Pedagogical Relationship as Curriculum in a Teacher Education Program

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Introduction/Orientation

For several years we have been implementing and researching the effectiveness of an alternative semester in McGill University's elementary teacher education program designed to enhance the preparation of future teachers.
Key features of the alternative approach include:

- A full fall semester (late August to mid-December) working in cohorts in local schools,
- Based on principles of experiential education,
- Designed to integrate theory and practice in students' learning,
- By means of a socio-constructivist and self-reflective pedagogy,
- Centered on the development of a professional teaching portfolio,
- And built around a government framework of professional teaching competencies as a curriculum (management, planning, instruction, assessment and evaluation, adapting for special needs learners, integrating ICT, working effectively with colleagues and parents, and professional and ethical behaviour).
This predetermined framework of competencies, as well as the learning resources and tasks designed to implement it, offer what Aoki (2005) calls “curriculum-as-planned”.

It also provided a focus in our initial efforts to research the effectiveness of this alternative approach, particularly the structural organization and pedagogical approach of the project.

In general, the effects of these two key factors in the project have been very positive (Dillon et al. 2007).
However, to our surprise, we discovered that an aspect of the project that was equally important and influential for the professional development of participating students was the “pedagogical relationship” (van Manen, 1991, 1995, 2002)

- between the teacher educators working in the project and the participating students,
- illustrating Aoki's (2005) contrasting notion of “curriculum-as-lived”

This discovery raised for us the question of the importance of “pedagogical relationship” in a teacher education program, particularly in light of the lack of attention to this topic in the research literature.
Conceptual Framework

A number of scholars advocate the importance of the emotional, intuitive, imaginative, engaged, and responsible aspects of the relationships that teachers build with pupils (for example, Greene 1995, Keltchermans 2005, Korthagen 2001, Zembylas 2005). However, van Manen (1991, 1995, 2002) has written extensively on this aspect of pedagogy and asserts that “human development and personal becoming” (1995, p. 45) are possible only within particular, concrete pedagogical relationships.
Van Manen, an educational philosopher, deliberately chooses the term “pedagogy” in order to avoid the connotations associated with more common and traditional terms such as “curriculum”, “teaching”, and “instruction”.

For van Manen, pedagogy is not a rational formula or set of techniques to follow for effective teaching.

It is, rather, a personal and improvised tact and mindful thoughtfulness through which a pedagogue tries to act in “a right, good, or appropriate manner” (p. 9) for the sake of what is best for the being and becoming of the learner.

While van Manen discusses pedagogy between an adult (parent, teacher) and child, we feel that the general notion can also apply to pedagogy between a teacher educator and students in a teacher education program [see our bolding within brackets next as our extrapolation of van Manen's ideas to teacher education].
“In this text it is suggested that the following qualities are probably essential to good pedagogy: a sense of vocation, love of and caring for children [teacher education students], a deep sense of responsibility, moral intuitiveness, self-critical openness, thoughtful maturity, tactful sensitivity toward the child's [teacher education student's] subjectivity, an interpretive intelligence, a pedagogical understanding of the child's [teacher education student's] needs, improvisational resoluteness in dealing with young people, a passion for knowing and learning the mysteries of the world, the moral fibre to stand up for something, a certain understanding of the world, active hope in the face of prevailing crises, and, not the least, humour and vitality.” (p. 8)
“It is possible to learn all the techniques of instruction but to remain pedagogically unfit as a teacher. The preparation of educators obviously includes much more than the teaching of knowledge and skills, more even than a professional ethical code or moral craft. To become a teacher includes something that cannot be taught formally: the most personal embodiment of a pedagogical thoughtfulness.” (p. 9)
According to van Manen, several aspects make up the nature of the pedagogical experience: pedagogical situation, pedagogical action, and pedagogical relationship.

“For the young person, the pedagogical relation with the educator is more than a means to an end . . . ; the relation is a life experience that has significance in and of itself. . . . what we received from a great teacher is less a particular body of knowledge or set of skills than the way in which this subject matter was presented or embodied in the person of this teacher—his or her enthusiasm, self-discipline, dedication, personal power, commitment, and so forth.” (p. 73)
“The pedagogical relationship is an intentional relationship between an adult [teacher educator] and a child [teacher education student], in which the adult's [teacher educator's] dedication and intentions are the child's [teacher education student's] mature adulthood [“teacherhood”]. It is a relation oriented toward the personal [and professional] development of the child [teacher education student]—this means that the pedagogue needs to be able to see the present situation and experiences of the child [teacher education student] and value them for what they contain; and the pedagogue needs to be able to anticipate the moment when the child [teacher education student] can participate in the culture [of teaching] with fuller self-responsibility.” (p. 75)

“The teacher does not just pass on a body of knowledge to the students, he or she embodies what is taught in a personal way. In some sense the teacher is what he or she teaches.” (p. 77)
Van Manen goes on to point out that the actual practice of pedagogy involves two major aspects:

• sensitive listening and observing of the learner and

• continual reflection on our actions with learners—in order to become more sensitive and insightful.

This thoughtful reflection and mindful action he refers to as pedagogical tact.
“Tact consists of a complex array of qualities, abilities, and competencies. First, a tactful person has the sensitive ability to interpret inner thoughts, understandings, feelings, and desires from indirect clues such as gestures, demeanour, expression, and body language. Tact involves the ability to immediately see through motives or cause and effect relations. A tactful person is able as it were to read the inner life of the other person. Second, tact consists of the ability to interpret the psychological and social significance of the features of this inner life. Thus, tact knows how to interpret, for example, the deeper significance of shyness, hostility, frustration, rudeness, joy, anger, tenderness, grief in concrete situations with particular persons. Third, a person with tact appears to have a fine sense of standards, limits, and balance that makes it possible to know almost automatically how far to enter into a situation and what distance to keep in individual circumstances. Finally, tact seems characterized by moral intuitiveness. A tactful person seems to sense what is the right thing to do.” (pp. 125-126)

“Tact is the practice of otherness.” (p. 139)
While van Manen offers insight to the importance of the *pedagogical relationship*, he offers few guidelines, strategies, or techniques for how to be tactful and thoughtful with learners.

For this reason we turned to Rosenberg (2003), a psychotherapist, whose work on “non-violent communication” for fostering healthy, positive, and productive relationships (family and friends, work situations, teacher-pupil interaction, professional-client relationships, etc.) reiterates several of van Manen's key points, particularly the importance of caring, respect, and sensitivity to the other.

However, Rosenberg's work also complements van Manen's in that it offers a framework of strategies, skills, and techniques that individuals can learn in order to create healthier relationships.
His framework of skills focuses on two aspects of creating what he calls a “*life-affirming*” relationship (as opposed to a “*life-alienating*” relationship):

(1) expressing oneself honestly by
   • observing neutrally instead of evaluating judgmentally
   • awareness of, taking responsibility for, and expressing one's feelings
   • awareness of one's unmet needs
   • requesting of the other ways to meet those unmet needs

and

(2) receiving others empathically, by trying to understand their feelings and needs and helping them to express them and have them recognized and “heard”. 
While van Manen's perspective implied that a pedagogue, in order to be truly effective, had to somehow already be a sensitive, caring, tactful, and thoughtful person,

Rosenberg's work offers the hope and promise that these abilities can be named and learned (although that learning implies a major and not always easy unlearning of past patterns and perspectives).

Indeed, Rosenberg's career has been devoted to teaching these skills and attitudes to people around the world.

(See [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org) for more information.)
In sum, the essential base for creating a pedagogical relationship with learners seems to be the personal qualities that make an empathic focus on the learner possible.

For example, Greene states,

“One of the reasons I have come to concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world is that it is imagination, above all, that makes empathy possible” (1995, p. 3).
Results/Data

Pedagogically, several factors have emerged as primarily important:

• *Initial Perceptions*
• *Teacher Educators’ Personal Qualities and Support*
• *Preparation*
• *Seminars*
• *Evaluation Process*
• *The David Dillon Factor*
The *Initial Perceptions* of students regarding the alternative field semester were identified:

- There was a “buzz” about the program and it is well known amongst the undergraduates;

- The students were introduced to two competing “alternative programs” at McGill University, many student teachers acknowledged an immediate connection to the “*Dillon Project*” as the lead educator-David Dillon’s demeanour was identified as more laid back, straight forward and positive...

As one student explained “*he was not trying to sell me a car*” when compared to the other “alternative program”.
The Teacher Educators’ *Personal Qualities and Support* was of utmost importance:

The teacher educators were identified as being:

- very supportive; created a positive environment for the student teacher; “*made to feel like a professional teacher, a colleague*”;
- took every participant seriously, a true commitment to each student; “The key is to get to know the student teacher; understand their personal ideals, visions and goals; what makes them tick; to create a relationship that engages both participants; this is what is happening here”;
- a more serious attempt/concerted interest was being taken by the teacher educators in making this extended stage a positive experience for them; “I am taken more seriously as a student teacher and therefore I take it more seriously”;
- most student teachers began to grow out of their passive roles as trainees; they could implement their ideals and approaches to education and this was attributed to the support and nurturing of the teacher educators.
The time spent on *Preparation* was an extremely important factor:

- the amount of time teacher educators spent to explain and inform student teachers of the experience. They provided a holistic experience, and “*were even in contact over the summer*”;
- supply genuine information and reporting of what to expect in the long semester and offer examples of the positive and negative aspects of the experience;
- appreciated the preparatory material provided beforehand and the website, as they felt supported and confident in their position. They felt more at ease before entering the school in what is deemed by many as a very anxious and unsettling time;
- The student teachers appreciated a more personal attempt at the pairing of the cooperating teacher and the student teacher when compared to the “regular” student teaching placement office.
The coordination of *Seminars* by the teacher educators has emerged as important:

- a valuable chance to step back from their professional work and to reflect on it and build knowledge in interaction with other student teachers in the project;
- an atmosphere that they felt supported and feeling comfortable to share experiences and fears, and to pool ideas about student teaching;
- the teacher educators responded to the experiences of the student teachers in their classrooms when introducing specific topics in the seminars.

“The timing of it (seminar) is genius as the seminar topics seem to coincide with the developing experiences in my classroom”...“It’s immediate, something happens in the classroom and half an hour later I am in the seminar talking about it and that works really well for me...For me the seminars are key, its ideal”. 
The Evaluation Process was another key factor:

• The student teachers feel they get more constructive criticism in this program. Teacher educators are seen more as mentors ("not tour guides that just help me through my visit"), they provide positive evaluations that are not always positive (as in A+) but constructive and critical ... One student teacher explained: "Finally I am being taken seriously";

• The evaluation techniques are deemed positive because they spend time to make personal connections and therefore gain an understanding of the student teachers that is reflected accordingly in more meaningful praise and constructive criticism. One student teacher articulated: "The evaluation process is positive in ‘How’ I am being observed. This speaks to the quality of people who supervise me as they provide positive and meaningful criticism that makes me a better person and teacher";

• Many student teachers identified the research aspect of the program as a crucial component to their development. It has been identified as a place to share, learn, reflect and discuss their experiences. A space to “debrief” and in many cases “it disturbs the settled memories and/or experiences and pushes me to think about things more”.
One dimension that all the student teachers stressed as being foundational to their success as beginning teachers and that of the program has been coined “The David Dillon Factor”; below are some of the student teachers responses when referring to this “phenomenon”:

- “David puts himself out there to help us anyway he can, he communicates that from the beginning”
- “The sheer energy he puts into the program is inspiring and speaks to his passion for the field of teacher education”... “His values are reflected in the program”
- “He is not enthusiastic like a cheerleader but positive no less and realistic, always working on improving the program and ironing out the kinks”
- “He has many responsibilities and manages many different groups, so much of the program’s success relies on his personality”... “his natural spark gets you excited and motivated, it affects us all”
- “I am not sure if the program would survive without him and also not sure if I (a student teacher) would be involved in it (program) without him”
- “Many of us (student teachers) feel like we share common ideals concerning education and revel in the opportunity to discuss and debate education with him”
- “You (a student teacher) really see and feel what it is to be a good teacher as a result of working with David”... “He models how to be a good teacher”.
Discussion
The most basic question seems to be:

*Is the aspect of pedagogical relationship between teacher educators and pre-service students important enough in a teacher education program to be worth considering?*

We feel that it is for two reasons:

- First, in this case, the nature of the pedagogical relationship certainly seemed to have a positive influence on students—becoming excited and motivated about the project, taking the experience more seriously, reducing their level of anxiety and stress, feeling safe to share experiences and questions, and ultimately developing very competently and confidently as future teachers.

- Second, the students' experience of this pedagogical relationship seems to have become part of the curriculum they learned and internalized during the project, “*curriculum-as-lived*” in Aoki's terms.

“You really see and feel what it is to be a good teacher as a result of working with David.”
Although our study was not set up as a comparison between students' experience in this alternative project and their experiences in the rest of their teacher education program, the stark contrast with the rest of their experience in the program which they portray is striking and worrying.

Also striking and worrying is the lack of attention to this apparently important aspect of teacher education in the research literature. It almost seems as if the advice given to teachers about their relationship with children does not apply to teacher educators' relationships with their adult students.
One likely reason for the lack of attention and awareness to this aspect is the institutional environment that works against the development of healthy pedagogical relationships in teacher education programs:

• large (that is, cost-effective) classes that foster anonymity,

• lack of involvement of permanent staff in students' teaching experiences with children, and

• higher priority placed on research and scholarship that erodes time devoted to students.

These issues seem especially salient at “research-intensive” universities.
“It is safe to say that virtually all teachers (and parents too) experience in their lives constraints that frequently seem to make it difficult to be a significant influence on the children or young people for whom they feel pedagogically responsible. Many of these constraints have to do with institutional and political factors that operate in people's lives. For example, a common concern for teachers is that modern schools tend to be run like businesses, complete with measurement of `production performance,' `output figures,' `projected increased rates of success,' `effectiveness of teachers,' `students standardized test outcomes.' Consequently, the teacher's ability and inclination to reflect thoughtfully on the pedagogical nature of their lives with students are being atrophied by the objectifying and alienating conditions under which they work.” (van Manen, 1991, p. 99)
The resulting situation in many teacher education programs is that, while teacher educators may offer a “life-affirming” message to teacher education students, their contrasting behaviour as pedagogues may be offering a “life-alienating” message and serving as a powerful example of “curriculum-as-lived” that contradicts their “curriculum-as-planned.”

A final hopeful perspective offered by Rosenberg's work is that not only can teacher educators become more aware of the constraints that work against the development of pedagogical relationships with their students, but also that they can learn different patterns and perspectives in order to help foster these seemingly important pedagogical relationships.
References


Program website- www.mcgill.ca/edu-e3ftoption