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Descriptive feedback: student voice in K-5 classrooms

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Abstract In this article, the author argues the imperative of critical dialogue between learners and teachers on learners' experiences in the classroom. This dialogical process is called "descriptive feedback"—feedback given by students to teachers on their (students') experiences as learners. Drawing on the literature on feedback, descriptive feedback, and student voice, the author contends that descriptive feedback dialogues are not only rich sources of understanding of learning, teaching, and school, but offer a creative counter to a relentless, often dehumanizing, atmosphere of test prep and "coverage." The results of this study point to the creation of space where students become teachers, teachers become learners, learners become learners of teaching, and both collaborate on creating curriculum. Within this space students develop a heightened sense of their own agency, and acquire new language with which to talk about learning. Teachers develop a curiosity about students' point of view and come to trust in their capacity to contribute to both curricular content and pedagogical process.

Keywords Descriptive feedback · Student voice · Pupil voice · Pupil consultation · Student agency · Primary and elementary students

Introduction

In this article, I argue the imperative of critical dialogue between learners and teachers on learners' experiences in the classroom. I call this dialogical process "descriptive feedback"—feedback given by students to teachers on their (students') experiences as learners. Drawing on the literature on student voice, I contend that

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descriptive feedback dialogues are not only rich sources of understanding of learning, teaching, and school, but offer a creative counter to a relentless, often dehumanizing, atmosphere of test prep and "coverage." The results of this study, situated in the Bronx, New York, point to the creation of pedagogic forums where students become teachers, teachers become learners, learners become learners of teaching, and both collaborate on creating curriculum. Through this collaboration students develop a heightened sense of their own agency and acquire new language with which to talk about learning. Teachers develop a curiosity about students' points of view and come to trust in their capacity to contribute to both curricular content and pedagogical process.

I have defined descriptive feedback as "a reflective conversation between teacher and students wherein students describe their experiences as learners, with the goals of improving learning, deepening trust between teacher and student, and establishing a vibrant, creative community on a daily basis. It is distinct from student assessment or self-assessment because it is, by nature, descriptive rather than evaluative" (Author 2006, p. 209). Based on a Deweyan/Freirean (Dewey 1916, 1933; Freire 1970; Rodgers 2002a, b) conception of reflection and agency, as well as on Carini's (2001) work in descriptive inquiry, descriptive feedback offers teachers evidence that is not necessarily perceptible through even very careful observation of children or their work: the internal workings of students' hearts and minds. Descriptive feedback from students to teachers, not to be confused with teachers' feedback to students on their work, offers students a chance to build awareness of themselves and each other as learners, and agency as co-planners and powerful actors. In addition, descriptive feedback is designed to provide teachers with a chance to build awareness of themselves as teachers—their assumptions, motives, skills, and attitudes—and their teaching. To teach in response to students' learning is to privilege learning over requirements—not to ignore them, but also not be subject to them. This study asked the following research questions:

(1) What are the observed and perceived influences of descriptive feedback on the instructional dynamics of the classroom?
(2) What sustains the practice and what hinders it?

Literature review: descriptive feedback and student voice

Descriptive feedback grows out of work in group dynamics from the 1950s conducted by the National Training Laboratories (NTL) in the U.S. Eager to know from participants themselves how groups worked (and failed), researchers held regular dialogues with participants about group process (Lewin and Cartwright 1951; Kolb 1984) and called this process feedback. Later, educator Gattegno (1974), using the same term in his work with teachers and students, saw feedback as a cornerstone of the "subordination of teaching to learning" whereby teaching is guided by students' learning. While a teacher could make learning visible in numerous ways, there were still processes that were invisible to the eye and could only be accessed through

dialogue with students. "In human transactions," he wrote, "[asking for feedback] means attention to the existence of others, but also giving others the right and the means to alter the course of a process in which they are involved" (p. ii).

In my own work (Rodgers 2002b, 2006, 2010) I have explored the use of descriptive feedback by student-teachers and as part of the reflective process (See Fig. 1). The framework for reflection and the place of descriptive feedback within that framework constitute a process for learning from one's teaching based on evidence that includes students' perspectives. This concept is fortified by Carini's (Carini, 2001; Carini and Himley 2010) work with the processes of descriptive inquiry. The discipline of description slows down the rapid, judgmental work of teaching to see what is. As Carini (2001) so eloquently puts it, "To describe is to value" (p. 163).

Student voice scholarship investigates how students can contribute to decisions impacting their lives in and out of schools. Student voice (also referred to as pupil consultation) research began at the level of the classroom (Rudduck et al. 1996). Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) of the UK defined pupil consultation as "talking with pupils about things that matter to them in the classroom and school and that affect their learning." Cook-Sather (2006), a leader in student voice work in the US, particularly in higher education, defines student voice as students' "having a legitimate perspective and opinion, being present and taking part, and/or having an active role" in decisions relative to practice and policy (p. 362). While the terms have differed, they share the emphasis on granting students the authority of their experiences as learners and their right to have a say in those experiences.

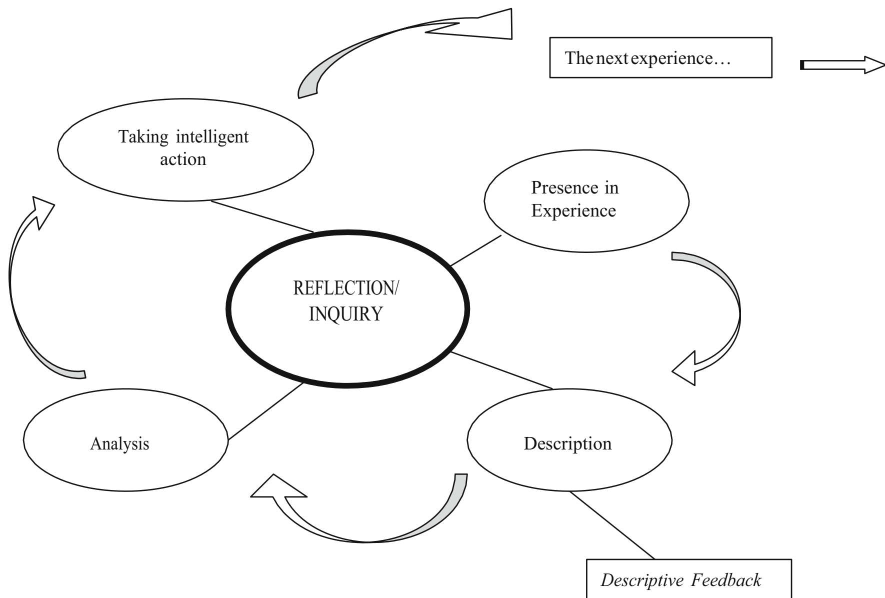

Fig. 1 The reflective cycle

More recent research in student voice extends beyond the classroom to school and policy reform, as well as to the realm of community action. The Student Voice Collaborative has been central to this movement (see e.g., Mitra 2015; Sussman 2015; Parkman and McBroom 2015.) Student voice efforts range from including students' perspectives in studies to enlisting them as researchers themselves (Cook-Sather 2002; Mayes et al. 2016).

While the move to bring students' voices to policy discussions is vital, it is not my primary interest here. I am interested in returning to Rudduck's original pedagogical focus. In doing so, I acknowledge resistance to the practice from teachers themselves (though rarely from students). It is easy for teachers to assume that they engage in student voice work by dint of teaching alone: "I listen to students' voices all day long!" But as Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) note, "[Such a] strategy is primarily about subject knowledge, [in contrast, student consultation] *engages directly with pedagogic experience and the teaching strategies that pupils find more or less helpful for their learning*" (emphasis added, p. 4). In other words, most teacher–student dialogue centers on academic content rather than on process or the purposes behind what students are being asked to do.

A global assumption is that the purpose of school is to prepare students for further schooling and the job market. These assumptions are rarely questioned or serve as topics of dialogue with students. Teachers may not see students as sufficiently mature to offer much of value to such a debate. Or, after an initial foray into consulting students, teachers receive answers from students that are unhelpful or superficial (Bragg 2007). Still others see their students as adversaries rather than partners and are fearful of what students actually think. Asking students for input on how to teach can feel like a pilot asking her passengers how to fly the plane.

Another reason descriptive feedback is not often practised in the classroom is simply that it does not occur to teachers. In my work in professional development and teacher education, it is not unusual for teachers to complain that students do not engage as they had hoped. When I suggest that they ask students about it, they puzzle over it, as though if they have to ask for help from students, they have somehow failed.

Finally, and perhaps most common, is teachers' resistance to "wasting time." If descriptive feedback is seen as something extra, it cannot compete against the demands of an over-crowded curriculum and expectations of ever-higher test scores. Until it is experienced as actually *timesaving*, it is often pushed into the "if time" category, which means never. Descriptive feedback admittedly forces teachers and students to slow down, to take stock. Medical doctor Victoria Sweet (2012, 2017) calls this the "efficiency of inefficiency." She stresses that the time taken to listen, to "see" patients and hear their stories, is not wasted but saves time and money in the long run. The same is true in teaching.

Cautions and caveats

In spite of all the benefits that can come from consulting students, there are numerous cautions and caveats that researchers have underscored, among them power differentials, appropriation of student voice, essentializing students' voices,

and the shifting nature of identity and context. No matter how democratic a teacher's or school's intentions, power differences exist. As Cruddas (2007) writes, the teacher–student relationship is inescapably binary and the best we can do is to act with awareness of existing power structures, and "struggle toward shared social meanings" (p. 485).

Several studies (Cook-Sather 2007; Cruddas 2007; Silva 2001; Bragg 2007) cautioned that voice (like identity) is always under construction and offers listeners only a partial view of the speaker. As Cook-Sather (2007) states, "What you don't know is much bigger than what you know" (p. 382). Or, as Cruddas (2007) writes, "Our voices (adults and children and young people) are not the pure expression of individual consciousness, 'full being' or 'self'; they are the complex products of past meanings and sedimented histories enacted within a dialogic context" (p. 486). Voice (again, like identity) is also always subject to the contexts and communities within which it is expressed (Gee 2001; Raider-Roth 2005).

Another caution researchers offer is the danger of accepting wholesale what children say, merely because they have been given the chance to say it. As Spivak (1988) notes, it is tempting to uncritically "'essentialize' [student] experiences by assuming that they are free to represent their own interests transparently" (p. 368). Children, as do many of us, often say what they assume they are expected to say; they are unsure exactly what they are actually feeling and thinking in the moment, or lack the language to say it.

Finally, student voice can be co-opted by systems or powerful individuals for their own ends. Simply using student voice without also changing assumptions about the value of students' voices, the limitations of existing power structures, and existing, narrowly defined purposes of education, risks using students as tools, a means to justify unexamined ends and the status quo (Fielding 2016; Fine and Weis 2007; Cook-Sather 2006). Student voice, then, cannot be thought of as an automatic and ultimate good, or a mere tool or technique; it must be seen within a larger moral context.

Research design

The practice of descriptive feedback was an intentional professional development intervention designed to involve students and teachers at the Bronx (New York) City Charter (hereafter, BCC) in an explicit exploration of the affordances and limitations of current teaching practices. The research design is based on principles of Design-Based Research, an approach that "studies learning in context" through the systematic design of interventions and their evolution (Design-Based Research Collection 2003). The intervention included a one-day orientation and training (described below), twice-a-month classroom observations and consultations, and twice-a-month teacher group meetings. The intention was both to develop skills of asking for, receiving, and responding to descriptive feedback, and, in the process, to craft descriptive feedback questions that were suited to the K-5 student population. This report focuses on the first year of the project, the 2014–2015 academic year. (All names and locations are pseudonyms).

Participants and context

Participants in the project included nine K-5 classroom teachers, five Academic Leaders (ALs), and approximately 50 children, all of whom signed consent or assent forms approved by both the school's review board and University at Albany's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participating ALs recruited interested teachers to participate in the study. Participation in the study was optional and seen as one among many professional development options. In addition, children and parents/guardians signed consent or assent forms. While children signed forms to participate in the study, they did not have a choice to participate in descriptive feedback itself. The school, as a partner in the research, sent the consent form to all parents and both the university researcher and the school kept copies of all signed forms. In all cases but one, parents/guardians agreed to have their children participate in the study. This child was not recorded or interviewed (Table 1).

BCC is a K-5, public charter school in an urban setting. It serves 492 Pre-K–5 students; 98% are Black (Jamaican, African, and African American) and/or Hispanic. Over 80% qualify for free or reduced lunch. After grade five, students enroll in various public, private, or parochial schools, in the Bronx or Manhattan. BCC co-locates on a shared campus with a regular New York City public primary/elementary school.

There are close to 50 teachers (60% of whom are White) and 35 teacher assistants (mostly Black). Academic Leaders (ALs), who also teach, are assigned to most grades. The large number of assistants and the active support of ALs make small group work a feature of nearly every classroom, especially in the upper grades (3rd through 5th). In addition, there is a professional development staff of four that has supported the research.

BCC was founded on the principle of the "subordination of teaching to learning" (Gattegno 1978). While the school recruits teachers with this philosophy explicitly stated, it also works with them in ongoing professional development to realize the

Table 1 Teacher and academic leader participants

Teacher	Grade
Ms. Trotter	Kindergarten
Ms. Smith	1st grade
Ms. Comerie	2nd grade
Ms. Napoli and Ms. Kenyatta	3rd grade ELA; Mathematics
Ms. Tucci and Mr. Ketchum	4th grade ELA; social studies and science
Ms. Brady and Ms. Boris	5th grade ELA
Ms. Alexander	Academic Leader—5th grade
Mr. Srinavasan	Academic Leader—3rd grade
Ms. Puccini	Academic leader—4th grade
Ms. Moreno	Academic leader—1st and 2nd
Ms. Esposito	Academic leader—K and 1st

philosophy in practice. The use of descriptive feedback is one effort in that direction.

Central to BCC's curriculum is the use of two sets of materials: Cuisenaire rods and Words-in-Color© charts. The rods, used to teach mathematics, are one centimeter square, one to ten centimeters long, each a different color, and designed to give students the experience of number before they are asked to deal in number symbols. The Words-in-Color charts serve as a bridge to reading. Developed by Gattegno (1978, 1987), color is assigned to sound, making a language like English, which has multiple spellings for a single sound, easier to decode. For example, the sound /ə/ is yellow; thus the "o" in *of*, the "au" in *because*, the "e" in *the*, and the "a" in *what* are all yellow. These materials were to prove critical in children's descriptions of their learning in descriptive feedback sessions.

Study parameters

In the summer and fall of 2014 approximately 20 teachers were given a one-day orientation to the theory and practice of descriptive feedback. This included a theoretical overview of reflection using the Rodgers' framework (Rodgers 2002a, b) (see Fig. 1), and two experiences using descriptive feedback, one as learners giving descriptive feedback, and the other as teachers asking for it. In addition, teachers read an article on descriptive feedback (Rodgers 2006). Five of the participants (all ALs) had taken or were currently taking a semester-long online course with me, focusing on reflection and other processes of descriptive inquiry (Carini and Himley 2010; Carini 2001).

Teachers were asked to use these descriptive feedback questions:

- What did you learn?
- How do you know you learned it?
- What helped you to learn it?
- What got in your way?
- How did you feel?
- What else do you want me to know? (2002b)

As will become clear, the questions evolved over the course of the project. Almost immediately, teachers varied in their use of descriptive feedback. Some pulled small groups of children out of class for the descriptive feedback discussion, while others worked in small groups within the classroom, and still others with the whole class. Some did all of these. Sessions lasted between a few minutes and up to 40 minutes or longer. The questions further evolved as a result of sharing and discussion at our twice-a-month teacher participant meetings.

Data collection

Data included audio and/or video recordings and transcripts of the following: descriptive feedback sessions and the lessons which preceded them; debriefing sessions between teachers and myself following observed feedback sessions; twice-

a-month teacher meetings involving all participating teachers; end-of-the-year interviews with all participating teachers and students; and observational field notes and reports written by me and required by the school in my role as consultant. These notes also took account of contextual forces at play and their impact on the practice of descriptive feedback, particularly the presence of state tests upon which the survival of the school depended, and the concomitant "testing season" which spanned the months of February through April. Finally, the literature and videos available on the school's website provided additional context. There were recordings of 36 feedback sessions and subsequent debriefs, seven teacher meetings (each lasting about one hour), and interviews lasting between 30 minutes and an hour with the nine participating teachers and groups of participating students, conducted at the end of the 2014–2015 academic year. Because of scheduling, we combined student groups; all were interviewed jointly by teachers and myself.

Data analysis

Data analysis was ongoing, iterative, and also done in real time. I drew upon a Design-Based Research model, where the intervention itself evolves as a result of ongoing inquiry and analysis, in effect, mirroring the process of descriptive feedback itself. I analyzed data in three arenas: (1) ongoing open coding of transcriptions of descriptive feedback dialogues, debriefing sessions, teachers' meetings, and reports; (2) ongoing reflections with participating teachers and ALs at bimonthly teacher meetings on what they were learning, obstacles they encountered, and adjustments they were making to the questions; and, (3) personal reflections on transcripts and field notes in the form of my bimonthly reports for the BCC PD team. All transcripts and reports were coded using open coding loosely aligned with anticipated themes (e.g., awareness of learning, questioning, and student agency). Sub-categories emerged from these. For example, under "awareness of learning" emerged the sub-category "co-construction of language." Within "student agency" the sub-category of "student suggestions" emerged. These initial analyses were shared with teachers at our bimonthly meetings where teachers would verify, deepen, extend, or correct our analyses. My graduate students and I then refined our analysis with teachers' input. We looked across themes for their relationships to each other, using both NVivo and hand-drawn concept maps. Findings were continuously shared with teachers for verification and revision. A sub-group of teachers participated in presentation of findings at a regional research conference and later at AERA in Washington, DC.

Findings

Again, this study sought to explore (1) the observed and perceived influences of descriptive feedback on the instructional dynamics of the classroom, and (2) what sustains and hinders its practice. The practice of descriptive feedback was widely embraced by teachers participating in the study and changed in significant ways teachers' practice and students' learning. First, we learned that descriptive feedback

allowed students to develop a set of inner criteria for what learning felt like. Second, experiential activities and rich materials facilitated students' expression of these experiences even as they struggled, along with the teacher, to articulate them. These struggles were also opportunities for language development. Third, repeated opportunities for descriptive feedback nurtured a growth in student agency and student–teacher collaboration. Finally, a coherent theory–practice environment facilitated the practice of descriptive feedback while a test-dependent reauthorizing system militated against its effectiveness. I explore each of these areas below. In addition, I track changes teachers made in their practice and perspective.

Development of inner criteria

A primary challenge of descriptive feedback for students of all grade levels was shifting from a stance of giving the right answer, verified by both the external context of school and other external criteria (i.e., praise from the teacher, high test grades), to looking inward and asking: What *did I* experience? What *do I* think and feel? If the teacher taught it, does this mean I learned it? In other words, developing *inner criteria* for learning.

That shift was particularly problematic in regard to the first question, "What did you learn?" Often students would relate what they were *taught* and what they believed they *should* have learned in school, regardless of whether or not they actually had learned it. It was a question that reinforced ossified notions of school. For example, Mike, a fourth grader, when asked early in the project by his ELA teacher, Ms. Tucci, "After this learning process [work on comprehension techniques] this week what do you feel like you've learned?" Mike answered, "I learned that we should circle little words that we read and underline what we understood." When asked how he knew that he learned it, he answered tentatively, "Because you taught us?" He listed the techniques he had been taught, but was unclear about whether learning had happened, voicing the assumption that if something is taught, something is learned, and perhaps reflecting the power dynamics in play—that if a teacher teaches something, students better have learned it!

Yet, there were signs that students were capable of reflecting on and expressing what they *actually* learned and looking to their own experience for verification. For example, in the same descriptive feedback session, Kayla responded to Ms. Tucci this way:

> It helped me learn that I should actually read more carefully and don't ignore my question, and I have to, like, think about what I read and think about what is the person doing, is it interesting for *me*. I have to think about my own feelings *and* the book's words.

There followed an exchange between two other students in the same group, Cura and Sojourner, that revealed Cura's sudden awareness of her reading habits, as well as Sojourner's horror that Cura would "confess" to bad reading habits, as if a school rule had been broken. But it also suggests the power of descriptive feedback to disrupt assumptions about school and learning, as Sojourner's shock suggests.

Cura: We usually read to be the first one to finish the passage. And when the teacher asks you, "What did you learn from this passage?" You're usually speechless.

Sojourner [aghast]: Why would you tell them that!?
[Ms. Tucci reassured them that she wanted them to be honest because it helped her.]

Cura: I learned [to visualize when I read] because, like, I usually don't do it. Wait—! I usually read a book and then, when I go to sleep, the next morning, I don't usually remember what I read!

Sojourner: Yeah, that's true.

Cura had, it seems, awakened to the difference between reading to get through something and reading as an exchange between herself and the text. Sojourner then concedes to the difference. More importantly, the girls participated in a dialogue that was exploratory and came to an insight about reading and themselves as readers that was valued by the teacher and useful to them all.

Sometimes teachers, in an effort to help, supplied what they *assumed* students meant without verifying with the student, thus short-circuiting students' ability to tap into their experience. Ms. Smith, for instance, asked her first grader, Precious, about what helped and what got in the way after a lesson using the Words-in-Color charts (called "fidels").

Precious: Some of the words on the fidel didn't really help me.
Ms. Smith: Okay, didn't help you. So, you didn't know all the colors, so it wasn't helpful? [Precious nods yes]

Ms. Smith still did not know which words didn't help or why, and attributed her own reason to Precious ("You didn't know the colors"). In turn, Precious, in nodding yes, likely abandoned her own reasons along with her self-knowledge, replacing them with words that the teacher—a more authoritative source of knowledge—had supplied, rather than trusting what she knew (Raider-Roth 2005).

Language, experiential activities, and rich materials

Part of developing a voice includes the development of vocabulary to accurately express experience. As students struggled to find the words, teachers (in contrast to Ms. Smith's early attempts) struggled beside them to supply the words without putting words in their mouths, robbing them of the authority of their experience. It was a tricky balance to strike.

In the following exchange between Ms. Alexander and Shanti, Ms. Alexander checks out her interpretation of Shanti's words.

Ms. Alexander: So what do you need? Shanti: I need *alone*.
Ms. Alexander: You need what? Shanti: I need to be alone.
Ms. Alexander: [Pausing] OK. You need space? [Shanti: *Yes*.] Quiet? [Shanti: *Yes*.] OK.

In one of our teacher meetings a few weeks into the project, three teachers from first, fifth, and fourth grades, respectively, described this phenomenon, which we came to refer to as "re-languaging," that is, offering students a more precise vocabulary, hopefully getting closer to the truth of their experience.

> Ms. Smith: There are times when I think, "I don't know what [that child] is talking about!" [And I've learned to ask,] "Did you mean…? Could you explain…?" And if they can't explain, I try to string their thoughts together, and you get like, "Yeah, yeah, *that's* what I was trying to say."

> Ms. Alexander: It's the same in fifth grade! We get the same feedback! [The kids say,] "I *know* what I have to say. I *know* how it feels, I just don't know how to express it!"
> Mr. Ketchum: They *know* how they feel, it's just that they—Some of them with a limited vocabulary—They can't say, "I prefer to have active activities." (…) [So], I'll say, "So what you're saying is… It's exactly what you said, [but] it's a different way to [say it]."

Towards June some teachers said that the kids began to "re-language" for each other: "I think she's trying to say that…," thus making re-languaging a widely distributed effort.

As students struggled to find language to express internal cognitive and affective processes, we learned that having concrete materials and experiential activities to refer to helped them to describe their learning. For example, one kindergarten boy spoke vividly about how the rods helped him make sense of number using white rods (= 1) to figure out the length/size of other larger rods, like orange (= 10):

> Dane: With the rods we can make equations with the rods and we can build, and sometimes if we don't know what number is the rod, we can use the whites and put them under the orange so we can know how much the orange [is]. And *all* the rods. Except the white rod because the white rod will just be one.

Having these concrete materials, and a memory of *doing* to refer to, facilitated both the learning and the articulation of it. Ms. Trotter described how her Kindergarten students also used the rods to explain their thinking to each other:

> It's interesting to see. [Cherisse] has really gotten into this descriptive feedback. She's able to—She says, 'Wait a second, I'm thinking.' … I'll say, "Cherisse, OK, what did you *do*? And she'll explain exactly her process." And then Dane will go, "You mean you did this?" "No, no, no, that's not what I mean. I mean I went like this with it," and she'll, like, grab the rods and show them what she did and explain to them exactly her process.

In one descriptive feedback exchange with fourth graders, students talked about the power of "a learning experience" (as opposed to "a teacher teaching"), displaying vivd insight into their own learning processes:

> Deshawn: Because when it's fun and a learning *experience*, it makes me more want to learn than just, like a teacher teaching, and then it's just boring. I'm

not gonna really, like, *retain* anything that they're really saying. [*Rodgers: Why don't you retain it?*] It's just boring. It just kind of… *passes* me sometimes.
Bronte: *All* the time. All the really, really, really, *really*, really, really, really boring topics are like in the dungeon in the back of my head, locked up. No matter how much I try, I could never remember them. No matter how many times I could review it, I could never remember!

Learning experiences, (experiential activities, interactive materials) triggered feelings, thoughts, images, and connections, which in turn triggered a desire to share, to *tell*. Articulating these feelings, thoughts, and images allowed students and teachers together to construct language and an awareness of what it means to learn. As Dewey (1915) once said, there is a world of difference between having to say something and having something to say.

Student Agency

One of the questions that teachers developed over time was, "What do you need next?" The exchange below between Ms. Puccini and Kaylah, a struggling reader who had frequently been labeled as a "behavior problem," showed that when she was given an opportunity to voice her inner struggles and the opportunity to ask for what she needed, she took it.

Ms. Puccini: What got in the way of your learning?
Kaylah: Not knowing the words, I try to pronounce it and pronounce it and I got angry with myself cuz I want to know more. (…)
Ms. Puccini: How did you feel during the lesson?
Kaylah: I felt angry because I felt behind because I didn't understand the words. Ms. Puccini: Is there anything else you want me to know?
Kaylah: I want to read the chapter before we meet in groups.

Ms. Puccini shared the transcript of this exchange at one of our teacher meetings. To hear so clearly Kaylah's feelings of anger and frustration and to imagine her alone with those feelings, and frequently reprimanded for expressing them "inappropriately", was powerful and moving. "How can we help?" became the overriding concern rather than, "What are we going to do with her?" It is worth noting that Kaylah also knew and asked for what she needed. In other words, the burden of figuring out what students need can be shared with students. Teachers do not need to figure this out completely on their own. In the process, trust is built and agency can grow. As Ms. Tucci commented in one teachers' meeting, "[Students are] able to say, 'I want to practice this more, I don't understand this. It almost makes planning easier for me because I don't have to figure out what to do—like, they're giving it to me!" Students began to trust their teachers to listen to them and teachers began to trust them as partners.

Contextual forces

While there were many aspects of BCC that supported our work, it was also true that we encountered contextual forces that militated against its use. Supporting the work was the school's clearly stated philosophy of subordinating teaching to learning, its supportive PD department, and various school structures like multiple adults in each classroom. But there were significant countervailing forces as well, namely, the constant pressure on the school to prove its worth to its authorizer, the Trustees of State University of NY, its external funders, and the larger external accountability culture of our times. Like other public schools, BCC's "worth" is measured yearly by the school's annual mathematics and ELA state assessment results. However, as a charter, it must exceed the aggregate results of other schools in its geographic district. If it falls too far below this standard, it risks closure. Its very survival depends on state test scores.

Consequently, a portion of each school year is spent doing "test prep," wryly referred to as "testing season." The exercises that characterize testing season aim at developing test-taking skills. Descriptive feedback on testing, in contrast to other learning experiences, is generally anemic and thin. For example: "I learned I have to echo the question [in my answer]." It became a self-reinforcing exercise where questions about what helped and hindered students' learning pertained only to the efficacy of test prep. Descriptive feedback used in this or other highly prescribed contexts where opportunities for pedagogical adjustments are small, risk reinforcing the perceived value of such practices. In other words, descriptive feedback, like student voice, is not in and of itself a moral practice. It is, rather, useful as a tool towards moral ends.

Teacher growth

In the beginning, teachers noted that they initially stuck close to the questions provided, asking all of them, and in order. Further, once they had retrieved an answer to a question, they would hurry to the next question without inquiring further or checking to see if the same answer held true for others. Teachers also wanted to know how often to ask for descriptive feedback and how long it should take. In addition, they tended to ask for feedback only at the end of a lesson. Though it was not part of the professional development, many of the teachers asked students to respond to the questions as homework.

The effect of marching through all the questions and using the questions as a homework activity initially cast feedback as yet another "school task" to be accomplished "for the teacher" (or for the researcher). I counseled teachers to use written feedback only as a means for students to gather their thoughts. I also encouraged them to ask for feedback when they were puzzled by what they observed, even in the midst of a lesson.

One hurdle teachers had to manage was to ask genuine questions instead of "teaching" questions. For example, after a lesson on value and number with coins (e.g., one nickel is worth five cents) one Kindergarten student, in response to his teacher's question, "What was confusing?" responded, "I don't know how much a

nickel is on the tails side." Curious, the teacher asked, "What do you think?"—a genuine question. Another teacher, on hearing this story, told me she would have asked, "Is it still a nickel?"—a teaching question, meant to lead the student down a particular path to a particular answer she already had in mind. As one teacher said, "I had to learn not to listen for *my* answer, but to listen for *theirs*."

Similarly, the teachers and I learned the value of using "you" when asking for descriptive feedback rather than "we." For example, when teachers asked, "What helped us in our writing today?" it prompted students to look at what they had been taught and *should* know. If the question shifted only slightly to, "What helped you with your writing today?" it shifted the locus of the knowing and authority to the learner.

All the teachers instinctively understood that they had to follow up on feedback. If students' suggestions were untenable, teachers explained why they could not address them. By the same token, they saw students' delight at having their suggestions listened to and acted upon, which stoked desire on both their parts to continue the dialogue.

Finally, the questions themselves, originally designed for adults, had to be adapted for young children. I made it clear that the teachers were the ones who knew their students best, and that it was they who were best equipped to find developmentally appropriate ways of wording the questions and asking for further clarification. The first question, "What did you learn?" underwent multiple revisions. It was parental and normative. So, teachers started to ask, "What do you feel master of?" "What do you think can you teach someone else?" "What are you pretty sure you will wake up tomorrow and be able to do/remember?" Likewise, they began to ask only the questions that they were curious about rather than feeling obliged to ask them all. By the end of the project, teachers were dancing with the questions, going directly to what helped and did not, often skipping the first question, asking questions not on the list, or asking in the midst of things.

Most importantly, now into the fourth year, feedback continues to be used by all the teachers in the project as well as others who, seeing its effectiveness, have adopted it. There is evidence of its continued use in teachers' weekly reflections (required by PD). As Ms. Alexander wrote: "Descriptive feedback is seemingly everywhere, all the time. All four of us in the room use it constantly" (weekly PD reflection, Jan. 1, 2018). I continue to see feedback in use as I visit these teachers' classrooms, woven into the fabric of their teaching, and not infrequently hear the words, "We should ask the students."

Discussion

By all accounts, the intervention has added value to the classroom dynamics. It has strengthened students' awareness of their own and each other's learning, strengthened their ability to express themselves, and heightened their sense of agency in the classroom. Teachers in turn have gained respect both for what students have to offer and insight into their experience. In addition, teachers have seen the value of meaningful, authentic learning experiences that bring forth the "learner within." As Dewey (1915) wrote, "The moment children act they individualize themselves; they cease to be a mass

and become the intensely distinctive beings that we are acquainted with out of school, in the home, the family, on the playground, and in the neighborhood" (p. 22). Their humanness is brought forth. When this happens, it is the natural inclination of the teacher to be human in response. Trust and relationship strengthen.

Because descriptive feedback aligned with the school's commitments, it had a chance not only of success but enduring success. BCC was founded by four people driven by and committed to a set of principles: that teaching should be subordinated to learning; that children are independent, autonomous, and responsible; and, that learning begins with awareness, which can only come through experience—interaction between the child and the world. The school's activities, materials, methods, criteria for hiring and firing of staff and consultants, all stem from an effort to instantiate these principles. The practice of descriptive feedback aligns with these principles and commitments and was no doubt more easily embraced because of it. On the other hand, even in the face of all this trust and commitment there was fear and doubt stemming from the importance of test results. In the face of this fear the school continues to maintain a focus on test preparation. This undercuts to some extent the gains of descriptive feedback—the provision of rich learning experiences, and the strengthening of relationships of trust, as well as students' trust in what they know.

What remains unknown is what happens once these students leave BCC. Once a child experiences himself or herself as competent, valuable, worthy, and senses his or her own capacity for awareness, self-expression, and agency, are these gains durable across contexts and time? Are the children any more immune to the potentially dehumanizing impact of the world they are stepping into?

Conclusion

Friere (1970/2011) wrote that our "ontological vocation"—our reason for being—is to become more fully human (p. 55). In the face of so much that is dehumanizing in (U.S.) cultural history and the geo-political present, the kind of mutual humanizing that is inherent in the descriptive feedback dialogue offers hope. It is my hope that this study can contribute to humanizing the classroom and fortify the evidence that children in the primary and elementary grades have something to say about how this can happen.

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