Background Information

On the first day of school, I was delighted to meet a warm, friendly, bubbly group of fourth graders. I admit that they intimidated me for the first few days of school, but it was not long before I felt at home in my classroom. Although I was nervous about my own ability to teach these kids, they did not purposely give me any reason to feel uncomfortable. My mentor looped with the class from third grade to fourth, so the students were familiar with her and the classroom atmosphere. From the beginning, the classroom community embraced me.

As the year progressed, I got to know the students better and better. I really enjoyed getting to know them and being around them. I found that as the students got to know me better, they did not hesitate to joke around with me or ask me questions about my personal life. While they were not being disrespectful, I found myself questioning the appropriateness of the conversations in which we were engaging. I wondered if talking with the students, as a "friend," would damage my authority in the classroom. I began to think about the level to which I could entertain such conversation, but still keep enough of a distance between the students and myself. As my mind became consumed with thoughts about crossing the invisible line between friend and teacher, I could not help but wonder, what if my "bonding" improves my credibility and enhances my teaching?

When sifting through ideas for inquiry, I kept coming back to this idea of teacher identity and effectiveness. I decided that this inquiry would allow me to ask veteran teachers and fellow interns about their experiences. I was also

excited at the idea of asking my students what their ideal teacher would be like.

As I prepare to take on my own classroom in September, I will need to decide

how I am going to set the tone of my room. In conducting this inquiry, I hope to

find something that will help me find my own teacher identity.

My Peek into the Experts' Beliefs

In researching this idea of teacher identity, I found many published works.

The struggle that I was having dealt with finding something that could be related

specifically to my inquiry. I spent time looking for articles on the internet and

paging through books and often found myself putting things aside while thinking

that there was not enough of a correlation between the text and my inquiry.

A teacher from my school suggested that I have a look at some of her

books that might be helpful. Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community

by Alfie Kohn stood out to me as having some beneficial information. The chapter

entitled "The Classroom as Community," a section about strategies for building a

community, was particularly helpful.

Kohn states, "Children are more likely to be respectful when important

adults in their lives respect *them*. They are more likely to care about others if they

know *they* are cared about" (Kohn, 1996, p. 111). He also talks about the idea of

showing humanness to the students.

> To be a *caring* person, though, an educator must first be a person.
>
> Many of us are inclined instead to hide behind the mannerisms of a
>
> constantly competent, smoothly controlled, crisply authoritative

Teacher. To do so is to play a role, and even if the script calls for nurturance, this is not the same as being fully human with children (Kohn, 1996, p. 111).

As I would expect, he also discusses the vulnerability component to this type of relationship. Not only does it make a teacher vulnerable, but reaching out to children in this way can also compromise the teacher's ability to control her students (Kohn, p. 112).

In short, Kohn feels that teachers who form these relationships with students act as role models, showing children how they should act with each other.

Educators who form truly caring relationships with students are not only meeting emotional needs; they are also setting a powerful example. Whenever an adult listens patiently, or shows concern for someone he doesn't know, or apologizes for something he regrets having said, he is modeling for students, teaching them how they might be with each other (Kohn, 1996, p. 112).

My Wonderings

Although a multitude of questions were running through my head about the relationship between a teacher and student, I knew I had to pinpoint one specific idea to question. After collecting data and reevaluating my own motives for the inquiry, my question became:

Can sharing personal information change the relationship between a student and teacher such that the authority of the teacher is affected negatively?

I also wondered if this teacher authority could have a role in the effectiveness of the teacher's lessons, and so I formed this sub-question:

Does the way in which a teacher interacts with her students have an effect on what they are able to gain from her lessons?

My Inquiry Plan

How did I carry out this inquiry?

Since my wonderings involve the way I act with my students, I found that there was nothing new for me to implement in my classroom or my own teaching. I found that the answer to my wonderings would be discovered through evaluating what I already do. I spent some time writing periodic journal entries throughout my inquiry to reevaluate my feelings about my own teaching.

I thought about what information I could find valuable through this inquiry process. I decided to ask the veteran classroom teachers in my building about the experiences they have had in their respective grade levels. I also thought that it would be interesting to hear from other interns to see if their experiences were similar to mine. I wanted to know if they had trouble deciding how to interact with their students, especially since they are viewed as young, "cool" interns. Finally, I wanted to hear from my students! I asked them about their ideal teacher and the type of relationship they would want to have with this teacher.

How did I collect data?

I administered surveys to ask the teachers in my school and my fellow interns about their experiences. The survey for the teachers asked what grade they were currently teaching and what grades they had taught in the past. I was curious to see if varying backgrounds with children of different ages would play a role in the answers they submitted. I included a ranking portion where the teacher was asked to rank the following qualities in order of importance: authoritative, disciplining, having a sense of humor, nurturing, organized, and creative. Next, I asked the teachers to put an "x" on a scale classifying their relationship with the students as "formal" or "informal." I had them do the same on a scale asking them to think about how often they shared personal anecdotes with the students. The scale ranged from "often" to "seldom" to "never."

I also asked the teachers some open-ended questions. I first asked teachers to share whether they notice a change in the rapport they have with the students when they are teaching different grade levels. Secondly, I asked that they think about their effectiveness as a teacher after sharing personal information with their class. Finally, I wanted to find out how they, as the teachers, create a respectful classroom atmosphere. To distribute the surveys, I simply put the surveys in the teachers' mailboxes and asked that they return it to me.

The survey given to the interns had a similar theme, although the open-ended questions were adjusted. First, I asked them to specify their grade level and complete the same "teacher quality" ranking as the teachers' surveys. Next,

they were asked to put an "x" on the same scales that the teachers' surveys included. Finally, their first open-ended question asked that they explain their feelings about the way they have been interacting with their students and whether they feel it has increased or decreased their credibility as an authoritative figure. The last question invited them to discuss what type of relationship they hope to have with their students next year, in their own classroom.

As another part of my data collection, I conducted student interviews that I tape-recorded. I asked the students to describe their ideal teacher, keeping in mind that they should be realistic. For example, a teacher who allows recess all day is not realistic. If the student had trouble answering the question or was not quite talking about the ideas that I was looking for, I prompted them by asking how they would want their teacher to act with them during recess, in the morning before school starts, or in the afternoon when school is over. This gave them the opportunity to share how they would act with their teacher in a situation that did not interfere with their learning.

Since I only interviewed seven children, I was sure to choose students that had very different personalities and rapports with me. I did this because I wanted to see if the students' answers varied in keeping with their personality. I made it a point to interview both boys and girls (3 boys and 4 girls), in case there was an extreme difference that could be attributed to gender. I was curious to find out if the students had different expectations of their ideal teacher, while taking into consideration all that I have learned about each child since September.

Teacher Survey

1. What is your current grade level? K   1   2   3   4   5

2. What grade levels have you taught in the past? K   1   2   3   4   5

3. Please rank teacher roles/qualities from 1-6 in order of importance to you. (1 being most important, 6 being least important)

    _____ authoritative   _____ organized

    _____ sense of humor   _____ creative

    _____ disciplining   _____ nurturing/kind

4. How would you characterize your relationship with the children in your class? Please place an X on the scale where you see fit.

    Formal   Informal

5. Do you share personal/family anecdotes with the children in your class? Please place an X on the scale where you see fit.

    Often   Seldom   Never

6. When changing grade levels do you notice a change in the rapport that you establish with the children? If so, how?

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

7. Do you think sharing personal/family stories with the children lessens or strengthens your effectiveness as a teacher? Please explain.

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

8. How do you, as the teacher, create a respectful class?

    _____
    _____
    _____

Intern Survey

1. What is your grade level?   K   1   2   3   4   5

2. Please rank teacher roles/qualities from 1-6 in order of importance to you.
   (1 being most important, 6 being least important)

   _____ authoritative   _____ organized

   _____ sense of humor   _____ creative

   _____ disciplining   _____ nurturing/kind

3. How would you characterize the relationship you have with the students in your class? Please place an X on the scale where you see fit.

   | Formal   Informal |

4. Do you share personal/family anecdotes with the children in your class? Please place an X on the scale where you see fit.

   Often   Seldom   Never

5. In your opinion, has the way you have been interacting with your students increased or decreased your credibility as an authoritative figure in the class? Why?

   _____

   _____

   _____

6. What type of relationship do you hope to establish with the students in your own class next year? Why?

   _____
   _____
   _____
   _____

How did I analyze the data?

Once I received the surveys, I thought about how I would go about sifting through the information I obtained. I began by sorting the interns' surveys into piles according to their grade level (Junior Primary, Primary, Intermediate, and Upper Intermediate). Since the interns only have had experience in one grade level, I thought it would be best to compare their responses to those of other interns working with the same age group. This also allowed me to narrow down the number of surveys that I needed to absorb at once.

I started with the Junior Primary (Kindergarten) interns and jotted down some trends that I noticed from looking at their sheets. I was particularly interested to see where the interns ranked "nurturing" as an important teacher quality. In addition, I was curious to see how many other interns had the same worries as me about crossing the line between friend and teacher and losing their authority, credibility, or effectiveness. I performed this same analysis across all grade divisions.

I did not feel that the teachers' surveys needed to be analyzed in quite the same way because many of them have had teaching experience across several grade levels. I separated them in the same fashion that I did with the interns' surveys. I chose to do this so that I had an opportunity to narrow down the amount I was looking through at one time and to help me organize my thoughts.

Since the Junior Primary division is made up of only Kindergarten, I received just two surveys from teachers in my school. The Upper Intermediate division is only comprised of fifth grade and I only received one survey from a

fifth grade teacher. While I did not have many to compare among the Junior Primary and Upper Intermediate divisions, I had many surveys from the Primary and Intermediate divisions.

While sorting through the six surveys I received from teachers in the Primary division, I noticed that three of the teachers had only taught in the primary grades. The other three teachers had experience teaching in both primary and the upper grades. I chose to further break down the group according to these two distinctions.

When looking through the seven surveys that had been completed by intermediate teachers, I found that only one teacher had experience with just intermediate grades. Three of these teachers had experience with both primary and intermediate, while the other three had experience with both intermediate and upper intermediate. I decided to make two sub-groups as I had done with the primary division using this criterion. Also, since only one teacher from the upper intermediate grades submitted a survey, and had previously taught intermediate, I included her survey in this group as well.

Using the grouping system mentioned above, I analyzed the surveys in the same way that I had analyzed the interns' surveys. I looked for trends across every group. I compared their responses to the open-ended questions with the scales on which they had placed an "x." I used the trends that I noted to help me make connections and come to some conclusions about the thoughts on different grade levels and the thoughts that may have been consistent across grade levels.

Finally, I listened to the seven child interviews I had conducted and wrote down the key ideas that each student had developed. I used these notes to see what similarities there were among students with very different personalities. Discovering what is important to the children is critical in evaluating my own interactions with my students, now and in the future.

My Findings

Claim #1: *A nurturing, kind teacher is most desirable.*

When looking through my surveys, I found that in all cases, both interns and teachers ranked nurturing among the top three qualities desirable for a teacher. In many cases, nurturing was ranked one or two. During my student interviews, I found that the students like teachers who are nice and "cool." One student said, "I like teachers who care for their students if they are hurt or upset."

Claim #2: *Sharing personal information can strengthen a teacher's effectiveness because it shows children that their teacher is a real person too.*

The survey results showed an overwhelming (yet not unanimous) amount of people agree that sharing personal information would help their students realize that teachers are real people who have lives outside of school. Some teachers mentioned that they feel sharing information gives their students a sense of comfort and safety in the classroom. They realize that everyone makes mistakes, including teachers, and this knowledge could improve children's sense

of self-esteem and self worth. It is especially beneficial for building a community in which everyone can feel that they contribute an important part.

The students that I interviewed talked briefly about enjoying teachers whom they can have a conversation on a topic that is not school related. One student expressed that she would like to talk to her teachers about pets, because that is something that interests her and sparks her curiosity. Showing interest in something a child is passionate about and making connections to your own life can give them a feeling that they can connect with the teacher on a level other than an educational one.

Claim #3: *Teachers need to find a balance between "friend" and "teacher" that feels right for them, taking into consideration their students' age, needs, and personalities.*

While I did not find a straightforward answer as to where to draw the line between friend and teacher, I did find that several people feel that each teacher needs to find the type of relationship that is comfortable for them. No one is going to tell me exactly how to act with my students. One important factor to consider is the age of the students in the class. Younger students have different needs than older students and this needs to be addressed when forming a relationship. My mentor says, "With younger students, you [teacher] are more of a 'motherly' figure." Another teacher comments on the changes he notices when looping with a class, "If I loop with a class, the relationship seems less formal and more like a parent-child relationship."

I also need to think about the personalities of my students. If I feel that my students will take advantage of a teacher that shares too much about herself, I will need to reevaluate the type of relationship that I want to establish with them. One of my fellow interns, placed in a fifth grade classroom, says, "I feel that the relationship between teacher and student needs to be assessed periodically in order to be sure things are running smoothly."

Claim #4: *Students feel more comfortable asking their teachers for help with any problems when they are confident that their teacher is a caring, trustworthy, and helpful individual.*

To quote one of my students, "It is easier to ask for help in school when I can communicate with my teacher. I like teachers you can have fun with and work with too…like you." Caring, trustworthy, helpful, playful, and fun were some of the characteristics that my students used when describing their ideal teacher. One teacher says, "Learning is easier in a comfortable, safe atmosphere where students are not afraid." I have found that teachers whom students can trust are more effective in that the students will come to them with any problems, including academic ones. When a student can recognize that they need assistance in a certain subject area, and feel comfortable asking the teacher for help, they will be more successful, in turn, enhancing the teacher's effectiveness.

There is also a time and a place for conversation that does not pertain to academics. Obviously, entertaining a question about the latest *American Idol* during a read aloud is not appropriate, while the same conversation could be

perfectly acceptable in the morning when the students are arriving, during recess, or after school. While I want my students to be comfortable talking to me, they should not feel that they could act disrespectful or impolite.

In the Future

How will my findings affect my future practice as a teacher?

I will definitely use the knowledge that I have gained as a result of this inquiry as I prepare myself to take over my own classroom in the fall. I will no longer have another adult in the room that will influence the way in which I interact with my students. I will be on my own and I will need to establish a classroom environment that works best for me.

My classroom is going to be a warm, nurturing, caring environment where students can feel at home. I would never want my students to feel threatened or uncomfortable in my room. I will strive to build a sense of community where all students feel a part. I want my students to see me as a person, just like they are. After the work I have done for this inquiry, I do not see how having a friendly relationship with my students can hinder this classroom environment, so long as I ensure that it is also a respectful one.

As I reflect on the past year, I realize that there have been some bumps along the way. I am not convinced that the way I interacted with my students at the beginning got me off on the right foot. I feel that the students had some preconceived notions about my being an intern. My fourth graders are very observant and many of them are used to having interns in their class. They

understand the difference between the teacher and the intern and they are aware that I am still learning. I think that this knowledge worked against me a bit. They tested me and used my kindness and interest in having their approval against me. While I do not think that they were trying to be disrespectful, they were trying to see how far they could push me. I had to reevaluate our relationships and adjust my interactions with them as I began to take over a lot of the teaching.

Next year, when I give my students their first impression of me, I will keep in mind my experiences and the things I have learned. I do, however, feel that things will be different simply because I am going to be the teacher. I will never be an intern to them. They will view me as the authority figure from day one and I predict that this change will naturally create a difference. Of course, I cannot count on this alone to give me the perfect balance between friend and teacher, but I can count on it to change my circumstances.

What am I still wondering?

Over the past couple of months, this issue of teacher and student relationships has been weighing on my mind. After my work studying the issue through this inquiry, I feel a little bit more at ease about "starting the year off right" this coming fall. I now have new worries, new wonderings. I know that I will be in a new place this fall, where I will be the sole teacher in a classroom. This makes me think about my effectiveness as a teacher. The students will be my responsibility alone and it will be up to me to ensure that they have the best learning experience possible. I think that having a personal relationship would

enhance credibility and effectiveness as a teacher because the students will see me as a "real person," just like them. I cannot help but wonder:

> Can the relationship between a student and teacher have an effect on the effectiveness of the teacher?

I will also be in a new school with new colleagues. I do not know what these teachers' experiences have been with their students. I think about how my new colleagues' relationships with their students will be and I wonder what their stance is on having personal relationships with students. I formed a second wondering:

> Will teachers who do not agree with this type of interaction question my professionalism?

I know that inquiry is an on-going exploration into my own teaching. I will carry this experience with me through next fall, along with all of my new wonderings. While I may never find a person to show me the "perfect" balance between a friend and teacher, I think that my continued work in this profession will enable me to find *my* perfect balance between friend and teacher.

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