"I've Killed My Puppet!"

A Relational Psychotherapeutic Approach to Inclusive Classroom Practices

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AS A DEAF TEACHER EDUCATOR working at a non-deaf, public university teaching in an undergraduate, pre-kindergarten through fourth grade (preK-4) program and a graduate program that trains educational researchers and leaders, I have been compelled to rethink what it means to be inclusive, and that has upended what I previously understood to be inclusion. In the essay "Your American Sign Language Interpreters Are Hurting Our Education," I wrote about how my understanding of what made inclusion, well, *inclusive* crumbled apart after a particularly intense exchange with a group of non-native English speaking international graduate students. Much to my disbelief, the students confronted me after class with complaints that the American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters were impeding *their* education. In short, the international students demanded that I ditch the ASL interpreters and read their lips instead when in class (Valente, 2016).

While initially this painful incident felt like a discriminatory attack on my rights to have what is a legally-mandated accommodation of ASL interpreters (and it was one), I later found it emotionally reparative *and* pedagogically generative to consider alternative ways of reading what transpired that memorable day. I came to understand the international students' many grievances: feeling disconnected from me with the ASL interpreters as communicative intermediaries, feeling "culture shock" with having interpreters repeatedly overstep or violate boundaries of space in their struggles to hear sometimes soft speaking, mumbling, or strongly accented speech, feeling humiliated being asked to repeat what they said when the interpreters struggled or failed to understand, and feeling unsure if the interpreters were interpreting their comments in class accurately or clearly enough.

Once the grief of exclusion felt less raw, I came to realize that I, too, shared many of the same feelings and concerns the students raised. For me, this episode with my graduate students brought into sharp relief the paradoxes of inclusion and exclusion. After working through this and other similarly difficult or traumatizing experiences of exclusion as a patient in relational psychoanalytic psychotherapy (e.g. Valente, 2014a, 2014b, 2016), I eventually came to learn about and attempt to put into practice a relational psychotherapeutic approach to inclusive classroom practices (e.g. Benjamin, 1997; Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983; Minow, 1990; Ogden, 1994; Skrtic & Kent, 2013; Valente, 2016). So, then, what *exactly* is a relational psychotherapeutic approach to inclusive classroom practices?

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At its core, a relational approach is about relationships. What this has meant practically in terms of inclusive practice is reframing "difference" (e.g., disability, language, race, my "deaf" difference, international students' "language" difference, etc.) itself as a *relation*.[1] In other words, a relational view presupposes that "difference" does not singularly reside in the individual, but that "difference" is also shaped and given shape by the group. A distinct feature of a relational praxis that makes it especially *inclusive* is how relationality works purposefully to keep front and center individual and group practices of relating (or not) to one another. Another distinct feature of a relational approach is how it reframes teaching and learning as simultaneously a *pedagogic* and *therapeutic* project (Valente, 2016). In my everyday practice, this means there is an equal emphasis on attending to the *emotional/affective* and *intellectual* lives of and relations amongst members of the classroom community.

Additionally, through a relational praxis, inclusive educators are compelled to continually consider how "inclusion" and "exclusion" are what psychoanalytic theorist Gail Boldt (2006) called, "relational act[s]" (p. 274). For instance, when later revisiting the incident with the group of international graduate students from a relational perspective, I came to realize how our failure to communicate and relate to one another *with* and *across our differences* affected all of us—as a *group*. Simply put, ours was a group failure. For me, reframing this episode not as an individual but collective failure was productive because I came to realize the generative, inclusionary potential of thinking about and responding to difference not as an individual's burden, but as a group's responsibility. Most especially, I came to understand the critical mantra of relationality: there should not be a hierarchy of difference but a shared burden to deal with difference in ways that allow all members of the group to share the rights and responsibilities for establishing an inclusive community (Valente, 2016).

Rather than further describe what a relational approach "is," the purpose of this essay is to instead show what relational strategies can "do" to help educators create an inclusive classroom community. In what follows, I begin with the "I've killed my puppet" story to provide a concrete illustration for inclusive educators of the remarkable potential of putting into practice a relational psychotherapeutic approach to inclusion. Afterward, I use the "I've killed my puppet" story as an example to foreground relational strategies employed in my teaching practice in my class and in this particular episode. I aim to use this story and the discussion that follows to make the case for inclusive educators to consider adapting or modifying into their own teaching practices these particular relational strategies.

"I've Killed My Puppet"

Picture in your mind this scene: a university classroom with twenty pre-service students in groups of five huddled together around four oval-shaped tables, each table camouflaged by the blue, green, red, yellow, tiger-striped, or polka-dotted body parts of partially-sewn and stuffed melon-head puppets. On the tables were also sewing machines, laptop computers, marble notebooks, fabric, thread, sewing needles, felt, polyfoam, polyester fiberfill, glue guns, scissors, rulers, and markers. The class was abuzz like a workshop.

A short while later, I noticed Whitney sitting in a chair a little distance from her groupmates, all of whom were busily working at their table. I observed Whitney’s familiar pattern of spasm-like movements: head jerking, shoulders shrugging, and left leg kicking out. Whitney’s head, shoulders, and leg repeated the same sequence of movements. And, again. I watched Whitney stare out the window lost in thought, her clasped hands clenching pieces of fabric. I soon observed another pattern that emerged. I noticed one groupmate at a time approach Whitney, whisper in her ear or have a quick exchange, and then return to the group working at the table. After each visit from a groupmate, Whitney would return to staring out the window. Eventually, I decided to approach Whitney to ask a rather simple question, a version of which countless teachers since time immemorial have asked, “Whitney, where are you staring off into space to?”

Much to my surprise, Whitney let out a woeful howl that hushed the workshop buzz and got the attention of all the groups in the classroom, “I’ve killed my puppet!”

And, with that, Whitney’s trembling eyes welled up with tears and her cupped hands jerked outward to show me the puppet she had “killed,” with its tortured threadwork and mangled puppet limbs then falling to the floor. By no means was this my first time having a student cry or get emotional in class, but the juxtaposition between the almost comic absurdity of Whitney’s comment that she had “killed” her puppet and the intensity of her despair caught me off guard. Momentarily unsure how to respond, I uncharacteristically said nothing. Instead, I clumsily placed my hand on Whitney’s shoulder and with my free hand motioned to the rest of the on-looking class to get back to work.

Whitney sat in her chair looking depressed and defeated. In a soft voice, she continued, “I can’t do this. I just can’t. I’m not good at this arts and crafts stuff. I wish I could just write a paper or take a test and not do this.”

Before I could respond, Whitney shot me and her surrounding groupmates a grudging half-smile to acknowledge she knew what was coming next. On cue, I looked at Whitney and her groupmates, “Do you imagine that in your future classroom your students will feel this way about their learning? How would you respond?”

Relationality as Inclusive Praxis: Practicing Relational Strategies in the “Puppet Class”

The “Puppet Class”: Puppets as a Vehicle for Practicing Relational Strategies

In what follows next, I will describe the “puppet class” and then draw attention to the relational strategies built into the course before concluding with the strategies implicitly and explicitly at work in the “I’ve killed my puppet” story. *The Happy Valley Puppet Show* or what is colloquially known by students as the “puppet class” has three major strands of scholarship that shape the course design or make up the class readings, including disability studies in education (e.g. Valente & Danforth, 2016), reconceptualizing early childhood education (e.g. Ayers & Alexander-Tanner, 2010; MacNaughton, 2003) and psychoanalytic or psychotherapeutic approaches to pedagogies (e.g. Boldt, 2006; Boldt & Valente, 2016; Britzman, 2015; Paley, 1986, 1990, 2009; O’Loughlin, 2009; Valente, 2016). *The Happy Valley Puppet Show* is a class-produced and performed puppet variety show about an inclusive kindergarten class that riffs off of the television program *Sesame Street*. Each group in the class is tasked with making a 5-10 minute skit for a production of *The Happy Valley Puppet Show*, and the course culminates with filmed performances for local preschool audiences. The original inspiration to use theatre as a pedagogy for *The Happy Valley Puppet Show* came from Vivian Paley’s (1990, 2009) use of storytelling theatre with children and the Sesame Workshop (e.g. Cole, Richman, & Brown, 2011; Fisch & Truglio, 2011; please see the endnote on the Sesame Workshop and the course)[2]. A salient feature of each relational strategy discussed in this essay is our purposeful practice of dialoguing openly and often about our own and our group’s ways of relating (or not) with one another and dialoguing about how these relations affect individuals and the group.

Relational Strategy: Attending to Our Ways of Living and Relating Inclusively (Or Not)

As I explain to students each semester, the pedagogic purpose of *The Happy Valley Puppet Show* is to use it as a vehicle for practicing strategies of relationality in our classroom life. *The Happy Valley Puppet Show* is designed to purposefully provide opportunities (or, really, the needed tensions) for practicing relationality. I make explicit to my students that the pedagogical purpose of puppet-making and producing an original puppet show is to have pre-service teachers—most of whom are clearly experts enough at “doing school” (Pope, 2001) to attend our flagship university—engage with materials and activities that they have little or, most often, no experience with, including, most dauntingly, tackling the sewing machine, stitching (yes, there is a difference between sewing and stitching), singing, writing song lyrics, character voicing, puppeteering, script development, and so on.

It never ceases to amaze me how thread stuck in a sewing machine, singing in front of a group, or biting criticism from focus groups after doing mock performances can and often does evoke strong emotions and noticeable affect in people. All throughout the semester, I make and re-make the point that the purpose of the puppets is that they serve as a medium for provoking classroom encounters that compel us to dialogue about and across our differences, our experiences of inclusion/exclusion, and how we are affected by and affect the group. Instead of only reading and talking about inclusive practices, we attempt to *live* and to *relate* to one another inclusively while navigating through the inevitable obstacles that come up in our efforts to produce and put on a puppet show.

Relational Strategy: Tracking, Dialoguing, and Journaling About Affect

To have students practice attending to the emotional and intellectual lives of everyone in the group, I organize class readings, discussions, and activities around talking explicitly and regularly from the first to the last day of class about our relational practices (or lack thereof). We put this relational principle into practice on the very first day of class by tasking students with tracking their own and others’ affect. To come up with a working definition of affect, we begin by reading and discussing an excerpt from Kathleen Stewart’s (2007) description of ordinary affects which,

> are the varied, surging capacities to affect and be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences. They're things that happen. They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency…that catch people up in something that feels like something. (pp. 1-2)

Rather than focusing on defining affect too long, we instead focus on what affect *does* or when it seems to materialize. To do this, we practice early on and throughout the semester the strategy of tracking affect by watching short videos from Penn State's Exemplary Digital Teaching Archive (see link: http://edtap.psu.edu). The Exemplary Digital Teaching Archive project (EDTAP) is a collection of videos of elementary and middle school students in classes led by master teachers modeling lessons in project-based, inquiry-based, or studio-based pedagogical approaches that we learn about in the course. These EDTAP videos are a rich resource that we use repeatedly throughout the semester for doing the dual task of trying to make sense of the affective/emotional and intellectual lives of students. For this purpose, each time we watch an EDTAP video, we watch them twice with the idea that we need to read each scene in the classroom for both affect/emotion and teaching/learning dynamics. The first viewing is to practice tracking and dialoguing with groupmates about the affect of the children and teachers in various contexts in the video; similarly, the second viewing is to track and dialogue about the specificities of the above-mentioned pedagogical approaches. Before starting, as we will do for almost every class activity throughout the semester, I remind the students to pay attention to and think about their own affect and others' affect as they do these activities.

To watch the video, students are given prompt questions to write in their journals about such as:

- How do the students relate (or not relate) with one another one-on-one, in their groups, in whole class activities/discussions?
- How do the students relate (or not relate) with the teacher one-on-one, in their groups, in whole class activities/discussions?

The students then discuss these journal entries with their groupmates in order to talk openly about how the affective flows and relationships are shaping or shaped by our individual and collective experiences in the class. Through this routine, we make the practice of dialoguing about and across our differences, through discussions, journals, and then discussing journal entries, part of our collective habits.

Relational Strategy: The "Pause," Quick Reaction Journal Entries, and Dialoguing Some More

Another routine I have adopted is to pause or interrupt an activity or discussion "that catch[es] people up in something that feels like something"—that is, moments that feel especially intense, uncomfortable, boring, disconnected, and so on. This pause strategy, much as a therapist would employ it during session, allows pre-service students to practice taking stock of and to master tracking their own and their group's affect when "something that feels like something" emerges during class. Students are then tasked with writing quick reaction journal entries about how they feel about their learning, their peers, and our class. These journal entries are, in turn, shared within their groups for students to dialogue once again about how they are affected and affect others in the group and class. Through these quick reaction journal entries, students are habituated to our collective responsibility to "pause" to think about the purpose of every interaction and take into consideration how it will affect—unproductively or productively—relationships in our classroom. As a group, we are all supposed to be on the lookout for how our ways of relating with one another connect or disconnect us from our shared experiences of learning and our collective responsibilities for building an inclusive classroom community.

Returning to Whitney: From "Why" to "Where" to Another "Pause"

In returning to the story about Whitney, I want to circle back to the original question I asked that she curiously did not respond to in that moment: "Whitney, where are you staring off into space to?" Through the years, ad nauseam, I have asked students, "Why are you staring off into space?" Whitney staring off into space presented the quintessential teacher dilemma of what to do when a student appears to be off task or disengaged. In this instance with Whitney, the shift from asking "*why*" to "*where*" may seem insignificant; however, for me, it was indicative of my continuing efforts (not always so successful) to break free of old patterns of relating to my students. As I described at the opening of this essay, these old patterns of relating had the effect of reinforcing traditional, hierarchical roles of student-to-teacher and perpetuating unequal power dynamics. These days I am cognizant of the fact that hierarches of differences and unequal power dynamics disconnect me from my students both emotionally and intellectually. Rather than responding as I have in the past and getting stuck with the usual troubling results, I attempted to engage with Whitney *relationally* as an *ally*. Changing the question from "Why are you staring off into space?" to "Where are you staring off into space to?" was my somewhat awkwardly worded attempt to spark a connection—an *alliance*—with Whitney.

Relational Strategy: "Therapeutic Alliance"

In my rather bumbling efforts to engage Whitney, I had in mind the idea that I was modeling for her groupmates a strategy from a recent reading by Boldt (2006), where she described the psychotherapeutic practice of "therapeutic alliance" or "working alliances." By alliance, Boldt (2006) means seizing opportunities—those seemingly ordinary and extraordinary—during class where "the [teacher] proves she is not punishing, even in the face of the worst the [student] has to offer," which allows the student and teacher "to begin to work together to help the [student] address ideas, needs, and desires that previously had felt much too dangerous to face" (p. 295). The concept of "alliance" was a core tool for the course that we revisited continuously in order to consider our ways of relating to and being inclusive of one another (Greenson, 1965; Rather, 2001; and Zetzel, 1956; all as cited in Boldt, 2006).

As it turns out for Whitney, there was indeed something "too dangerous to face" beyond "killing" her puppet or rather her stated frustrations with her failures in puppet-making. Because of what happened, Whitney, her groupmates, and I engaged in a rich, lengthy conversation about how each in the group would have wanted me (as their teacher) and their peers to have responded if in a similar situation to Whitney, and we then had an exchange on how each imagined they would respond to their future students. As is wont to happen, for those who are familiar with psychotherapy, it was when our conversation was about to conclude that Whitney let out a deep sigh, turned to look at her groupmates, and then looked directly at me to say, "You asked me earlier where I was staring off into space to?" I nodded, yes.

Whitney's lips quivered, "I was staring off to…a hospital, thinking about someone I love who is dying."

Relational Strategy: Returning to the "Pause"

Upon hearing Whitney, her groupmates and I comforted her and re-engaged in another conversation, albeit a different one with different ways of relating. At this juncture, I need to pause here to caution against reading what Whitney revealed to be evidence of correlation or causality that the relational approach can work. I also do not want to read this as what some folks call a "*Chicken Noodle Soup for the Soul* moment" (okay, maybe for some folks it is). For me, there is something that feels, at best, sensationalist and, at worst, akin to emotional voyeurism to try to imagine I can or ought to analyze Whitney. I am not Whitney's therapist; I am her professor. I can provide her with compassion, not therapy. Equally as much, I think there is danger in reading Whitney revealing her tragedy to the group and me as "good" or the desired outcome. I cannot know what it meant to Whitney or what motivated her to share her tragic news. Whitney may not know herself.

What I do know is that the switch from "where" to "why"—my attempt to be curious and to connect—did not yield to me the answer to the question at the point I initially asked Whitney. Understandably so, maybe Whitney did not feel able to be vulnerable in that moment in front of the class but did later in the small group with peers she has been engaging with in close conversations through the semester. Or, as I imagine, perhaps she was still working through her own complicated feelings at that moment. Maybe Whitney pivoted to the puppet because it was less dire or a more immediate tragedy or she thought *I thought* being on task with the puppet was more pressing. Whatever the case may be, I cannot know as, thereafter, when I or her groupmates inquired a few times about how she was dealing with the impending death of a loved one, Whitney pivoted to another conversation. Taking the hint, I did not raise the topic again—to have done so would have felt like it was more for me than for her.

Importantly, I think focusing on the "reveal" redirects our attention from the more pressing issue of what the reveal *does*, not so much for what it *means*. I do know asking the question affected Whitney and that it later affected our group. Everyone was affected. The goal of being relational was not for Whitney to reveal what she had yet to share with anyone. But instead, the goal was to open up pathways for dialoguing and connecting with one another. In this case, we connected over the unanticipated ways our vulnerabilities can affect us and, in turn, affect others in the group. If there was anything that was important, I think it was that curiosity and being in relation with Whitney was generative in creating new ways of relating to one another—not better or more honest—but differently shaped by our shared sense of intimacy in that moment.

Conclusion: Inclusive Education as a Therapeutic and Pedagogic Project

In closing, what I argue for here is a version of inclusion that takes into account affect and emotions. A relational ethos ought to address differences in our real and/or perceived attributes, in addition to attending to our differing *and* shared emotional lives as we navigate inclusion and exclusion. We need to rescue emotions, feelings, and the ways we are affected, affect others, and affect the group from the margins—for me, this is the *affective potential* of what a relational approach to inclusion offers. As I have written before, I see inclusion these days not as a noun but a verb (Valente, 2016). Our shared work toward a relational understanding of inclusive classroom practices is a never-ending process and dialogue. Educators need to unfasten themselves to a priori understandings of inclusion and consider how inclusion is a process that is constructed intersubjectively. This relational ethos is not about eradicating exclusions nor resolving or guarding against the affective and emotional complexities of exclusions. The power of the relational psychotherapeutic approach to inclusion is that it provides a framework within which community members routinely, dialogically engage and are duty-bound to collectively respond when exclusions inevitably do emerge. Finally, a relational ethos recognizes the inclusive potential of reconceptualizing teaching as a therapeutic *and* pedagogic project, where the emotional *and* intellectual lives of and relations amongst members of the classroom community are held to be equally vital.

Notes

1. For readers less familiar with relational models of disability studies, see Dan Goodley’s (2010, 2016) primer *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* about global disability studies movements and disability politics. Goodley outlines four major traditions that make up the field of global disability studies, which includes the social, minority, cultural, and relational models. While a description of the specificities and entanglements of these four disability studies models is beyond the scope of this paper, I do caution against reading Goodley’s description (or any account, for that matter) of the major models of disability studies as a continuum from outdated to contemporary (where relational models replace social, minority, and cultural models), but instead read these various models as productively complementary and complexifying (even as and especially because these models of disability studies sometimes contradict and contest each other). For readers more versed in disability studies and particularly relational models of disability studies, see “L’école Gulliver and La Borde: An Ethnographic Account of Collectivist Integration and Institutional Psychotherapy” by Boldt and Valente (2016), which offers an alternative account of a relational model of disability studies grounded in the works of Felix Guattari, Fernand Deligny, and their contemporaries (which stands in contrast to the Lacanian and Nordic relational models of disability presented in Goodley’s work).
2. Due to space limitations, a fuller description that does justice to the pedagogical innovativeness of the Sesame Workshop is outside the scope of this essay. For those interested in learning more, here is a brief account: The Sesame Workshop is a non-profit organization that produces the popular PBS television program *Sesame Street* and offers other educational media and outreach. The precursor to what is today the Sesame Workshop was the Children’s Television Workshop (CTW) that originated the CTW coproduction model, an innovative feature of which was its development of a flexible creative plan and processes for productively facilitating dialogue during the group work collaborations between television writers and producers, curriculum specialists, and educational researchers (Cole et al., 2011; for more on CTW, see Fisch & Truglio, 2011). Another innovative feature of the CTW coproduction model was its use of individual and focus group interviews with children, their parents, and educators to learn about and take into consideration the educational and social-emotional content of the shows prior to releasing on television, and post-airing interviews were sometimes conducted too (Cole et al., 2011). In *The Happy Valley Puppet Show*, we do a version of these focus groups for peer feedback at selected phases during the semester, where groups perform parts of their skits, script dialogues, or songs in-progress for the other groups in the class who are charged with assessing the performances for how well they align with the

curriculum models we are learning about, as well as creating plot points or lyrics that make concrete a relational approach to inclusive classrooms preschool audiences.

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