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(R) Listening to Children: "What Could We Possibly Have in Common?" From Concerns With Self to Participatory Consciousness

THE AGE-OLD MYSTERY about the nature of the "self" has increasingly preoccupied me over the last few years. The question of what a "self" is and what it is not, and therefore how it relates or does not relate to "other," has taken center stage in both my personal and professional life. The academic part of this search has made it clear to me that, particularly under the influence of Western thought since the Enlightenment, we in the West have come to understand the self as something with clear boundaries, purposes, and goals—an entity that, in seeing itself as separate and distinct, constructs that which is not-self as "other"—thereby creating, and then maintaining, a process of self-other distancing.

Such an understanding, however, has not been characteristic of all cultures or all world-views. I have discussed these thoughts elsewhere (Heshusius, 1994) with regard to ideas of objectivity and subjectivity in educational research. Here I connect the other-self relationship to the teacher-student relationship with particular regard to how teachers listen, or do not listen, to the youngsters they teach.

A "Purposeless" Assignment

In an undergraduate course on theories of education, an assignment I have been giving for the past several years is for each student to engage in a conversation with a youngster. This project is designed

to let the two get to know each other—not for teacher-oriented reasons such as developing better lesson plans or assessing the youngster. Students are not to conduct an interview (read: fire a list of questions) in which they can control the conversation. Rather, the idea is to create a situation in which the students have to deliberately meet and get to know a young person whose teacher they could possibly be, while keeping their teacher identities from dictating the interaction. The youngster is to be between the ages of approximately 6 and 14 and someone they do not know or know only superficially.

In developing this assignment, I wanted to problematize the self-other relationship within the "normal" teacher-student relationship. I wanted to see what would happen when one asks student teachers to really listen.¹

This assignment has two parts: (a) to write out to the best of their recollection a script of the conversation and (b) to reflect on their most personal reactions to this assignment: What did the conversation illuminate about *themselves*? What did they feel, think, look forward to, worry about, enjoy, not enjoy, before, during, and after the conversation, and why?

I first thought of this assignment because of a growing awareness of the complexity of the act of listening and talking in my own life. I had become conscious of the fact that not only did other people rarely really listen to me, but I rarely really listened to other people! It was easy to reach the former conclusion, but it was only in my most honest and nonjudgmental

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moments that I could observe myself and acknowledge the latter. It was only when I could rid myself of any need to evaluate my own listening behavior (as "good" or "bad") that I could start seeing what was happening when I thought I was listening but was not.

It became clear that when I thought I was listening, most of my attention was with myself: I wondered how the other person's message applied to myself; I had vague images about what I would rather be doing than listening to this person; I wondered about what I should be saying, given my particular role (e.g., as teacher, mother); I thought about what I could say next to the person to steer the topic into another, more interesting, direction. Not that I did all this deliberately and consciously; these modes of listening (or rather, partial listening, or not listening) play themselves out as habits of which we are hardly aware.

I began focusing on how other people behave when I feel they are truly listening to what I am saying, those occasional times when I know persons are fully listening, without any preoccupation with themselves. I feel the person's complete attention. There is a quietness, a stillness about the person. Nothing in her or his mind is weighing, evaluating, judging, or formulating unsolicited advice. Such encounters are rare, but lovely. You feel so completely attended to that you can think aloud, feel aloud, go slowly or quickly, and you know the other person is with you. Time seems to stop.

Next I set out to deliberately observe myself during those occasional moments when I find myself fully attentive to what someone is saying: moments when self-centered concerns do not seem to be present. When this happens, I feel quiet but very alive; completely attentive to the other. There is a sense of opening up. The self is forgotten; there is no "I" with whom I am preoccupied or who is judging. I become something larger than myself—something that is, for that moment, undefined. I saw that I can only be this way when I am not tired, not too busy, and when I feel a friendly disposition to the other. Otherwise, I slide right back into preoccupation with my own needs, feelings, and ego concerns, which invariably make me a halfhearted, if not an absent listener.

I thought of children and teachers. We know that teachers generally do most of the talking. Given that I had just paid close attention to this business of talking and listening in my own life, discovering

how difficult it is to truly listen, I decided to ask the students in my class to really listen to children. I could not remember many teachers in my own schooling—at whatever level—who had been listeners in that fully attentive manner. Only one came to mind: a professor in world literature at a teachers college 30 years before. Just one.

Under what conditions would I ask the student teachers to listen to youngsters? What should their conversation be about? I reasoned that if I gave them a certain topic to talk about, or a certain purpose (e.g., to learn about a youngster's hobby so they could plan a lesson around it), I would be filling their heads with reasons to be preoccupied with their own purposes for talking and listening. This would block full attentiveness toward the other. I decided to ask them to listen without a purpose.

As many students have told me, my request to do a "purposeless" assignment was the strangest task they had ever been given. Assignments they had received that involved listening to a youngster had always centered around a specific teaching-oriented purpose. I asked them to just *be* with a youngster and listen. I thought this would facilitate the possibility for self-forgetting and, therefore, fully attending to what might occur in a new self-other space. I realized I was asking my students to enter a self-other relationship distinctly different from, if not contradictory to, the one implied in the teacher identity to which they were aspiring.

Below I share some major themes from students' reflections. In terms of the quality and direction of attention involved in the act of listening, there were two major ways in which the other-self relationship played itself out. First, many of the comments showed that for most students, attention (particularly before and during the beginning of the conversation) was shaped and limited by their own concerns. These concerns directed the conversation and turned it into an interview. It allowed the student teacher to keep control over the direction of the conversation and to keep the youngster at a psychological/emotional distance as "other," maintaining a self-other separation. Most students made the *a priori* assumption that they could not possibly have enough in common with a child on which to base a non-teacher-like conversation. Typically, maintaining control over the perceived self-other distance was made possible by turning the conversation into an interview.

Secondly, for a good number, although certainly not all of the students, a shift occurred: Something akin to identification with the youngster took place. This seemed to dissolve some of the self-centered concerns and the resulting self-other separation. As a result, a more complete mode of attending was engaged in. This shift typically occurred well into the conversation when a certain comfort level had settled in and a spark of real interest in the youngster made it easier for the adult to relinquish concerns around the self.

This change seemed to occur because of the purposeless nature of the talk and a related set of conditions that presented themselves as the conversation developed: an openness between the adult and the youngster; a feeling of excitement about the pleasantness and increasing richness of the conversation; a discovery of a common ground of shared childhood; and, in those cases where difficulties in the youngster's life were the main focus of the conversation, a feeling of genuine concern and empathy.

This of course did not happen for all students. It did not happen for those who "kept the lid" on the conversation by directing it as one would a structured interview, or for those who jumped from one topic to another, thereby staying in control and keeping the conversation at a surface level. What follows is a summary of students' reflections. All examples, including the theme headings, are direct quotes from students' essays and are representative of the majority of comments.²

Maintaining the Other-Self Separation

"What could I possibly have in common?"

I had expected some students to feel a certain anxiety, a pleasant nervousness perhaps, when starting the assignment—an unsettled feeling in anticipation of something new that is not under one's control. I was not prepared, however, for the reaction of the majority of students, who attributed their (sometimes extreme) nervousness to a conviction that children were so different that they could not "just talk" to each other:

How could I possibly carry on a 20 minute conversation with a child who I know relatively little?

It was quite an experience to approach someone half my age and to try and initiate a casual conversation.

I couldn't see the relevance in talking to a student for 20 minutes about anything!

I thought it would be awkward to sit down with a child who I did not really know and engage in a pleasant conversation.

Giving feedback in class, I have commented to the students: "You plan to be with a group of people, every day, with whom you think you have nothing in common?" A slightly embarrassed, surprised laugh has been the typical response. These student teachers had come to imagine their conversation with youngsters only from within the parameters established by their authority as teachers; the self-other relationship had been appropriated by this authority.

"I concluded he was a very gifted child."

Although I had stressed, over and over, that the reflections were to be about themselves (for this particular assignment, I was not interested at all in the youngster), a few students could not get away from the quintessential teacher task of assessing the other. Four to five students in each class barely said anything about themselves but analyzed the youngster instead, effectively maintaining the self-other separation. When I pointed this out to them, it still seemed impossible for some to realize that they had focused on the child and not on themselves. They would say: "But these are *my* views on the child . . . it is about me."

With two or three students, I never managed to help them step out of this inflexible teacher identity. They insisted on leaving the self in a safe, hidden place. The students who interpreted the assignment as an analysis of the child were also among those who turned the conversation into an interview, as illustrated in the next theme.

"I asked questions to keep her talking!"

When discussing the assignment, I had carefully explained and stressed that this conversation, by its very lack of predetermined purpose, could not be thought of as an interview. At least as it is traditionally understood, an interview is centered around the interviewer's ideas, needs, and understandings. They could not just "fire" a set of questions at the youngster. I told them, therefore, to not even think of what questions they were going to ask. Despite my warnings, 8 to 10 students in each class "conducted" the entire conversation as an interview. The need to be in control came through clearly, resulting in scripts such as this one:

Student: What is your name?
Youngster: Nicole Hammen.³
Student: What grade are you in?
Youngster: Five.
Student: Do you have any brothers or sisters?
Youngster: Yes, a little sister. Her name is Stephanie.
Student: How old is she?
Youngster: Three years old.
Student: Any brothers?
Youngster: No. Just my sister.
Student: Is she going to be coming to school here?

In their reflections, most of the students who had engaged in "conversations" as illustrated by this script were aware that they had interviewed the youngster, rather than having listened and talked without a specific purpose:

Up to this point the whole situation felt a bit stiff. . . . I was asking too many questions.

I tried to ask questions that would require a more in-depth answer. But as I was doing this, I felt kind of guilty. I felt I was manipulating the conversation, rather than letting each of us experience a natural chat.

The awareness of the need to be in control was expressed by several:

The discussion was mostly one-sided . . . it was in large part my doing. . . . I had monopolized the conversation.

I learned how damn much I needed to be in control!

I was nervous about simply approaching her. . . . I was unwilling to break down that wall of aloofness which I maintained. . . . I suppose I was quite comfortable with the supposed control I had over the relationship.

A few students, however—one or two in each class—who had fired a series of questions at the youngster were not aware that they had done so until I pointed it out to them. Even then, they had a hard time seeing it. One may think that through interviewing one might get to know the child. But such knowing is on the interviewer's terms and is therefore under her or his control. The knowledge gained is not of the youngster on the youngster's terms, which can be of a very different nature and quality.

Blurring the Self-Other Separation

"Kids know more than you think!"

The self-other, adult-child distance became blurred when students realized that the youngsters knew far more than they had expected. Once they gave up the idea of exerting the typical adult control

over the conversation, they learned that children's thinking may be on a higher level than they had realized through previous interactions with them. In having to reconsider the nature of the other, they had to reconsider the nature of the self:

I did not expect an 8-year-old's level of thought to be so intense.

I was the one out of touch. She was a very good informant, and was aware of more than I thought she would be.

A child can bring to a conversation . . . a perspective that has never been considered.

How can you not fall in love with that spontaneous manner of thinking and blatant honesty? His vocabulary completely blew my mind!

"I felt as though I were talking to myself."

Many students wrote that being with the youngster in this unstructured way evoked memories of their own childhood. Usually, though not always, these memories were positive, at times somewhat nostalgic. Sometimes they seemed to be a bit romanticized, but they always brought about a degree of psychic, emotional, and somatic identification with the youngster that lessened the self-other separation:

For a brief moment I felt like a child . . . I felt full of excitement.

I was surprised at the emotions which surfaced, as well as the memories which were provoked by our discussion.

This experience was deeply personal.

"I want to get to know this child better!"

By the time the conversation ended, many students expressed a desire to get to know the youngster better:

I was having such a good time I did not want it to end.

I gained a friend while completing an assignment!

I remember thinking "I want to keep talking to this child."

Beyond Psychologizing

This assignment is not meant to psychologize youngsters, teachers, or their interactions, nor is it meant to foster a humanistic attitude. I do not urge student teachers to make children feel better about themselves by listening to them, to foster self-esteem, or to address the whole child. Such purposes are about changing the other and are typically informed by a

concept of self-other boundaries that pictures the other as unique, individual, separate, and distinct. By implication, the self is then likewise seen as enduring and relatively fixed in its essence. The boundaries between self and other can be clearly drawn.

The purpose of this assignment is to suggest a different understanding of the nature of self-other boundaries—not as fixed, not as clearly drawn, but as permeable and changing. When the mode of consciousness one enters is participatory, that is, when concerns with the self have been let go, total attentiveness can occur. The boundaries between self and other blur: The self and other are not, by definition, separate and distinct. There is no fixed core to either self or other (see also Berman, 1990; Heshusius, 1994; Schachtel, 1959; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991).

Some students did not manage to imagine themselves outside the parameters of the humanistic attitude in which they had been well educated. They kept themselves separate and distinct from the youngster. I wanted to direct their experience, however, to a very different understanding of the self-other relationship, by helping them to see that listening to children—to anyone for that matter—is affected by the particular concept we hold about the self: Do we decide (in the very act of considering the other as “unique” and “whole”) to conceptualize our self as separate and distinct from other, or do we temporarily dissolve the boundaries of the self, making complete attentiveness to other possible and, in turn, opening up access in new and unanticipated ways?

The assignment helped most students become aware that the boundaries of the self we draw around us are made up of ego concerns that can readily express themselves in the form of control mechanisms, which stand in the way of full attentiveness. Students realized that the very teacher identity they were acquiring could function as such blockage. There are times when one’s teacher identity might best be left out of the self-other relationship in order to fully attend to the other. The choice to do so can be made deliberately with sufficient awareness of, and honesty toward, the self.

Furthermore, the assignment helped students see that “listening to children” is not as easy as it sounds, or is made to sound, especially within humanistic theory. It is, in fact, very difficult if done within a participatory mode of consciousness in which one is confronted with the habitual focus on the self. Listening to children within a participatory mode of

consciousness, then, is not about enhancing the other’s self-esteem, or paying attention to the whole child: It is rather about boundaries. It is about boundaries we habitually draw around the self in order to keep ourselves separate and distinct from the other; and it is about the possibilities of dissolving those boundaries, so that we may come to know the other, and paradoxically also the self, more fully.

Fully Attending: A Participatory Mode of Consciousness

In the years that have passed since I first gave this assignment, I have engaged in a more deliberate study of the different modes of consciousness within which we conceptualize the self-other relationships and the different qualities of attention involved (see Heshusius, 1994; see also Schachtel, 1959; for related readings, see Berman, 1981, 1990; Harman, 1988; Keller, 1983, 1985; Tarnas, 1991). When we are preoccupied with any aspect of self, we construct distance between self and other based on the presumed prior existence of the self as a separate, individual entity. This definition of the self is characteristic of Western thought. The distance is maintained by responding in terms of the self, although we think we are listening to the other.

This is not to say that we never should respond in terms of the self. There are times, of course, when it is necessary to listen for specific purposes, including listening while having in mind how we would act, think, or feel ourselves, or what question we need to ask next. My position here is that it is important to understand the difference between listening with a specific purpose and listening without a specific purpose, that is, listening *without wanting anything from it*. The latter, paradoxically, opens up fuller access to the totality of the other.

I believe an understanding of the difference between listening with and without a purpose cannot be obtained intellectually. It must be grasped in the doing of it rather than conceptually and verbally. We must watch ourselves, non-evaluatively, to actually see (not analyze and judge) what the mind is doing when we think we are listening. When we can observe ourselves fully attending to the other or, on the other hand (and likely more often for most of us), barely attending but pretending we are, only then can we consciously change our mode of attention. One has to first be aware of the difference.

If the desire is to be fully attentive, we can learn to temporarily let go of the self and direct complete attention to the other. One cannot set aside egocentric concerns until one has first clearly observed them in operation. The problem, of course, with egocentric concerns is that they have become deeply ingrained in our day-to-day lives and are shaped at an out-of-awareness level. It is only in the nonevaluative seeing that one can temporarily let go of them and fully attend.⁴

The mode of consciousness in which egocentric concerns do not stand in the way has been referred to as a participatory mode of consciousness. This does not refer to action as such or to verbal experience; rather, it relates to a way of being with others and with the self that is passively alert, vigilant but not intrusive, a way of attending that is characterized, as Schachtel (1959) states, by both "the totality of the act of interest" and the "participation of the total person" (p. 225). It involves a temporary eclipse of all egocentric thoughts and strivings, of all preoccupation with self (p. 181). One does not want or need anything from the other. One does not want to achieve anything.

Conclusion

The mystery of the nature of the "self" has surely not been clarified by this article. With regard to teacher education programs, however, I hope to have problematized the largely exclusive understanding of the self in terms of a well-programmed teacher identity. This self-as-teacher identity had made the student teachers I worked with believe they had nothing in common with youngsters on which to base a conversation. Injecting contradictions into such a self-as-teacher identity has destabilized it and created a larger reality in which the student teacher can experience the self-other relationship with a youngster on a less defined but more complex and transformative basis.

Teacher education programs characteristically shape teacher identity by speaking of the need to plan, manage, direct, assess—in other words, have an array of predetermined purposes for interacting with youngsters. The assignment I use as a vehicle to explore the nature of self (and therefore of other) disrupts such a legitimated control identity. It apparently runs against all common sense understanding of what it means to "become a teacher." As a result, students have come to see that the self is not a fixed

identity, but is formed and reformed in "selfother" encounters.⁵

I hope the students have learned that to understand the self as a fixed entity can severely limit the access we have to others, and can foreclose the possibility of joining a larger selfother reality that enriches and changes the self. I hope the students have experienced more consciously what it is like to deliberately let go of the self, thereby discovering how much they can relate as people to the youngsters they will teach. To hear youngsters we must get ourselves out of the way.

I hope the students have learned that the having in common and the not having in common are reciprocal processes: They are not fixed states. Neither alone should be the basis for the thinking of the self. It is in the space that exists between the having in common and the not having in common that the possibility for true dialogue can occur and the generative conditions for real listening, talking, and learning exist.

Notes

1. Of course, this assignment, by the very fact that it was an assignment, was somewhat artificial. In each class, one or two students initially objected to the assignment on this basis. However, only two students in the 3 years I have given this assignment have stated that the artificiality had been a problem to the end. Others, who had initially thought of the assignment as artificial, noted that such perception dissolved as the conversation went along. In almost all cases, it was the youngster who reached beyond the initial artificiality and put the adult at ease.
2. The student reflections are taken from papers that 135 students voluntarily submitted for me to use in an article.
3. Pseudonym is used.
4. Jiddu Krishnamurti (see Krishnamurti, 1954, 1972) has been particularly lucid in describing why our observations have to be nonevaluative. When we say to ourselves, "that was bad," "that was good," such judgments cloud the ability to see. The mind is then obsessed with judging rather than with seeing and is still focused on the self.
5. I am using the word "selfother" to reflect the temporary unity experienced of self and other within a participatory mode of consciousness. Berman (1981, p. 335) similarly suggests the word selfother, a word, he says, that is awkward because the still dominant discourse of Cartesian dualism does not allow us to express ourselves in nondualistic terms. Regardless of its awkwardness, I decided to use the word here (see also Heshusius, 1994) as participatory consciousness *means* to be and to know, however temporarily, in a nondualistic mode.

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