DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

HOW TEACHER-WRITTEN PRAISE NOTES FOSTER RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

ALANA FITZ
SPRING 2018

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a baccalaureate degree in Secondary Education with honors in Secondary Education

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Anne Whitney
Professor of Education
Thesis Supervisor & Honors Adviser

Michelle Knotts
Assistant Professor of Education, Department of Curriculum & Instruction
Faculty Reader

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.
ABSTRACT

Praise has been studied significantly by various researchers, but there is little research about how praise in the form of postcards sent to students’ homes impact student development and teacher-student relationship development. My experience in the Professional Development School with my 11th grade English students at State College Area High School, inspired my desire to learn about how students respond to praise, specifically in the form of postcards sent to their homes. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of teacher-written praise notes on student development and relationship development between students and teachers. Findings showed a greater sense of student moral agency and academic motivation, in addition to deeper connections between students and teachers.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................... iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................. v

Chapter 1 Introduction ................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 2 Literature Review ...................................................................................... 6

  Introduction .................................................................................................................. 6
  Understanding “Care” .................................................................................................. 7
  Building Relationships Between Students and Teachers ....................................... 10
  Developing Caring Relationships Through Praise ............................................... 10
  Student Development .............................................................................................. 11
  Limits of Praise ......................................................................................................... 12
  Written Praise .......................................................................................................... 13

Chapter 3 Methodology ............................................................................................. 16

  Context ....................................................................................................................... 16
  Postcard Creation ..................................................................................................... 16
  Postcard Content and Topics .................................................................................. 17
  Recording Student Progress Through Journaling and Survey ......................... 19

Chapter 4 Findings .................................................................................................... 23

  Academic-Related Postcards ............................................................................... 26
  Social-Related Postcards ....................................................................................... 29
  Anecdotal Evidence ............................................................................................... 31

Chapter 5 Discussion ................................................................................................. 33

Chapter 6 Conclusion ................................................................................................ 36

Appendix A Survey ..................................................................................................... 38

Appendix B Survey Question 3 Student Responses ............................................... 41

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................................................ 42
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. SCASD Postcard ................................................................. 18
Figure 2. SCASD Postcard Address Label ......................................... 19
Figure 3. Student Perception of Acknowledgement in School ........... 24
Figure 4. Student Perception of Acknowledgement in English Class ... 25
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to give my appreciation to Anne Whitney, my thesis supervisor and honors advisor, for her genuine support and feedback throughout the thesis writing and revision process. Your assistance and knowledge are much appreciated!

I would also like to give my heartfelt gratitude to Michelle Knotts for her unconditional guidance and support. You provide knowledge and experiences that allow students to grow into their best teacher-selves and their best human-selves! You have helped me develop my own teaching values through your love for teaching. From your passion for teaching and your endless knowledge, I have learned teaching practices that I am eager to implement in my classroom, I have developed my own set of values that is continuously expanding, and I have discovered life lessons that will always be remembered. Your patience, wisdom, encouragement, humor, and optimism will be inspiration for my future as a teacher and will forever be treasured in my heart. I aspire to provide opportunities for self-development for my students as you have provided for me.

I would like to express my gratefulness to Veronica Iacobazzo, my mentor, for her guidance and assistance throughout this school year. It has been an absolute pleasure, blessing, and honor to work with and learn from you each and every day.

I would like to thank Karen Morris for her constant reassurance, support, and expertise throughout this process. You pushed me when I needed it, you have the research knowledge that I had to learn, and you helped me remain hopeful and sane through the hardest times. I am so unbelievably grateful for everything that you provided for me throughout this process.
I would also like to express my many thanks to my parents for being the absolute best listeners and for being supportive beyond words. You helped me recall my passions, my values, and my identity when I needed the reminder.

Finally, I would like to thank my students who made this study possible. I feel so fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with such special individuals. You all made my first year of teaching a very memorable one.
Chapter 1

Introduction

One of my passions in life is getting to know people and creating meaningful relationships with those around me. Since I decided that I would pursue a career in education, I looked forward to the opportunities to build connections with each of my students by showing deep care for them. I want to find ways to reach every student and help them develop and grow as individuals. As an intern in the Professional Development School for the 2017-2018 school year, I am student teaching at State College Area High School. I teach College Prep English and Advanced English to 11th graders. Through my internship experience, I have learned to value the daily opportunities to interact and create connections with each of my students.

This study was inspired by my first day of in-service training prior to starting my year-long internship, I attended a meeting where faculty members were asked to write a note on a SCASD postcard to a colleague to express something they appreciated about the individual. When school started, I noticed the handwritten SCASD postcards displayed on teachers’ desks, on classroom walls, and in the English office. This introduction to postcards opened my eyes to the happiness and motivation that is brought when an individual is recognized and praised for something that they do.

The focus of this study is also influenced by my mentor, who embodies all qualities of a caring teacher and prioritizes building relationships with her students which has allowed me to explore and pursue these beliefs in our everyday classroom. Working with her since August has inspired me and further validated my perspective on the importance of connection amongst
teachers and their students. She introduced me to several activities that allow individuals to express themselves more than the average daily lesson and curriculum permits. For example, we start each class with a whip around question that students voluntarily answer, followed by either “Fishbowl” or “Mystery Student”. Whip around questions vary significantly. Some examples are:

- What is something that makes you laugh?
- If you were stranded on a deserted island, who is the one person you would want to have with you?
- What do you do after school? Do you have a job? If so, where?
- How did you spend your snow day?
- What is one thing you’re thankful for?
- What is an issue in society that you are concerned about or interested in?
- What is one goal or intention you are pursuing in this new year?

My mentor and I also answer the whip around question every day. Each question opens a new realm for students to explore and discuss with their peers and with their teachers. Following the whip around question is either the Fishbowl challenge or Mystery Student. We started the school year with each student attempting the Fishbowl challenge. For the challenge, the participant has one minute to answer as many questions (written on index cards shaped like fish) from the bowl. The questions are simple enough that the participant can answer them within a few seconds, but they are still personal which provides some information about the participant’s identity for those listening. Once everyone had done the Fishbowl challenge at least once, each student participated in Mystery Student by writing a fact about himself or herself that no one in the room knows. My mentor or I will read the fact, and the class gets 3 attempts at guessing who the
mystery student is. This is my personal favorite, as I learned so many random facts about my students that they may not have had the opportunity to explain and express during normal instruction. Some of the facts that I remember are:

- “I attended a family barbecue with Jimmy Carter.”
- “I used to put beetles in my pockets in elementary school.”
- “I have 7 siblings.”
- “I am somehow related to Amelia Earhart, I think.”

All of these brief activities provide the opportunity for students to get to know each other on a deeper level and allow teachers and students to recognize one another as humans beyond the simple roles taken in the educational setting.

I became intrigued by the unique humans my students are beyond the 90 minutes that I see them, every other day. I was motivated to find out more about each individual and build stronger relationships with my students. I wanted them to see through my efforts by writing postcards that they are noticed in class, their accomplishments are honorable, and that their well-being is considered and cared for. Using postcards in my teaching practice lead me to combine my relationship aspiration with my in-service experience. I wanted recognize the brilliance, kindness, and greatness that my students bring to the classroom, find out if praising my students by sending handwritten postcards to their homes would help my mentor and me connect with our students on a deeper level, and analyze other possible impacts on student development in any form. Some of my questions included:

- What would students think about receiving a postcard in the mail?
- How would they feel?
- What impact would these postcards have on student achievement?
What type of recognition would have the most impact on a student?

Could writing these postcards help me build stronger relationships with my students?

I was filled with excitement and curiosity. I wanted to be able to show my students appreciation for all that I observe and experience with them each day.

While considering these questions and my interest in student acknowledgement of my appreciation through written praise, I reflected on the current educational culture in our nation. Today, students constantly feel pressure from various sources, struggle with mental health concerns and illnesses, and are identified and ranked by standardized, quantitative terms. Although many researchers have studied praise and its impact on students, I wonder if these contemporary factors and concerns create a new, different impact on the way that students respond to written praise from their teachers than what has already been explored.

In a few short months, I will have my own classroom where I will be responsible for creating a community where the best possible learning happens. Given the current educational culture of our nation and the factors that heavily influence students today, I wonder what role praise plays in teacher-student relationship development and student development. Additionally, I wonder how the correlation between these contemporary factors and reaction to written praise influences how the best possible learning is achieved.

To begin this study, I will review the existing literature about relationships built through care, praise, and the connections between these concepts. Following this literature review, I will describe my process of writing and sending postcards to students and describe the survey that participants voluntarily responded to. I will then analyze changes in teacher-student relationships
and I will analyze students’ verbal, behavioral, and academic responses to the postcards and the survey.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

In a country where the education system is dominated and influenced by heavy standardized testing and expectations for continuing higher education, it is becoming a challenge to find time in the classroom to recognize students for the positive ideas, behavior, and actions that they bring to the classroom. Students are being silenced and ranked through the authority of testing, suffering from anxiety and stress, and being deprived of play and creativity, all of which contribute to empathetic failure for our youth as sight, suffering, and personal experience are avoided (Gray, 2015). Thus, we must repair this “educational trauma” and its long-term consequences (Gray, 2015). As said by Nel Noddings (2005), “we must take public responsibility for raising healthy, competent, and happy children” (Gray, 2015, p. 14). As educators, we have the ability to promote empathy and compassion in the classroom through the encouragement, honor, and promotion of teacherly love and through the mindful awareness of both our students needs and our own (Gray, 2015). Noddings (1984) believes that “caring” should be at the heart of education (Owens & Ennis, 2005) and in the foundation for curriculum to promote caring for others, for ideas, for the environment, and more (Wolk, 2009). In order for students to learn about caring, first, teachers must support and encourage care in their classrooms through their own teaching practices.
The promotion of empathy and compassion in education stems from the wellbeing, values, and dedication of the teacher. In order for one to become a caring teacher and promote care in the classroom, the individual must first provide care for his or herself (hooks, 1994). Care for oneself can be through reflection, learning, and wonderings which will result in the quality of life for a teacher improving and then spreading as quality for students (Gray, 2015). hooks (1994) believes that attention to feelings and care allow teachers to act as healers for students and help bring about justice. However, if teachers are not content themselves, then they will not be able to reach their students to the best of their abilities (hooks, 1994). Once teachers are committed to promoting their own wellbeing, they are able to teach in a manner that heals and empowers their students, thus, care must first be directed towards his or herself which then allows teaching practices to demonstrate respect and care for students and their needs (Daniels & Pirayoff, 2015; hooks, 1994).

**Understanding “Care”**

Researchers and theorists define “care” with slight variation, as this term is ubiquitous, flexible, personal, and dynamic, and thus, its meaning varies depending on the individual (Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008). Throughout this study, the term “care” will be used in reference to the loving kindness towards students built through teacher reflection and classroom practice (Kelly, 2015), “the relational practices that foster mutual recognition and realization, growth, development, protection, empowerment” (Gordon, Benner, & Noddings, 1996 as cited by Owens & Ennis, 2005, p. 393), and the relations between teachers and students that provide a foundation for successful pedagogical activity (Noddings, 2005). The purpose for a teacher to illustrate care
in the classroom is to create a climate that encourages interaction and develops collaborative skills (Daniels & Pirayoff, 2015), integrates students’ needs, talents and working habits to build lessons that plan for individual progress (Noddings, 2005), and foster authentic relationships that allow authentic teaching to occur in the classroom (Quinn, 2017). To show care through teaching is to provide the conditions needed for each student to reach the deepest and most intimate possible learning (hooks, 1994).

A relationship of caring has a developed connection between two humans, a carer and a recipient of care, or the “cared-for” (Noddings, 1992). The carer is committed to the solicitude and protection of the cared-for (Morrison, 1985). In schools, often the teacher is the carer, and the recipients of care are the individual students. The carer (teacher) gains information from the cared-for (students), such as interests, talents, working habits, and needs, considers how the cared-for is expressing desires and feelings, and responds with positivity based on the carer’s individual values and capacities (Noddings, 2005). The carer also is attuned to the various learning needs of the cared-for (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2007). The teacher must also understand the non-academic factors that influence student needs and school experience in order to demonstrate care for the whole child (Daniels & Pirayoff, 2015). A way to gain insight to this crucial information about the cared-for is through talking. Dialogue between the carer and the cared-for is a necessity in fostering a relationship (Owens & Ennis, 2005). Discussion between students and teachers allows the building and maintaining of a relationship (Owens & Ennis, 2005; Tarlow, 1996). Eventually, students must learn how to illustrate care in these relationships with teachers (Owens & Ennis, 2005), but through these initial acts by the carer and awareness of the carer’s role, the foundation of a relationship can develop.
Noddings believes that the act of caring between one’s self and other(s) contains four properties of receptivity, reciprocity, engrossment, and obligation (McKenna, 2015; Noddings, 1984). A caring teacher is committed to their profession in all aspects, is known as an easily approachable individual, is genuinely interested in each student’s personal situation, and is driven to establish trust and respect in every relationship with students (Vogt, 2002). Additionally, a caring teacher is aware of student needs, performs with students’ best interests in mind, and demonstrates acts that facilitate student learning. Once a teacher provides these components of caring, then the recipients of the care, students, should respond with reciprocity to allow the caring relationship to continue (Owens & Ennis, 2005).

Caring teachers show compassion by supporting children academically, socially, and emotionally, indicating awareness of (Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008) and care for the whole child as a person (Daniels & Pirayoff, 2015). Caldwell and Sholtis (2008) dissected the “windows of care” for students into four categories; Student-oriented, work-oriented, engaging students, and active. In the student-oriented category, all students are treated respectfully as unique individuals, given positive encouragement throughout class activities such as lessons, homework and classwork, and free time, and have opportunities to illustrate their knowledge, attitudes, and opinions through communication outlets such as exit tickets and letters to the teacher to conclude class (Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008). These techniques serve as a reminder to students that they are accepted, listened to, and appreciated (Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008). For the work-oriented students, teachers are willing to adjust classroom rules, modify workload, provide additional time for assignments, when necessary (Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008). All of the work-oriented strategies aim to illustrate patience, accommodation, and differentiation for individuals. In the engaging students window, the teacher assists students in becoming independent, and in the
active category, the teacher is energetic, displays passion, and shares relatable personal experiences (Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008). When these four categories of the “windows of care” are combined, teachers are able to create the foundation for a caring relationship with students.

**Building Relationships Between Students and Teachers**

Building a caring relationship with each student has been proven to impact student achievement. Strong relationships between students and their teacher is just as crucial as a teacher’s pedagogical expertise (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005, as cited by Daniels & Pirayoff, 2015). Positive relationships between students and teachers contributes to students’ perspective on learning, serving as motivation (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2007). Teacher recognition of students’ value in the classroom invites students to take risks in the learning process (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2007). Recognizing the intrinsic treasure in every student (Quinn, 2017) and what each student brings to the classroom allow teachers to demonstrate the different aspects of care which assist the development of stronger, deeper relationships between the teacher and each individual (Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008).

**Developing Caring Relationships Through Praise**

One important contribution to relationship development is praise. Praise is a verbal or written expression of approval that acts as reinforcement by acknowledging a desired behavior (Howell, Caldarella, Korth, & Young, 2014; Gable, Hester, Rock, & Hughes, 2009, as cited by Nelson, Caldarella, Adams, & Shatzer, 2013). According to Loveless (1996), it is most effective when it is immediate, frequent, enthusiastically delivered, and the behavior is described (Cox,
Young, Peterson, Young, & Young, 2008). When using praise, it is important to be as specific as possible in the recognition of the student’s behavior, as the goal of praise is to increase the probability and/or frequency of the behavior that the student is demonstrating (Howell et al., 2014). Intrinsic motivation is when students are inspired to behave based on an activity itself, and extrinsic motivation is when a student performs for a reason beyond the activity such as rewards or praise (Howell et al., 2014). Some believe that providing students with praise may decrease the strength of their intrinsic motivation if they are performing strictly for the praise. Students may be more inclined to repeat the behavior if they enjoyed the process rather than if they expect to receive praise, thus, to increase the likelihood of the repetition of the behavior, students should be praised for behaviors that they can control such as effort rather than the uncontrollable factors such as intelligence or ability (Howell et al., 2014). Praising controllable factors can provide encouragement, build student self-esteem, and improve relationships between students and teachers (Brophy, 1981, as cited by Cox et al., 2008).

**Student Development**

One goal for praise is that students use the recognition as an opportunity to reflect and develop. A possible field of development is moral identity. Moral identity is a “critical determinant of moral behavior” (Aldridge et al., 2015, as cited by Reynolds & Ceramic, 2007, p. 8) which generates the desire to behave based on one’s ideals, which directly influences one’s behavior (Blasi, 1993, as cited by Aldridge et al., 2015). According to Liddell (1993), “moral decisions are based on an ethic of caring, emphasizing context and relationships” (Owens & Ennis, 2005, p. 399). Caring teachers are aware of their positions in students’ lives, and
recognize that their relationships with students allow access to students’ moral problems and challenges (Morrison, 1985). Moral agency is defined as “the morally significant behavioral acts or intentions and the sense of making a moral difference in the world” (Ivey & Johnston, 2013, p. 263). When dealing with moral dilemmas, the teacher encourages students to reflectively think, feel, and act by showing responsible awareness for others and illustrate moral agency (Morrison, 1985). Some refer to developing moral identity as building good character. Good character involves “applying principles such as truthfulness, respect for others, fairness, and responsibility when faced with behavioral choices” (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006, p. 84).

**Limits of Praise**

It is important to note that some researchers are skeptical of the impact that praise has on building relationships between teachers and students. According to Weinstein (1998), many novice teachers believe that caring and maintaining order in the classroom are problematic opposites (Vogt, 2002), and thus, there is not an emphasis on caring. Haywood (2008) found writing praise notes as time consuming and slightly awkward, but she later concluded that writing praise notes to students, was time well spent because students were receptive to the notes, responded positively to them, and illustrated the value of a strong teacher-student relationship. Haywood (2008) says, “My eyes have been opened to how valuable the feeling of success is for my students and how important it is that all of them get the opportunity to feel it” (p. 63). Although there may be hesitation for writing postcards to students due to time consumption, those who have tried writing them found that they were encouraging and beneficial to student achievement.
Written Praise

There are many studies that recognize that verbal praise has a positive impact on students such as the development and improvement of relationships, increased on-task behavior, and academic motivation (Haywood, Kuespert, Madecky, & Nor, 2008; Howell et al., 2014). However, there has been little research that examines the social validity of praise (Howell et al., 2014), and very few studies have explored teacher-use of written praise (Nelson, Young, Young, & Cox, 2010).

In this study, written praise will be referred to as praise notes. Praise notes can be given to students in school or sent to students’ homes. Praise notes are nonintrusive and cost effective, and they allow the praise to be shared with students’ families, which may result in additional reinforcement from parents or guardians (Howell et al., 2014; Hung, Badejo, & Bennett, 2014). Additionally, they are tangible which enable students to refer back to the note at a later time, providing continuous opportunities to receive the reinforcement even long after the initial interaction (Howell et al., 2014; Hung, Badejo, & Bennett, 2014). The few studies that do explore the use of written praise have found that the notes had improved behavior, decreased the rates of discipline referrals, decreased student tardiness, and promoted a more positive school environment (Howell et al., 2014; Caldarella, Christensen, Young, & Densley, 2011, as cited by Nelson et al., 2010). Another study concluded that there was a positive correlation between students reporting that their teachers provided positive feedback and reporting that they have strong relationships with their teachers (Burnett & Mandel, 2010). In a study conducted by Hung, Badejo, and Bennett (2014), both teachers and students found that student behavior had improved due to praise notes. Caldwell and Sholtis (2008) state that a caring teacher should model to students how to share compliments, recognize student achievement, and appreciate
individuality. Teachers can model all of these acts through the writing of praise notes to individuals, identifying an act committed by the student. In Caldwell’s study, students suggested that a way for teachers to show their care, they can call students or write letters to students (Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008). One specific type of written praise which will be used in this study is a postcard.

In order for a teacher to demonstrate care towards students, the individual must first show care towards his or herself by engaging in reflection, learning, and wondering (Gray 2015). To improve my teaching practices and to support my research for the study, I engage in these practices to be able to create a caring foundation for my classroom environment and promote my students to engage in care. As a result of showing care to myself, I am able to provide care for my students to foster strong relationships with each individual. I want to build deeper connections with my students as there are many studies that have shown that building caring relationships impact student achievement, contribute to students’ perspective on learning and serve as motivation, and encourage students to take risks in the learning process (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2007). In addition to the relationship development between my students and me, this study will also measure how written praise can also result in student development. Student development refers to student engagement in reflective thinking, feeling, and action, how students make decisions based on their moral agency, and applying moral principles such as respect for others and fairness (Morrison, 1985; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). In this study, I will focus on how I built these relationships with students, specifically through praising factors that students can control, as that build student self-esteem, and improve relationships between students and teachers (Brophy, 1981, as cited by Cox et al., 2008). The praise that I engaged in for my students is written praise. Although some researchers believe that
written praise is time consuming and awkward, students seem to be very receptive to and appreciative of the notes. The purpose of using written praise in this study instead of using verbal praise is to change the stigma around “a note home from school” and to provide students with a reminder of their successes long after the initial behavior. This study will measure how written praise in the form of postcards impact teacher-student relationship development and student development.
Chapter 3
Methodology

Context

This study took place in State College Area High school, where there are 600 students in a graduating class. In a school this large, it is difficult for students to know many of their peers, which is a reason why I wanted to praise students for making decisions that positively impact themselves and their peers and create a comfortable classroom environment. The postcards are a way for me to counter the typical discourse of a contemporary classroom, where logic is foregrounded and feelings are often discounted, and where competition is encouraged over compassion. These postcards serve as an opportunity to recognize students for the values that our educational culture has lost sight of.

This study began within the first two weeks of the school year. All participants of this study are in my Advanced English 11 and College Prep English 11 classes at State College Area High School. There are 70 students who have received at least one postcard home, and 52 students voluntarily responded to the survey. Of those 52 students, 17 are female and 35 are male. There are 30 survey participants who are in Advanced English 11, 22 who are in CP English 11, and three students with an IEP.

Postcard Creation

During class periods or immediately after the period had ended, I would write a note to myself that contained a student’s name followed by a brief summary of why they should receive
a postcard. If a student had stood out to my mentor during class, she would also write a student’s name and a reason for the student to receive the postcard. After class, she would explain her reasoning and I would add the student to the list of recipients. The postcards were sent within 24 hours of the student’s recognized behavior. On average, I sent 10 postcards per week.

Postcard Content and Topics

The postcards used for this study were created specifically for State College Area School District faculty usage. Directly above the space provided for an address, the postcards said “To the Parents or Guardians of:” which implied that the note is not meant to go directly to the student. To change the directed recipient, I began each message by addressing the specific student followed by a possible secondary audience with “Dear _______________ (and family)”. This allowed for the student to be the intended recipient but allows parents and guardians to also have involvement in the conversation if desired (See Figure 1).

After the greeting to the student and his or her family, each postcard began with specific recognition of the accomplishment or class contribution in one to two sentences. The postcards concluded with a phrase of encouragement to continue the action or behavior and were signed with my mentor’s name and my name. I have sent postcards to every student who my mentor and I thought should be recognized for the accomplishment, contribution, or excellence that they demonstrated in class that day. The reasons for receiving a postcard varies tremendously based on the student and the action that my mentor and I observed. There were two categories of possible accomplishment recognition; Academic and social. Within the academic category, there were six subcategories; Homework and assignment preparation, class
participation, leadership, academic growth, and performance on written assessment, and presentation performance.

Figure 1. SCASD Postcard
Recording Student Progress Through Journaling and Survey

To promote a “caring” environment, I have engaged in journal reflections that included my wonderings, my learning (Gray, 2015), and my observations from the classroom. I have written journal entries at least three days a week since the beginning of the school year. Reflecting through journal entries either took place during class as I directly observed student behavior or immediately following the class when I could discuss my thinking about what I had observed, not strictly observations. In some of my reflections, I discuss individual students who have stood out to me. I write my observations about their classroom behavior, their level of preparedness for class, their contributions to discussions, their attentiveness, and their interactions with peers and with teachers. For instance, I was intrigued by one of my students who seemed to love to be the center of attention. I found him to be an interesting character as he
always had something to contribute to the class conversation (not always academic), made excuses to stand up and walk around the room, and never wanted to focus on his academics. These entries were helpful when I analyzed the changes in his behavior after he had received a postcard. I wrote about another student who only wanted to sit in the back left corner of the classroom with one headphone in, her hair covering the side of her face closer to the front of the room, and her head looking down towards the desk. From this entry, I was able to compare this student and her behavior to the student who loved to be the center of attention. These comparisons between students allowed me to consider how sending a handwritten postcard may impact these very different students in very different ways.

In other reflections, I have written about classroom profiles and the similarities and differences between each block. These entries have allowed me find strengths in each block and helped me praise individuals in those classes for demonstrating those strengths. For instance, my Block 3 class is very sociable which makes it easy to have a class discussion where students are engaged and contributing. Thus, when I wanted to send postcards to some students in Block 3, I referred back to this class profile journal entry and was able to praise certain students for their meaningful contributions and consistent attentiveness in class.

Additionally, I have explored students’ friendships and how outside factors have played roles in individuals’ classroom experiences. Two of these explorations involved the same student at different points in the school year. The first entry was in regards to a student who had been missing class due to health complications and had an episode in which a peer assisted her to the nurse’s office. After this experience, I had observed how she interacted with her peers, her level of preparedness for class, and her willingness to contribute her thinking to discussions. This entry was compared to a later entry when I noticed she was silent for an entire class period,
continuously checking her phone as it seemed she had a distraction from her personal life which had impacted her school life. Both of these reflections helped me consider how a postcard of praise could have impacted her relationship development with my mentor and me and her own individual development.

Also, I write about my wonderings that arise every day. These wonderings focus on how I can improve my teaching practice so that I can create an environment of care. For instance, on September 27, I reflected on a lesson that I had given to Advanced English 11, and made the goal of writing transitions for the future so that the lessons can run smoothly. On October 6, I wrote about how I had prepared transitions for my lesson and implemented them into my lesson. It helped me facilitate and it helped students have a direct focus, which I find important in order for students to thrive in the classroom. Additionally, I reflected on each block of the day, what went well and what could have gone better in each class, so that I could make modifications for future classes to promote a comfortable environment for students.

These various recordings have allowed me to compare classroom experiences from different points in the year, which help me identify any changes in the classroom and in individual students. By creating awareness for myself of individuals’ behavior, peer interactions, and the overall classroom environment through my journal entries, I was able to reflect on any changes that had risen from this act of “caring” by showing compassion and providing support to students through postcards.

After I sent postcards to 70 individuals and had recorded my observations from class in my journal reflections, I created an optional survey that postcard recipients could respond to (See Appendix A). The purpose of the survey was to gain insight about how students feel about school, English class, their personal relationships with my mentor and me after they had received
a postcard at their homes. Before sending the survey to students, the survey was reviewed with a Penn State PhD student and was approved by my mentor.
Chapter 4

Findings

Some preliminary conclusions found through the survey and through anecdotal evidence illustrate that students who received a postcard were more comfortable in the classroom as they engaged in conversation with peers, with my mentor, and with me, and they participated more in discussion and class activities. The relationship development and student development as a result of receiving a postcard varied among the individuals, but there was an overall increase in the level of care in the classroom.

Student responses to the survey were first read and analyzed for overall patterns amongst participants. A commonality among recipients of both academic related postcards and social related postcards is that 46 students (88.5%) feel that they are acknowledged in school for positive behavior, ideas, and contributions, while 3 students (5.8%) are neutral and 3 students (5.8%) disagree (See Figure 2).
Figure 3. Student Perception of Acknowledgement in School

There was an agreement among 48 participants (92.3%) that they are acknowledged for their positive behavior, ideas, and contributions in English class specifically (See Figure 3). Students who agreed with this statement described a positive experience in English class. Some words used by participants to describe their feelings about English class were “encouraged”, “cared about”, “intrigued”, “comfortable”, “welcomed”, “happy”, “included”, “valued”, “motivated”, and “confident” (See Appendix B). These findings suggest that students view English class as a more positive environment than their overall schooling experience.
In English class specifically, I feel acknowledged for positive behavior, ideas, and contributions

52 responses

![Pie chart showing student responses]

There were 46 students (88%) who responded that they had enjoyed receiving the postcard. Three (6%) students claimed that they had a neutral response, and two (4%) participants did not respond to the survey question that asked if they had liked or disliked receiving the postcard. Although there were no participants who specifically reported that they disliked receiving the postcard, one student (2%) reported that he found it unnecessary as he didn’t think his contribution was “deserving of that level of recognition”. There are 35 students out of 52 who noted they still have their postcards in an accessible and noticeable place which I infer means that they found the praise important to either their own personal development or to a stronger relationship with my mentor and me.
Of the 52 students who participated in the survey, 45 students (87%) had received a postcard for an academic related reason. According to Caldwell and Sholtis (2008), academic-related postcards illustrate student-orientation through positive encouragement about class activities such as lessons, homework and classwork. Some postcards recognized more than one academic achievement. Within the 45, 11 postcards had included praise about class participation, nine acknowledge academic growth, eight were for presentation performance, six postcards contained a message regarding homework and assignment preparation, four recognize student leadership, three applaud performance on written assessment. Common combinations of praise on postcards were academic growth throughout the marking period and either presentation performance or class participation. Many students who had made academic progress had also gained confidence in speaking during class. Students who received an academic-related postcard illustrated growth in their relationship development with their teachers, increased academic effort, or both.

Student 38 received a postcard for his effort to improve his writing which resulted in a well written paper. He responded to the survey that he “likes the English teachers, but doesn’t like the content [of the course]”. Student 38 said he liked receiving the postcard and he still has it on his desk at home. Although he responded “neutral” to the survey question “Receiving a postcard helped me improve my classroom behavior and performance,” he agreed that receiving a postcard improved his relationships with my mentor and me. He claimed that the postcard “didn’t have an impact on [him]”. From his earlier responses about his perspective on English class, I infer that the “impact” he is referring to in this statement is strictly in regards to his
academics, as it is evident that it did impact his relationships and his perspective on the relationships.

Student 24 has received multiple postcards throughout the school year. Her first postcard was for an exemplary presentation performance, and her second postcard was for a well written paper and overall growth throughout the marking period. Student 24 has consistently grown as a student throughout the school year, and she claims that receiving postcards have “made [her] work feel like something more than just a grade”. From receiving these postcards, Student 24 acknowledges that my mentor and I notice her consistent academic effort which has motivated her to continue her hard work for reasons beyond a score. Through my class observations and journaling, I have kept track of Student 24’s progress since she received these postcards. She has come to speak with my mentor and me during her free periods for feedback on her work and discussion about English class but also engages in casual conversation. It is evident that these postcards have helped her grow more comfortable with us as her teachers, in addition to strengthening her academic inclination for the pride that she feels from the process, not just the outcome of a grade.

Student 42 is a male student with an IEP who was the first student to receive a postcard this year. He was praised for illustrating leadership by volunteering to be the first student to do the Fishbowl challenge. In his responses to the survey, he recalled the postcard message well and said that it sparked a conversation with his mother. He said, “I liked getting a postcard because it showed my mom that my loudness and love for being the center of attention was finally used for something good. It feels pretty dope.” Student 42 disagreed with the statement about feeling acknowledged in school (See Figure 2), but strongly agreed with the statement about feeling acknowledge specifically in English class (See Figure 3). The postcard he received in September
helped build the foundation for his strong relationships with my mentor and me, as he viewed us as teachers who acknowledge his strengths and find ways for him to use these strengths in an academic classroom. I have observed Student 42 in his other academic classes, attended an IEP meeting with his other teachers and parents, and have spoken to his paraprofessional. He typically has to be reminded of what he needs to accomplish academically which I believe is the reason he doesn’t think he is praised in school. Given this perspective on his school experience, he said that the postcard “made [him] feel better about [himself].” Since he received the postcard, I observed his classroom behavior and his academic achievement. Although his academic drive had not increased much from receiving the postcard, Student 42 discovered comfort in talking to my mentor and me about school related material and outside information.

I compared Student 42 to Student 40. Student 40 also has an IEP and needs many accommodations in class. He was praised in his postcard for consistently taking the initiative and advocating for himself and his needs. He strongly agrees with the claims that receiving a postcard helped him improve his classroom behavior and performance and helped him strengthen his relationships with my mentor and me. For Student 40, the postcard had a similar outcome as it did to Student 24, as he says that receiving “motivated [him] to complete assignments”. Although Student 40 is a strong student who had never struggled with turning in his work and earning good grades, I infer that his response is in regards to motivation to continue advocating for himself in class and taking the initiative when it comes to his accommodations.
In addition to the academic-related postcards, some students received social-related postcards. Although there were only 7 postcards in this category out of the 52 postcard recipients, I felt that it was crucial for students to know that my mentor and I notice more than just academic achievement in class. According to Caldwell and Sholtis (2008), the category of engagement includes the teacher assisting students in becoming independent. The social-related postcards aim to help student development in forming their own set of values and encourage students to consider the impact that their actions have on others. These postcards were given to students who demonstrated honorable principles or a kind act towards a peer that was irrelevant to coursework. Students who received these postcards illustrated a more conscious reflection of their moral decisions.

Student 45 is a male student who I struggled to feel connected to. His contributions in class tended to have a negative tone, he often was distracted by technology or chatted with a peer. However, two months ago, I witnessed an internal struggle when he took out his last piece of gum for himself and a peer asked to have it. His slight reluctance was apparent through his facial expression, but Student 45 ended up giving the piece of gum to the peer. He received a postcard that praised his moral decision of being selfless and thoughtful to his peer. Since receiving the postcard, I have personally felt a stronger connection to Student 45 as I had seen a new side of the student. He must have also felt relationship development as he responded to the survey question about recognition for positive behavior, ideas, and contributions in English class with “strongly agree”. He claims that it “didn’t have an impact on [him]” but through my journal reflections and class observations, I have noticed improved classroom behavior and more kind interactions with his peers. Student 45 thinks that the postcard helped him improve his classroom
behavior and performance and his relationships with my mentor and me, and from my observations, it certainly has. From his change in behavior, I suggest that demonstrating to students that they are seen in school for more than just their academic efforts, they feel more appreciated and are aware of the decisions that they make.

Student 16 is a female student who agrees that she is recognized in school for her positive behavior, ideas, and contributions, but strongly agrees that she is recognized in English class specifically. I infer that she has a stronger agreement about being recognized in English class for her positive behavior, ideas, and contributions over other school settings as she claims that in English class, she is “comfortable because the environment is welcoming and open-minded”. Student 16 received a postcard after assisting an ill peer to the nurse’s office and then bringing the peer’s belongings and assignments to the office. She said that she liked receiving the postcard because it was “old school to receive a handwritten note in the mail”. She added that “Appreciation and doing good things doesn't always get acknowledged so [the postcard] made me feel really happy and good about myself”. Receiving this postcard illustrated to Student 16 that my mentor and I see her has a whole individual with contributions beyond her strong academic drive and academic success. She reported that “it made [her] feel more connected to [her] English class and English teachers, and motivated [her] to come into English class and work hard because I felt like I had a purpose, and my good actions would be noticed and appreciated”. Student 16’s grade in English class had significantly increased after receiving the postcard, which suggests that the praise had served as encouragement to continue to strive academically, in addition to her grown awareness of her social and moral decisions.
Anecdotal Evidence

The impact of the postcards varied between individuals. Each student has had their own level of development from receiving the postcard. Through my observations in class, it is evident that students are more confident after receiving the praise and are more comfortable interacting with their peers and with my mentor and me.

The students who were praised for a social-related reason have demonstrated an awareness of their decisions. Student 45 has been one of my favorite students to observe after he received a postcard. In my journal, I reflected on his interactions with his peers, specifically the student he gave his last piece of gum to. Before he received the postcard, he only spoke to his closest friend in the class and didn’t acknowledge anyone else in the room. After he received the postcard, I watched Student 45 looked his peer in the eyes and asked in a very genuine tone, “how is your day going today?” I cannot conclude that his reasoning for his friendliness is directly as a result of receiving postcard, but it is evident that the postcard had brought him an awareness of his decisions and his interactions. He has demonstrated reflective thinking and moral agency by showing respect for his peers (Morrison, 1985; Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). The postcards have given students a sense of awareness in regards to the decisions they make and their interactions with others which positively contributes to the environment of care in our class.

Since I have written the postcards, I personally feel relationship development between my students and me. Writing postcards to students have given me the opportunity to think about each individual and find something special in all of my students. Taking the time to write them personal notes has made me feel closer to them, as I am showing them my appreciation for everything they bring to my classroom. It also has helped me understand who they are as whole
individuals as I learn about their strengths, interests, and identities beyond the classroom. Going to each of my classes has been so enjoyable for me after building the foundation for relationships through postcards because my students feel comfortable starting a conversation with me about their lives outside of school.

I believe that strong relationships can be developed without teacher-written postcards. However, the postcards had sped up the process of building mutual respect, trust, and comfort and allowed students to feel more comfortable in the classroom at an earlier point in the year. Once relationships are built, the rest of the classroom practices follow (Downey, 2018). Now that my students and I have established relationships of trust, fairness, and care, they feel comfortable approaching me.
Chapter 5
Discussion

Writing praise notes in the form of postcards may have been an informal educational strategy used in the past. However, the purpose of this study is to empirically and theoretically analyze the impact that teacher-written praise notes has on student development and relationship development between teachers and students. The results indicate that students have had positive reactions to receiving postcards which influence their learning environment either through improved relationships with teachers, or increased individual development.

Postcards are a form of discussion, which is necessary in fostering and maintaining a relationship (Owens & Ennis, 2005). According to Owens & Ennis (2005), once a teacher takes the initiative to start a discussion, a relationship is established and students will respond with illustrating care in these relationships with teachers. As seen through the conversations established using postcards for Student 16, Student 24, Student 38, and Student 42, these students were prompted to further develop their relationships with my mentor and me. As a result, they have improved their communication skills by starting conversations with us, coming to visit us outside of class, and demonstrating a sense of comfort while talking to us. From these postcards, students have learned that they are cared-for, that their efforts are recognized, and that my mentor and I are available for discussion of any sort which has fostered deeper connections between us and our students.

Praising controllable factors can provide encouragement, build student self-esteem, and improve relationships between students and teachers (Brophy, 1981, as cited by Cox et al.,
Once deeper connections have been established between teachers and postcard recipients, those students then illustrated greater academic inclination due to an increase in self-esteem. As seen with Student 24, she has grown into a more conscientious student, simply by being recognized for performing well in a task and making the effort to build strong relationships with her teachers. The postcard encouraged her to ask us questions and ask us for feedback on her work, demonstrating higher self-esteem. Students who developed the connection with teachers were driven to continue to work hard, in order to feel that pride comes from recognition through the process. Students should be praised for behaviors that they can control rather than the uncontrollable factors such as intelligence or ability (Howell et al., 2014). An increase in self-esteem was present in students who were recognized for a personal strength that was used for an academic purpose, as seen with Student 42. “If we want students to learn with us and become their best selves, we first need to show them that we’re interested in them as people” (Quinn, 2017). To build this bridge to reach the learning, growing, and development (Quinn, 2017), I expressed interest in my students’ personal strengths through postcards, which allowed individuals to see that they are cared-for beyond academics. Once individuals develop relationships, all other achievements are possible (Downey, 2018).

Caring teachers show compassion by supporting children academically, socially, and emotionally, indicating awareness of and care for the whole child as a person (Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008; Daniels & Pirayoff, 2015). The postcards aim to acknowledge these different aspects of student achievement. It was discovered through this study that recognizing students for a social-related reason also impacts their academic drive or their perspective of the learning process. Teacher recognition of students’ value in the classroom invites students to take risks in the learning process (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2007). As seen with Student 16, when she realized
that she was valued in English class for more than just her academic achievement, she felt that she was seen for her whole self, and she was inspired to develop her character in addition to continued academic effort. “Self-identity is embedded at the core of one’s being and involves being true to oneself in action” (Aldridge et al., 2015; Erikson, 1968). Student 16 has made conscious decisions based on the recognition of her behavior which has influenced her self-identity.

My experience with writing postcards has been beneficial to my students’ growth and to our relationship development. Witnessing and studying the changes in student behavior was astonishing, and it is rewarding to see that my effort to create an environment of care in my classroom had happened from something as simple as postcards. It has also influenced my development as a teacher. Through this study and from writing postcards for the school year, I have discovered a teaching practice that has confirmed my passion for building meaningful relationships. The postcards support my commitment to the ethical responsibilities of being a teacher, and this practice will remain part of my teacher identity throughout my career. I also want to encourage other teachers to implement this practice into their teaching, as I think it would have a large impact in creating a school environment of care and appreciation for all.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

There were some limitations of this study. First, the participants of this study were all in 11th grade at the same high school. Additionally, it is challenging to determine the effectiveness of praise notes as other components were present throughout the study such as direct instruction and verbal praise. There can be a suggested correlation between receiving a postcard, relationship development, and student development, but the impact can vary depending on numerous factors as simple as the task, the student, the school day, illness, and other outside influences. Another limitation of this study was the possible bias in the survey. The phrasing of the questions may have encouraged a positive response from the participants.

One alteration that I would make for future postcards is to include the date that the postcard was written. Since 35 of the 52 recipients still have their postcard in an accessible and noticeable spot, I believe including the date would not only help students recall the behavior that is being praised, but it would also allow students to continue to reflect on their development throughout the year. Also, if students receive multiple postcards, they would be able to visibly see the progression of their accomplishments throughout the year. Another alteration I would make is in regards to the survey. Responses to the survey questions weren’t required in order to move onto the next question, so some students skipped questions. Now, I am wondering if making the survey questions required would have provided complete surveys with answers to all questions or if it would have discouraged some students from participating in the survey at all.
I hope to continue this work with praising students using handwritten postcards sent to students’ homes, as I want to continue to study the impact that it has on relationship development and student development. From my work with postcards, I have discovered new wonderings that I would like to pursue. Some students responded to the survey that they enjoyed the postcard, but when asked if they want to receive an additional postcard in the future, they responded that they didn’t want another one. If a student enjoyed receiving the postcard and it had a positive impact on their relationship development, their personal development, or both, why would they be opposed to earning another? There was an overall positive response to receiving postcards, but if teachers send postcards home and students don’t want them, are there any negative impacts on relationship development and student development? I would also like to explore why praise through the use of postcards is not heavily used by schools throughout the country. There are not many studies that address the use of postcards for praise. Although they are time consuming and slightly awkward, they have been proven to be cost effective and positively received (Haywood, 2008). Further research on these questions would assist my wonderings that this study has discussed.
Appendix A

Survey

1. At school, I feel acknowledged for positive behavior, ideas, and contributions (pick one of the following):
   A. Strongly agree
   B. Agree
   C. Neutral
   D. Disagree
   E. Strongly disagree

2. In English class specifically, I feel acknowledged for positive behavior, ideas, and contributions (pick one of the following)
   A. Strongly agree
   B. Agree
   C. Neutral
   D. Disagree
   E. Strongly disagree

3. When I am in my current English class or think about my current English class, I feel ___________ because ____________.
   Your answer:

4. What was the reason for receiving a postcard home from Ms. Iacobazzo and Ms. Fitz?
   Your answer:

5. Did you like or dislike receiving the postcard? Why? How did it make you feel?
   Your answer:

6. Do you still have the postcard? If so, where is it?
   Your answer:

7. Did the postcard spark a conversation between you and your parents/guardian? If so, describe.
8. Receiving a postcard helped me improve my classroom behavior and performance (pick one of the following)
A. Strongly agree  
B. Agree  
C. Neutral  
D. Disagree  
E. Strongly disagree

9. Receiving a postcard helped strengthen my relationships with my English teachers (pick one of the following)
A. Strongly agree  
B. Agree  
C. Neutral  
D. Disagree  
E. Strongly disagree

10. What was the result of receiving the postcard? Some examples are: "it motivated me to work harder to complete my assignments on time," "it didn't have any impact on me," "it made me want to continue to help my peers when needed"

Your answer:

11. I would like to receive another postcard (pick one of the following)
A. Yes  
B. No

12. Students should be praised at school for demonstrating appropriate classroom behavior, kindness to peers, and academic effort (pick one of the following)
A. Strongly agree  
B. Agree  
C. Neutral  
D. Disagree  
E. Strongly disagree

13. Is there anything that you would like to add about your experience with receiving postcards?

Your answer:
14. If I have any follow up questions, would you be willing to interview? (pick one of the following)

A. Yes
B. No
Appendix B

Survey Question 3 Student Responses

Survey question 3: “When I am in my current English class or think about my current English class, I feel _________ because __________”

Student 3: Intrigued because the teachers reach out to troubling students.

Student 4: Cared about because my teachers are always offering to help me and I feel like I can talk to them about any problems (school related or none).

Student 15: Comfortable because the environment is so welcoming and open minded.

Student 16: Valued because my ideas are listened to.

Student 18: Welcomed because my classmates are respectful.

Student 22: Included because everyone gets called on.

Student 39: Happy because I have two great teachers and great classmates.

Student 40: Motivated because my teachers are nice and push me to turn in well done work.

Student 45: Comfortable because there is a great learning environment.

Student 48: Happy because I like my class and my teachers.

Student 50: Happy because I am listened to and am around friends and other welcoming people.

Student 52: Comfortable because I feel like I can ask any question I need to and just talk to the teachers.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Howell, A., Caldarella, P., Korth, B., & Young, K. R. (2014). Exploring the social validity of


EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University | Schreyer Honors College  University Park, PA
Major: Secondary English Education  Class of May 2018
Minor: English  Dean’s List 7/7
Certifications: PA Instructional I Teaching, Secondary English and English as a Second Language

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

State College Area School District  State College, PA
Professional Development School Intern
Fall 2017-Present
• Designed and implemented unit plans and daily lesson plans for College Prep English 11 and Advanced English 11
• Contributed to Professional Learning Communities to discuss curriculum, assessments, and PA core standards
• Provided input to IEP teams and implemented individualized modifications and accommodations
• Engaged in collaboration and communication practices with colleagues, parents, students, and administration
• Incorporated innovative choice reading program as part of the language arts curriculum

Mentor
Fall 2016
• Observed and participated in one-on-one activities in an ESL classroom grades 9-12

Volunteer in Public Schools (VIPS) Tutor  Fall 2016
• Strengthened middle school ESL students’ reading and writing skills through one-on-one tutoring

Penn State Intensive English Communication Program Tutoring Center  University Park, PA
Tutor  Fall 2016
• Assisted adult ESL students in learning reading, writing, and pronunciation skills

Umbra Institute  Perugia, Italy
Study Abroad  Spring 2017
• Organized and engaged in reading events at local libraries for Italian learners of the English language
LEADERSHIP AND ACTIVITIES

Schreyer Honors College Student Council  University Park, PA
Member  Fall
2014-Present
• Facilitated communication and cohesion between scholars, faculty, administration, and students

Kappa Alpha Theta Fraternity  University Park, PA
Chief Panhellenic Officer | Executive Board | Pledge Class Representative  Spring 2016-Fall 2016
• Advocated for positive change in policy as the chapter delegate on the Penn State Panhellenic Council
•Collaborated regularly with the Panhellenic advisor, district director, campus advisor, and members

Scholarship Director  Spring 2015-Fall 2016
• Created a structured tutoring program with incentives and rewards for academic excellence

VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

Teens 4 Teens with Cancer  Bedford, NY
Founder  Fall 2013-Present
• Established a nonprofit organization that fundraises to buy iPads for the oncology floor at the Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital at Columbia Presbyterian

The Pennsylvania State University Annual Dance Marathon – THON  University Park, PA
Family Relations Chair  Fall 2016-Present
• Organized family events for the student-run philanthropy for children with pediatric cancer

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
• Documentary screening of Tested and talk event with filmmaker Curtis Chin
• John Collins Workshop
• National Council of Teachers of English, member