"My Russian Aunt" or "Dad, It Works": Towards Folkloristic Teacher Training

(Commentary Piece)

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Abstract

Teacher training poses a paradox: Everyone agrees that classroom management is the most troubling area for young teachers during their first years in school. Everyone expects teacher training programs to try to equip their graduates with the proper tools to deal with this difficulty. But, amazingly, everyone also agrees that these training programs almost completely ignore the issue of classroom management. The article presents the customary research solution orientation to mitigate this paradoxical tension, and points to its limitations. Instead, it raises a different orientation which centers on teaching stories. This folkloristic orientation does not require generalization, clarity or exclamation points.

Keywords: teacher training; classroom management; teaching stories;

'Tamar' and I have had two support and encouragement strategies through the years of our relationship. Let's say that Tamar tells me that, in a conversation with her Department Head, he informed her that he would not approve of her half year sabbatical which she had planned to take the following year. One strategy would have been to tell her: Stop thinking about that nonsense. It's just nitpicking, cookie. You are healthy; the sky is blue. Put your sabbatical off for another year. What's the big deal? The second strategy would be to say to Tamar: Yes. You are right. What a jerk! It's hard to accept and frustrating, after all you have invested in the department. You know, my Russian aunt had a similar experience. Her sabbatical was also refused and it was hard to take and frustrating. I think your frustration really rests on solid ground. It's difficult and it's really not fair, not for you nor for my Russian aunt. Well, what happened to her was that she fought and fought, but didn't succeed and she got her sabbatical a year later, with an enlarged research allowance as compensation. (And I have no Russian aunt. It is just a code name for someone to identify with. It might just as well have been "my sister in Paris".)

My natural tendency is to encourage Tamar using the first method. Tamar's natural tendency is to want to receive encouragement with the second approach. This challenges our relationship. But the challenges of my relationship with my life-partner are not the topic of this article. On the other had "my Russian aunt" actually is. The present article argues that teaching class management in teacher training programs should focus on the "Russian aunt" and tell the student teachers about her. That would likely be useful to them as they teach.

For the last few years, we have had a ceremony at home before going to sleep. After supper and a shower, Naomi and Shira, my twin daughters, dressed in pajamas and snug under the covers (in winter it is a soft down comforter), and me, standing near their bunk beds and reading assertively, in rhythmic tempo, the words written in large letters on the opposite wall: You will be able to do anything you want when you grow up. Never give up. Everything you do, do well. Remember that your father loves you.

I once found this good night wish in one of Robin Charma's books. Robin Charma is a kind of spiritual leader and his books deal with personal development, self-improvement and empowerment. I am a great fan of the genre to which his books belong. The books contain all sorts of advice for living, and clichés such as "Our lives are a chain of moments; if we miss the

moments, we miss life", or "Don't run away from your fears; always run towards them". This advice is not particularly innovative nor is it surprising or unexpected. It is almost trivial, but, in my view, hearing advice like this that you already know is both pleasant and important, and even a kind of valuable reminder.

As I have mentioned, I once read this goodnight wish in one of his books; perhaps it was *The Monk who Sold his Ferrari* or *Family Wisdom* or *Leadership Wisdom*. I don't remember any more. But in one of them, he tells that he used to preach this to his children every night before bedtime. They were already getting fed up with their nudnik father and had asked him to stop, and they had resolutely argued that they had already internalized the message. But he did not give up and continued to annoy them. And then, some time after his children had grown up and had left home, one day he received a letter from his daughter who had written: "Dad, thanks. It works!" And I, like Charma, struggle with my daughters who also think I am a nuisance and who have also argue aggressively that they have already internalized the message. But I too go on, waiting and convinced that, one day, I too will receive the letter I am hoping for. But neither are my ceremonies with my daughters at bedtime the subject of this article. However, what happens in this process between exhausting Sisyphean evening readings of axioms to children and the report that "it works" (and what "it works" actually means) certainly is.

More is unknown than is known about what happens from the time of the reading up to the receipt of the letter. We cannot know how the seeds planted by Charma in his children germinated and came to fruition. This process is shrouded in the mists. What type of seeds were they; how were they mixed with other seeds which had been implanted in them previously by him or by others; what mixture was created; in what proportions? That we cannot know. But we do know that the letter arrived. "That it worked".

What we have at our disposal to teach class management in teacher training courses (and that is no small amount) is the possibility of casting our bread upon the waters: telling student teachers stories about teachers and about teaching (about "my Russian aunt"), stories which will be implanted in them as seeds are, and which will someday, in some way, come to fruition. Hugging them tight; wishing them well, watching them as they recede farther and farther away and telling them that we are back here for them.

Adopting this approach to teaching class management, I argue, may dismantle some of the main stumbling blocks and may soften a few of the repeated complaints about teacher training programs and their irrelevancy for future teachers.

The Paradox of Class Management

In the research, there is almost complete agreement regarding three assertions about teacher training. These arguments, whether we line them up one next to another or one under another or one over another, or in any other constellation, create a paradoxical tension. The first assertion is that *classroom management is the subject which most worries young teachers in their first years in school and it is the main factor which causes many of them to leave teaching during those years*. The Introduction to the thickly paged *Handbook of Classroom Management* (2006), trying to establish class management as a research area, opens by determining that class management is an ever present subject of concern for teachers, administrators and the wider public. And that teachers at the beginning of their careers relate to class management as their greatest challenge; and that classroom management is one of the central causes of teacher burnout and dissatisfaction with the profession; and that the public places the issue of discipline as first on the list of problems the school must cope with. In order to anchor and summarize these determinations, the authors of the Introduction quote the words of C. M. Charles:

> Our schools are in the grip of a serious problem that is wreaking havoc on teaching and learning. That problem is student misbehavior. If you are now teaching, you have had ample experience with it. If you are preparing to teach, be forewarned: It is the major obstacle to your success and has the potential to destroy your career (in Everton and Weinstein, 2006:3).

The centrality and the enormous difficulty for teachers, created by discipline problems penetrates from this Introduction into the depths of the book and peers out of almost every page, as it does from the opening paragraphs and introductory chapters as well as the main sections? of countless research studies dealing with issues of class discipline (see for example: Freiberg & Lamb, 2009).

The second assertion is *that for this reason, it would have been expected that teacher training programs try to equip their graduates with suitable tools to deal with this difficulty*. And this is clear and taken for granted. The goal of teacher training programs without exception is certainly to equip their graduates with

everything they need both theoretically and practically to be good teachers; to teach them everything necessary for them to be able to do their work, the work of teaching, as well and as meaningfully as they can for their students. These training programs are meant to prepare students of teaching to deal with the challenges of teaching in practice. The central organization which aims to oversee, advance and evaluate curricula for teacher training in the United State, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, for example, places at the top of its list of objectives: "To develop and maintain high standards for the knowledge skills and professional dispositions required of educators and for the units and programs that prepare them to practice."

The third assertion is that *the teacher training programs almost completely ignore the issue of class management, and those who nevertheless relate to it, do that only minimally*. Laura Stough in her article "The place of classroom management and standards in teacher education" (2006) presents a broad literature survey of the place of classroom management and the way the subject is handled in teacher training programs. The survey touches upon research literature which has been written during the last three decades. At the center of this literature are both retrospective evaluations of young teachers about the training they had undergone, and studies which have examined the extent to which lessons on this issue had appeared in their training programs. Several researchers, for example, searched for lesson headings which included the words "discipline", "control", "behavior" and "management", and if they existed, how they were related to: Were these obligatory lessons or electives. Some investigated the syllabuses of these programs in an enormous number of teacher training institutions; others examined references to the issue in courses which dealt with a variety of educational topics, not devoted specifically to class management alone. The findings of all of the research were identical: class management is neglected at best and is usually a topic ignored almost completely by institutions of teacher training.

What Can Be Done?

The research not only establishes these assertions, assertions which outline one of the most significant difficulties in teacher training, but has also proposed ways to be extricated from it, that is, proposals for improvement in the approach of teacher training curricula to the question of classroom management and of tools to be used by student teachers who so need them. The National Council on Teacher Quality, in its report "Training our Future Teachers for Classroom

Management" (December 2013) for example, examined more than 100 programs for teacher training in the United States and clarified whether, when teaching classroom management, they presented the "big five" and ranked them accordingly. The "big five" are the golden rules directed to by 150 research studies conducted during the last 60 years. The authors of the report extracted five rules from them which, in their view, should be taught to student teachers and which should be part of every teacher training program. And these are:

1. Rules: Establish and teach classroom rules to communicate expectations for behavior.
2. Routines: Build structure and establish routines to help guide students in a wide variety of situations.
3. Praise: Reinforce positive behavior using praise and other means.
4. Misbehavior: Consistently impose consequences for misbehavior.
5. Engagement: Foster and maintain student engagement by teaching interesting lessons that include opportunities for active student participation.

These, of course, are golden rules for every teacher. But these rules, in my opinion, not only do not contribute to the dismantling and neutralization of the paradox; the opposite is true. They only add to it and intensify it. Because if there are such golden rules, and they appear to be quite clear and simple, why isn't there quiet in the classrooms? Let's say the teachers are not exposed to these golden rules during their training; why can't we expect that they will simply use Google and lay their hands on them, engrave them on their hearts, enter the classrooms equipped with them, and finally quiet will prevail? That does not happen because, in my view, it's a bit, or perhaps very much more than a bit, complicated.

Lists of rules like these do not really work very well. Educational realities in the classroom are too complicated to be able to equip the teacher with a list of dos and don'ts to be activated in the classroom, and the children will simply abandon their telephones and the conversations with their friends sitting next to them and the attempts to impress the girls in the class, and simply sit quietly attentive. Educational realities in the classroom are so complicated that a list of rules like this one can, at most, be a rather limited source of inspiration and directive for what to do to achieve quiet in the classroom, and no more than that. Anyone who has escorted student teachers as they entered the classroom has more than once seen them standing in front of the class and not managing to get a few consecutive sentences out of their mouths. And the lesson "falls apart", not because their lesson plans have not been well prepared, but because, in the left

row, near the window, three children have "made every effort" to have the lesson fall apart. Anyone who has escorted student teachers at the start of their careers and has more than once seen them leaving the classroom in tears after the lesson knows deep inside that this has not occurred because the teachers have not internalized these five golden rules or any others.

Moreover, as I see it, formulating rules like these only maintains and perpetuates the main problem which has shrouded teacher training for more than one hundred years: the gap between theory and practice (Korthgen, 2011:32). This gap has been created by adopting the traditional training model for teachers according to which the university supplies the theory, the methods and the skills, while the school constitutes the experimental field, and the beginning teacher brings with him/her the willingness to make the effort to apply the university knowledge in the school (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998: 133). This model has been given different names by various researchers like "the sacred theory-practice story" (Cladinin, 1995), "the theory- to-practice approach" (Carlson, 1999) or "the technical rationality model" (Schon, 1983: 21). The model, which has been dominant for dozens of years of teacher training, has been found to be limited in the research of the past decade (Korthgen 2011: 32-33). The question of classroom management, in my opinion, reinforces this limitation, and formulating golden rules like these does not contribute to reducing this gap but rather to expanding it, as I will now demonstrate.

One cannot deal with classroom complexity in the context of discipline and classroom management, I argue, with such a set of rules or with any other, as they cannot by their nature encompass this complexity. However, one can deal with this complexity using a tool which can contain it, and the richness of the educational situation (Carter, 1993: 5) – by using stories. I think that the student teachers should be exposed to as many teaching stories as possible. Simply tell them teaching stories without trying to extract generalizations from them, that is, telling them (or showing them) pedagogical stories and enabling them to experience the effects of these stories in a way which is difficult to put one's finger on, not only for us, as spectators from the outside. But even for those who have actually heard the story and have been affected by it. These stories must remain private stories. Their consolidation into rules, if it occurs at all, is an intimate inner process, completely personal for every student teacher. Each of them will make use of the stories as s/he sees fit, perhaps extracting the five golden rules for him/herself, and perhaps not. That's what we can do. That's what teacher training can provide for the young student teacher at the crossroads where they are most helpless. Tell them teaching stories about classroom management and let them become submerged in them.

The willingness to give up on "golden rules" for the sake of a variety of stories has its price. It demands concessions. It requires abandoning the desire to hold on to something "real" regarding an issue so important in teacher training. And that is not easy. Adopting this tool demands many concessions from the standpoint of the mainstream in the field of teacher training. It requires that we give up teacher training aimed at turning teaching into a profession, as outlined by Lee Shulman, proclaiming that those who work in a profession, act to achieve their goals and know how to explain why they have chosen this way and not any other on the basis of the unique knowledge that they possess (Beck, 2014: 98). It requires abandoning the desire to turn teaching into a profession with all that it entails, such as giving up what is usually gained from being considered a professional, such as prestige, and social status, improvement in wages, and professional uniqueness (Ben Yehoshua and Gibton, 1995: 125). It also demands a retreat, at least somewhat, from the desire, the need, and the importance of creating a reflective teacher – the case of managing a class is so complex and so multifaceted that it is impossible to create or to conceive of these reflective insights and to turn them into common knowledge. It requires the moderation of the trend towards academization of teacher training that leads to an attempt to reach codification and discussion of questions of supervision and professional quality (Schwartz, 1996: 5). It demands the willingness to retreat from the tradition calling for academization of teacher training which stresses the importance of generalized scientific academic knowledge as an orientation which is likely to improve this training, and to strengthen the tradition of seminar education which has been pushed aside, and perhaps to go even farther than that. It must be a courageous step. It demands looking very closely at the attempt to learn how to manage a class, seeing the mysterious mists which surrounded it, perceiving the question marks hovering over it, and bearing the understandable uncertainty in all that. Here are three teaching stories which should demonstrate this complexity and what they can teach us about it.

Frank McCourt and the Problem of the Sandwich

Frank McCourt in his well-known *Teacher Man* (2005), not very far into the book, describes his beginning steps on his first day as a school teacher. He entered the classroom for the first time and stood behind the teacher's desk. As he did so, Petey called out from one of the seats at the back of the class, "Anyone wan' a baloney sandwich?" And Andy, who was sitting in the front replied, "You kidding? Your mom must hate you, givin' you sandwiches like that." Petey, in response, threw the sandwich at Andy, to shouts from the class, and the sandwich landed in front of the class in the space between the blackboard and the first row, where Andy was sitting.

What could he do? Which of the strategies could he use? To formulate a rule that no sandwiches were to be thrown in the classroom? To write this rule on the board? To punish Petey? To punish Andy for his provocation? Punish both of them? To ask Petey to pick up the sandwich? To pick up the sandwich himself and throw it in the bin? To write Pete's name on the board, as the first to be put on the "black list" which might grow longer? Send Andy out of the class? Those certainly could have been possible ways to deal with the situation. But McCourt, who had never heard a lecture on flying sandwiches during his four years of teacher training at New York University, nor had he heard about critical moments in class, did not adopt any of those solutions. McCourt stood there behind the teacher's desk and shouted the first word of his teaching career, "Hey!" His shout was ignored by the students who were busy promoting the quarrel between Petey and Andy. So McCourt tried something else: "Stop throwing sandwiches," he called out to Petey. Benny, in the last row, responded, "Hey, teach, he awredy threw the sangwidge. No use tellin' him now don't throw the sangwidg. They's the sangwidge there on the floor." The class reacted with laughter. How to proceed? What to do? The class was waiting for the new teacher to react. McCourt picked up the sandwich and ate it. That was his first act of classroom management. And it was as successful as could be. From that moment, the class was "his".

This is an important story. It is important that student teachers know it. It is important for them to know what Frank McCourt did when a sandwich was thrown in class on his first day of teaching. But this knowledge gives us no hint of what they would do if someone threw a sandwich in their own class. Perhaps they would eat it and nothing would happen. Perhaps they would not eat it and other things would happen. There is no way of knowing. But it is important that they know what Frank McCourt did in his class when someone threw a sandwich.

Destruction, Exile and Salvation

Each year the Department of Internship and New Teacher Training of the Israeli Ministry of Education conducts a short story competition for new teachers in their first year of teaching. These stories enable a uniquely direct glimpse at what goes on behind the classroom doors of teachers who are taking their first teaching steps. One of the winning stories last year was submitted by Matan Morag and was entitled "Destruction, Exile and Salvation". I have read the story dozens of times and it never fails to move me. At each reading I feel a tear rolling down my cheek or about to roll down. It is a sad story. Not an easy story.

The story is constructed as an exchange of emails between Shay, who is a Bible teacher in his first year of teaching and the coordinator of Bible studies at the school, Michal, a veteran teacher of many years. The story begins with their correspondence during the summer vacation, before the beginning of the school year, and continues until the end of the year, 16 short emails in all. (The story is 1300 words long.) Shay is assigned to teach Class 12-3. It's not an easy class; it's a difficult one. Two years earlier, all of the grade's weak student had been concentrated in this class so that other classes could be taught and would learn. This is a class that Shay defines as "a cemetery for new teachers" but he is willing to undertake the challenge. "I wanted to be a teacher because of student like those of Class 12-3", he says. Learning did not take place there during that year. "In class it is impossible to learn". "The lessons look like a pogrom". Shay has tried almost everything, but in vain.

On November 21 he writes to Michal about an idea he has had. He thinks that if the students in the class got to know him better "it would be unpleasant for them to disturb in the lessons". He begins to conduct personal conversations with them. Michal, the experienced teacher, answers him on the following day, "Your initiative to conduct personal discussions is fine! I am sure that you will discover that they are effective".

The weeks go by. The discussions have apparently continued, and so have the disturbances. Towards the end of January Shay writes to Michal:"…Do you remember the personal conversations? The situation in class is still awful. And their getting to know me has not made them disturb less…" This sense of frustration continues until the end of the year. As the end approaches, Shay writes a personal letter to each of the students. The story ends with an email that he sends describing an sms message that he has received from one of the students in reply to the personal letter she received, "Shay, thank you very much for the letter. It was really nice. Please excuse me if I did anything wrong during the year. I am sorry. Stay the way you are. Have a good weekend."

Which of the five rules had Shay not applied in class? Are personal discussions an effective tool to create greater responsibility among the students to be quieter in class? Michal, speaking from the heights of her experience thought that it would work. But it did not work. Perhaps it would have worked for Shay in a different class. Perhaps it would not have worked for Shay but would have for Michal. What generalization can be made from the story? The truth is that none can be

made. It would be impossible to make a generalization from the story about Shay. But it is important to hear the story. It is important for student teachers to know what Shay once tried to do to get some quiet in the classroom, but failed.

Good Morning First Graders

A few years ago, I thought that in my own internal resumé, one of the items had to be "teaching the first grade". I have no training for it, but the interaction I have had with my daughters' friends left me with the feeling that I was "good with children." And that feeling was well-based. But what became clear to me was that "being good" with my daughters and their friends had no connection to "being good" with 35 children in the first grade. That was the most difficult educational experience I have ever had. After I had convinced the supervisor and the school principal that it would be OK, that I was great, that I was filled with innovative ideas and that I was different and creative, I entered a school serving upper middle class pupils from the north of Tel Aviv. I was subbing for a teacher on maternity leave for three months. At the end of two weeks, I asked the principal to find me a replacement.

It was awful. In the morning, the kids would ask Rotem to "be a grandpa". And Rotem would blow some mucous out of his nose and smear it over his face until it had turned into a white beard. Adorned in his white beard, Rotem crawled under the table. The children broke out in screams of "Ugh! Ugh! And the lesson was over. I tried to be cool; I took a box of colored chalk and went out to the schoolyard with the children to solve some arithmetic problems on the sidewalk. I bent down, wrote 8+3= in red chalk and looked up, waiting for the children to answer. "It's 11", answered Assaf correctly. When I lifted my head after the second arithmetic problem, I saw that I had remained with only half of the children, and after the fourth, only a few were still there. The rest were in the schoolyard going about their own business.

I needed help. I talked to veteran teachers and to the principal who tried their best, but it didn't help. I went around to see and hear what other teachers in my position were doing. I found a clue in the muscled personage of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

In Ivan Reitman's police comedy, Kindergarten Cop (1990), Schwarzenegger plays a plainclothes policeman who, while chasing after a drug dealer, must masquerade as a teacher in a first-grade type of kindergarten where the drug dealer's son is a pupil, and the working assumption of the police is that the child may ultimately lead to the capture of the father. On the first day of

kindergarten work, a veteran teacher meets him at the door of the class and warns, "You know, kindergarten is like the ocean. You don't want to turn your back on it". He replies, "They're OK. Don't worry. Everything is under control". He turns away from her and enters the classroom: Sodom and Gomorrah! A mess, noise, chaos! The secretary and the principal peer through the door and see what is going on. The secretary asks the principal, "Aren't you going to break it up?" and the principal replies, "No. Two more days of this and he'll quit". But Schwarzenegger does not quit after two days nor does he leave after two weeks. He succeeds where I failed, and in a big way. He manages to create order from the chaos and to enforce severe discipline on the class. What did he do that I hadn't done? I watched the film again and again and tried to understand. I noticed inter alia that at the end of the process, he came into the noisy classroom, put a whistle (on a yellow string) into his mouth and blew into it; a loud whistle was heard and the children stood silently. The lesson began in exemplary silence.

I thought that that was not a bad idea. I went to a sports shop and bought a professional football referee whistle and tied it on with a yellow string. I was sure that I was equipped with the ultimate doomsday weapon, and that tomorrow I would show them…The morning opened as usual with general chaos. I did not hesitate for a moment. I took out my whistle with the yellow string and I did what Schwarzenegger had done; I blew into it. A sharp whistle was heard; the children stood quietly and sat in their places; the lesson began. Quietly. Uncharacteristically quietly. I was overwhelmed with pleasure. But that didn't continue for very long. During the day, the gaps between one whistle and another diminished. By the end of the day, the children had become indifferent to the whistle.

Perhaps using a whistle is effective to create a clear line for the beginning of the lesson, or to call the children to order during the lesson or to indicate the teacher's strong desire to have long awaited silence. In the film Kindergarten Cop, it "worked"; in my real world, it didn't really "work". I tell this story of my failure every year to my students. It might be that if you see a teacher walking in the hallways of a school or catch sight of him in the teacher's room with a whistle tied with an orange string in his hand, there is one of two possibilities: either he was in my lesson or he saw the movie and thought it could be useful to him. Let us hope that it will really be of use to him.

And if I am asked why this is important, why it is important to tell students stories like the three I have told, I may supply many different kinds of answers. But the right answer and the one which is most accurate is: "just because". Because I believe that it is important to be exposed to stories about teaching. Because I believe that these are the materials which penetrate us and change us from the inside in some kind of inexplicable way. We will tell them teaching stories about dealing with discipline in the classroom and will hope that these enable them to deal better with the discipline problems in class when they are teachers. We must tell them about teachers, about my Russian aunt, for example, who was also a teacher for 29 years in a school in Moscow, and how she dealt with discipline problems (not really). And we must wait for the letter from them which will proclaim, "it works". And hope that it will arrive. No more than that.

It may be that the teacher training systems actually also think/feel this to a certain extent. Perhaps they think that indeed we cannot teach the subject of classroom management, at least, not in the following way: Come and let me tell you what the five golden rules are for achieving quiet in the classroom, and that quiet will actually occur. That may explain the fact that, despite the critical importance of teaching classroom management to student teachers, it is missing from the syllabi of most training programs. But perhaps they are not courageous enough to go one step farther and to honestly and fairly say what they can teach and what they cannot teach in the framework of the policies that they have adopted. Their aims of designing teaching as a profession and 'academizing' teacher training, and the scientific ethos which lies at its basis are the sticks in the wheel regarding the ability to teach anything about classroom management. Thus, this policy is also the stick in the wheel in the attempt to close the gap between theory and practice, which is manifested in academic research and is criticized by it so vigorously.

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