

Reaching Reluctant Students: Insights from Torey Hayden

Mike Marlowe

Department of Language, Reading, and Exceptionalities

Appalachian State University

Boone, North Carolina 28608

Running Head: Torey

Abstract

Students who fight or avoid adults cannot learn from them. This article illustrates important principles of reaching these challenging youngsters by using examples drawn from the writings of Torey Hayden. Hayden's series of books are based on her rich experiences as a teacher of troubled children.

“Reaching Reluctant Students: Insights from Torey Hayden”

Torey Hayden's books are autobiographical accounts of her teaching experiences with children whose lives are marked by mental illness, learning disabilities, delinquency, anger and defeat. Hayden's first book, One Child (1980), is the story of Sheila, a silent troubled girl, who had been abandoned by her mother and abused by her father. She has penned five others: Somebody Else's Kids (1982), Murphy's Boy (1983), Just Another Kid (1988), Ghost Girl (1992), and Tiger Child (1995), the sequel to One Child.

Each of her books mirrors the synergistic power of relationships between a teacher and her children. As Hayden writes of Sheila in her prologue to Tiger Child, "This little girl had a profound effect on me. Her courage, her resilience, and her inadvertent ability to express that great gaping need to be loved that we all feel - in short - her humanness brought me into contact with my own." (p.8) Hayden's books are a heartfelt testament that living with and loving other human beings who return that love is the most strengthening and salubrious emotional experience in the world.

Hayden's Practice Wisdom

Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990) presented ten concepts which can serve as guidelines for building relationships with relationship-resistant children. While Hayden eschews any formal model or fixed steps for relationship building, these ten concepts are mirrored in her practice wisdom.

1. Love is an action, not a feeling. Hayden portrays the loving relationship not as an affect but as an action, a process of giving, not a feeling. Hayden gives of herself: of her interest, of her joy, of her understanding, of her knowledge, of her humor, of her sadness. In giving she enriches the lives of her children and that which she brings to life in them is given back to her. As Erich Fromm noted in his classic, The Art of Loving (1956), love is a power that produces love. In One Child Hayden reads the fable, The Little Prince, to Sheila, and afterwards they discuss the part where the little prince tames the fox:

"Why you do this?" she asked?

"Do what, Sheil?"

"Tame me."

I did not know what to say.

Her water blue eyes rose to me. "Why you care? I can't never figure that out.

Why you want to tame me?"

"Well, kiddo, I don't have a good reason, I guess. It just seemed like the thing to do."

"Do it be like the fox? Do I be special now cause you tame me? Do I be a special girl?"

"I smiled. "Yeah, you're my special girl. It's like the fox says, now that I made you my friend, you're unique in all the world. I guess I always wanted you for my special girl. I guess that's why I tamed you to begin with."

"Do you love me?"

I nodded.

"I love you too. You be my special best person in the whole world." (pp.104-105)

2. Classroom crisis is opportunity. Hayden manages behavioral crises in her classroom with composure and sensitivity and uses the situations as opportunities for teaching, building trust, and bonding. In Somebody Else's Kids, Tomaso, an abused migrant child who has witnessed his stepmother kill his father, corners Hayden in the classroom with a pair of shears. She can only hope to outwait him without inciting him. The minutes edge by, one by one.

"I dared not move. His hand was open flat now, and as I breathed, my shirt touched the point of the scissors and made them quiver in his palm. Or perhaps his hand was trembling.

"Why don't you just leave me alone?" he asked. His voice was very soft and he raised his eyes to me. "Why are you always looking in me?" I saw his hand close around the scissors and lower them. "I wanted to hate you. Why wouldn't you let me? Why wouldn't you just let me be alone?"

He took the scissors and with one mighty motion he slammed them to the floor.

Then he simply lowered his head covered his face with his hands and wept.

I was overwhelmed. The question of questions he asked me. What right did I have to make him care about a world that did not care about him. For me the sorrow came in having no answer, to never quite being sure that the pain I gave was any better than the pain I relieved. It was an issue that made the scissors look unimportant.

I reached out for him and he was in my arms.

We comforted each other. Down on my knees. I held him to me. My residual fear made emotions difficult to control. Sitting on the floor, my back still to the door, I took Tomaso on my lap. He was a great big boy, eleven, and within sight of manhood, but there was no other way for either of us. He clung to my neck and buried his face in my hair. He wept low, hard, body-racking sobs. I rocked us back and forth against the door and crooned soft things to him, small nonsense words only love knows. My own heart was full of things too deep for tears."

(pp.174-175)

3. Loving the unlovable. Hayden's students receive an abundance of love and affection whether they deserve it or not. Tax-free nurturance is a given, no matter how hard some try to make themselves repugnant. She never uses affection as a bargaining chip in teaching her children. Hayden knows love withdrawal may well establish short-term control, but for her children love is their primary unmet need.

4. Disengaging from the conflict cycle. Hayden is careful not to be lured into counter-aggression with her difficult students.

"While Tomaso's constant testing of the limits and deep rage were difficult to contend with, I found those nothing compared with some of his other behavior. The kid figured out quickly that destructiveness and violence were not going to make me lose my composure. But they were not the only tricks up his sleeve. One of his most effective weapons was his ability to pass wind. To me it seemed he could do it at any time he chose and at any decibel level. Up on one buttock he would rise and aim so that his victim received full benefit of the smell and sound. "It must have been the beans I ate," he would always say sweetly. My gosh, this kid had to be eating beans morning, noon, and night to accomplish what he was capable of. I am sure that if sheet music were available, he could have farted The Star Spangled Banner. The crowning touch involved pulling his pants out in back and sticking a hand down to feel. God only knows what he was checking. I never asked. In fact I tried my best to ignore the entire business. For that kind of behavior, inattention seemed the soundest recourse."(Somebody Else's Kids, pp. 86-87)

5. Earning the trust of youth. Trust between child and adult is essential, the foundation on which relationship building rests. Many of Hayden's children have grown up with the belief that most adults cannot be trusted. A major hurdle is to help her children build a new kind of relationship with an adult who can be trusted for support, understanding, and affection. In Ghost Girl Hayden sits in a bolted cloakroom after school and listens to a frightened Jadie's shocking story of satanic abuse.

"I know what that sign means now," Jadie said quietly, not looking over.

"What sign is that?"

"Over by ninth street, there's a brown church, and it's got that sign out front. It says "Safe with God." I kept reading it when we went by, and I never knew what it meant. She smiled. "But I do now. I'm safe in here, aren't I? I'm safe with you." (p.59)

6. Time is an ally. Relationship-resistant children may be fearful, suspicious, or antagonistic. Patterns laid down over a lifetime are slow to change. Hayden models persistence and patience in returning day after day to encounter youths who seem oblivious to her overtures. It takes time to establish bonds and ties.

7. Life space counseling. Redl (1952) developed the life space interview for understanding and helping troubled youth. Some teachers are intimidated from providing emotional first-aid or entering in serious discussions with youth because they are not trained in counseling. Others are inhibited by treatment models which discourage relationship building. Sometimes a teacher who is actively involved with a youth can engage in more genuine and helpful communications than can a therapist outside the school. Hayden listens to her students' point of view, presents alternative views in a

nonmoralistic manner, and supports them as they make decisions that will affect their lives.

8. Respect begets respect. Obedience can be demanded from a weaker individual, but one can never compel respect. According to William Glasser (1986), power is a basic need of children. With growth and development, children show a strong need to be independent and free. Hayden recognizes this need and is not preoccupied with obedience and teacher power. In each of her classrooms there are only two general rules: "try your best" and "do not hurt anyone." She prefers to manage behavior without the use of power, that is, consequences. Observing Hayden at work, one is reminded of the Taoist teaching: "he who has power does not use it, and he who uses power does not have it." Hayden has no need to triumph over her children, to show them who's boss, thereby undermining her influence. Instead, she focuses her efforts on mapping out structure and values and demanding mature, responsible behavior.

"I found establishing a structure a useful and productive method with all the children because it erased the fuzziness of our relationship. Obviously, they had already shown they could not handle their own limits without help, or they never would have arrived in my class to begin with. As soon as the time came that they could, I began the process of transferring the power to them." (One Child, p.24)

9. Teaching joy. Nicholas Hobbs (1982) who founded the Re-ed school for troubled children put forth the principle that each child should know some joy each day and look forward to some joyous event for the morrow.

"Every Wednesday we made something to eat. This afternoon it was chocolate bananas, a messy affair involving a banana stuck on a stick that was dipped into chocolate and rolled in topping and then frozen. . . Sheila hesitated to join in,

clutching her banana tightly and watching from the sidelines as the others babbled gaily. Yet, she was not resistant, and Whitney lured her over to the chocolate sauce when everyone else had finished. Once Sheila started, she became fully absorbed and began trying to roll all four different toppings onto her sticky banana. I watched from the far side of the table. She never spoke but it became apparent she had some definite ideas about how to get the toppings to stick by redipping the banana in the chocolate after each roll in a topping. One by one the other children began pausing to watch her as she experimented with her idea. Voices became hushed as curiosity got the better of them. Rolling the huge sticky mass in the last dish of topping, she lifted it up carefully. Her eyes rose to meet mine and slowly a smile spread across her face until it was broad and open, showing the gaps where her bottom teeth were missing." (One Child, pp.54-55)

10. The invitation to belong. Attachment is a powerful universal need in humans. Every young person has a deep need to belong. Hayden creates a classroom based on community, not compliance. Morning discussion, the kobold box where children could leave notes complimenting their classmates for perceived acts of kindness, journaling, finger-painting, skits and plays, cooking, and field trips, all nourished inviting relationships in a culture of belonging.

Hayden's Reviving Influence on Teachers

More than mirroring relationship building skills, Hayden's writings serve a bibliotherapeutic purpose for teachers, that is, they provide a process of dynamic interaction between the reader and the text which may be utilized for personality assessment, adjustment, and growth (Marlowe, Maycock, Palmer, and Morrison, 1997). The "therapy" in bibliotherapy denotes a three-step process, from identification to catharsis to insight (Shrodes, 1950). Identification with Hayden, the teacher, and

situations and elements of her classroom enables the reader to view his or her teaching difficulties from a new and different perspective and thus gain hope and tension release (catharsis). Such tension reduction allows the reader to gain insight into his or her own motivations and actions and allows for positive change in attitude and behavior.

Since 1992 some 300 preservice and 150 inservice teachers have read, discussed, and journaled about her six books in university courses. Marlowe (1996) analyzed the inservice teachers' journal data using the Colazzi (1978) method. This method consists of six steps: dwelling with the data, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, organizing the meanings into clusters of themes, creating an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, and reducing the description to a statement of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon.

The structure of the inservice teachers' experience of reading Hayden was one of self recognition evolving into ways of feeling and knowing . Ways of feeling consisted of shared experience, validation, comfort, hope, inspiration, and catharsis. Ways of knowing consisted of information gathering and understanding.

Teachers reading Hayden reported they recognized themselves in the character of Hayden. This oneness lead participants to feel as if they were the same as Torey.

“The more I read her book, the more I found myself agreeing with her thought patterns and actions. I could relate to her.”

“It was like this person has experienced what I've experienced in working with troubled kids, she's been through it.”

Recognizing themselves in Hayden's books gave teachers a feeling of not being alone in their difficulties, a feeling of shared experience and validation.

“It was validating to read that another teacher felt the way I did. I belong to the better to have loved and lost school which is not a popular notion

at my school. My principal is always preaching against getting too involved in the lives of my kids. It was very beneficial to read that Torey felt the way that I do, that she too belongs to the better to have loved and lost school.

Hayden's message to me is that I'm a-okay"

Reading Hayden also provided comfort, hope, and inspiration. From reading her participants received feelings of confidence and a sense their relationships with difficult children would improve. Reading about positive outcomes in Hayden's classroom gave participants reason to hope for themselves and the determination to take steps to improve their situations. Participants also described feelings of release or relief when reading Hayden.

"One Child is a very special book. I just finished reading it at a good time of the year for teachers - February; a time that seems to last an eternity until spring break finally arrives. Lately, my patience has been worn thin, but after reading One Child, I have had pieces of wool pulled from over my eyes. It is so easy to let frustration and typical adolescent behavior cause my heart to be hardened and my face to form a permanent stern look. After reading One Child, a burden was lifted off of me in a weird sort of way. Torey's book allowed me to enjoy my students, to not focus always on the problems and to try and avoid putting consequences with every discipline problem. As a teacher, if I let myself become so involved in the behavior problems of my kids, I miss the fun and joys each day can bring. There are so many parts of Torey's book I could focus on. The more I read her book, the more I found myself trying to understand Torey along with her thoughts and actions. I found myself wanting to be more like her. If she can treat the

children she had with such love, respect, and understanding, I want to make sure I always do the same with my children. . ."

Reading also gave participants information that educated them, gave them advice, guidance, or suggestions on how to deal with difficult situations.

"I feel much better informed on ways to reduce undesirable behaviors without using consequences. Torey models many of Redl's techniques for managing surface behavior."

Finally, reading Hayden provides teachers with insight into their own motivations and actions in teaching relationship-resistant children. This is reflected in this closing teacher's journal entry:

"I have gained a greater insight in working with troubled children. Torey's love and motivation helped me understand the school may be the only place some children receive love. Teachers may be the only person who ever encourages or shares time with a child. I feel that I have a brighter outlook and more positive attitude about teaching. Showing kindness and caring for the children in my class has always been important to me, but now I see this as essential to teaching."

References

- Brendtro, L.K., Brokenleg, M., and Van Bockern, S. (1990). Reclaiming youth at risk. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.
- Colazzi, P.F. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist sees it. In R. F. Valle & M. King (Eds.), Existential-phenomenological alternatives for psychology (pp. 48-71). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fromm, E. (1956). The art of loving. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers.
- Glasser, W. (1986). Control theory in the classroom. New York: Harper and Row.
- Hayden, T.L. (1980). One child. New York: Avon Books.
- Hayden, T.L. (1982). Somebody else's kids. New York: Avon Books.
- Hayden, T.L. (1983). Murphy's boy. New York: Avon Books.
- Hayden, T.L. (1988). Just another kid. New York: Avon Books.
- Hayden, T.L. (1992). Ghost girl. New York: Avon Books.
- Hayden, T.L. (1995). Tiger child. New York: Avon Books.
- Hobbs, N. (1982). The troubled and troubling child. San Francisco: Josey-Bass Publishers.
- Marlowe, M. (1996). The novels of Torey Hayden: Their influence on teacher attitudes and practices. Paper presented at the 16th Annual North Carolina State Conference of the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, Winston-Salem, NC, April, 1996.
- Marlowe, M., Maycock, G., Palmer, L., and Morrison, W.F. (1997). Utilizing literary texts in teacher education to promote positive attitudes toward children with emotional and behavioral disorders. Behavioral Disorders, 22, 152-159.
- Redl, F. (1952). Controls from within. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Shrodes, C. (1950). Bibliotherapy: A theoretical and clinical-experimental study.

Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of California, Berkeley.