

# Encouraging the Discouraged: Students' Views for Elementary Classrooms

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Every teacher is faced with students whose troubled behavior challenges their sense of pedagogical responsibility. But what would the nature of that pedagogical responsibility be under such conditions, and how could one research this question in a way that retained the living voice of the child? This paper reports on a project that attempts to address those questions. In the context of a video production project we sought to engage students with a history of behavioral difficulties in sharing their views about how elementary school teachers can transform modes of discouragement into modes of encouragement.

The students discussed many aspects of helpful teacher practices. In this paper we provide a brief overview of the ideas they related and then focus on their specific suggestions and experiences related to encouragement. In examining the encouragement or discouragement stories they shared, we saw that encouragement became linked with experiencing teachers as caring and discouragement became linked with experiencing teachers as punishing. Because punishment interfered with both a student's ability to concentrate on school work and the student's relationship with the teacher, frustration, punishment, alienation and discouragement easily became a self-perpetuating cycle of despair. Students wanted teachers to recognize their limits and provide appropriate help or at least calming, encouraging words. The students prized personal recognition for accomplishment or improvement and treasured any concrete mementos of those instances of recognition. The students listened closely for genuine praise when constructive criticism was given. They needed their teachers to communicate hopefulness for them and trust in their abilities and intentions. Without knowing students well, it can be difficult for teachers to recognize students' limits or correctly discern their intentions or preoccupations. Taken together, the students' stories suggest the value of erring on the side of preserving relationships with students in the same ways one might with any other person. If relationships aren't positive, it is unlikely that they can become genuinely pedagogical.

## BACKGROUND

Our work began with a concern for students whose troubled behavior can render them unwelcome in regular classrooms by the time they complete elementary school. These are students

who, because of behavioral difficulties in the classroom or school, are often required to attend alternative programs at the junior high level. We wondered how such students experience the classroom in their elementary school years and what we could learn from them about circumstances in classrooms that could have a positive impact on their experiences. Given the complexity and breadth of social and biological issues that can contribute to students' troubled behavior, teachers and school administrators may sometimes feel at a loss as to what to do or where to begin in order to make any real difference. Further, because school programs are not the apparent «cause» of troubled behavior, it may not seem that changes in school practices are likely to provide any substantial solution. Nevertheless, in this study we endeavoured to learn students' views about how classroom practices could better support students who tend to develop a history of behavioral difficulties in school. We are concerned that educators' awareness of challenging social and cultural conditions can detract attention from what schools can be doing to support students.

TABLE 1:

### Students' Views on Helpful Teaching Practices

#### Point 1. Practices that are not helpful for misbehavior:

- blaming the wrong student
- believing a student's «enemies»
- blaming the «victim»
- yelling
- using time-out for a young child who already feels isolated and abandoned
- requiring a student to miss recess or physical education
- overusing the principal's office
- becoming angry with the whole class because of one student's behavior
- using time-out for a student who is «goofing off» (as opposed to a student who is angry and needs to calm down)
- failing to respond to misbehavior and then «blowing up» when it persists
- dwelling on or reminding students of past infractions and punishments

**Point 2. Practices that are helpful for misbehavior-**

- «coming back after' in order to ask students why they're misbehaving and whether anything is upsetting them
- if a student has «an accident,» providing comfort and assistance rather than increasing distress by blaming or accusing about behavior that may have led to the accident
- if a student has done something wrong, explaining it rather than assuming that the student knows what was wrong with the action that is being reprimanded
- if a student persists in talking, calmly asking the student to move to another seat
- helping students learn how to get their anger out and giving them opportunities to do so
- being a «friendly father figure» who «shows the way» rather than a stern lecturer
- helping the «class clown» learn when it is or is not appropriate to «entertain» the class (and finding ways to give him/her some attention)
- letting kids know that by succumbing to peer pressure they'll be the only ones getting into trouble and will in fact lose popularity because other kids will then not be allowed to keep company with them
- diffusing tension in the classroom (or the teacher's own negative mood) by interjecting an activity that is fun or relaxing for everybody
- using whole-class incentives such as a movie on Friday afternoon to work towards

We met with the students in a junior high alternative program in a small urban school district and asked for volunteers to work with us to make a video program that would present their views about how elementary school teachers can be helpful to students. Each of the 10 participating students were interviewed 2, 3 or 4 times. The students also expressed their ideas in writing after the second last interview. All of the last interviews were video-taped, 8 of the first interviews were videotaped, and all interviews were audio-taped.

**Point 3. «Winning over» is the best way to prevent misbehavior.**

**Winning over entails:**

- (a) Respecting students
- (b) Providing encouragement
- (c) Caring
- (d) Making learning enjoyable
- (e) Discerning and supporting students' learning needs
- (f) Being a nice person

**(a) Respecting students**

- If students feel respected they don't want to be «bad» and risk losing that respect. If students feel respected by the teacher, then they respect the teacher in return.
- If students don't respect the teacher, then they don't want to do anything «for» the teacher.
- Students respect a teacher who is «friendly,» i.e., asks how they are, participates in games/sports with them in the gym, talks to them at recess or lunch, greets them if they see them at the mall or elsewhere.
- Students respect a teacher who trusts them and is willing to reason and compromise with them.

**(b) Providing encouragement**

- Give recognition for an individual's improvement.
- Respond positively to inept work; e.g., «Close, but good try.»
- Say, «You can do it! Leave the hard question, go on and do the others, and then come back to it.»
- Make a fuss over creative work; e.g., put story in newspaper, take photograph of art work or construction.
- Be careful with «constructive criticism»; i.e., make it clear that the work is already good and that if the student wants to add things, then here are some ideas.
- Help a child achieve success on a unit or upcoming test by identifying the component pieces of learning and acknowledging success in each part along the way.
- Give compliments, compliments, and more compliments.

**(c) Caring**

- means «being there for» a student
- means noticing if a student needs help in some way and making sure he/she gets it
- means making sure that students have a feeling of belongingness and safety in the classroom means letting a student tell you his/her troubles and letting him/her know that you care and that you understand how he/she feels

**(d) Making learning enjoyable**

- Use humor.
- Use the school grounds for math activities.
- Use games.
- Use group work.
- Focus attention with a riddle before starting class.
- Use decorative or thematic drawings or symbols on the board.
- Give choices.
- Use variety.

**(e) Discerning and supporting students' learning needs**

- Use a different way to explain something if a student hasn't understood the initial presentation or instruction.
- Notice a student who is struggling, and provide an alternative task or set of materials.
- Support the learning needs of students whose strengths are in different modalities; e.g., visual, kinesthetic.
- Provide or obtain extra help for students who have difficulties.
- Allow time for slower students to complete a test rather than collecting it whenever most students seem to be finished.

**(f) Being a nice person**

- «A good teacher is a nice person.... easy to get along with, fun to be around.»

All of the video tapes, transcripts, and students' writing were coded to identify topics, sub-topics and recurring ideas. The professionally produced video program, Listen Up!: Kids Talk About Good Teaching (1997), was composed with a view to providing a representative cross-section of all of the students' ideas. Table 1 provides a categorized listing of the students' ideas. The 23-minute video is used in a number of teacher education programs to stimulate discussion about ways that teachers can be proactive regarding classroom management concerns. It is available for purchase very inexpensively. Some teachers show it on the first day of school to stimulate class discussion about how students want their classroom to work. It has been publicly broadcast several times a year on ACCESS Television in Alberta.

When the video was completed, our colleagues expressed surprise that what the students said they wanted wasn't radical at all-what they were asking for was basic. After seeing the video, parents with teenage children typically asked their sons and daughters what they wanted from teachers and were surprised to hear the same ideas our 10 alternative program students had expressed. The students' ideas about good teaching are not novel. Other researchers (e.g., Lowman, 1996; Phelan, Locke Davidson & Cao, 1992) have also found that students want teachers to be friendly, respect them, relate to them as people, be caring, make them feel safe and accepted, encourage them, motivate them, make learning active and enjoyable, use variety, use group work, and have a good instructional repertoire. In undertaking this research, however, we did not expect that students would suggest practices that were previously unheard of. Instead we hoped that students' stories and voices would return the dramatic tension and significance to many good ideas that have become dry, abstract prescriptions. As Crites (1971) has argued, without the human story, abstractions can become hostile to life itself. We also hoped to gain insight into the dynamics of classroom experience from the perspectives of students with histories of behavioral difficulties in that context; that is, to learn how, in their experience, everything was connected to everything else, or how one thing led to another.

We have had some success with both expectations or research purposes. Many teachers who have viewed the video and completed evaluation forms have indicated that the video caused them to reflect and deepened their commitments to supportive practices for students. In terms of the

classroom dynamics for students with troubled behavior, we have discerned how easy it can be for students who are most in need of belonging or of encouragement to get even less than their more advantaged classmates. It is obviously easier to offer approval, affirmation, and encouragement to students whose academic work is strong. It can require more care and imagination to formulate encouraging comments for students who are less adept with assigned tasks. Thus students who come to school with fewer academic skills can become increasingly discouraged where school work is concerned. Similarly, if students do not experience a secure sense of belonging and affiliation in their life outside of the school, they can have particularly high needs for connection, inclusion, and belonging in the classroom itself. Sadly, their lack of emotional nurturance outside of school can lead to troubled behavior in the classroom that may in fact diminish their opportunities for experiencing inclusion there. We realize that teachers can experience disruptive students as taking up more than their fair share of the teacher's time and attention. The nature of the attention they receive, however, is often not experienced as affirming or as enhancing their feeling of belonging in the classroom.

We have revisited the students' stories of events related to belonging or encouragement to attend to the dynamics and meanings of these events for the students. Our work with the theme of belonging has been presented elsewhere (Ellis, Hart, & McGinley, 19986). A brief overview of key ideas related to belonging and encouragement has also been reported (Ellis, Hart, & Small-McGinley, 1998a). In this paper we wish to offer a more in-depth examination of students' stories of how they experienced encouragement, or in some cases, discouragement, during their elementary school years. The students' perspective can be a rich source for informing reflection on one's own teaching.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Researching Students' Perspectives*

While recognized as an expensive and labor intensive undertaking, researching students' perspectives interpretively or ethnographically is understood to be a necessary means for understanding students' behavior. It is the students' own interpretations of classroom dynamics that guide their thoughts and actions in those contexts. Because the child's viewpoint can be distinctively different from the adult's viewpoint, misreadings or misunderstandings of students and their perceptions can impede teachers' best intentions. As Sanders (1996) and others (e.g., Christensen & James, 2000; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Mergendoller & Packer, 1985; Peevers & Secord, 1973; Shedlin, 1986; Weinstein, 1983; Whitfield, 1976) have contended, children can reliably describe events and experiences in the school setting. In sharing their perceptions, they also reveal their understandings of the events that give structure to their lives. Without access to the meanings of events for students, teachers' best efforts can be hampered by their own broad assumptions about students' perceptions.

### *The Pilot Study*

As a field test for the methodology, an interview was conducted with a grade 7 student who was enrolled in an alternate program because of behavioral difficulties in the classroom and school. As the open-

ing question for the interview, the student was asked what advice he would offer to teachers about how to make the classroom a supportive place. The student talked for 40 minutes with no further prompting. Then he was asked to put his ideas in writing. He was offered an honorarium if he could use his computer word processing equipment to produce 20 double-spaced pages of text on the topics he had discussed. He produced 4 double-spaced pages showing 12 paragraphs on separate coherent topics and then said he couldn't think of anything else. He was paid the whole honorarium. The analysis of the pilot study has been presented elsewhere (Ellis, 1997).

### ***Site and Participants***

A small urban school district in Alberta agreed to support our research and made it possible for us to meet with 29 students (24 boys and 5 girls) to extend our invitation for participation. All of the students were in the same junior high alternate program. Of these 29 students, 23 were interested, and 10 finally submitted all required signed consent forms. Of the 10 students, 7 were boys and 3 were girls. In age, 1 student was 13, 7 were 14, and 2 were 15.

### ***Data Collection***

Each of the participating students was interviewed 2, 3, or 4 times and completed a piece of writing to express his/her ideas. The four students who were slower to submit signed consent forms had a smaller number of interviews. Students were paid an honorarium for their writing work. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. One or two of each student's interviews were also videotaped. Excerpts from videotaped interviews were used in a video program entitled Listen Up! Kids Talk About Good Teaching (1997). All interviews and writing took place in October and November 1996.

### ***Interviews***

The interviews with students were unstructured and open-ended. At the beginning of the first interviews students were asked to reflect back on elementary school experiences and to formulate advice they would offer to student teachers or beginning teachers about how to make the classroom a more supportive place for all students. When students ran out of ideas to bring forward, they were prompted to think about memories from specific grade levels or teachers they had particularly admired or appreciated. In follow-up interviews, students were asked to clarify or expand points they made in previous interviews and to offer any further ideas that they could think of. Through this open-ended approach and through following the students' lead in terms of topics, we hoped to avoid introducing language or terminology and ideas that did not come from the students' own perspectives.

Students were asked to write about a number of their ideas after their second last interview. All students completed four double-spaced typed pages of writing focusing on five or more of the topics that had been of high interest to them in their interviews.

### ***Data Analysis***

Through our analysis of the students' interview transcripts and writing, we sought to understand the significance of various teaching practices to these students. There were a number of teaching practices or

teacher characteristics that were commonly mentioned by the large majority of the students interviewed. Examples of these were making learning fun, providing choice, providing help, using humor, using group work, respecting students, encouraging students, caring, talking to students, using incentives and consequences, and using helpful ways to respond to misbehaviour. Each of the students also brought forward a unique topic that was particular to his/her own experience. Examples of these topics were: protecting a child who is being bullied or picked on; how to respond helpfully to a class clown; the importance of talking to students about peer pressure; responding to the troubled behaviour of a child who is already feeling isolated and alienated; helping a student un-learn the rhythm of frustration and despair with school work; diffusing rather than exacerbating tension or anger in the class; and refraining from asking prying, sensitive questions unless the parents are there.

Although the students' ideas were not necessarily novel, their modes of expressing these ideas often served to remind us of the deep reciprocity in relations between teachers and students. For example, one student talked about the relationship between caring and respect in the following way:

Like, if a kid thinks a teacher cares about him, it's kind of like how you treat your mother. Some of the ways you treat your mother might start rubbing off on your teacher. Without even thinking, you'd start treating the teacher with more respect. Just because the teacher was nice to you that one time would make the kid feel like there is someone who does care out there and someone who does care where you're going in life.

The majority of the ideas listed in Table 1 have been presented in the students' own voices with their own stories in the video program Listen Up! (1997).

For this paper, we have studied all of the students' stories that pertain to encouragement and endeavour to highlight key ideas about how these students have experienced and understood this dimension of elementary school.

## ENCOURAGEMENT

Encouragement was a recurring theme in the general advice that students said they would offer to teachers. The following excerpts are from interviews with five of the students.

*«Give compliments, compliments, and more compliments!»*

*«It [encouragement] makes you want to do more work!»*

*«Say: 'You can do it! first try your hardest. And if you can't get that one, go on and do the other ones and then come back and try it again. «'*

*«And if I didn't get it, she would say 'Close, but good try' and that made me feel like she appreciated my effort. «*

*«Your self-esteem is like a balloon. If someone says to a kid, 'Oh, you're so stupid', that's just like letting air out of the balloon. «*

During the interviews, students were asked to share any striking memories they had from earlier grades. They were also asked to recall teachers they had appreciated and any special things these people had done. Students most frequently answered these questions by either describing a

«winning over activity» a teacher had used (e.g., letting each child have a turn at being «principal» of the classroom for a day; giving a picnic at the teacher's home), or by relating an event they experienced as extremely encouraging or discouraging.

### THE SALIENCE OF ENCOURAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

When students shared memories of events from elementary school years, they became particularly animated when telling stories about encouragement. If the stories were positive ones, their eyes sparkled and their faces lit up as they appeared to re-experience the uplifting quality of the remembered moment. If the stories were negative ones, the heaviness and disappointment of those experiences were palpable in the retelling.

In the following interview excerpt, a student shares a memory of discouragement from the first day of school in grade 1. Notice how at the end of the story he reminds the interviewer of another happier story about a caring teacher who remembered and recognised his August birthday on the last day of school in June. Experiencing encouragement and caring may be closely intertwined for some of these students.

*I had a Grade 1 teacher, and on the first day of Grade 1 she said to everyone, «Write a word on a piece of paper. « I didn't really understand the question, so I just started picking letters off the wall and writing this big, long line. She went around to everyone else, saying, «That's really good. Look at this! Look at that!» and I think I was the only one that didn't write a word or something that made sense. I said, «Look how long my words is, « and she said, «That isn't a word. « It made me feel like I was stupid because I didn't know how to do any of that. That gave me a bad impression for when I got in Grade 2. When I did get that teacher that did give me a pencil and a cupcake because my birthday was in August, that was a good experience, and it prepared me for Grade 3, 4, and so on.*

In the following excerpts from interviews with two students, the students share positive memories of experiencing encouragement. Interestingly, both students explicitly connect the encouraging event to feeling cared for.

**Student:** *I wrote a 19- or 20 page story. I was only in Grade 1. It was a Halloween story, and she liked it so much and I liked it so much that she decided to publish it in the newspaper.*

**Interviewer:** *How did that make you feel?* **Student:** *It made me feel that people actually cared and made me feel really proud of myself.*

**Interviewer:** *Tell me about your Grade 6 teacher.* **Student:** *She acted like she cared about what you did regardless of the importance of it. This one time I wasn't doing very good in school and I got a 75 on a test, and she said, «That's really good. « She let me take a pencil out of this pencil jar, and I thought it was really great. It made me try harder. It picked up my marks too because I thought it was just the best.*

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Another student told a story about how his teacher took a photograph of a structure he had built out of blocks. Thereafter, he said, he always went to get her whenever he made something out of blocks again, just to see if she'd take another photograph. As we re-visit these encouragement stories we

feel that we see glimpses of the magic of teachers who know how to let students know that they care by seizing any available opportunities to affirm and celebrate students' accomplishments. We hope that these stories will help teachers remember what they always already knew and reassure them of the value of these kinds of encouragement efforts.

### PRIZE AS ARTIFACT

The students' stories about recognition that was accompanied by a concrete prize, helped us to appreciate the significance of their concrete materiality. Individual recognition for accomplishment or improvement was prized by these students. The concrete materiality of the pencil or the newspaper publication of the Halloween story forever froze these moments of recognition into their memories and into their stories about their own capabilities. The possession of a concrete prize also gave them the opportunity to extend the moment of recognition. One boy spoke insistently and at length about how he preferred it if a teacher wrote a note to his parents about his improved math work during the week rather than simply telling them by telephone. He appreciated being able to present the note to the parent of his choice at the time of his choice. The note was his prize. In concretely presenting it himself, he could count on extending his moment of recognition. Another student treasured a certificate he had received for making the largest improvement in a particular subject area. The certificate remained on the refrigerator at home for three years. We wonder what can explain the potency of these «trophies.» Have they been so hard to come by? Have they served as lifelines in a sea of self-doubt? Whatever their meaning, teachers can know that these forms of thoughtfulness on their part are not wasted.

### CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM THAT ENCOURAGES

The students seemed to be incredibly sensitive detectors of either encouragement or discouragement. They were very ready and able to «teach» us how to «do» encouragement.

One of the students in our study spoke at length about how he experienced constructive criticism as detrimental rather than helpful. He said that if a teacher used constructive criticism all the time a student would feel that there was always one more thing to improve on, that his/her work would never be good enough. He gave the following example in one of his interviews:

**Student:** *A student gets 75% on a language arts assignment, and the teacher comes along and says, «You know, this is not a bad mark, but if you just sound out your words a bit better, you could get 80s on it. You just have to try harder. « I took that as a put-down. She thinks I could do better; she's not happy with what I did.*

**Interviewer:** *What would you suggest instead?*

**Student:** *She could have said, «This 75% is really good!» She may not have thought it was really good, but she could have said that just to keep on good terms with me. She could have said, «Do you want me to give you a secret on how you can do better on tests?» And I'd say, «Yeah, « and she'd say, «You know those long words. Sound them out; it might help you a lot. That 75% was really good. «*

Another student explained the art of constructive criticism metaphorically.

*It's like when someone builds a sand castle. Another person might come along and say «You could put a door there. « Your response might be «Well, yeah» or you might just knock the whole thing down*

and say « Build it yourself. «Instead the person could say «That's a really great sand castle. Do you want to add something to it?»

The first student above used the phrase «to keep on good terms with me.» Perhaps the students are reminding us of the importance of preserving relationships. In our relationships with loved ones, do we not endeavour to exercise tact or discretion when we consider offering constructive criticism? At the very least, the students remind us of the difficult work of teachers who must help students progress while also supporting their sense of accomplishment and capability.

### ESTABLISHING THE CYCLE OF DISCOURAGEMENT

Students' difficulties with school work, coupled with their behavioral difficulties, sometimes meant that punishment became implicated in discouraging experiences and failed relationships with teachers. Everything became connected to everything else, eventually creating a «knee-jerk» response of high frustration whenever new, difficult tasks were presented.

In the following interview excerpt, a student asks that teachers recognise a child's limits, provide help that may be needed, and if that's not feasible, leave the child with the encouraging words, «That's better. Try a bit more.»

**Student:** *I'm a really messy writer because I'm dyslexic, and my handwriting is really messy. My l's didn't look good enough, and she would just go, «Do them right!» and I couldn't do them right. And then she would go, «Go! Go sit down and do it again!»*

**Interviewer:** *So that's some advice you'd give student teachers - to encourage students?*

**Student:** *Yeah, not hassle the students; encourage them so they will feel better about what they are doing.*

**Interviewer:** *Okay, what do you mean by hassle?*

**Student:** *So instead of «Do this! Make those letters!» I think, Why should I try? That's a hassle right there. That's just like pushing the student too hard to do something that they might take a bit longer to learn how. Instead of that I would try to make the student feel better about what they are doing. You know, say, «That's better. Try a bit more. «Encourage them so they feel better about what they are doing, so they will get it done right. Instead of keeping them in for recess or lunch hour because they didn't get it right, sit down with them some other time and let them work, and help them get it right.*

Some of the students in this study come to school already upset by their social or biological conditions. They can be easily agitated by negative experiences. As much as other students, and perhaps more than most students, they welcome a calm, patient, encouraging manner. The difficulties they may exhibit with school work or behaviour can very likely make teachers feel frustrated and impatient. The students remind us to consider whether our words and our tone can be experienced as encouraging.

The following is a brief excerpt from the above student's lengthy discussion about how he began to experience pressure and frustration in early elementary grades:

**Interviewer:** *Can you give me an example of a teacher hassling a student?*

**Student:** *Well, like, the student is sitting in class and does his work, talks to someone, with the teacher being the authority figure, that would be like, «You get down and you do your work, and after, for talking, you can do this and this and this!» Then the student goes back to their work and looks at the question 6 times 7, and instead of getting, like, 42, right off the bat they will be, «Uh, ah, what about the work I have to do after school? What about this? Oh, no! Oh, no!»*

The student's discussion of this example and related experiences extended over several pages of transcripts. He talked to the interviewer about how even simple «consequences» for small infractions like talking can be emotionally upsetting and preoccupying for a young child who may already have «problems from home» on his mind. So, for example, if he were told of a pending consequence such as staying in after school and missing play with friends, he would become preoccupied with that and then, in his words, «freeze up» and not be able to figure out his school work. This would be followed by the teacher asking him why he was unable to do his work. This created more frustration because he knew it would be confrontational to tell the teacher the real reason.

Some punishments were also experienced as humiliating and created a feeling of rage. For example, for throwing things into the wastepaper basket from a distance, he was made to not only stay in at recess but also to vacuum the entire classroom floor while the teacher and custodian watched. His stories gave meaning to a simple statement by another one of the students who said that punishment wasn't a good idea and that, yes, «We can learn from it, but it doesn't help us out much.» It seems that for students who are already upset about one thing or another, punishment gives them even more to be upset about, distracts them from school work, and distances them from the teacher who is the only present adult who might have been «helpful» in some way. Even the punishment of being yelled at by the teacher in front of the class was a strong one. When asked how that feels, one student replied that «it makes you feel like everyone else in the class is better than you.» Just as encouragement was associated with caring on the part of the teacher, discouragement seemed to be connected to a punishing attitude on the part of the teacher.

## HOPE AND RE-ESTABLISHING ENCOURAGEMENT

The Latin root word for courage is *cor*, meaning *heart*. If one considers the word *encourage*, what would it mean to *en-hearten* a student? Would it mean to give love? Would it mean to give life force? Would it mean to give hope? In the following interview excerpt, a student offers contrasting stories of ways that teachers can dis-hearten or en-hearten students:

**Student:** *Well, like at some schools it is harder to be there with teachers that pressure you. Like this one teacher, when you were having problems with your work he'd say, «If you don't get this right you ain't going to pass. «*

**Interviewer:** *How did that make you feel?*

**Student:** *Well, that made me feel that I wasn't going to pass no matter what I did. It made me feel that I wasn't going anywhere. And other teachers encourage students, and they make you feel that you have a really, really good chance to pass, which makes the students feel better. Teachers should have a happy attitude.*

Can teachers, being fearful about their students' likelihood of success, communicate that fear, discouragement, or despair to the students? This story suggests that in order to be hopeful themselves,

students draw strength, inspiration, courage, and serenity from the teacher's «happy attitude.» A teacher who is en-heartening or encouraging is one who communicates hopefulness and a sense of possibility in their interactions with students. If students are to have courage and confidence, they have to see that teachers are at least trying to have confidence in them. As one of our students said, «Encouragement is like a railroad track. It keeps you going.»

The student discussed in the section above, «Establishing the Cycle of Discouragement», explained how some teachers were able to support him in breaking out of that cycle.

**Student:** *Teachers like Mr. - made me feel like I had the choice to do my work. Like, if I didn't want to do it, I was allowed to take a little time out and go to a little table alone to re-gather my thoughts until I was ready to do it.*

**Interviewer:** *So you mean he gave you a break to go re-gather your thoughts. What do you mean?*

**Student:** *Like, if I wasn't getting something right and I was getting frustrated about it, he let me go sit in a corner and read a book, put down the book, and then think about what I was just doing, to figure it out when I was not under pressure. When I have all that done I come back to the class. That made it a lot easier because I wouldn't want to sit there for the whole class, getting frustrated. So he gave me five minutes to go figure it out. He didn't pressure me. That makes people feel more mature and more secure about themselves. And they actually feel that they can do it if they set their mind to it. Some students like to do it that way because they know they can get it done. Like, me, I like taking my time and think things out. With the right teachers and the right principals, I can do that.*

One of our students said, «You have to trust students; and even if you don't, you have to try.» In this story of the student being allowed or invited to take a break to «re-gather his thoughts», we see an example of how teachers can demonstrate trust and communicate confidence in students' abilities.

## CLOSING REFLECTIONS

As we searched for a theoretical framework that could most adequately account for or hold together the ideas students had expressed, we found Eric Fromm's (1956) model of positive relationships to be most satisfying and parsimonious. In this model, Fromm identifies *caring*, *responsibility*, *respect*, and *knowledge* as four elements that are common to positive relationships. *Caring* entails concern for the life and growth of the person in the relationship. *responsibility* means being ready to act to meet the needs, expressed or unexpressed, of another human being. *respect* entails having the ability to see an individual as s/he is and allowing that person to develop without exploitation. *Knowledge* includes not a superficial awareness but genuine understanding of the other's feelings, even if they are not readily apparent.

We expect that elementary school teachers choose their profession because of their *caring*, that is, their willingness to be concerned for the life and growth of students in their classrooms. However, their ability to exercise *respect* and *responsibility*, that is, to recognize a child's limits and to take appropriate action to meet a child's needs, depends on their *knowledge* of the child. *Knowledge*, in Fromm's sense, means being able to read a child's feelings, intentions and responses. If a child is mis-read, actions which may be intended as helpful can work at cross-purposes.

Getting to know a student can sometimes require more than listening to the stories a student comes forward to share. A number of student teachers and teachers have used a particular interview schedule to invite students to discuss a variety of topics that are most salient for them. This interview schedule and procedures for its use have been reported in previous articles and a book chapter (Elks, 1992; Ellis 1994; Ellis 1998). Many student teachers using this interview activity often found that simply conducting the interview was enough to transform a previously «difficult» student into a cooperative one. The following is an excerpt from a student teacher's written reflection on the interview experience.

*Finally, the interview served to encourage me to think that I am able to develop the same close, warm rapport with junior (grades 4, 5, and 6) boys as with girls-and indeed of the value of the interview as a tool for building trust and friendship. Ryan was tremendously supportive following the interview, and volunteered continually for demonstrations, solo musical performances, and generally anything in which I sought input or assistance from the class. He also raised his hand to answer any question I ever posed-all of which reinforced the notion that elementary-aged children typically enjoy only with very few adults a relationship that allows them to talk openly and share concerns.*

Although a primary benefit of the interview activity is the relationship it cultivates, the topics the students discuss also alert teachers to their preoccupations, motivations, fears, hopes, and loves. Increased awareness of the student's perspective enables the teacher to support connections between the student's story and the classroom story.

We are also aware that the pressures many teachers may experience to have their «performance» and «achievement» as teachers meet certain standards can discourage them from providing the kinds of support some of their students may need. A number of the students in our study said that they often needed time to calm down or time to just talk to other students, and that a class in which everyone had to be «on-task» at all times was not a good one for them. One of the boys talked about the value of group work as providing a space for «talking about feelings» which he said isn't feasible during the physical activity of recess. Teachers need more space, not less, to accommodate the growth needs of all students in their classrooms.

Teachers in our graduate courses have also reported that the percentage of high needs students in their classes has increased dramatically during the last 10 years. Recognizing that teachers cannot individually provide all the support that so many students need, we turned our research efforts in the direction of school-based mentorship programs, peer support and student leadership programs. These are programs that provide students with opportunities for attachments with adult mentors, contribute to a climate of caring, or empower students to care. In our research with such programs we have endeavored to:

- Work with schools to collaboratively develop and research mentorship programs for students in the early school years
- Locate and study other existing mentorship programs spanning the years of K-12
- Locate and study peer support programs spanning the years of K-12
- Locate and study student leadership programs

Our intent was not to develop a comprehensive list of existing programs in any specific geographical area, but rather to conduct case studies of a wide range of programs with a view to learning how they work and what their benefits are. We collected data on each of the programs through whatever means were feasible including: audio-taped and video-taped interviews with program coordinators, students, mentors, parents; students' written narrative reports; and program documents. Because most of the programs we found and studied had been in operation for five to seven years, the program coordinators were well informed about program benefits and the practicalities of operating such programs successfully.

In the mentorship programs that we helped to develop, we conducted three intensive studies on the following questions:

- In a short term mentorship program (8-10 weeks) with minimal training and structure for mentors, do the mentors and children achieve mutually satisfying relationships and are the mentors effective in providing academic support to the children?
- How does the mentor's pedagogy work? What informs or guides the mentor's instructional planning and decision-making? To what extent is the mentor's pedagogy shaped by the child or the child's responses?
- How do the mentors and children develop their relationships? What are the dynamics or key components of non-related adults cultivating relationships with young children in one-hour per week mentorship sessions over an 8 to 10-week period?

These research questions were considered important given that the schedules of schools and available mentors make short term programs most feasible. Further, there is little research available on mentorship programs for young children and little in-depth qualitative research on mentorship programs for older students. The findings from these three studies were expected to clarify the potential value of such programs and the processes for their successful implementation. An understanding of the dynamics of mentoring young children would be useful to program developers who must make many decisions about the structure, resources, and support for such programs. The results of the completed research have been made available through several publications (Alberta Teachers' Association, 1999; Ellis & Small-McGinley, 1998a; Ellis & Small-McGinley, 1998b; Ellis & Small-McGinley, 1999a; Ellis & Small-McGinley, 1999b; Ellis, Small-McGinley & Hart, 1998; Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio 1999; Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fabrizio, In Press).

This paper has focussed on students' views about how elementary school teachers encourage achievement. Their stories revealed how difficult it was for them to separate discussions about encouragement from discussions about the nature of their relationships with teachers. To support their growth, to give them strength and courage, students need affirmation and encouragement from adults who are oriented to them in a positive way. The students have given many examples of how teachers accomplish this. With so many students needing school to be their primary site for experiencing belonging and encouragement, it makes sense for teachers to be encouraged to give emphasis to their relationships with students. It also makes sense for schools to coordinate programs such as mentorship, peer support, and student leadership to provide further support for the growth of all students in the school.

In closing we wish to express our own tribute to the many teachers who have taken time to listen to the stories of individual students and who have used their art, heart, and imagination to help students find supportive places in their classrooms. We also thank the students who participated in this research for their trust and their efforts to help us understand their experience.

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