth has been life changing. I also teach because I want to be able to cultivate a place of reflective thought, acceptance, personal growth and awareness, as well as an awareness of others and our connectedness; and school is a place where I feel this is possible. I want this because I believe if we could recognize more connectedness the violence and the closed mindedness and greed I see in our culture would decrease. I think recognizing connections in all that we see, learn and experience makes us better thinkers overall.

I teach because I see myself as a person who is an agent of change. This perspective makes me feel empowered and optimistic, and when I feel like I am making a difference in

someone's life I am happier. Lastly, I teach because I feel our schools are getting short changed by the state and they are being viewed as a business without any realistic understanding of the human component that is so intrinsic in our day- to-day work. When I'm in the classroom, I have more control over instituting what I think is important in learning, such as not only being a great thinker, but having integrity and being an active participant in the community.

As I discuss my reasons for teaching, I also see how implementing dialogue is still something I wish to do. I still believe it has many connections to learning and building a stronger sense of community. I feel that I can continue to work on some more research of other educators in similar positions as myself that might offer some advice. As far as the educators that I did speak with about dialogue, all have seen a difference for the better in their classrooms. I am thinking that as my own vision of dialogue as I discussed it is somewhat theoretical, I will not have a "perfect model" just yet. In fact, I think that some of the discord and behavioral issues in some of my students might require some dialogue sooner than later. Although there is a container necessary for dialogue, I will never have one with my students if I don't try it at all. They will need to see it modeled and will only get better with it if it's consistent.

My reflection has also helped me to think about where I can find what I love about teaching, in other contexts other than a classroom position. I realize that what I love about facilitation and collaboration happens in many different organizations. I see how what also impassions me is the idea of whole-school change, in addition to individual learning. I am interested in working with outside organizations and educators as well as students to make change happen. I see that my love for working with students can be fulfilled in other ways besides teaching in an elementary classroom. Lastly, I see how every school I've worked in is

different. This is my personal reminder that the organization, in which I seek these interests, is just as important as the job itself.

My struggle with implementation has been both an obstacle and a catalyst. It has frustrated me and kept me feeling somewhat stalled in moving forward with past research. Yet it's forced me to look harder at other "obstacles" that I've been experiencing. Putting this paper together and dissecting and analyzing my past learning, has put me closer to identifying what it is I want in my work. This is crucial whether I am going to teach, or not.

First, I know that it's important for me to be a part of a democratic learning environment. I want to be a part of an organization where reflective thinking, effective communication, and the practice of dialogue are valued and consistent. I want to ensure that my thinking will be stimulated with analyzing, brainstorming and problem-solving opportunities. This may be in what I do as an individual, or as a member working toward a greater cause. I want my work to be authentic in this organization. I want to have the freedom to make what I do a reflection of what I am, and what I stand for. I want to be in an environment that is honest and progressive in its use of collaboration. A place where I will grow and be able to engage in professional development is essential. I think a work environment that allows all of its members to lead at different times, or to apply personal expertise to its vision creates a better morale. This is definitely true for me. Finally, I believe that an organization that holds a genuine intrinsic belief in the highest potential, not productiveness, of each member, is one that will strive to continue to learn in new ways as well as stimulate this in others.

For now, this belief in the highest potential is what I must continue to reflect on as I plan each day with my students. It has been rewarding in the sense that I have felt successful in reaching them personally one on one. And they have been teaching me as well. When I have

been out many of my students tell me that they missed me. And when I speak to them, I do feel that they trust I am listening and that they listen to me in return. I notice that some of my students now count to ten before reacting verbally to another student who upsets them. Other students are helping their group members when it's time to get organized for another class or task. They've been much more patient with one another during cooperative work, and what they come up with in creative writing and ideas are always impressive to me. They are truly an enthusiastic group, which always makes for an interesting day. Not all of the progressions I'd hoped to see are occurring. I am still seeing some violent reactions with one of my students in particular, and I am still feeling like the numbers of my class is an issue with one-on-one time and feedback time.

Future Plans

I would still like to apply more of the tools that were helpful to me in my classes to my teaching. For example, I could try a Vision for Change activity with my class and ask them of their visions of their education or their academic year. I can still create more opportunities for ownership of their education and actions. If I am truly going to be a believer in the highest potential I have to remain above my entrenchment of behavioral issues to apply what I have learned.

Currently, I am working with the Values teacher at my school to try a weekly dialogue with my class. We will start by using the suggestions from the Responsive Classroom Curriculum Model referenced in Chapter 2 of this synthesis. We've decided on trying it during their Values time in order to have two facilitators for the group. In addition to having two facilitators for the large group, I also feel that this teacher is another adult with whom the students have a genuine rapport. We have decided to try it sometime after February vacation so

that we can put together a format for how we'll continue and run the dialogue. Although this initialization has begun later than I had originally planned, I am eager to try it out.

Gradually, I have come to accept my current work situation and its limits. I am looking at what I can do now without putting too much emphasis on what I am not doing. In order to do this, I've had to be more willing to look at the positives of the environment in order to move forward. I feel that it's something I owe to myself as well as my students.

I don't think that I will be returning to this job next year. It still involves too much that is beyond my control systemically and organizationally. However, I am appreciative of having a first hand understanding of what these schools and their students must endure. I've also been able to appreciate the true dedication of my coworkers necessary to continue teaching around all of the everyday obstacles. I have begun looking at other organizations of interest as my former teacher suggested. One of these is Project 540, which helps schools implement student-facilitated dialogues for change in their schools and communities. I plan to use the upcoming months to continue this search.

Intrinsically, my passion for dialogue is still driving me, as is the new knowledge I've acquired through my courses, teachers and personal examination of my process. I am optimistic that through utilizing this drive, this learning, and all of my CCT and work experience, I'll remain true to my own journey toward achieving my personal vision in my life and work.

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