Creating Civility:
Dialogue Journals in Special Ed Classes

by

ELIZABETH ANDERSON

For a number of years, I taught a group of middle schoolers variously described as "learning disabled," "borderline retarded," "behaviorally disordered," and "economically" or "culturally" deprived. In reality, these were catchall phrases, designed to encompass the range of kids who couldn't fit in anywhere else. Their one commonality, and the deciding factor in their placement, was extreme difficulty with school language — and, in particular, written language. Already excluded from most of the experiences of their peers, the inability to read served to further isolate these young people from the mainstream and provided adequate justification to describe them as disabled. Perceived disability then took precedence over all other aspects of their lives; by the time they reached my class, most of these students defined themselves as failures, disenfranchised members of a club whose bylaws they could not even begin to understand. This paper describes some of my attempts to bring them into the literate world — particularly through the exploration of journal writing.

My students' education generally reflected the behavioral approach to instruction which had been popular when I was earning my credential some twenty years before, and is still favored in many special education classes. It assumes that language can be reduced to subcomponents, to be taught in a systematic, linear fashion considered responsive to deficits identified in formal assessment. There is little or none of what Vygotsky describes as "the complex dialectical process characterized by periodicity, unevenness in the development of different functions, metamorphosis or qualitative transformation of one form into another, intertwining of external and internal factors, and adaptive processes" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.73) which accounts for ongoing development. Instead, instruction largely consists of rote drills in isolated skill areas.

Activities used to this end had included basal readers at a primary level (material which rubbed salt into already much inflamed wounds), programmed instruction, worksheets, and flash cards developed from sight word lists. Both on the explicit level (such as their Individual Educational Plan goals), and in the personal, often heartrending requests from parents and children alike, there was enormous pressure for my students to learn to read and for me to show them the way. At times, however, I felt I was participating in a con game where, in teaching children what I knew in my heart were splinter skills, I could maintain the pretense they were actually acquiring the abilities of a literate person. Neither prescriptive reading programs nor flash cards generalized into reading — they were boring for child and instructor alike, and isolated from relevant meaning making.

Erickson aptly describes the counterproductive nature of such instruction, which denies authentic interaction, scaffolding, and creativity. He wonders "whether such environments can possibly be arenas for the enactment of civility, or whether civility — mutual commitment to participation in society beyond the self — is impossible in such circumstances" (Erickson, 1984, p. 56). Such questions are of fundamental importance when one considers the battleground between teacher and child that many special day classes become — and how so many children who have difficulties with language are subsequently also described as behaviorally disordered.
It was in this search for “civility” that I entered a process of reconsidering my instructional strategies. I recognized the journals some of my students had begun as a useful part of the program. I’d been an inveterate journal-keeper from childhood, and was encouraging my young daughter to develop the habit — now I pushed journal use across the classroom. For all students, journals allow safe exploration of written language and represent a natural way to connect oral and written language and experience. As journal writing gives students a chance to write on any topic they choose, it allows the writer a subtle “buy-in” to the exercise. The writing was their own, so they were engaged. For my students, whose voices were too often silenced, journals also provided a valuable way to validate thoughts and feelings. Students were able to participate at different levels. Since nearly all the class began to write, I encouraged approximations of correct usage and spelling. I was doing everything I could to support a wide range of abilities. Some children dictated their journals, some children dictated and then copied into their own writing, and some wrote independently.

Journal writing became an enormously important part of the day. For Lisa, an isolated, physically aggressive and essentially nonverbal child, it was indispensable. Her morning could not continue until she had indicated from a long list who were her friends of the moment, and who was out of favor. Her writing provided her important connections to her classmates. Trevor also explored peer interactions:

That this kid at pe and I don’t like him because he makes me mad and I hat him because he makes a fool of him self and I don’t like him because he makes a suped face at me

as did Anna:

Yesterday I minded my own business. There was a boy and a girl kissing in the assembly. I was minding my business because I wouldn’t talk about Gayle’s problem. Gayle took Catherine’s watch and broke it.

Rae describes a weekend at home, in what reads as a poem to life in the projects:

I dint do noting this
Weekend.
The bathroom is messed
Up. The wall

Still leaks. Theres a cracked
Pipe in there. The toilet is
Loose. The screws are striped
The landlord
Hasn’t come yet

Other students mull over the universal quandaries of adolescence:

My mother is screamin at me do case I talk smart to
my mother because I don’t want to do no work. Her
holes at me really loud. Te whole neighborhood can
hear it. I start crying.

—Tiffny

Notig is going on in my Life well. I just got of
punishment. And I get all of my priceleges back bout
wene I was on punishment I cnait do ney ding bout set
up in my room and do my homework. And go to bed.

—Yoonne

My brother is a puck he got the last of the iescream he
wons to get his way

—Ilovee

I dont like the principal
He says
I dont get to wear
Caps or wallet chains
I just made my chain
Shorter so he
Doesn’t see it

—Alan

For some students, a more sophisticated exploration of feelings developed. Anna writes about moving on to high school:

I feel a little bit sad. I’m going to miss my classmates.
The new class will be scary. There are some boys and
no girls. I’ve been in Elizabeth’s class for 4 years.
That’s a long time. I think about my old class. They
said I was talking to the wall. I talk when I want but
now I do it inside my head. Elizabeth and I go fir walks
and talk inside our heads togethr.

Continuing to look for ways to help my students develop their writing, I discovered the concept of dialogue journals at a summer program offered by the Bay Area Writing Project. Although there is very little research about the use of dialogue journals with chil-
An important teacher goal was developing conversation open-ended enough to be responded to with more than a yes or a no, but not so complex that it overwhelmed the child's emergent language.

I introduced the process as a “Language Experience Activity” similar to the “Daily Journal” described by Strickland (1990). A class-generated journal was incorporated into our morning group time, with children participating actively in shared discussion, writing, and reading. The journal took the form of a poster on the wall which we left up and often added to during the day, providing a record of moments in student lives and, perhaps even more importantly, a public recognition and validation that they were kids with the experiences and desires of all their schoolmates:

Alan went to Rae's apartment yesterday. They went down to the church to catch lizards. Sean forgot he was meant to bring Elizabeth flowers. Trevor's dad gave him a haircut because Trevor hates the barber. Alan and Rae want to go to the show on a double date with Shaunna and Melisa. Karl went to the school dance on Friday. That took a lot of courage.

From here, my next step of extending written interaction to individual journals was a relatively easy one. Students took their journals home and wrote every night and I responded to them each morning. I found that both my students and I looked forward to what the other had to say. One of the most striking features of the writing is the attempt to make connections, share experiences, and offer support. This last, in particular, was a novelty for my students, most of whom had very little experience in being at the giving end of a relationship. However focused on everyday matters they may seem, the children's thoughts are certainly an entry into Erickson's arena of civility. Yvonne writes me, before my appointment for a long-dreaded root canal:

I hope you don't cry Elizabeth wind you get shot in your mouth at Dennis don't be scare Elizabeth don't be nervous

On another day, she warns me that her buddy is angry, and I should stay out of her way, but not take it personally:

Tiffy's dad got bete up in the streets. Askin for Money and then he went to the Hosebottle by the cambalalams. Titny very oup site because she was mad at the peple.

Entries rapidly turned into ongoing discussions, such as the one below, which continued for over a week. An important teacher goal was developing conversation open-ended enough to be responded to with more than a yes or a no, but not so complex that it overwhelmed the child's emergent language. I took as an example the model of language acquisition which begins so naturally between parent and child at birth, a carefully orchestrated dance in which the more skilled adult must learn to advance and then draw back, maintaining engagement yet guiding the child to independent expression, and I soon found myself well partnered. The following exchange could be considered particularly remarkable, since it involves an autistic young man who frequently demonstrated difficulty responding to any oral classroom conversation in an appropriate (topic centered or sequential) manner.

E: How is Lizzie (a pet iguana)? This afternoon we are going to East Bay Vivarium because my daughter wants a lizard. Have you ever been there?
J: No I have not been to that pet store. Lizzie is fine. My father buys her food at East Bay Vivarium. My father and I saw the Blue Angels from Pier 39 on Saturday.
E: We think E. Bay Vivarium is really neat. My daughter got two Anoles. They change color from green to brown. Tell me about the Blue Angels.
J: The Blue Angels were very exciting. What did you name your lizards?
E: Laura named them Silver and Gold but I don’t like those names. Any suggestions?
J: I like the names George and Joyce for the lizards. But a name is just a name.

The journals are also a search for common ground between teacher and child. In everyday details of living, we found considerable overlap, despite the presumed differences of our worlds:

T: Dear Elsbith My dad cooked a chicken and rice for dinner. What do you have for your dinner?  
E: chicken and rice sounds good. I think we are going out tonight - do you like Mexican food?  
T: I like Mexican food. It is good it is red hot and it is spicy and I love it.  
E: The spicy part is good. Do you like spicy Chinese food? We went to a Hunan restaurant in the end. (T’s father is Chinese)  
T: I love hot spicy Chinese food, do you like chong paw chicken.

Or, in another exchange:

E: Do you all decorate your tree together - and do you have any special ornaments? I collect birds for my tree.  
P.s. I hope your sister is feeling better.  
T: We are going to get our criss mas tree on December 14. We all decorate our tree together. Our ornaments are prite.  
E: I think I’m getting my tree then too! This weekend Laura and I are baking cookies shaped like stars. Do you make any special holiday foods?  
T: We cook stick rice and we cook ham bow and we have some buns and we make crissmas cooke, and that is it! Tod ay was cumey.  
E: What made today crummy, Trevor?  
T: Now today was nice and the sun was out and the sky was just nice and I just love it, Love T.

I was still shown the letters! It was also useful for the students to feel that they could use appropriate communication methods — rather than acting out to get attention — and know that they would get a response:

Dear Principal  
I want to talk to you. I want to have a dance party  
And dance in front of the whole school on the stage  
Dance until I die! I want  
Rock and Roll  
Sincerely your student  
Andrew

Yvonne addresses another staff member:

To pe teacher Im very very sory four what I did at pe.  
I will participate in pe. I will run my laps at pe, you is a very nice teacher. I will not right Love letters to boys a gain.

Finally, the death of a popular singer inspires Tifny to spend her bus ride on a letter to the editor:

To eldor: Way di biggie and Big pope get short? Avery body that that 2pac was steal alive. Please please tell me wie did they kill him my auntie sheree called and started crying.

In everyday details of living, my students and I found considerable overlap, despite the presumed differences of our worlds.

Although it is obvious that the initial focus of this writing was not on mechanics, correct punctuation and spelling were modeled in teacher responses and specifically taught in other parts of the writing program. It also needs to be remembered that very few of the teenagers came to the class with writing skills higher than what is considered to be a first- or second-grade level. I felt that we met the primary goal, which was to use writing to legitimize the students’ voices, freeing them from the constraints of disability, as expressions of the tides of feelings felt by any adolescent. The creative exploration of writing was perhaps particularly important for these students. They were genuinely excited at being invited to enter the “lit-
eracy club.” It was clear that we recognized each other as writers, and such inclusion was good.

I have files of student writing, memories of the years I taught. Among them is a note from a parent that I think of when I hear discussions about the etiology of learning disabilities. It serves as a good reminder of the importance of context in all our expectations of student ability and potential—and of the difficulties of changing from comfortable, familiar patterns:

*Hi Elizabeth — This is Bob. Kristi is writing too much in her dialog (sic) notebook. She writes for hours (sometimes) and drives us crazy asking for spelled words, etc. Can we agree to limit this? We’d appreciate your help. Thanks!*

**References**


*Elizabeth Anderson is a doctoral student in Education, Language, Literacy and Culture at U.C. Berkeley and taught for the Contra Costa County, CA Office of Education for over twenty years.*