

Meeting Student Needs in the Freedom Writers Movie: An Activity in a Classroom Management Course

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Abstract

The study described in this paper explored the understanding pre-service teachers' have of PK-12 student needs (i.e. Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity) and the importance of meeting these needs in a climate of Invitational Education. 71 undergraduate teacher education candidates enrolled in a Classroom Management course at a mid-sized Southeastern university in the U.S, learned about the Circle of Courage. This included viewing the movie Freedom Writers to focus of on how this philosophy was incorporated in the movie. Following the viewing, the participants wrote an essay about the significance of meeting these student needs. This activity enabled the participants to link theory to practice, as it prompted them to take a reflective stance, identify some of the strategies they witnessed in the movie, and evaluate how these might benefit their future students.

When pre-service teachers enroll in my Classroom Management and Communications course, for the most part, I believe they expect a bag-of-tricks on how to discipline students when they misbehave. One of the first things I tell them is that there is no such tool. They soon learn that the course is designed with a proactive approach in mind, and the most important lesson they will learn, is the significance of getting to know their students. The course revolves around creating a classroom management plan geared towards acknowledging the diverse needs PK-12 students have and the use of brainstorming techniques to meet these needs. In order to understand that most of these needs are universal, regardless of the age, the students participated in a short exercise at the beginning of the semester, discussing their own needs.

The most commonly identified needs were: the need for a good education (having knowledgeable instructors and being presented with relevant and accurate information); the need to feel safe in class (they can speak up their minds without fear of being judged or ridiculed by instructor or peers); the need to have instructors who care about the success of their students (who are flexible, have high expectations, and are available for office hours); and the need to have a choice (in classroom projects, sitting accommodations, and group work). When looking closely at their own needs, the pre-service teachers realize that their students will have similar needs. This is how our classroom discussion about the significance to meet the basic student needs begins.

The goal of this study was to increase pre-service teachers' understanding of the significance of meeting basic student needs (i.e. Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity). This understanding was facilitated by viewing

the movie Freedom Writers (DeVito, Shamberg, Sher, & LaGravenese, 2007). The theoretical perspective of this study draws from the theories of the Circle of Courage (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990) and Invitational Education (Purkey, 1999). The media device used in this study, the movie Freedom Writers, can be interchanged with other inspirational education movies, helping pre-service teachers to develop the following understanding; when teachers care about their students, they create a climate of trust, respect, and optimism, influencing their students' attitudes about school and their academic performance (Purkey & Novak, 2001). In such a climate, "human potential can be realized best by places, policies, processes, and programs specifically designed to invite development and by people who are personally and professionally inviting with themselves and with others." (Purkey & Novak, 2008, p. 17).

Literature Review

Student Needs: Circle of Courage

Grounded in the Native American Philosophy, the Circle represents "a holistic approach to child rearing" (Bloom, 2009, p. 21). Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity are the four central elements of the Circle of Courage.

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These pillars are based upon the theories of motivation, agency, and initiative, which support the claim that students are successful academically when their basic needs of autonomy, competence, and belonging are met (Bloom, 2009).

Moreover, these cultural perceptions of student needs are embedded in the theory of Invitational Education (Purkey, 1999). The four basic needs discussed by Bloom (2009) are in perfect alignment with Purkey and Novak's (2001) six features of the Inviting Family Model; respect for individual uniqueness, cooperative spirit, sense of belonging, pleasing habitat, positive expectations, and vital connections to society.

In essence, a sense of belonging is a sense of relatedness and attachment to others and to the school environment. Through cooperative learning and democratic classroom practices students work towards a common goal developing a connection to the community (Vieno, Perkins, Smith, & Santiello, 2005). In order to foster Mastery, Bloom (2009) discusses the need for teachers to help students adopt goals related to learning and de-emphasize goals related to performance. When students are engaged in learning goals they develop positive self-efficacy beliefs (Wolters, 2004). Teachers foster independence when they create opportunities for students to make individual choices, empowering them to regulate their own actions (Johnson & Johnson, 2004). Equally significant, the spirit of generosity involves the sense that one can give back to the community.

In an inviting environment, the educator respects the individual uniqueness of their students (their need for Independence); the educator fosters a sense of belonging and a pleasing habitat (the need for Belonging); the educator maintains positive expectations (the need for Mastery); and the educator helps develop a cooperative spirit, while at the same time enabling the students to make connections with the outside world (the need for Generosity).

The need for belonging

Individuals of all ages strive for acceptance and belonging, essential features for our emotional health and well-being: "children flourish when they feel a sense of belonging or connectedness at school" (Bloom, 2009, p. 24). Children develop a feeling of belonging in school when they form relationships with peers and adults (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004), when they feel they are loved (Glasser, 1990), and when they recognize they are valued and cared for (Coppersmith, 1967). The many benefits of fostering Belonging in the classroom include, among others, an increase in the academic achievement and a decrease in negative behaviors (Catalano et al., 2004; McNeely & Falci, 2004).

Teachers, by being aware of the policies, programs, and procedures employed in the classroom, have a guide for developing feelings of Belonging in each child. Examples of places, policies, programs, and procedures include: (a) a positive classroom climate in which the teacher actively invites student participation; (b) acceptance of differing views by demonstrating respect and trusting students to follow the teacher's example; and (c) collaboration among students in structured activities, but also providing support for students to establish peer relationships supportive of cooperative engagement.

The need for mastery

Both children and adults strive for mastery of their environments. From a classroom management perspective, the implications of fostering Mastery are invaluable: first, a sense of achievement feeds intrinsic motivation, leading to further achievement; and secondly, a person's perception of competence has a great influence over their choice and behavior (Bloom, 2009). Students develop a sense of mastery when they are able to perform a socially valued task (Charles, 2011), when they feel competent and useful (Sagor, 2002), and when they are in an environment where they experience a sense of control and power over their learning (Glasser, 1990).

In this climate of intentionality, teachers "are committed to the continuous appreciation and growth of all involved in the educative process" (Purkey & Novak, 2008, p. 14). Through the policies, programs and procedures employed in the classroom, teachers foster Mastery, enabling their students to develop intellectually and socially. Experiences that foster the need of Mastery include: engaging students in collaborative projects in which they learn from and teach their peers; helping students achieve meaningful success (seeing mistakes as learning opportunities); and creating opportunities for students to use their intellectual, social, and physical potential in all sorts of situations (Purkey & Novak, 2008). According to Aronson (2004), Mastery is also accomplished when teachers emphasize improvement, by focusing on effort and practice rather than perfection, and when they engage their students in activities that promote collaboration rather than competition.

The need for independence

Independence refers to "one's sense of control over their destiny" (Bloom, 2009, p. 30). In the classroom setting teachers prepare students to become responsible citizens when they empower students to make choices about their learning. "With a strong sense of autonomy, children can learn responsibility and self-discipline. Teachers can support or thwart autonomy in the class" (Bloom, 2009, p. 30).

When teachers support autonomy, by fostering creativity and deep information processing, students are more engaged (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004), and as a result, school attendance improves (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006).

In a democratic classroom, teachers foster independence by giving students a voice, listening to their input, giving students choices in terms of assignments, and allowing students to think for themselves. Purkey and Novak (2008) contended that “people who are affected by decisions have a say in formulating these decisions” (Purkey & Novak, 2008). Consequently, when teachers encourage student initiative, they prepare students for responsible participation in citizenship (Bloom, 2009).

The need for generosity

According to Bloom (2009, p. 32), “generosity involves a sense that one can, and should, contribute to the community, consider the welfare of others, and share personal and human resources.” Creating opportunities for generosity in the classroom enhances the feeling of empowerment and competence (Muscott, 2000), even in the case of students who would not naturally be role models to others. Curwin (1993) discusses a noticeable change in both attitudes and behavior of students affiliated with gangs when they served as tutors and caregivers.

When teachers create opportunities for students to engage in peer tutoring, community, school, and/or classroom service students learn to care about someone else and contribute to the good of the community of learners. By helping their students acquire a mindset in which they “link significant personal means with worthwhile societal ends” (Purkey & Novak, 2008, p. 16), teachers help create the sense of altruism in students. This occurs when teachers involve their students in cooperative learning where they work together as a group and become more aware of each other’s needs (Gillies, 2002; Schmidt, 2002).

The Circle of Courage in the Movie Freedom Writers

While discussion about the philosophy of the Circle of Courage was a predetermined assignment in the classroom, the class as a whole picked the movie mid-semester. I presented my students with the following list of educational movies inspired by a true story: Dead Poets Society (Haft, S., Junger Witt, P., Thomas, T., & Weir, P., 1989); Stand and Deliver (Musca, T., & Menendez, R., 1988); Dangerous Minds (Simpson, D., Bruckheimer, J., & Smith, J. N., 1995); Goodbye Mr. Chips (Jacobs, A. P., & Ross, H., 1969); Lean on Me (Piazza, B., & Avildsen, J. G., 1989); Mr. Holland’s Opus (Field, T., Cort, R. W., Nolin, M., Duncan, P. S., & Herek, S. (1995); and Freedom Writers. Freedom Writers

won the popular vote, and the students watched the movie during a class session at the time that had been previously scheduled.

A short discussion about the story line followed the movie watching, and then students briefly reflected on Ms. Gruwell’s students’ needs as portrayed in the movie. This discussion did not focus on any of the classroom practices that Ms. Gruwell used to meet her students’ needs. Since my students had to write an essay about how the teacher met the basic student needs, I did not want to steer them in any direction.

Freedom Writers is a prime example of real-life application of the Circle of Courage as the teacher is constantly meeting her students’ needs. Countless examples of Belonging are intertwined with examples of Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. The teacher successfully modeled the four pillars of the Circle of Courage, creating a climate of intentionality, which encouraged competence, independence, caring, respecting, and helping one another. The students can only be as successful as their teacher in displaying generosity, care, and respect. In a recent study, Pimentel (2010) describes using the movie as a starting point in identifying racial discourse in the Hollywood films. On the other hand, Choi’s study (2009) discussed the four prevalent themes in Freedom Writers; rewriting curriculum, treating students as creators of knowledge, creating classroom community, and teaching as self-realization.

Methodology

Context and Participants

The participants of this study were pre-service teachers enrolled in two sections of my Classroom Management course. As the course targets a general pre-service teacher population, an eclectic group of students were enrolled in this course during the Spring 2011 semester. The 71 students were education majors; elementary, middle, and high school pre-service teachers. As part of the course discussions the students analyzed the different student needs and the significance of meeting these needs from the perspective of classroom management. Along with the course readings and class discussions the students watched the movie Freedom Writers. The movie was followed by a short debriefing period where students shared beliefs and feelings related to the movie. The following week, the students submitted an essay in which they described how Ms. Gruwell fostered Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity in her class. The participants also reflected on the significance of meeting these needs, and they described a few of the strategies the teacher used in the movie they would use in their future classrooms.

Data Sources

Narrative analysis was used as the methodological design of this qualitative study. A narrative is a first-person account of experiences that is presented in a story format: “first-person accounts of experience form the narrative ‘text’ of this research approach” (Merriam, 2002, p. 286). The participants tell the story of Ms. Gruwell’s implementation of the Circle of Courage in her high school class in the form of an essay. The participants become storytellers of someone else’s story, but they actively make the story, interpreting this account analytically as they retell it. Mishler (1995) referred to this process as the construction of storytelling and its meaning: “In this sense, the story is always coauthored, either directly in the process of an interviewer eliciting an account or indirectly through our representing and thus transforming others’ texts and discourses” (Mishler, 1995, pp. 117-118). For example, the participants discussed in the essay whether or not they believed Ms. Gruwell fostered Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity in her class, providing concrete examples to support their claims.

The movie exposure provided the participants with the theory-in-practice approach, as well as enabling them to observe the benefits and/or potential problems when such a concept or theory was implemented (Sykes & Bird, 1992). In the essay following the movie watching, the participants explained whether the movie, coupled with the class discussions and the Circle of Courage philosophy, increased their understanding of the importance to meet PK-12 students’ needs in their future classrooms. Finally, the participants identified a few teaching strategies they witnessed in the movie that they would like to incorporate in their own classrooms.

Procedures

Prior to collecting the data for this study I obtained the university’s Institutional Review Board approval. In order to make sure students did not feel constrained to participate in a study conducted by their course instructor, I had invited a volunteer to come in and explain the study. The volunteer explained to the students that writing the essay was a course requirement, but their participation in the study was completely voluntary and confidential, as I would not have access to the data until the grades had been posted. The volunteer collected the informed consents at a time when I was not in class.

The week following the movie watching I collected the essays and had made copies of all the essays to give to the volunteer. The volunteer only included the essays of the students who wanted to participate in the study. Fifty students (of the total of 71) indicated their willingness to participate.

A total of 44 essays were used, as they were considered complete (students answered all six questions). Despite its small participant sample, this study can be easily applied in other contexts, using other media tools to raise awareness of the significance to meet the needs of today’s students.

Data Analysis

The purpose of the study was to determine whether such an activity (exposing the students to the philosophy along with the movie inspired by a real life event) increased the participants’ understanding of the significance of meeting the basic student needs. I conducted the narrative analysis at the following two levels:

First, I used the participants’ narrative about Ms. Gruwell to account for their understanding of the practical application of the Circle of Courage philosophy in Ms. Gruwell’s classroom. In doing this I analyzed the specific examples that the participants identified for how Ms. Gruwell fostered Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity in her class.

Secondly, I conducted this analysis with the goal to account for the impact the movie and the Circle of Courage philosophy had on pre-service teachers’ understanding of the significance to meet basic student needs. Quotes from student answers confirmed or infirmed the benefit of this activity on the participants’ understanding of the significance to meet basic student needs.

Findings

The data emerging from the student essays are organized in the following three categories: a) raising awareness of the importance to meet PK-12 students’ basic needs; b) fostering the spirit of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity in the Freedom Writers Classroom; and c) incorporating Freedom Writers activities into future classrooms. The results in the first category elaborate on the participants’ understanding of the basic student needs, as well as the significance to meet these needs. The second category of results includes specific examples of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity, as observed by the participants in Freedom Writers, while the third category presents examples of activities from the movie the participants would like to implement in their future classrooms.

Raising Awareness of the Importance to Meet PK-12 Students’ Basic Needs

The participants were asked to reflect whether this activity increased their understanding of basic student needs. Overall, 95.45 % of the participants discussed the benefits of being exposed through this classroom activity to both the philosophy of Circle of Courage, which they saw as the

foundation to understand basic student needs, and the classroom application through watching Freedom Writers. A series of participants discussed the real-life application of this activity. For example, one participant stated: "The movie definitely expanded my knowledge of the Circle of Courage and showed it in a real world sense. It put actions into words and showed exactly what each of the four qualities was meant to be." Another participant explained the significance of seeing this incorporated in the classroom activities: "The movie helped because we were able to see it put in action...I understand the Circle of Courage so much more now due to the movie putting it into perspective for me."

Other participants echoed similar thoughts:

I have learned a lot about the Circle of Courage this semester, but watching this movie put it all into perspective as I finally see such an awesome example of an effective teacher and what it means to instill Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity.

Another participant reflected:

The movie Freedom Writers is a perfect example of how to incorporate the Circle of Courage in the classroom, and it shows me how it is possible and why it is important. It was amazing to see a real life example of how a teacher took the Circle of Courage into her own hands to truly change her students' lives.

Other participants believed that their understanding increased because they could see the impact addressing these needs had on Ms. Gruwell's students. Said one participant: "The movie increased my understanding of the Circle of Courage because it showed that when fostering Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity, the teacher reaches out to affect every type of student." Another participant commented: "The movie did a great job portraying that it does not matter who your students are, if you foster these four aspects, you will engage the students and they can succeed."

Another participant specifically explained what she took from this activity, which would help her become a better teacher:

The movie and the philosophy of Circle of Courage increased my understanding about the need to foster Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity in my classroom. I think the most important is Belonging. When you show your students that you care about them

and they are needed, everything else begins to fall into place. I need to take the time to get to know my students and make sure I am incorporating Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity into my teaching.

Another participant commented on the teacher's responsibility to meet the basic students' needs:

I have now seen the difference it makes when students are welcomed into an environment where they can feel comfortable, safe and appreciated, while at the same time challenged. I have come to realize how important it is for the teacher to take on this responsibility.

An increased understanding and practical application in their future classroom is also the case of another pre-service teacher, who stated:

I never realized how important it was to make students feel as though they belong and how to be generous, and I never knew ways to teach students Mastery and Independence either. Both the movie and the Circle of Courage gave me many ideas of how to foster these needs. Before reviewing the Circle of Courage and watching the movie, my ideas of fostering the four needs would be less impressive than Ms. Gruwell's.

Furthermore, one participant discussed how this activity changed his previous beliefs about meeting basic student needs:

Before watching this movie I can honestly say I thought the Circle of Courage was something I did not believe in, and something that I would never use in my classroom. Freedom Writers showed me the Circle of Courage could be very effective for use in certain classrooms. It can be used to break down the barriers that are often developed between different groups of students. Not only did it encourage social interaction, the Circle of Courage also promoted learning as well.

Although not all participants' understandings of the basic student needs dramatically increased as part of this activity, the movie and the philosophy served as a reinforcement of the significance for a teacher to be in tune with his/her students' needs as one of the most important prerequisites to classroom management. One of the two participants who responded that this activity did not increase their

understanding of the student needs explained that this happened because he “had a reasonable understanding and belief about these necessities beforehand.” The student went on to explain: “It did, however, reinforce these central values and gave a great practical example of how this sort of attitude can change even the most dismal of situations.”

Similarly, the other participant stated that even if the movie did not increase his understanding of the Circle of Courage, “it did provide a more tangible [idea] of how the Circle of Courage may be implemented in a classroom setting.” The student further discussed the significance of this philosophy: “I do realize that the Circle of Courage is, as the name implies, a circle. All it takes is a person brave enough to open his/her heart to one another in order to get the metaphorical wheels turning. Once the circle has been started, it will continue to rotate from Belonging, all the way to Generosity, as it spreads from person to person.”

The above findings indicate that for the most part, the participants’ understanding of the student needs highly increased through the exposure to both the philosophy and the movie. Even in the case of the students who stated they did not gain more understanding of the need to foster Belonging, Mastery, Generosity, and Independence in their classrooms, as they had been aware of these needs, they both felt that the movie and the philosophy served as a good refresher of the teacher’s role in fostering a climate of invitational education (acceptance, encouragement, challenge, etc.).

In order for pre-service teachers to foster an invitational climate in their future classrooms they need to understand not only what the basic student needs are, but also how to meet these needs: “Classroom management practices can affect the amount of time that students are engaged in learning, their attitudes toward learning, their motivation, and their willingness and ability to collaborate with each other” (Bloom, 2009, p.35). The professional literature (Hanze & Berger, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 2004; Reeve et al., 2004; Vieno et al., 2005) illustrates many examples of classroom practices that support the four pillars of the Circle of Courage, describing its benefit to student learning. Thus, it became essential for the participants to have a clear understanding of how to use these pillars in their own classrooms. The section below focuses on how the participants interpreted instances of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity in Freedom Writers.

Fostering the Spirit of Belonging

Throughout the semester, the pre-service teachers recognized the need to foster Belonging in their students. A lot of them identified Belonging as being the most significant need to be

met in order for students to acquire Mastery, become Independent, and be Generous with one another. This was portrayed very well in Freedom Writers as Ms. Gruwell turned her class into a safe haven where her students thrived academically and developed social consciousness.

In one of the essay sections, I asked the pre-service teachers to discuss whether Ms. Gruwell was successful in fostering Belonging in her class, and to identify examples of such practices. The participants unanimously believed the teacher fostered a community of learners, despite the fact that Belonging was “probably Ms. Gruwell’s toughest challenge when she first came in because students had so much hostility toward one another.” After watching the movie, the participants believed that in order to create a climate of Belonging in their classrooms, teachers needed to show their students they cared about them, while at the same time teaching them to care about each other.

The participants were in agreement that Ms. Gruwell fostered a positive classroom atmosphere by greeting her students at the door, making the room feel like home, arranging the desks in a way in which no ethnic group felt segregated, and helping students to discover things they had in common and appreciate the things that distinguished them. Moreover, students developed a feeling of Belonging when they felt the teacher valued their ideas and opinions, and when they could speak without fear of being judged or ridiculed. One participant stated: “By listening to the students, and giving them a voice, the students in Ms. Gruwell’s class were able to have an open mind towards their peers, to come together as a group and work together.”

Fostering the Spirit of Mastery

Once the bond of trust and respect was established between teacher and students, and the students knew that the teacher cared about their success, they were likely to reciprocate and work hard to achieve success. When describing some ideas to foster Mastering in their classrooms, as they observed Ms. Gruwell do in her class, the participants addressed setting high expectations, as “the students in the movie were influenced by [the teacher’s] perception of their competence and were motivated to complete their work.” When the teacher believed in her students, and challenged them with readings, problems, and activities that engaged them in critical thinking, students believed in their abilities to succeed. Said one participant:

Ms. Gruwell instilled in them a sense of pride and self-worth. She allowed every student to feel like they matter, like they have a voice, and they should speak their mind in their writing, which

later was turned into a book. They became an inspiration, a model, and a hope for future classes to come.

Teachers foster success when they intrinsically motivate their students. They can do this by relating the curriculum to their lives and engaging them in activities and projects they find meaningful.

Fostering the Spirit of Independence

Many participants identified journal writing as the most prevalent independent activity to take place in the movie and stated they would incorporate this activity in their classroom. Voice and choice become the main factors in developing independent learners and both these qualities were beautifully portrayed in the movie.

In order for students to feel like the classroom is as much theirs as it is the teacher's, they need to feel like their input is valued and their opinions are respected. The participants addressed the need to include their future students in instructional and curricular decisions, to allow them to make choices, but most importantly, to support these choices. Such an example was Ms. Gruwell's support of her students' fundraising decision to bring Miep Gies as a guest speaker. On the other hand, another participant discussed that the most powerful example of Independence involved the teacher enabling her students to choose how they wanted to live their lives: "Ms. Gruwell showed her students that they had a choice about how they wanted their lives to go."

Fostering the Spirit of Generosity

There were numerous examples of generosity that Ms. Gruwell displayed throughout the movie, but I asked the participants to specifically focus on examples of student generosity. Seeing generosity modeled by their teacher, who put her students above all, the students learned to be selfless and helped one other succeed. One participant stated: "Seeing her generosity towards the class made the students become generous towards one another. The students become better in decision making."

This was obvious in the fact that Ms. Gruwell's students learned to stand up for the truth, as exemplified by Eva, who testified against "her own" and thus defended an innocent man. One participant stated: "[Ms. Gruwell] planted the seed in Eva that eventually changed the life of an innocent man." Maybe the participants of this study will not have their students go through dramatic situations like Ms. Gruwell's students, and maybe their displays of generosity will be to a smaller scale. However, they all understood that generosity needed to be modeled. It only takes on small act of kindness to change a life.

Purkey and Novak (2008) advocate that when educators assume an inviting stance they foster a climate of respect, trust, care, optimism, and intentionality in their classrooms. These five elements mirror the four pillars of the Circle of Courage philosophy. For example, in a classroom that fosters Belonging, educators care about their students and teach their students to care for one another. In such an environment the educators develop trust-worthy relationships with their students. In turn, in order for educators to foster Mastery feelings in their classrooms they build on the bonds of care, trust, and respect that they have developed with their students. Moreover, optimism (the belief in students' potential to meet the teacher's expectations) is another very important component of a Mastery environment.

Teachers who foster Independence in their classrooms respect their students, and they demonstrate this respect by involving their students in the decision-making process. Finally, Generosity is accomplished when students learn to care about one another, about the classroom and school community, as well as the outside world. A climate of intentionality is created when people are personally and professionally inviting to themselves and others (Purkey & Novak, 2008).

One of the most common critiques about the theories pre-service teachers learn as part of their teacher education programs is the fact that these theories paint a pink picture of PK-12 school life, and they have little in common to the real world (i.e. budget cuts, large class sizes, limited resources, diverse students with diverse learning needs, limited time to meet all these needs, lack of support from school administration, etc.). Pre-service teachers need to see this philosophy at play to understand its real-life application. I tried to make this experience relevant for the students in my class in two ways: by having them experience firsthand an invitational setting in our own classrooms, and by having them observe an invitational setting in a movie inspired by reality.

An effective teacher develops positive relationships with their students and models the behaviors they expect to see from their students. I strongly believe in order to teach about the significance to meet basic student needs it is important that the environment I create in my classrooms is an invitational one, where students feel I care about them, that I respect them, that I am enthusiastic about the subject matter, and that a bond of trust can be formed between all classroom participants. I hope that they carry these in their future classroom and "assume an inviting stance toward their students" (Purkey & Novak, 2008).

Equally significant, I wanted my students to see how the Invitational Education theory (Purkey, 1999) and the Circle of Courage can be found in a K-12 setting, similar to the ones they may find themselves teaching in. The movie *Freedom Writers* enabled us to take an outsider stance and observe how Ms. Gruwell built a community with her students by fostering Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity in her classroom.

Incorporating Freedom Writers Activities into Future Classrooms

According to the participants, the value of this activity lay in its practical application. The movie allowed them to see examples of activities the teacher used successfully in her class, creating bonds with and among her students. The participants identified many great strategies to create such bonds of trust between them and their future students. However, due to the lack of space, I will only focus on three such practices: the field trips, the “Toast for Change,” and the teacher’s resilience to obtain needed supplies and funding to meet student academic needs. One of the favorite strategies the pre-service teachers identified was the use of field trips to accompany instruction. Discussing the many benefits of the school trips, one participant stated:

Class field trips show students that learning is fun and it can take place anywhere. Removing students from their usual setting within the classroom can reinvigorate their zest for learning. Field trips show students that textbooks are not the only way in which a lesson is taught.

Another participant discussed the need to expose students to different cultures through visits to museums:

Being in an elementary setting, I think that field trips to museums and art galleries would be a great idea for my students to get to see and experience. For some students this may be the only time they get to see these things and I think it helps students to experience different cultures and different ways people might have lived.

Another participant focused on the benefit to expose students to places outside their comfort zone:

I think field trips are great because they show students a glimpse of the real world they will soon be part of if they choose. It takes them places they otherwise would not have visited and it opens their eyes to the different opportunities the world has to offer.

Another very important lesson the participants learned from watching the movie is to put their students’ needs above anything else, even if it means challenging policies set in place. Two participants discussed the significance to have the courage to ask for things students or the schools do not have. “I don’t want to be afraid to go above my school representative to ask for the proper materials my students need to succeed when I am their teacher,” confessed one participant. The other stated:

One of the practices Ms. Gruwell used that I will incorporate in the classroom is not to be discouraged by inadequate administration. This is a reality in every job field, and education is no exception. Ms. Gruwell was able to change some policies and practices by simply being persistent.

The *Toast for Change* was another practice the pre-service teachers stated they would use in their future classrooms to help their students set goals. One participant stated:

I like the idea of the Toast for Change because it is an opportunity for students to state their goals and commit to attaining them. It becomes a covenant between the teacher and the student to do everything possible for the student to achieve success in the classroom.

Another participant explained how she would use the Toast as a way to establish trust and caring in students:

The Toast for Change is a great way to encourage your students to celebrate a new beginning. It motivates the students to achieve their goals because they are the ones who came up with them. Announcing it to the class also provides them with the opportunity to receive accountability from their peers.

Researchers (McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright, 2008; Zeichner, 2003) continue to discuss the need to link the theoretical foundations of teacher education programs with practical experiences in the school setting in an attempt to “bridge the divide between the higher education institutions where teachers are prepared and the school sites where they work with students” (Rinke, Arsenie, & Bell, 2012, p. 99). This need is constantly reiterated by my students, every time I teach Classroom Management, as pre-service teachers constantly ask themselves: “How can I apply this theory into my classroom?”

Although on a very small scale, the *Freedom Writers* activity enabled my students to link theory to practice, as it prompted

them to take a reflective stance, identify some of the strategies they witnessed in the movie, and evaluate how these would benefit their future students. This echoes Ryan and Townsend's (2012) conclusion of using media devices in the teacher education classes: "Through analyzing the scenes depicted with ever-deepening reflection, pre-service teachers can develop a repertoire of instructional strategies that would otherwise only be achieved after the initial novice years of teaching."

Concluding Thoughts

The above findings indicate that the majority of the participants deemed this classroom activity relevant (discussing the student basic needs in the context of watching *Freedom Writers*), as they stated it made them more aware of these needs in their classrooms. The theories discussed in any Classroom Management course are extremely important in creating a positive learning environment for all our students, but they may not be enough to increase the pre-service teachers' understanding of the significance of such theories. When pre-service teachers have many opportunities to discuss the theories they read about in the textbooks, and when this theoretical background is coupled with real-life applications, their appreciation for learning about meeting basic student needs increases (Rinke et al., 2012; Ryan & Townsend, 2012).

I created this movie assignment as an opportunity for the students to observe how the theories they study in class apply in the real world. I understand the limited practical orientation this assignment provided, and furthermore I realize that an optimal experience would have come from a Field II Placement where the pre-service teachers may observe firsthand whether and to what extent the teachers meet their students' needs. However, not all the pre-service teachers enrolled in this course were taking a Field II component, and some would have been left with just the theoretical approach of the textbook.

Furthermore, when given opportunities to see successful practices used by real classroom teachers in the media, pre-service teachers learn the value of the different theories discussed in their education courses, as well as they uncover the real-life application of these theories. Inspirational stories enable pre-service teachers to emulate behaviors they see portrayed by the successful teachers, and it helps them

understand the need to care for all their students. Ryan and Townsend (2012) commented on the benefits of incorporating media examples in teacher education classes, as analyses of popular media representations "can offer surrogate experiences upon which to develop an educational philosophy and to consider classroom strategies as well as opportunities for future teachers to explore their own preconceptions about teaching that may well have been influenced by such representations" (Ryan & Townsend, 2012, p.239).

As a result of watching this movie, the participants took away a few strategies they stated they would like to incorporate in their classrooms (i.e. the journal writing, making the room inviting, connecting content with real life situations, and field trips). Others discussed activities they would slightly alter to meet the needs of the particular age group they would teach (Toast for Change, the line game), and some went even further and discussed the need to be resilient and stand up for their students.

The success of this activity inspired me to continue using the movie *Freedom Writers* while discussing meeting basic student needs. In the semesters following this study I slightly modified this activity by using a few representative fragments of the movie in class, or making it a Bonus Points option, having the students watch the movie at home and answer the essay questions for extra points. Although deemed significant by the students who chose to do the activity, these modifications did not have the impact that watching the movie as a group and then discussing its implications for their future teaching did. Only showing a few segments did not do justice to the whole movie, as it is filled with examples of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity activities. Furthermore, since it was no longer a classroom assignment, only a few students watched the movie and completed the essay.

As I teach this course every semester, I continue to brainstorm ways to make the Classroom Management theories relevant for pre-service teachers. I hope these shared findings may serve as an encouragement for other teacher educators to continue to use diverse media tools in their classrooms to enable their students to see how theory plays in the real classrooms.

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