

The Power of Children's Voices: Potentials for Teacher Education

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Abstract: Research literature documents a richness of innovations and projects advocating school-university partnerships that facilitate robust clinical practice. In the context of this focus on clinical work and school-university partnerships there are many possibilities to explore the way children may participate in these partnerships as contributors and experts; particularly, when we acknowledge that their role has predominantly been that of the benefactors of partnership efforts. Children have often been seen as the targets and recipients of the combined efforts of pre-service and in-service teacher collaborations with a focus on student achievement and social/emotion growth. In response to the call for innovative clinical work in the context of school partnerships, in this writing we will discuss what we have learned when conceptualizing and implementing Fowler University, an initiative to have elementary school children and undergraduate students participate as peers in a university class about pedagogy. Through our analysis, we revisit what we have learned about education, children, and teachers, providing insight into how we might think differently about teachers' practices. In the context of Fowler University we consider the following questions: (1) What can teacher candidates learn about pedagogy and effective practice through their collaboration with children? (2) How can children's voices contribute to the pedagogical development of teacher candidates?

KEYWORDS: Early Childhood, Elementary Education, Professional Development School, School University Partnership, Teacher Education

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community;
2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community;
3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need;
4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants;

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We worry about what a child will become tomorrow, yet we forget that he is someone today.

Stacia Tauscher

Research literature documents a richness of innovations and projects advocating for school-university partnerships that facilitate robust clinical practice (Carpenter & Sherretz, 2012). The emphasis on totally immersing teacher candidates in the day-to-day realities of teaching and schooling as a path for effective teacher education and teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005; Levin 2002; Garas-York, Hill, Day, Truesdell, & Mathers 2017) has yielded many partnerships between schools and universities. Teaching quality has been defined as "instruction that enables a wide range of students to learn" (Darling-Hammond, 2012), and it is one of the strongest school-related factors that can improve student learning and achievement (Cochran-Smith, 2006; Hanushek, 2011; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain 2005).

The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (2004) defines Professional Development Schools (PDSs) as "...real schools, often in challenging settings, which have been redesigned and restructured to support their complex mission. PDS partnerships typically support professional and student learning through the use of an inquiry-oriented approach to teaching" (p.1). Levine (2006) cites PDSs as "superb laboratories for education schools to experiment with the initiatives designed to improve student achievement" (p. 105). He further indicates that a PDS can "offer perhaps the strongest bridge between teacher education and classroom outcomes, academics and clinical education, theory and practice, and schools and colleges" (p. 105). In order to ensure teacher quality Goodlad (1984) argues for exemplary schools in which clinical-like learning is facilitated and emphasized. Such clinical-like opportunities are the mainstays of a professional development school partnership. This authentic approach to teacher education prepares new teachers for the realities of classrooms and offers daily opportunities for observing and experiencing the connections between theory and practice (Buchanan & Corenza, 2018).

In the context of this focus on clinical work and school-university partnerships there are many possibilities in which to explore the ways children may participate in these partnerships as contributors and experts; particularly, when we acknowledge that their role has predominantly been that of the benefactors or subjects of partnership efforts. Children have often been seen as the targets and/or recipients of the combined efforts of pre-service and in-service teacher collaborations with a focus on student achievement and social/emotional growth. Drawing on her collaborative research with students, Oldfather (1995) makes it clear that we should be pushed to move beyond research in which children believe that in this kind of work "you're working with a bunch of guinea pigs or something" (p. 131). There is a need for research opportunities where "those who have in the past so often been the mere objects of investigation, themselves become the agents of their own transformation" (Fielding 2004). Taylor (1991) asserted, "We consistently underestimate the enormous potential of children to participate in the construction of their own learning environments" (p. 3). After all, children are the "only authentic chroniclers of their own experience" (Delpit, 1988, p. 297).

In this writing we respond to the National Association for Professional Development School's call for "A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community" (NAPDS, 2008). To this end, we discuss and reflect on what we have learned when conceptualizing and implementing Fowler University, an initiative to facilitate elementary school children and undergraduate teacher education students participating and interacting as peers in a university class about pedagogy. Through our conceptualization of our experiences we will revisit what we have learned about teacher education, children, and teachers, providing insight into how we might think differently about teachers' practices and what insights they can glean from children. To this end, we consider the following questions:

- (1) What can teacher candidates learn about pedagogy and effective practice through their collaboration with children?
- (2) How can children's voices contribute to the pedagogical development of teacher candidates?

Fowler University

Fowler University was implemented for two semesters at Fowler Drive Elementary School. Fowler Drive is one of 14 elementary schools in Athens (Georgia, United States) and has a student population of 579 students (African American—47%; Latino—46%; White—5%; Multi-racial—3%). The free and reduced lunch rate of the student population is over 90% as defined by the federal lunch program for public schools. Fowler Drive Elementary school has been engaged in a professional development school partnership between the Clarke County School District and the University of Georgia College of Education for eight years. As a part of her role as professor in residence, first author Beth Tolley developed the idea of Fowler University as a way to support the school district's initiative to promote college and career readiness for all of its students.

To implement the initiative fourth and fifth grade students were invited to participate in the University of Georgia early childhood education course (Integrated instruction in the early childhood classroom) taught on-site at the school. The objectives, activities, and readings for the university course remained the same as they had been planned for teacher candidates in other sections of the course. Children were given a summary of the readings for the week they were to participate to prepare for the discussions that would take place in class. With the goal to provide access to the initiative to as many elementary school children as possible, each fourth and fifth grade classroom was invited to participate during a different week in the semester. Influenced by Shier (2001) we emphasized collaborative activity between teacher candidates and children to bring about the most effective participation. Teacher candidates and children engaged throughout the course, focusing on the characteristics of effective teaching and the dispositions needed for elementary teaching. We worked to create a space that prioritized the voices of children and where ideas of effective and ineffective teaching generated from the children themselves, those who will be most influenced by teaching practices. We believe "if children are seen as competent social actors, then they have the right and the ability to act as participants" (Skelton, 2008, p. 8). There is a growing body of research evidence to show that this kind of participation brings many

and varied benefits to children and schools (Shier, 2018; Correia et al., 2019; Halliday et al., 2018).

The children offered their perspectives and experiences to examine the ways we think about the language that teachers use, challenging behaviors in the classroom, and how children are affected by classroom routines, procedures, and disruptions. Inspired by bell hooks (1994) we aspired to provide opportunities to shake up children's hearts and minds to care about themselves and their worlds and to understand that they have valuable insight to offer. Collaborative inquiry and critical reflection drove the majority of the practices in place at Fowler University. There were also frequent intentional efforts to make connections between the necessary skills and dispositions of a typical elementary day and those of a typical college day for children to see the similarities of their days with those of the teacher education students. The children were able to understand that reading, note-taking, discussing, cooperative learning and inquiry are common characteristics of both educational settings; through these experiences we wished to provide authentic exposure and understandings regarding the importance of these skills beyond the classroom. As Fowler University evolved, we were committed to facilitating opportunities for the teacher candidates and children to participate together in professional conferences (e.g. Tolley, 2019), furthering the experience of what it means to be a scholar and teacher, highlighting the importance of the skills learned in school.

A Typical Class in Fowler University

The typical Fowler University weekly class incorporated discussions and interactive activities in whole group and small groups to provide adequate space and time for teacher candidates and children to express their ideas and learn together. Wyness (2006) encourages such child-friendly spaces as ones in which adults are required to *listen* to children and not just *hear* them. Thus, university instructors saw their role as listeners, encouraging the teacher candidates to also listen to the elementary school students. Careful listening to children offered ideas for further inquiry with teacher candidates and provided insight as to how the teacher candidates were developing their listening skills. Creating a space of listening also fostered ways to listen to teacher candidates themselves, providing an authentic assessment of where they are in their teacher training and pedagogical understanding.

The main assignment students were asked to complete during Fowler University was an inquiry project. For this assignment, teacher candidates were expected to take the lead in deciding on an inquiry question that they would explore with the children and that connected to their perspectives and experiences as students and teachers in schools. Throughout the semester we facilitated different work sessions in which the children and teacher candidates worked together to better understand the questions posed by the teacher candidates. The assignment was also designed to provide a metacognitive opportunity for the teacher candidates to reflect on how pedagogy and learning that is led by children and based on real issues may take place.

Course readings included books such as *Choice Words* (Johnston, 2004) and *Teaching Difficult Children: Blue Jays in the Classroom* (Gnezda, 2005). Discussions were intended to elicit children's perspectives and feelings about the oral language and body language that teachers use in teaching, and how students are impacted by their teachers' oral and body language. The children offered their thoughts about effective practices, practical classroom routines and procedures, successful discipline, their roles in the classroom, and their visions for

what they want in a classroom. Teacher candidates gained insight into children's school experiences and teacher interactions from authentic child perspectives. Simultaneously, elementary school children were able to ask questions about college life and were exposed to ideas about college attendance with our hope of children being able to conceive of college as an accessible space that is a possible choice in their futures.

Fowler University as an Initiative and as Research

Fowler University was an initiative that arose from our commitments to support the school district where we work; honoring the needs they identify for themselves and prioritizing the perspectives of teachers and students that work with us in developing our teacher candidates into effective, caring teachers. For Beth these commitments arose from her experiences as a teacher and teacher educator, where she has worked to support children and teacher candidates for forty-seven years. For the second author, Cristina, these commitments arose from her experiences in teacher education, where her identity as an immigrant and Latina have highlighted the need to find a way to diversify the voices that shape the knowledge that is privileged. As educators and researchers, we saw a need to create more equitable learning spaces, positioning children as having a depth of knowledge to contribute to a learning community as well as positioning children as people who are able to learn and are able to make choices about their learning.

In the context of Fowler University, we bridged as educators and researchers becoming participant observers; we were completely immersed in the experience as instructors while also taking the role of researchers in our intentional study of the initiative. As participant observers we relied on our experiences and observations, as well as on each other, to gain deeper understanding of the events taking place, with a focus on the learning of our teacher candidates. To supplement our observations, we also collected data through: (1) field notes of regular instruction, recollecting class events; (2) student work completed as part of regular instruction; (3) audio recordings of class sessions; (4) surveys of student perceptions, given as part of the regular implementation of Fowler University; and (5) field notes taken by a research assistant who attended the class sessions regularly. Fowler University took place over the course of two university semesters (16-weeks each). One hundred ninety-seven fourth and fifth grade students participated along with 53 University of Georgia teacher candidates and eight classroom teachers.

Teacher Candidates Learning from Fowler University

In this section we discuss what we have learned while implementing Fowler University; specifically, we consider what teacher candidates can learn about pedagogy and effective practice through their collaboration with children and how children contribute to the pedagogical development of teacher candidates. To do so, we draw on our observations and experiences as facilitators as well as quotes from data collected about teacher candidate perceptions of their collaboration with children. In this way, we examine the possibilities afforded within Fowler University for teacher candidates' pedagogical development. Through our experiences implementing Fowler University we found that children's participation in the pedagogy class provided many opportunities for teacher candidates to learn and develop their pedagogical skills.

Listening as a Pedagogical Strategy

Children often conveyed ideas and skills consistent with the pedagogical practices teacher candidates were expected to learn during the class and as part of their training. As we mentioned, the idea of learning from listening to children was a cornerstone of Fowler University. For instance, a teacher candidate shared: “One thing I learned is that teachers should be listening to their students more. I felt that sentiment every time that we asked the students a question, and they had so much to tell us that they had never even told their teachers.” Our observations and the perspectives shared by the teacher candidates showed that teacher candidates took ownership of Fowler University as a space to think about and practice how to listen and learn from children in their own terms. Children expressed important understandings regarding pedagogy as well as issues of equity and social justice. For instance, children expressed they wish to be treated as people and not just students, they often experienced school and norms set by teachers as unfair, how they felt unfair assumptions were made about them, and that they wish to be given choice and freedom within educational spaces. As teacher educators, we saw the important implications in children’s ability to convey and explain issues related to social justice and schooling to future teachers.

Engaging in dialogue with children often required teacher candidates to negotiate their own perspectives as teachers about regular issues arising in classrooms, issues that often were exclusively considered from the perspectives of teacher candidates or collaborating teachers. For instance, another teacher candidate stated,

“The big takeaway I learned from Fowler University is that every student is truly different and has unique needs. My job as a teacher is to never stop discovering those needs and discovering techniques and strategies to use that meet each students' needs. It was also interesting how comfortable students were talking and working with me because they didn't view me as a "teacher." They saw me more as a friend, and I thought that was really neat.”

As can be seen in this statement, the teacher candidate shows a willingness to consider the children’s perspectives and a commitment as a teacher to support the diverse needs of her students. At the same time, we also see the conflict that arises for the teacher candidate from her own developing pedagogical understandings and identity as a teacher, positioning herself as a friend instead of a teacher when listening to children’s perspectives. The quote above illustrates how, in general, teacher candidates understood the importance of listening to children while also having conflicting views about the implications of children’s perspectives for their pedagogical practice and themselves as teachers.

Inverting Power Dynamics for Learning

The conflict between being a peer and a teacher to children was a present tension for teacher candidates throughout the implementation of Fowler University. We observed that because teacher candidates were developing a teaching identity themselves, they often did not wish to be seen by the children as students themselves. Some teacher candidates did not seem ready to engage with children in pedagogical discussion or to talk about difficult topics. Other teacher candidates were not willing to have responsibility for the children in the space of a university class. For instance, a teacher candidate observed that it would be helpful to “have their actual classroom teacher rotate throughout the group to help control behavior of the students.”

This perspective is consistent with that of some teacher candidates who still judged the children's behavior as something to be controlled, positioning children as either their responsibility or as another whom they were not willing to learn with, even though the children consistently demonstrated their ability to participate in the university class productively. Often, we observed that the children were actually the more flexible participants, were more willing to take risks, and better able to participate in a flexible learning space.

The perspective of children not being able to contribute or behave appropriately during a university class was connected to teacher candidates' ability to engage with children in discussion. Some teacher candidates saw their role in fostering productive discussion while other abdicated the responsibility they may have in maintaining a productive discussion with the children. This can be seen in the following contrasting views from two teacher candidates:

"Some [elementary school] students were super engaged, and some were not engaged at all. If students liked their Fowler Drive teacher [candidate], they seemed to participate better than if they did not like their Fowler Drive teacher."

"Many children I worked with did not have any interest in the topics we were discussing. I felt bad taking away from their class time."

From these two perspectives we see how the teacher candidates themselves also identified the different levels of success in engaging in pedagogical discussions with the children, pointing to the potential of the experience of Fowler University in supporting teacher candidates in taking ownership of their pedagogical development. The space facilitated opportunities for reflection and for teacher candidates to learn from observing each other and to recognize effective ways peers were engaging with children and ways they were not. Thus, Fowler University also proved to be a fruitful space to identify and support teacher candidates who were not yet pedagogically ready to engage with children or have discussion about complex topics.

Inherently, the children brought diversity of experience and perspectives to the conversations fostering teacher candidates' awareness of structural inequalities that are materialized and reproduced in formal schooling. Both children and teacher candidates needed practice discussing difficult issues surrounding schooling and issues of social justice. Demographics such as the ones in Fowler Drive Elementary School, too often lead to deficit-oriented perspectives and too often define and influence teacher practice. The idea of deficit suggests that there is something wrong with a child who differs from those who naturally succeed in school and places the focus on remediating problems rather than appreciating the strengths all children bring to the classroom upon which a teacher can build to extend knowledge. The children had contrastingly different perspectives from the teacher candidates about their experiences in school, their families, their communities, and even their struggles. These differences in perspective often drove further discussions with our teacher candidates, urging them to think critically about their assumptions in contrast to the messages and deeper understanding the children were able to offer.

Learning from Spaces for Teacher Education

We conclude that one of the key factors that fostered teacher candidates' ability to learn from children's perspective was that Fowler University also created a space that disrupted traditional school practices as an environment that was intentionally designed by teacher educators for teacher education. In this sense, it differed from other field experiences teacher

candidates may have had that immersed them into the world of public schools in Georgia and the hegemonic views and practices of teaching. Hence, Fowler University helped disrupt underlying assumptions and misunderstandings that often arose for teacher candidates in relation to their field experiences in elementary classrooms. Predominantly, it provided a space in which children that teacher candidates may have perceived as problematic were given an opportunity to express their own perspectives and experiences. The experience required many candidates to see with new lenses and be more aware of how making assumptions is problematic. For instance, a teacher candidate reflects on how it was fruitful for her to hear from children's perspectives:

“In particular, conversations that I had with some of the older students were very enlightening. Many students we talked to had never been given the experience to talk about their school experiences before, so they had a lot to share. Particularly, conversations I had with them about their negative interactions with teachers will help inform my future teaching.”

The perspective of this teacher candidate portrays how engaging with children led to open reflections about how interactions with teachers may be perceived by students and the pedagogical understanding of the need to account for it.

Fowler University provided a space where teacher candidates could try recommended strategies and practices to support the development of learning communities. For instance, many teacher candidates expressed that in their practicum classrooms they found morning meeting ineffective or that they did not have an opportunity to experience how to effectively implement it in their classroom. However, incorporating children into the space of Fowler University gave them an opportunity to see how children responded to such recommended teaching practices. This can be seen in the way a teacher candidate reflects on the effectiveness of morning meeting at Fowler University:

“This was a great way for students to get warmed up and get to know each other as well as the college students. This positive energy carried throughout the rest of their time at Fowler University. I also learned that giving students a lot of control is not a bad thing. Instead, they were very capable and with guidance when needed were able to complete the activities.”

In this instance the teacher candidate identifies morning meeting as effective in building a learning community and also connects it with other important supported teaching strategies such as encouraging agency in children, students' ability to complete challenging tasks, and effective ways of providing support.

In creating a setting different than the one in classrooms teacher candidates and children most commonly experienced, Fowler University also disrupted other common assumptions by offering opportunities to experience how children approach learning differently in different settings. A key issue for teacher candidates during the class and in relation to their field placement was classroom management. During Fowler University children behaved differently and children's perspectives also provided an opportunity for teacher candidates to confront their concerns and assumptions about classroom management. For instance, two teacher candidates shared:

“I noticed that many of the students complained about not having a teacher that was "compassionate" or [one who] "yelled a lot." It really affects me, because I know that

classroom management can be difficult, yet I want to create a positive environment in my classroom.”

“I found it super helpful to hear from the students about their own experiences and how they think a classroom should be run.”

Their observations and reflections point to one of the productive spaces teacher candidates found and created in their interactions with children. We capitalized on this experience to facilitate discussions and ideas for reflection by drawing on the recognition that there were no major disruptions or behavior issues during any of the 32 sessions of Fowler University.

In contrast, other teacher candidates perceived that having the children as part of the university class prevented them from confronting specific issues with classroom management they were encountering in their field placements. For instance, two other teacher candidates share:

“I wish that we had spent more time talking about practical applications of what we've learned, such as what to do if a student cusses you out or throws a chair at you.”

“Provide enough time to just have college students have a discussion without the children. I felt I missed out on time to talk about placement and things happening there because of Fowler University”

These perspectives demonstrate the lack of comfort of some teacher candidates in discussing difficult topics and experiences with children and in seeing children as true collaborators in solving difficult realities that arise from teaching. It also demonstrated that teacher candidates need to think more about the extenuating circumstances and schooling practices that influence children's choices in classrooms rather than the nature or contexts of children themselves. Thus, it was important to support teacher candidates in noticing the contrast of the actual experience of Fowler University and their expectation that there would be issues as many of the children came labeled as “troublemakers” by their classroom teachers or by our own teacher candidates. This contrast proved successful in highlighting inconsistencies in expectations and the behavior that can result from those expectations; helping teacher candidates understand the impact of the self-fulfilling prophecy for how students either rise or fall to our levels of expectations.

Learning from Fowler University

Overall, we found that teacher candidates' experiences in Fowler University varied based on their own readiness to engage with children in difficult discussions and the stage of pedagogical ability. Teacher candidates who had strong pedagogical understandings as well as commitments to honor children's experiences and perspectives were able to use the space to grow pedagogically; these teacher candidates practiced listening to children and considered their perspectives in relation to pedagogical practices and themselves as teachers. Teacher candidates who were struggling to understand their role as teachers, had authoritative views of teaching, or were unsure about how to approach difficult topics themselves struggled to engage with children and take ownership of the learning opportunities Fowler University afforded. As Kellett (2006) explains “a combination of circumstances is necessary for child voice to have influence, not least of which is a pre-disposition on the part of adults to value what children have to say and to appreciate the uniqueness of their perspectives” (p. 197).

Regardless of the level of readiness, as teacher educators we found that Fowler University provided a space that was fruitful for teacher candidates and that created opportunities

to identify and support them in their different levels of readiness. Particularly for teacher candidates that were struggling Fowler University provided a space where teacher candidates could be frequently supported and where teacher candidates could observe their peers to reflect on their own level of success and the pedagogical practices they were developing. Building on the idea that children can offer rich perspectives to key questions that arise for teacher candidates in their professional development furthered the initiative of Fowler University. During Fowler University children were welcomed into a friendly risk-free environment in which they were given opportunities to (1) express and facilitate understanding of their views, (2) have their views respected and listened to, and (3) see their views acted upon as appropriate (Lundy 2007). We also drew on the work of Hart (1992) and his “ladder of participation” and facilitated experiences in which (1) children are listened to, (2) children are supported in expressing their views, (3) children's views are taken into account, (4) children are involved in decision-making processes, and (5) children share power and responsibility for decision-making. Their participation was about “being recognized for who they are in the here and now, and for their place in social and cultural life which leads to increased levels of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem” (Kellett 2010, p.196). The conscientious effort to move toward a view of learning as a process of social construction and dismantle notions of teaching as transmission was incorporated into the activities of Fowler University, thereby infusing long-proven research ideas (Marshall 1992, Oldfather 1995, Paley 1986). We have worked to disrupt the idea that teachers more often than not leave students out of the dialogue about educational concerns and underestimate the potential that students have in contributing to our understandings (Erickson & Schultz, 1992).

As teacher educators our objective was to provide authentic instruction to our teacher candidates such that they become “confident teachers who research questions that intrigue and puzzle them, who seek answers and understanding about their students’ learning and their own teaching, and who strive to be more knowledgeable in their responses to the teaching/learning cycle” (Olson, 1990, p. 13). We wanted to encourage our students to constantly probe and question, listen and observe, notice and note. Teachers that Goodman (1989) describes as “kid watchers” (p. 8), teachers who interact with students and monitor activities in order to understand more about teaching and learning. We wanted our teacher candidates to benefit and gain pedagogical knowledge from Fowler University as a child-friendly space that reflects children’s interests, their ideas, and their “preferred ways of engagement so that children’s voices do not become a tool for reinforcing adult governance” (Kellett 2006, p. 197).

The implications taken from Fowler University can offer guidance to all stakeholders—children, teacher candidates, practicing teachers, teacher educators, as well as partnering schools and universities. Child-led discussions about pedagogical practices that encourage and discourage, procedures that are fair and consistent or haphazard, and opportunities for explaining their actions and concerns before assumptions are formed, offer rich material for professional development. Positioning the children as experts of their own needs and education necessarily opens questions about who should be consulted when considering the characteristics of effective teaching. In this sense, a fundamental understanding is that “adults have greater knowledge than children in many areas of life but with regard to childhood itself—in the sense of what it is like to be a child—it is children who have the expert knowledge” (Kellett, 2010; Mayall, 2000). This expert knowledge emphasizes what effective teaching looks like, sounds like, and feels like to

children, calling our attention to the frequent absence of the children's perspectives in classrooms. Listening to the voices of the children reminds us and emphasizes the need for teachers to see "everything that happens in a classroom... as data to be understood rather than causes for blaming or congratulating" (Bissex 1986, p. 483). Thus, teacher inquiry with children generates data that need not become major research projects "but can be a matter of regular and intentional examination of what kinds of learning experiences students find most engaging, discussing and comparing them, and using the insights gained for students to make choices for ways in which they wish to pursue learning" (Oldfather 1995, p. 136.)

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