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A Puzzling Association: How an Educator and Author Influenced Teacher Candidates

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As a professor of children's literature at a Midwest university, Sharryn, the first author, met children's author Jody Feldman at a social event. The conversations about her writing and the field of children's literature continued as the two met over several years. However, when the Sharryn accepted a position at a regional, Pacific Northwest university, the conversations were hindered. Simultaneously wanting to continue the conversations with Jody and looking for a way to connect the pre-service teachers enrolled in a children's literature course with an author, the Sharryn approached Jody about the possibility of holding a Skype interview with pre-service teachers. Although both were novices in using this technology when they first started, they quickly learned how to effectively use this medium. Thus, quarterly Skype sessions began.

Children's authors frequently visit schools as a way to excite students about reading, to talk about their craft, and to promote their books, yet numerous teacher candidates have never had this experience as students, nor have they considered the value of such visits. Teachers have cited the importance of bringing writers to schools in order to support the teaching of writing (Rubin, 2007). Such school visits take the mystery out of writing, acknowledge how difficult a task it is, and offer demonstrations of writing strategies. The visits encourage young writers and foster enthusiasm for the reading/writing process (Naslund & Jobe, 2006). Additionally, visiting authors pass on their love of reading and of books, while encouraging family involvement in both. Bringing authors into schools puts names to faces and makes the reading of particular books more personal (Harvey, 2005).

When planning an author visit, schools should consider several factors (Harvey, 2005; Ruurs, 2005). First, the school community must decide which author to invite, and at what cost. Because of the economic downturn, many schools and children's authors are finding Skype visits to be viable alternatives to "live" ones (Lorenzi, 2009; Messner, 2009; 2010; Micklos, 2012). For children's authors, the benefits of this type of visit include the convenience of staying home and the ability to show their writing environments, while still maintaining the interactive nature of the visits. From their perspective, teachers and librarians note the economic benefits and the away-from-ordinary nature of the visits.

After the author has been selected and the mode of the visit agreed upon, the students and school

community must prepare so that everyone involved receives the full benefit of the event (Harvey, 2005; Ruurs, 2005). The preparation should minimally include introducing the author's books and could also include reading the books, holding discussions, and engaging in book-related responses. Using the book in an integrated teaching approach is one way to increase interest across classrooms and subject areas. In regard to in-school visits, Ruurs (2005) recommends creating art projects based on the author's books to increase student interest and to welcome the author with vibrant hallway displays.

Although there is research that supports and recommends hosting author visits in elementary and secondary schools, there is scant evidence of children's authors visiting pre-service teachers in college classrooms. The aim of this study was to solicit feedback from teacher candidates about the use of an author's visit via Skype in a children's literature course. The findings add to the depth of knowledge about teacher candidates' perceptions of the use of children's literature, author visits, and the use of technology in their teaching. Additional implications for teacher educators and children's authors are presented.

The Study

To investigate how teacher candidates perceived the author's visits through Skype and how such visits might affect their teaching, an on-line survey was created. After the course was completed, the teacher candidates were invited to participate in the study. The survey consisted of nine questions in which the teacher candidates wrote short answer responses.

Participants

Teacher candidates enrolled in a children's literature course at a Pacific Northwest university read either *The Gollywopper Games* or *The Seventh Level* by author Jody Feldman and participated in several different response strategies/activities before interviewing her through Skype. One hundred seventeen teacher candidates enrolled in different sections over a five-quarter span were invited to complete an on-line survey about the experience at the end of the course. Thirty-eight (32%) of the teacher candidates voluntarily completed the survey.

Research Methodology

As part of the children's literature course, the teacher candidates read either *The Gollywopper Games* or *The Seventh Level*. Before reading the book, the teacher candidates were assigned roles established by Daniels

(1994) within the literature discussion group format. While participating in the discussion group, the teacher candidates also used the premises of Questioning the Author (QtA) (McKeown, Beck, & Worthy, 1993; Beck & McKeown, 2002) in which they used the text and queries to develop questions for the author. As the discussion progressed, each teacher candidate refined his/her list of questions for the author. For instance, many of the teacher candidates noted similarities between *The Gollywhopper Games* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Dahl, 1964). Their questions centered around Jody's awareness and/or reasons for this. Additionally, many of the teacher candidates were curious as to how Jody became a children's author.

To further respond to the books, the teacher candidates participated in a variety of follow-up activities. Different follow-up activities were used in different quarters. These activities included playing board games, analyzing the use of games with students in the classroom, exploring the author's website, and writing riddles or jokes (Zipke, 2008). The follow-up activities were used to show the teacher candidates how to integrate experiences across the curriculum. Participation in these follow-up activities occurred in the time period between the group discussion and the author interview.

Each Skype interview began with Jody providing background about herself and her journey to becoming a children's author. Then the interview was opened up with the teacher candidates introducing themselves and asking questions. The teacher candidates took notes during the interview, and often used the notes to ask follow-up questions about the topics. Each Skype interview lasted approximately 75 minutes.

After course grades were posted, the teacher candidates were sent a link to the survey, created through *Qualtrics*, an on-line software system. In order to generate the survey questions, the researcher and the author communicated through email, suggesting the types of information they would like to know about the experience. Through this set of communications, nine (9) questions were devised. The first two questions inquired which book the teacher candidate read as part of the course, and which strategies and activities were included in the course. The remaining questions were open response, inquiring what they found interesting and not interesting about the interview; what they liked and disliked about the interview; what about the interview prompted different ways of thinking; how the interview might affect future teaching; and if either book was used in a teaching experience with children. It concluded with an opportunity to offer additional comments. The survey took no more than 15 minutes to complete.

Using a constant-comparative method, the raw data from the surveys were coded within each question type by the researcher. A preliminary list of categories was created from this initial reading (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

The children's author read through the initial coding, offered additional code names, and rearrangement of the data. That data was then coded into more specific categories by the researcher. The children's author reread the data in order to verify the consistency of the category names. Through this reading and rereading of the data, the researcher and children's author refined the categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Findings

Five categories of comments were elicited through the survey. Within each category, the teacher candidates cited activities as interesting or least interesting; gave positive and negative experiences of the Skype experience; highlighted elements of the interview that made them think differently; concluded how the interview might affect their teaching; and offered additional comments they wanted to share. Some ideas were cited in more than one area, thus creating some contradictions in the findings.

The most interesting and least interesting activities. Two broad areas were cited by the teacher candidates as the most interesting activities related to the Skype interview with Jody. First, the Skype interview itself was noted as a "unique experience." Because of the use of this digital technology, the teacher candidates gained an understanding of an author's life, the writing process, and insights into the publishing process. Through this unique experience, the teacher candidates enjoyed being able to see the author and were appreciative of her affability during the interview. Her willingness to share her writing influences and how she started as a writer were cited as interesting. The teacher candidates enjoyed learning about the author's perspectives on writing, most notably her personal writing process. Jody shared how she developed characters and their names, sequenced events, developed evolving ideas, and created the riddles and puzzles included in her books. They also appreciated being able to understand the reasons that she writes what she writes.

During the interview Jody also shared the path it takes to get a book published while noting the number of years it took her to get the first book to print. Because of the interview process, the teacher candidates asserted that they acquired a deeper level of comprehension of the book. The broader understanding of an author's life helped the teacher candidates look at the book from a different perspective, thus having more information to share with the students they will teach.

A second area the teacher candidates cited as interesting was the use of the in-class discussion groups. The discussion groups were used to both exchange ideas about the reading and to prepare for the interview itself. Teacher candidates stated that these groups helped them widen their perspectives of the concepts in the book. Entertaining the thoughts and opinions of others promoted the teacher candidates to gain a deeper understanding of the book.

Although the discussion groups were mentioned by some as interesting activities, others mentioned them as some of the least interesting. The comments here pointed out that discussion groups took much effort, and they were difficult to do successfully when some had not read or completed the reading of the book. The discussion group was also identified as being less interesting than the author interview itself.

Additionally, the use of the games and the web exploration were noted as least interesting. Teacher candidates commented they saw no observed connection between playing games and the concepts from the books. Those who found the web exploration as least interesting stated that teacher candidates spent enough time on computers for classes and did not want to spend more time on them for a class assignment.

Positives and negatives concerning the Skype experience. Four themes were listed as positive take-aways from the Skype experience. Many of the teacher candidates described the personal nature of the interview as positive. Because she shared her background and life as an author, Jody was perceived as “friendly,” “personal,” “open,” “fun,” “witty,” and “honest.”

The interaction of the interview was also viewed as positive in that the teacher candidates felt they were treated as “professionals,” as opposed to students. In this way, they felt they were able to “get to know the author as a person,” asking “deep and surface questions,” while gaining insights into her perceptions and inspirations for writing.

A third positive from the interview pointed to increased insight into the writing process. Jody’s personal touches to the interview helped the teacher candidates learn more about the writing process from inside an author’s mind. As Jody explained how she did or did not use background information for inspiration or ideas for writing, the teacher candidates were able to “translate the process into writing tips for teaching.”

Reading the books in preparation for the interview was voiced as a fourth positive from the Skype interview. Although it was stated that some had not read or completed the reading of the book before the discussion groups took place, some of the teacher candidates shared that they read the book differently because they were going to interview the author. Knowing there was a different purpose for reading and discussing a book, caused the teacher candidates to “read more deeply.”

Even though some of the teacher candidates cited the personal nature of the interview as a positive, a few highlighted as a negative that the experience “wasn’t in person.” In both cases the Skype connection was slow in some spots, then lost altogether. Having to reboot the system took away from the interview time, also seen as a negative. At least one teacher candidate stated that there were “no negatives” of the experience.

Elements of the interview that caused the teacher

candidates to think differently. The most frequent comment about how the Skype interview caused participants to think differently concerned the need to prepare for technological difficulties before they happened. The teacher candidates shared that having a plan of action in place, such as having the author’s phone number handy in order to make contact should Skype disconnect, was necessary. As a whole, they had not thought of this possibility until it happened during the interview.

The teacher candidates also gained new insights into the world of authors. They acknowledged that “authors are people,” and they also discovered a newfound appreciation for the books they read. Some had not considered how difficult it is to get a book published, and this new insight added a greater level of appreciation for literature. They also acknowledged that the process of writing takes much time, and that not everything gets published. This was a helpful tip for classroom teaching in that perhaps not everything written in a classroom needs to be taken to final draft.

How the interview will affect teaching. The teacher candidates realized that some of the behaviors they displayed in discussion groups may play out in their own classrooms. Coming to discussions prepared to participate is necessary for successful group work. The discussions led to a deeper level of understanding, and will work to strengthen their own teaching of story comprehension in the future.

They also cited the necessity of reading the whole book, including the dedication and acknowledgements. Those elements contain pieces of information which help complete the story. The interview also brought forth the notion that teachers need to consider students’ interests, including the content of the stories, when helping them select books. In this way, the teacher candidates surmised they could help create life-long readers.

The Skype interview illuminated the power a teacher holds. When Jody shared a story from her seventh grade year in which a teacher told her she was “disappointed” in the ending of a story she wrote, she also shared that this one comment discouraged her from writing for many years. This story illustrated the impact teachers can have on their students. The teacher candidates responded that should be careful in the feedback they provide to their students and they should utilize methods that encourage success and motivation in writing.

Additional comments shared. At the end of the survey, the teacher candidates were asked if they had any additional comments. A few shared ideas that were not part of the formalized interview questions. One student commented that she had a better understanding of the use of cross-curricular teaching because of the use of *The Seventh Level* in class. This teacher candidate noted that novels can be used in content classes, such as math, as a way to gain a deeper understanding of content.

Another student wrote that she wished that Skype was used in other courses. She felt the interaction between non-educators provided an outside perspective to teaching, especially when being able to talk to a children's author. Overall the Skype interview was viewed as "inspiring" and "rewarding."

Limitations of this Study

There are several limitations to this study. First, a small number of teacher candidates responded to the survey. As a way to avoid coercion, the voluntary survey was sent to the teacher candidates after the course grades were posted. A larger number of participants would add more credibility to the study, and perhaps add more depth to the ideas shared. A second limitation is that the teacher candidates offered perspectives on the interview soon after it happened. If the candidates had been able to apply the ideas and concepts learned in a classroom with students, it would add more credence to the impact a Skype interview may have on their teaching. Despite these limitations, this research does provide a number of implications.

Implications

There are three groups for which research implications can be presented. Clearly, as the participants of this study were teacher candidates there are implications for their teaching. Instructors of children's literature courses can also gain knowledge from the feedback. Finally, there are points of value for children's authors.

Implications for Teacher Candidates

A strong lesson learned by the teacher candidates through this interview was the power their words hold toward their students. Comments similar to, "What you say as a teacher can have lasting effects on your students," were frequently expounded in the survey. Many of the teacher candidates had not considered how their words and behavior can affect a student's motivation and success in a classroom. Jody's personal story of how a teacher's words impeded her writing made a lasting impression on these teacher candidates.

The teacher candidates also acknowledged the fact that "writing is hard work," and this is an important message to carry to their students. Being motivated to write, having an interest in and enthusiasm toward a topic, "thinking like an author," using writing strategies, and sharing writing with students are all aspects of teaching they need to consider. Learning about the number of revisions Jody completed on her first publication showed the teacher candidates that it is not a matter of sitting down and writing one draft, but that a good piece of writing requires revisiting and rewriting multiple times.

Not only did the teacher candidates acknowledge that writing is hard work, they also recognized that not every piece of writing gets published. This is true for classroom practice as well. In a writer's workshop approach, not every piece can or should go to final draft. Writers spend time exploring and experimenting with ideas that may be useful in another piece of writing, not necessarily the one

currently being written. As readers sometimes abandon a book because it is not interesting, writers do the same.

Through this interview, the teacher candidates were reminded of the importance of familiarity with books. As teachers they agreed that knowing about a variety of books will more successfully enable them to "match readers to texts." Likewise, they acknowledged they needed to encourage students not to judge a book by its cover. Some of the teacher candidates were not inspired by the covers of *The Gollywhopper Games* or *The Seventh Level*, yet they enjoyed reading them. This experience is a helpful insight when assisting students select books for themselves.

Implications for Teacher Educators

The use of Skype was viewed as a novel approach to teaching and was appreciated by the teacher candidates. The use of this medium expanded the scope of the course experience and brought in a speaker from more than 2,000 miles away. Skype could be used to bring in speakers from the community-at-large in any subject area. Secondly, because of a connection to an outside speaker, the teacher candidates expressed that they did think differently about the use of children's literature in the classroom. Having an outside professional support the course concepts and the teacher educator's instruction appeared to add credence to the content learned. Finally, the teacher candidates voiced their perceptions on the various response activities presented in conjunction with the reading of the novels. In one particular case (the use of games in the classroom), it appeared that the teacher educator did not make a clear connection or purpose for the use of games in the classroom. This feedback provided the teacher educator with critical feedback about her teaching.

Implications for Children's Authors

Children's authors are known for visiting schools where they discuss their books and writing processes. However, the Skype visit to a college course filled with pre-service teachers appears to be a novel idea. When making this type of visit, the children's author needs to somewhat change the focus of the visit. While still being able to present information about the books and the writing process, the children's author needs to be aware that the audience is composed of pre-service teachers. They are not beginning college students, nor are they yet practicing teachers. Learning to connect and build a relationship with these pre-professionals requires a different tactic than meeting with schoolchildren or with a group of practicing teachers.

It is also important for children's authors to adjust the format of the presentation to fit the context of the course of study. Setting the purpose of the interview provides relevance for the teacher candidates. Once this baseline is established, it is easier for the teacher candidates to make connections. When the content and personal connections are made through the interview, the teacher candidates become less intimidated about asking questions of the author. As a result, the interview progresses quite smoothly

with few awkward moments of silence.

Conclusion

The use of Skype in order to interview a children's author was viewed positively by teacher candidates. The teacher candidates suggested that the use of this medium could enhance the teaching of other college courses. In these interviews, the teacher candidates were able to converse with a children's author, thus gaining a deeper understanding of the use of children's literature, author's visits, and technology in their own teaching. It is suggested that further research on such aspects of teacher education may provide increased understanding of teacher candidates' perceptions of these components.

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Jody Feldman is the award-winning author of *The Gollywopper Games* series and *The Seventh Level* (both, Greenwillow/HarperCollins). She holds a Bachelor of Journalism degree from the University of Missouri and worked in advertising before she became a full-time author.

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