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**Conversations in the Classroom: The Critical Need for Students'
Voices to be Heard**

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Conversations in the Classroom:

The Critical Need for Students' Voices to be Heard

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Abstract

Conversations in the Classroom: the Critical Need for Students' Voices to be Heard was inspired by a course taken at Bank Street College of Education titled, "Social Worlds of Childhood". In this course, I was asked to think of a challenging topic to discuss with my students, such as: death, sexuality, race, et cetera. As I reflected on my students, I thought about how they solve classroom conflicts with violence, regardless of the severity of the conflict. I decided that I wanted my students to think about and discuss why they use violence to solve the majority of their problems. I was hoping my question would begin a series of conversations that would help the students and me better understand the choices they make.

After having two conversations with my students regarding their use of violence, I realized that it was not the topic that held their interest. On the contrary, it was the act of conversing that impacted my students so profoundly. After this realization, I decided that conversations needed to become a daily routine in my classroom.

Too often, students' ideas, opinions, thoughts, and questions are halted and trivialized. In our current test driven world of teaching, teachers and administrators too often forget that children should be encouraged to think critically and to have their voices and ideas heard. The conversations my students participated in were my attempt to move beyond standardized testing and "skill and drill" teaching. I saw a dramatic improvement in my students' confidence and self-worth when they felt they had a safe place to be listened to. Our daily conversations helped me better understand my students and assured them that their voices mattered and were heard.

Eileen L. Fitzgerald



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INTRODUCTION

The phrase, standardized testing, is at the forefront of many current educational debates. Administrators and teachers bear the burden of producing students who perform well on standardized tests. With standardized testing as the focus of the current educational system, I often wonder what has happened to the art of teaching and the drive to create independent, critical thinkers in our students.

For the past three and one-half years I have worked at a small public elementary school in the Bronx, NY. The school houses approximately 200 fourth and fifth grade students. During my first two years of teaching, I taught the same group of 20 students for fourth grade and fifth grade. Although, I felt pressure to insure my students' success on the standardized tests, I did not feel the overwhelming necessity to teach solely to the test unlike I do presently. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to sit with my students for one-half hour each morning and listen to their thoughts and ideas on a multitude of topics. Working with the same group of students for two years afforded my students and me the opportunity to establish a strong, supportive classroom environment. This rich environment helped create a classroom community in which my students and I could engage in deep and meaningful conversations throughout our second year together.

During my first year of teaching at a public school identified as high needs, I was faced with a variety of issues in the classroom. With limited

education and experience as a classroom educator, I was unaware of the intensity with which my students would enter the classroom. In general, "Teaching begins as an encounter among strangers. This is particularly true for beginning teachers" (Kohl, 1998, p. 21). In my experience, I was not only embarking on a journey with "strangers", but I was entering into an unfamiliar culture.

The school's student population is comprised primarily of Hispanic and African-American children from the surrounding neighborhood. Ninety-eight percent of the student population receives free and/or reduced price lunch. The New York Department of Education deemed the school a SURR school (School Under Registration Review) for failing to meet the state standards on the fourth and fifth grade state tests. It was this judgment, along with the school's other characteristics, that gave the school a "high needs" label.

My first week of teaching was sheer chaos. My students were often in disagreement and fiercely arguing with one another. More often than not, my students' arguments would turn into physical violence. As a first year teacher, I was inexperienced with handling these situations. I was also experiencing "culture shock". I was unfamiliar with the tactics my students employed to resolve conflict in the classroom. As Banks and Banks (2007) noted, "The growing racial, cultural, and income gap between teachers and students underscores the need for all teachers to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to work effectively with students from diverse racial, ethnic, social-

class, and language groups" (p. 219). After my first week of teaching, I found myself faced with the realization that I had yet to develop the "knowledge, attitudes and skills" to work effectively with my group of fourth grade students.

After three months of teaching, I was able to minimize the chaos in my classroom through improved management techniques. However, it never occurred to me to deal directly with the underlying issues which were causing the chaos. I also neglected to think about bridging the cultural divide that existed between my world and my students' world. I was too concerned about keeping my classroom under control and preparing for the state standardized tests, which were important to my school's reputation with the New York City Department of Education. Reynolds (2007) articulates the pressure I was feeling in my first year of teaching. She states,

The No Child Left Behind act and its emphasis on standardized test results have forced school systems to produce high scores, and in turn school administrators pressure teachers to prepare students for taking standardized tests. Teachers may want to deal with students' problems, but a required curriculum emphasizing skill drills has compromised teaching time. Teachers are not free to determine what should be taught in their classrooms. (p. 53)

It was not until later that I was able to get beyond the pressures my school and the NCLB act mandates and "...be vulnerable enough to allow [my] world to

turn upside down in order to allow the realities of [my students] to edge themselves into [my] consciousness" (Delpit, 1993, p. 139). When I allowed this transformation to place, I simultaneously began to understand my students and their world on a different level.

At the end of my first year of teaching, I approached my principal about the opportunity to loop with my current students. Looping is explained by Hedge and Cassidy (2004) as, "the same teacher educating and caring for a group of children for at least two years" (p. 1). I felt passionately that looping with my students was imperative for their academic and social growth and important to my growth as a teacher. By the end of my first year, I was able to grasp a deeper level of understanding of who my students were as learners and as social beings. I was beginning to understand their family lives and backgrounds. It was with these understandings that I felt I would be able to provide my students with a better education if I spent a second year with them. Researchers Chirichello and Chirichello (2001) found the following:

The looping teacher would have a better understanding of her students' strengths and weaknesses as a result of looping (academic). The students themselves believe that their relationship with the teacher improved (social), that they had less anxiety about returning to school in September (emotional) and that they would learn a lot as a result of looping. (p. 5)

Throughout our first year together, my students had developed a trust in me and their classmates which had created a safe place within the classroom. I was confident that in our second year together, this safe place would allow my students to experience and discuss new things. These discussions would foster social and academic growth. I knew some of the discussions would be difficult and challenging, but I was hopeful they would also be rewarding. After discussing my reasons for looping with my principal, I was granted permission to loop with my students to the fifth grade.

Several months into my second year of teaching, I was fortunate enough to enroll in a course at Bank Street College of Education, titled "Social Worlds of Childhood", which pushed me to accomplish my goals of creating a classroom environment which allowed students to feel safe while having new experiences. During the course I was given an assignment to lead several conversations with my students about difficult topics. Since I was confident in the classroom environment we had begun to create the previous year, I was eager to start the process of getting to the root of the issues I had seen my students deal with for the past year and one-half.

Throughout the thirteen months I was with my students, I listened and watched as they interacted with adults and their peers. While observing my students, I discovered there were many reoccurring themes in their words and actions. One theme that constantly repeated itself was that it is acceptable to

solve a problem with physical violence. I use the word "problem" to refer to a student bothering another student either by hitting or touching them and/or by making derogatory comments towards them. Furthermore, I found that it was also acceptable to solve a "problem" with violence whether or not the "problem" was caused intentionally or accidentally by another student. During these occasions, I struggled to bridge the cultural divide which existed between me and my students.

I was raised to believe that is not okay to solve my problems with another person through physical violence or verbal aggression. Conversely, many of my students felt differently, as did their families. Annette Lareau (2003) attributes the cultural and class differences I was experiencing during these moments to the difference in the way I was raised verses the way my students are being raised.

She states that

...middles-class parents tend to adopt a cultural logic of child rearing that stresses the concerted cultivation of children. Working-class and poor parents, by contrast, tend to undertake the accomplishment of natural growth. Working class and poor children, despite tremendous economic strain, often have more "childlike" lives, with autonomy from adults and control over their extended leisure time. (pp. 4-5)

On the other hand Lareau (2003) explains that, "Although middle-class children miss out on kin relationships and leisure time... From the experience of

concerted cultivation, they acquire skills that could be valuable in the future when they enter the world of work" (p. 5). My students were raised to deal with their problems in ways that were unfamiliar to me. During many moments in my classroom, I felt alone while attempting to bridge this cultural divide. However, I realized it was crucial that I begin to understand and navigate through these differences for the benefit of my students.

It is no surprise that I found it difficult when dealing with violence and aggression in the classroom. As Polakow-Suransky (2000) states, "Despite years of research on youth violence and escalating public concern about its dangers, violence in schools continues to plague communities across the nation" (p. 101). It is evident that I am not the only one at a loss for curbing youth violence; the general public is as well. The cultural divide existing between students and teachers seems to affect many schools in the United States.

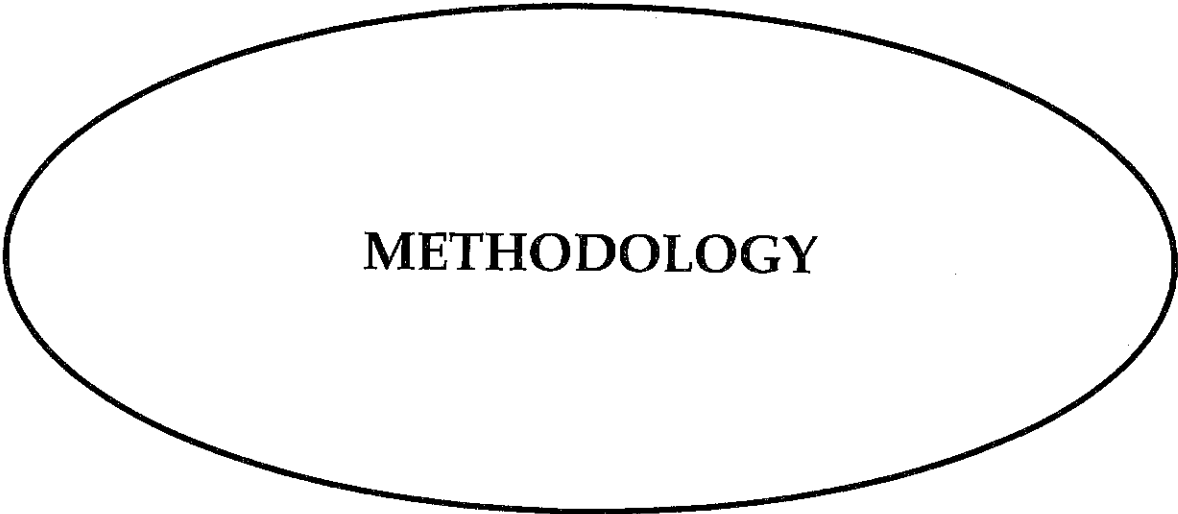
In the beginning of my teaching career, I did not feel the need to discuss the issue of violence as a solution to a problem, because in my mind it was unacceptable to physically or verbally attack someone, no matter the circumstance. However, as the first year ended and the second year began, the topic became more complex when I began to better understand the community my students were from and their families' opinions on physical and verbal aggression.

At the start of my second year of teaching, two of my male students, Zamari and Luke got into a physical altercation. Luke accidentally pulled Zamari's hair when he lost his balance and grabbed onto Zamari for support. Zamari was quite upset about his hair being pulled and consequently kicked Luke in the stomach. After talking with both students and explaining to Zamari that Luke's actions were not intentional, I wrote a note home to Zamari's mother. The next day I got a letter back from Zamari's mother explaining to me that I needed to explain to Luke that it was not acceptable to accidentally pull her child's hair. It was at this point, that I began to grasp the depth in which physical and verbal aggression is accepted and expected in my students' community. I began to understand that in my students' world, nothing is an accident and therefore if someone wrongs you it is your right to defend and avenge yourself through physical and verbal aggression.

"Social Worlds of Childhood" helped me understand the importance of setting aside my own biases in order to help my students grapple with the more important underlying issues. As I began to prepare for the conversations I would have with my students, my biggest fear was that my intentions would be misunderstood. I do not pretend to understand what it means to grow up in the Bronx, in the projects, in a shelter or in poverty. Therefore, my own ignorance regarding the issue is what concerned me the most.

However, the conversations that were taking place in my classroom increasingly became less about completing a "Social Worlds of Childhood" assignment and more about the changes I was seeing as a result of the conversations. Mayall (2000) astutely articulates the results, which were occurring because of the conversations taking place in the classroom. He states that "through conversing with children we learn about what they know, and, to some extent how they learn" (p. 120). The conversations taking place in the classroom had an enormous impact. And as Dewey (1938) points out, "Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had" (p.27). Both my teaching and more importantly my students' learning and experience in the classroom were greatly impacted by the conversations taking place in the classroom.

What began as a small group of students discussing an issue of physical violence as a fair response to a problem, blossomed into whole class discussions about topics concerning who they are, what is important to them, and how they experience themselves and others within the context of the classroom, the school, and the broader community. Our conversations became an essential element in the classroom. These conversations allowed additional space for my students' voices to be heard, and helped my students make sense of the many changes and discrepancies in their lives.



METHODOLOGY

A variety of methods were used in order to capture the conversations that took place in the classroom. I recorded the conversations from October through June. The original two conversations regarding the issue of physical and verbal violence in response to social issues began with a small group of seven students from my fifth grade classroom. These conversations were held during an extra 45 minutes of school at the end of the day called "Extended Day". The students I chose ranged from the quietest students to the more talkative, the more "academically challenged" students to the "high achievers", and the more "popular" students to students who were not seen as "popular". It was important to have a diverse group of students from my classroom so that a wide range of voices and opinions could be heard. I was hoping with this sample of seven students to get a general sense of what my students were thinking. I wanted to know on which subjects they agreed or disagreed and what the common threads were in the conversations. All of this information would lead me to a better understanding of my students' perspectives.

The seven students involved with the two original conversations were asked to write on index cards their thoughts on physical and verbal violence in response to social issues. This would give the students a chance to think and respond to the questions in writing. This allowed students to gather their thoughts before they discussed them with the group. The students sat in a circle and discussed their thoughts after writing them down. During these early

conversations, I recorded what was said in a journal. I also collected the students' index cards and combined their index card responses with my notes from the conversations. It was important I did not get involved in the conversations. I reiterated to the students multiple times during the conversations, that I would not be voicing my opinion on the topics they were discussing. I felt this was important because as Mayall (2000) states it is important "that the adult tries to enter children's worlds of understanding" (p. 121). I felt that the only way to truly enter the students' world would be as a bystander, listening to their ideas and opinions rather than interjecting my own. This is supported by Mayall's (2000) research which discovered that using conversations without teacher input as a form of data helps children manage the pace and direction of the conversations consequently allowing the researcher to understand what is important to children (p. 121). As the small group conversations came to a close, I began to see an increasing need to expand the small group conversations into whole class conversations. As I moved the discussions from the small group to the whole class, I kept a similar conversational format. This would allow the small group members to help foster a fluid transition between the small group and whole class conversations.

Instead of holding the conversations at the end of the day during extended time, I decided to integrate the whole group conversations into the morning meeting, which was a familiar routine. As a result, the students were

relaxed and enjoyed the experience. Kriete (2003) substantiates the transformative power the morning meetings had in my classroom by saying, "done well, morning meetings can transform classroom groups into caring communities by offering daily instruction and practice in building a community. Over time, this daily practice weaves a web that binds a class together in community" (p. 70). These conclusions validate my choice to incorporate the discussions into our already existing morning meetings. The type of community Kriete (2003) explains, I felt would be most conducive for my students to successfully and openly discuss difficult and demanding topics.

The same format was followed each day during morning meetings. This allowed the students to feel comfortable with the process. A writing prompt was written on the board, which the students responded to in their journals. After the students had time to reflect in writing to the prompt, the students would have an open discussion. Once again one of my goals was to stay out of the conversation as much as possible. During the discussions, students could choose to either read their response or simply respond to the prompt verbally. The listening students were given the opportunity to respond to the comments if they wanted to. As the students spoke, I transcribed what they said with as much accuracy as possible. Later, I compiled my notes from the conversations with the students' journal responses. At one point I used a digital voice recorder to record the conversations. Unfortunately, the two voice recorded

conversations were inaudible and I could not use the data from those conversations.

My goal for every conversation was to solely be a listener. I wanted the students to respond to each other as much as possible without my interference. As Kozol (1993) writes children in America are not often given an opportunity to discuss their views on the matters they face in their tumultuous lives, especially when it comes to violence. He also noted that often times children's opinions are legitimized only when they concur with adult viewpoints, thus marginalizing youth and denying them the central role they play in their experiences (p. xiii). His beliefs reinforced my conviction to be as uninvolved as possible during the student conversations. It was crucial that my opinions did not taint the students' viewpoints and conversations.

Throughout the year, the conversations most commonly happened during the morning meetings. However, as the students became more comfortable with the morning meetings, other conversations began to come up more organically throughout the days and weeks. The spontaneous conversations were always the hardest conversations to catch and write down. The conversations I was able to catch were recorded in my journal. Many of the unprompted conversations became an integral part of helping me see as a teacher how important it is to have a safe place in the classroom for discussions about issues that interest and impact students. After every conversation, I reflected on what the students said

and their reactions to each other's opinions. As the year progressed, the students began to crave the routine of the morning meeting and morning conversations. It became increasingly apparent to me how important it was to have a place in the classroom where students' voices were heard and validated.

At the conclusion of the research, all data gathered during my observations and research was used, except for the two inaudible conversations from the digital voice recorder. I felt all of the conversations that took place, no matter the level of seriousness, were an important indication of the students' growth during the year. I also concluded that all the conversations were an important indicator of the shift in the classroom dynamic and environment throughout the year.



RESEARCH AND FINDINGS

Conversational Touchstones

As described in the introduction, the first set of conversations revolved around violence in the classroom. When the classroom discussions expanded to include all of the students in the classroom, the focus of the conversations broadened as well. The students began to talk about various topics, rather than continue to focus on violence in the classroom.

After completing the first set of conversations, there was an apparent need for the rest of the students to have their voices heard. The first conversations with the entire class brought a sense of empowerment to all students, which accentuated their need for this experience. At the same time, it became apparent that the students needed the experience of discussing a variety of topics. Discussions brought the students a sense of empowerment, importance, respect and empathy they were not learning or experiencing elsewhere in the classroom.

Small Group Conversations

During preparations for the first discussion, the only considerations taken into account were the problems we faced in our own classroom. I neglected to look at the larger more pervasive picture. Much of the research I found lacked information on students' use of violence to solve problems in the classroom. For instance, there was limited written literature about unprovoked retaliation by children. For example, when a child believes it is okay for him to hit another child, even if that child only brushed past him, accidentally touching him in the process. However, the literature I read helped illuminate a larger issue which needed to be considered. I realized that incidents such as school shootings happen in the upper grades because there is a lack of intervention in the lower grades. Osofsky (1997) writes that there is a need for interventions to take place in the lower grades. These interventions need to address the minor violent patterns taking place in classrooms across the country because minor issues can inevitably spread into larger issues as students grow up (pp. 4-5).

Based on other research and my own, it is imperative that students are given the tools to deal with conflicts in a non-violent way. What will happen in high school when these students are constantly bullied and they cannot tolerate it anymore? One can speculate that a child will resort to violence rather than use other conflict resolution tactics to help resolve the issues at

hand. In high school, the violence a child uses to solve his/her problems will more than likely escalate and be more aggressive than hitting a person back.

Thinking about how to approach the topic of using violence to solve problems, my concern became understanding the students, their backgrounds, and their families' encouragement to hit and talk back. Despite my hesitations, it was important to remember that the most important step is to foster a supportive relationship with my students would (Noguera, 2000, p. 151). If a trusting relationship was cultivated then further discussions could successfully include corresponding topics such as bullying, the long-term repercussions of choosing to fight back, and conflict resolution tactics.

Small Group Conversation One

The students were asked to think about the following questions and write their answers down on index cards. After the students had time to write down their answers, I went around the circle and gave the students the chance to read and discuss their opinions. The following is a transcript of the discussion that took place.

Focus Questions: How would you solve a problem you are having with another student? And how do you think others should solve their problems with other students?

Diego: People should stop talking about people behind their back. People should say what they're going to say to people's faces and not say it behind people's backs.

Luke: I think if somebody hits or talks about you, you should tell the teacher or another adult, and if they don't do nothing, tell your parents. And if they don't do nothing, hit or talk about them back and leave it alone or ignore them.

Ms. Fitzgerald: So, tell me if I understand you correctly. It's not okay to hit someone back the first time they hit you. But if they keep doing it, then it's okay to hit them back?

Luke: Yeah.

Diego: Yeah, because if someone keeps hitting you, you have the right to hit them back. They shouldn't be hitting you.

Ms. Fitzgerald: But it's not okay to hit them back the first time? You should give them a chance?

Diego and Luke: Yeah.

Hailee: No, when I have a problem if like someone hits me, then I hit them back even though it's not the right thing to do. I learned that if someone hits me, then hit them back, but now I know not to hit back. I just tell the teacher.

Ms. Fitzgerald: So, does everyone think it's okay to hit back?

Everyone: A chorus and of yes and no and well...

Ms. Fitzgerald: So, when is it okay to hit back, the first time they hit you, the second, or never?

Hailee: See, my mom always tells me if somebody's bothering you then you should hit them back or talk about them back. But at school we are told it's wrong to do that and if we do hit back or say something mean to someone back then we get in trouble. But, I think if no one does nothing at school to help you then you should hit them back.

Malcolm: Yeah, I think if someone hits you, you should tell the person next to you like a grown-up. Then if they do it again, you should tell them to stop. If they don't stop, hit them back, then you should tell the grown-up why you hit them back.

Ms. Fitzgerald: So, let me see if I understand what you are all saying. Some of you say to hit back right away and some of you are saying to wait, try telling a grown-up, but if they keep hitting you, you have every right to hit them back. Is this what I'm hearing?

Everyone: Yeah.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Okay, so I have another question. Is it okay to hit someone back even if they hit you by accident?

Zamari and Diego: Yeah, because people shouldn't be touching you.

Zamari: Like when *someone* (looking straight at Luke and referring to an incident that had happened earlier in the week) accidentally pulls on your hair because they tripped and they're trying not to fall, they shouldn't pull on your hair. They should grab a desk or something so they don't fall. They shouldn't be touching you, even if they are falling, and so you have a right to hit them back if they touch you.

Diego: Yeah, nobody should be touching you, so if they do, you should hit them back.

Akeisha: Can I share what I wrote?

Ms. Fitzgerald: Of course.

Akeisha: Okay, so I think people should express how they feel and how they could make it better because everyone needs to learn to express their madness.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Thank you, Akeisha. Is there anyone else that would like to share what they wrote? *Nobody answers.* I think what Akeisha wrote is important. We all need to find ways to express our anger. And next time we talk, one of the things we will discuss is if there are other ways to express your anger besides hitting or saying mean things back to people.

* Marisol was in the group too, but she chose not to talk. However, this is what she wrote down on her index card. "I think the way to solve a problem is by telling your parents, then the teacher, and then when they keep bothering you, then you should tell the principal."*

Small Group Conversation Two

Originally, I told my students that in our second conversation we were going to talk about the other options for solving problems. However, after speaking with a colleague who grew up in the community, I decided to focus on three different themes with my students during the next conversation. I decided to talk with them about whether or not hitting back actually solves their problems. If there are other ways, besides hitting back, to solve the problems they encounter. Also, if we had time I wanted to discuss our topic with a more global perspective. I hoped to talk about what happens when people continue to use violence to solve problems. What are the possible future repercussions if violence is used to solve all problems?

The conversation began with students reviewing our first conversation. The students then took some time to write down their thoughts on index cards about the new questions. We then had a sharing session. Here is a rough transcript of the discussion that came from the original question I posed.

Focus Question: If you hit or say something mean back to a person, does it solve your problem?

Luke: They might learn something, so maybe they'll stop.

Akeisha: If someone hits you, you should tell the teacher or ignore it and walk away.

Diego: It doesn't solve anything. It just makes it worse for that person.

Isabelle: It doesn't make a difference, you could just tell the teacher that the person is bothering you but don't ever touch the person that is touching you.

Luke: It doesn't make any difference if somebody hit you and you hit them back, you both get in trouble.

Ms. Fitzgerald: So, what I'm hearing is that if you hit someone back, it doesn't really solve anything. So, my next questions are: If it doesn't solve anything to hit someone back, why hit them back? Does it prove something?

Hailee: It proves nothing by hitting back and hitting can get into problems. If you don't hit, there would be no problem at all.

Malcolm: I think it won't do nothing because you shouldn't start nothing you can't finish.

Diego: Yeah, you shouldn't hit someone in the first place.

Luke: Nobody should be touching you. If they are, you should hit them back.

Ms. Fitzgerald: I understand what you are saying; people shouldn't be touching you in the first place. But, my question is, if I keep poking Luke and finally he hits me back, do you think that'll make me stop poking him? Or will that make him feel better because he hit me back?

Luke: No, but you shouldn't be poking me.

Diego: Yeah, you shouldn't be touching him in the first place, so he should hit you back so you'll stop.

Malcolm: Don't make chicken, if you can't eat it all.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Can you explain what you mean by that?

Malcolm: Well, if someone hits you and you hit them back, you're just gonna go run off and cry? You shouldn't start something you can't finish.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Okay, last week we were talking about how some of your parents tell you to hit back if someone is bothering you. And you also said that at school the rule is different, that you get in trouble if you hit back. Hailee, you were one of the students that said your mom tells you to hit back. Why do you think your mom tells you to hit back?

Hailee: Maybe, because when you get older you'll have to defend yourself out there.

Luke: If you're a mom, you're gonna tell your kid to hit back so they can defend themselves.

Ms. Fitzgerald: I'm wondering, do you think there are other ways you can solve the problem of someone bothering you, other than hitting back?

Diego: *Tells a story about a fight he had in third grade.* See, moving me to a different class would've solved it. Then I wouldn't have had to fight him again.

Luke: *Tells a story about being bitten in second grade. He hit the child back but the child kept hitting him, so at the end of the day he kicked the child in the stomach.*

Ms. Fitzgerald: So, Luke when you kicked the kid at the end of the day did he stop bothering you?

Luke: Yep, he never bothered me for the rest of the year.

Ms. Fitzgerald: So, I want to go back to something Hailee said earlier. She said that her mom tells her to hit back and Hailee thinks maybe it's because when she gets older she'll have to know how to defend herself outside of school. My next question is: Do you think there is a different way you need to know how to act outside of school than inside of school? Are there different rules you have to know?

Luke: You learn to act different

Isabelle: You have to be tough in the streets.

Hailee: Yeah, you can get into the wrong crowd.

Luke: Yeah, and be sent to juvi or get shot, if you get into the wrong crowd.

Diego: Like my dad, he was blamed for killing someone because he was in the wrong spot at the wrong time. They arrested him, but found out he didn't do it later.

Akeisha: Yeah, that happened to my dad too. The cops took him because they thought he was doing the wrong thing when he wasn't.

Diego: I don't fight people that much outside. I mean I did once, but never again because it's not good to fight out there.

Luke: That's why they want you in a gang. Because they think you'll fight and do stupid stuff.

Ms. Fitzgerald: So, it sounds like sometimes people have to be able to fight back so they can defend themselves. But in school you're told not to fight. Do you think everyone in the world solves their problems the same way? By fighting or hitting back? Or do you think there are other ways to solve your problems?

Luke: I don't think everyone hits back, I think there are other ways.

Everyone: *Most of the students nod in agreement.*

*Again, Marisol didn't choose to share any of her ideas. Here is what she wrote:
"If someone was hitting you and you hit them back, they are going to hit you back more and then you are going to start a fight. Nothing will be better, it's just going to be worse."

Reflection

Small Group Conversations

During the first set of conversations, a number of the students' sentiments were intriguing. During the first conversations Zamari made a comment about how a student should not have touched him even if it was by accident. Over the past couple of years, I have found that this is a reoccurring sentiment not only in my classroom but also out in public. Recently a friend of mine, Addison, unknowingly bumped into someone standing behind her on the subway. This person's friend started yelling at Addison, physically pinned her against the subway door and hit her arm making a bag of carrots she was holding fall to the floor. This woman continued to berate and threaten to beat Addison up between train stops. This incident perfectly illustrates the point made by Osofsky (1997) that when violence used as retribution is not addressed with children, they grow up to be teenagers and adults who use violence to solve all their problems.

It is interesting that my students had difficulty getting past the idea that they were wronged when someone hit them whether by accident or intentionally. When I posed the question about whether or not hitting back was a productive solution to their problems, the students kept coming back to the fact that they were wronged in the first place. It seemed as though they felt that they were entitled redemption whether it solved the situation or not.

One of the students repeatedly made comments referring to someone starting something they could not finish. It seemed as though many of the students believed hitting someone first meant you are the weaker person and

thus if you did not hit back then you are showing weakness. Hitting back is not necessarily about the action itself for the students, it is much more about the message it sends to the person who hit them.

During the end of the second conversation, I posed a question asking the students if they feel like they have to deal with situations differently outside of school than inside of school. The fascinating part of the conversation was when they told stories of going to juvenile detention, having family members in jail, and getting shot. The students seemed to speak about this with ease. I also found it ironic that they felt they needed to defend themselves in school, but outside of school they tried to avoid any situation in which they would have to physically defend themselves. It's evident they see the risks as being too high outside of school and perhaps school is a safer place to "practice" physically defending themselves.

Large Group Conversations

Approximately one month after the small group discussions ended, a student in the fifth grade passed away unexpectedly. My students were in need of a way to process the loss of their fellow schoolmate. Thus began a series of difficult, yet much needed conversations. These conversations began before the New Year and continued after the students got back from vacation. Eventually, a shift took place within the classroom. The students began talking less about the death of their classmate and began talking more about other topics.

Unfortunately, the device I used to record the conversations pertaining to the death of my students' classmate was too difficult to hear to transcribe. However, many of the conversations that came up organically in the classroom or that were spearheaded by a writing prompt during morning meetings are transcribed below.

The first conversation below is a brief description of one of the conversations lead by the students. The remainder of the large group discussions were started after a prompt was put on the board and the students were given time to respond to the prompt.

Large Group Conversation One

The week before winter break, one of the fifth grade students at the school unexpectedly passed away. In order to help the students cope with the loss of their classmate, I began a conversation about Taygen during one of our morning meetings. Before winter break, the students exclusively discussed the unexpected death of Taygen. After returning from winter break, I was not sure if the students would continue to discuss Taygen's death or if they would want to talk about other topics. I let them know that we could have more conversations about Taygen if they wanted as the year went on. However, their need to talk about this tragedy seemed to diminish.

In February, my students initiated a conversation during the morning meeting regarding a prep teacher. I was initially very surprised when my students began a discussion on their own for the first time. The topic of the discussion was of strong interest to many of the students. Most of the students had an opinion on the topic, which resulted in a very vibrant and serious conversation.

Through the conversation, it was brought to my attention that my students were feeling uncomfortable with one of their prep teachers. Zamari describe an incident in which Mr. Michaels insinuated that Zamari was stupid. Zamari explained that Mr. Michaels caught Jacob looking over his shoulder at Zamari's paper. When Mr. Michaels saw this he said to Jacob, "Why would you look at his (Zamari's) paper? You'd be better off looking at a kindergartener's

paper.” Many of my students confirmed that Mr. Michaels had said this to Zamari. However, one of my quieter students (Jose) raised his hand at this point. Jose believed Mr. Michaels was just trying to be funny in an attempt to get everyone to do the right thing. Many of the other students vehemently disagreed with Jose. The next Monday this conversation came up again in front of Mr. Michaels, and Mr. Michaels had no qualms with repeating exactly what he had said to Zamari.

During this discussion, another student expressed that he was feeling attacked by Mr. Michaels. Malcolm informed me that while they were in prep Mr. Michaels made some comments to Malcolm implying that he was, as Malcolm put it, G-A-Y. (Every time Malcolm wanted to say gay he spelled it out.) This spurred on a comment by another student who said to Malcolm, “You don’t have to spell the word out every time you want to say it. You can just say gay.” I was pleasantly surprised to hear the student say this to Malcolm. Casper and Theilheimer (2010) write, “...using the word *lesbian* or *gay* early on provides a foundational understanding about two people of the same sex who love each other” (p.428). We never spoke about the topic of sexuality in the classroom, but I was glad to see that some students were comfortable commenting on the topic on their own.

I asked Malcolm to further explain the situation with Mr. Michaels in detail. He said that he kept kicking Peter under the table by accident. When Mr.

Michaels told him to stop, he said to Malcolm, "Why are you kicking Peter so much? Are you trying to play footsie with him?" Malcolm felt Mr. Michaels was implying that he was gay. Malcolm let me know that he told Mr. Michaels that he should not be making those types of comments to students, and that he would tell the principal if it continued.

A few of the girls brought forth the last concern. They explained that they felt uncomfortable around Mr. Michaels, especially during gym class. They accused Mr. Michaels of looking at their backsides during gym class. I asked how they knew he was looking at their backsides, and they were unable to fully explain.

This particular concern worried me. When the girls first brought this concern up, some of the boys told them to shut-up and to stop ratting out Mr. Michaels because it wasn't right. Jacob said, "He's not like that". The girls were frustrated by the boys' comments and replied, "You just want to defend Mr. Michaels because you like him and you want to keep going to gym."

I explained to the class that these were very serious accusations they were making and that they needed to make sure they were telling me the complete truth. I told them that that I believed them, but if this really was happening then it was my duty and job to take this information to the principal. And then it was the principal's job to discuss this with the assistant principal and for them to figure out what the next steps were. I explained that this accusation could cause

Mr. Michaels' to lose his job. I explained that I didn't want to scare them, but I wanted to make sure that they were being one hundred percent truthful with me. At this point, I explained that I would need to talk to the girls alone. I said that if anyone wanted to stay back from prep and talk to me about it they could.

Three of the girls stayed back during prep to talk about their concerns regarding Mr. Michaels. I asked them again to try and explain how they knew Mr. Michaels was looking at them inappropriately during prep. Isabelle brought up that Hailee would make comments to the girls to watch out when they were walking away from Mr. Michaels because she told them he was going to look at their backsides. Isabelle visually showed me that he would tilt his head when they walked away from him and look at their backsides. Akeisha said she didn't want to cost him, his job but agreed with what Isabelle said about Hailee. Anna agreed as well. When I asked if they ever personally saw him do this Akeisha nodded and said yes.

Reflection

Large Group Conversation One

During this unprompted conversation, I could not help but wonder what had shifted in the classroom in order to make the students feel comfortable bringing up a conversation organically, especially one at this level of seriousness. I can only guess that after weeks of discussing their classmate's death, the students felt more comfortable and respected in the classroom. This incident demonstrates the students' acceptance and support of each other while discussing difficult topics.

It was interesting that at the beginning of the conversation the students, especially the boys, did not want Hailee, Isabelle, Anna, and Akeisha to bring up their complaints against Mr. Michaels. My first reaction was that the boys were being sexist towards the girls. As I listened and thought about it more, I realized that my students have this notion that all of their "fun" activities will be taken away if they tell on someone. I believe some of the students were concerned they would lose gym class if they supported the girls' story. As the discussion progressed, the students realized gym class was not going to be taken away, so they felt safer supporting the students who were voicing complaints.

While talking to three of the girls privately about the matter regarding Mr. Michaels, my perception was that Hailee may be the one starting this notion of Mr. Michaels looking at the girls the wrong way. It was interesting that Hailee did not stay back from prep to discuss the concerns with Mr. Michaels. Regardless, I felt that their concerns be taken seriously.

Looking back, I still can't help wondering if my students' complaints were legitimate. Nothing ever came of their complaints, even after speaking to the principal and assistant principal about them. Additionally, the students never complained about Mr. Michaels again. This begs the questions: Did my students make these accusations up because it made them feel like they had something important to talk about and a teacher would finally take them seriously? Or was there really something to their accusations and after speaking about them, they felt validated and thus did not feel the need to discuss it further?

Large Group Conversation Two

This was our first formal morning meeting with a conversation. I explained to the students that I was working on a project for graduate school. I was interested in finding out more about what is important to children, who they are, and what their likes and dislikes are. I explained that our new routine for the rest of the year would start with a morning meeting. I would ask questions about various topics and we would discuss their ideas, similar to the discussions we had had up to this point. I explained that because I was taking notes on the conversation, they would be responsible for calling on each other. After a brief explanation about the expectations and rules for the discussion, the conversation began.

Focus Question: Why do kids like video games?

Ms. Fitzgerald: Why do kids like video games?

Isabelle: You're into it, you can't stop playing, you're into it.

Esmeralda: It's fun, when you come home you can just play video games.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Why is it fun?

Esmeralda: I don't know.

Anna: Your head gets into the game, you don't want to stop.

Peter had a smile on his face and was excitedly raising his hand.

Diego: Peter, you are so into it. Like if you have a bad day you can just turn it on and it doesn't matter.

Peter: You like it because you can blow zombies heads off. *Laughs.* Just kidding. It's entertaining.

Luke: *Laughs.* They're cool. You feel like you want to do it in real life, you can play when you are bored.

Ms. Fitzgerald: I clarified and restated what I was hearing.

Anna: Like you want to jump in it like it's real life.

Malcolm: You can go home and relax instead of being outside in the cold.

Zamari: *Explains one of the games he plays.*

Ms. Fitzgerald: Are some games similar to real life?

Multiple Students: Yeah

Jamila: They're fun for me, entertaining. I like when there are powers and you can fight people.

Hailee: If you've had a long day, you can play a game to stay active.

Jalyn: Some are interesting and some aren't.

Akeisha: When it's cold outside you can go upstairs and play video games.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Does it matter if it's warm or cold outside?

All: No.

Jose: I like video games because of the adventure and because they are exciting.

Carlos: Some people don't do anything, they just play video games.

Kathryn: It feels like you are inside the game.

Jacob: Can you tell people to stop saying the same thing? They took my ideas.

Kianu: When you are bored, you can just go play video games.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Have we heard from everyone?

Students: Yes.

Ms. Fitzgerald: I ended the conversation with asking the students how they thought the discussion went. These were their responses.

Anna: Good, because people can talk.

Luke: Good and Bad

At this point I realized they were responding to whether they thought the topic of conversation was good or bad. So, I rephrased my question. I asked, "How did we do as a class? Were we respectful of each other? Did we let everyone talk?"

Diego: We weren't respectful.

Akeisha: We were talking out and laughing a lot.

Isabelle: We were talking out.

Jacob: Why should we talk about video games? We should just bring them in and play them.

At this point, I reiterated what everyone else said and then I talked about what I would like to see the next time we have this type of discussion.

Large Group Conversation Three

Focus Question: What would happen if children ruled the world?

Jamila: If children ruled the world it would be better than grown-ups ruling the world. It would be fun. Instead of my parents beating me, I would beat them. And they would not watch TV, no snack and nothing for dinner but pudding. They would do all the chores and they would have nothing to do for the summer but chores. I wish children would rule the world. How good that would be for me.

Jalyn: Why would they eat pudding?

Jamila: Cuz I said so.

Kathryn: If children ruled the world, then I would make parents and all the adults give the children what they want.

Jacob: They already do that.

Jamila: Why was your answer so short?

Kathryn: Cuz I have very short comments about adults.

Akeisha: If children ruled the world it would be better because we would be dancing. And me and Bowwow, if he was a child, we would be married and go to parties all day every day. We would watch TV all day, drive everywhere and pick a fight, and eat whatever we wanted and run through the school and watch scary movies.

Malcolm: Why would you put food in it?

Akeisha: My parents eat.

Luke: If we ruled the world, I wish there would be no laws except for a few laws. Schools would only be 4 days a week and every holiday everyone would get free stuff. And kids could do anything except on Sundays. Only adults get Sundays and kids have Monday-Saturday. For the holidays, parents would get a week of vacation. And that would be the way it was if I ruled the world. Also, kids could get anything they wanted from the store.

Diego: I would kill everyone over 20 years old.

Jamila: So, are you going to kill yourself when you turn 20.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Diego, so let me get this right, you're going to kill everyone that turns 20.

Diego: Yeah, except my family. Oh and my teachers.

Everyone laughs.

Malcolm: We would make humans kiss our feet but not our family and not my teacher and everyone in the school and my family's school. And we would do whatever we wanted to do. I would go around the world for 25 years with my family and we will stop and go places. My friends will come with their families and I will tell them to bring their toys and their PSPs.

Jose: What will you do when you grow up and become an adult. You will lose all your power.

Diego: We could create a potion so we never become adults.

Luke: I should have used that in my story.

Large Group Conversation Four

Focus Question: What is your favorite time of the day?

Jamila: My favorite time of the day is the morning meeting. And also when we do the ball toss. And then we get to time ourselves when we are doing it. And it would be so much fun to do it today and to do it tomorrow. When we time it it's the best part but sometimes we don't because people act up and we get in trouble.

Malcolm: That's a good thing (that you like the morning meeting), mad good. I love the ball toss.

Zamari: Why you like it (morning meeting) so much?

Jamila: Cuz I like to toss the ball.

Malcolm: My favorite time of the day is lunch time. I love lunch time. I don't care about anything else because I can eat ice cream and things like that because that's the only time we can talk and nobody can say anything to because it's our time to talk. The grown-ups are there too but they can't say anything to us but if we are being bad we have to leave and finish eating somewhere else or we have to go upstairs but other than that it is my favorite part of the day.

Jalyn: Why don't you care about anything else?

Malcolm: I do, but you can't talk.

Diego: That was awesome. I don't care about nothing but lunch.

Diego: It is when we have dismissal from school because that is when I go home and go to sleep. And when I wake up I go to eat at Pizza Hut. I go back to sleep at 9:00pm and wake up at 12:30am. Then I'll fall asleep in the shower then get out of the shower, get dressed and eat.

Akeisha: That was entertaining.

Diego: I did it for all the fans.

Jose: You do a lot of sleeping. Doesn't that make you jumpy later?

Diego: No

Jamila: When you go home, what about your homework?

Students: Ohhhhh, snap.

Ms. Fitzgerald: What about your homework?

Diego: I have detention. Can I go to sleep in detention today?

Ms. Fitzgerald: No.

Luke: (laughing) You do a lot of eating. Luke proceeds to repeat Diego's schedule to him.

Diego: That's what I do.

Isabelle: My favorite time of the day is when I go to sleep because you have dreams. Like running around a garden. Every time someone sleeps it is relaxing because you don't have to do nothing else but just sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep.

Luke: Same as Jamila (referring to the question she asked Diego). What about homework?

Isabelle: Shrugs her shoulders. (*Isabelle does her homework every night*)

Malcolm: I didn't hear nothing you said.

Diego: You copied off of Luke's story.

Jalyn: Don't you have nightmares when you sleep?

Isabelle: No

Jamila: Bad dreams, cartoons, people, being sick?

Akeisha: My favorite time of the day is on Saturday because I get to lie down and relax. And you already have your homework done and your mom makes breakfast for you in bed and then you have a bubble bath, then do sit-ups and push-ups and jumping jacks and bother your mother and then play fight with her and also watch TV with her. One time she dragged me out the room and locked the door. So I picked the lock and she had the belt so I went into the bathroom and then she poured water on me.

***Isabelle:** *She says something under her breathe about Akeisha needing to exercise because she's overweight.*

Hailee: *(yelling)* Isabelle, that isn't nice, you're skinny.

Isabelle: I'm not talking about that.

Hailee: Stop lying. You're still saying that she's big.

Zamari: *(yelling)* Stop lying.

Isabelle: She's still tall. *A side conversation ensues for a little bit.*

Hailee: What did she do with the water?

Akeisha: She poured cold water on me.

Diego: Why did she kick you out of the kitchen?

Akeisha: She was tired of me.

Zamari: *(laughs)* Yeah, my mom does that too.

Jalyn: Can you read the part in the middle?

Akeisha: I should be exercising and losing weight.

Zamari: Duh, obviously.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Zamari that's not nice. You just got done telling Isabelle she shouldn't have said something unkind to Akeisha and now you are.

Zamari: No I didn't.

Large Group Conversation Five

Focus Questions: What would happen if there were no TVs? Would this be good? Bad?

Carlos: If there were no TVs it would be bad because there won't be movies, DVDs, previews, or cartoons. Nothing will be good. I'll be bored because stations need TVs even portable ones like PSPs and D.S. And there won't be PS3s, Xbox 360s, PS2s, Wiis. I'd be bored and I'd kill myself to be in the future to have better stuff. I'd be eating most of the days. I'd really feel bad that there's nothing to do just sleep, eat, and do homework. I don't really know what I'd do in that time. I know that I'll have to wait to get good TV.

Luke: What so funny about the play stations?

Carlos: He (Jacob) kept making me laugh.

Peter: How can you kill yourself and then go to the future?

Carlos: In another life.

Diego: I only heard one part, you need to speak louder?

Carlos: Alright.

Hailee: If there's no TVs wouldn't you miss it?

Luke, Malcolm and Carlos are talking over each other and I don't catch what they are saying.

Luke: Where would the TVs go (if we couldn't have TVs anymore)?

Ms. Fitzgerald: TVs weren't always around.

Malcolm: Yeah, you know first was electricity and then phones but PSPs were the 1st (laughing) (Looking around) Trust me.

Ms. Fitzgerald: No.

Luke: If there was no TVs I would just die. It will be bad. What if we wanna watch the news or a new movie? Also, some people just would sue the company or whoever took the TVs to get them, like some people I know. A few of them would just eat, sleep, and wait until it comes so they gonna look like dirty people eating potato chips all day with some soda or beer and they be having mustaches with flies flying around smelling because they don't take shower until the TV comes.

Jacob: Ew. He wrote the same thing. Read his.

Jamila: Why wouldn't they be able to shower? Showering has nothing to do with TV.

Diego: Sometimes it does.

Jacob: You been take a bath, cuz what you staring at if there's no TVs.

Jamila: That's what I said.

Diego: It would be a good world because now kids would be more fit and parents would be fit and everyone will not die because of heart attacks. But it is also bad because I won't be able to play games or watch the TV. Mu ha ha.

Luke: Since when you say that? You're copying off of Jamila.

Isabelle: Why would you be happy if TV was gone?

Diego: Cuz I need to get fit, mad people need to get fit.

Luke: Yeah, like this flubber (moving the skin on his arm back and forth)

Akeisha: Why would you copy off Jamila

Diego: Cuz she mad cool.

Everyone laughs.

Large Group Conversation Six

Focus Questions: Everyone changes over time. How has our class remained the same since September? How has our class changed since September?

Akeisha: Our class is the same because we still fight and talk. And some people still don't know to keep people's names out of their mouths. Our class is also different because we don't act crazy no more and we are better than we were in September when we was acting like animals. I'm the same because I can't hold my anger and I'm different because I'm doing a little better at ignoring people when they make me angry.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Are we less or more different?

Everyone: Less and more.

Jamila: People aren't talking out a lot.

Hailee: But other people get into other people's business still.

Akeisha: Yeah, they start jumping in if they hear their name.

Jalyn: We still talk a lot.

Esmeralda: We didn't graduate last year and we weren't seniors.

Elizabeth: I thought she (Ms. Fitzgerald) asked us how we were different from September not 4th grade.

Jamila: We still wear uniforms.

Elizabeth: We're still the same because sometimes we wear uniforms but sometimes we don't.

Hailee: We still get to go outside sometimes.

Jamila: Most people used to wear regular clothes when it was cold. And we still get to go outside. I don't get it. *There is a rule in the school that if you don't wear uniform you don't get to go outside. Jamila is referring to the fact that the rule is not always enforced.*

Akeisha: In winter we can go outside without our uniforms.

Anna: Our class is not the same as in September because people in the class look at our clothes and they judge how you dress and they start calling them names and saying that's how your mother dresses you. Our class is different in June because people started calling people names and people started saying that some people are following other people and then they start cursing at the new kids who are in our class. Our class is the same as in September because we are still having the same people in our class and we have the same teacher.

Hailee: What you mean by certain people?

Anna: I'm not gonna say. They call other people names.

Jamila: I agree, if somebody wears something because they can't afford something else. They're made fun of.

Kathryn: Yeah, a lot of people be doing that.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Can you give me more details about what is happening when students are making fun of what each others are wearing?

Anna: A lot of people being saying stuff about what other people be wearing.

Akeisha: I agree, we was talking and agreeing that nobody should be calling each other names. And nobody should be talking about nobody and how they dress.

Luke: Yeah, people talk about other people's clothes. When people be walking in the auditorium, people be staring at you. Looking like you can't get through.

Jamila: Thinking you're just jealous if you talk about somebody's clothes.

Hailee: So wear something different. People stare if they think your cloths are different.

Jalyn: People like to judge other people and call them names.

Ms. Fitzgerald: So, who is calling other people names because of what they are wearing?

Hailee: Everyone in the class. This morning, Diego was like that. He came out of nowhere sayin, "You can't be on the Senior Trip without no uniform".

Anna: I was sitting at my table and I heard someone calling people a hoochy mama because of what they be wearing.

Jalyn: They judge you about your family too. And say, "How do they let you dress like that?"

Luke: What's wrong with tight pants and mismatched socks? What's wrong with it?

Kianu: Matthew does it. *This is one of the popular kids in the 5th grade.*

Anna: When Briony came to our school people called her mad names. Like Crispy. And they said she didn't take showers. *Briony was a student who transferred to our school in October and then transferred out a few months later.*

Elizabeth: Diego said that.

Luke: People used to say things about Briony, like she smelled like pee.

Hailee: Nobody wanted to sit next to her.

Luke: I want to sleep.

Hailee: One way we are the same is that people kind of get in each other's business. Another way we are the same is that people still talk a lot. One way we are different is our behavior got worse than before. Another way we are different is the homework is worse.

Jalyn and Anna: It got better not worse.

Hailee: Not the homework getting done.

Jalyn: I disagree. We get detention if our homework isn't done. We are better.

Anna: I agree with Jalyn.

Jalyn: Everyone started changing.

Akeisha: I disagree with Hailee because in September we got Friday detentions, but it got better. *Akeisha looks at me.* Some Fridays you have no one in detention.

Esmeralda: Yeah, and Ms. Fitzgerald used to check homework at our tables and now she has us line up to check our homework. And the "Do Now" used to be done at our table and now we do it on the carpet.

Luke: Some kids do this. They hit you and you like it so you stick out your tongue and then they tease you.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Can you explain more about that?

Jamila: Luke's always making fun of people.

Isabelle: About homework, a lot of people get detentions because they still don't do it. I was like that then I told my family and they be telling me to do it so I don't get detentions.

Akeisha: I was gonna say what I forgot to say about homework. I think it's getting better because we only get 1 or 2 things for homework now. And I'm lazy.

Large Group Conversation Seven

Focus Questions: Everyone changes over time. How are you different from September? How are you the same?

Anna: I am different from September because I don't talk as much as I used to. Also, I used to not wear uniform but now I'm wearing uniform because we lose our senior trip if we don't. *Anna omitted the next sentence when she was reading her answer.* I'm the same because I don't give anymore attitude as I used to give to all my teachers.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Are you the same as you were in September?

Anna: No

Ms. Fitzgerald: So, you are saying that you are totally different?

Jamila: Did you say you were the same or different?

Anna: I said I was different.

Akeisha: I didn't hear what you said about being the same.

Diego: She didn't say anything about being the same.

Anna: Yeah, I didn't say anything about being the same.

Jamila: I'm different because I read better and my writing skills are better. My math is a little better. I'm the same because I still try my best to get my work

done and my homework. I'm still in Ms. Fitzgerald's class and I'll be the same, my liking my teacher, my 4th and 5th grade teacher forever.

Diego: What you say?

Jamila: *She read her answer again.*

Diego: Stop! Why do you like to read?

Jamila: Because

Diego: Reading is so boring. I only do it so she can be proud of me.

Luke: How's he going to get places if he doesn't like reading? What if you need directions to fly and you can't read to get to the airplane?

Jamila: How will you be able to read the number for the cab?

Jalyn: So, if it's not interesting you don't read.

Luke: So, if it's boring you won't read it?

Diego: If I see long words I fall asleep.

Luke: Supercalif.... (Diego fell over)

Luke had trouble finishing the word, so I stopped and helped him say it.

Esmeralda: What is that word?

Ms. Fitzgerald: It's a word that is used in the movie Mary Poppins.

Luke: *He starts to tell about the movie.*

Akeisha: Can I read?

Akeisha: I'm the same because I still get mad and when I get mad I get angry.

Then I get disrespectful and nobody likes that. I am different because I try my best not to be disrespectful because sometime I hold my anger in and I also don't yell in the classroom anymore. And I'm also different because if my friend was picking on someone, I would feel mad and tell them to stop and I would tell the teacher. Then if that doesn't work I would tell the principal.

Luke: Isn't mad and angry the same thing?

Akeisha: Not really.

Jalyn: I have a question. When you be yelling and stuff do you do it on purpose?

Akeisha: I don't do it on purpose, people just get me angry.

Large Group Conversation Eight

Focus Questions: What do you think makes a good friend? Give examples of a good friend and the things they do to be one.

Jamila: A good friend is like a brother or a sister to a person. Also, a good friend is a friend that you tell a secret to and they don't tell anybody else. And I'm a good friend if Hailee tells me she is allergic to chicken, I wouldn't tell anybody. If I tell Luke then the next day he would bring chicken to school and put it in her book bag. Then Hailee would see what he brought and she would have an allergic reaction. Then she would have to go home and then when she comes back she wouldn't talk to me. Then I wouldn't have a friend. So if your friend tells you they are allergic to something don't tell anybody that because that person won't be your friend if you do.

Akeisha: Don't you think people are allergic to other things?

Isabelle: Why did you come up with the Hailee and chicken thing?

Jamila: Chicken is good and Hailee is my friend.

Luke: What happens to me?

Jamila: You're a chicken hater.

Luke: Why am I a chicken hater?

Jamila: Because you put chicken in Hailee's book bag?

Luke: But why does that make me a chicken hater?

Jamila: *Jamila retells the story to Luke.*

Luke: Okay, that's cool.

Diego: A good friend is someone who has your back. They help you with any problem, from fighting to homework. If you have no money, they give you some for any reason. They are on your side for good or worse. The is what a true friend is

Zamari: If I was your friend and you got into a fight, I'd help you.

Jamila: You're a good friend right? You said, "You're a good friend." Well if I was your friend would you give me money?

Diego: Yeah.

Peter: What do you think is a bad friend?

Diego: You. *Starts laughing.*

Luke: If you give money to all your friends and you have 1,000 friends, who wouldn't you give money to?

Diego: I don't got any money so.

Luke: So, you don't have money. But what if you friends have it and you ask him for it and he doesn't it give it to you. What do you do?

Diego: What's all the money questions for?

Ms. Fitzgerald: Okay, let's move on. Who is reading their thoughts next?

Jacob: What I think is a good friend is one person that helps you out and doesn't tease you when other people are. They don't talk you into bad stuff they wanna do like smoke, drink, jump people and jack people with money. They don't skip important stuff like class. They listen to good stuff and they don't argue with you and do bad stuff. They help you with good stuff that you need to know.

Akeisha: If someone asks you to drink and smoke, what would you do?

Jacob: I'd say no.

Anna: What if you asked?

Jacob: Why would I ask?

Anna: Well, if you asked and they said no. What would you do?

Jacob: I wouldn't ask.

Jalyn: If you have a bad friend he had you do something bad, but he's playing.

Would you do it?

Jacob: No!

Ms. Fitzgerald: Okay, I think we have one more person that wants to share what they wrote.

Luke: A good friend would help people with their work or wouldn't get the person in trouble. For example, like if you are having trouble on something, they'll help you with your work. Another example is that if you were not supposed to talk and that person is talking but they're telling you to be quiet so you don't get in trouble. Also, if you doing the wrong thing they'll help you not get in trouble.

Jamila: Diego is your friend, right, and Jacob. Say Diego gets him in trouble. Is that a good friend?

Luke: No.

Jalyn: Why are you his friend?

Luke: I dunno. Because they do nasty stuff. Why you ask the question?

Large Group Conversation Nine

Focus Questions: If your friend was picking on someone else, how would you feel? What would you do?

Isabelle: Well I would feel bad and defend that person that my friend is picking on because every time you pick on someone it's really hurtful for me and for that same person because everybody is the same as us. There is no reason to pick on someone.

Malcolm: That's good that you didn't want her to feel bad.

Jalyn: What would you do?

Isabelle: I'd defend them.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Is it easy to defend someone who your friends are picking on?

Elizabeth: No, because they don't have to listen to you.

Isabelle: If you defend the person who your friend is picking on, your friend might not think you are their friend.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Okay, Anna you wanted to share next right.

Anna: If my friend was picking on someone, I would feel mad because you don't know how that person feels inside. I would tell my friend to leave them alone because you might get in trouble. Also, because you are hurting that person inside and you don't know how they feel. I would tell my friend to stop bothering them because they are going to get mad and they might fight them.

Ms. Fitzgerald: What do you think your friend would do?

Elizabeth: They'd tell you it was none of your business.

Luke: They'd probably tell you to shut up and to mind your own business.

Isabelle: You have to defend them though.

Luke: If you hate someone. Why would you tell your friend to stop picking on them?

Jamila: So, if Isabelle is picking on Hailee. What would you do?

Anna: It's like what the assistant principal said, you have to stand up for people that are being picked on.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Okay, Zamari let's hear what you have to say.

Zamari: If my friend was picking on somebody, I wouldn't do nothing. Cause while I'm trying to stop my friend from picking on that person, I might get the blame. And that's not fair. Because some teachers let the person that was picking get away with it, and you might get in trouble for interfering.

Luke: That's smart, sometimes teachers will think you did something when you didn't.

Large Group Conversation Ten

Focus Questions: What would you do if your two best friends went to the movies without you? How would you feel?

Anna: If my two best friends went to the movies without me I wouldn't be mad because they're my friends. If my two best friends went to the movies without me I wouldn't be mad because they didn't invite me maybe because they forgot or maybe there mom only wanted one friend to come. Maybe next time she will go with me. I wouldn't be mad. I wouldn't be sad. I think I wouldn't feel anything.

Jalyn: Why wouldn't you be mad? What if her mom said you could ask two friends and it wasn't you? How would you feel?

Isabelle: I wouldn't be mad.

Zamari: How you wouldn't be mad?

Akeisha: It's just a movie.

Kianu: How your two best friends forget about you?

Anna: I just wouldn't get mad. We could go another time.

All: That's messed up.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Okay, let's give someone else a chance to share.

Akeisha: If my friends went to the movies without me, I would be angry, mad, sad and furious because they didn't even call me to tell me I'm sorry. Or tell me we will go to the movies another time or come to my house to ask me do you want to come to the movies with us. Or come pick me up at least and tell me what the movie was about and take me to eat.

Diego: Could I go with you to eat?

Akeisha: No.

Diego: You mean I'm not your friend?

Luke: Can you read that last part?

Akeisha: *Rereads the end.*

Luke: Where would you eat?

Akeisha: Chinese.

Luke: I'd just buy a bootleg movie.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Okay, let's hear from Hailee.

Hailee: I would feel bad, like why didn't you call me up and tell me y'all was going to the movies. So, I'd do them dirty and get another friend and go to the movie with them so they can get jealous of me but I'll have mercy on them. But,

if they do it again I won't have mercy on them again. So, I will feel like an Oreo without the cookies on each side.

Isabelle: What was the whole think about the Oreo?

Hailee: You're in the middle like that (claps).

Jamila: What was the last part you said?

Hailee: I would feel like the inside of a cookie without the sides. You know, the cream. Oh gosh.

Ms. Fitzgerald: Okay, let's move on and give Peter a chance to talk.

Peter: If it was a movie that I really wanted to see like "Wanted" I would bother them until they were 21 or until they get me the movie on DVD. Then both of them have to give me \$25 for not taking me to the movie theatre with them. But if it was a wack movie like "Kung Fu Panda" I wouldn't really care because it's a kids' movie like "Speed Racer" and I'm 11 so to me movies like that are for 9 and 5 year olds.

Luke: That two friends thing having to pay you \$25. What if you get hit by a car before?

** The students are having side conversations. So, we end the conversation there.**

Reflection

Large Group Conversations Two through Ten

The second whole group conversation was the start of a new process for me and the students. I was probably much more apprehensive about the process than my students. We had been having unstructured conversations for one and one-half months before this point. However, the conversations had first revolved around violence, then death, and finally misconduct. These topics were all very important to discuss, but they were also extremely difficult topics to discuss in the classroom. I wanted to continue to have discussions in the classroom, but felt it was important to give the students opportunities to discuss a wide range of topics that were not necessarily so heavy. No matter the topic of conversation, all students should have an opportunity to speak about what is on their minds. In this time of standardized testing, students voices are shut down and their opinions are devalued. What is valued is a students' ability to reproduce what they are shown in the classroom with the utmost of accuracy.

As Dewey (1938) points out,

The traditional scheme is, in essence, one of imposition from above and from outside. It imposes adult standards, subject-matter, and methods upon those who are only growing slowly towards maturity. The gap is so great that the required subject-matter, the methods of learning and of behaving are foreign to the existing capacities of the young. They are beyond the reach of the experience the young learners already possess. (p. 18-19)

With our daily conversations, I was trying to get away from the monotony of “test prep” and “skill and drill” activities. I worried the structured weekly conversation might feel trivial and unimportant. However, I realized what was important was for the students to have a place to express their individuality and think beyond the scope of the standardized test subjects.

After rereading and analyzing the nine large group conversations, it was extremely surprising to see the number of times violence came up in the conversations. I never expected that a conversation regarding someone’s favorite part of the day could illicit responses with violence in them. No matter the conversation topic, the students seemed to respond at some point to the prompt with an answer that included violence. Violence seemed to be one of the topics bonding our classroom community together. As Dewey (1916/2005) states,

...What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge – a common understanding – like-mindedness as the sociologists say. The communication which insures participation in a common understanding is one which secures similar emotional and intellectual dispositions – like ways of responding to expectations and requirements. (p.5)

Violence was an expected response in their community and common understanding among students. For example, the students talked about enjoying the power to fight against someone or something in a video game. They referred

to the violence they experienced against them by their parents in two of the conversations. They talked about the instances in which they would respond by fighting. What was most fascinating to hear throughout these conversations was the delicate line which was created between "play fighting" and "real fighting". I wonder how the students are able to navigate that invisible line successfully. I also wonder if it is fair to say they are navigating it successfully. The students seem to see fighting as an acceptable response to almost every situation. Maybe there isn't an invisible line. Maybe "play fighting" and "real fighting" are synonymous and it is the outsider who creates the invisible line?

Another theme that permeated the conversations surrounded the notion of freedom. The students spoke of the freedoms they felt they did not have as children, but that they felt the adults in their lives did. In many of the conversations, the students expressed their desire to have the freedom to do as they wished and also the freedom to decide who gets freedom. The notion of freedom that came up in many of the conversations was linked to a desire for power as well. One student spoke of "creating a potion to never become adult". Prior to that comment he spoke about his desire to have the power to decide who gets to be free. Is it that he wants to be a child forever as well as have the powers and freedoms adults have? Cannella (2008) claims that children are made to believe that the decisions they make in the classroom are based on their own deliberations. However, she believes this is not the case and instead covert

control is established, creating an illusion of freedom for children in the classroom (p. 122). Perhaps the children sense a "false freedom" in the classroom and with the adults in their lives. I wonder if their desire for freedom and power is equated to a sense of powerlessness then. Perhaps, the students spoke of using violence as a viable solution to almost every situation because they see power and freedom in fighting. I wonder if this ever really changes for the students. Is it possible that they grow into adults who feel powerless and victimized and thus as adults they will resort to violence to solve their problems?

Through many of the conversations the students spoke about the idea of escape. The students spoke about going home and sleeping. They used sleep as a tactic to stave off boredom, as a way to enter a dream world, and as a way to be exempt from doing things. They also spoke about using video games as a way to escape from reality. As this notion of escaping came up repeatedly throughout the conversations, I could not help wonder why my students had such a strong desire to escape from reality. Their reasons for escaping reality are definitely vast and numerous, but I wonder does it have anything to do with the other themes of freedom and violence. I wonder if part of their desire for escape is because their lives are filled with violence and a pervading feeling of helplessness so they feel sleep and daydreaming helps them escape the stress of their lives.

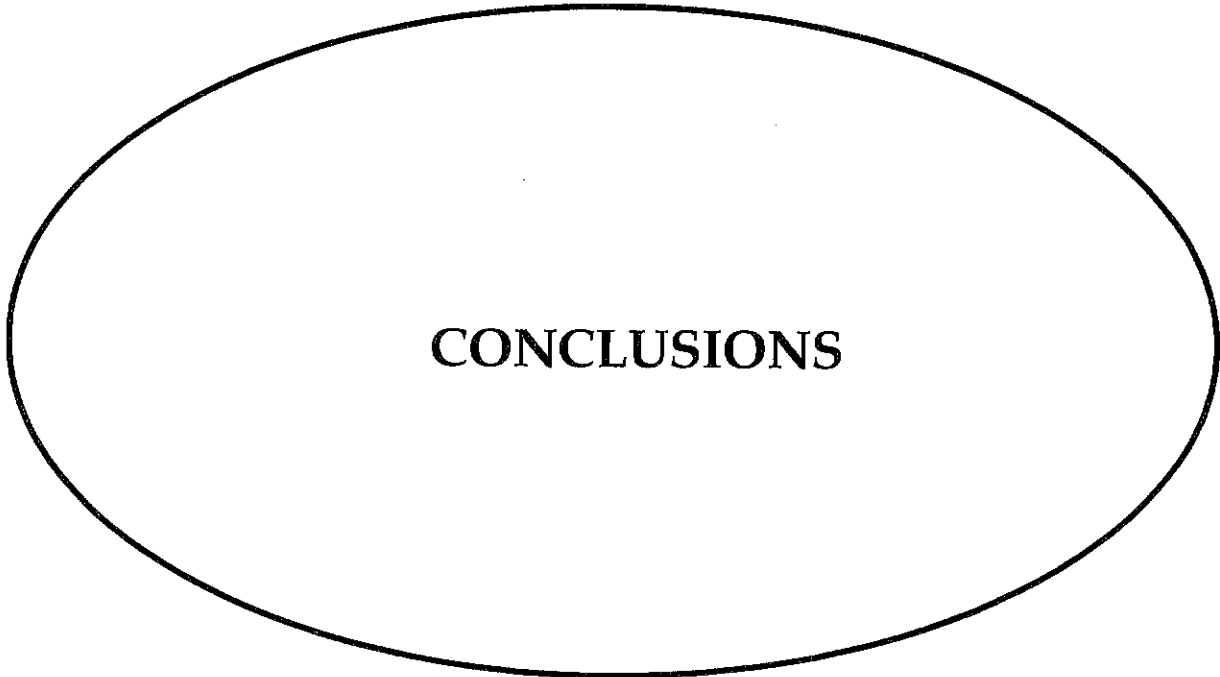
The last theme was that of talking. Students at the school I work in hear a lot of teachers tell them to stop talking. After listening to the students bring up how they feel they talk too much in school, I could not help wonder if they have trouble separating this from the idea that their opinions and ideas are valid and important. When teachers tell their students to stop talking repeatedly, I wonder if students assume teachers do not care about their opinions. As Cannella (2008) writes,

... our [adults] knowledge of children and what is best for them has resulted in the silencing of human voices that are not ours. Voices of "silent knowing" are those of the actual children with whom we work as they live their real lives in settings that we have not comprehended, as they display strengths and understandings that we have not dreamed of, and as they construct knowledge that would challenge the boundaries of our own worlds. (p. 3)

During one of the conversations, my students described a good friend as a good listener. Perhaps, this is a lesson for teachers as well. Teachers need to be better listeners. If teachers do more listening and less talking, students will feel more validated and heard. Perhaps this will help students feel less powerless and they will begin to see that there are other solutions beside violence.

As my students spoke of power, freedom, escape and being heard, I realized there are lessons to be learned by the educators of the world. It is vital

that space is created in the classroom for children to have their voices heard. When they know their opinions matter, it disrupts their feelings of powerlessness. In turn, it allows students to be in a position of power, knowing their words matter. Children then discover they have some of the power and answers within them. Alternatively, teachers will have the opportunity to be the "student" in their own classroom and learn more about their understandings and misunderstandings.



CONCLUSIONS

Conversations became an integral part of the classroom culture and experience during my second year of teaching. The written documentation of the conversations does not do justice to the transformation that took place with my students over the year. As I reflect on the many conversations we had, it has become increasingly apparent how important it is to create a space for dialogue in the classroom. As Fine (2003) believes it is necessary for educators to allow for the voices of students to be heard, otherwise the silencing of America's youth will create impenetrable barriers between their school life and community life (p. 18). Conversations in the classroom give each student the opportunity for their voice to be heard. This then builds a strong sense of community within the classroom. It also creates a safe place for children to negotiate through all of the trials and tribulations of life and helps bridge the gap between school and home.

A few days before the end of the school year, my students were taking part in a graduation ceremony celebrating and commemorating the completion of the fifth grade. The students all met up in our classroom the morning of the graduation so that we could file down to the auditorium together. As we were waiting for the students to arrive, one of my most challenging students came up to me and said, "Ms. Fitzgerald, are we going to have our morning meeting this morning?" I was completely caught off guard by this question. As he turned to walk away, he approached the other students in the classroom and began the morning meeting without me. It was at this moment that I truly began to understand the depth of impact the morning meetings and conversations had on my students.

On graduation day I realized that our morning meetings and conversations had become a comforting routine for many of my students. It was a place where they could

express their opinions freely without fear of being ridiculed. As Meier (1995) wrote, it is important that all children "...be inventors of their own theories, critics of other people's ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on this most complex world"(p. 4). Throughout the year, we worked hard as a class to create a place where this could happen and where all our voices could be heard and everyone could feel comfortable expressing their feelings, ideas and thoughts.

A month after I introduced the idea of having conversations in the classroom, one of the students' classmates passed away. Because the students were dealing with such powerful feelings and were all going through a common grief experience, it brought them together as a class. It was because of this experience that the students were able to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings throughout the rest of the year. It is also through dealing with and discussing these complicated issues that the students will be able to become good citizens in the future (Meier, 1995, p. 8). As I have heard many times throughout my teaching career, "children are resilient". This statement may be true. However, it is never a good idea to underestimate the transformative power a simple conversation can have for a child.

At the beginning of the current school year, I was excessed from my school. A month after school started one of the 5th grade teachers quit and I was put back in the classroom. The teacher's last day was extremely difficult for the fifth graders. As I was preparing for this group of students and struggling to figure out how to walk them through a difficult transition, I thought back to my second year when I had daily conversations with my students. I remembered how powerful that experience was. It became instantly apparent that I already knew how to help this new group of fifth

graders transition from one teacher to the next. Thus began a series of conversations, which helped a new group of students transition between teachers.

During my second year of teaching, my students grew in their ability to express their thoughts and feelings effectively and respectfully. As the school year progressed, I saw their trust in me and their fellow classmates increase exponentially. I also witnessed the increasing level of comfort in the classroom. The students took more risks in their academic work and they created respectful relationships with each other. The conversations we had, created a sense of safety which would not have been there otherwise.

Adults often underestimate the power a simple dialogue can have with a group of students. As is apparent in section three, not all of the conversations I had with my students were about serious topics. The most important part of having conversations in the classroom is giving the students the opportunity to have their voices heard no matter the topic. If students feel that their voices are being heard and that their thoughts and feelings are valid, it positively affects other areas of the classroom. As Kriete (2003) states, "The information that students share extends their knowledge of one another, and the respectful reception of their news builds students' sense of significance" (p. 69). Students need to feel that they are part of a community where their voices are heard and where they feel safe. No matter where a student comes from, who their parents are, what their race, or income level, a student needs to feel valued and heard in the classroom.

It does not matter what school you teach in. What is important is to create a safe place where your students are listened to and valued. As I experienced firsthand, allowing conversations to take place created a positive classroom environment full of articulate and critical thinking students. "It is the sharing of activity. It is in doing together, in the sharing of hopes and aspirations, in participating toward a common end that communities are created and sustained" (Cufforo, 1995, p. 26). These activities and conversations will hopefully breakthrough the years of silence, especially with regards to low-income youth and empower them to fulfill their dreams of the future.



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