

**Using Dialogue Journals in Mentoring Relationships: Teacher Candidates' and Mentors'
Experiences**

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Abstract

Existing literature on the use of dialogue journals in teacher education highlights its relevance in facilitating teacher candidates' reflective thinking. There is little, if any, focus on the use of dialogue journals within the mentoring relationship, between teacher candidates and cooperating teachers, during field experience. Utilizing a phenomenological inquiry, the researcher sought to gain insight into teacher candidates' and mentors' experiences using dialogue journals during an early childhood practicum. Results reveal that teacher candidates' and mentors' experience using dialogue journals varied. While some participants reported that the dialogue journals were beneficial to their relationship, others did not see the same value.

Keywords: mentoring; dialogue journals; field experience; teacher candidates; cooperating teachers; early childhood

Introduction

Within the context of this paper, a dialogue journal can be defined as the written exchange between two people in a professional setting, with one of the persons being viewed as the expert, or more experienced of the two. This exchange is usually initiated by the less experienced, or novice person, although that may not always be the case. The topics of the written exchange should emerge organically, as opposed to being predetermined. For example, if a novice teacher has questions or comments after observing a lesson activity or is simply seeking advice on specific classroom management strategies, he or she would initiate the written exchange to reflect those inquiries. Finally, the exchange can extend anywhere from a few weeks to as long as a year. The foundation of the dialogue journal, obviously, should be the exchange; therefore, the more experienced teacher has the power to transform the dialogue journal into a valuable teaching tool in preservice teacher education.

The present study, a phenomenological inquiry, investigated teacher candidates' and cooperating teachers' (mentors) experiences using dialogue journals during an early childhood practicum, or field experience. The researcher sought to gain insight into the mentoring relationships and, particularly, into teacher candidates' and mentors' ideas about the value of the dialogue journals in relation to enhancing communication during the practicum.

Literature Review

A search for relevant literature on dialogue journals (specifically in teacher education) revealed a lack of current empirical work. The few studies available usually focused on the exchange between teacher candidates and either their course instructors or their university supervisors. Additionally, the discourse on the use of dialogue journals essentially comprised of the use of dialogue journals as a reflective tool (Barkhuizen, 1995; Bayat, 2010; Holten & Brinton, 1995; Lee, 2007; Recchia & Shin, 2010) and the benefits of utilizing dialogue journals (Garmon, 2001; Lee, 2004). Little, if any, of the research specifically examined the dialogue journal within the context of a mentoring relationship—the relationship between teacher candidates and their mentor teachers (i.e., cooperating teachers who volunteer to participate in field experience).

In Barkhuizen's (1995) work with graduate students, one of his aims of dialogue journal writing was to "give students the opportunity to reflect critically upon their experiences of the course-work, readings and assignments" (p. 24). Further, in Lee's (2007) research, teacher candidates were instructed to use dialogue journals to reflect on issues raised throughout course sessions. Holten and Brinton (1995) discussed the use of dialogue journals between practicum students and their practicum supervisors and revealed that the idea of the journals was adopted "as an integral component of the practicum to foster self-reflection" (p. 23).

In one study (Herndon & Fauske, 1996) that did include cooperating (mentor) teachers, the dialogue journaling took place between the cooperating teacher and university supervisors, not teacher candidates. And again, the focus was on journaling for reflective purposes. In Garmon's (2001) study, teacher candidates were asked to provide feedback on the dialogue journals they used in exchange with their course instructor. Teacher candidates reported, among other things, that the journals contributed to their understanding of course material and promoted greater self-reflection.

Although dialogue journals could easily be incorporated into course work as a means to facilitate reflection on some level, they may hold greater potential when used during field experiences. Previous research has revealed that communication is a key ingredient for a successful mentoring relationship (Beyene, Anglin, Sanchez, & Ballou, 2002; Clifford, 1999). However, problems in communication during field experience are all too common as there has been a tradition of silence within these experiences (Albers & Goodman, 1999).

Dialogue journals can—to some degree—curtail some of the common challenges in communication between teacher candidates and their mentors. However, the benefits of using dialogue journals in field experience may not be realized when clear expectations of the process are not made explicit. As stated previously, the foundation of the journal rests in the actual dialogue; therefore, it cannot and should not be one-sided.

Method

Setting

The present study, which received approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), was conducted in the College of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction at a large northeastern university. An early field experience, or practicum, was required of all teacher candidates majoring in early childhood education. The eight-week practicum usually took place during the beginning of teacher candidates' junior year and they were placed in a variety of child development centers on or near campus. Before the practicum began, teacher candidates were paired with cooperating teachers (mentors) as a means to facilitate mentoring relationships.

Participants

Four teacher candidate-mentor teacher dyads participated in the study. All participants gave written informed consent prior to inclusion in this study. The teacher candidates consisted of two females and two males. The mentor teachers were all females. While the participants did not represent a range of racial or ethnic groups, they did vary in gender, age, and years of teaching experience (See Table 1). There were no set criteria for pairing the dyads; they were randomly assigned. The dyads met twice a week for two to four hours throughout the duration of the eight-week practicum. Often times, teacher candidates did not have the opportunity to speak one-on-one with their mentors during their visits. Dialogue journals were incorporated as a means to facilitate additional communication, given the time constraints during visits.

Table 1
Demographics of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Years of Teaching Experience	Highest Level of Education	Race/Ethnicity
Peter (TC)	18-25	Male	1-5	High School	White
Tiffany (MT)	26-40	Female	6-10	Bachelor's	White
Ashley (TC)	18-25	Female	0	High School	White
Kasey (MT)	40-65	Female	21+	Bachelor's	White
Derek (TC)	18-25	Male	0	High School	White
Jana (MT)	26-40	Female	1-5	Bachelor's	White
Natasha (TC)	18-25	Female	1-5	High School	White
Mary (MT)	40-65	Female	16-20	Master's	White

Notes. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the participants. TC= Teacher Candidate; MT=Mentor Teacher

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher's interest in gaining insight into the mentoring relationship between teacher candidates and their mentors, and the communication that does or does not exist during the relationship, prompted a phenomenological inquiry. From a phenomenological perspective, the research seeks the experiential world of participants, which can only be accessed through some form of expression (Giorgi, 2009). In this study, the experiential world, or phenomena, included the mentoring relationship and the experience of using a dialogue journal during the relationship. The teacher candidates' and mentors' experiences were accessed mainly through their language—verbal and written.

Data consisted of semi-structured, open-ended interviews with teacher candidates and mentor teachers, field observations and dialogue journals. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions related to the mentoring relationship and the usefulness of the dialogue journal throughout the practicum experience. Informal observations took place during each of the teacher candidates' visits to their mentor's classroom. Field notes were taken during these observations. Prior to the teacher candidates' first visit to their mentors' classrooms, they were provided with a notebook to utilize as their dialogue journals. There were no scripts or writing prompts for the dialogue journals; the only instructions that were

given included a requirement to begin a new journal entry during each visit and to leave the journals with the mentor teachers so they could respond before the next scheduled visit. The teacher candidates had complete freedom in what they asked or comments they wished to make. Although the dialogue journals were not collected until the end of the practicum, the researcher usually perused the journals during field observations, simply to confirm participation on the part of both the teacher candidate and the mentor teacher.

At the end of the practicum, the dialogue journals were collected, interviews were conducted, and handwritten field notes were gathered and organized. Interviews were transcribed immediately and handwritten field notes were subsequently typed. In order to get a global sense of the data, the researcher first read through all of the data before beginning any formal analysis (Giorgi, 1997). Afterwards, the researcher began the process of hermeneutically interpreting the text (van Manen, 1990). Participants' dialogue journals and transcribed interviews were read and re-read multiple times. Key statements or phrases that were considered essential to understanding participants' experiences within the mentoring relationship and with their use of the dialogue journal were identified and highlighted. Text that did not seem to be relevant to participants' true experiences was extracted. Next, using the key statements and phrases, the researcher crafted a description of each participant's experience. The written descriptions were then read several times in order to find meaning in the text. Finally, interpretations of the text were made and read over one final time to complete the analysis process.

Results

The intent of this phenomenological inquiry was to gain insight into teacher candidates' and mentors' experiences within the mentoring relationship and with their use of dialogue journals during an early childhood practicum. Analysis of the interviews and dialogue journals revealed that participants' experiences varied. Some teacher candidates and mentors found value in using the dialogue journals. In at least one dyad, the mentoring relationship did benefit from the written dialogue that took place throughout the practicum. In other dyads, the dialogue journals did not seem to matter in terms of enhancing the mentoring relationship. During site visits, the researcher noted few verbal interactions between most of the teacher candidates and their mentors; only one dyad communicated regularly during visits, in addition to the dialogue journals.

Mary and Natasha

Mary and Natasha appeared to have the most successful, positive mentoring relationship. The dialogue journal was only a supplement to their ongoing verbal communication. Even though they conversed on a regular basis, Mary always responded to Natasha's questions in a timely manner. Additionally, Mary provided positive feedback in relation to Natasha's questions in the journal. For example, Mary's praises included, "*Wow, such great questions!*" and "*This is a great question!*"

Natasha stated that Mary seemed very open to discuss any topic with her. Moreover, Mary's responses were always in great detail, usually two to three pages in length. In the example below, Natasha asks for feedback after teaching a small group activity.

Natasha: What do you consider to be my personal weakness(es)? How can I improve?

Mary: As a mentor teacher, I would also like to mention your strengths. You are very knowledgeable about child development, interact very well, reliable, and seem to be very interested in learning more! (Such as the insightful questions you are asking in this journal). With regards to things to work on: Some suggestions were made on your lesson plan activity; Try to be more patient with the children especially when they seem upset or angry; Don't be too hard on yourself as this is a learning experience and don't strive for perfection: As no one is!; Remember to have fun! If you're not enjoying what you do, the children quickly learn this; Also, always keep in mind that these children are only 3, 4, and 5 years [old]. Sometimes we have high expectations and lose sight of who we are working with!

Tiffany and Peter

While Peter expressed happiness with his overall experience during the practicum and with his mentor teacher, he mentioned their lack of verbal communication as a drawback. In his interview Peter stated:

Tiffany was really great; I had a lot of respect for her. I just wish I could have talked to her more because I didn't really do that too much...there were a lot of days where literally the only thing we said to each other

was, 'Good Morning' and then, 'See Ya Later.' I mean, I wanted to be communicating more, but I guess it was all circumstantial...Fortunately, the dialogue journal provided me some supplementary advice from Tiffany.

Tiffany, similar to Mary, always responded to Peter's questions in great detail and often made comments such as, "Good Question!" or "Great questions so far, I can tell you really think about your work." During Tiffany's interview, she stated that the dialogue journal was helpful and that Peter was very observant and posed good, thought-provoking questions in his journal.

Jana and Derek

During Jana's interview, she discussed Derek's discomfort in speaking with her. According to Jana, whenever she tried to speak to Derek, he seemed uncomfortable and would never make eye contact. When the researcher spoke with Derek, he admitted that he felt most comfortable using the dialogue journal. He stated,

If anything, I found the notebook conversations to be invaluable over the course of the practicum. Through it, I was far more comfortable asking questions about the program and requesting suggestions on personal approaches in early childhood.

While Jana expressed an appreciation of the dialogue journal, she felt that many of Derek's entries contained trivial questions that could have been discussed in person. On more than one occasion, Jana attempted to initiate verbal communication. For example, when Derek asked Jana about particular strategies or activities to keep her classroom under control, she responded, "I would like to talk personally about this. I think that is going to be much better!"

Kasey and Ashley

During observation visits, the researcher noticed virtually no verbal communication between Ashley and her mentor, Kasey. According to Ashley, from the first day of the practicum she felt confused about her role because Kasey had not communicated any expectations to her. Initially, Ashley felt that the dialogue journal would be a good way for her and her mentor to communicate, given her mentor's busy schedule. Much to Ashley's dismay, Kasey did not treat the dialogue journal as a priority as she often

forgot about it and on several occasions needed to be reminded to respond to Ashley's questions in the journal.

During the interview with Ashley, she expressed disappointment in the lack of communication between her and Kasey. She stated, *Certain times [Kasey] was really busy and I did not want to bother her, so I would write in the dialogue journal. The only thing is, she really didn't respond...I would kind of say, 'Oh I wrote some questions in the dialogue journal' and she would be like, 'Oh yeah, well I didn't get to it, I've been really busy.' But then the more I thought about it, I was like, 'Well there's nap time in the afternoon.'*

Discussion

Teacher candidates' and mentors' experiences using dialogue journals varied. While some participants reported that the dialogue journals were beneficial to their relationship, others did not see the same value. Two teacher candidate-mentor dyads expressed an appreciation of the dialogue journals and cited its practicality, especially when there was insufficient, or nonexistent, verbal communication. All of the teacher candidates could see the possibilities in using a dialogue journal during field experience, even if it did not seem to benefit their current mentoring relationship. However, one mentor teacher reported that she actually preferred traditional verbal communication over the dialogue journal. In the case of Jana and Derek, for example, Jana wished to communicate more verbally even though Derek seemed more comfortable with written forms of communication. Although Jana made many attempts to converse face-to-face, Derek had never reached a level of comfort that would facilitate full engagement with his mentor. Jana and Derek's mentoring relationship could have simply been a result of pairing two very different people. Given the fact that there was no formal process in place for partnering the teacher candidates and mentors, one should expect the possibility of mismatches in personalities.

While neither Mary nor Natasha expressed a preference for one form of communication over another, their strong relationship demonstrated that the written communication in dialogue journals could be equally as effective as verbal communication. In the case of Tiffany and Peter, both saw the value in using dialogue journals. However, Peter expressed some disappointment that their verbal dialogue did not really extend beyond the mere, "Good Morning" or "See Ya Later." But as Peter stated in his interview, he accepted that it was all circumstantial. In other words, he did not take it personal as he was

aware that logistically, verbal, or face-to-face communication would be a challenge. Peter reported that he was well aware of the time constraints that acted as a hindrance during field experience.

Finally, Ashley believed the dialogue journal seemed like a good idea in theory. However, in her particular situation, even the dialogue journal could not remedy the communication challenges Ashley faced with her mentor, Kasey. In speaking with Kasey, it was apparent that she was well aware of the communication problems between herself and Ashley and she was not hesitant in taking blame. Kasey said she knew it was important to communicate but time constraints certainly made the task of mentoring a challenge.

Implications

The results of this study have implications for teacher education in all contexts—nationally and internationally. In teacher education, there is always the search for new ways to help teacher candidates and novice teachers make practical sense of teaching and all that it entails—the highs and the lows. Dialogue journals could become an invaluable teaching tool and resource in all types of teacher preparation programs worldwide and, thus, should be considered for more widespread use during field experience. The value in gaining insight from experienced teachers—the gatekeepers of the profession—should not be understated. In analyzing the dialogue journals, the researcher discovered that teacher candidates also have a number of concerns related to teaching. The most common themes to emerge from the journals included questions about classroom management, curriculum, and specific teaching strategies. This may, in some way, explain why teacher candidates see value in using dialogue journals, especially when verbal communication is limited. Dialogue journals are beneficial not only because they ensure that some form of communication is taking place (in most cases), but perhaps more importantly, because they serve as an additional resource for teacher candidates as they prepare for a career in teaching. Through dialogue journals, mentor teachers are given a sometimes rare opportunity to explicitly share specific teaching strategies and this alone can be invaluable to novice teachers. Even more, dialogue journals can be used as a reference guide, long after field experiences and college courses are completed.

While the use of dialogue journals during field experience may hold potential, it is clear that more research must be done in this area. The small sample size (N=8) limits the researcher's ability to

generalize any of the findings. The participants' experiences were varied and one must also take into consideration the multiple layers of a mentoring relationship. Time is a critical factor in the development of any meaningful relationship; therefore, the short duration of the practicum (eight weeks) should also be considered a limitation of this study. This study could be replicated in any teacher education program, both nationally and internationally. Suggestions for future research include a larger study that extends over a greater period of time. A greater sample of teacher candidates and mentors during an extended field experience (i.e., student teaching/internship) would certainly offer deeper insight into the true value of incorporating dialogue journals and its influence on the mentoring relationship.

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