Exploring Dialogue Journals as a Context for Connecting with and Supporting the Emotional Lives of Fourth Graders

Samantha Simone Johnson
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd

Part of the Education Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Exploring Dialogue Journals as a Context for Connecting with and Supporting the Emotional Lives of Fourth Graders

Samantha Simone Johnson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Erin Feinauer Whiting, Chair
Corinna Peterken
Michael Richardson

Department of Teacher Education
Brigham Young University

Copyright ©2020 Samantha Simone Johnson
All Rights Reserved
Exploring Dialogue Journals as a Context for Connecting with and Supporting the Emotional Lives of Fourth Graders

Samantha Simone Johnson
Department of Teacher Education, BYU
Master of Arts

About 20 percent of school-aged children, 18 years and younger, struggle with mental health issues in America today. Mental health issues lead to greater rates of suicide, depression, loneliness, anxiety, and bullying that takes place in and out of schools. This exploratory multiple case study looks at how 10 fourth graders, five male and five female, use a weekly entry in a dialogue journal letter to their teacher to share their emotional lives. I explore how a dialogue journal can open up a space between students and teachers for emotional aspects of life and learning to be included in schools. This study specifically explores what children say about their lives and feelings in a dialogue journal across a period of a school year. I also inquire into changes in a period of crisis teaching when a worldwide pandemic closes down school and children are forced into distance learning in their homes. We find that 1) students can share feelings, ideas and parts of themselves with me in a dialogue journal that they don’t share in class, 2) the journal provides a space for them to elaborate upon and become more aware of their feelings, 3) students seek to have a personal connection with their teacher, 4) students have comments and feedback about what is happening in the classroom, and 5) the student’s entries affected my immediate practices as a teacher and added insights and ideas for future practices on how I could have been even more supportive to the students.

Keywords: mental health, socio-emotional learning, emotional development, dialogue journal, elementary schooling
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must first take a moment to express gratitude for my committee here at BYU and all that they have done in helping me become a researcher - especially Dr. Erin Whiting. Next, I would like to thank all of my sweet 4th grade students who were eager to participate and be of assistance in this project and willingly offered the use of their journals. Lastly, I’d like to thank all of the people who believed in me on the days that I didn’t, listened to me complain, offered perspective, encouraged me to take breaks and who reminded me how much this study matters to the world—you know who you are. This is dedicated to my family, my cohort at BYU, The Fab Five, my roommates and Dr. Robert Bullough Jr.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td></td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td></td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td></td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td></td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td></td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: Introduction</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Problem</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of Purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: Literature Review</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Development</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and Emotional Learning Programs</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue Journals: Connection to Emotional Development</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: Methodology</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting and Participants</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Participants</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Researcher</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Process</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection: Dialogue Journals</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Case Study: Building Cases</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis Procedures</td>
<td></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4: Findings

Case 1: Bota

Case 2: Maddy

Case 3: Emily

Case 4: Lindsay

Case 5: Mia

Case 6: Toby

Case 7: Matt

Case 8: Devin

Case 9: Parker

Case 10: Anthony

Summary

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

Caring and Emotional Sharing

Space for Developing Self-Awareness

Student Interest in Strong Teacher-Student Relationship

Synergy with Classroom Practices Between Students and Teacher

Potential for Emotional Concealment

Limitations and Future Directions

Implications for Practitioners

Conclusion

REFERENCES

APPENDIX A: Consent Forms
## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1  *Participant Characteristics* ........................................................................................................ 16
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Life is hard,” nine-year-old Conner says when asked how he is feeling. He goes on, “I suck at math and I hate coming to school… I just want to stay at home and play video games all day.” When 10-year-old Travis is asked the same question, he responds, “Well, I’m okay. I just forgot my homework at my mom’s house and am going to be at my dad’s house tonight and he gets mad at me when I forget.” After a slight pause, Travis adds, “They’ve been separated for almost 4 months now and it’s been hard. My mom says my dad is a jerk…. And maybe sometimes he is.” Travis quietly walks back to his seat and stares at the wall for a few seconds before getting back to work on his times tables. Maria, when asked how she feels about coming to school responds, “Eh, it’s better than sitting at home alone like I do every evening. My mom and grandma work a lot at Burger King, so when I come home I just watch YouTube videos or draw and sometimes that gets boring.” When asked why she doesn’t play with anyone her age she answers, “All my step-siblings are back in my old town and I just moved here, so I don’t know many kids yet. But usually, kids don’t like me anyway, so it’s fine. I don’t need friends.”

All of these scenarios and statements are circumstances and things that I have heard come out of the mouths of eight and nine-year olds that I have taught in the past four years. These children are going through challenging life experiences and seeking counsel, support and love, whether they know it or not.

Statement of Problem

Life in the United States is changing rapidly. Changes in children’s life experiences in the past century, reflect “increased economic and social pressures in families; weakening of community institutions that nurture children’s social, emotional, and moral development; and easier access by children to media that encourage health-damaging behavior” (Greenberg et al., 2003, p.
Between 1999 and 2014, the age-adjusted suicide rate in the United States increased by 24%, from 10.5 to 13.0 per 100,000 population (Curtain et al., 2016). For children, the Internet and social media, while having many positive effects, can also lead to loneliness, fewer opportunities for social interaction, and cyberbullying (Byrne et al., 2014; Livingstone, 2008).

Mental, emotional and behavioral (MEB) disorders threaten many youth in the United States. Half of all adolescents have had at least one diagnosable mental disorder—anxiety disorders are the most common (31.9%), followed by behavior disorders (19.1%), depression (14.3%), and substance disorders (11.4%). About 40% of the children who meet the criteria for one of these disorders also meet the criteria for another (Catalano & Kellogg, 2020). Children in the U.S. grapple with a myriad of challenging issues such as suicide, self-harm, drug use, depression, anxiety, bullying, and school violence (Eckersley, 2011). Anti-social behavior and conduct disorder are estimated at over five percent of children, particularly boys, while anxiety and depression affect an estimated four percent of children (Green et al., 2005).

Three of the top five types of mental health issues reported by teachers include significant family stressors (e.g., divorced parents, parents in prison, parents with mental health concerns), social skill deficits, and depression (Reinke et al., 2011). Such issues often go unaddressed, resulting in many missed opportunities to assist and promote positive social, emotional, and behavioral functioning in children (Green et al., 2013; Merikangas et al., 2011).

Statement of Purpose

The seriousness of mental health challenges for children and youth cannot be overstated (Rodger et al., 2019). It is more important than ever that steps be taken toward supporting and assisting in the improvement of children’s mental health. Mental health is “conceptualized as a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to
his or her community” (Sixty-sixth World Health Assembly, 2013, p. 3). Children must be emotionally prepared to handle and deal with the challenges that they face in today’s world in a productive, positive, and healthy manner.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs are one promising tool increasingly available in schools for ameliorating the emotional development of children as they face increasing challenges to mental health. SEL programs help young people learn to appreciate the perspectives of others, better handle interpersonal situations, and develop responsible and respectful attitudes and values about self and others (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003; Elias et al., 1997).

Social and Emotional Learning programs seek to help all children to better understand their emotions, learn from their behavior, and work well with others (Lendrum et al., 2016). SEL is organized to lead children to identify how they are feeling, express those feelings in appropriate ways, and pay attention to how others are feeling. When such skills are developed in the context of a caring, participatory classroom environment, SEL advocates claim resilience to the onset of mental health difficulties increases as it fosters greater attachment to school and enables more effective coping in adverse circumstances (CASEL, 2007). SEL can help to facilitate a mental health state of well-being, which means that children have “a positive sense of identity, the ability to manage thoughts (and) emotion, and to build [positive] social relationships” (Sixty-sixth World Health Assembly, 2013, p. 3).

However, SEL programs have various critiques and shortcomings that include their inability to effectively reach diverse populations and not being cost-effective. Perhaps the most important critique of SEL programs is that they are rarely integrated into classrooms and schools in ways that are meaningful, sustained, and embedded in the day-to-day interactions of students, educators, and school staff (Jones et al., 2012). SEL programs are typically implemented as half-hour lessons on a
weekly or monthly basis (Jones et al., 2010), without much follow up or time for deep discussion. Just like academic skills, social and emotional skills develop over time and in a continuous way. Therefore, when these efforts at SEL can be embedded into the context of daily life, they will be more effective and helpful. Schools must look beyond the typical program that attends to SEL skills solely during a half-hour lesson a week. Instead, they must seek to develop SEL skills throughout the social challenges that naturally arise, and other teaching opportunities in classrooms (Jones et al., 2012). SEL programs demand that students’ emotional growth be tended to and nurtured, yet, many programs do not properly set up the space for that to take place.

One promising mechanism that can be used to facilitate this natural, individualized space for students to regularly explore their feelings and emotions in a healthy way is through a teacher-student dialogue journal. Dialogue journals are a useful tool to assist classroom teachers in promoting a positive SEL environment in school for students (Konishi & Park, 2017). They create a genuine, meaningful way of interacting with students on a personal level that is inexpensive, yet can be such a powerful way for students to express themselves and develop important skills of labeling and describing emotions they feel.

Though most research on dialogue journals thus far has focused on the effect that dialogue journals can have on students’ reading, writing, or foundational relationships with their teachers, some research points to dialogue journals as a way to attend to and facilitate students’ emotional development and self-awareness (Regan et al., 2005). Dialogue journals are interactive; allowing children to express their feelings and explore their emotions with the teacher, which is crucial to the well-being of the child (Eksi, 2013; Fulwiler, 1987; Gambrell, 1985).

Fourth grade has been recognized as an important year developmentally as children move into more academic tasks in school. More complex and academically based reading and increasing reliance on background knowledge, in particular, are associated with what some term the ‘fourth-
grade slump’ (Best et al., 2004; Chall, 1983). The increased emphasis on high stakes testing and academic tasks, together with an increased ability for abstract thinking at this developmental age, makes fourth grade an interesting time to look at how children are articulating their feelings and emotions.

In this study, I explore how to support fourth-grade students as they express their emotional experiences, feelings, and thoughts when given the chance to write a weekly letter to their teacher and respond to various prompt questions. This weekly dialogue journal will consider the context of how journaling can support fourth-graders’ mental health at school, specifically how encouraging them to write and reflect on emotions and experiences in their own life can give them a voice to narrate and understand their own lives. The dialogue journal is intended to give students a chance to explore their own emotions and express themselves in writing; providing a unique, authentic opportunity to aid students in recognizing, reflecting on, and articulating their feelings. This study is grounded in the body of research that concludes that children who have developed strong emotional skills tend to have an increased level of social competence, good mental health, and good academic performance compared to those children who haven’t adequately developed their emotional skills (Brackett et al., 2015).

Research Questions

This study explores how 4th-grade students use an open response dialogue journal assignment to write about their feelings and share their social and emotional lives with their teacher. The journals were created as a safe space to write freely to their teacher with thoughtful prompts encouraging reflection on their lives and emotions. This exploratory study specifically investigates the following research questions:

1. How do fourth graders share their social and emotional lives in private classroom letters and online letters to their teacher over the year?
2. How did student responses about their social and emotional lives change after a shift from the regular school routine to at-home digital learning due to a worldwide pandemic?
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Emotional Development

Children in elementary school are building on the emotional knowledge and skills they have developed during infancy and early childhood (Miller et al., 2005). There is a need for continued attention to emotions in school so children can keep developing an awareness of their emotional states that include a variety of fluctuating emotions (Saarni, 1999) and learn healthy ways to express those emotions.

A key competence of mental, social, and emotional health may very well be to identify and comprehend the feelings and emotions accurately and to understand and accept the full range of emotions rather than denying or avoiding them. When children are aware of how they feel, they are increasingly able to remain in control of their behavior in light of strong emotion, to monitor and reflect, and to make conscious choices, taking into account how they feel (Weare, 2000). In order to harness the “energy, motivation and good sense” (Weare, 2000, p. 71) that emotions can provide, children must first be able to acknowledge and learn to express those emotions.

Part of the ability to recognize feelings is dependent on the ability to express those feelings in words (Gardner, 1993; Greenberg & Snell, 1997). In order to help children recognize their feelings it is important for them to explore and develop linguistic competence (Weare, 2000). Giving children opportunities to write and talk about their feelings about things that are happening in their lives is a great opportunity to support emotional learning and development. Teachers also have opportunities to invite students to recognize and identify these feelings and the emotional aspects of their lives for learning and growth when there is an open space embedded in classrooms to share emotions and feelings. Further, reflection about emotions and feelings in journaling helps students practice articulating and organizing thoughts about feelings. As students do this, they will
potentially build larger emotional vocabularies and that can lead to more accurate emotion recognition skills that have been found to increase their effective social functioning at school (Miller et al., 2005). The development of the ability to communicate how we are feeling with others is crucial to feeling good about ourselves and relating effectively to others (Farley, 1987).

Additionally, as students begin to recognize and name their own emotions, it may enable them to better recognize emotions in others and potentially empathize with them, to imagine how they are feeling and therefore understand others better (Weare, 2000). One study involving 200 children in first through fifth grade, which focused on the development of emotion situation knowledge (ESK), or the ability to infer others’ emotions from situational cues, indicated that ESK develops through elementary school years and has the ability to help students foster effective relationships with others (Fine et al., 2006).

Social and Emotional Learning Programs

Schools offer rich settings for targeting children’s mental health (Greenwood et al., 2008). Schools are powerful institutions, effective places to build social skills, connections, and teach lifelong civic responsibilities while bringing together students, parents, teachers, and communities. Klinenburg (2018) asserts that “Educational institutions do far more for success than teach individual students. From childcare centers to research universities, schools create social worlds that shape and sustain entire communities. They’re our primary public institutions for establishing democratic ideals and instilling civic skills. Schools are our modern agoras, gathering places where we make and remake ourselves and develop a sense of where we belong” (p. 40). When schools are welcoming, safe, and intentional places, children learn and grow.

A way that schools have been working to attend to children’s emotional development needs are through Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs. Research on SEL programs emerged in the 1990s and has expanded dramatically since that time (Osher et al., 2016). Social concerns,
like bullying and school shootings, generated an urgency for school-based programs that promote safe and emotionally supportive school climates that support learning (Dwyer et al., 1998; Dwyer & Osher, 2000).

SEL programs not only seek to prevent problem behavior, but also aspire to cultivate emotional intelligence, character values, and promote mental health, as well as 21st-century skills (Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence, 1994; Elias et al., 1997; Langdon, 1996). Twenty-first century skills are directly connected to what the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has identified as five groups of interrelated core social and emotional competencies. These competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; 2005; Devaney et al., 2006).

However, despite the importance of attending to the emotional and social development of children in school, concerns remain about the implementation of SEL programs. Scholars question which programs and practices are most effective when it comes to assisting children in developing and utilizing various prosocial skills. Caution ought to be used when thinking about the generalizability of SEL programs across diverse groups of children and adolescents (Rowe & Trickett, 2018). One size fits all programs cannot simply be thrown at unique schools with various populations, circumstances and locations.

Another concern, that holds significant practical implications when thinking about how to reach as many students as possible, is the cost of that program (Hunter et al., 2018). In a time of increased demand for accountability and evidence-based practice, resources in schools prove to be strained (Levin & Belfield, 2015). It is important to find practical, cost-effective ways of helping students recognize, understand, and work through their emotions in a healthy, positive manner. In addition to these concerns, there is also the huge concern mentioned previously that these SEL
programs do not offer regular, genuine opportunities for students to practice, reflect on, and engage with the skills they are being taught in 10 to 30 minute increments on a weekly basis.

In this study, dialogue journals are used as a means for students to genuinely reflect on and express their emotions and experiences, which in turn gives them a safe place to be practicing the skills that the SEL program is used to teach and develop in them. While the study does not look in-depth at the specific SEL program being utilized by the school or seek to measure its effectiveness, the program is a backdrop when considering how students in this study decided to talk about their emotions and experiences in their dialogue journals.

**Dialogue Journals: Connection to Emotional Development**

This exploratory study seeks to give fourth-graders the opportunity to write about their feelings in a supported, contextualized, and naturalistic way in dialogue journals. Interestingly, dialogue journals in schools were first used by deaf educators in the 1960s and 1970s. This research was led by Jana Staton, who encouraged teachers to exchange notes with students as a logical accommodation to their learners’ communication needs. These dialogue journals helped the students articulate their thoughts and feelings clearly and distinctly (Staton, 1980). Since then, they have been found to do many more things, such as promote rapport between teachers and students, where students feel comfortable enough to disclose concerns (Hail et al., 2013; Staton et al., 1988), as well as enhance collaborative learning between teachers and students (Bruner, 1988).

More recently dialogue journals have been looked at through a lens of how they can enhance children’s reading and writing capabilities to assist students in reaching common core, standardized testing goals. This means that some forms of dialogue journals are being used for students to respond to what they’ve read. Smokey and Elaine Daniels write about dialogue journals and different forms of written communication in a book published in 2013 called, “The Best Kept Teaching Secret.” They assert that “getting in the habit of verbalizing your thinking as you read
transfers to your cognitive repertoire; the more aware kids become of their own thinking (their
connections, their inferences, their visualizations), the better readers they become, with others and
on their own” (p. 21).

If we extend that to emotional development and learning we could say that if students are
able to verbalize their emotions more and become aware of their own thinking, the better their
emotional development and ability to regulate those emotions will be. Dialogue journals are a
potential tool to provide students with this type of opportunity.

Dialogue journals have great potential in furthering children’s self-awareness. Self-awareness
consists of being able to accurately assess one’s feelings, interests, values, and strengths,
all while maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence (Collaborative for Academic,
Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005). A large part of this competency can be found within a
child’s sense of self which includes concepts such as self-esteem, self-confidence, and the ability to
perceive feelings and accept those feelings. Dialogue journals provide an effective, safe way for
fourth graders to authentically develop this SEL competency in their everyday lives.

One established way to improve a child’s perception of him/herself is by “increasing [their]
competence in a variety of socially related skills” (McGinnis, 2012, p. 4). This study explored how
students can use a dialogue journal to express and communicate their emotions, feelings and
experiences to their teacher, inevitably developing social skills involving their self-esteem and how
they perceive themselves. It is conjectured that “through the interactional scaffolding in the
dialogue journals, students may be able to identify their problems and learn effectively to cope with
their problems from their teacher” (Konishi & Park, 2017, p. 249). In other words, dialogue
journals can create windows for teachers to better understand where students are coming from and
therefore support students in more effective ways. As children grow in their ability to navigate the
world, they become more confident in themselves and their abilities, which is essential to learning and growth.

Additionally, “experiencing warm personal, trustworthy relationships is absolutely fundamental for the growth of self-esteem” (Weare, 2000, p. 86). In this study, children interacted weekly with their teacher in personal and engaging letters back and forth, that are structured to provide children with opportunities to develop a trusting, open relationship, to have a voice to talk about their lives and that encourages them to reflect on their own feelings. A dialogue journal can “establish trust between a student and teacher which encourages the student to express individual concerns to a responsive audience without fear” (Konishi & Park, 2017, p. 249).

When considering how dialogue journals can influence children’s mental health, Garvis and Pendergast (2017) state, “a key preventative measure for mental health is having strong relationships with others” (p. 142). Facilitating an opportunity for students to explore and write about their lives and emotions through dialogue journaling, while creating strong, teacher-student relationships should produce the sort of learning climate necessary for mental health growth.

Crisis Teaching

During the time of this study, students around the world were impacted by legislated stay-at-home orders related to the COVID-19 pandemic. School was moved to online remote teaching and students’ lives were disrupted and changed very quickly. Foster (2006) reflects on the 2005 Hurricane Katrina crisis teaching period and suggests three principles for maximally effective crisis teaching. They are as follows;

1. “Know our students” - paying close attention and listening to our students and their families in order to learn, work with and respond to their stories, circumstances, needs, and strengths.
2. **Build community** - working with individuals in the classroom, with community organizations, and in local communities to build robust networks of need responsive support for our students.

3. **Maintain reciprocal high expectations** - expecting manifestations of greatness not only from our students but from ourselves; providing space and opportunities (in and outside of class) and demonstrating the knowledge, caring, and creativity for students to do great things – both in terms of curriculum, and as morally grounded, mutually supportive community builders and citizens.” (p. 2).

Foster (2006) further details a teacher named Ms. B who discovered that journaling assignments provided an ideal way to allow students to address events around their range of Katrina-related experiences if they wanted to. These journals offered a place for catharsis, as well as a means for caring teachers to watch and monitor signs of students’ mental health and adjustment to their new surroundings during an especially challenging time.

Similarly, the goal of allowing the 4th-grade students in this study the opportunity to continue their dialogue journal writing to their teacher online during the COVID-19 pandemic was to give them the opportunity to process and address the events around them, as well as the emotions they were feeling. It was an optional assignment and only a portion of the students chose to engage, however, this study seeks to look at how students utilized this space and opportunity during this unique time, as well as how their responses changed from how they were writing previously in their dialogue journals throughout the year.

Due to the unique situation of this study, I also raise issues associated with the potential for dialogue journals to support emotional development and needs during crisis teaching. The particular effect of this larger social moment is certainly implicated in what we find students have shared or written about in their dialogue journal responses during the COVID-19 pandemic.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This section will discuss the details of the study, including who participated, the setting for the study, procedures for collecting data, and the research design that explains why the study was conducted in this particular way. This study is a multiple case study (Stake, 2006) that explored the ways that 4th grade students shared their social and emotional lives in dialogue journals over the course of a year. Open response dialogue journal assignment allowed students to write about their feelings and share an emotional space with their teacher. Looking closely at 10 student cases allowed me to see the variety and potential commonalities of how dialogue journals can be used as emotional space and support for 4th graders. Whenever possible, direct quotes and spelling from the dialogue journals was used to help readers see the language and personality of the students.

Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in a fourth-grade classroom within a Pre-K through sixth-grade public school in the Mountain West of the United States. This school has been open for four years and is located in a rapidly developing, suburban neighborhood. The school has approximately 687 students that attend and is ranked in the top 30th percentile in the state in both reading and math test scores. Only 6% of the students attending are Hispanic and the remaining 94% are white.

The school implemented a weekly schoolwide SEL program, that aimed to help provide children with explicit help in thinking about and attending to an understanding of their own emotions and also the emotions of others. Throughout the year students participated in weekly 10-minute whole class discussions from a schoolwide implemented manual called *Skillstreaming the Elementary School Child* (McGinnis, 2012), which encouraged them in various ways to acknowledge their feelings, respond appropriately and problem solve on their own.
Skillstreaming is an influential series of prosocial skill step lessons, developed by Goldstein and furthered by McGinnis, that provide “a comprehensive resource of SEL content, strategies, and assessments across the schooling years” (Garvis & Pendergast, 2017, p 204). Skillstreaming was designed to improve elementary children’s interpersonal communication and social and emotional competencies in six categories. Garvis and Pendergast (2017) state that “explicit classroom instruction in SEL supports a positive state of well-being and mental health” (p. 198). This focus on SEL development at the school potentially frames the way that students understand the dialogue journaling and writing about their emotions.

**Student Participants**

The participants in this study are fourth-graders at a public kindergarten through sixth-grade school located in the Mountain West, United States, selected through a convenience sample due to their placement in the researcher’s classroom. The class included 28 students ages ranging from late nine-year-old to mid 10-year-old who participated in the dialogue journal assignment throughout the year. All participants were given pseudonyms and all identification content was taken out of entries and descriptions to maintain the confidentiality and privacy of all student participants.

The sample of students consists of 10 fourth-grade children (5 females and 5 males), all Caucasian (see Table 1). This sample is a subset of the whole class, being that the total 410 entries from all student participant journals were much too large of a data set for this multi-case qualitative analysis approach. The specific 10 participants were chosen purposefully due to their active engagement in the weekly writing assignments, interesting responses that highlight different purposes that a dialogue journal can play in students expressing their emotional lives, and according to a balance of five male and five female participants.
### Table 1

**Participant Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case # and Pseudonym</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>General Description</th>
<th>Entries in Journal</th>
<th>Entries online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Bota</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Quiet and shy, doesn’t often volunteer, loves cats</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Maddy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Relatively quiet, talkative with friends, caring heart, oldest</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Emily</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Extremely quiet and shy, new to the school</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Lindsay</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Outgoing, chatty, class clown, acts before thinking</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Mia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Talkative, lots of friends, energetic, athletic, kind</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Toby</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Quiet, confident in schoolwork, unique sense of humor</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Matt</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Talkative, lots of friends, medical condition, Active</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Devin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>New to school in November, quiet, speech r slur</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) Parker</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>New to school, quiet, hard-working, cooperative</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) Anthony</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Quiet, sensitive to any negative experiences</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>139</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, the selected participants have a range of experiences that help make the sample diverse, including various characteristic traits of being quiet, shy, talkative, not many friends, lots of friends, inclined to academics, dislike for schoolwork, talkative, obedient, serious, funny and many other attributes that make for a unique data set. Three of the 10 participants were
brand new to the school this past year, while seven began the year knowing at least a few classmates and teachers. The 10 selected participants also display a range of interests from sports, to reading, to crafting, to love of animals or traveling.

Nine of the participants continued the optional dialogue journal assignment during the COVID-19 online school transition, writing at least one entry over email to the teacher. This is important to this study because it allows us to specifically look at what role the dialogue journal assignment played in students’ lives in the middle of a worldwide pandemic and teaching crisis. The one student participant who did not write during COVID-19 was still selected in the sample due to how emotionally expressive and unique her journal was during the rest of the school year.

**Teacher Researcher**

As the teacher-researcher in this study, I just completed my fourth year of teaching, three years in third grade, and one year in fourth at a new school in the Mountain West region of the United States. I am a 26-year-old, single, white woman who grew up in a small rural farming community on the east coast of the United States. I have taught in a large inner-city public school on the northeastern coast of the United States, a small inner-city public charter school in the southwestern region United States and now in public schools in the Mountain West region of the United States. I chose to implement dialogue journals for the first time in my first year of teaching fourth grade upon urging from my co-worker who gushed that it was a great way to develop a relationship with students, get them writing, and allow them to have a voice in the classroom. I spent on average, forty-five minutes each weeknight after school personally responding to the 5-6 journal entries from separate students that were due that day throughout the week. In addition to specific responses to student experiences and questions, each week I had generic questions prepared to ask students that I believed would be interesting for them to respond to and elicit emotional reflection and responses. This was based on research that postulates reflective writing is
most effective when prompts are directive with specific connections to students’ feelings toward experience and the course content (Billings, 2002; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997).

**Research Process**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for working with human subjects and the school district reviewed and approved the research protocols (Appendix A). Parents of the students in the fourth-grade students in the classroom received a letter explaining the SEL dialogue journal study and had the opportunity to excuse their child from the study portion of the project. Parental assent to use student dialogue journals was obtained as parents responded to an email query from the researcher and indicated their approval. Students were also invited to give permission for their dialogue journals to be used through a video from the researcher that explained the project in language accessible to them and asked them to talk it over with their parents. Each of the students in the study has been given a pseudonym.

**Data Collection: Dialogue Journals**

As part of a weekly homework assignment, required for students to go to *Fun Friday*, a special reward time for the class, fourth-graders were asked to write a short letter to their teacher. This close-knit classroom setting of a school facilitated one-on-one writing within a dialogue journal between students and their teacher to create a safe place for children to share thoughts and feelings. These letters were supposed to be at least 12 lines long and written in as neat of penmanship as possible. They were not graded according to content, neatness, or spelling. They were simply required to complete the assignment by the end of the week so that they could attend Fun Friday. Students were allowed to talk about anything in their journals and were encouraged to ask their teacher questions to facilitate a two-way relationship.

Each week I, as the teacher, would respond to what each student had written the week before, answer any questions that the student had asked, and then ask a couple of follow-up
questions. These were framed according to either what the students had talked about previously or according to what I thought would be something they could reflect on in their life and would be interested in. These prompts and responses were sometimes the same for each student that week, but often they varied according to what I was interested in knowing more about in that specific student’s life that particular week.

In March when the school year was abruptly transformed from traditional, in school class learning to digital, at-home learning due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the dialogue journal routine changed. Students were then given the option to continue emailing their weekly letter. The teacher sent out a personal email to all the students and provided video directions to all students on how to access their email and respond to her. For various, often unknown reasons, some students emailed weekly letters and responses for the remainder of the school year, while others never responded to the initial email or encouragement from the teacher. Dialogue journals were collected at the end of the school year from students’ porches due to pending circumstances of COVID-19 that prevented students from turning them in at school. Overall, 23 out of 28 journals were collected. Out of those 23 journals, I chose 10 participants to feature in these cases.

Individual student responses ranged from a couple of sentences to the assigned minimum of 10-12 lines, to pages of writing with details. Their response lengths also varied by week as some weeks offered them more time to write, while others did not. There were weeks that students chose not to or were unable to complete their journal assignment. There were 17 possible entries for each student throughout the school year until the change to digital learning took place. Seven of the 10 participants wrote more than 14 entries while the remaining 3 wrote between 8 and 11 entries throughout the school year. This resulted in a total of 139 total dialogue journal written responses that were read through and coded for this project. Additionally, nine of the student participants continued journal responses during digital learning, with 6 possible online entries. Of these email
responses, eight participants wrote at least 4 entries, one wrote only 2 entries and the last student
didn’t respond at all during this time. This resulted in a total of 32 online entries in this project.
This provided a grand total of 171 journal entries, handwritten and emailed, which were coded and
drawn from in this research study.

Multi-Case Study: Building Cases

A multiple case study analysis was chosen for our particular study due to its relevance to
Yin’s (2003) qualifications for a case study being, (a) the focus of the study is to answer “how” and
“why” questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study; (c) you
want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under
study; and (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context.

For this case study, data from 10 of the 28 students in the class were used to build cases to
explore the research question in depth. Dialogue journal entries, both in a physical journal used
before the COVID-19 school closure and from online typed journal responses after the school
closure, were utilized to explore how these children responded to specific prompt questions.

These specific cases were built in a way that acknowledges Stake’s (1995) multi-case study
description that each case represents a separate example of how 4th grade children interact with
dialogue journals. A constant motivation in building each case was to characterize the findings
relating to the research questions and to “show how the phenomenon appears in different contexts”
(Stake, 1995, p. 27). The phenomenon these cases revolve around the research questions designed
to help us understand how dialogue journals can be used to support students’ social and emotional
health and explore how these children use them.

For this study, the “different contexts” mentioned refers to the variety of participants used
within the study. Thus, efforts were made to balance male and female voices, as well as include the
situational, in class and personal contexts that may have played a factor in what the students’ chose
to write about their emotionality and sociality. This additional context from the participant researcher adds depth to the cases and allows for a deeper understanding of the data. For example, in one case, a student writes a ‘P.S. note’ in her journal about something that happened in class that day, but without the contextual information of what happened, the quote could be misinterpreted or overlooked as less relevant to the study.

Each case was individually considered from not only the students’ dialogue journal responses, but also from this contextual viewpoint. Stake (1995) asserts, “The case’s activities are expected to be influenced by contexts, so contexts need to be studied and described, whether or not evidence of influence is found” (p. 27). In my analysis I included context from in-class observations that I made throughout the year as a researcher that affected my perspective of each student, as well as my own personality and style of teaching that could influence the case. Extraneous factors which applied to the phenomenon were also considered, such as, if the student was new to the school or if the student had notable fears or issues that I knew about outside of the journal entries.

Other additional components that were applied in this analysis to assist in upholding rigor and focus include, the consideration of issues while analyzing data. Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) both suggest that propositions and issues are necessary elements in case study research and analysis to help keep the researcher focused. The issues that this study generally focused on were (a) children need a place to be able to healthily enact and express their emotional lives and (b) dialogue journals may be a tool that can be used in schools to support students’ social and emotional health in order to mitigate overwhelming mental health concerns that plague today’s schools. Therefore, in this study, I specifically analyzed dialogue journals for ways that these 4th grade students shared emotional situations in their lives, feelings, preferences, and personal aspirations and about their relationships with others around them.
I also looked for the ways that dialogue journals revealed new information about students and their personalities which allowed me to consider how to better connect and support these students in class. For example, reading that a student thought her handwriting was terrible, allowed me to be sensitive to that insecurity and gently encourage and support her throughout the journal. Also, reading through entries of students who made me laugh out loud as they tried to be humorous, gave me the opportunity to be more humorous in my responses and facilitate a deeper more personal connection with students.

These issues of students needing a healthy place to express their emotions and a tool to help support their social and emotional health provided clear lenses to peer through and consider as I read through hundreds of journal entries, both when choosing which participants to select, and choosing which examples and quotes to choose out of those entries. Baxter and Jack (2008) recommend returning to these issues often because, “The pitfall in the report writing that many novice researchers fall into is being distracted by the mounds of interesting data that are superfluous to the research question. Returning to the propositions or issues ensures that the researcher avoids this pitfall” (p. 555).

Data Analysis Procedures

For my first cycle of data analysis, I read through each journal entry and tabbed ways that students shared emotional situations in their lives, feelings, preferences, and personal aspirations and about their relationships with others around them. I also looked for their personalities in their writing and tabbed parts that allowed me to better understand how they were communicating with me. This first cycle was helpful because it provided imagery, symbols, and metaphors for rich categories, themes, and concept development (Saldaña, 2013) as I carefully read through each response and considered each student individually and how they were engaging with their dialogue journal.
During the second cycle of data analysis, I made lists of all the data I had taken from each student and began to piece together similarities and organize the emerging and recurring themes into categories. This allowed for broader thematic clusters to be formed, but still, I strove to maintain student voice and words throughout (Saldaña, 2013). Additionally, this helped me begin to focus on which 10 students I wanted to choose for this particular case study according to richness of data, diversity of experience, and gender representation.

After second level coding I consulted with a research partner to discuss and identify patterns emerging from the data relating to the questions of how 4th graders used the dialogue journals to connect emotionally with me as the teacher. Responses and interpretations were discussed to assure a comprehensive exploration and to attend to the data ethically throughout the research process and analysis. Many times, throughout the process of analysis it was important for me to step back from my teacher perspective and look at the data through more of a researcher and outsider perspective. A research partner joined me to sift through all the data to analyze and make meaning out of it, rather than simply telling my student’s stories descriptively. In the final analysis, four emergent themes captured the main ideas in these student cases. These main themes showcase how dialogue journals can act as a space for students to share emotional and personal aspects of their lives and feelings that can add to what is done in classroom spaces. We strove to expound upon why these themes from students’ entries in their dialogue journals are amazing and the potential for understanding and connecting with students as well as for future teacher practice.

I constantly asked my research question of how fourth graders share their social and emotional lives in private classroom letters and online letters to their teacher over the year as I read through the data. I also explored any changes in these spaces as emotional supports after a shift from the regular school routine to at-home digital learning due to a worldwide pandemic. As I worked to analyze and look closer at these 10 cases, I looked for how each case illuminated
particular ideas that pertain to how 4th-grade students use a dialogue journal to share their social and emotional lives both before and after the pandemic. I use their wording and language as they wrote it to present the findings of this analysis in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4

Findings

The following case analyses are compiled from both my in-school observations and interactions with the following 10 students, as well as their dialogue journal writing entries from the entire school year. It is important to note that, given the limited range and time this data represents, we recognize that this reflects only a piece of these students’ lives and experiences in regard to how they choose to share their emotional and social lives with their teacher and any potential significance of that sharing. These cases are not intended to portray a holistic or complete view of who these students are or all that they chose to include in their journals. I reiterate that the following case analyses are not claims that I make to represent specific students but are cases meant to delve deeper into how 4th grade students, in general, have the potential to share themselves socially and emotionally in dialogue journals that may make a difference in their mental health and well-being. These cases are used to explore the possibilities for how dialogue journals can act as a space for 4th grade students to share personal and emotional aspects of their lives as well as exploring the potential support for students.

In this chapter, I present the main themes that emerged about how students used their dialogue journals to share their social and emotional lives. The four main themes I identified are that students can share feelings, ideas and parts of themselves with me in a dialogue journal that they don’t share in class; that the journal provides a space for them to elaborate upon and become more aware of their feelings; that students seek to have a personal connection with their teacher; and that students have comments and feedback about what is happening in the classroom. In addition, a fifth theme emerged related to how the student’s entries affected my immediate practices as a teacher, as well as how reading them afterwards as a researcher added insights and ideas for future practices on how I could have been even more supportive to the students.
I present each of the 10 student cases and elaborate what each contributes to our understanding of these main themes, in addition to any individual insights from each case into how fourth grade students use dialogue journals to share their emotional lives in school. My own responses and realizations as the participant teacher and researcher are also interwoven in each case as analysis of student responses and journal entries illuminated potential implications for future practice. I present the cases in order of gender starting with the girls in the first five cases and then presenting the cases of boys in the last five cases.

**Case 1: Bota**

From my teacher’s perspective, Bota was what I might call a beautiful “wallflower.” She actively listened and engaged in conversation when directly spoken to, but didn’t often take initiative to reach out to communicate with me. She had a couple close friends with whom I noted she would openly and expressively chat during free time, making surprising facial expressions, and giggling uncontrollably with them from time to time, but I rarely personally experienced that side of her as a student in my classroom. She shyly gifted me with a homemade, detailed origami box on Halloween, eagerly awaiting me to discover the surprise of chocolate candies encased in eyeball wrappers inside.

Overall, this case illustrates how Bota used the dialogue journal as an avenue for her to open up about deep, personal and vulnerable feelings. She most likely wouldn’t have had the chance or voice to share these kinds of feelings and experiences within the regular school day. She was able to share and reflect on feelings connected to her identity, as well as express her honest, clear preferences and feelings about experiences she was having in her life throughout this time. Without her journal entries, I feel confident in saying that I wouldn’t have known these feelings or preferences because she was not a student who openly talked or expressed these things within the
classroom, nor would there have been an opportunity built into the regular curriculum for her to share such feelings.

Within her journal, Bota began the year in an open entry that shared about her evening playing Pokémon Go with her friend in a park, jumping on her trampoline and finished with a genuine expression of her innermost feelings on the topic of going to bed “I hate going to bed it takes like three hours plus my little sister will not stop talking.” As the year went along, Bota wrote about hobbies she enjoyed, such as playing Minecraft, dancing hip-hop, swimming, and singing. She also wrote detailed accounts of her cats and the funny things that they did:

My cats cuddle me all the time at night. When I wake up in the middle of the night they are sleeping on me. Hey, Saturn keeps biting my pencil and trying to drink my root beer. Saturn loves me. I don’t know why she loves me so much.

This quote from Bota’s dialogue journal shows a more playful, loving side to Bota than I knew in class. She described her cats’ antics and love for them in detail, illustrating how much her cats mean to her. I could feel how significant that connection was for her and therefore was able to also connect with her as I talked about my cat I grew up with as a child and my memories of what she used to do.

Bota also shared how she dealt with her little sister questioning her about her favorite color when she wrote, “Anytime I say I like yellow my little sister says ‘Eww why do you like yellow it's the color of pee’ I just say ‘there are other things that are yellow that’s not just...pee.’” This quote illustrates what I believe could be Bota’s attempt to write her inner dialogue of how to stand up for herself and her beliefs. By writing to me about this situation, she seemed to be sharing her thoughts and feelings about how she stood up for herself in what I believe is a healthy and confident way.

In fact, Bota also shared her feelings about how to stand up for herself in other entries. The following was an entry she wrote mid-year upon being given the opportunity to introduce herself
in a letter to my roommate. Bota took the occasion to open up and be vulnerable as she expressed her feelings about her name in introducing herself for the first time to a trusted friend of mine. She wrote, “I hate my name I don’t know why but people made fun of it. It was so annoying! It made me so mad and one boy said it to annoy me on purpose I didn’t like him.” Bota appears to be grappling with her sense of identity here as she expresses her annoyance and hurt when other people pick on her because of her unusual name.

My roommate replied, compassionately back to Bota, saying, “I am so sorry to hear about that! But you should love your name!” My roommate went on to talk about what Bota’s name really meant and why she thought Bota’s name was so amazing, ending with the statement, “You should be so proud of your beautiful name, I love it.” This response provided Bota with perhaps a new and exciting perspective on her name that was meant to help her feel accepted and as if that name has a purpose for belonging to her that others may not recognize. It encouraged Bota to take a different view and see the good part of her name rather than just the side that people tease her about. Bota responded “Ok, you are right I’m glad you said that… but I still hate that annoying commercial you know that song that’s just like “[Bota, Bota, Bota].” My grandpa thinks that should be my theme song! … and by the way I like your name too!” This response illustrates a development of self-awareness as she is working through deeply personal and vulnerable ideas and feelings about what it means to be her. Her comment about liking my roommate’s name also is a significant indicator of social development. The dialogue journal became a space for Bota to be vulnerable and complain a little bit about something in her life, as well as receive a little comfort and assurance. Due to her quiet, keep to herself disposition in class, I don’t think that she ever would have admitted these things to me in person unless we were given one on one time in person where I was asking her specific questions, which would have been near impossible for me to do without her dialogue journal entries to inform me.
When school transitioned to online schooling due to the Coronavirus pandemic and the dialogue journal became an optional assignment, Bota continued writing at the first chance and was able to continue to express herself in an online forum. As she wrote about her spring break, she included details about going on “AWESOME” hikes, baking delicious scones as well as her need for connection as she wrote about various social parts of her life that were both missing and that were helping her cope. She wrote,

Erica has been wanting to have a play date so badly so have I. I've been so bored lately not being able to play with friends. My cats have been keeping me company while I do school work Saturn is always watching and making sure I do my homework...They are adorable! I love cats! I miss normal school too. Home school is sooo boring. Oh ya I forgot I also did some art. I made a card for my next door neighbor and I putt it on her doorstep and ran to my trampoline with my brother an acted like it wasn't me but it really was.

She used this writing opportunity to maintain a connection and continued to express her emotions and share parts of her life with me. I would not have seen this side of her in a regular classroom setting, things like delivering a handmade card to her next-door neighbor during COVID-19, without an open communication channel she found available in the dialogue journal format.

In other online letters she clearly expressed her disdain for school taking place at home by stating, “I'm also excited to go back to school. I hate homeschool! It's so boring.” Bota continued to use her dialogue journal as an outlet for expressing her emotions and articulating preferences that she would not have shared otherwise. She was developing a voice and confidence with me and I felt like she trusted that I was there to listen to her frustrations and ideas.

As a teacher, lots of what Bota chose to share and write about in her journal allowed me to react to her in a more supportive, responsive way. Initially with the personal connection I was able to make with her about her cats, which I imagine helped establish trust between us, and then on to
deeper levels of emotional support I was able to provide as I understood where she was coming from. For example, after she shared the insecure feelings about her name, I was then able to pick up on a boy who would occasionally sing the song with her name in it to annoy her in class. I was able to have a conversation with him that stopped him from continuing to do that in my classroom. Also, because Bota shared that she was feeling sad she couldn’t get together with her friends during the remote learning period, I was able to comment and let her know I was feeling similarly. As I reflected during my research on Bota sharing her small example of sticking up to her sister about her love for the color yellow, I recognized that it would have been helpful for me to respond by praising her for standing up for what she believes in and validating her choice to peacefully disagree with her sister.

Overall, this case shows how the dialogue journal provided an additional way for me to interact and learn about students and where they were coming from. It provided a safe, constructive space for me as a teacher to compliment students and point out their strengths as the students openly shared parts of themselves.

**Case 2: Maddy**

From my teacher perspective, Maddy was a kind, caring student who got along well with her classmates and engaged in polite and friendly conversation with me. Occasionally she needed reminders to refocus on her work, rather than passing notes or whispering about who had a crush on who with a nearby classmate. As the oldest of four siblings, she definitely had an air of responsibility and authority to the way she carried herself and was in charge of many group work situations.

Maddy’s dialogue journal shows how she sought a deeper personal connection with me as her teacher as she offered compliments, showed gratitude, asked questions and shared details of her life. Her dialogue journal also shows how 4th grade students can use the journaling space to stop
and think and reflect more deeply on life; writing down thoughts about feelings or events that they may not have the chance to do elsewhere. It also created a space for her and I to work through her insecurities in a positive, healthy way and for her to give commentary about assignments and classroom related issues she was having to create a synergy in the classroom that would have been lacking otherwise.

At the beginning of the dialogue journal assignment, Maddy described the names and ages of her family members; shared her love for hobbies such as dancing, swimming and playing with slime; and told an interesting fact that “me and my mom have the same birthday which is on cinco de mayo. I was born at 2:00 PM. She went to the hospital in the morning so it was a very short delivery. I want to be a delivery nurse when I grow up.” Her decision to write this personal story began to build a trust and knowledge between us that went much deeper than typical classroom interactions would have taken us. When asked what she would write a book about if she wrote one, she expressed “it would be about how people are different and that you will respect others.” This surprised me at first because I had not had a chance to see how much Maddy was already considering her future and how deeply and compassionately she thought about others around her. It created a basis of connection between us as I in turn was able to ask her even more reflective questions as she had been so thoughtful and responsive to the initial questions.

Her interest in those around her also extended to me through the dialogue journal. Maddy used this space to reach out and form a personal connection with me by asking me lots of original questions that she was curious about in order to get to know me more fully as a whole person. She asked things like, “What is your favorite kind of animal? What are some of your favorite hobbies? How was your Christmas break? What have you been up to? How are you feeling? What is some things you are planning for the summer? Are you having fun?” She would then further comment on my responses with things like “that is disgusting that you tried to capture mice. I cry if I see a
“mouse” or “me and my grandma love watching hallmark movies too!” which allowed me to feel her care and connection with my responses. Our trust and personal relationship definitely grew as she thoughtfully used her journal to ask me questions and comment on my answers. I think it would have been hard for her to ask these kinds of questions and reach out to me personally in the ordinary school day.

Maddy took the opportunity throughout the year to share her opinions about what was happening at school and academic-related issues that she noticed. She wrote “I know my handwriting can get better but not yet. I love your handwriting. But I will get better.” Two entries later she reflected, “I think I’m improving my handwriting.” She continued to apologize for her writing towards the end of the year when she wrote, “I’m sorry I wrote your name so big on top of the letter. I wrote 11 on the date and I’m like oh no it’s december.” Clearly, Maddy was unsure of her handwriting skills and shared this emotion with me as a sort of vulnerable part of herself, something she didn’t think she was good at. Maddy had never once told me during writing time or regular school day routines that she didn’t like her handwriting. The dialogue journal provided a safe, different kind of space for her to feel comfortable bringing up this insecurity where I was then able to be attuned to it and support her in working through it.

In the dialogue journal there were other entries that showed this more insecure emotional side of Maddy. She reflected on why I had moved her seat, though I had never given any reason for having done so, and stated in a PS after her entry, “Thanks for switching me to another table it will help me not talk. But only talk when it’s time to talk which is recess.” As she shared her own understandings and reasoning about this unexplained change, we see a process of self-reflection and perhaps Maddy was also reaching out to me as her teacher to connect with me and seek attention. Additionally, this was a space wherein she was comfortable enough with me to share vulnerabilities and weaknesses.
Later in the year when I followed up with her in the dialogue journal about how she was liking her seating arrangement she frankly stated, “I mean the seating arrangement is fine but I hate how its the vocabulary table it sucks because it just becomes so messy. like really messy. I tried to draw a mad face. hahahah.” I wonder if Maddy would have ever had the opportunity or courage to bring this up to me on her own in a busy classroom where comfort and cleanliness aren’t a big part of the driving academic force most days. The dialogue journal gave Maddy a space to openly criticize and complain about the cleanliness of the classroom that I, as a teacher, am generally responsible for. This is an example, once again, of how the dialogue journal empowered Maddy to voice things that she normally wouldn’t dream of articulating straight to my face.

She also offered feedback to me about homework one week in November, saying “When you said we had to do the 10-15 units that made it a lot easier for me to do my homework. Thank you.” She also complimented my clothing choices by saying “I like that you have taco socks on Tuesdays.” The dialogue journal allowed Maddy to continue to form a distinctive personal connection with me by expressing gratitude to me and complimenting me on things that she likes.

Maddy shared deep thoughts from time to time such as when asked what she was excited about for the new year, she wrote “What I’m excited about the New Year is it is a new start so all the times I messed up I can forget about all those times I messed up! Also now I have way more memories than I used to!!!!!!!” This showed the surfacing of what may have been another one of Maddy’s insecurities and illustrated the work she was doing to think through what she saw and encountered in her life. She displayed an awareness of her emotions as she expressed excitement at the thought of moving on from times that she messed up. I would never have known these thoughts of hers had she not shared them in her journal.

During online schooling, Maddy waited a few weeks to begin emailing dialogue journal entries, however when she did, she began to identify specific ways that she’d been feeling and why.
In response to prompts asking her how she was feeling lately, she wrote “I’m sad because I have a major sunburn but I’m happy because my birthday is next Tuesday,” a week later she explained, “I’m feeling tired and great today its a mix and a memory that makes me happy is when my cousin and I were 5 and we went on a stage and sang let it go. my least favorite feeling is sadness because it stays with me for a while it just won’t come out of me.” As Maddy shares her feelings and her thinking about them, we see the development of emotional self-awareness and awareness of others when she compliments me. She also is able to recognize that you can feel more than one emotion at a time and that her feelings are more complex than just being one way. Upon reflection, I wondered if Maddy may have been seeking support in a backward way, without directly explaining why she was sad. When writing about how she was feeling about school ending she said “I AM VERY sad that I have to say goodbye to everyone it sucks but summers coming so today I am going to watch highschool musical 2.” She used the dialogue journal as a safe place for her to recognize feelings and share those in an open, expressive way that she may not have had the opportunity to share elsewhere.

Maddy’s dialogue journal allowed me, as a teacher, to become aware of ways to be a support to her in both emotional and practical ways. When she shared her insecurity about her handwriting, I was able to lovingly encourage her and support her by responding in ways like, “Your handwriting will improve the more you practice, so keep at it!” and “There were really nice spaces in between your words last time, keep it up!” Without the journal I may not have been able to encourage her like this because of so many other things that I am responsible for doing throughout the school day, and because I may never have known the level of this insecurity of hers had she not written about it. Also, when Maddy commented on the vocabulary table being messy, I really appreciated this feedback. I was able to recognize that the vocabulary table wasn’t being cleaned up properly and that it was a nuisance and perhaps a distraction for students like Maddy.
who prefer order and cleanliness in their learning space. I quickly made adjustments and the problem was taken care of. This open form of individual communication between a teacher and student acted as a way for students to give feedback and for appropriate responses that helped the whole class.

**Case 3: Emily**

From my perspective, Emily was an extremely introverted, bright student who struggled to speak in front of her peers and me without blushing or getting nervously choked up. Emily’s mom had approached me before the school year started to inform me that Emily was trying public school for the first time, due to her little first grade sister’s encouragement, but that Emily was really nervous about the transition and making new friends. I therefore put in extra effort to talk to her, seat her in safe places next to friendly, calm students and help facilitate small recess groups where new students (Emily in particular) had groups they felt comfortable hanging out with.

Overall, we learn from Emily’s entries that the dialogue journal can provide a space for new, shy and hesitant students to open up and be heard with the teacher, and become comfortable in class through seeking a personal connection. As the year went along, Emily became more aware of herself, expressed what she perceived her strengths to be within her journal, and eventually freely shared and labeled her emotions and why she was feeling that way. The journal gave me a chance as a teacher to be responsive and supportive to her hesitancy and encourage her in feeling comfortable and confident in her new setting. It also gave Emily a space to reflect on the positives of her new school experience and on the way that certain books and stories made her feel. During online schooling, it appeared that the journal gave Emily a much-needed outlet to make sense of and identify how she’d been feeling with all the change going on and ask for emotional support through the COVID-19 quarantine.
It was clear to me early on that the dialogue journal provided a great way for Emily to communicate with me and introduce herself to me as she shared preferences and things going on in her life. In her first entry, introducing herself to me, she wrote, “I love to do art my walls are covered in paintings. I like to read a lot. I prefer reading more than to play with friends.” Emily recognized that while many of her peers preferred playing with friends over reading, that she does not and she wanted me to know that she accepts her individual preference to read rather than play with friends. Later in the year, she elaborated on this self-awareness and asserted her self-acceptance in her preference for quietude. When I asked her a few things that she loves about herself and that made her special she wrote, “A few things that make me unique is my last name, me being quiet and shy and that I read a lot and doing it makes me happy.” Because the dialogue journal gave her an opportunity to reflect, she was able to share part of her perception of her identity and feelings in a way that I would never have known about in the course of a regular school day. Additionally, she was able to assert this identity in concrete ways as she worked through how she fit into school life with her peers. To finish off her first entry, she said, “I have a feeling this will be a good year.” This shows an optimism from Emily that I would never have seen in school due to her lack of facial expressiveness in class or verbal communication with me, and it did change how I saw my work with her. Writing in Emily’s dialogue journal built an informative, safe relationship between her and me that we otherwise wouldn’t have had and it allowed me to understand better where she was coming from in order to help her with her particular challenges as she transitioned to school.

In a heartfelt journal entry in January, Emily expressed, “I have noticed compared to my old [private] school that this school is better because I have more friends, have more opportunities, and closer to my house. Here I have the chance to attend choir, computers, fun projects, and P.E. I am glad that I switched over to [school name] Elementary.” Emily shared a recognition of personal
growth within her own life and writing this shows that she may have felt more confident in where she was at socially and who she was becoming. The dialogue journal gave Emily the uncommon opportunity to pause and recognize how she was feeling toward this new experience in her life and why. This is a particularly important step for her given her circumstances of being so unsure about public school to begin with and feeling hesitant to attend. The journal allowed her a space to articulate her feelings in a way that she normally wouldn’t have been given, and she also shows the development of a sense of self-awareness with her feelings and thoughts about how to be confident in her own experiences.

The dialogue journal also provided a way for Emily to share her feelings about things she loved related to learning, as she expressed her love for books many times in her journal. She wrote, “The battle of the books is coming soon I am so excited. When will we start practicing?” and then after I asked her which book was her favorite that she’d read so far she answered, “My favorite book so far is Moo because it has poems and I like the stubborn old cow. My least favorite book so far is Bearstone because Cloyd’s father is braindead and there’s a page where Walter Landis swears at Cloyd a lot.” Here she expressed her own recognition that the emotions the second book elicited in her were uncomfortable for her. Books, especially for Emily who loves reading so much and treasures the stories, can be a good avenue for students to begin expressing their thoughts and feelings on situations in a less intimate manner. Dialoguing about books gives children a relatively safe avenue to talk about characters in the story and draw connections to how those characters and situations make them feel. The journal gave her a place to recognize things she liked and didn’t like within the stories and why that was.

As the transition to online schooling happened, Emily’s entries became more reflective about her feelings and emotions. She wrote, “My feelings have been all over the place. I am happy about the nice weather but upset that we are not going back this year. I miss you a lot.” This was
the most expressive and direct that Emily had been in her emotions thus far in her journal. In the following entry she said, “When I am sad I go to my room and read my book. It helps me get my mind off of it. If I were invisible I would do a few tricks on my siblings and if I had a bad hair day no one would see me.” In her final online entry, she said, “Some emotions I have been feeling lately are grateful for beautiful weather. Sad that the school year is almost over and I won’t have you for my teacher next year. I’m so excited for my birthday on the 20th. I am mad because my birthday is during this stupid quarantine. So we cannot go swimming or out to eat at a restaurant.”

The dialogue journal became a place for her to vent a little about the frustrations that have come from quarantining and shutting down places, it became a place for her to openly express her negative feelings and acknowledge them without fear of judgement or backlash. Without the dialogue journal space, it is unlikely that she would have been able or had the courage to share herself so freely with me face to face in the classroom (or during our online math review classes) due to her shyness. It was also a place where she provided information on her perceptions of teacher-student relationships.

As a teacher, I was better able to support Emily through the dialogue journal by making a connection as I shared my love for drawing and art as a kid with her and echoed her feeling that it was going to be a good year right back to her. When she shared her impressions on stories that she’d read, this made me more aware of her sensitivity as a reader and I was able to make further book recommendations accordingly, as well as have a conversation with her about what makes books enjoyable and what doesn’t. I wouldn’t have known her reaction to books if the dialogue journal didn’t open up the space for her to openly share those reactions with me. The dialogue journal opened up possibilities for me to see how to support Emily emotionally as well as academically.
**Case 4: Lindsay**

Lindsay is a very social, outspoken girl who loves to make people laugh and to be the center of attention. She showed up to back-to-school night dressed in pajama bottoms and made a comment to me about comfort being the new trend in the first few minutes we met. She had strong opinions on Gwen Stefani, Wednesday Addams, and corgis. Academically, she struggled and lacked confidence with math concepts and also had a small speech impediment. She notably seemed impervious to social critique and was very popular with her peers. I would often also catch her reaching out to others who were having a harder time making friends.

One day she walked into class carrying a water bottle and sporting a t-shirt, both of which had her father’s business logo printed on them, she strutted around the room smiling and saying “Just jwumming up business fa my dad!” And whenever I would put the song Feliz Navidad on around Christmas time she would hop out of her seat and give a Latin style rendition of a dance for the occasion. A few times throughout the year I had conversations with her about knowing when and when not to be silly, about kicking or hitting boys, about telling the truth and about not throwing cones from the playground on top of trailers after school.

Overall, Lindsay was very emotionally expressive and effusive. She used her journal entries to express her strong, big, emotional responses to the world around her. Whether those feelings came from watching a movie, or real-life experiences like her grandmother’s living will, or a teacher showing up to her dance recital, they were honest, heartfelt articulations of how she felt. While it may have been her personality to share these things in class as an outspoken child, the structure of the classroom often didn’t allow her to share all of these types of thoughts and opinions.

As she shared her emotional responses in the dialogue journal, I was able to connect with her emotionally and do my best to support her in my role as a teacher in what she was going
through. When she went to see the movie *Little Women* with her mom and aunt, and recommended that I go and watch it, it was a great opportunity for me to connect with her emotionally. After I saw it, I shared my impressions and feelings about it to which she responded, “Same, I cried when Beth passed away too it broke my heart too when he married Amy.”

Additionally, I was also vulnerable back with her, and I opened up a part of myself that is not usually part of my work as a professional educator. Her journal was the most open and personal of all, becoming a clear example of seeking a strong teacher-student connection with me and doing it in her own particular humor filled way that drew us together in a close, strong relationship of respect and understanding.

Her journal quickly became an open place for us to talk about anything and everything including fears, crushes, frustrations, and special events. She relished sharing many of her opinions and preferences in her journal such as when she wrote about where she lived, “I like it living in [her city] except the mink problem. In [nearby city] you can’t ride your Bike alone or have any freedom. In [neighboring city] you have freedom But you live next to a busy street called 12th south.” She shared her political preference when she signed off her name, writing beside it “(against trump)” or would try to convince me to put her seat at the same table as one of her friends, desperately asking “what will it take?” These opinions allowed me to understand her better as a person and set up opportunities for me to support her as a teacher, like knowing that the incentive of sitting next to a friend may help her focus on a writing assignment that day, or that she politically had a desire to express her voice which warranted us opportunities to talk about government set up in class and the impeachment process.

Her sense of humor also carried through brightly in her journal, she used it to reach out and make a connection with me. For example, she comically explained why she took piano lessons, “P.S. I just do it because of my dad and she gives me free candy.” Or when she signed off in
various ways like “your favorite student Lindsay don’t tell anyone I said that but we both know it’s true” or “your favorite student Lindsay, President of the United States of America! Has a nice ring to it.”

She also expressed concern about my car, which I had told her was in the shop under a paint warranty claim when she wrote, “How is your car doing I mean how hard is it to fix darn paint?” and then continued in a later entry, “they should have your car done by now. its been a couple months. Whos car are you driving?” and finally after I told her I got it back she said, “thats nice they gave you your car back.” I could feel Lindsay’s support and empathy as she continued to check in and write to me about my car, even though it had absolutely nothing to do with her life and wasn’t an inconvenience at all to her personally. She definitely used the journal to make a personal connection with me. Lindsay used her journal to reach out and ask specific questions about my life and be curious about me like when she asked: “What state park did you work at? Did you live in the country part of New York or the city? What were the abandoned houses like? Did your dad ever go in one? What do you want for Christmas? What is something I don’t know about you?”

She also took opportunities to advocate for herself and inquire into classroom matters such as when she wrote, “And by the way can you put me and Maddy at the same table?” and “Why did Ellie and Kat switch spots, were Taylor and Kat talking too much?” All of these questions and engagement in the dialogue journals allowed us to connect and delve deeper into our teacher-student relationship and form a strong bond.

She also wrote about more serious things. In fact, Lindsay used the journal to write about a very emotional and vulnerable situation going on in her life. In likely the most vulnerable and open entry that a student wrote to me all year, Lindsay shared,
I’ve had a hard week because my grandma is in the hospital. And she is having a hard time breathing and she’s in the ICU. ICU stand for instent care unit. And I just found out about her whale [living will] not the mammal it is where you decied if you are going to die but they can save you like give you CPR but she decided she wanted to not get saved so that makes me sad.

I remember that week I was behind on responding to journals and hadn’t even looked at hers by Wednesday when she asked me if I had read her journal that she had turned in on Monday. When I finally got around to reading it on Thursday, I was able to understand why she had looked so gloomy that week and wasn’t her usual bubbly, responsive self. She was able to open up and share her feelings on a topic that had been weighing heavily on her heart and because she did that I was able to not only be more sensitive and understanding of her in the classroom, but also write a supportive, heartfelt response back to her to let her know she wasn’t alone in feeling that way. I wrote,

I am so sorry to hear about your grandma… I’ve been thinking about her and hoping she isn’t in too much pain. I get that hearing about her living will and decision to not be saved makes you sad. My grandma made the same choice, but when you think of it from their perspective… and how much pain or hurt they are feeling, it makes a little more sense. Anyway, you just keep loving her and being your sweet self… she is so lucky to have a granddaughter like you and NOTHING can change that!”

Although she didn’t end up responding to that entry due to a thumb injury (and her dad acted as scribe for a while), it opened up a space that allowed for deep emotional sharing and shared empathy. Later in the year she had asked me to tell her something she didn’t know about me yet and that week my grandfather had had a stroke and was in the hospital, so because of our previous exchange and interaction I felt it was safe and appropriate to share that with her and let her
know I was feeling blue that week since I was so far away and my grandpa was going through a rough time. She responded with “I’m so sorry to hear about your grandpa I know how you feel and its hard.” Lindsay used the dialogue journal to support my emotional health as a teacher and made me feel less alone.

Toward the end of the school year I went to watch her in a dance performance that she was in on the weekend and talked to her about it on Monday, but she said that she hadn’t seen me and was kind of disappointed. I luckily was able to show her video proof that I was there and later that week she wrote, “I was really happy you were there, although I did not see you.” She used the journal to express feelings that she didn’t express verbally to me as I showed her the video. It is clear that the journal can allow for students to share and express themselves in ways that they are not yet able or comfortable enough to do in face to face conversations.

During online schooling Lindsay chose not to do the optional dialogue journal assignment, though she showed up to most every google meet and chatted about all sorts of things in the middle of our math review lessons, sharing quarantine stories, asking other students about their lives and playing Despacito from her computer and dancing around her room for us. She also chose to sign up for and do the student spotlight interview video that I gave the students an option of doing. At the end of the year when I went to drop the student’s things off Lindsay had waited by the door all day, met me on the porch and had a long talk with me. I feel the dialogue journal played an important role in how I was able to connect with Lindsey emotionally throughout the year.

As a teacher, Lindsay’s dialogue journal was able to help me see a deeper, more emotional side to Lindsay than was evident in her frivolous, joking everyday self. It also established a connection between us that allowed for the exchange of vulnerabilities between us. I personally recognized that there was such a power in sharing vulnerable, appropriate things with students that I normally wouldn’t have shared. Usually I would have kept my grandfather being in the hospital to
myself and put on the facade as a teacher that everything in my life was perfect, but this dialogue journal and the space it set up allowed for a very vulnerable, mature, and healthy exchange to happen between Lindsay and me. I was able to see another way to connect with my students that can open space for teaching and developing emotional health. Additionally, as I looked at the journal as a researcher and considered my interactions with Lindsay throughout the year, I noticed that the personal connection that Lindsay sought with me, allowed her to be more responsive whenever I needed to have behavioral conversations with her about things she should or shouldn’t be doing in a school setting.

**Case 5: Mia**

Mia was a quick-witted, hard-working student who loved to learn, play and have a fun time. She was popular with her classmates and very influential among her peers. In class, she began the year relatively quiet, but quickly broke out of that shell and became more confident and outspoken as the year went on. Mia’s journal became a place where we talked as friends. Because of the relationship that we developed within her dialogue journal, I felt that whenever I redirected her in the regular class time, she was immediately responsive to what I asked her to do. She also became a great ally to me by encouraging less enthusiastic classmates to do the same, and at times stood up for me when a student in the class would mouth back or disrespect me.

Overall, Mia’s dialogue journal showcased the finding that some students may be yearning for a deeper and more human friendship with their teacher. Many times, throughout her journal she would ask deeply personal questions and respond in deeply personal, reflective ways. The journal gave her a forum to tell me personal opinions and feelings about things that she wouldn’t have usually said in the classroom. Additionally, her entries showed a level of self-awareness toward her own emotions and specific situations that made her feel a certain way. Her journal also illustrates
the power of student feedback about how things are done in class, which allowed me to adapt them as a teacher to better serve students’ preferences.

In Mia’s first entry she drew a map to her house and told about her middle name and skin tone linking her to being Italian, when her birthday was, and her love for soccer and puppies. At the bottom of her first entry she wrote, “PS Don’t tell any teacher this but you are my favorite teacher so far in school.” Immediately, I felt a connection with her and recognized her desire to form a friendship with me. Her journal became a space to have a current, active friendship to get to know one another better and communicate with each other.

She had absolutely no filter on her questions to me in her journal, which was refreshing because in class students are often discouraged from asking off topic questions. She often asked me personal questions through her journal like, “Can you tell me a little bit about you? What is your favorite book? Do you have a sister? What do you like to do with your family? What is your favorite holiday? Are you glad we have fish? You know when it was your birthday, did you do something after school or no? Do you have nicknames? Are your parents different or alike? Can you tell me something I might not know about you? What was your favorite sport when you were little? and What did you do on your snow day?” These questions forged a deep friendship and bond in our teacher-student relationship.

Mia curiously used her journal to challenge typical teacher roles and push me into the social life of the classroom. In one entry she asked, “If you had to marry a boy in our class who would it be? I will only answer that question if you do first. Hahaha!!” I responded carefully, striving to give attention to her question and not make her feel bad for asking it, but also to steer clear of anything inappropriate for a teacher and student. I wrote, “I wouldn’t marry a boy in my class, so I can’t answer that. Haha. But when I was a kid I had a crush on a boy named Adam… he was cute, funny and played soccer and basketball like I did. Anyway, what do you like about the boy you
have a crush on? (Please don’t tell me his name… I like to stay out of that realm of my classroom).” She answered back, “I’m not saying anything about that I love Boy in class thing. I said that I would only answer that if you did, so I’m not answering that! Sorry!” Although at the end of her entry she did write “P.S. that was so cute and funny when Chris kissed your hand” referring to an incident when a boy in class noticed I had pinched my hand hard in the laptop cart while trying to get computers put away and had asked to see my boo boo as I tried to shake it off. When I showed him my hand, he gently took it, looked it over and quickly kissed it before beaming up and me and saying “all better!” Mia used the journal to further comment on and reflect on classroom happenings in a way she never would have in class. She wouldn’t have walked up to my desk later on and said, “It was so cute and funny when he did that” to my face, but she did say it in her journal. This indicated to me that she welcomed a friendship in her life where she felt safe to be able to talk about boys without fear of being picked on or judged. I was far enough removed from her immediate family (and two older brothers), was familiar with her social life at school, and seemed friendly and cool enough to warrant her feeling comfortable enough to share these vulnerable things with me and inquire more personal questions about me.

Additionally, in her letter to my roommate, Mia felt comfortable and curious enough to ask, “Also is Ms. Johnson ever bad in the apartment you guys live in!!!” She also humorously tried to fact check my alter (substituting) ego -- which I occasionally take on in my classroom when the students seem to lose interest in the same old Ms. Johnson -- with my roommate saying, “Do you know who Ms. Sanderson is? If you don’t she is Ms. Johnson’s twin sister. (Not really, she just lied to us).” Mia used the journal to try and get as much information about me and my life as she possibly could.

Mia used humor to express herself and share with me, for example when she wrote, “When I am older I want to be an artist and a teacher. How about you… I mean you are already pretty old.
I’m not saying you are like a Grandma old, just for your age!” Her teasing created a back and forth between us as I defended my youth and said I was as young as a spring chicken. Mia used her personality and humor to strengthen the friendship and trust that we had between one another.

Mia also expressed her desire for our relationship to extend outside of the classroom as well when she wrote, “I also want you to come to my house sometime. Just call … that’s my mom’s phone number. Well, hope to see you sometime. Plus you can see my puppy.” I once again did my best to show deep appreciation and gratitude for her invitation, yet I felt pressure to remain professional and wasn’t sure that would be a good idea. I let her know that perhaps at the end of the school year I would have time to pay a visit, which I eventually got the chance to do because of all the school closure things. Normally, students don’t just invite me to their houses, but the dialogue journal, as a space of individual conversations with students outside of peer supervision, encouraged Mia to feel comfortable reaching for a more personal relationship.

Mia also used the journal to give student feedback and voice her opinions and preferences on class jobs, “I hate being a lead dancer it is so embarrassing!! I’m not trying to be rude. But I would love to be a bead rewarder or a mail carrier. I don’t have to be one of those I just like those. Oh yea or lunch bin carriers.” She used the dialogue journal to express her preferences of which jobs she did and didn’t want to have in the classroom. This type of sharing helped me be responsive as a teacher and created a greater synergy in our classroom by changing the way I assigned jobs to give students more autonomy.

Throughout her journal, Mia shared personal feelings and thoughts like, “What I would like to share at a talent show is probably my soccer skills or piano. I also really like to sing but not in front of people. I’m only brave enough to sing in front of my family!!” In this response, she used the journal to help her become more aware of herself and why she reacted certain ways to certain situations.
She also openly shared her thoughts when I asked what were some sounds that she likes to hear. She wrote, “Some of my favorite sounds throughout the day is when my sister is singing. Her singing is so cute and it also makes me laugh so much. The next thing I like to hear is whenever I have a soccer game and I make a goal. I like the sound of people cheering me on.” I could see that validation and approval of others made her feel good and improved her social and emotional well-being. This became a driving force of her dialogue journal as I reread it and I saw how much she craved attention and approval. Having the opportunity to write about these experiences and reflect on them, gave her the chance to know herself better and articulate her feelings clearly.

Mia showed a consideration of my time and life one day when she wrote, “I am sorry I always write so much! It probably takes up time for you to do the other Monday journals.” I felt that Mia considered me as a person beyond a teacher robot who does her school work through all hours of the night and never gets tired. This indicates an increase in her social awareness. The dialogue journal provided a way for me to bring more of myself into my teaching as I saw that students wanted to see and understand these parts of myself.

Mia used her journal to share how she was making sense of herself and her worth. She wrote, “Something you maybe don’t know about me is that I was the first girl in my family, so I’m a special person.” When I asked her if my sister was special too since she was the first girl in my family and whether or not her brothers and little sister were special, she replied, “Yes. Your sister is special. My sister is special because she was born last, my brother Treyson is special because he was the second child born, and my last brother Boston is special because he was the first child born.” She is reflecting on her feelings and worth in her journal and then upon my prompting is using the space to consider other’s value. The journal was full of opportunities to practice becoming more aware and reflecting on how she feels toward herself and other people around her.
When the online schooling transition happened, Mia continued to be expressive in her entries. She wrote “I have been feeling pretty good and also mad we can't really do anything. things that make me happy is when the sun is out so you can at least do something instead of being bored in your house. Things that make me sad is when the sun isn't out.” She continued to express her emotions about the quarantine time when she said, “I really want to go to the teacher parade. (I will ask my Mom) When quarantine is all over I will do lots of stuff out of my neighborhood like go swimming, go to trampoline places, play with friends, and lots of other stuff.” And when asked what cheers her up, she wrote, “Things that make me feel better when I'm sad are when I see smiles and laughs … it makes me happy!!!!”

As a teacher, throughout the year, Mia’s journal influenced many things about my practice and how I interacted with her and the class. First of all, I innovated how I thought about some classroom procedures. When Mia mentioned her opinions on classroom jobs, I began randomly picking names out of a jar at the beginning of each week, allowing students to pick their own jobs, rather than randomly cycling them through the jobs or assigning their jobs on my own. Her comment made me realize that choice and preference is such a big thing and that some students would love being the lead dancer, while others hated it! Also, because of her entries, we had a much more open, joking relationship in the classroom where I knew I could trust and count on her to do tasks that I needed done, or to openly ask her to share her impressions about something we had read or an activity we had completed. She became a dear, special student to me as the year went along which made showing up to work that much more enjoyable.

As a researcher there were many things that I considered more deeply as I reread through Mia’s entries. I recognized that as a teacher I was nervous when she invited me over to her house because of the way some people may perceive it. A few months earlier a local special education teacher was being investigated for taking the time to walk one of her students home after school
because that student’s ride didn’t show up to school. I was able to reflect on how sometimes I feel that as a teacher I live in an eggshell-filled environment full of tensions about how I can attend to the needs of my students. I am trained on the way to hug students, the way to speak to students, the appropriate subjects to talk about with them and whether or not it is appropriate to show up and do a home visit or not. I sometimes feel that these boundaries, while obviously meant to keep students and teachers safe, can have an unintentional negative effect on their social and emotional development and well-being.

**Case 6: Toby**

From my teacher viewpoint, Toby was an extremely smart, intellectually oriented student who enjoyed challenges in learning and liked to share new information with others. He was quite the bookworm and never needed reminders to stay focused on an assignment because he was already deeply committed and engaged. Often the first to finish, Toby was always eager to walk around and help struggling peers with their work, as our classroom culture frequently permitted. He also had a love for sports and a mature, dry, quick witted sense of humor. In his journal, he introduced his love for reading, explained places he’s travelled to, and expressed his desire to become an NFL player someday.

Overall, Toby’s entries illustrate the opportunity it gave him to share things with me that he most likely wouldn’t have shared face to face and open up a softer, compassionate side of himself. It also was a way for him to connect with me, his teacher, on an academic level and share his opinions on math subjects to create a dialogue on classroom math concepts being taught. During the quarantine period, he used his dialogue journal to explore his feelings of being away from school and unable to do things “normally.”

The dialogue journal became a place for Toby to share a gentle, giving side of himself that was not strongly visible to me in the classroom setting. In one entry where he responded to a
question about what he would spend a million dollars on, he wrote, “If I had $1,000,000 then I would give 75% if it to the poor. Then I would use the rest of the money on what me and my family needs.” This response differed from the typical fourth grade response grounded in personal toys, mansions, and trips they wanted to go on. Then, when I asked Toby what were some ways that he’d been kind lately he said, “I don’t really know how I’ve been nice lately. I have recently decided not to start fights when I could’ve. … Another way I’ve been nice/kind lately is that I say goodbye to each one of my sisters each morning before I leave.” When I commented on how nice that was, he followed up in his next entry by saying, “I will always say goodbye to my little sisters. Always. I have 3 little sisters. They are all so cute! One is 4, one is 2, and one is 8 months.” Toby was able to use his journal to express his heartfelt love for his little sisters and his commitment to being the best big brother he can be. This would not have been apparent to me or in turn been something that I could have validated unless there was an individual personal space and connection afforded by the dialogue journal. I was able to see him more fully than the face-to-face interactions we shared in class that involved mainly school performances and sports played at recess.

Toby also chose to discuss academic preferences with me in his dialogue journal. He wrote, “Do you know when we’ll be learning how to do decimals in division? I really want the whole class to learn it! Thanks for being a great teacher!” I responded by saying decimal division wasn’t part of our curriculum this year, but next year everyone would learn it. I also asked who taught him. He said, “I don’t know about you, but I remember you giving me a quick 30 second explanation on how to do it! The only person I’ve taught is Jeff. Besides us two, I don’t think anybody has a clue of what it is, or how to do it.” I can see Toby using the journal to convey his excitement for learning, as well as his desire to share that learning with his peers and be able to impart his knowledge to others. It also was a way to see his learning needs and interests that were outside of the regular 4th-grade curriculum. The dialogue journal acted as a place where Toby shared his
interests and academic curiosities with the expectation that they will be valued and that he will receive positive, encouraging responses.

The dialogue journal provided an opportunity for Toby to show his curiosity for who I was as a person and connect socially to his teacher as well. He often asked personal questions about my life and experiences that sometimes connected with his own experiences, and sometimes just sought to know me better. For example, “I’ve been to New York before when I was a baby. But not Chicago. What were they like? What would you do when you were a kid? Did you read Nancy Drew when you were a kid? Do you like Mystery Books, Fairy Tales? What makes you happy? What are some of your favorite hobbies? What are you looking forward to this year? Was hiking the Y hard?” All of these questions allowed me to share parts of my personal life experiences with Toby as the year progressed and in turn created a genuine bond of trust between us. This set a foundation perhaps that allowed him to feel comfortable sharing all the other things with me that he decided to share throughout the year.

During the online learning transition, Toby wrote more lengthy responses and considered his feelings and emotions more. Toby articulated the struggle of not seeing his friends and the challenge of his social life throughout the online journal writing, in his first entry he wrote, “I have been feeling great lately! Besides the fact that I can't play with friends. Otherwise, I'm OK. I'm happy when I'm being played with, but unhappy when I'm left out...sometimes when I go out to shoot hoops, My friend and I talk over the fence. I hope you have a great week!” In another entry he wrote, “And I'm also really happy that we might be able to play with our friends next week. I'm really/not really excited about summer break. Because of no more homework, but more chores!! Ugh/kind-of yay.” He is conveying his awareness of his feelings and the complexity that comes along with being both excited and not at the same time. He is using the dialogue journal as a space to articulate these feelings and complexities.
Also, Toby was able to reflect on and explain other emotions that didn’t only stem from not being able to go to school. For example, he wrote, “I've been feeling kind-of sad, too” and then went on to write about how his dad had promised that he could play a video game in the morning that he really wanted to play, but that the game ended up ruining their computer that night and he never got the chance to play. He felt comfortable sharing his feelings about things that were going on each week in his life. As he worked through what to do with his feelings, it gave me an opportunity to support and reassure him in his emotional awareness and development.

When I asked again how his day was and an emotion that he doesn’t like feeling, he said, “I'm feeling great today! I had a great sleep and a good start for my homework! I hate fear because just when you get a little bit scared it raged through your body before you even know it.” Also, when I asked him to reflect on what made him feel better when he was sad and how he handles frustration, he wrote, “When I am sad, I feel better when I am comforted and loved… When I get frustrated I just take a few deep breaths and go back to normal.” Usually students aren’t given chances to individually talk about their emotions and how they perceive them in a school setting, or life in general, however Toby’s entries show that when 4th grade students are given this opportunity, some students are articulate about what they’ve felt and can recognize how those emotions can affect them. They can also write about choices to deal with those emotions.

As a teacher, I was able to better understand and support Toby in school as he used the dialogue journal to personally connect with me and share his thoughts. I was able to see his passion for math and his desire to help others learn as well, which led me to more readily assign him to help his struggling peers with math concepts during math time. I also was able to praise his efforts to be a great big brother, sympathize with his disappointments that he shared and in turn share my own disappointments to help him know he wasn’t alone. The dialogue journal definitely helped me to connect to him and support and respond to his emotional reflections and needs throughout the year.
Case 7: Matt

Matt was a sweet, talkative student who could melt a heart with one little smile. He had a medical condition that required him to be in close contact on a daily basis with both the office staff and me. He was quick to offer assistance and had a bright, spunky personality that enabled him to get along with everybody in the classroom. He loved sports and talked about his favorite football and basketball teams and players on a regular basis. Sometimes he rushed through his schoolwork just to be the first one done and often made silly little mistakes. He was almost always smiling and rarely complained unless it involved missing P.E. for a week because of an assembly.

Matt’s journal entries were specifically included to illustrate that not all students readily expressed emotions and feelings in their journals. He mostly used his journal to tell me about things in his life and talk about preferences without deep introspection. Though Matt didn’t write many emotional entries throughout the year, he was a pretty open book as to how he was feeling in school through his disposition. It is important to note that he did not especially enjoy writing time and would often scribble his journal entry in the morning before it was due, just so he could attend Fun Friday that week. It seemed to me that he did not see the journal as a place he needed to connect with me as his teacher. We already had opportunities to connect in class and he was able to share his personality and needs in class. He would joke around with and come up to talk to me frequently throughout the day to talk about things on his mind. When the quarantine began, I did notice Matt begin to open up a little and reflect on his feelings as I prompted him to tell me how he was feeling, perhaps due to the fact that we no longer had face to face communication and conversations.

In Matt’s opening entry, he gave an exuberant explanation of his favorite ride at Lagoon and summarized his summer as being “super fun” as he talked about playing baseball games, going to birthday parties and eating cupcakes. When I asked Matt something that he’d done recently for the first time he said, “My last thing I did for the first time was riding a motorcycle by myself and it
was super fun and it went super fast about 25 miles an hour and I am saving up to buy one of them a blue one it will be super cool!! It’s about 12 hundred dollars but I’m trying to get enough money to buy it.” I was able to respond and encourage his endeavors by saying I had ridden on a motorcycle once before too and I thought it was fun too and that “1,200 dollars is a lot of money, but you can do it!” I then went on to ask him what he does to earn money and explain some of the chores that I used to do as a kid. He responded, “That sounds like hard work you had to do and I earn money by doing lots of pretty hard chores and I get money by pulling a ton of weeds and me too I get money when I shovel dog poop too! It’s so gross and I get money for babysitting and if we’re good while someone is babysitting me I get money too! But only like 3$ but it’s better than nothing and that’s how I’m going to save up for my motorcycle.” Matt used the dialogue journal to share a meaningful part of his life and what he was thinking about and excited about despite his dubious attitude toward writing.

In further entries Matt went on to answer prompt questions in very descriptive, perfunctory ways. He described who he babysat, what his dream house would look like, and what he would plant in a garden in the future. He wrote about holidays, for Halloween he commented, “I got a lot of candy but I’m selling my candy for money instead. And I will buy lots of toys instead of ruining your teeth with candy.” After Thanksgiving he said, “My Thanksgiving was awesome. My favorite part of Thanksgiving is the food the feast. My favorite food is the stuffing it is so good.” At Christmas he wrote, “I do love to decorate and set up my Christmas tree with my family” and then proceeded to share his wish list, giving me a detailed description of what a rad robot was. Although he fulfilled the requirement of writing in his dialogue journal, his entries remained short and stayed within a positive, explanatory realm of what he liked to do rather than in depth of how he felt and why.
Interestingly, when the shift to online learning happened, I saw a complete turn for Matt in his writing to me. Email became a passion for Matt… I received frequent short messages from him asking me how my day was and what I was doing. He almost always commented on the short daily video I would post to the google classroom saying hi to his classmates or declaring what number he was in viewing the video. When talking to his mom at the very end of the school year she said how he would check his email multiple times a day to see if I had responded or any of his friends that he’d messaged had replied back. It appeared that writing in the dialogue journal was not a primary outlet for him to share himself until his interactions were limited through the remote learning experience. He seems to be energized by social interaction, which in his experience seems to involve mostly positive expressions.

In his dialogue journal he was more expressive about his emotions, he wrote, “I have been feeling good. I want to come back to school so bad! Something that made me happy was that it was Easter.” He is using the journal to express his feelings. Later on he wrote, (in response to my prompt asking what made him happy when he was sad and how he handles frustration) “Hi, something that makes me feel happy when I am sad is that I go play with my dog! Something I got frustrated about and I fixed it is that I had to do so much work and I got stressed and then I thought why not take a break in between! Alright see you later at a google meet! Bye!” This offered some possible insights into how Matt deals with negative emotions and why his entries appeared less emotional than others. It appears that he experiences the difficult emotions, but they don’t seem to stay with him for very long. Matt thrived on social interaction and his dialogue journal and online class sessions provided an outlet to begin to expand his emotional articulation during the remote schooling period because of other limitations for social interaction during COVID-19.

As a teacher, I don’t feel that Matt’s dialogue journal helped me support him a whole lot better than I already did in the classroom. However, knowing about his goal to buy a motorcycle
and types of chores that he did, was helpful in beginning a connection between us that wasn’t based solely on academics. After reading through his journal entries as a researcher, and looking at how his entries started to become more emotional during the COVID-19 quarantine, I determined that I could have asked him more emotional questions as the year went along to try and elicit more open, vulnerable responses from him. I recognized that I was more likely to ask emotionally engaging questions with participants whose journal entries were deeper and who sought an outlet for their feelings, rather than with students who seemed happy to talk about positive everyday happenings in their life.

Case 8: Devin

Devin was a very quiet boy who moved into the neighborhood and school district a couple months into the school year. As a teacher, I did my best to give mid-year move-in students an extremely positive experience and always have new friends nearby to help explain classroom procedures and school policies and such. Devin clicked with people from the start with his smile, friendly attitude and love for sports.

Just as they did for Emily, Devin’s entries showed how the dialogue journal can create a quick, safe connection between a teacher and student who has just barely moved into the school and who is especially seeking belonging. Additionally, his entries provided us with an example of how during a time of change and crisis, the journal assignment provided him with an outlet to reflect on his feelings and develop self-awareness as he openly shared his feelings and thoughts. It became a place for him to preserve his connection he’d made with me as a teacher in the past 4 months, and also to express disappointments, sadness, and happy things that were currently happening in his life. Devin also used the journal to seek a personal relationship and connection with me as his teacher and trusted me and our relationship enough to express his opinions on classroom placement for the next year.
In his first dialogue journal entry he explained all the places he’d moved to in his life, then finished with the following statement, “Now I am liking it here. I have a lot of friends at school and at home. I also have a really good teacher which is you. I like this school too.” The next week he again commented at the close of his entry introducing his family members to me that “I have been here in [city] for about four weeks. And now I have lots of friends at school and at home I am making a lot of friends still.” These entries are vulnerable, as Devin shares his opinions on the new place he’s just moved to and they suggest Devin’s deep desire for belonging and perhaps consistency in his life. He is using the dialogue journal to share ideas and feelings that he wouldn’t have the opportunity to share within the school day.

Devin also showed interest in getting to know me throughout the journal, as he wrote personal questions like, “How was your break? What did you do? What would you like to do when quarantine ends? What are your top 4 favorite sports? What is your favorite season and what is a memory that you’ve had? What’s your favorite NFL team?” Some of these questions were reflections back of the questions I had asked him, and some were specific ones that he came up with on his own that he was interested to know about me. He was clearly interested in knowing these things about me and seemed to be seeking a connection with me in the sports realm which is a place that he felt comfortable and passionate about. Either way, he indicated that he wasn’t only interested in sharing about himself in his journal, but that he seemed to want to know about me and create an opportunity for a connection to me as his teacher.

In further entries throughout the year Devin talked to me about how much he enjoyed the skiing field trip we went on, his love for basketball and how many points he scored in his games, and what kinds of foods he liked and didn’t like. At times his entries lacked the emotional expression that I expected. In a brief, matter of fact sentence he wrote, “my grandpa past away so I will see all of my cousins this week at his funeral” before going on to talk about his love for
basketball and how many points he scored in his last game. In my response to him that week I wrote, “I am very sorry to hear about your grandpa passing away, you must miss him. You can tell me about him if you’d like. I know that when my grandma passed away it sometimes helped me to feel happy when I talked about her.” But he never verbally responded to that part of my letter and just answered other questions I asked. This was a stark contrast to what Lindsay shared when her grandmother’s health challenges and potential death. There are many general reasons as to why Devin may not have responded to that question; perhaps he didn’t know his grandfather well or his family encouraged him not to make a big deal out of it, it also may have been because he wasn’t emotionally able to articulate his feelings, or that perhaps he didn’t feel close enough to me to share those inner feelings yet. Perhaps he was not yet socialized to articulate his feelings, which the dialogue journal may help him to do over time. However, his sharing did portray that the dialogue journal was a place he considered safe enough to share what had happened and inform me on an event that occurred in his life that he most likely wouldn’t have shared otherwise in the course of a regular school day, even though he didn’t explore his emotions in response to that specific event.

When the shift to online learning happened, Devin’s entries became longer and expressed much more emotional reflection than before. In his first entry he finished by saying, “I have been feeling sad and happy. I have been feeling sad because I want to see my friends and I have been feeling happy cause I can play basketball a lot and soccer a lot and I can watch t.v. a lot. I miss our class. I hope we can go back to school soon.” Like Toby, he is conveying his awareness of his feelings and the complexity that comes along with feeling one thing and another completely opposite thing at the same time. He is using the dialogue journal as a space to articulate these feelings and complexities. This suggests that his ability to articulate his emotions is there, but not normally evoked by certain contexts. Being online may have helped him to become more emotionally expressive, and the history of our previous entries in his written journal.
In his next entry he wrote, “When quarantine ends I would like to play with friends have sleep overs go to fun centers go to school go to lake powell go on a trips and a lot more things.”

When I asked about things that cheered him up when he was sad and about what makes him frustrated and how does he handle it, he responded, “When I am sad things that make me happy are playing basketball with my dad cause he is a challenge, playing games cause I win a lot and that makes me happy and even when I don't win I am still happy and watching tv cause I can just sit on the couch and calm down. I was frustrated when my brother thought I was wearing his socks and making holes in them and so I told my parents and they talked to him.”

Devin used the journal as an outlet to manage and contemplate his emotions that may have been encouraged by my earlier prompting for him to share his emotions. He also clearly explained healthy ways of dealing with his frustration by talking to his parents and a growing awareness of self-advocacy. These are complex emotions and processes that Devin is articulating that he normally would never have the space to talk about in a regular school day or hardly consciously think about in life.

In his next entry, Devin was extremely expressive of his emotions. He wrote,

Hi I am excited for my football season because I am on the same team as Matt and Kevin but we might not be able to do it because of COVID-19 but I hope we are able to do it the league...I'm sorry you can't be at your sister's wedding. I've been feeling sad and happy and confused because they're shutting everything down but I can play with friends now so I'm kind of happy and I'm sad because I can't like go like do other fun stuff like go to fun centers or go on trips. Can you make sure Matt and Kevin are in my class next year?? I miss them. And Toby.

Devin used the dialogue journal to share his frustrations and feelings involved with COVID-19 and grappling with everything that is happening with the closures. He also showed empathy for me in regards to missing my sister’s wedding and then reached out in the only outlet he felt he had to try
and preserve the friendships that he forged throughout the school year. The dialogue journal gave him a space to advocate for himself.

As a teacher, I feel I was able to support Devin so much more than I ordinarily would have because of insights I gained through the dialogue journal. The relationship that was fostered between us in that writing space opened up new opportunities for him to speak up in class. Though he was naturally shy, he sought help from me on an academic basis and I also feel that I was able to support him emotionally through the school closure time. Because he opened up in his journal, I could thoughtfully respond to his entries to offer words of encouragement, support and shared vulnerable things I had been feeling too. I was able to attend to his plea to have certain friends in his class the next year, by placing him with at least one of his friends that he had requested.
Without the dialogue journal forum, I am not sure he would have ever come up to me with this request verbally.

Case 9: Parker

Parker was also new to the school this year like Devin and Emily. He was a quiet, kind student who was always willing to help out. He was a gentle leader in small groups who prompted everyone to work together and shyly raised his hand to share his thoughts. He would write about his hobbies, including parkour (creative navigation of typically urban environments and obstacles through running, jumping, climbing, etc.), art, building and creating stuff. In his journal he also expressed his desire to become an FBI agent because he liked action and going on secret missions and offered me an in depth work out description about how he stays in shape.

Parker’s entries showed for the third time in this study how a dialogue journal can encourage a new student to open up and feel comfortable relatively quickly in a brand-new setting and school. It also portrayed how during the pandemic, he was able to express his feelings and emotions in an open, reflective way. Parker also used the journal to establish a personal connection
with me as his teacher as he asked many questions and showed interest in how I was doing during the pandemic.

Within Parker’s first journal entry he bore his heart and feelings openly as he explained how itchy hives had kept him from attending school for the first week and why that mattered so much to him. He wrote, “I am sad that I didn’t get to go to school last week. Especially because my little brother just started kindergarten! I wanted to go with him on his first, second, third, fourth, and fifth day of school.” From this entry, I was able to get a sense of Parker’s big brother, compassionate heart. I doubt that he would have ever shared such a personal statement with me at the beginning of the year, being that he was already showing up to school a week later than his classmates and that I would have been so focused on catching him up, rather than talking about what it was like to miss the first week of school. The dialogue journal gave him a place to share that sensitive part of himself.

Parker continued to talk a lot about his family and how much he enjoyed his time that he spent with them, he wrote about exciting Christmas events, trips to Vegas to see his little cousin’s baby blessing, and how he chose to ski for the field trip because his dad said it would be easier for him to learn to snowboard if he learn how to ski first. When I asked who he would talk to when he was sad, he responded, “I would talk to my mom if I was sad because she talks through it with me and helps me feel better.” I could feel Parker’s deep connection and respect for his family in just about every one of his entries. I was able to begin connecting with him on these topics that he chose writing about and along the way he reached out many times looking for that connection with me as well.

He would ask me deep questions like, “What are some of your favorite things to do? What do you wonder about? What are you afraid of and what would you grow in your garden if you could grow anything you wanted? What traditions do you have? Do you decorate your house?
How was your break?” As stated, many times throughout this study; these questions allowed us to form and build a genuine bond and relationship, using the dialogue journal as a tool to do so.

When the online schooling transition took place, Parker’s entries became more emotionally expressive, as he sought to label how he was feeling. He wrote, “I have been feeling realy sad because I miss school and friends! I also miss you and reces! How have you been feeling lately? How dose it feel to teach us school online?” Parker used the dialogue journal during the pandemic to express his feelings about what is going on, as well as to show concern for and to connect with me as his teacher and friend. This type of interaction indicates emotional development in being able to reach out to someone else and see how they are doing and feeling. He initiated questions towards me to check in and make sure I was doing okay during the global pandemic. These wouldn’t have been normal things to be sharing in the classroom setting in the middle of math, reading groups, science or writing.

In another entry he typed,

“I am feeling happy and sad because I hit my head on the tramp! I didn't injure it, I just slipped and did a belly flop. I had a good day because I played with my baby brother! It was especially fun because he is starting to walk and he loves wrestling me! A memory that makes me happy is our family reunion all of my dads brothers and one sister came to our grand parents house! It was sooooooo fun!!!”

During the online schooling, Parker’s strong family connection continued to be a big part of his emotional and social life that he chose to share in his dialogue journal, as well as specific ways that he was able to share how he was feeling and why he was feeling that way.

As a teacher, I feel I was able to form a strong, personal connection with Parker through the journal. In his particular case, his journal also was a place to work on correcting a lot of spelling errors… after each entry I would pick 3 or 4 words he had misspelled and write them in the back of
his journal for him to re-write 10 times. I was careful not to pick out too many words, so as not to overwhelm him, but he liked the extra practice and challenge to get better. As the year progressed, I saw a great improvement in his spelling abilities. As I reflected on his journal as a researcher, I saw the opportunity I missed to ask him more emotional things that I feel he would have been ready and willing to express had the opportunity been more clearly presented to him.

Case 10: Anthony

Anthony was an extremely quiet student who only talked in class if he was called on or spoken to. For the first few months of the year it was hard for me to read his emotions or tell if he enjoyed anything because he rarely smiled or seemed excited with his body language. As the year went on and he warmed up in class he smiled more readily and offered more opinions and insight. A few times throughout the year Anthony and I had conversations about his exorbitant hesitation to work with girl partners or simply sit next to girls in groups. These conversations usually began with him denying his hesitancy to work with girls, even though I watched him move his chair far away from the table to avoid sitting next to girls or walk way across the room during our partnering up activity to avoid being partners with a girl nearby. After several conversations alone in the hallway and emails with his mother, it seemed that this issue stemmed from being picked on for liking girls and therefore not wanting to be near them so that no one could pick on him for it.

Anthony’s entries are quite fascinating to me because he was so hard to read in class. The dialogue journal assignment provided him a space to admit some tough feelings that he had towards his siblings that he likely wouldn’t have been given the chance to talk about with me in the classroom. Additionally, the journal allowed him to show a softer, more humorous side of himself who wants friends and to be included in things like sports, or writing to my roommate. I feel confident in saying that I wouldn’t have known any of this emotional side of Anthony had the
dialogue journal not existed between us because he hardly spoke in class at all and time isn’t specifically allotted to speak about the things he chose to share.

In his dialogue journal, Anthony began by writing about there being 8 people in his family along with 2 cats, and about his love for football, Harry Potter books and Star Wars movies. He mentioned, “I play with my little brothers at least every week, but never with my older siblings” which made me wonder if there was some tension between him and his older siblings. When I asked why he doesn’t play with them, he dismissed it by saying, “the thing about my older siblings is that football is not their thing, their favorite sports are like basketball, track and cross country… just stuff like that.” I still felt that there may have been more behind it than just a mere difference in sports interests, but that Anthony wasn’t ready or able to express why he doesn’t play more with his older siblings. Much later in the year, around Christmastime, when talking about what he wanted for Christmas, he wrote, “I asked for a hoverboard because my sister never uses hers and won’t let anybody use it. If I do get a hoverboard I won’t let anyone use it and I will ride it a lot.” I feel like this revealed inner feelings of frustration at his older siblings for not including him, as he expressed this idea of being included in other ways as well throughout the year. The idea that he would continue this pattern for his younger siblings as he chooses to keep his own hoverboard to himself and not share it with them showed grappling with his feelings about his position amongst his siblings. I noticed that his little kindergarten age brother would come to meet him at the door after school, but that Anthony would never really acknowledge him with a smile or hug or high five like other students would with their little siblings. In fact, Anthony would sometimes say, “I told you to wait at the corner!” Anthony seemed to perhaps struggle with the way others perceived him or levels of rejection sensitivity.

One notable use of the dialogue journal was when he used the journal to call me, his teacher, out for being insensitive to a comment he made. I initially had asked what made him feel
brave, to which he responded, “I don’t really have anything that makes me feel brave. But I do have my cats, they make me feel safe when I go downstairs early in the morning because I think pennywise will jump out of the vent instead of the sewer.” I mistakenly thought that he was being funny about the pennywise part and responded, “Haha… that Pennywise vent comment made me laugh… I’m glad you have your cats around to protect you!” In his next response he called me out, saying, “I really don’t like it when people laugh at me when I tell them about the cat and Pennywise thing.” I apologized in my next response and we moved on, but I was happy that he was able to express that he didn’t appreciate what I had said and that he gave me the chance to apologize, instead of just ignoring it like he may have if I had made the comment in face-to-face conversation. This also shows the potential for dialogue journals to empower children who are unable to express ideas or to have voice in other arenas. This is even more remarkable when students are able to articulate something of how they are feeling even though it may not be what the teacher would want to hear.

Sometimes Anthony’s entries surprised me. Once he decided to write about a cat’s cradle demonstration that Parker and his grandmother had taught the class one day. Anthony wrote, “I really like the rope thing that Parker taught us. I liked it so much I taught my whole entire family. My mom already knew how to do it. Me and my mom were doing it and then my grandma came over and I did it with her and she was really fast.” Talking about connecting with his mother and grandma weren’t usual topics of discussion or writing for Anthony, so this particular entry allowed me to see a softer side to him than I had known before.

Anthony also maintained his shyness when given the chance to write a letter to my roommate, he instead asked me if I could ask my roommate to write a letter to him, he said, “Can you ask Pamela to write to me. You asked Frank how nice her writing is, that made me want to see what her writing is.” It seems that he is yearning to be included, but doesn’t yet know how to reach
out and make that inclusion happen himself by writing her a letter like all the other students did. If she wrote to him first, he wouldn’t need to worry as much about his writing being rejected. He also could get a sense about what types of things she might want to talk to him about. He was the only student that I asked my roommate to write to first, however, it became a great exchange after my roommate expressed her excitement to write to him and asked him a few questions. He began his response by saying, “I am excited too. The whole reason I wanted to see your writing is because everyone kept on talking about how nice your writing is. I like your writing too.” This was the first time I had seen Anthony give a compliment in his writing. After my roommate wrote one more response to Anthony, he wrote back to me saying, “Thank you for letting me write to Pamela. I think she is really funny. She made up a name called “cilantro” from my cat’s name “nutmeg.” You can even look at the bottom of her page for more proof.” This also happened to be the first time that I’d seen Anthony express that he thought something was funny or amusing. His emotions in class were so masked, except for an occasional smirk that he would often quickly hide, that it was so hard for me to actually tell if he was enjoying activities that we did.

After that, I shared a funny story with him about fishing with my siblings when I was a kid and asked him to share a funny story from a time with his siblings with me. He said, “I don’t really have a funny story with my family, but I do with my friends.” This may once again point to potential tension with his siblings if he can’t think of a single funny experience he’s had with them. He then told me a story that slightly mirrored mine about accidentally falling into a shallow frozen pond with his friend and how they laughed and laughed. He also expressed how much he values his friends in his second to last entry when he wrote, “I’m still debating whether or not to play lacrosse with Cam or play NFL flag football or play baseball with Jeff and some other kids. Ya, well once I choose what to play I will have a friend in it anyway.” He chose to elicit an emotional comment that indicated his value of having friends, which could also be connected to the theme we saw
throughout his journal of avoiding rejection and getting people to like him. Once again, his journal gave him an avenue of showing me a different, more vulnerable side of himself than I would ever have known about in the classroom.

During the online schooling period, Anthony only wrote one journal entry to me that explained his Spring break and talked about waking up early to go fishing with his brother, but not catching anything “of course,” as well as talked about seeing a girl from our class at the bike ramps, but “all she did was ignore me and go around the ramps, it was kind of funny to watch.” We can see his sensitivity to the idea ‘do I matter?’ as he specifically chose to write about how she ignored him and his emotion labeling of it being funny may have been his way to mask how it really made him feel. The idea of being ignored usually doesn’t make a person laugh, especially one who has indicated that fitting in and having people think well of him is important to him.

After reading through Anthony’s entries as a researcher, I noticed that a lot of his entries danced around feelings that he had, and carried a hint of nonchalance to them that seemingly dismissed the true emotions that he was feeling. For instance, him saying that the girl ignoring him was “kind of funny” didn’t actually feel like it was funny to him, but it also was really hard for me to tell what he meant or wanted to convey by sharing that with me at the time. The mere fact that he chose to share that he saw her and that she ignored him, led me to believe that he felt weird about seeing a girl from his class at the ramps, or that he was a little sad or upset that she didn’t acknowledge him. Since she was from my class, perhaps he thought it would be a topic that might interest me. Generally, for him to share that she had ignored him indicated a willingness for him to be vulnerable with me, and even though he downplayed it, it was impressive for him to do given his sensitivity. Also, his comments about his siblings and the tension between them wasn’t something he came straight out and said, but he hinted at those things throughout his entries and with his behavior. Had I noticed this earlier I could have asked more relevant questions pertaining to these
issues and perhaps helped him discover what he actually was feeling and why those situations made him feel that way. While I am not sure how he would have responded, I imagine that progress toward emotional expression could have taken place with more direct action and language on my part in bringing these things up to him. It may have helped to talk through some of the negativity he felt towards his siblings or through the feelings of being left out or teased for liking girls. Also, if I had noted this more throughout the year, as a teacher I could have been more responsive and encouraging toward him, rather than being frustrated by his silence or refusal to do things with girls at times because he perhaps feared what others thought of him. I wouldn’t have felt so hopeless in my feelings of not knowing how to understand or reach him in a meaningful way.

Summary

In summary, we can see that these 10 student cases show an array of how students used the dialogue journal in different ways to share their social and emotional lives. While there were many special and specific findings that each case had to offer, collectively there were five distinct themes that emerged as the cases were analyzed and developed.

The first and most evident finding that emerged was that each case offered a rare window into their lives that proved to be extraordinarily deeper than I would have been aware of in the traditional classroom setting without the medium of a dialogue journal. The dialogue journal provided a qualitatively different kind of emotional space for students to share their feelings and impressions than would occur in a normal school day with the hustle and bustle of curriculum expectations and dozens of other students to attend to. Could you imagine walking up to your teacher in class and asking her, “If you had to marry a boy in our class who would it be?” or “I really don’t like it when people laugh at me when I tell them about the cat and pennywise thing.” or “I will always say goodbye to my little sisters. Always. I have 3 little sisters. They are all so cute!” So many things that the students wrote were things that I wouldn’t have had any clue about in their
lives if the dialogue journal wasn’t a bridge between us. As a teacher in today’s schools, there is so much curriculum that we are responsible to get through and with 30 plus students in the classroom, it can be near impossible to teach that curriculum effectively in the five hours a day that I spend with them, much less enough time to make meaningful connections that allow them to feel seen, heard and supported individually.

The second finding was that the dialogue journals showed students’ sense of emerging self-awareness and provided a space for students to reflect on and write their feelings in healthy ways that they might not normally have the opportunity to do elsewhere. Perhaps, this is because it gave them a place where they felt safe and valued to share whatever they wanted to, as well as direct prompts that asked them how they feel, whereas school curriculum doesn’t attune much to those types of social and emotional sharing opportunities on a regular basis. Examples of this include when Parker was able to identify his feeling of sadness that he wasn’t able to come to school with his brother who had just started kindergarten for the first week, or Lindsay’s reflection on her grandmother’s living will, “she decided she wanted to not get saved so that makes me sad.” These types of reflections on feelings are important for students’ emotional development.

The third finding that emerged was that nearly every student displayed a deep interest in having a personal connection with their teacher through thoughtful questions, comments and insights directed towards their teacher. Time and again as the entries were analyzed, this theme screamed out from the pages. It is apparent in Mia’s invitation for me to come over to her house, or her questions that pry into my personal life. It is also highlighted in Lindsay’s concern over my car being fixed, or Parker asking me how I was doing throughout COVID-19 and if I was liking online teaching. It is evident when Devin expressed his apologies for me not being able to attend my sister’s wedding and when Lindsay comforted and sympathized with me when my grandfather was
in the hospital. These students demonstrate that they are not only capable of a more complex and
deep relationship with their teacher, but that it is something that they appear eager to establish.

The fourth finding was that students used the dialogue journal to comment on, critique, and create a synergy with classroom practices by giving feedback to the teacher about things that happened in class. They used the journal to add their two cents on how they thought things should be done in the classroom. Mia’s opinion on classroom jobs sparked me to encourage more autonomy in the classroom and begin to let the students pick their own jobs. Maddy’s complaints about her messy vocabulary table allowed me to be a responsive teacher and clean up each week after vocabulary, to make sure that the learning environment was conducive to her needs. Toby used his journal to ask about when we’d be learning about decimals in division and relate his love and excitement for math and for helping others learn math. Because he shared this with me, I knew I could count on him to help his peers if I was busy helping others and readily called on him to do so.

The fifth finding is related to how I reacted with the information that the students shared with me in efforts to be a more responsive and supportive teacher. This theme involved both in the moment reactions and responses I made during the school year as a teacher, as well as the reflections of what I could have done to better support students after I studied the entries as a researcher. Speaking towards the emotional support that a teacher can provide, Lindsay’s entry about her rough week with her grandma allowed me to understand her more and be more loving and forgiving towards her that week when she was less apt to do work and acting more gloomy than usual. Bota’s entry about her frustration with her name helped me to be more aware and direct when handling students who started singing the teasing songs by quickly shutting them down, and then saying positive comments to Bota about her name.
These cases show that the emotional lives of 4th grade students are complex, rich, and diverse. The next chapter, we will explore the implications for these themes and how they connect to what we already know as well as additional questions for children’s mental and emotional health as these connect to what is possible in schools.
CHAPTER 5

Discussion

This study is a remarkable look into the ways that fourth grade students use dialogue journals throughout the year to connect with their teacher and share their lives. Using a multiple case study approach allows us to see variations across several important themes that have implications for educators. In this chapter, I discuss some primary implications from this research including emotional sharing, developing self-awareness, teacher-student relationships, and synergy with classroom practice.

Caring and Emotional Sharing

One clear finding of this study is that dialogue journals can provide a safe and individualized space for children to share and bring up topics with their teacher that they wouldn’t normally bring up in face-to-face classroom interactions in the regular school day. Students openly talked about their personal interests and feelings. Journaling created a qualitatively different kind of emotional space between the students and me. These journal entries also provided opportunities for me to connect with my students to build trust and to come to understand where each student was coming from as they shared parts of themselves with me.

This study supported research findings that a dialogue journal can “establish trust between a student and teacher which encourages the student to express individual concerns to a responsive audience without fear” (Konishi & Park, 2017, p. 249). Not only did children take the opportunity to express their individual concerns, but many throughout the study also expressed interest in me and acknowledged my own challenges as a person. They showed care and offered consolation to me for car troubles, missing important family events, and feeling lonely during quarantine. This in turn encouraged me to share more personal and genuine feelings and responses with them. When creating a climate of care in the classroom, it is essential to “encourage children to learn to ‘read’
and respond appropriately to the feelings of others” (Noddings, 2012, p. 777). The dialogue journal gave students the chance to do just that with not only me as their teacher, but also as they reflected on the feelings of others that they wrote about, such as siblings, friends, and parents.

Practicing becoming emotionally attuned to others is important because a huge part of developing a robust mental health involves having strong relationships with others (Garvis & Pendergast, 2017). As these students used the journal to interact with me as their teacher, it allowed for engagement in more complex topics. This naturally led to deeper connections and relationships with my students as long as they felt supported and comfortable in the ways that I responded to what they shared. The opportunity for students to explore and write about their lives and emotions through dialogue journaling created strong teacher-student relationships, which in turn produced the sort of learning climate necessary for supporting and developing mental and emotional health.

With research suggesting that half of all adolescents have had at least one diagnosable mental disorder (Catalano & Kellogg, 2020) it is more important than ever for teachers to be giving their students this kind of attention. Teachers must use their professional and moral judgement to tend to the needs of their students. These needs include assumed needs of curriculum and education as well as basic expressed needs that students share with the teacher when there is an established caring relationship (Noddings, 2012). I definitely was able to see and understand things about my students that I completely would have missed otherwise in the classroom setting because of our interactions in the dialogue journals. I was able to see insecurities, fears, challenges and humor from my students that better helped me understand their needs.

Additionally, it is important for us to spend time in our classrooms talking about moral problems that we face, like the feeling of being left out, anger, fear, and ways to manage those problems (Noddings, 2012). For people who think that creating a climate of care on top of everything else that teachers are expected to do is asking too much, Noddings postulates,
“establishing such a climate is not ‘on top’ of other things, it is underneath all we do as teachers. When that climate is established and maintained, everything else goes better” (Noddings, 2012, p. 777). In this study, the climate of care established in the dialogue journals certainly seemed to create a foundation of trust that influenced student interactions and participation in class as well. For example, when I noticed that Mia responded more quickly to behavioral correction and encouraged other students to do so as well.

This study indicates that within the context of a dialogue journal, students are able to talk about their emotions and concerns in an authentic, comfortable manner that could be useful to educators everywhere. It is time for educators to creatively reflect on their practice and consider what way works best for them to give their students an opportunity to express their needs. The dialogue journal definitely opened up a new, more confidential space to communicate with their teacher about many things that a regular six-hour school day-- packed with curriculum standardized test prep expectations, shared with other peers-- doesn’t afford them.

The emotional writing and reflection revealed in this study shows the potential to expand upon and broaden the positive effects of SEL programs in school. As SEL programs seek to help all children to better understand their emotions, learn from their behavior and work well with others (Lendrum et al., 2016), dialogue journals could play an essential role in practicing and facilitating teacher support in the development of these skills. SEL discussions could be genuinely carried over into the journal depending on the week and the topic, giving students a place to reflect on and apply the skills and dispositions that they are being taught. Based on the general openness of the journaling space in this study, I would postulate that most students would be willing to respond and engage with most topics that I endeavored to bring up.
Space for Developing Self-Awareness

As I considered the study and read through the entries, a common thought that kept coming to my mind was that this journal was allowing my students to sift through and take time to process what was happening in their lives and make meaning of their current or past feelings. This proved especially true when the home-based schooling began and children were all experiencing a huge change as they transitioned to a very different life than they were used to. As previously mentioned, self-awareness consists of being able to accurately assess one’s feelings, interests, values, and strengths, all while maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005).

Dialogue journals were opportunities for the teacher to engage in conversations with students about emotions. In addition, because the dialogue journals were writing activities, it slowed down thinking and allowed children to explore their own experiences. Essentially, these journals encouraged and supported a process of emotional thinking and exploration, while also giving an opportunity to express those feelings in words. Research has shown that this is critical for emotional development (Gardner, 1993; Greenberg & Snell, 1997; Weare, 2000).

Opportunities for discussing emotions allows children a chance to have reflective distance from feeling states themselves, and creates a space for them to interpret and evaluate their feelings and reflect upon causes and consequences (Denham et al., 1992; Denham & Grout, 1992; Eisenberg et al., 1998). There are many ways that adults who are present in children’s lives -- parents, grandparents, or teachers -- can assist students in thinking about and discussing their emotions. In order to promote emotional competence, teachers should focus on validating children’s emotions, while at the same time creating and sustaining adult-child emotion conversations that open up emotional exploration (Denham, 2007).
The dialogue journal gave me so many opportunities to probe into and validate my students’ emotions that they shared with me in their journals. They shared feelings of sadness, frustration and fear, as well as feelings of hope, excitement and joy. As the analysis took place, I became more aware of the broad range of emotions that children chose to express in their journals. Often in school I see quiet, shy students who rarely express how they are actually feeling about anything, or outgoing, energetic students who chatter about things that they really love or feel passionate about. Additionally, I rarely hear about feelings of sadness (unless it involves bullying on the playground), or feelings of frustration, or feelings of insecurity and failure in classroom discourse. But I heard plenty of it in the dialogue journal. This new layer of emotional conversation that included more negative emotions raises questions about how negative emotions can add to our conversation about supporting children in their emotional development.

The dialogue journals became spaces where students could talk about negative feelings and experiences, they were going through. Research suggests that giving opportunities to children to express and reminisce their negative feelings in a safe, validating environment is “critical for children’s emotion understanding and well-being, and may additionally provide children with a higher sense of competence” (Marin et al., 2008, p. 576). Unfortunately, teachers don’t often validate children’s negative emotions (Ahn, 2003). Perhaps this is because students are strongly encouraged to be positive and think optimistically throughout the school day in classrooms. For example, our school highlights and encourages the general development of the following character traits throughout the year: positivity, respect, integrity, determination, and engagement with curriculum.

While promoting these healthy traits is important, I think there is also a power in allowing students a space to confront and express discomfort or distress, where they know it is alright to feel negatively connotated emotions like sadness, frustration, or fear as they work through the regular
disappointments and challenges of their lives. They are often encouraged to be happy, remain calm and let things go, but they are rarely encouraged to talk about their negative feelings, or to feel okay with experiencing emotions that aren’t generally seen as positive. According to Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of sociocultural development, talking about negative experiences could be particularly critical in facilitating emotional development because adult-child verbal interactions equip the child with a structure for shaping and organizing their thoughts and emotions. Without the opportunity to express their negative emotions, it could become counterproductive to the development of their emotional health.

The dialogue journal could be a key opportunity for teachers to delve into these conversations revolving around negative emotions with students and help students feel validated and able to work through those negative feelings in healthy ways. This one-on-one space when centered around trust in the student-teacher relationship can lower the affective filter associated with any stigma associated with expressing negative emotion and support students as they grapple with a full emotional range and come to know themselves emotionally.

**Student Interest in Strong Teacher-Student Relationship**

Another theme that our data clearly showed was these students seeking and reaching out for a personal connection with me as their teacher. This included looking for a stronger connection with me and getting to know me on a deeper, more personal level. Students appeared to want to understand me as a more complex being than the robot who eats, sleeps, and breathes in the classroom, grading papers and planning lessons.

As mentioned in Mia’s case, I felt at times that boundaries limiting teacher’s connections with students can have a detrimental, unintentional negative effect on students’ social and emotional development and well-being. While I can understand why restrictions are placed on teachers to keep both teachers and students safe, I wonder why I should feel so nervous to stop by
my student’s house and meet her puppy one day after work? To my heart it feels like a no brainer, I often show up to my students sporting events that they invite me to, but for some reason the home invitations feel too personal and like I am overstepping my boundaries as a professional. However, in what greater way could I show my students I care and am interested in their lives than showing up on their porch, on their turf and talking to them for a few minutes some evening?

Similarly, a teacher may feel so restricted in topics that they are allowed to talk to students about, that they may miss important clues and information that would lead them to assist their students in hard social and emotional cases they may face. Research posits that if a student–teacher relationship is conflictual and distant, caregivers may be unable to read children’s emotional cues or respond in ways that minimize distress (Calkins & Hill, 2007). This particularly matters in school because children’s difficulty to manage emotions such as anxiety and fear can influence their ability to pay attention, and thus impair their school performance (Durbrow et al., 2000). Therefore, when a teacher-student relationship is lacking in communication and trust, it can make it difficult for children to focus and feel comfortable in the classroom, especially when they have emotional challenges taking place that already affect their well-being. In fact, student–teacher closeness could function as a potent protective factor, that helps to counterbalance deficiencies in emotion regulation, which in turn may strengthen emotion regulation (Liew et al., 2010).

This study suggests that a dialogue journal can open up an almost immediate window of sharing and trust with nearly each individual student. This positive open sharing relationship that is built between teachers and students can have many positive outcomes. I personally saw the opportunity it gave for me to connect with my students on a more meaningful, deeper level. This reflects research that shows dialogue journals promotion of rapport between teachers and students, where students feel comfortable enough to disclose their concerns (Hail et al., 2013; Staton et al., 1988). They frequently shared experiences with me that I didn’t often hear from students in
previous years of teaching when I wasn’t using a dialogue journal as a form of communication. I don’t think that this is because the students’ in my particular class during this study had more insecurities, struggles, or challenges going on in their lives than other classes that I’d taught. In fact, I would argue the opposite due to previous teaching in Title 1 schools, and having students in foster placements, those who were struggling to learn English as their second language, and who generally lacked access to technology, books, or the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities they may have wanted to. I wonder what the dialogue journal, and student-teacher relationship it likely would have created, would have meant to some of my former students.

**Synergy with Classroom Practices Between Students and Teacher**

A finding that applies directly to my practice as a teacher was that as I interacted with students in dialogue journals, I was able to better understand and tailor my instruction and responses to my students on an individual basis. This finding is consistent with Bruner (1988) who found that dialogue journals can enhance collaborative learning between teachers and students. As I opened the door for my students to openly share their opinions and voices, I was bombarded with an array of suggestions and reflections from students that I wouldn’t have gotten otherwise. Because of all this extra information, I was able to perceive student needs and change my practices and perspective accordingly- to both physically and emotionally support my students.

The communication loop that I saw in my analysis of dialogue journals relates closely to scholarship on the innovative practice of descriptive feedback. Rodgers (2006) defines descriptive feedback as, “a reflective conversation between teacher and students wherein students describe their experiences as learners, with the goals of improving learning, deepening trust between teacher and student, and establishing a vibrant, creative community on a daily basis” (p. 209). Clearly, opening up spaces for this kind of feedback can facilitate learning and development in schools.
The types of questions we ask might also be worth further exploration. Rodgers (2018) conducted a study involving twenty K-5 teachers who regularly asked their students questions after lessons that led to descriptive feedback over a two-semester period. The process involved the teachers having to adapt the questions that they asked students from the original ones meant for adults. These teachers discovered the power in asking ‘you’ questions like “What do you think can you teach someone else? What are you pretty sure you will wake up tomorrow and be able to do/remember?” These questions allowed students to be responsible for their knowledge and authority as a learner. These more personal questions were in contrast to asking ‘we’ questions like “What helped us in our writing today?” which superficially prompted students to look at what they had been taught and should know (Rodgers, 2018, p. 100). Teachers quickly found that they gained a newfound curiosity about students’ point of view which allowed them to build strong relationships with students who were in turn more engaged in their learning. Students’ strengthened their awareness of their own and each other’s learning, as well as the ability to better express themselves, and heightened their sense of agency in the classroom. Teachers gained a respect for what students have to offer and insight into their students’ experiences as learners (Rodgers, 2018).

Although in this current study I was not explicitly asking students about their classroom learning on a weekly basis, or about what would help them learn better, they did occasionally use the dialogue journal to convey those sentiments to me. As I came across these expressions of academic preferences and opinions of my students, I had three choices: 1) to ignore them wholly and move on- assuming that I knew best as the teacher, 2) to acknowledge them and make a well-meaning attempt to validate students’ thoughts while not actually changing any practices, or 3) to listen fully to their petition and decide to change my practice in a way that they suggested might work better for them and their classmates. Accepting feedback from students proved to be an empowering experience for both the students and I.
As a teacher I sometimes feel so bound by curriculum and traditional order and procedures in the classroom that I forget that my ultimate main goal is to make curious, determined lifelong learners out of my students. To give my students the liberty to share their opinions, preferences and ideas about learning and how it should look in the classroom is a freeing, (mildly terrifying) feeling as a teacher. In turn, building spaces in school for student agency is an incredible opportunity to be handed to a student. As Rodgers (2018) points out, “students’ delight” at realizing they have a say in their own education and that they have a voice to make their classroom a better place for them to learn or even just exist within (p. 100). The classroom becomes a living and breathing atmosphere to perpetuate independent learning, not just walls that were built to contain and maintain a child’s education.

Potential for Emotional Concealment

The dialogue journals appeared to open up many routes of emotional and social communication for students, yet it is also important to consider what walls of concealment existed in this avenue of communication that created challenges. For example, the misunderstanding with Anthony was likely due to something that was concealed by the journaling format. If I had heard or perhaps visually saw him relate his comment about Pennywise and the cats protecting him, I likely would have recognized something in his facial expressions, body language, or tone of voice that would have led me to believe that he was being serious. However, because I was reading it at home, far away from Anthony’s personal and physical relation of his story, I mistakenly thought that he may have been joking and trying to be funny with me. Other students did not call me out as he did, and it is impossible to know if there were other potential misunderstandings or misrepresentations in written interactions. Therefore, perhaps the journals enrich the teacher-student relationship with the caveat that they cannot replace some traditional elements--like a good 'ol face-to-face chat?
Research on dialogue journals has focused on the ways that these written conversations can facilitate writing and communication skills (Daniels & Daniels, 2013). Further research might explore the contours of the interactions in light of the affordances of this medium. This is also important for variations in emotional expression specifically.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This study is not intended to be generalizable in the sense that specific findings can be directly applied in other settings. This case study includes a small number of students to explore their experiences in depth. Due to the amount of data that was collected, and the type of in-depth qualitative research that I wanted to do, I explored the journals of only 10 of my 30 students. Another limitation of the study is the lack of racial and socio-economic diversity in the student participants. All participants in this study were white and came from a mid to high socioeconomic status, and from two parent households.

Due to the nature of the pandemic and the uncertainty of students’ having access to do all of their schoolwork online, we were cautioned to limit assignments as teachers. Therefore, I did not give students the option to write journal entries online to me until about a month into the online schooling transition. Those four weeks could have provided us with richer, more vivid entries where the students reflected on their original feelings of grappling with the pandemic. Additional research could focus on the role of the specific questions in a dialogue journal to elicit deeper emotional responses and reflections from student participants, as well as how a teacher can develop a genuine enough relationship with their students for them to share and trust those teachers enough to write and share those experiences.

It would be interesting to do this type of study with more socio-cultural diversity among participant students. Another suggestion for future research is to continue dialogue journals over a longer period than just one school year and to interview students after two or three years to explore
student perceptions about how to support them mentally and emotionally. It would be interesting to hear student reflections about the dialogue journals and see how they verbalize the difference that it may or may not have made in their lives. In addition, it would be insightful to look deeper into the context of each student and seek to better understand what in their backgrounds sparked how they decided to engage with the journal, whether they were emotionally engaged or more closed off to sharing more vulnerable and emotional parts of themselves.

Implications for Practitioners

Dialogue journals can be tailored to classroom levels and contexts. In high schools where teachers potentially have upwards of a hundred students, the journal could be formatted into a series of one or two personal emails that a teacher sends to their students, that those students will be expected to respond to sometime during the school year. I would argue that it is not so much the weekly frequency of the dialogue journal that prompts students to open up their social and emotional lives, but rather the sincerity and authenticity of a teacher’s invitation for students to open themselves up, as well as a willingness on the teacher’s behalf to be vulnerable themselves which empowers students to engage in dialogue journaling in such a meaningful way as our results suggested.

Along the way, I learned that I received more thoughtful and emotional responses as I asked students specific questions about my students’ feelings. This included feelings on what was going on in their lives at home (excitement of new siblings being born), what was taking place in the world around them (birthday parties and clubs being cancelled because of quarantine), and on certain situations that I picked up on within the classroom (tears being wiped away from eyes as they entered the classroom from recess). As I consciously chose to bring these topics up in caring, thoughtful ways where I too shared personal experiences with similar emotions, a climate of trust was formed where students felt comfortable enough to open up and candidly respond back.
Additionally, as I studied these journals as a researcher and continued my practice of them, I noticed that I became increasingly bold in following up on vague student responses that I initially had dismissed as them not wanting to go into detail. I asked for clarification and prodded deeper into their responses rather than just accepting them and moving on. Often students need validation and the knowledge that someone is listening and interested in order for them to disclose certain feelings or thoughts. It is not hard to follow up on a brief emotional response that they give such as “I felt sad in class today when we read about the dog getting hit by the car,” by writing, “I felt sad too. Why do you think you felt so sad about the dog getting hit by the car?” The further you question students' emotional responses, the more likely they will be to recognize their own emotions and practice articulating and dealing with them in a healthy way. Dialogue journals provided opportunities to do this with my students.

Conclusion

As a teacher having initially begun the practice of dialogue journaling with my students under the premise that it would help me get to know them a little better and help them practice their writing stamina and conventions, I proclaim that these journals did that and a substantial amount more. The dialogue journal gave my students more than just a place to practice writing skills, it became a weekly opportunity to connect one on one with me as their teacher, sharing their hopes and dreams, preferences and opinions, joys and sorrows, fears and insecurities.

Additionally, it became an informative space for me to look at my students in a rejuvenated, pure light where the time crunch of curriculum pacing calendars and strains of overcrowded classrooms no longer prevented me from seeing the incredibly complex souls that seek to understand and fit into the world around them with such a beautiful curiosity and vigor. As a teacher, time and again while reading these dialogue journal entries, I was reminded how important it is to give students a voice to share their thoughts and opinions. I was also reminded of how
incredible it can be to form a caring, vulnerable relationship between teachers and students where no topic is proclaimed “off the table” and honest, empathetic responses are exchanged with one another to create an extraordinary climate of care. There is an additional power in all of this that must continue to be researched and explored in relation to how these journals can be used to support children’s mental and emotional health over a school year and perhaps beyond through consecutive years.

This research explored the dialogue journal entries of 10 fourth grade students over a year to explode possibilities for how they might share their emotional lives with their teacher. Many potentially significant findings emerged to raise questions and ideas about ways teachers and others can support students in their emotional development and in facilitating close teacher-student relationships. It is critical for educational stakeholders to continue to seek understanding and explore the emotional terrain of schools. This oft overlooked aspect of schooling has potentially large implications for supporting students in their emotional development and mental and social well-being in schools across the country. Now is the time to be seeking to build these bridges between teachers and students as suicide and mental disorders continue to rise. Dialogue journals definitely enriched the social and emotional communication between my students and I throughout the year and these kinds of approaches to emotion support and development warrant further research.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Consent Forms

Consent to be a Research Subject

What is this research about?

I am a student at BYU as well as your teacher and I want to tell you about a research study I am doing. A research study is a special way to find answers to questions about how things work. We are trying to learn more about how the dialogue journals that you wrote back and forth with me this year can help children talk freely about their emotions and experiences and make their life better. I am asking you to join the study because you are a part of my classroom.

If you decide you want to be in this study, this is what will happen.

1) You will agree for me to look at, read and use your dialogue journal responses from this school year in a paper that I am writing up

Can anything bad happen to me?

You may also lose some privacy; however, I have already read all of your entries as part of the assignment, and I will take your name off of all the work that you turn in and the things you say. The journals will be kept in a locked, safe place where only researchers can access them. No one else at school will be able to see them.

Can anything good happen to me?

We don't know if being in this study will help you. But we hope to learn something that will help other people someday. You may have developed a strong teacher-student bond while dialogue journaling throughout the year, or improve your writing skills, or the ability to express your emotions and experiences in a healthy and safe way.
Do I have other choices?

You can choose not to be in this study if you do not want your journal responses used.

Will anyone know I am in the study?

We won't tell anyone you took part in this study. When we are done with the study, we will write a report about what we learned. We won't use your name in the report and no one at school will know what you said.

What if I do not want to do this?

You don't have to be in this study. It's up to you. If you say yes now, but change your mind later, that's okay too. All you have to do is tell me anytime you change your mind. Before you say yes to be in this study; be sure to ask me, Samantha Johnson or your parents, to tell you more about anything that you don't understand.

Parents will be emailed due to COVID-19 circumstances for online consent:

Dear Parent/ Guardian,
Hello! I hope you are having a great day! As you are probably aware, I am currently enrolled in a Master's Program in Teacher Education at BYU. For my final credits, I have had the privilege of reviewing lots of research, picking a topic that I feel passionate about, and now of carrying out my own research to help further that field. I have chosen to explore how students have chosen to talk about their feelings and experiences in their dialogue journals and how that can further their emotional development and wellness.

Research indicates that dialogue journals can allow children to express their feelings and fully explore their emotions with their teacher, which is crucial to the well-being of the child (Eski, 2013). Also, dialogue journals can help “students articulate their thoughts and feelings clearly and distinctly” (Staton, 1980) and promote rapport between teachers and students, where students feel comfortable enough to disclose concerns (Hail, George, & Hail, 2013; Staton, Shuy, Kreeft-Peyton, & Reed, 1988), as well as enhance collaborative learning between teachers and students (Bruner, 1988).

I am hoping to use student dialogue journals as data for my research thesis examining how teachers can support the emotional well-being of students. All data I collect would be confidential and your child's name would never be publicly referenced. The safety, privacy, and confidentiality of your student would always be considered as a priority before I write or include anything. This study has already been reviewed and approved by the Review Board for Research with Human Subjects at BYU (IRB), the School District, and the principal of the school.
I will be explaining the study and inviting your child to participate by letting me include their dialogue journals through a short video message to them, and I would love if you talked the opportunity over together. While I would really appreciate and love to use your child's dialogue journal and feel that it would be a beautiful, awesome resource, I also understand if you feel hesitant or unsure of this study. You are free to decline and if you choose not to participate, there will be no repercussions at all.

I have attached the official consent forms for you and your child to review. These articulate the risks and benefits of the study as well as other details. I have also attached a child consent form which I will use as a script to introduce this project to your child as well. Thanks for your consideration and please don’t hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or concerns.

Your affirmative reply to this email will act as consent from both you and your child for me to use your child's dialogue journal responses in my research. Please email me either way so that I know if you are willing to let me use the dialogue journal from your child in my study.

Warmly,
Ms.
Johnson
Appendix A Reference List


APPENDIX B

IRB and District Approval

Memorandum

To: Erin Whiting
Department: BYU - EDUC - Teacher Education
From: Sandee Aina, MPA, HRPP Manager
       Wayne Larsen, MAcc, IRB Administrator
       Bob Ridge, PhD, IRB Chair
Date: July 14, 2020
IRB#: IRB2020-258
Title: Exploring Dialogue Journals as a Context for Connecting with and Supporting the Emotional lives of Fourth Graders

Brigham Young University’s IRB has approved the research study referenced in the subject heading as expedited level, category 5. The approval period is from 07/14/2020 to 07/13/2021. Please reference your assigned IRB identification number in any correspondence with the IRB. Continued approval is conditional upon your compliance with the following requirements:

1. Any modifications to the approved protocol must be submitted, reviewed, and approved by the IRB before modifications are incorporated in the study.
2. In addition, serious adverse events must be reported to the IRB immediately, with a written report by the PI within 24 hours of the PI’s becoming aware of the event. Serious adverse events are (1) death of a research participant; or (2) serious injury to a research participant.
3. All other non-serious unanticipated problems should be reported to the IRB within 2 weeks of the first awareness of the problem by the PI. Prompt reporting is important, as unanticipated problems often require some modification of study procedures, protocols, and/or informed consent processes. Such modifications require the review and approval of the IRB.
4. A few months before the expiration date, you will receive a prompt from iRIS to renew this protocol. There will be two reminders. Please complete the form in a timely manner to ensure that there is no lapse in the study approval. Please refer to the IRB website for more information.

Instructions to access approved documents, submit modifications, report complaints and adverse events can be found on the IRB website under iRIS guidance: http://orca.byu.edu/irb/IRIS/story_html5.html
August 3, 2020

Samantha Johnson

Dear Samantha,

Thank you for completing our application to conduct your research with School District. I am granting you permission to contact the principal at the school you requested. You must contact him for permission to conduct your research at his school.

Good luck in your research, and if you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to call at the number stated above.

Sincerely,

[Name]
Director of Research and Evaluation

DM/cse

cc: [Name]