Creating Authentic Connections with High School Students: A Classroom Teacher Generated Algorithm

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ABSTRACT

It is a continuous challenge for Manitoba (Canada) educators to reduce drop-out rates and increase graduation rates. Reasons for dropping out appear to resemble a "perfect storm" of sociological, socioeconomic, cultural, behavioural, and academic factors. The purpose of this study was to seek out Manitoba high school classroom teachers, invite them to participate in a *think tank*, and capture their voices to better understand what makes them successful at helping adolescents stay in school and graduate. While the participants (n=9) indicated many challenges to connecting with students, they unanimously agreed that connecting with their students was an essential element of student success – especially for those deemed at-risk. When asked to specify how they connected with at-risk youth, teachers described the need to find similarities and shared interests, help students with their needs and wants, and be viewed as authentic. The study concludes that a useful "algorithm" for making positive connections with students is to combine incentives and authenticity creatively.

Keywords: high school, teachers, graduation, drop-out, think tank, connection, incentives, authentic

INTRODUCTION

High school graduation is considered to be one of the major life achievements for all youth, and the perception that virtually every adolescent is capable of attaining a high school diploma is a widespread belief in Western society today. For example, Pharris-Ciureja, Hirschman, and Willhoft (2012) stated, "The near universality of high school graduation is considered one of the major achievements of the American education system. Social indicators, based on survey and census data, show that high school completion has risen from about 50% of young adults in mid-20th century America to almost 90% among recent cohorts" (p.709).

In Canada, the drop-out rate appears to have been reduced to half its level of 20 years ago. The national drop-out rate in 1991 was 16.6% (Statistics Canada, 2011). Statistics Canada (2011) recently reported that 191,000 individuals, or 8.5% of all Canadians aged 20 to 24, were considered high school drop-outs.

As a society, we can be proud of such success, because dropping out of high school costs a great deal to both the individual and the community at large. Englund, Edgeland, and Collins (2008) noted the following startling facts concerning the disparity between the earnings of high school graduates and students who drop out of high school:

1. Individuals who graduate from high school earn, on average, 1.5 times more than high school drop-outs and individuals with a college degree earn 2.7 times more than drop-outs.
2. Nearly one out of every four individuals in full-time working families where the head of household had less than a high school education were living in poverty.
3. The unemployment rate was 33% for those individuals who dropped out of high school in 2004–2005. (p.64).

While these statistics may be sobering, they are more troubling when we consider that recent studies have reported that the actual graduation rate is far from universal. Pharris-Ciureja, Hirschman, and Willhoft (2012) studied the records of nearly 9000 high school students in a large American metropolitan school district from 1994 to 2005. They tracked each student from the time they entered the school system until they left the system or graduated. Based on their findings, they determined that only 65% to 70% of the high school students earned a high school diploma. This disparity between reported graduation rates and actual rates is significant and also puzzling.

It is apparent that our claims of a near universal high school graduation rate and our actual conditions that an alarmingly high percentage of youth drop out are not aligned.

One reason for the different findings may be due to the manner in which results were obtained. Pharris-Ciureja, Hirschman, and Willhoft (2012) noted that most national results concerning graduation rates come from household surveys and censuses, and many individuals appear to exaggerate their educational credentials. Warren and Halpern-Manners (2009) discovered that 25% of the drop-outs' parents also lie about school attendance when asked, stating that their child was still enrolled in school when they clearly were no longer attending.

A closer inspection of Statistics Canada's (2011) graduate numbers reveals some similar discrepancies. For example, the Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey Questionnaire (2012) obtained its results from a telephone survey, where the questions asked included, "What is the highest grade of elementary or high school [name] ever completed?" (para. 46), "Did [name] graduate from high school (secondary school)?" (para. 47), "Has [name] received any other education that could be counted towards a degree, certificate, or diploma from an educational institution?" (para. 48), and "What is the highest degree, certificate or diploma [name] has obtained?" (para.49). It is reasonable to assume that national graduation statistics are most likely inflated, in part due to respondent dishonesty.

When examining high school graduation levels, Statistics Canada (2011) reported that 89.5% of all Canadians aged 20 to 24 have (or perhaps more accurately, *claim* to have) a high school diploma (or equivalent), 2% are still enrolled in high school (or equivalent). That leaves only 8.5% to be considered high school drop-outs. If, however, one looks at the age groups of 18 to 19-year-olds, Statistics Canada (2011) also noted that only 76.9% had graduated high school *on time.* Although Statistics Canada (2011) claimed that 14.7% of 18 and 19-year-olds were still attending high school (leaving only 8.4% to be considered high school drop-outs), it is not difficult to find a reason to dispute such findings. In the province of Manitoba, the Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey (2012) concluded that only 73.9% of all 18 and 19-year-olds have a high school diploma. Richards (2009) stated that Manitoba, in fact, has the highest drop-out rate in Canada, and that, "The ratio between the province with the highest drop-out rate, Manitoba, and the lowest, British Columbia, is two to one" (p.2). He reported that the number of 20 to 24-year-old Manitobans without any high school certification was, in fact, 24% for males and 19% for females.

Reasons for High School Dropout

Reasons for dropping out appear to resemble a "perfect storm" of sociological, socioeconomic, cultural, behavioural, and academic factors (Englund, Edgeland, & Collins, 2008; (Pharris-Ciureja, Hirschman, & Willhoft, 2012; Richards 2009). Pharris-Ciureja, Hirschman, and Willhoft (2012) stated the following reasons:

Why do so many high school students drop-out from high school? Our results confirm many of the familiar findings from the literature on the salience of risk factors - earlier disadvantages beget later disadvantages. Minority status, economic marginality, distressed families, and human and social capital deficits are strongly associated with poor school performance and high school attrition (p. 724).

Socioeconomic status seems to be the largest predictor for dropping out, as adolescents from low-income households continue to drop out of high school at higher rates than those from other socioeconomic backgrounds (Reimer, 2011). Although many youths from poor households do graduate from high school, Englund, Edgeland, and Collins (2008) noted that the drop-out rate for students from the low-income bracket was, "twice the percentage of adolescents in the middle-income, and nearly six times the percentage of those individuals in the high-income bracket" (p.77). Pharris-Ciureja, Hirschman, and Willhoft (2012) noted that

students from "low-income families are 25% less likely to graduate than are students from non-poor homes… Students from the best neighborhoods are twice as likely to graduate on time as students from the lowest ranked neighborhoods" (p.724)".

Unfortunately, these sociological problems seem to pass on from generation to generation. Richards (2009) stated, "In empirical analyses of parental influence, the two most important variables are usually parental education levels and family income. Parental education measures the stock of human capital that parents can contribute to their children's education" (p.17).

According to Wotherspoon (2009), *Haman Capital Theory* supports the idea that schools are an "investment to stimulate productivity and economic growth" (p.25). Davies and Guppy (2010) stated that "Human capital theory sees schools as organized largely to nurture productive skills needed in the economy, and thus receive public support accordingly" (p.55). It is evident that education has symbiotically and exponentially increased in value for both the individual and the public. One of the major issues that society faces is its ability to equitably distribute important capital – human or otherwise - to everyone.

Economic, Cultural, and Social Capital

Bourdieu (1986) distinguished between three forms of capital as *economic, social,* and *cultural.* Although economic capital is the most commonly referred to form of capital, cultural and social capital are also very valuable in today's world (Reimer, 2011). Whitaker (2006) defined cultural capital as the "cultural practices, including language patterns and experiences such as visits to museums, which provide knowledge of middle and upper-class culture – the culture of schools" (p.15). Some examples of cultural capital include having a large vocabulary, appreciating the arts, and frequenting museums. Schools have the ability to offer this type of capital to youth (Reimer, 2011). When compared to middle and upper-class families, parents from working-class families are less likely to cultivate this type of capital in their children. Bourdieu (1998) argued that the current education system does little more than increase the gap between the middle and upper-class families and working-class families, as these groups tend to have unequal amounts of it from the outset. Bourdieu (1998) described how families use cultural capital as a reproductive strategy:

> Families are corporate bodies animated by a …tendency to perpetuate their social being, with all its power and privileges, which is the basis of reproductive strategies: fertility

strategies, matrimonial strategies, successional strategies, economic strategies, and last but not least, educational strategies. Families invest all the more in school education (in transmission, in help of all kinds, and some cases…in money) as their cultural capital is more important. It allows us to understand how the highest school institutions, those who give access to the highest social positions, become increasingly monopolized by the children of privileged categories (pp.19-20).

Cultural	Social
Cultural capital is the "cultural practices, including language patterns and experiences such as visits to museums, that provide knowledge of middle and upper-class culture – the culture of schools" (Whitaker (2006, p.15).	*Social capital* is about the power of social connections, networking, and relationships we make in our life.
Some examples of *cultural capital* include having a large vocabulary, appreciating the arts, and frequenting museums.	"If *cultural capital* refers to what you know, *social capital* refers to who you know" (Davies and Guppy, 2010, p.52).
Families invest all the more in school education (in transmission, in help of all kinds, and in some cases…in money) as their *cultural capital* is more important. It allows us to understand how the highest school institutions, those who give access to the highest social positions, become increasingly monopolized by the children of privileged categories (Bourdieu, 1998, pp.19-20).	This is troubling because students from middle and upper classes have the ability to convert *social* and *cultural capital* into *economic capital* (Whitaker, 2006).

Figure 1. Cultural and Social Capital

In addition to receiving cultural capital, middle and upper-class parents are also more able to pass on social capital to their children. Social capital is about the power that social connections, networking, and relationships have in our lives (Reimer, 2011). Davies and Guppy (2010) stated that "If cultural capital refers to what you know, social capital refers to whom you know" (p.52). This is troubling because students from middle and upper classes seem to have the ability to convert social and cultural capital into economic capital in a way that students from poor backgrounds cannot (Whitaker, 2006). The challenge for schools is to determine how to address these monumental concerns.

Perhaps teachers who work daily with these students can offer some solutions to this problem. These teachers might be in the position to offer insightful perspectives concerning sociological issues and education. As most students tend to drop out of the public school system while in high school, high school teachers are the only educators that have daily

interactions with the youth that tend to vanish from Manitoba's high schools. Perhaps high school teachers hold vital information about what causes at-risk youths to stay, or even reappear.

THE STUDY

For this study, the author sought out Manitoba high school teachers and attempted to identify what it is they do that keeps adolescents in school (Reimer, 2014). Specifically, the purpose of the study was to seek out Manitoba high school classroom teachers, invite them to participate in a *think tank*, and capture their voices to understand better what makes them successful at helping adolescents stay in school and graduate. The study used qualitative methods and was conducted between June 2013 and January 2014.

Nine teachers from two large high schools emailed the author, indicating an interest in participating in the study. Although all of the teacher participants (n=9) were currently teaching in one of two high schools in the same school division, their backgrounds varied in many ways **(see** Figure 3.1**).** Six of the teacher participants were male, and three were female. Two of the teachers indicated that they were between 20 to 29 years old, three indicated they were between 30 to 39 years old, two indicated that they were 40 to 49 years old, and two indicated that they were over 50 years old. The range of teaching experience in Manitoba varied dramatically. Three participants had taught in Manitoba for less than five years, two had taught between 5 and ten years, two had taught between 11 and 20 years, one had taught between 20 and 25 years, and one participant had taught for over 40 years. It should be noted that two of the 9 participants had lead professional development workshops for school or divisional staff. Additionally, three participants had received some recognition or award for teaching at some point in their career, although none elaborated as to what specific award it was that they received.

Collectively, the teachers taught in a wide variety of subjects and at all high school grade levels. Two participants had or were currently teaching in Industrial Arts Programs, and one participant taught Physical Education part of the time. Participants also taught academic subjects, including Mathematics (Pre-Calculus, Essential), English, Social Studies, Geography, History, Chemistry, and Biology. Two teachers indicated that they assisted in the Resource department, one was assigned to Guidance, two taught in a credit recovery type programs, and one teacher provided "English as an Additional Language" (EAL) support.

Other courses that participants stated they taught included Leadership, Philosophy, Aboriginal Studies, and Law.

Teacher participants' post-secondary education also varied. All participants had obtained their Bachelor of Education. Five of the participants also obtained a Bachelor of Arts, and three obtained a Bachelor of Science (one with Honours). Two participants had diplomas in Industrial Arts. Two participants had obtained a Masters in Arts, and two had obtained a Masters in Education. Finally, two participants stated that they had obtained their Ph.D. in Education.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTIONS

The first session was opened with the question, "What is it that you do in your classroom that you think reduces the risk of students dropping out, and increases the probability that students will graduate?" It was followed by asking each person around the table to comment. If there was one dominant theme that continuously surfaced throughout all of the think tank sessions, it was the emphasis that all of the participants made great efforts to *connect* with their students. In fact, this theme was the first one that teachers wanted to address and arose several times throughout each session. After asking the initial question, the first participant who spoke immediately offered:

> The main thing I do is connect with students, that's a big thing I do. Connecting with them socially, engaging with them academically as best as I can. All of these things – connecting with home, all of these things to keep them in school. I think connecting with kids also goes into the classroom. We have to establish connections with the kids, and that is a very important thing so that we are sure that students who are there want to be there, and if we can provide a sense of belongingness.

Initially, the teachers promptly agreed that connecting with their students was a crucial component to achieving success in their classrooms. For example, one teacher quickly stated, "Absolutely, I agree; I mean making meaningful connections with students by having authentic conversations with them is important." Another said, "I think that it has a lot to do with the relationships that you make with the students. It was important that I built those relationships with them and it's kind of how I spent the last two months was building those relationships just getting to know them, their interests. I've kind of become a person whom they trust" A third teacher offered that connecting was an essential component of high school success, noting, "I felt there was a real need to connect. They (students) didn't know me, and I didn't know them but I just need to connect, and I know that they will need it too".

When asked to describe what "connecting" with their students meant, a teacher offered the following statement.

> It's a lot about building a rapport with them and making sure they are comfortable in the room. I think that some, it's kind of come to my attention with a few of them where they have said they just don't feel comfortable in some of their classrooms, and so they didn't go. So, I think that is really important in any classroom, actually having those relationships with the students and making them feel comfortable and not just academically but on a personal level as well.

Challenges to Connecting

According to responses made in the think tank sessions, it appeared that connecting with students was easier said than done, particularly with students of high school age. The challenges were primarily focused on a variety of difficulties that students face as they transition from elementary and middle years environments to high school settings. Specifically, the think tank participants highlighted the following challenges.

1. Middle school transition.
2. Inadequate student preparation.
3. Adolescent malaise.
4. Finding adequate student-teacher contact time.
5. Students' physiological and psychological changes.
6. Competing with increased distractions,
7. Increasing job demands.
8. Misperceptions of high school teachers.

CONNECTING STRATEGIES

In order to counteract the challenges, regarding making connections, many useful strategies and examples were offered by the teachers. In each of the think tank sessions, the high school teachers shared many examples that demonstrated the importance of connecting with students to combat the sobering drop-out statistics. First, the participants shared ways in which they connected with students by finding similarities and shared interests. These included finding similarities in culture and language, age, personal and emotional hardships, hobbies, clubs, humour, and popular culture. Although each of the participants found different ways to connect with students, there was a unanimous consensus that to be effective in the classroom, teachers benefited greatly by finding similarities and shared interests with their students. Each teacher also shared examples of how he or she had connected with his or her students by helping them with an issue or problem. Many of these examples involved assisting students when economic

imbalances were involved, but they also included examples of teachers providing students with personal and academic assistance. Third, teachers noted the importance of being viewed as authentic in the students' eyes.

To summarize, teachers thought that in order to connect with students. They needed to do the following:
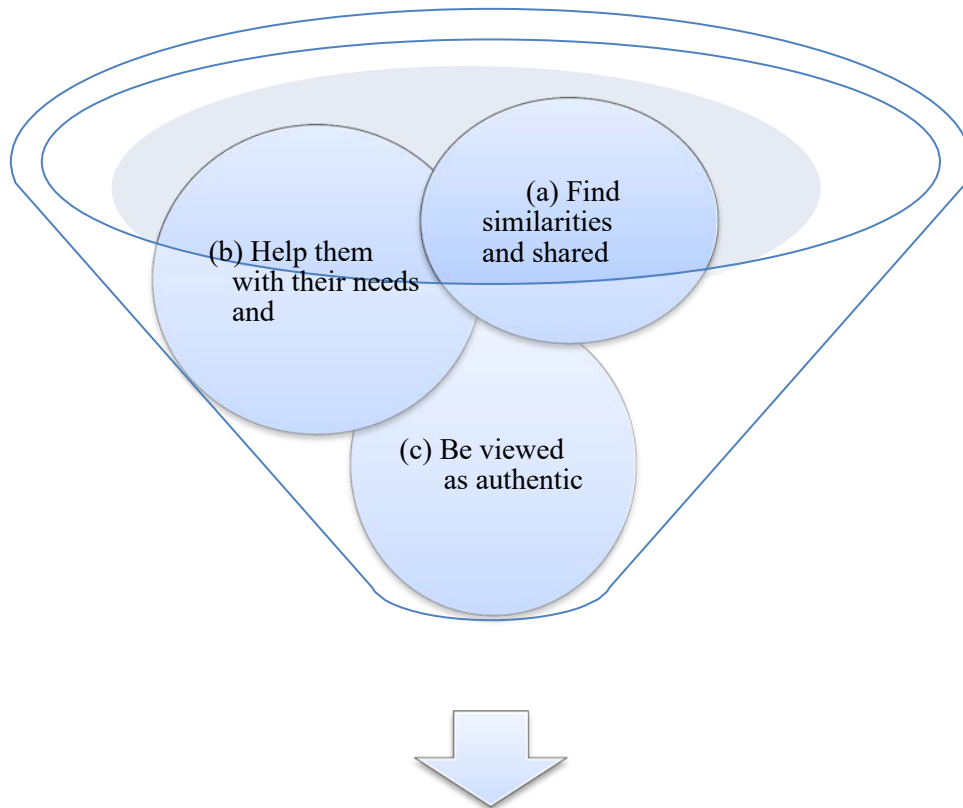
1. Find similarities and shared interests with their students.
2. Help students with issues and problems.
3. Be viewed as authentic in the students' eyes.

Finding Similarities and Shared Interests

Many teachers shared personal anecdotes that exemplified a great desire to find common ground with their students, based on their personal interests and values. For example, one teacher noted, "I think of the word 'communal,' or things that we have in common are really important because we (teachers and students) have a lot in common. I find that we're a lot more similar than we think". Common ground is sometimes obvious to find, as is illustrated an invaluable link with the student and his home.

Sometimes teachers drew upon their own emotional experiences growing up and made connections that way. For example, one teacher noted that he could readily identify with students who were at-risk to harm themselves, stating, "I was suicidal when I was a teenager. I never actually attempted suicide, but I was there. I looked it in the eye more than once."

One teacher thought that there were benefits to being similar in age to the students, as it made connecting with them much more natural. Another teacher stated that finding common hobbies or shared interests presented an invaluable opportunity to connect with students, particularly those deemed at-risk. This participant provided one such example of how sharing a seemingly extraneous pastime contributes significantly to connecting the student with academics. Shared interests seemed to provide the impetus for clubs being formed in schools. In the teachers' eyes, these clubs seemed to provide highly effective ways to link teachers and students. Participants cited examples of starting hip hop and moccasin clubs as examples of how in one teacher's example of how shared culture and language provided clubs connected students with teachers. The participants shared many examples of effective, less formalized strategies to connect with students.

(a) Find similarities and shared

(b) Help them with their needs and

(c) Be viewed as authentic

Keys to Connecting with Students

Figure 2. Participants' Connecting Methods

To summarize, each of the participants shared numerous ways in which they connected with students by finding similarities and shared interests. These included finding similarities in culture and language, age, personal and emotional hardships, hobbies, clubs, humour, and popular culture. Although each of the participants found different ways to connect with students, there was a unanimous consensus that to be effective in the classroom, teachers benefited greatly by finding similarities and shared interests with their students.

Helping Students with Their Needs and Wants

Although there was a consensus among all of the teacher participants about the advantages of finding similarities and shared interests with their students, all agreed that this was not always possible. In one of the earlier think tank sessions, teachers were rapidly exchanging how they used similar interests as a means to connect with students viewed as at-risk, when one teacher quietly noted, "I'm thinking about kids that I don't have a lot in common with which I have a few of, like the real at-risk kids, I don't have a lot in common with like I don't hang out

downtown and do all the things they do, but I find that one of the things I do to connect is just helping them out."

This comment seemed to swing the focus of the conversation from connecting by finding shared interests with the students to connecting by finding ways to help students. A conversation suddenly ensued about the differences in needs that all students had and the best ways to address these concerns. One teacher strongly felt that educators needed to assist students in any way they could, even if it meant providing more assistance to some than others. This teacher stated, "That's what we call equity over equality." Later, a teacher noted, "Yeah, you have provided a need that you are able to give. It is something that is negotiable; this is not a non-negotiable." Another participant added, "I think meeting their hierarchy of needs, you know like finding out if there are certain things missing from their day to day life that are integral to their day to day life, whether its food or having a sympathetic ear or a place or a person they perceive to be safe. Just dealing with those day to day needs." Another teacher offered that different students came to school with different forms of capital and that teachers needed to be cognizant of this.

"I think what you're saying is very similar to the idea of capital. Everyone has certain capital that they have; whether it's economic, social or socioeconomic, or all of these things and but we are as teachers we are sort of told that we have to teach to a standard, right? Not everybody comes from the same background; not everybody has the same headstart, so we have to take that into account when we teach."

All teachers indicated that they had helped students in the past. Many of these examples involved assisting students when socioeconomic imbalances were involved. One teacher expressed the delicate nature of providing such assistance, especially as these students got older.

Kids are extremely astute when it comes to those things, and then we retroactively try and fight against those things, so things like including a food program in the school or dresses and tuxes for grads, or after school tutoring for people whose parents aren't active in their education, so I think we are quite proactive at excluding some of those practices that create some of those imbalances called the cost of things. But also I think that we manage to make things a level playing field by encouraging the best possible community we could create.

Interestingly, one teacher noted that one way to help students, especially those who often found themselves in distress, was to "not sweat the small stuff." When asked by a second think tank member what the first teacher meant by that, the teacher responded, "I'm not going to sweat the small stuff, because (a particular student) has big issues beyond the classroom really, and I don't want to stress her out, you know." The teacher who asked for clarification then stated, "I love that." The first teacher then added, "I found that keeping them in class, and not kicking them out if they get a bit disruptive, so they can leave and cause more troubles, I'm trying to keep them here and returning day after day."

Sometimes, teachers helped by facilitating connections for students with adults outside of the classroom who could assist in areas where the teacher could not help, such as access to school administrators or external social agencies. One teacher stated that students often needed assistance with issues that occurred outside of the walls of the school, and teachers needed to help with those concerns. This teacher stated, "I mean asking them with what bus they need to get home, or could you call my social worker – sure I'll call your social worker."

While the think tank participants recognized the value in assisting students with personal, social, or socioeconomic issues that often had origins outside of the school, teachers focused much of the discussion on how to best help facilitate learning inside the classroom. As one teacher noted, "Every kid is different. We got to teach a class of 25 kids, and we have to teach them all the same material. They don't all run the same, and I get that." One teacher questioned whether or not a very small minority of students with significant special needs still required specialized attention that the regular classroom teacher was not equipped to address, recalling two particular students when he noted, "She rarely can put sentences together; she spends most of her time in the hallway and sings the same song every day. There is another student who has a bike, who rides the bike from one end of the school to the other and then the Educational Assistant (E.A) pushes her back, and that happens every day at a certain time."

Despite some apparently noteworthy differences in each student, all teachers spoke about taking efforts to make the curriculum accessible to all of their students, regardless of their skill-sets. One teacher bluntly stated that to do this, sometimes, "You have to collapse curriculum area walls", noting that the teacher felt that not every facet of the curriculum could possibly be covered. Therefore, the teacher thought that it was her duty to occasionally select and highlight the most important components of the curriculum, rather than do a poor job

attempting to cover all of it.

Another teacher noted the importance of students, "getting a bit of a say in what we do, whether it's democratically voting on things, or accessing the curriculum in ways that are more meaningful to them." Another teacher offered, "content is obviously important, right, we do have to do curricular, but I think we also look at people as individuals."

There were some strategies that teachers shared in dealing with these challenges. One teacher emphasized the importance of creating the right environment, saying, "It's all about having a positive learning environment. Often you need to have trust with the students before they trust you enough to kind of let you into work with them."

According to the participants, setting up classrooms like this was easier said than done, but was well worth the effort. One teacher remarked, "It's a lot of prep. But I don't mind it. I love what I am doing, and I hope I can keep on as well, but it is a lot of work. You do improve on it every year I'm improving on it and trying to, that's my goal to get it more interesting. But the first year, it was brutal."

In summary, the participants noted many challenges they faced when working with high school students. These challenges included treating students equitably, responding to students' social needs, dealing with academic deficits while catering to multiple intelligences, and accommodating individual needs without creating excessive dependency. Although these challenges appeared daunting, my overall impression was that the participants in this think tank seemed confident that they could effectively respond to most of these difficulties.

The teachers provided several examples where they attempted to meet sociological and socioeconomic needs through small, individual actions. The teachers seemed sensitive to the negative effects of socioeconomic imbalances and the dire consequences of not responding to them. If students needed money, they provided examples of loaning money and finding grants. If students needed food, they provided examples of their involvement in breakfast and lunch programs, and even baking bread. If students required shelter or other primary needs, they provided examples of contacting social workers on behalf of the students in order to ensure these needs were being met. These solutions, although consistent with expectations woven into provincial, divisional, and school policy, were personally initiated by high school classroom teachers.

An Economic Response to Sociological, Socioeconomic, and Capital Deficits?

As previously noted, deficiencies in capital were considered to be prominent reasons for dropping out of high school. Bourdieu (1998) believed that parents from working-class families were less likely to cultivate this type of capital in their children compared to middle and upper-class families. The teachers in the think tank sessions provided several examples of ways they attempted to identify and appreciate the cultural capital that students came with, and the ways they sought out to enhance the various forms of capital crucial for school success.

The teachers shared many examples of building bridges between home and school by attempting to find commonalities through popular culture. The participants thought of other effective, less formalized strategies to connect with students by these means. Based on the review of think tank sessions, it appears that the teachers in the think tank responded to the multitude of socioeconomically rooted problems with an economic response of their own. In simple terms, when teachers saw a need that they could assist with, they provided it. The motivation for the teachers was that, by assisting with these needs, students were more likely to attend and be successful in school. The support that teachers provided seemed to be incentives for students to attend. Levitt and Dubner (2005) contended that incentives were the root of economics. In this way, their actions seemed to draw parallels with the economic approach that Levitt and Dubner (2005) described. I want to be careful not to force an unnatural correlation between the compassionate folk narrative that the participants provided with something as impersonal as the subject of incentives. The teachers in the study never referred to their help and support as forms of incentives, and their actions were compassionate responses, not economic ones. Having said that, I strongly believe that their supportive responses were very powerful incentives for their students. Therefore, an examination of some of these parallels between what the teachers did and what the economic literature says is worthy of exploration. Levitt and Dubner (2005) posited that "Incentives are the cornerstone of modern life" (p.11), and, "Economics is, at root, the study of incentives: how people get what they want, or need, especially when other people want or need the same thing" (p.16). The first theme of connecting with students by helping them with their needs and wants seemed to be the highest priority for the teachers in the think tank. Levitt and Dubner (2005) defined incentives as "simply a means of urging people to do more of a good thing, and less of a bad thing" (p.17). The teachers indicated that these acts of helping students often resulted in better

attendance and performance, and reduced behavioural issues and truancy. Levitt and Dubner (2005) stated that "There are three basic flavors of incentive: economic, social, and moral" (p.17). While economic incentives were strong, "people also respond to moral incentives (they don't want to do something they consider wrong) and social incentives (they don't want to be seen by others as doing something wrong)" (Levitt & Dubner, pp.17-18).
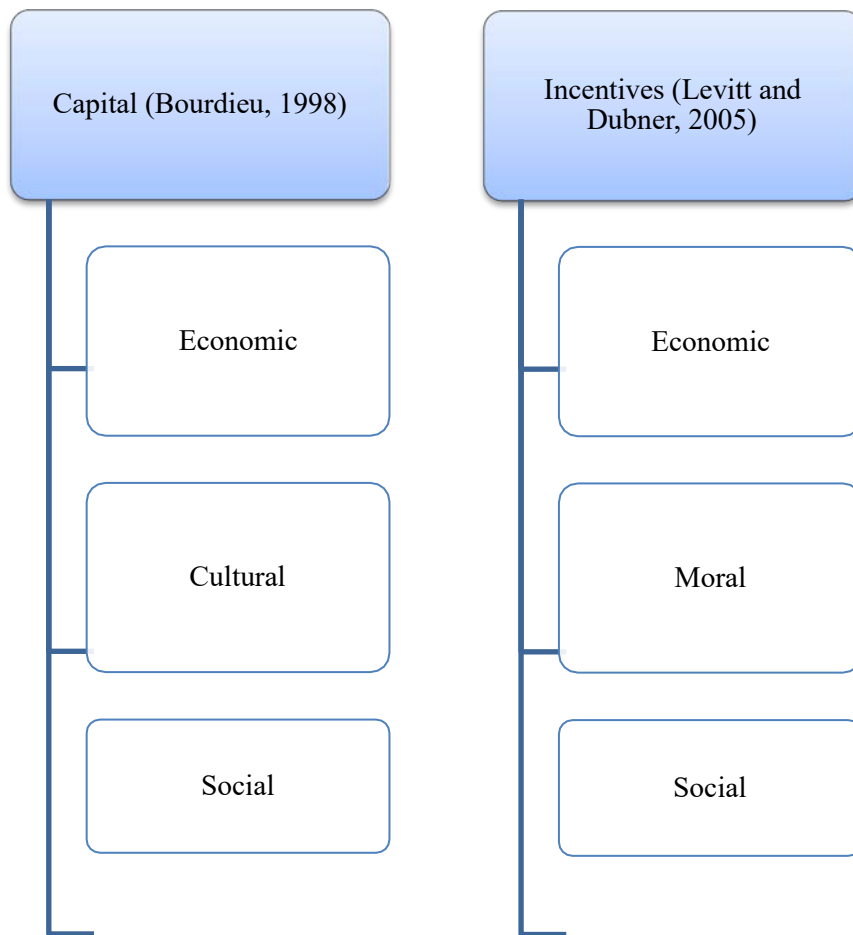
Figure 3. Three Forms of Capital vs. Three Types of Incentives

The incentives that the teachers described were, at times, personal, at times, social, at times academic, and at times economical in nature. Levitt and Dubner (2005) explained, "Morality, it could be argued, represents the way that people would like the world to work – whereas economics represents how it actually does work" (p.11). Although several teachers indicated strong ethical and moral reasons for entering the teaching profession (one teacher offered, "We went into this profession because we wanted to help you."), they often knowingly or unwittingly approached problems with students from an economic perspective of finding

the appropriate incentives.

Based upon the similarities above between Levitt and Dubner's (2005) writings on economics and the comments made by teachers in the think tank, it seems reasonable to contend that high school teachers employed incentives to keep adolescents in school. In this way, one might argue that socioeconomic issues of high school students elicit economic responses from high school teachers. In my literature review, I highlighted Bourdieu's (1986) assertion that modern education reproduces inequalities, due to the perception of an unfair accumulation of capital by some and not others. Capital comes in the forms of economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1998). When it came to incentives, Levitt and Dubner (2005) stated that "There are three basic flavors of incentive: economic, social, and moral" (p.17). Can it be argued that teachers consciously or intuitively respond to deficiencies in economic, cultural, and social capital with economic, social, and moral incentives (see Figure 4.2)? It is a compelling possibility, to say the least.

Still, the teachers stated that connecting with students meant more than just helping students; it also meant finding similarities, shared interests, and being viewed as authentic. Therefore, while the economic response of providing students with incentives may be a key component of the teacher response to dealing with struggling students, it only provided one component of the complete approach that the teachers have chosen to take.

The Importance of Being Authentic

A key component of making connections that were shared by many teachers in different ways was the importance of being viewed as authentic in the students' eyes. One teacher offered that students need to know that connecting was often "a matter of building that trust, that authentic trust, then you can move on from there." Another teacher commented, "And you're not just playing the game – they understand when you're being authentic or not." Another teacher offered a similar perspective.

> [Teachers need to] be real, that's the thing. If you could be emotionally open and emotionally honest, the kids will love you, they will come to you and they will trust you.

> Being emotionally open, being emotionally connected inside an institution of any kind is very difficult and it's very difficult in a school. For example, more than one participant described authenticity as being honest with the students when having conversations with them.

One participant described the importance of honesty, stating, "I think honesty is very important, that's my philosophy. To be as honest as I can and as human as I can." One participant described honesty as, "Opening yourself up to them as much as you can, and kind of being honest with them is important. If you don't give anything up of yourself, they won't give anything up of themselves." Another teacher commented on the significance of being viewed as "human" and described what that meant.

> It's showing people that I'm a little more human. I always tell the kids, "Listen, we're all human, teachers are not out there to ruin your life, trust me. We went into this profession because we wanted to help you. We actually decided a long time ago that maybe we had something that we could pass along and make a change, not just because we wanted just to collect a paycheque and make your lives miserable.

> Several participants noted the importance of listening to students when they spoke. Although the teachers acknowledged that being "real" meant understanding who they were and how they viewed reality, it was crucial to also listen to students in order to grasp their own subjective reality. One teacher commented, "Listening to understand is a part of what I do, but listening to be with the speaker is number one. Listening to be with the speaker. So, when someone is with you, try to be with them."

According to all participants, connecting with students is an arduous but essential element of keeping students in school and ultimately graduating. All the participants acknowledged that making connections and developing relationships with students was not something that happened overnight. Still, the participants reported that by taking the time to connect by finding similarities and shared interests, helping students with their needs and wants, or being viewed as authentic, the odds of students completing high school increased greatly, especially for those deemed at-risk. As one teacher finished describing all of the time, efforts and strategies he had made to connect with one particularly challenging student over several years to help him graduate, he proudly exclaimed, "This is the first kid in 21 years that brought me an apple. Only kid to ever bring me an apple, and again, it's being human, being honest and being funny."

The teachers stressed that helping students and finding similarities and shared interests were two important parts of connecting with students, but they also emphasized the importance of being viewed as authentic in the students' eyes. Authenticity could be established by having honest conversations with them. These honest conversations enabled students to view teachers

as "human." This required considerable effort on the part of the teacher. One teacher noted that to be viewed as authentic, one had to, "Dig deep into who you are and be who you are with courage, sensitivity, to passion, and a sense of humour. So, dig deep into who you are, with courage, sensitivity, compassion, don't give up. Don't be cynical, roll with the punches, have a sense humour." The participants thought that listening to students was helpful so that teachers could grasp the students' subjective reality. The participants reported that it took time to be viewed as authentic, but if successful, they thought that the odds of students deemed at-risk completing high school increased greatly.

An alignment between the teachers' need to be authentic and Gladwell's (2013) "Principle of Legitimacy"

Many thoughts expressed by the teachers suggested that connecting with students was much more than a matter of simply finding the appropriate incentives for the students and then providing them. Rather, the teachers' repeated highlighting of authenticity aligned more aptly with Gladwell's (2013) emphasis on the "Principle of Legitimacy," which he discussed in his book, *David and Goliath*. Gladwell (2013) posited that those in positions of authority need to keep this principle in mind at all times, stating, "The powerful have to worry about how others think of them – that those who give orders are acutely vulnerable to the opinions of those they are ordering about" (p.217). He described this principle as having three main components.

> This is called the "principle of legitimacy," and legitimacy is based on three things. First of all, the people who are asked to obey authority have to feel like they have a voice – that if they speak up, they will be heard. Second, the law has to be predictable. There has to be a reasonable expectation that the rules tomorrow are going to be roughly the same as the rules today. And third, the authority has to be fair. It can't treat one group differently from another" (p. 208).

Let us review Gladwell's three components of legitimacy, and compare them to some of the responses of teachers in the think tank. First, Gladwell (2013) noted, "The people who are asked to obey authority have to feel like they have a voice – that if they speak up, they will be heard (p.208)." Several participants stressed the importance of listening to students when they spoke. One teacher stated, "Listening to understand is a part of what I do, but listening to be with the speaker is number one. Listening to be with the speaker. So, when someone is with you, try to be with them." Many teachers emphasized the importance of creating opportunities to listen to students.

Gladwell's (2013) statement and the teachers' comments both stressed the importance

of allowing students the opportunity to have a voice and demonstrated that their voices would not only be heard but be honoured. Both responses suggested that teachers had to do more than just listen. As the authority figures in their classrooms, they needed to purposefully send the message to students that their voices would be honoured.

Gladwell (2013) also stated that the principle of legitimacy required predictability, saying, "There has to be a reasonable expectation that the rules tomorrow are going to be roughly the same as the rules today (p.208). In this regard, some teachers responded that predictability was a challenge for students because in the high school model, the "rules of engagement" suddenly changed from grade 8 to grade 9. They noted that the shift in the structure of the school day meant a reduction in personal student-teacher contact time. The participants noted this shift was confusing for some students, who were accustomed to having contact with only a few teachers during the school day. Other teachers shared that the shift in individual student-teacher contact made an enormous difference in the ability to connect in high school. The teachers then offered strategies they thought were helpful to counteract this shift from what students were accustomed to in the school structure and still respond to the variety of student skill-sets.

In the think tank, the teachers did not seem to think that predictability meant every teacher using the same method of instruction in every class. The teachers also were skeptical of any proposed "one size fits all" educational approaches. Instead, the teachers seemed to address issues surrounding predictability by trying to be dependable and reliable for their students. They noted the many "ups and downs" that struggling students often needed to contend with, and how they, as teachers, could always be depended upon to help them through these challenges.

According to Gladwell (2013), the third component of the "Principle of Legitimacy" was that authority figures have to be viewed as *fair*. Gladwell (2013) stated, "It can't treat one group differently from another" (p. 208). In the literature review, it seemed that the most contentious issue that I could find centered around the variety of understandings of the word, "fair," especially when applied to the modern-day school system

It appears as though this small four-letter word has the power to evoke very polarizing and combative interpretations, responses and emotions. Within the context of this study, the

teachers seemed to align their understanding of the word "fair" with terms like "equity" and "inclusive."

A further review of some of the exchanges in the think tank sessions bears repeating, as it provides evidence of this alignment. When one teacher asserted that teachers needed to assist students any way they could, even if it meant providing more assistance to some than others, another teacher remarked, "That's what we call equity over equality." Later, a teacher noted, "Yeah, you have provided a need that you are able to give. It is something that is negotiable; this is not a non-negotiable." A third teacher said, "I think meeting their hierarchy of needs, you know like finding out if there are certain things missing from their day to day life that are integral to their day to day life, whether its food or having a sympathetic ear or a place or a person they perceive to be safe – just dealing with those day to day needs." Another teacher offered that different students came to school with different forms of capital and that teachers needed to be cognizant of this.

The teachers provided many examples of trying to level the playing field in terms of capital and its various forms. Many of these examples involved assisting with incidents when socioeconomic imbalances were involved.

It seemed as though the teachers were careful not to underestimate the "extremely astute" nature of their students, and misinterpret their need for assistance as a deficiency in capital. Although Bourdieu (1998) believed that parents from working-class families were less likely to cultivate the type of capital that was valued in schools, he still posited that everyone received some form of capital from his or her parents. As stated earlier, the teachers provided several examples of the ways they attempted to identify and appreciate the cultural capital of their students, and the ways they sought out to enhance the cultural capital crucial for school success. As a result, the teachers did not want to make any false assumptions about the value of the capital their students came with, and create classroom environments that fostered unnecessary dependency in adolescents on the verge of adulthood. They indicated this by sharing concerns as to whether providing too much assistance was detrimental to students. Based on the responses of the teachers in the think tank, it appears that teachers are sensitive to the many issues revolving around fairness, equity, equality, inclusion, and meritocracy. As a result of this awareness, the participants indicated the need for teachers to carefully navigate their way with individual students and the situations they found themselves in.

CONNECTIONS = INCENTIVES + AUTHENTICITY

The first theme of this study stated that the participants strived to connect with students by (a) finding similarities and shared interests, (b) helping them with their needs and wants, and (c) being viewed as authentic. Based on an analysis of the literature review and the participants' responses, it seems that the teachers relied on strategies that blended together Levitt and Dubner's (2005) position with Gladwell's (2013) stance. That is, in order to get people to do "more of a good thing, and less of a bad thing" (Levitt & Dubner, 2005, p.17) people in authority (i.e., the teachers) simply needed to find and provide the suitable incentives for people they had authority over (i.e., the students). Additionally, teachers also needed to be mindful of Gladwell's (2013) "Principle of Legitimacy" and did so by finding numerous ways to be viewed as authentic in the eyes of the students. It seems reasonable to assume that the most effective response to the multitude of socioeconomic problems that get in the way of high school completion is the creative alchemy of teacher authenticity and teacher assistance. If we wish to construct this relationship between incentives and authenticity into a useful algorithm, then perhaps we could state that *Connections = Incentives + Authenticity*, or *C=I +A*.

INCENTIVES
Economic Response
= Economic, social,
and moral
incentives Levitt
and Dubner, 2005).

AUTHENTICITY
Principle of
Legitimacy =
Students have a
voice, teacher is
predictable and fair
(Gladwell, 2013).

CONNECTIONS
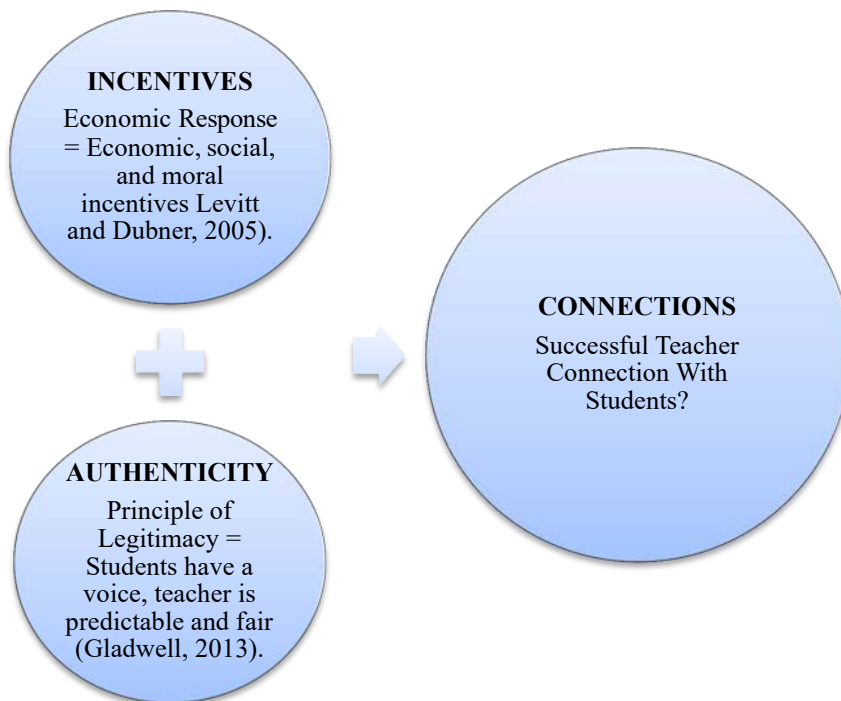Successful Teacher
Connection With
Students?

Figure 4. Algorithm for Success: CONNECTION=INCENTIVES+AUTHENTICITY (C=I+A)?

Earlier in this paper, causes of high school drop-out were largely explored from a

sociological perspective (Harden, D'Onofrio, Van Hulle, Turkheimer, Rodgers, Waldman, & Lahey, 2009; Wotherspoon, 2009, Bourdieu, 1986), Based on the teachers' responses, it seemed as though their solution to these types of behaviours resembled a partially economic response. Although this part economic, part authentic response does not incorporate all of the nuances associated with the larger socioeconomic issue of disparities in capital, the literature review suggests that itis not necessary to do so to have positive effects. Levy (2010) once noted that this position when describing the "intervention-attribution fallacy" (p.104), stating that a "solution to a problem does not inherently point to its etiology." The corollary of Levy's reasoning is that solutions to problems do not necessarily need to be directly linked to the cause of the problem. High school classroom teachers certainly were not the cause of all of the socioeconomic incongruities in the populace, but they can still attempt to respond to these issues in their classrooms effectively.

Therefore, the marriage of providing assistance and being viewed as authentic seems to be appropriate, albeit demanding, union. It should be noted that the teachers never used the word *incentive* in the sessions, they used the words *help* or *support*, and they used it often. I assert that the term *providing incentives* is a colder and more calculated phrase while *providing help* infers a much more caring, compassionate, empathetic, and accurate phrase to describe the actions and motivations of the teachers. In short, I believe that my study supported the notion that incentives can be used successfully in the classroom by high school teachers, as long as they legitimately come in the form of "help," and the efforts are viewed by the students as authentic as the teachers who provide them.

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