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**USING DIALOGUE JOURNALS TO FOSTER A STUDENT-TEACHER  
RELATIONSHIP IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM**

by  
Jamie Lyn Horton

A Thesis  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Science in Teaching Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
June 22, 2011

Thesis Chair: Susan Browne, Ed.D.



## ABSTRACT

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USING DIALOGUE JOURNALS TO FOSTER A STUDENT-TEACHER  
RELATIONSHIP IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM  
2010/2011  
Susan Browne, Ed.D.  
Master of Science in Teaching

The purpose of this study was to implement dialogue journals into a fourth grade classroom to find out if they fostered a relationship between the teacher and students. Over the course of five weeks, students were each given a journal in which he/she would correspond with me. As a class, topics to write about were brainstormed. However, students were welcomed to write about any topic of their choice. Students were asked to write one journal entry per week. Journals were returned the following Monday morning with my response. Data collection consisted of pre-dialogue journal survey, anecdotal teacher notes, the dialogue journals and the post-journal survey. Data was analyzed by comparing students' pre-journal survey responses with actual journal entries and post-journal survey. The surveys offered students' impressions on writing pre-and post journaling as well as whether they felt our relationship had strengthened through the use of the journals. The dialogue journals were an asset to the process of data analysis as this is where the rapport was established and noted. The study showed that dialogue journals can help foster a relationship between the students and teacher. The study also revealed that writing in dialogue journals can portray much more authentic writing than traditional classroom writing assignments.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

Throughout my college career, I was always told a teacher must be able to connect with their students, as they need to feel a part of a learning community. Prior to my pre-service teaching experience, I began to think of ways in which I could connect to my students. I wanted my students to feel a sense of security and rapport with me. Thus began the journey using dialogue journals-an authentic and purposeful way to connect with my students.

When I collected student journals that Wednesday afternoon, I did not know what to expect. I had been exchanging dialogue journals for only a few weeks and I already knew a variety of things about each student. Some told me their hobbies, while others told me about their family or favorite projects completed in class. I was excited to read all the journals. I had developed and enriched my relationships with every student in the class. These journals exposed hurt, excitement, and personal memories. These journals were a communication line. When I finished collecting all 26 student journals, they lined up and then single filed their way out of the classroom and onto the bus. I rushed back to my classroom, eager to see my student responses. Erica's journal was on top. I pulled it from the pile and began to read her entry.

“Dear Miss. H, Thank you for using my name in the math problem yesterday. It was really cool to see my name in it. I also liked how I got to come up and solve it. I don't really like math. I always do bad on the tests. I hope I do better on my tests this year. “

Such a short amount of writing went a long way. I gathered much about the type of learner Erica is. It also connected me to Erica in a way that never would have happened under regular classroom circumstances. With student-teacher ratios and curriculum demands on the rise, there is less time for authentic verbal communication with students. I put my pencil to the notebook and began to write back.

“Dear Erica,

I am so happy you enjoyed seeing your name in the problem! I hope to do more of them so keep your eyes open as your name might pop up again. When I was your age, math was my weakness. It wasn't that I wasn't good at it; I just needed extra help sometimes. Anytime you need help, you can always come and ask me. Maybe we could meet a day before a math test and review together? I think it would be fun! Let me know what you think. If you did better on your tests, do you think you might like math better? Enjoy the rest of your week!”

This journal spoke so much more than just an entry. It was Erica letting me know her struggles and it allowed me to individualize instruction to her needs. I had 25 more journals to read and respond to by Friday. Was it time consuming? Yes. Was it worth it? Absolutely.

### Purpose Statement

Schultz's (2003) book on listening explains that, “Trying to teach without that knowledge (of each student), treating the class as a whole batch, only works a little” (p. ix). What does it mean to know the content but lack the knowledge of who the students really are? Erickson describes that “a really good teacher knows subject matter *and* her students” (Schultz, 2003, p.x). The emphasis on “*and* her students” shows that in order for subject matter to resonate, one must first understand the learners. When Salcedo (2009) began searching for authentic ways for students and teachers to connect, she knew dialogue journals would be a way to understand her learners. (p. 440). While there is “a

narrowing of the curriculum and the imposition of a restricted, often official view of what constitutes knowledge”, dialogue journals are a resource which step out of that strict curriculum and allow student voices to be heard (Salcedo, 2009, p. 440). Preddy and Moore (2005) agree that dialogue journals are an invaluable use of instructional time by allowing students to personally reflect and self-analyze what has just been done, what needs to be done, personal thoughts, and feelings (p. 34). What makes dialogue journals so individual is their goal to encourage writing and thinking, not the acquisition of a grade (Burnsike, p.85). Students are less likely to take risks if a grade hands over them (Burnsike, p. 85). Dialogue journals allow students to share thoughts that otherwise may not have been revealed during class time. If the teacher makes writing in the journal a safe environment, students will write “without fear of failure, without the terror of grades” (Burnsike, 1994, p. 85). Dialogue journals allow for a real, authentic and positive interaction between a student and teacher (Salcedo, 2009, p. 443). The most important aspect of dialogue journals becomes that the writing serves as a greater purpose than standardized test preparation ever could (Salcedo, 2009, p. 445). Writing and responding as a teacher helps position oneself as a learner, a fellow writer and a partner sharing one’s own experiences, thoughts and feelings (Salcedo, p.445).

### Statement of Research Problem and Question

The high-demands of state testing have left little time in the curriculum for students and teachers to interact on a personal level. When grading, most teachers are focusing on a specific skill or answer. Unfortunately, this leaves little thought to the individual student who actually completed that assignment. The phrase “listening to teach”, presented by Schultz (2003) inspires the idea that in order for a teacher to be

successful, she must first listen to her students. The teacher must find authentic ways to connect with the lives of his/her students. Research points to dialogue journals as a vehicle that allows for meaningful connection to take place. Thus, the research question came about:

What happens when I implement dialogue journals into an elementary school classroom to foster a student-teacher relationship?

### Story of the Question

Although I have come a long way in writing, as a child, I dreaded it. I knew no matter my effort, it would not pay off when it was passed back with a grade on the top. The topic could've been on rabbits, an animal I was practically a master of knowledge of, and still barely get a B. As my years in school had gone by, essay upon essay, I would put forth my best work and still not receive that always desired A at the top. When I began college, I still wrote papers that received an average grade. When I reflected upon my college career, I realized there was a category of classes where my writing did not receive a grade with comments such as "awkward sentence structure" and "needs more detail". All the education classes I ever had, allowed me to reflect and write about my classroom experiences without ever critiquing my writing. Instead of returning with a grade at the top of my education papers, they were returned with voices. Voices of actual professors caring about what I wrote. They asked questions and commented on how I felt as well as on topics that may have confused me.

As a pre-service teacher, I had the opportunity to see classrooms filled with students eager to write but then disappointed when they saw their grade. There was no

relationship being established between the student and the teacher. Rather, it shielded the students away from being creative as if it wasn't written how the teacher wanted it; it wasn't "A" material. This is deflating to students. I realized the importance of making students feel appreciated and having a desire to write. After looking back on my educational career, I felt there had to be a way students could write their thoughts, questions and feelings without there being a specific topic that needed to be addressed. After countless hours of research, I came across dialogue journals. Dialogue journals would allow the teacher to communicate with students on a one-on-one level without judgment of the writing. It was a way for students to feel free to express themselves and establish a more concrete rapport with the teacher and vice versa. It gives teachers the opportunity to personally respond to students' feelings, reactions or questions. Dialogue journals allow both students and teacher to have a voice through writing-something often pushed aside in the educational curriculum today.

### Organization of Thesis

The chapters of this thesis are outlined in an organized fashion as so the reader can begin by reading the summarized literature supporting my topic and finish with an understanding of my individual research and data collection. Chapter two will engage the reader in a literature review which will explain what other researchers have concluded on dialogue journals. Chapter three is divided into two parts: the context of my study and the research design. The context of the study will introduce the reader to the Lake Tract School in Deptford, NJ in which my research has taken place in. The research design will give an in-depth look as to how I implemented dialogue journals as well as collected the data to explain my qualitative research findings. Chapter 4 will discuss the actual

implementation of the dialogue journals. Chapter 5 is the final chapter, analyzing and interpreting my data on dialogue journals in the classroom.

## Chapter Two

### Review of the Literature

*“I see writing as a way to catch a moment, hold it up to the light, marvel in it, and then, using words, further explore and share the wonderment.”*

*(Salcedo, 2009, p. 441)*

A dialogue journal helps create a safe and inviting place for students to express what they are thinking, and allow teachers to respond. This chapter is a review of the literature that examines the use of dialogue journals integrated across various classroom settings. The research shows the beneficial outcomes of implementing dialogue journals and the impact it has on building relationships among teachers and students.

### An Invitation for Communication

According to Peyton and Staton (1989), dialogue journals are seen as written conversation in which a student and teacher communicate regularly over a school year. In a dialogue journal, students write as much as they choose, and the teacher writes back regularly. In responding to students, the teacher answers questions or comments, introduces new topics, or asks questions. “The teacher is a participant in an ongoing written conversation with the student, rather than the evaluator who corrects or comments on the student’s writing” (Regan, 2003, p. 37). R.W. Burniske explains that rather than writing “awkward” in the margins or commenting on spelling, she lets students hear her voice in writing and encourage them to find their own (85, 1994). Instead of every assignment becoming “just another grade”, dialogue journals allow students to become less concerned with the grade and more sensitive to the teachers’ written response (Burniske, p. 86, 1994). Dialogue journals are a way to engage students and teachers in a

conversation. According to Peyton and Staton (1989), either writer (student or teacher) can initiate a conversation on a topic of interest (Garmon, p.38, 2001).

### Social Context of Learning Vygotsky

The idea of promoting a continuing exchange of ideas between teacher and student is congruent with Vygotsky's view on the role of language and social interaction in learning (Garmon, p. 38, 2001). The work of Vygotsky (1978) suggests that a learner gains more knowledge by learning from a more knowledgeable person. The more knowledgeable person can help the learner by assisting and guiding them to help move to a higher level of understanding. Thus, based on Vygotsky's thinking, dialogue journals are a way for teachers to push their students to higher levels of cognitive development through the use of teachers written comments (Garmon, 2001, p.39). McLaughlin (1993) explains that because dialogue journals "are interactive and conversational in tone"; they provide the opportunity for "real student-teacher communication" (, p.3).

Roe and Stallman (2001) conducted a comparative investigation of dialogue and response journals in a graduate-level reading methods course. The research found that students felt both journal types were beneficial; however, there was "a significantly stronger preference for dialogue journals on six of eight points of comparison" (Garmon, 2001, p. 38). Students preferred dialogue journals for:

- understanding difficult material
- clarifying their role as teacher
- increasing their development as a teacher
- understanding the social context of teaching



- extending time spent with course ideas
- doing a journal in another class

(Garmon, 2001, p. 38)

The data collected in Garmon's study showed that students preferred dialogue journals because students valued the feedback that they received in the journal as well as the opportunity the journal gave to exchange ideas with their instructors. While this study was completed on graduate students, the use of dialogue journals is not limited to university students. Even students on the elementary level are able to communicate through written expression. Regan (2003), a teacher of emotionally disturbed children, began using dialogue journals in her sixth grade class at the start of a school year. She explained that she enjoyed writing to the students, and was eager to read responses and answers to her questions. Regan knew that using dialogue journals allowed her students to express themselves and have a voice. Regan's students were given guidelines as to what consisted of an acceptable dialogue journal in her classroom. The following characteristics help define a dialogue journal in Regan's classroom (p. 38, 2003):

- teacher and student write back and forth regularly
- journals take 10-15 minutes to read and respond
- entries include date, greeting, body of the letter and closing
- entries are not graded

Often, teachers become caught up in grading and instructing a classroom designed solely by curriculum standards. Dialogue journals represent perspectives that knowledge is not always shown with a letter grade. Rather, in this era of standardized testing,

students and their teacher can use dialogue journals as “an authentic way to connect” (Salcedo, 2009, p. 440).

### Benefits of Communicating Through a Dialogue Journal

Cathryn Krebs explains that “a dialogue journal can be used in a small group setting, by students of any age, with or without a disability; it can be general or geared to an area of need” (2006 p. 176,). While Krebs summarizes the usefulness of dialogue journals in all grade levels, it is important to analyze and understand the benefits associated along with them. Krebs conducted a study using dialogue journals with a student in her 10<sup>th</sup> grade basic skills class. She decided to gear the dialogue journal on specific needs which included poor self-reliance and lack of responsibility for his work (2006). The student did have serious impending health issues including being legally blind, and having ADHD (Krebs, 2006, p.174). Once beginning the dialogue journal, Krebs began using this interactive writing as a way to be “nonthreatening and provide a bridge to discussion” (2006, p.174). Krebs wrote to the student in a way that encouraged him to express his feelings about issues regarding student responsibility and self-reliance (2006, p.174,). Using the dialogue journal allowed the teacher and student to focus on and discuss, responsibility and self reliance on a daily basis. By the end of the second semester, the student demonstrated improved situational problem solving and an increase in responsibility for schoolwork. Krebs’ study shows that with modifications, the teacher can gear a dialogue journal towards the specific needs of students at any grade level.

Similar to Krebs, Jeffrey McLaughlin (1993) decided to focus on the benefits of using a dialogue journal. McLaughlin looked to his undergraduate language arts methods

class of eighteen students (pre-service teachers) for the study. McLaughlin, however, did not use himself as the facilitator. Rather, he chose for his students to correspond with twenty-eight fifth grade students at a local elementary school. After a semester of communicating, McLaughlin concluded some major benefits of the journaling. Dialogue journals helped:

- provide concrete encouragement for children
- recognize the natural curiosity, openness and honesty that characterize most children
- identify specific areas in which students need instruction and guidance
- talk “authentically” with children and listen “authentically” with children
- respond to children’s concerns, both personal and scholastic
- model the writing process for children
- enter the personal lives of children

(McLaughlin, 1993, p. 11)

McLaughlin’s benefits focus on the teacher’s perspective and what they gained from the journaling. Both McLaughlin’s benefits and Krebs specific needs-directed journal helps outline the usefulness of using dialogue journals in the classroom.

Garmon (2001) produced a combination of both McLaughlin’s and Krebs’ studies. Garmon decided to implement dialogue journals in his undergraduate course as a way to understand if they would be a useful tool for following semesters. The journals were

used for reflection of course material as well as for students to express personal reactions. In this instance, Garmon used the journals for a semester and then wrote on the benefits of using them. Students perceived a wide variety of benefits associated with writing the dialogue journals. One of the benefits identified by most of the students was the way in which their learning or personal growth had been enhanced by the journal (2001,).

Garmon (2001) separated the major benefits into six categories:

- facilitating learning of course material
- promoting self-reflection and self-understanding
- procedural conveniences and benefits
- opportunity to express ideas
- getting feedback on ideas and questions
- improving student-teacher relationship

( p. 41)

In Garmon's study, he focused on giving the students perspective on the benefits of dialogue journals. Garmon also provided documentation of why students felt that these characteristics were benefits. Students felt that writing in the journals helped them remember course material. It also caused them to "think more deeply about the course material" than they otherwise would have (2001). An important aspect to this benefit includes students who felt that "the journals facilitated learning because they represented an accommodation for individuals who learn differently" (2001, p.41). A student explained that if someone does not test well; they may get more out of the dialogue journal than they would out of an exam. Students also agreed that being required to think

more deeply about the material led them to better understanding and often new insights. Without journaling, students would not have time to reflect on their learning. One benefit was explained by a student, Mary:

“This journal is also good for people who are shy and don’t speak up in class. The journal is a way to say how you feel without stuttering or feeling embarrassed. I know that sometimes I want to say something in class and I either can’t think of the right way to say it or there isn’t enough time, so this journal helps me say what’s on my mind (2001, p. 44).”

Another student, Ericka, explained that expressing her ideas in the journal allowed her more time to think of what she wanted to say.

“A lot of times in class, I’m focusing so hard on what other people are saying that I don’t have the opportunity to say anything. With the journals I can respond to what my classmates have said in class because by then I’ve had the opportunity to think about it (Garmon, 2001, p. 44).”

Students enjoy the benefit of being able to express themselves, whether they are able to verbalize in class or not (Garmon, 2001). While this study was using students who were not at the elementary level, it shows another perspective of how powerful dialogue journals can be. Also, the study gives the perspective of the students, which, regardless of age, showed success when dialogue journals were used in their class. Journals give regular opportunity for students to reflect and communicate which in turn provides both students and teachers with a chance to better understand each other.

Schultz (2003) refers to Dewey’s idea that both the child and the content of the curriculum should define instruction (p. 36-37). “Most teachers simply do not have the time to gain intimate knowledge of all the children in their classrooms” (Schultz, 2003, p. 37). However, teachers rarely reconfigure the classroom dynamics to create more “opportunities for talk and interactions” (Schultz, 13, 2003). Bloem explains how

classrooms lack the time needed for personal interaction. “Time is precious. So for example, there may be time for the teacher to listen to each child read aloud for a moment-after all, that is a measurable skill-but no time to discuss students’ meaty questions that follow the reading of a good text” (Bloem, 2004, p.55). Regan discusses her implementation of dialogue journals in her classroom and the impact it had both on her and the students. She “used the responses [from students] as a tool to make sense of students’ behavior or to figure out problems that existed for students during the day”(Regan, 2003, 37). Regan was able to follow Schultz’s recommendations to “create an environment that supports listening... rather than grooming students to fit classroom expectations” (Schultz, 2003, p. 13). By “listening to know particular students”, Regan was able to “draw attention to the relationship that shapes students positions in classrooms” (Schultz, 2003, p. 35). When Regan implemented dialogue journals, she realized “the students’ eagerness to read their journals, their willingness to respond, and their discouragement on a few occasions when I had to provide them with a journal topic because I was unable to respond the day before” (2003, p.37). Schultz (2003) describes this eagerness as students’ urgency to deliver a message (p.29). Schultz argues that letter writing allows students to feel like they are working together with the teacher, which in turn created the positive relationships that were developed in Regan’s classroom.

### Benefits of Writing in a Dialogue Journal

Hillocks (2005) recalls Applebee’s (1981) study which recognizes that most frequent comments from teachers on student writing related to “errors in mechanics” while “comments concerned with the ideas the student was expressing were the least frequently reported” (p. 240). These results determine that a dialogue journal is a

beneficial style of writing. When writing in a dialogue journal, the focus is on the content and not mechanics. Hillocks (1987) continues this claim explaining the benefits of free writing. He explains that “free writing is more effective than teaching grammar in raising the quality of student writing” (1987, p.74.) Dialogue journals allow students to write freely which in turn shows to be educational than actually teaching grammar. Hillocks (1987) highlights that along with free writing, “good pieces of writing as models is significantly more useful than the study of grammar” (p.74). A dialogue journal allows the teacher to foster modeling each time they write back to the student. It also allows the teacher to model proper spelling. Salcedo (2009) offers the suggestion of correcting students misspelled words in the teacher’s responses to model the correct form (p.446). One of Salcedo’s (2009) English Language Learners explained that the dialogue journal helped him “gain confidence as a speller, writer, reader, and learner of English” (p. 446). The teaching of writing does not need to be focused exclusively on the forms of writing; rather, students can learn through the creativeness and inquiry of a dialogue journal (Hillocks, 2005, p. 238).

### The Implementation of a Dialogue Journal

Young and Crow (1992) suggest that when implementing dialogue journals, students need to see “writing as a purposeful activity” (p.2). With this understanding, it is important that teachers establish an introduction to using dialogue journals which allow students to understand the meaningfulness of the activity. As stated by Burnsike, most students view writing as an evaluation which in turn impedes experimentation (1994, p.85). She explains that they need to be given an “opportunity to write without inhabitation, without fear of failure, without the terror of grades” (1994, p. 85). Students

need to feel excited about dialogue journals, and not fear that it's simply just another writing assignment.

To introduce the idea of dialogue journals, it is important for students to feel involved. In this case, a teacher might talk with students about how they feel when they get a letter in the mail (Young & Crow, 1992, p.2). The teacher can then describe how the students and teacher will exchange letters. The teacher could say “you’ll write a letter to me, and then I’ll respond to you”, or “I’m going to read what you wrote to me, and I’ll write back with comments and questions”. Next, the teacher should discuss the privacy of the journal. She should explain that “the journals belong to only the two people writing in them” (Preddy & Moore, 2005, p. 32). Journal entries should never be shared with anyone else unless both writers agree. “There are times when a teacher may be legally bound to report information; but otherwise, journals remain between the teacher and student” (Young and Crow, 1992, p.2).

Choosing topics for journals is not an easy task. It should be suggested to write about what they personally want to write about, and not just follow the given examples. However, with that said, the teacher can brainstorm with the students to show them the range of topics and purposes. Young and Crow provide topics such as books, relationships, school activities, family, games, etc . Once brainstorming has occurred, the teacher can then show students samples of journal entries (no more than about 4 examples). According to Young and Crow (1992), the students should discuss the entries in terms of interest, appeal, enjoyment, and reading ease. This will give students a visual of what is expected from them in an entry as well as help them conjure ideas for writing. The teacher should mention the length of the samples, explaining that they should write



as much as they can without actually establishing a limit of sentences. The teacher should emphasize that it may take time to get comfortable with writing in journals, and that is okay. The teacher should speak of the journals in an encouraging manner to allow students to see the journals as a positive and fun activity. The next step is to provide students with a feeling of “journal ownership” (Young & Crow, 1992, p. 3). “Each student should be given a journal to write in, preferably one that students can decorate the cover” (Preddy & Moore, 2005, p. 32). “It’s important to engage the students into the assignment and make them feel as though they can take risks with their thoughts and express personal opinions” (Preddy & Moore, 2005, p. 32).

Gambrell’s (1985) study on dialogue journals allowed her to understand that for best results, “one must set aside time for daily reading and writing” (p. 514). Once dialogue journals are implemented in the classroom, they must be managed. Also, the teacher needs to be aware that they need “to provide time for students to write back in their journals” (Young & Crow, 1992,p. 3). Gambrell recommends that depending upon grade level, journaling time should differ. For example, grades one and two should get about 10 minutes per day, while upper elementary children could easily spend 20 minutes reading and writing in their journals (1985, p. 514). Students should be provided with this time to read and write in their journals either at the beginning or end of the day. “As students become more comfortable with the dialogue journal process, writing can begin to take place at unset times throughout the day such as when work is finished early” (Peyton & Seyoum, 1989, p.315). However, while students can be given other times to write, it’s important that every student is given at least a minimum allotted time to work on their journal.

Through dialogue journals, “the teacher shares, comments, reacts, provides a model, answers questions, asks questions and most important of all, encourages students to express themselves in writing” (Gambrell, 1985, p.514). Gambrell feels that journal writing encourages written expression and therefore, the focus should be on communication with the student and not the students’ mechanics. The teacher should never correct a student’s spelling in journals. Burnside (1994) explains she’s never had a student say, “Gee, you did a great job correcting my essay. Thanks!” However, Burnside has had students step forward to say things like, “Thanks for the letter. That was nice.” Grades and spelling corrections do not touch students the way a written response can. Unfortunately, “many students are conditioned to see every bit of writing corrected and graded, so adjusting to the personal journal responses may take time” (Burnside, 1994, p 86). Teacher responses should encourage and stimulate a continued dialogue when important topics arise. Gambrell explains that teacher’s responses motivate the child to respond and should encourage written expression (1985, p. 514). Teacher’s report that children almost always respond to a request for more information. Comments such as “Tell me more about...,” “Describe...,” and “I’d like to know more about...” result in increased length and detail (Gambrell, 1985, p. 514). Dialogue journals need to be a place where students are gaining encouragement and positive reinforcement. “Teachers should express interest in what the students are telling them and focus on the ability to deepen and enrich the relationship with the student” (Salcedo, 2009, p.442).

“A writing exchange with caring adults is an antidote to the forces that push teaching to be curriculum centered, that push teachers away from the children themselves” (Bloem, 2004, p. 60). While the exchange may take time, it’s time that

children enjoy. “In some cases, the culture of schooling has dissolved into a focus on facts and isolated, lower-order thinking skills that will help students do well on the test instead of a focus on meaningful instruction that supports deep understanding” (Salcedo, 2009, p. 440). It’s the role of the teacher to be reflective and understand that introducing journaling may take time. However, dialogue journals allow students and teachers to step outside of the mandated curriculum and focus on getting to know the student, not a student grade.

### Listening

“When a positive relationship is developed, the teacher can then act as a model for values and behavior” (Regan, p. 37, 2003). Regan conducted a study using dialogue journals in her sixth grade class of eight students with emotional disturbance. Regan’s class was not a class filled with eager students who labeled themselves as good writers. In fact, all her students disliked writing. However, three days a week, her students would receive their journals and be given 15 minutes to respond to Regan with a letter. Over time, “the exchange of letters became a way for students to make connections with others, which in turn, built a sense of belonging” (Regan, p. 39, 2003). Students expressed that they felt this way because “the dialogue journals were individualized and, therefore, meaningful only to them, the recipient” (Regan, p. 40, 2003). This gave students a sense of connection with their teacher and gave them an opportunity to communicate on a personable level. By the end of her study, which was conducted from September through March, students were expressing thanks towards Regan for the dialogue journals. Some students also expressed notions of good luck, encouragement and compliments. Comments such as “I hope you have a good day” and “Try to get first

place in the MS walk-a-thon” portrayed the relationship established between the student and teacher (2003, p. 39). Regan was able to help nurture the children’s desire to have a positive relationship with adults, regardless of their classification.

“While I started with the intention of connecting to their writing, I ended by connecting to their lives” (Salcedo, 2009, p. 448). Salcedo’s quote shapes the meaning of how a dialogue journal can unintentionally foster an authentic relationship between the student and teacher. Julie Salcedo is an English Language Learner (ELL) teacher at two elementary schools. Her journey to dialogue journals began when teachers asked her to assist the ELL students (8 students) with their writing in an attempt to help prepare them for the state standardized test. She agreed, but soon faced problems implementing any additional help. Unfortunately, not all of the students qualified for the pull out instruction, and others exited the ELL program in prior years. Therefore, these students could not participate in any extra out of classroom help. Salcedo then decided to use dialogue journals as a way to invite students to learn to write without barriers. She was able to use the journals as a way to communicate, even though she did not have direct hours to meet with the students. She admitted prior to using the journals, her relationship with the students consisted of “a brief greeting in the hall” (2009, p. 442). As she began using the journals, she explains, “it allowed us to enrich our encounters by giving us space on the page to share and learn about each other” (2009, p. 443). The results of journaling were incredible on the student-teacher relationships. Salcedo (2009) was able to connect to her students by sharing similar experiences. In the end, even those students who she rarely had personal time with, wrote to her:

“Her phrase, “I missed you the most,” spoke volumes to me. Here is a student with whom I have no scheduled direct contact hours, and she wrote that she missed me the most. Our interaction through the dialogue journal was real and authentic and had a positive impact on our relationship” (Salcedo,2009, p. 443).

Salcedo felt that although there were not set times where she was able to meet with the students, she was able to “co-construct a community”. (Salcedo, 2009, p. 443). Those students wrote for purposes greater than any standardized test could measure. The results showed that the journal were time well spent, as they helped create a deep connection with the learners that would have otherwise been non-existent.

### Conclusion

As this review of literature suggests, dialogue journals can be an effective method in building academic skills, better understanding ones learners, expressing feelings and enriching relationships between students and teachers. In this era of standardized testing, there needs to be a way for teachers and students to step back from rudimentary tasks, and learn about each other. Dialogue journals provide a means for teachers to stop labeling students purely on their performance in academic subjects, and focus on the students as individuals. This relationship, in turn, allows the teachers to understand their strengths, weaknesses and personal feelings of the students. The curriculum demands can no longer override our student’s desires to be heard. Students want to have a “sense of connection, a feeling of freedom, and an opportunity to communicate”, so it’s up to teachers to promote this kind of discussion that is often squeezed out of the curriculum (Regan, 2003, p. 40).

## Chapter Three

### Context and Methodology

#### Introduction

Chapter three is divided into two sections: the context and the research design. The first section of this chapter provides the background of where the study took place through a description of the community, school, and the fourth grade classroom in which my research was conducted. The second part of this chapter examines the research design and provides a description of the qualitative teacher-research which took place. It also discusses the types of data collection used to analyze and inform my research on using dialogue journals in the classroom.

#### Context of the Study

##### Community

Lake Tract Elementary school is located in the suburbs outside of Philadelphia in Deptford Township, New Jersey. As of 2006, the population was about 30,000. The racial makeup of the population in Deptford is 83% white, 12% African American, .21% Native American, 1.53% Asian, .03% Pacific Islander and .99% other races. The makeup of the households includes 53.9% married couples, 11.9% female households with no husband, and 29% non-families. The average household size is 2.62 and the average family size is 3.12. The median income for a household in Deptford is \$50,147, and the median income for a family was \$56,642. Currently, 4.3% of families were below the poverty line.

Deptford Township consists of six early childhood/elementary schools, a middle school, a high school, and a special needs school to meet the needs of over 4,400 students. It's the third largest educational system in Gloucester County. The curriculum is based on providing all students with the learning opportunities they need, ranging from special services for special needs children to gifted and talented courses for those students who need enrichment. The township also offers a variety of supplemental courses such as art, music, physical education, technology and other rich elective programs. Deptford Township prides themselves on their students scoring above the state and national norms on state standardized testing.

Deptford Township School District understands the importance of parent involvement in students' education. Therefore, they have established a "Parents Anonymous Support Group" every 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday of the month. Parents Anonymous provides parents with a safe, accepting, and non-judgmental place to talk freely about being a parent. It also teaches parents through peer education more effective ways of providing safe and caring homes for their children.

The District also offers online resources on school subjects such as Math and Reading. The Deptford Township School District website offers links to videos that provide parents with ways to complete math problems using the new "Everyday Math" technique that many parents are unfamiliar with. Other links include reading resources which provides reading tips and recommended book lists that parents can read with their child. Another link allows students who have a valid Deptford Township library card to get free, live homework help from 2pm-10pm every day. They provide help with basic

subject matter for elementary students as well as GED prep, SAT prep, career help, and resume writing for teens, college students, and adults.

Other programs offered through Gloucester County include a support group for parents of children with Autism. Also offered through the county are ESL classes at Gloucester County College. There is a \$10 registration fee but the class is free. They hold classes daytime and evening classes, Monday through Thursday to provide convenience for parents.

### School

Lake Tract Elementary school is a comprehensive elementary school designed to meet the needs of the diverse student body of over 400 students. Lake Tract Elementary teaches students grades 2 through 6<sup>th</sup>. There are over 30 professional educators and staff at the school. The curriculum is designed based upon New Jersey's Core Content Curriculum Standards. They use programs in coordination with meeting those standards including Everyday Mathematics and a Trophies Reading Series.

Lake Tract Elementary offers a 3-tier tutoring program for students who struggle using the main curriculum sources. Tier 3 is the least severe of the tutoring programs. This involves using a computer-based program known as Compass Learning which provides individualized instruction based upon test scores (for math or literacy). This type of tutoring instruction occurs once a week. Tier 2 is used for students who are still struggling after being exposed to Tier 3. This tier uses small group instruction, two times a week. Tier 2 allows only a maximum of 10 students per teacher for this type of tutoring



session. Tier 1 is the most intensive intervention for students. This type of tutoring allows for 1 on 1 tutoring, 3 times a week, if they are still failing after tier's 3 and 2.

The administration and staff at Lake Tract Elementary found it important to set educational goals for the school. There are four goals the school looks to achieve, each one with its own timeline. The first goal looks to increase the proficient and advanced proficient levels of student's ASK tests scores. There are four activities provided to help accomplish this goal. The second goal relates to the activities provided to the community. This goal is to significantly increase meaningful parent and community involvement within the school and to use them as resources to help prepare students for college and a career. The third goal is to demonstrate to parents, students, and staff that collaboration with everyone enhances the educational process for all. The school plans to accomplish this goal through the use of birthday celebrations, family fun nights, talent shows and providing a welcoming environment for all students and parents. The final goal of Lake Tract Elementary is to increase and maintain the use of technology in order to best create a 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom. The hope is for all parents and students to produce various types of technology products as well as use the SMARTboards equipped in each classroom.

Along with providing educational services for all of their students, Lake Tract Elementary also offers many additional programs including Student of the Month, Character Education, Caught You Being Good, Spirit Days. Peer Mediation, and Student Council.

## Classroom

The study was conducted in a fourth grade classroom. The class was taught by one general education teacher, Mrs. Posey. In the class, there are 25 students. The class is split with 15 girls and 10 boys. Racially, there are nineteen white students, one black student, two Indian students, and three students of Asian descent.

There are three students who participate in the gifted program, LEAP. They attend the program once a week for an hour. There are also two other students who require speech once a week for 30 minutes.

There is only one student with an Individualized Education Plan. He is classified as a student with emotional disturbance. He has also been diagnosed with Asperger's and also has severe anxiety. . He is a part of the LEAP program at Lake Tract and does not suffer academically. Therefore, he is in the general education classroom setting all day.

## Methodology

### Research Design

Teacher research is regarded as “inquiry as stance” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009, p. 141). It's considered a “theory of action” that positions the role of practitioners and practitioner knowledge “as central to the goal of transforming, teaching, learning, leading and schooling” (p.141). This allows teachers to examine their own practices and use them as a tool to help make the learning environment more valuable. This research is of a qualitative nature as the dynamics of the study focus on active participation of both the teacher and student. As a teacher-researcher, this study is being constructed in a way that provides room to examine the developmental growth of the relationship between a

student and teacher. The use of qualitative research will help further understand how dialogue journals affect the relationship between teachers and students. There is a move toward “deprivatizing” teaching practice and developing a sense of shared responsibility for students’ learning (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009, p.49). Therefore, this research will be an effective tool in engaging the learners.

Although during this time I will be fulfilling my student teacher obligations, I will also act as the practitioner in order to take on the role of researcher. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) explain that the practitioner herself must take on the role of researcher because they are examining their own assumptions and gathering data based upon it (p. 40-41). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) describe teacher researchers as those who “work together to uncover, articulate, and question their own assumptions about teaching, learning, and schooling” (p. 141). Through this qualitative research design, I will be examining the students’ class discussions, writing and responses to determine how dialogue journals can be an integral aspect of establishing a rapport. This inquiry and the findings may be applied to other classrooms who also want to implement using dialogue journals who have their own questions or concerns.

### Research Plan

For this research study, I begin by studying the students in the classroom environment and noting the relationship between the students and myself. Observations will be collected in a notebook where I write down things students discuss with me as well as topics they talk about within the classroom. Initially, I do not introduce the

dialogue journals to the class because I want to take note of how they interact with me prior to having the written exchange.

After this initial collection of data, I begin to guide the students through a lesson on writing letters. This lesson will introduce the idea of writing a letter to the teacher. The class will brainstorm possible topics they can discuss with me. The students will also be introduced to the format of a letter including a heading, date, indented first line and a closing signature. This introduction on letter writing allows for a class discussion and generates topics for students to write on. I will use the topics discussed as well as the letter format in order to create a bulletin board to hang in the classroom. This is used when students have difficulty thinking of a topic or need guidance when using the written format.

Once the initial concept of writing a letter is established, I will give each student an individual journal. The journal will be blank, as the student is the first one to correspond. The students are required to write at least 3 sentences per entry. Students are required to hand in their journals every Friday. They are required to write one entry per week. The students are to write in their journals during their free time, once work is completed. By providing students with various times to write, it allows them to write when they generate an idea they would like to discuss with me.

#### Data Collection

During this study, there are several data collection methods used in order to analyze how dialogue journals are used to foster the relationship between the students and myself. The data sources include: pre-dialogue journal survey on writing, sample

student journal entries, my anecdotal teacher notes in my research notebook throughout the implementation of the journals, and a post-dialogue journal survey.

The first source of data will be my pre-dialogue journal survey. This survey will focus on students' feelings on writing. This will help guide my understanding of how students perceive writing assignments. I will use this survey to help correlate whether students' journal entries correlate with their survey answers.

The next source of data will be anecdotal teacher notes during the implementation of dialogue journals. I document the types of conversations and topics students engage in with me. This helps gain an understanding on what students feel comfortable talking about in the journal. I also observe and write what I learn about each student and the manner in which I learned it. Was it with the guidance of the bulletin board? Did they tell me something new about themselves? Did our conversation continue throughout multiple entries? This data will help guide the type of information and how much of it each student likes to share.

After this data is collected, I begin to implement the dialogue journals. The students dialogue journals then become the third source of data. While reading the dialogue journals, I take notes on the topics that students write about in my research notebook. I also encourage them to write more, asking questions such as "Why" Or "How". I also track if students gradually begin to write more as the semester continues. These journals are collected weekly and are the most significant source of data because they provide me with a personalized look at each student.

At the conclusion of this study, I give the students a post-journal survey. This survey focuses on how students feel about the dialogue journals. It will look at whether students felt they learned anything about me as well as if they think I learned anything about them. This final data source allowed me to see if students felt the dialogue journals were an effective way to foster a relationship between the student and teacher.

### Data Analysis

The data collected throughout the duration of this study including the pre-dialogue journal survey, anecdotal teacher notes, the dialogue journals, and the post-journal survey, were used to determine the impact on the relationship between the students and myself. In order to analyze this qualitative data, I examined the journals and looked for the quality and topics of information given, the length of the entry, and compared those qualities as the semester progressed. I also used my survey results before and after the implementation of the dialogue journals to inform my analysis of whether dialogue journals helped foster the relationship between the student and teacher.

### What's Next?

Chapter four discusses the results from the data methods used in this study. It will contain qualitative data primarily from the dialogue journals as well as my teacher research notes. Chapter five presents the conclusions and recommendations for further study.

## Chapter Four

### Data Analysis

Chapter four is an analysis of the data collected in response to the research question that asked, What happens when I implement dialogue journals into a 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom? Dialogue journals became a powerful way to create a positive relationship between the students and teacher. Students used the journals as a tool for us to learn about each other, ask questions, and find a sense of connection. Every student had a different approach to fostering our relationship. While some students focused on only asking questions about me, others discussed their interests throughout multiple entries. Dialogue journals allowed each student to individualize their writing and in turn, made it more meaningful. This chapter examines how dialogue journals helped students communicate stories, questions and opinions that otherwise would have not be offered in the classroom. The data reveals how students felt writing allowed them to not only learn more about me as a teacher, but in turn, felt the journals allowed me to learn more about them.

Over the course of five weeks, dialogue journals were implemented into Mrs. Posey's 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Each student was given their own personal journal to write in. The first week, it was the students' job to begin the correspondence. The journals were due every Friday afternoon and told to only hand them in on Friday. However, after week 1, students were allowed to hand them in once they were done responding, rather than Friday. The journals were put on students' desks prior to arrival on Monday morning with my letter response. Students were not allowed to receive their journal back earlier

than Monday. They also had to write a minimum of three sentences per entry. After five weeks of data collection, I made the dialogue journals optional for those who became uninterested in writing. The students who wanted to continue them were given the option to do so. Out of 25 students in the class, 21 decided to continue the journals.

### The Findings of a Pre-Journal Survey

The initial source of data in the study was a whole class discussion about students' feelings towards writing assignments. During my instruction, I took anecdotal notes on students' comments in class. The most common answers when asked "why don't you enjoy writing" were:

- "Too much writing"
- "Stressful"
- "RACIEER responses"
- "Restrictions on what you are allowed to write"

Students' answers were directly recorded during instruction as to provide accurate and direct quotes from students.

Once it was understood the reasoning behind so many students dislike for writing, I began to question "why" a step further. "Why is writing stressful?" Student responses included the following:

- "You have to write a lot"
- "You have to find a lot of information"
- "Timed writing is stressful"



- “Stressed about the grade I will get”

These responses were noted during the discussion. . These responses directly correlate with the RACIEER writing guideline that students are to follow when writing. Therefore, the next question to students was “Would you enjoy a writing assignment if it didn’t have to be a RACIEER response?” Out of the 25 students, 23 said yes. This pre-journal lesson allowed students the opportunity to express what it is about writing that makes it such a daunting task.

Based upon my anecdotal notes taken during the pre-journal lesson, I constructed a survey that would help give concrete data on how each individual student felt about writing as opposed to a whole group lesson. The survey was six questions, with the first question trying to connect where writing ranks in favoritism of subjects for students. Out of 25 students, 9 students ranked writing their least favorite subject while only 1 student ranked it their favorite.

Given that most students during the open class discussion expressed a dislike of writing, the next survey question asked students “Do you like writing?” There were 13 students who responded with “No” to this question. The majority of students answered either that it is “too long and boring” or “RACIEER responses have too many steps”. The reasoning given from most students was anticipated as students show signs of frustration when asked to complete RACIEER responses.

While most students expressed a dislike of writing during the class discussion, the next survey question was to have students explain what they *do* like to write about. While there are many attributes of writing that students do not enjoy, they did express

some forms of writing they do take pleasure in. The majority of students (both those who responded yes or no to “do you like writing?”) said they enjoyed writing about themselves, or personal narratives. They expressed that writing about their culture, adventures, or vacations they have taken were a type of writing they enjoy. This question shows that students do find specific types of writing to be fun.

The next two questions focused closely on different aspects of writing. Question four asked students if they have ever had trouble starting a writing assignment? The majority of the class explained that yes, they do struggle with the opening when writing. I included this question as I wondered if students would also struggle with beginning a letter to me. The following question asked what students felt they could improve on in writing. The majority of students responded with “RACIEER” or “write longer stories”. This response was anticipated and shows that most students do not see writing as a way of expression. Writing for these students is seen as following the RACIEER format emphasized in the district. This demonstrates the need to show students that writing can be used for reasons other than for a fixed, restricted prompt.

The final question led students into the concept of dialogue journals. The question asked students if they have ever written to their teacher before. Out of 25 students, 24 of them responded no to this question. The one student who explained she did write to her teacher said she had to respond to questions written on an online blog. This question allowed me to see how many students had experience writing to their teacher prior to my research study.

I chose to focus my data on a group of 9 students from the class who I felt rapport manifested the most. The students I chose were Kim, CJ, Gianna, Sydney, Eion, Sam, Hailey, Keith, and Shikha.

### Fostering the student and teacher relationship

#### Focus on the teacher

During the course of the 5 week journal study, many students had questions about me. As a pre-service teacher, I was a sudden change to the classroom dynamic. I purposely began the journals as soon as possible in order for students to have a place to ask me questions. There was a sense of curiosity from the majority of the class about my personal life. Many questions were reoccurring from students in the first few weeks of implementing the journals. The most common questions asked were my favorite color, food, subject, and/or animal. These questions were very straight-forward. However, as the journals continued, students began asking more intriguing and short answer type of questions. It was obvious that students became comfortable asking more personal questions as time went on.

#### Gianna

In her first journal; Gianna asked, “Why did you want to become a teacher? What grade do you want to teach?” As a new teacher in the classroom, Gianna wanted to better understand who I was and my reasoning behind becoming a teacher. She also asked this question during Career Week at Lake Tract which also may have attributed to her questions. However, Gianna also shared her career choices with me, possibly trying to find a common conversation topic to discuss further.

## Hailey

A quiet yet academically gifted student, Hailey began her first entry asking the general “favorite” questions of my favorite food and color. However, she also concluded the entry asking a deeper question, “Why did you want to be a teacher?” This question did not have the same type of concrete answer as many other questions had. Hailey understood my role as a teacher and took the opportunity to find out why I decided to pursue a teaching career. It was clear she had a profound interest in understanding more about me.

## Eion and Keith

Another student, Eion, questioned my workload for student teaching. In his first entry, he asked “what school do you go to?” I responded explaining that I am in college at Rowan University. For the following week, Eion wrote, “I was wondering do you have break time? Because with all those book reports, projects and so on you must be really tired!” Eion was obviously interested in learning more about my academics as in both weeks he continued to ask school related questions. At one point, I did not answer one of his questions. Eion underlined the question and asked if I could answer it in my next journal response. There was a dedicated interest in asking questions about me and better understanding my role as a teacher and college student. While Eion asked questions throughout every entry, Keith only began his first journal entry asking several questions. Keith questions were generated about my interest in sports and from those questions, created the basis for all of our following conversations. Although the students generated different topics of discussion, they both were interested in knowing more about me. It

was clear they wanted to find a connection and establish a more concrete rapport. The student interest showed that they did find meaning in writing and used it as a tool to learn more about me.

### Using the Bulletin Board as a Tool to Write

The bulletin board was a tool to help students who struggled with beginning a letter to me. For many, questions emerged through the use of the bulletin board. There were multiple topics that had been previously brainstormed with the class that were posted onto the board. Most students used this as a technique to help them start an entry.

### Keith

Keith wrote his first entry using the bulletin board topics. He asked multiple questions in regards to the topic of sports. “What is your favorite sport? Why do you like the sport? Do you play this sport?” As a sports orientated student, Keith was looking to find a common interest in sports. Unfortunately, I do not nor have I ever played a sport. Therefore, I explained my love for the Philadelphia Phillies and expressed that I do not play a sport myself. I responded asking what his favorite sport. His response indicated he too loved the Philadelphia Phillies. Therefore, our entries continued based upon his use of the bulletin board topics. Keith was able to find a prompt that was relatable to him and use it in hopes to find a common interest with me.

## Hailey

Another topic placed on the bulletin board was “pets”. Hailey discussed her pets in her second entry telling me about her two great Danes. She follows up her pets descriptions by asking “if I like dogs?” I was able to respond and we were able to find a commonality of liking dogs. She also asked “Do you have dogs?” which allowed us to elaborate on the topic and discuss our pets breeds, size and age. Hailey proceeded to use the bulletin board again for the same entry, asking what my favorite sport is. The topic on the bulletin board listed “sports”. Hailey answers the question for herself, letting me know she loves the Philadelphia Phillies. I was able to respond again with a commonality of enjoying baseball and the Philadelphia Phillies as well.

## Sydney

Another student, Sydney, began her first entry asking what my favorite subject is. The bulletin board had “favorite subject” listed as a category. While other students usually gave their own personal response to a question they asked me, Sydney did not. Most students would have told me what their favorite subject is as well. However, Sydney did not share this information for that question. She did; however, make use of the bulletin board to help form her letter response.

## Continuing Conversation throughout multiple entries

One way of establishing a rapport is to take a topic and discuss it in detail. Therefore, I looked at conversations that continued through multiple entries as a way to collect and analyze my data. Often, students discussed topics at great length in which I would respond with questions. Students, in turn, would answer my questions and add additional

information on a specific topic. Looking at my extended conversations with students allowed me to better understand a student's stance on a particular topic.

### Mia

Mia wrote extensively of becoming an aunt. Throughout multiple entries she described her excitement and all the help she has been giving her sister. I asked Mia in an entry to bring in pictures if she would like to show the class. Mia was thrilled to bring her pictures in and share them with the class. Mia and I discussed her new niece, Riley every week of the entries. This allowed me to understand how important becoming an aunt was to Mia and allowed her to share her excitement with me.

### Keith

Many other students also maintained a topic of conversation throughout multiple entries. Keith had used the bulletin board to help generate the topic of "sports". From this topic, Keith and I continued through multiple entries to discuss baseball. For Keith, this became a commonality that he felt he could discuss with me. Once it was established that my favorite sport was baseball and my favorite team was the Phillies, it led Keith to ask questions based on this information in following entries. In one entry, Keith and I learned that we have both been to Phillies games before. Therefore, Keith continued his next entry explaining, "I agree it is fun, if people are not booing at the Phillies." As the entries continued, we were able to learn more about each other's knowledge of the sport as well as our feelings towards it.

## Sydney

As a pre-service teacher, many students learned that I, too, was a student at Rowan University. Once Sydney had learned this information, she spent several entries discussing her time at Rowan's summer camp. "I can't wait to go to Kid's Rule again this year at Rowan! Have you ever seen me there? And do you know any other kids' there or counselors, or C.I.T.?" Unfortunately, I had never seen her at Rowan and responded to her explaining that I am not at Rowan often in the summer. Sydney followed up her next entry asking "I know I had Mr. John as a counselor but I don't know who else. Do you know anyone that is a counselor?" Again, I did not recognize the name, nor did I remember knowing a counselor. However, Sydney did maintain the subject across multiple entries in hopes that she would find a commonality through Rowan's summer camp.

## CJ

CJ is a student who is part of the gifted and talented program known as LEAP. One of the requirements of leap was a field trip to the Baltimore Aquarium. Throughout several entries, CJ wrote about how much he enjoyed his trip. "I am a little annoyed that I missed career day, but I had fun at the Baltimore Aquarium." I responded to this entry asking how the trip was and what he had done at the aquarium. CJ responded in great detail of all the things he got to experience. The journals allowed me to learn about CJ's trip and ask questions through multiple entries. Also, it allowed CJ to reflect on his time at the aquarium and let me how he felt about missing career day.

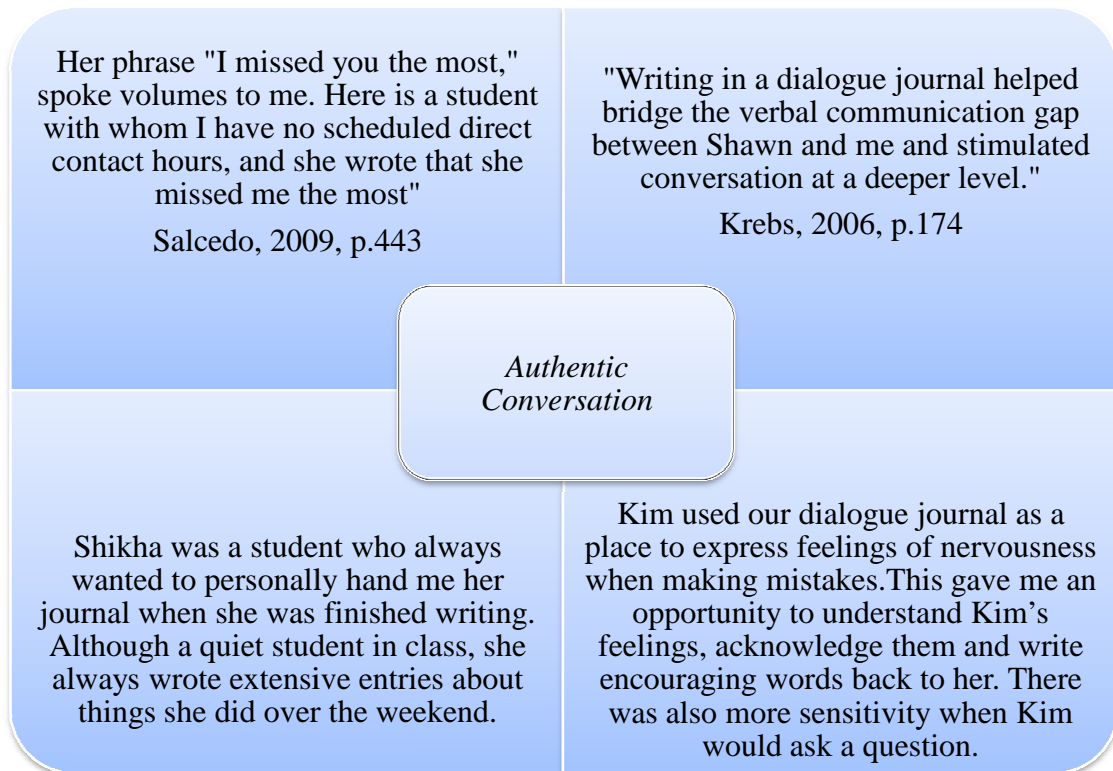


## Gianna

In several entries, Gianna and I discussed her health issues. Unfortunately, Gianna suffered from a leg injury which left her on crutches. Often, she had to leave school early for doctor's appointments or came to school late. Therefore, the journal became an open conversation to discuss her injuries. Almost every week there was an update on her leg. This health issue was such a prominent part of her life at the time, and the journal was a helpful way to allow her to update me each week on her injury.

The dialogue journals as an opportunity for me to learn about students

The next way I decided to analyze how rapport developed was noting if I learned something new about a student from the journal that I otherwise would not have known. This in turn would represent how the journals manifested rapport.



## Kim

The student I learned the most from happened to be one of the quietest students in the classroom. Kim was very critical of her work and always questioned her answers. Rarely did she speak about something unless it was academically related. However, during the second week of dialogue journals, I learned something new about her. Kim used our dialogue journal as a place to express feelings of nervousness when making mistakes.

“Anyway, let me tell you another thing about myself. I HATE to make mistakes. Like if I get one wrong and still get a good grade my heart is bumping real fast and my stomach goes in a knot and I get super dizzy.”

This entry spoke deeper than any verbal conversation I have ever engaged in with Kim. This was a comfortable place for Kim to express her feelings without having to directly confront me about them. Prior to this entry, there was no conversation of this. Rather, Kim would constantly come up and ask if she was correct, without my knowledge of how she was actually feeling. This gave me an opportunity to understand Kim’s feelings, acknowledge them and write encouraging words back to her. There was also more sensitivity when Kim would ask a question. This journal entry allowed me to not only learn more about Kim but gave her a place to express herself.

There were many other instances in which I learned more about Kim. As a shy student, the journal provided an outlet for her to talk to me in a private manner. Kim discussed the activities she participates in after school in one of her journal entries. She explained that she loves to swim and has “swimming practice almost every day after

school". She continues to say her parents want her to practice less days but she loves it too much. This shows Kim's dedication to not only her academics but her extra-curricular activities as well. During my pre-service time in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade class, Kim came to school sick several times. I did not understand why she did not stay home and rest rather than coming to school. In a later journal entry, Kim explained "My dad is a nurse. It is like when I am sick I don't have to go to the doctor in such a hurry." I was able to learn that although Kim was sick, her father had medical knowledge to help treat her at home.

### CJ

Another student, CJ, was able to provide me with much insight to his likes and dislikes in my class. He was also able to recognize his struggles and ask for help with them. This allowed me to learn a lot about the type of learner CJ was as well as his personal feelings on tests and quizzes. CJ's first entry was full of what he thought about different activities. "I liked doing the legends! It was fun! Can we do more work on division and multiplication? I need to work on that". He was able to acknowledge his weaknesses and strengths and discuss them. As a student in the gifted program, I was shocked to find out he felt he needed additional help on multiplication and division. Without the journals, CJ would not have expressed all of these thoughts to me. Also, during writing instruction, CJ often times writes very short responses. He does not like to elaborate in his writing. However, within the journals, CJ wrote entries that were length compared to the whole class consensus. This showed me that CJ can enjoy writing, but he may only enjoy certain styles.

## Sydney

Sydney was a student who showed much interaction through the journal. At the time of the journals, Sydney was dealing with family health issues (some of her own too) and would share them with me through writing. Every week, Sydney would give me an update on the various health conditions. Without the journals, Sydney would not have the privacy to discuss her family matters with me. When she first began writing to me, she wrote about each family member that she lived with. She even included her two pet birds and bunny in her family description. I was able to learn and relate to Sydney as I always had rabbits growing up. Also, I was able to relate to many of the health issues described in her journal. I explained to her my own struggles with my family's health when I was in fourth grade. Prior to the journals, I was unaware of the health issues that she had been dealing with at home. After she wrote of these issues, the following entry explained, "My week has been very tiring with my sister in the hospital, seeing my aunt and having a cold." Once I read this entry, I was able to understand not only what was going on at home but I was able to reason why she was having difficulty paying attention in school. Therefore, her entries about her family manifested a stronger rapport between us as I was able to learn more about what was happening with her home life.

## Gianna

Another student dealing with her own health issues at the time was Gianna. Every week, Gianna would write to update me on her condition. The journal was an especially helpful tool as Gianna was frequently absent. Therefore, on the days she was in school, she was busy completing make up work leaving little time to verbally update me on her

condition. The journal gave us the time needed for me to learn more about her situation. When Gianna did attend school, she rarely showed an effort in wanting to learn. However, during career week, Gianna wrote to me of her aspirations. “When I grow up I either want to be a fashion designer or a person who studies the stars.” The type of student Gianna portrayed in school did not reflect the goals of her career. I was pleasantly surprised and extremely delighted by this entry. This entry proved that although Gianna does not always portray her desire to learn, she does in fact see herself becoming successful in the future. This entry also allowed me to learn more about her and use that information to encourage her to pursue her goals.

#### Sam

Sam was a quiet and reserved student in class who used the journal to inform me of the knowledge he knew of particular subjects. For example, I learned through the journal that Sam felt his best subject was science. The science unit that was being taught at the time was Land and Water. Sam continued to explain, “I really like the ice-pack on the plastic wrapper on the water table. We drink 3,000,000,000,000 bottles of water every 4 years.” This entry allowed me to learn that not only does Sam feel science is his best subject, but he displays great knowledge of it. I wrote back to Sam asking if he knew more facts about land and water, and if so, would he like to share them with the class. Sam wrote back to me, “Yes it would be nice to share them with the class one day.” The journal allowed Sam to share knowledge that he otherwise would not have.

## Shikha

After the journals were introduced, Shikha was a student who always wanted to personally hand me her journal when she was finished writing. Although a quiet student in class, she always wrote extensive entries about things she did over the weekend. However, her last entry allowed me to learn about how Shikha viewed me and the impact I had on her. Shikha wrote:

“For crazy hair day, you were so creative and it was the first time you celebrated a spirit day in our classroom. P.S. I wasn’t coming to school today but I did cause I knew you were leaving.” This entry was written my last day of my pre-service teaching in the class which also happened to be crazy hair day. I realized the impact I had on Shikha as she was able to notice it was the first time I had participated for a Spirit Day. Also, the fact that Shikha attended school that day just because it was my last day showed the dedication and appreciation she had for me. However, Shikha communicated all of this through writing rather than verbally showing the impact of the journals.

Did students overlap into more than one of these categories?

The data presented has been divided into questioned categories to help readers understand the various ways in which rapport was manifested. After categorizing students’ journal entries, it is important to look at which student journals were able to relate to more than one category. The strongest rapport was often developed when a student used multiple methods to create a conversation. By doing so, their conversational topics often varied allowing us to learn more about one another. Out of the nine students

the study focused on, five students' journal entries were recognized under more than one specific category. The categories of focus included:

- Did the students ask the teacher questions?
- Did they use the bulletin board as a tool to write?
- Did conversation continue throughout multiple entries?
- Did I learn something new about the students that I otherwise wouldn't have known?
- Did the students' journal writing match their pre-journal survey answers?

There were three students whose journal entries established rapport through three of the questioned categories. Keith was a student whose entries overlapped into three of the categories. While his entries overlapped, his subject matter stayed the same throughout. Keith was able to establish a rapport through the multiple categories by focusing on a particular topic. The journals became a way for Keith to learn more about me and my enjoyment of baseball. Therefore, while my rapport with Keith developed, our connection was a focus on baseball. While Keith's entries had a clear conversational focus, Gianna's dialogue journal exhibited a variety of topics. Gianna's entries overlapped into three categories. While most of Gianna's entries focused on her health issues, she often asked questions about me or allowed me to learn more about her. Sydney also overlapped into three categories. Throughout Sydney's entries, I was able to learn a lot about her family life. It also gave me the opportunity to learn more about her as we kept conversations continuing throughout multiple entries about her experience at summer camp.

Hailey and CJ journal entries also overlapped into multiple categories. Hailey was able to use the bulletin board to help her create entries on her pets. She also showed curiosity in knowing more about me by asking several questions. While the main focus of Hailey's entries was about her dogs, we were able to discuss multiple conversations to make several connections to one another. CJ entries allowed me to learn something new about him as well as create conversation across multiple entries. CJ's entries usually told him about his likes and dislikes of school related assignments which really allowed me to get to know him as a student and learner. We were also able to take his likes and discuss through several entries what was so enjoyable about them.

Did their writing match their description from the pre-journal survey?

A source of data that is important to compare would be to look at the pre-journal survey and compare it to the students' journal entries. This would show whether their beliefs on writing prior to the journals was reflected in their writing. Sydney completed the survey with writing being her least favorite subject. However, Sydney wrote some of the longest entries out of anyone in the class. She did state that no, she did not enjoy writing because she does not like RACIEER and she has a difficult time thinking of stories. She did explain that she enjoyed writing about adventures; however, none of her entries wrote of adventures. Sydney wrote a lot of entries about herself and personal events happening in her life. After reviewing her pre-journal survey and comparing it with the results of her journal, Sydney did not show signs of writing being a challenging or unlikeable subject.



## Shikha

Shikha's pre-journal survey was very interesting as her feelings towards writing directly correlated with her entries. Shikha did rank writing as her least favorite subject stating that it hurts her arms and "it's hard to think what to write". However, Shikha did say that she did enjoy writing letters. Therefore, Shikha's entries were always very personable and she wrote extensive letters to me.

## CJ

CJ's survey also had writing as his least favorite subject. He wrote that he disliked writing because "it takes long and your wrist gets cramped". CJ then wrote that he does enjoy writing about himself. All of CJ's entries discussed his dislikes, likes and own personal stories which show that his pre-journal survey give much truth in what he wrote. The journals allowed CJ to write about himself which was reflected in his survey.

## Eion

When looking at Eion's pre-journal survey, it appeared as though writing was a subject Eion did not enjoy at all. He ranked writing a 5 which was one of his most disliked subject areas. He explained that he did not like writing and there was absolutely nothing he enjoyed about it. However, Eion always wrote insightful entries and showed true curiosity about me. Eion would often times write more than one entry a week and include several questions to me. Eion's post-journal survey showed that he greatly enjoyed writing in the journals and his outlook on writing had changed.

## Kim

As the pre-journal survey was analyzed, Kim's survey showed a direct correlation with her journal writing. Kim rated writing her least favorite subject because "it has RACIEEER and has a lot of steps". However, she did like to write about informational topics and her culture. Even from Kim's first entry, "I was born in Pennsylvania in fall 2000. Most of my family members are from Vietnam. I am very proud of my culture". Kim clearly portrays her pre-survey feelings as she discusses the importance of her culture as well as informed me of her childhood in Pennsylvania. Being that the journals did not require a RACIEER response, she was able to provide me with cultural and informational letters.

## Sam

Sam's pre-journal survey ranked writing a 5, with 7 being the least favorite subject. Therefore, writing did not rank high on his list of favorite subjects. He explained that he did not like writing because it is very long. However, he did like to write about his life. Sam's journals did reflect the pre-journal survey as his entries were very short. It was clear that he did not enjoy writing long entries. Although his entries were not long, Sam was still able to share a great deal of information about himself. Sam did write about his strengths with the fraction unit as well as his enjoyment of science. Sam also wrote about his personal life, telling me about a dentist visit he recently had.

## Mia

Mia's survey ranked writing a 1. She was the only student in the class to rank writing her favorite subject. She wrote that she enjoyed writing because she likes "to write big long paragraphs". She continued on to say that she likes to write about animals. After reviewing her journal entries, while she did write lengthy entries, none of them discussed the topic of animals. Therefore, her survey did resemble her likes of long paragraphs; however, she failed to write anything about animals.

## Gianna

Of all the students, Gianna was one of the only ones who indicated she enjoyed writing in journals in her pre-journal survey. She ranked writing a 3 out of 7, making it a fairly enjoyable subject for her. Along with enjoying journal writing, she wrote that she also enjoyed writing about her family tree. While none of Gianna's entries focused on her family tree, she did hand in her journal on time and often early. Most of her entries did focus on her health issues, in which she wrote in journal format.

## Hailey

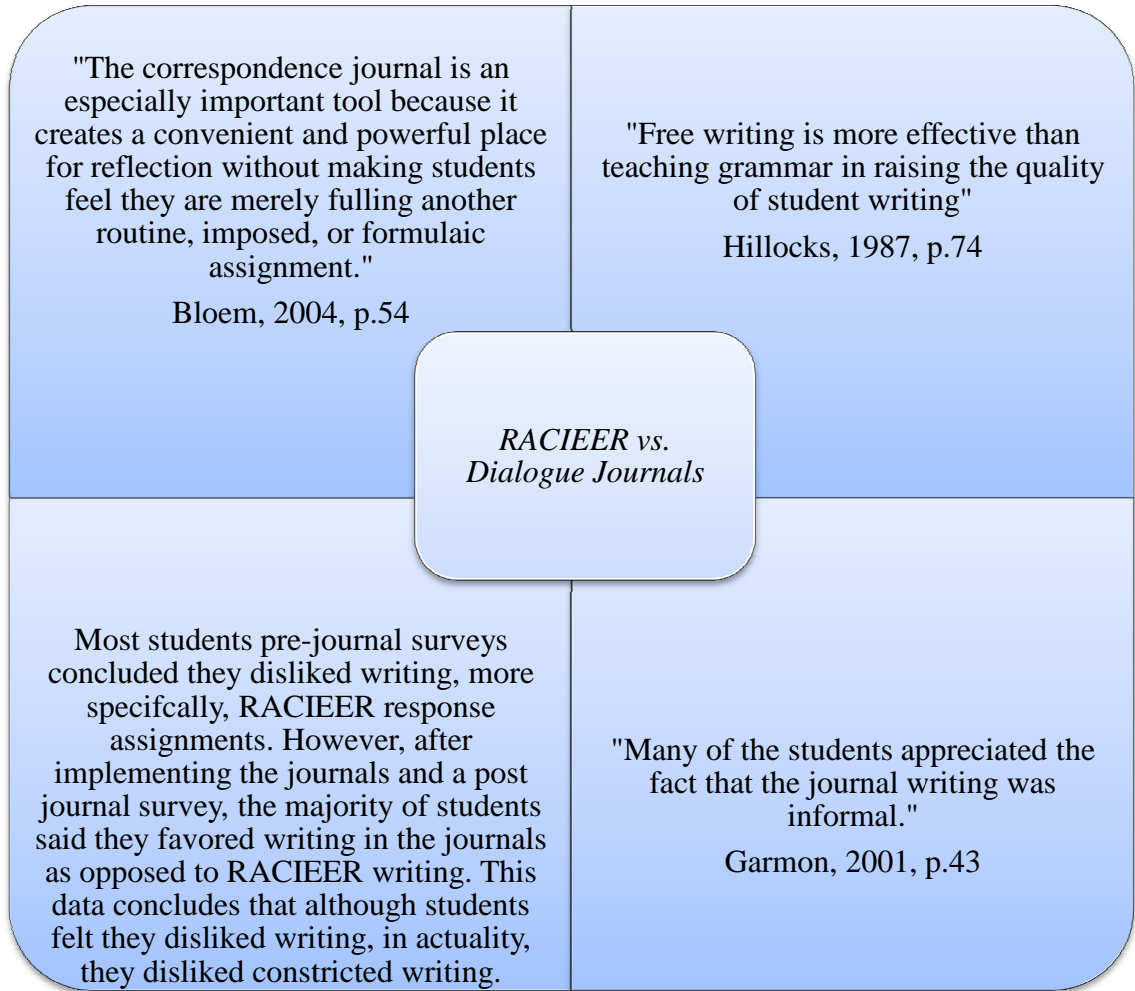
Hailey's pre-journal survey explained that out of the 7 subjects listed, writing was a 4. She explained she did like to write scary stories. Although Hailey's survey expressed her like of story-writing, Hailey did not write any stories. All of Hailey's entries focused on her family pets and the Philadelphia Phillies. However, journal writing did not lend an easy opening for writing scary stories. Overall, Hailey's journal entries did not reflect her pre-survey answers.

## Keith

Keith's pre-journal survey described writing as his least favorite subject. He explained that he did not like writing because "it takes forever to think what to write". Keith's journal clearly represented his difficulty in coming up with what to write as he frequently used the bulletin board for topic ideas. Keith's pre-journal survey directly correlated with the writing in the journal.

## Concluding Survey

The concluding survey conducted allowed me, as a researcher, to understand if students felt they developed a better rapport as well as had an enjoyment in the letter style of writing. All nine students included in my focus group said they enjoyed the journals. Keith wrote, "yes because I got to learn more about you and I also liked the journals because I was excited when you wrote back!" Gianna's response incorporated information she learned about me in her response to the question. She wrote, "Yes, I liked writing in the journals because it was nice to learn about Miss Horton and what she was like and why she wanted to become a teacher." It was interesting to see that students did in fact enjoy writing in a journal and felt they did learn more about me. All students apart of the focus group, with the exception of Sydney, said they would like to continue writing to me. They also concluded that they enjoyed this type of writing more than a RACIEER response. Shikha not only circled yes to that question but drew a smiley face next to it to emphasis her point. CJ circled and drew arrows around yes, also emphasizing his point that he enjoyed writing in the journals more than a RACIEER response.



Other pertinent data collected from the survey was student opinions about what they had learned from writing in the journals. Students were asked, do you feel like your teacher got to know you better because of the journals? Why or why not? This question allowed students to tell me what they feel I learned about them through the use of the journal. Eion wrote, "Yes, well she knows what's my favorite pets, color and so on." Eion did in fact state these facts about himself in his journal which shows he used the journal in hopes I would better know him. Kim wrote, "Yes. Because when you write to them they could understand more about you." For Kim, the journal became a place of

confiding. She was able to express her feelings in an indirect way through the use of the journal. Kim saw the journal as a way for me to better understand her. Keith and I engaged in a conversation about sports across multiple entries. For his post-journal survey, Keith recognized that our conversations focused on sports. He wrote “Yes, because you got to learn I like sports and the Phillies.” It is clear that Keith was able to realize that our rapport was based on our discussions of sports.

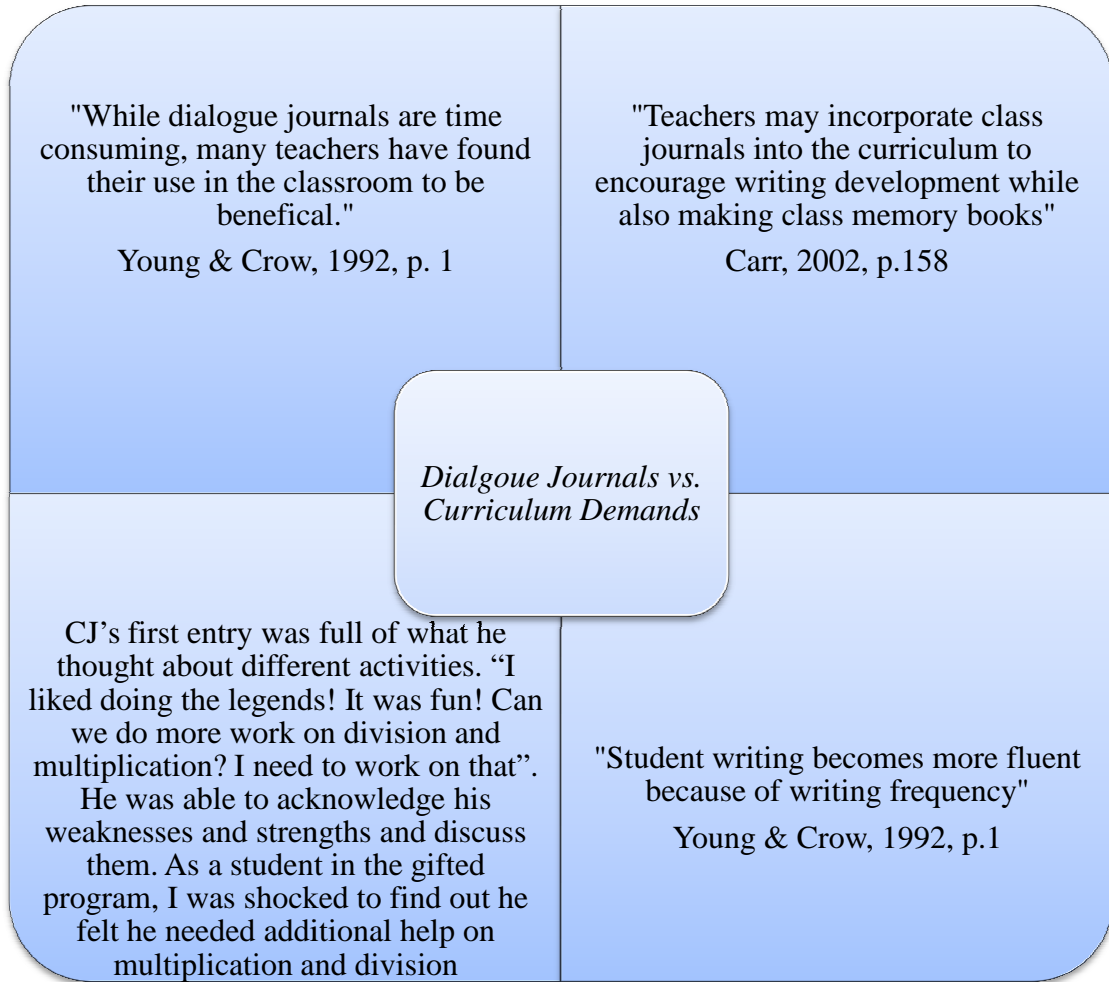
The next question on the concluding survey correlated with the previous question. The question asked students, did you feel like you learned more about your teacher from writing in the journals? All of the students except for one responded “yes” and continued to explain what they learned about me. Shikha had written “not really because all the things I wrote was about me and my answers to what I did for trips and she wrote back about that too by saying it was fun or how was it.” Shikha’s answer, although different from others, was accurate. Shikha’s entries did lend way for me to ask further questions about the topic she had written on. Shikha did not question me at all which in turn did not allow her to learn anything about me. While she was a student I learned a lot about, I did not offer information about myself to her. The concluding surveys provided very accurate descriptions for the impact of dialogue journals as students’ answers were honest and correlated with their entries.

## Summary of Findings

*“I see writing as a way to catch a moment, hold it up to the light, marvel in it, and then, using words, further explore and share the wonderment.”*

*(Salcedo, 2009, p. 441)*

When I first introduced this quote in Chapter 2, it did not hold the same meaning it did at the end of this study. After months of research and weeks of implementing dialogue journals, this quote ended up having a deeper meaning than it originally held. The dialogue journals helped to develop understanding and create authentic conversation. Together, the students and I were able to learn about each other and the letters showed personal growth and feelings. Often, there was urgency for a student to deliver a message as they knew I would read, react and respond to how they were feeling or a thought they had. Students felt a sense of working together on the journals as we both used the journal as a place to express ourselves.



As the data analyzed throughout this chapter concludes, dialogue journals are an effective tool for students and teachers to develop authentic conversation and rapport. Students did not see the journals as "just another writing assignment"; rather, they saw it as a purposeful activity. They asked questions, told stories and allowed emotions to show through. Being that each journal was individualized, it became a meaningful activity for each student. Every student had their own ways to connect with me, showing the uniqueness of each of my students. Students want to have a sense of connection with their teacher and an opportunity to communicate, so implementing dialogue journals is a way



to promote this type of discussion that is often squeezed out of the curriculum (Regan, 2003, p.40). The effectiveness of dialogue journals showed that amongst curriculum demands, an authentic student-teacher relationship can be established.

## Chapter Five

### Revisiting the Study

A dialogue journal is a way to create a safe and inviting place for students to communicate with their teacher. As Bloem states, it promotes the kind of discussion that often gets squeezed out of the curriculum (p. 54, 2004). It asks both teachers and students to engage in a deeper meaning of conversation. This study looks to further investigate if dialogue journals truly foster a more enriched rapport between the students and teacher.

If I corresponded with students in journals, would they tell me things that otherwise would have been left unsaid in the classroom? The goal of my study was to have each of my 25 students' write letters without any type of writing prompt. In turn, I would read, reflect, respond and learn about each individual student. In turn, I hoped to learn something about each student I had not known before. I wanted to connect to each student just as Salcedo had done with her students (p. 443, 2009).

Prior to introducing the dialogue journals to the fourth grade class at Lake Tract, I began with a lesson on writing. This lesson was not to teach student's mechanics or format, rather it allowed them to express and reflect on their true feelings about writing. A class consensus was made that they did not enjoy writing because of "RACIEER". RACIEER is an acronym used for Lake Tract's Writing Curriculum. Each letter corresponds with an objective they are to meet in their writing. It serves as a guideline for students to enhance their writing. A teacher-generated survey was then presented to the students. The objective of the survey was for students to feel comfortable expressing their feelings on writing. This survey focused on writing primarily to understand what

students focused on about writing-whether it's content, grammar, spelling, organization, etc. The survey also asked them to rank subjects from favorite to least favorite. The lesson concluded with a brief review of instructing how to write a letter. As a class, they brainstormed the main concepts that make up a letter including name, date, and closing.

Following the lesson about writing instruction, I began to explain the idea of writing in a journal. It was explained to students that they would be writing a letter to me and I would be responding weekly to them. As a class, we brainstormed topics that could be discussed in the journals. The students and I came up with a list of appropriate topics including: struggle in a subject area, a funny story, pets, family, culture, sports, activity in class you enjoyed, activity in class you did not enjoy. These topics were then used to create a bulletin board in the classroom. This became support for those students who felt stuck beginning a letter. They were able to go to the bulletin board and choose one of the topics listed if they felt necessary. This was not a rubric they had to follow but simply a reference point if needed. They were able to write of other topics they were not listed as well.

### Research Study Findings and Implications

Throughout this research study, I have come to find that dialogue journals can in fact establish and strengthen a rapport between the students' and teacher. Although student attitudes towards writing reflected a negative outlook, the journals proved otherwise. After analyzing the pre and post journal surveys, anecdotal teacher notes and the journals themselves, I found that students did not enjoy constrained writing but enjoyed the free write of the journals. The data also concluded that students did feel our relationship manifested through the use of the dialogue journals. This chapter will

provide a brief summary of the study, the conclusions drawn from my data analysis, and implications for further research of using dialogue journals in the elementary classroom.

### Summary of the Study and Conclusions

The study conducted looked to examine if using dialogue journals with fourth grade students would help establish a rapport between the students and myself. Katherine Schultz, author of “Listening”, explained:

“Most teachers simply do not have the time to gain intimate knowledge of all the children in their classrooms” (Schultz, 2003, p. 37). However, teachers rarely reconfigure the classroom dynamics to create more “opportunities for talk and interactions” (Schultz, 13, 2003).

Schultz’s explanation sparked interest in creating an opportunity for authentic conversation in the classroom setting. This study focused on breaking down the traditional classroom dynamic and making time for students and teachers to interact through dialogue journals. The 25 students involved in the study were each given an individual journal and I had five weeks to gain more intimate knowledge of my students and vice versa. After an introduction on letter writing and a brainstorm of topics to write on, students dived into writing.

After only one week of implementing dialogue journals, students expressed their enjoyment in writing to me. The journals allowed students to ask questions and embrace their curiosity about me. It allowed them to ask questions that did not pertain to curriculum demands; rather, they focused on telling me about their lives or asking about mine. During those five weeks, I had the opportunity to learn about my students as individuals and not just their math or reading abilities.

At the conclusion of the five weeks, every student took a survey about their thoughts on writing in the dialogue journals. I found that the majority of the class enjoyed writing and wanted to continue, even though the study was over. Dialogue journals allowed them to feel a connection with me and for that; I continued to implement them after the study. After completing the study, it was explained that the journals would be optional to continue. Out of 25 students, 21 continued to write up until my last day as a pre-service teacher. The journals became something they had to complete on their own time, yet they still wrote. I was no longer a pre-service teacher in their class, yet they still wrote. The impact of this study was still emerging long after the 5 weeks of data were collected. Dialogue journals allowed me to follow Katherine Schultz idea of listening to my students. It changed the classroom dynamic and allowed the opportunity for talk that otherwise is pushed aside due to time constraints and curriculum demands.

### Implications for Further Study

While many of the students in the study were able to write journal entries that contained valuable information in regards to either themselves, school or other relative subjects, some students lacked interest in writing. Nearly all of the students were able to write at least one entry with some form of engaging information. However, very few students were consistently able to do this. If the study had been conducted for a period longer than 5 weeks, it is possible that students would have written more in-depth responses throughout.

For this study, data was not collected on whether students writing skills improved. Although this was not the goal of the study, had it been conducted for a longer time, writing may have showed signs of improvement. Students may have felt more

comfortable taking risks in their writing as time went on which in turn could have produced longer, more in-depth responses.

This study was initially designed for implementation in the general education classroom. However, I question had this been conducted in a special education classroom or even for specific students struggling with various situations such as behavior issues. Perhaps these students have more frustrations or concerns that they wish to express. This would give the teacher and student the opportunity to interact and communicate about specific problems. While the goal of the study would remain the same, this could help deter behavior problems or help a student dealing with a specific home or school issue.

This study had allowed students to write about anything that interested them. Although the goal of the study was to establish a better rapport, it would have been interesting to look at focusing entries on reflections or questions relating to school subjects. This would allow students to reflect on what they learned. This may show academic improvements while allowing the teacher to better understand what each student was thinking during a lesson. While the focus of the study may shift, this may focus on each student's perception of learning. This would still be a tool to establish a rapport, just in a slightly different context.

If further study was completed on dialogue journals, it would be interesting to see the results if journals were implemented for the length of the entire school year. If students had more opportunities to write, they may be able to promote a deeper level of stimulated conversation. Had the dialogue journals been implemented since the first day

of school, it could have shown more growth in responses and more knowledge about each student.

Although the study was only conducted for 5 weeks, it showed that elementary students do enjoy writing to their teacher and it does provide information that would otherwise go unknown in the classroom. For many students, it provided an outlet to feel a part of a positive relationship. It also allowed me to make sense of certain students behavior at times, based on things they expressed in the journals. Dialogue journals became a way to create a comfortable place for communication and offered insight to students' thoughts and feelings.

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