

Teacher-Student Connections in the Elementary School

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study, conducted in 2018, was to invite Manitoba elementary school classroom teachers into a think tank and ask them what they believe they do to connect with students in their classroom. I found that the elementary school classroom teachers who participated in the study believed that connecting with their students was a very important component of their job. The participants strived to find creative ways to connect with students by:

1. Attempting to meet students' needs;
2. Empowering students to express themselves and discover their own interests;
3. Incorporating what they learned from students into their daily interactions and the curricula; and
4. Creating opportunities for shared experiences.

The study concludes that elementary teacher practices for teacher-student connection align with Harari's (2014) emphasis on establishing 'shared' or 'collective imagination.'

Keywords: Elementary, Teachers, Students, Connection, Inclusion, Think Tank

INTRODUCTION

It appears that a vital component of school success for schoolchildren is whether or not they make positive connections with their teachers and schools (Davis, 2001). Students who "both interpersonally and institutionally [connected with teachers] had higher grades and graduation rates" (Nasir, Jones, & McLaughlin, p.1755). 2011). Strong relationships with teachers can assist students in feeling safer in their schools and help in forming positive connections with their classmates (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). While positive teacher-student relationships benefit students of all ages, these connections seem most critical for children first entering the school system (Baker, 2006; Davis, 2001).

According to Nasir, Jones, and McLaughlin (2011), "schools play an important role in structuring experiences of connection or disconnection for students" (p.1755). Schaps, Battistich, and Solomon contend that when combined with "high expectations...and challenging, engaging opportunities to learn", the "priority on community building in schools provides a

powerful focus for improving educational practice” (p.189). The question that needs to be asked is, how can school systems assist in facilitating teachers in creating these crucial relationships with their young learners? The purpose of this study was to seek out Manitoba elementary school classroom teachers and invite them to participate in a think tank designed to better understand what they believe they do to connect with young children in their classroom successfully.

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to seek out Manitoba elementary school classroom teachers and invite them to participate in a think tank designed to better understand what they believe they do to connect with young children in their classroom successfully. Many elementary teachers have successfully incorporated inclusive practices by creatively connecting [i.e., “bring together or into contact so that a real or notional link is established” (Oxford, 2017)] with children who are at risk for becoming disengaged in school at a very young age. Elementary teachers are familiar with the nuances and intricacies of the elementary school system, and they are the first educators to have daily interactions with children, including those who are at risk of dropping out one day. This study hoped to capture these teachers’ voices in order to better understand what makes them successful at connecting with young children and help them become engaged in their education. The study attempted to do this by establishing an elementary school teacher think tank.

Think Tank

There appear to be numerous benefits in gathering teachers together into a group think tank. Reimer (2014) shared these thoughts when conducting a similar study with high school teachers: Using a think tank model, I hoped to encapsulate some of the concepts, methods, and practices these teachers successfully incorporate into their classrooms to help connect with young students. I hoped that the classroom teachers participating in the study might view themselves as sources of ideas and expertise (p.65).

First, I received approval from the ethical review board at the University of Winnipeg to conduct this study. I needed to recruit teachers for my study. In order to recruit these teachers, I was required to receive permission from a Manitoba school division in which I planned to conduct the research.

Upon receiving divisional approval, the Superintendent's office forwarded my research proposal to elementary school principals in the division. I also proceeded to personally contact the principals of several elementary schools in the division by email and telephone. Principals who agreed to allow their teachers to participate signed a consent form. All teachers from the school's staff were invited by the principal to participate in the study. Participation in the study was optional. Teachers who were interested in participating were invited to contact me. Eight teachers from two elementary schools indicated an interest in participating in the study.

Participants

The teacher participants (n=8) were currently teaching in one of two elementary schools in the same school division. Still, their backgrounds varied in a number of ways. Seven of the teacher participants were female, and 1 was male. Four of the teachers indicated that they were between 20 to 29 years old, two indicated they were between 30 to 39 years old, one indicated that they were 40 to 49, and one indicated that they were over 50 years old. Three participants had taught in Manitoba for less than five years, four had taught between 5 and 10 years, and one participant had taught for between 21-30 years. All participants held the compulsory Bachelor of Education diploma, four participants had a Bachelor of Arts diploma, and five participants had completed their Post Baccalaureate Diploma in Education (PBDE).

Collectively, the teachers all taught academic classrooms from grades 1 to 6. All had experience teaching in multi-age classrooms, and one participant indicated (s)he had some experience teaching physical education. One participant taught in their school's French Immersion Program, and one participant indicated experience in Learning Support.

Data Collection and Analysis

Six teachers from one school agreed to meet collectively for one think tank session. Two teachers preferred to meet individually with me to share their thoughts on making positive teacher-student connections. All three meetings were audiotaped, and transcripts of the sessions were made. My research assistant and I independently reviewed these transcripts. Upon completion of this independent review, we met and eventually came to a consensus on several themes that emerged from the transcripts. I then sent these themes to the participants via email. No participant indicated disagreement with the themes. I completed a report of my findings, which I sent to each participant for review. Based on their feedback, I made some minor edits that focused on

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minor grammatical issues. Once this was completed, I then sent the final report to each of the eight participants.

Table 1 Teacher Participant Information (n=8)

Gender	Age (years)	Teaching Experience (years)	Subjects/Areas Taught	Post-Secondary Education (Degrees)
M (1)	20 to 29 (4)	Less than 5 (3)	Physical Education	Bachelor Education (8)
F (7)	30 to 39 (2)	5 to 10 (4)	Grades 1-6 Academics	Bachelor Arts (4)
	40 to 49 (1)	21-30 (1)	Multi-Age classrooms	PBDE (5)
	over 50 (1)		French Immersion	
			Learning Support	

Next, I analyzed one of the emergent themes of this study. While I insert many quotations from participants, please note that I occasionally removed terms such as “like” or “um,” or words they repeated as they spoke. This was done to benefit the reader of this study.

Findings

One of the themes that emerged from this study was that the participants strived to find creative ways to connect with students by; i.) Attempting to meet students’ needs; ii.) Empowering students to express themselves and discover their interests; iii.) Incorporating what they learned from students into their daily interactions and the curricula; and iv.) Creating opportunities for shared experiences.

Attempting to Meet Students’ Needs

One teacher was careful to differentiate how connections were different with friends compared to students, noting, “it is less reciprocated in the classroom, especially with the younger kids. Your connection to them might not necessarily be the same as them to you, just because of the role that you have. You’re their teacher; you’re their guide; you’re their supporter.” Therefore, connecting with young learners is less about reciprocity and more about meeting the needs of the child.

When I asked if connecting to students was an important component of their job, teachers unanimously answered “yes.” One teacher noted, “You need to be the one that (the student)

remembers. It's like the same thing they say (they will) all remember a bit of what you told them, a little bit about what you had them do, but they'll never forget the way you made them feel." Another teacher stated, "I think that's the way you feel the most proud is when you see a kid and they are grown up and they want to come over and chat with you and talk to you and joke around you. That's the best feeling."

One teacher seemed to be excited to speak with her colleagues about the importance of making connections, as it was an overlooked yet important topic. The teacher stated, "To be totally honest - connections - we know are so important for children to be engaged at school. I feel like we don't do a very good job of talking about that. You know, we talk about literacy, we talk about math, we talk about science, and French and social. But, we don't really [talk] about ways to connect with children."

Teachers in the think tank tended to agree that the topic of making connections was not commonly spoken about, but was important. One teacher noted that positively connecting with others had universal benefits:

That's true in high level business too. It's true in universities; it's true in high schools, it's true in the early years. Doing things is actually pretty easy. The hardest part is getting two people or three people or thirty people to get together and work together on something. If you can make that happen and make it seem easy and fun, then it's like, 'well why wouldn't I go there . . . these are my favorite people'. People generally want to be in places where their favorite people are at." You know, where they feel pretty good about themselves.

One teacher stated that it was crucial to create an atmosphere in the classroom, "where they feel pretty good about themselves. If you can do that, then the multiplication table, the alphabet, social, storytelling, lining up for the gym - those things actually are not that hard."

General creativity strategies. Teachers shared some general ideas for creatively connecting with young students. One teacher stated, "The first word that comes to my mind is just listen, because the little kids will tell you everything." Another teacher added, "Listen, they will tell you about some toy they love." One participant stressed the importance of meeting students where they are at, noting, "I like to get down to their level." One teacher mentioned that little remarks like, "commenting on their clothes or their glasses, just like picking out one personal

little thing and then go on from there” can go a long way in shaping the course of a student’s day. The accumulation of these seemingly simple efforts can add up to positive results. As one teacher noted, “I’m saying to them (that) I’m honouring their ideas, I’m honouring their questions. I am saying, ‘You are worth it, like, you are important, what you have to say is important, let me help you find these answers.’”

Empowering Students to Express themselves and discover their interests

Giving young children power. Some teachers in the study talked about the importance of empowering their young students. One teacher stated,

(it) is giving them power...their own power to feel successful, to find success. When kids feel like they’re successful, they’re generating their own ideas and they’re propelling their own research projects or inquiry. They are going to come to school because they don’t want to miss an opportunity to learn more about what they are excited to learn about. The teacher later added, “You know, kids don’t get a lot of power. They are little super heroes.

One teacher shared,

You go into a divisional classroom and the power is all on the teacher. You see it in the way that the classroom is designed. You see it in the way that the children are interacting with each other and the teacher. I wanted to get away with all that because the children come in with so much understanding and knowledge about the world around them. [They have] so many experiences that have informed them to create these beings that can survive on their own without their Mommy and Daddy. That’s powerful; they have the power to come up with their own ideas; they have the power to ask questions; they have the power to just challenge me.

‘Invisibility’ is not a power children want in elementary school. One teacher noticed a difference when children do not feel empowered when a student joined the classroom a few months into the school year. The teacher noted, “I had a little boy that came into our classroom from a different school. And he came in . . . the first week of December. I could see ...how unpowerful he feels. And how his self-efficacy has not been supported and pushed and nurtured. He hasn’t been nurtured in the classroom in ways that I nurture my kids in the classroom.” Then, the teacher added, “He was like a phone that wasn’t charged.”

The teacher later shared, “I wondered if other kids would think that he might be feeling like an invisible boy because he is more quiet; he is less self-confident.” As a result, she creatively found a book to read aloud in the classroom titled “The Invisible Boy” (Ludwig &

Barton, 2013). This exercise had a profound effect on many young learners in her classroom. She stated, “I think some of [my students] did see him as, ‘Oh, I wonder if he feels like the Invisible boy and how can we help him not feel that way?’ That’s pretty powerful...We talked about it afterward and the children were like, “Wow, that must have been really hard for that boy to feel that way.” And I’ve noticed that there are some kids outside at recess who aren’t in our class, that are just walking around alone, and I wonder . . . And they say, ‘I wonder if that boy feels invisible?’ So, for the children . . . going up and saying, “Hey, you want to come play with us?”

One teacher stated the inclusive effects of playing with classmates, saying, “I just looked at a study this morning that talked about if you asked kids with special needs, ‘What is the number one thing that they want in a school to be inclusive?’ And they said, playtime. The number one (priority) is to have playtime with others.”

Incorporating what they learned from students into their daily interactions and the curricula

Elementary teachers incorporate what they learned from students into their daily interactions and the curricula. Teachers noted the importance of connecting their students to the curriculum wherever possible. One teacher stated, “Well, it’s a lot of me listening to the children and picking out things that I feel like they’re interested in but, they could also be related to the curriculum that we need to cover.” One teacher shared, “I’m interested in where they are coming from, like who their family members are, who do they live with, where do they get to go on vacation, [and] what do they like? Getting to know all those little details, so that later on if I am doing a lesson or inquiries, I can pepper in their interests and their strengths into those learning opportunities.” One teacher noted, “Whatever they’re interested in, I can find ways of tying into the curriculum in authentic ways for the children. Some days they probably don’t even think they are learning much because they are just doing, doing, doing, and investigating and wondering, writing down lists, playing, all sorts of things. Most of my curriculum [can be done through] inquiry”.

Being students’ scribes. Teachers emphasized the importance of students having the opportunity to express themselves. This can be difficult when working with young children who likely have limited writing skills. This makes the use of photographs even more valuable. One teacher shared,

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I have a couple of students whose writing is not their thing and they don't want to do it... no matter how much I prompt them and how many things I say you can write about. They are still not into it, but as soon as I put down making their own photo albums - every child will have a certain amount of pictures as well, but - they are in that picture for sure. They are telling me what they are doing in that picture. So, now every time I have the picture, the munchkin sees herself in it and she won't stop talking. Then BOOM, five minutes [and] she's got something else written on her paper that says whatever she was doing in that picture.

Photographs are not the only creative method that the teachers used to produce the written word. They also shared how playing games and oral storytelling were effective means of producing written word, as long as teachers were prepared to act as their students' "scribes". One teacher proudly exclaimed, "We are big story tellers in my class. And I value unstructured-like play because that's where we get ideas from - and writing stories. The kids just write stories all the time."

One teacher shared that elementary teachers need to take advantage of the fact that young children are gifted at storytelling and play, sharing, "[Children] are story tellers. Even the grade ones, they were really good story tellers at the beginning of the year. Now they are starting to become writers, because they are taking their ideas from storytelling and play and putting them onto paper."

The teacher continued, "I was really interested in that when I transferred from kindergarten to grade one. Because kindergarten is a lot of just play and [I am] the documenter of writing down. That's also a connection, with the children in kindergarten, when I used to write down their stories. They're trusting me with their words."

One teacher described using a similar strategy as her young students played, outlining her approach in great detail.

I would watch them play. When I felt like they were ready or they had a coherent story that they kept replaying or reacting out. I'd go over and say, 'Hey, it looks like your story is kind of flushed out, do you want maybe tell me what you are doing? It looks like you were doing this and this'. And they would just start blabbering on, so we'd write it down. Constantly reading it back to them. The kids would often say, 'What is that word? What is that word?', because they are not used to an adult taking the time to sit with them and write down what they have to say. I don't know if they...haven't had the experience of it being important enough but, for me, it was important. So, I would be writing down and writing down and rereading it, rereading it and then I'd offer them and say, 'Hey, do you want to act out this story?' And so, they'd say, "Oh, okay!" So, we'd practice it and we

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acted out other stories as a practice. I'd read the story out loud first and then we'd celebrate like, 'Yay, thank you for sharing, thank you for reading the story'. Anyway, then ...it's time to act. So the actors would go off to the side and I'd start reading it and as they read, they acted out. Oh my goodness, after the first one, every single child wants to be a storyteller I would keep track to make sure I didn't miss anybody.

“Drawing” feedback. Several examples were shared by teachers demonstrating how they used the ability to convert photographs, storytelling, and play into written word. One teacher revealed how feedback from teachers did not always need to be in written form. This participant thought this approach was an excellent way to connect with young learners, and described the following practice.

One of the little tricks I know that I use is when they are writing in their journals. Sometimes kids are a little bit more introverted in some ways. [Providing feedback to what students have written is] a great way to respond to them, get to know them. When you respond [with] little comments... [you] make a connection. It shows that you've read [their journal entry], and (then you) make a goofy picture about something that they are writing about. Make a little picture and you make a little comment. You draw a little picture and you try to illustrate what they've said with your own little goofy picture. I do it all the time, because they know you've read their thing. You haven't been reading it to carve it apart with red ink.

When asked to provide an example of what 'drawn feedback' might look like, the teacher said, "Yes, you illustrate it with little sisters that went tobogganing...so, you draw a picture of them on the toboggan with their sisters and they are falling out of the toboggan and their toques are flying. You make little silly comments. Or, you every now and then say, 'Hey, I love the way you do this' or 'I really like this' and it just makes so much sense. I get university papers back and Profs do that to me and I tell you what - it feels good. It's a way that you are doing something together . . . you are going through together.

Creating Opportunities for Shared Experiences

Teachers create opportunities for shared experiences. One common topic that teachers all seemed to use to connect with young learners was creating shared experiences with their students. This was done through a variety of ways. One teacher spoke about how reading books to students had many benefits, saying, "Maybe the secret weapon of all time is reading to them." One teacher stated, "Always have a book on the go. Always have a book on the go with the kids."

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One teacher thought that reading to students was, “A great way to connect with kids. You can’t beat it.”

Sharing a book together. One teacher offered that, “A really good book that you are into and the kids are into. It is something that you do together and you can refer back to it. Then you are out somewhere and you start doing the voices from the book, and you are talking to them just on your own, and you go into another character, and you can just make them laugh. And there are some books that have a real good message. I think that’s a great thing.”

One teacher noted, “[R]eading a novel is a shared experience. You go through it together you read it together, and you are all thinking about it and you are all talking about it and you are all laughing. You are all going, ‘Oh, what’s happening?’ It’s that shared experience, and then we have something together. It’s hard to think of anything better than a book, because it’s got everything there. And if you get the right book and I think it is just a great way to share.”

I’ve got a handful of really great novels. You do all the voices and characters and you goof around and you play it up, and the kids when they read the book themselves realize that you are adlibbing a bunch of stuff right? But you make it sound more like a panic, and or you make the centipede sound more like a pompous fool. You just entertain them a little bit, that’s one way to catch them in.” When asked if watching movies together provided a similar experience to reading a book to students, one teacher hesitantly offered a lukewarm response, saying, “Movies can do that too. But movies...movies are fine and you can watch them every now and again.”

Teacher play with students. Creating time each day for young students to play was important to some of the teachers. One teacher answered a question about connecting with reluctant talkers with, “How do I connect with my non-verbal students? I think having play time every single day”. This teacher further added, “Because I can sit with the ones who don’t speak often, and we can probably play for a good half an hour and carry on a conversation through what we are doing.” One teacher stated that occasionally joining in on the play had many benefits. This teacher happily spoke about the shared experience created by playing with students whenever possible. The teacher said that this epiphany came when students were, “calling on me to come and interact with them. And this year, I have used (unstructured) time to connect, to play and connect. I do a lot of it at school.”

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When I asked participants what playing with students looked like, one teacher offered, “(We) are building Legos together”, and that the play took place, “absolutely on the floor.”

The teacher stated that it was enjoyable playing with students on the floor, the teacher said, “I guess (the students) can connect to the level that you are at. Maybe they are not getting it at home, so they see that you are putting time and you’re making a personal connection with them that way.”

One teacher offered that playing with students during recess time was an excellent way to connect with students, especially at the beginning of the school year. The teacher offered, “I’ll, for the first couple of weeks, as much as I can, I’ll go outside with the kids and play with them.”

This teacher typically went out to play with the students “during the first recess, because, I do need to take a break for lunch and eat. I used to be as a kid so scared of recess because it is so daunting, especially [in] grade one. This is the first time that they are out facing that bad world.”

The teacher added,

“My fear is that my little grade ones are going to be off in the playground lost and scared with no one to play with. And that is a terrible feeling, because I can help them in the classroom when there is all of them. But, then when they are all outside, it just seems a bit scarier. So, anyway, I tell them, ‘I’m going to be outside. Let’s play this. Let’s make a plan. So, we make a plan, and a lot of times. It’s typical hide and go seek (or) tag. But I want them to develop their creative thinking skills. So, we’ll start playing pirates, or Zombies, or whatever they come up with. I love acting and pretending and playing. The great thing is once they’ve kind of done that a number of times, then they are like ready to do it on their own”.

Shared Experiences and “Collective Imagination”

As stated earlier, teachers in the think tank provided many examples of how creating shared experiences with their students played a vital role in connecting with young learners. One teacher noted that reading books aloud to students was an excellent way to create a shared experience for the entire class. Another teacher spoke about the importance of playing with students in class and at recess was an excellent way to create connections through shared experiences. This approach seemed to connect well with Harari’s (2014) work which highlighted the power of shared or collective imagination as a means of connecting people. Harari (2014) noted that

human beings are so successful because they have the ability to collaborate by the millions because of a “mysterious glue” that has the capacity to connect us together. Harari (2014) further stated that collective imagination is the “mysterious glue that enables millions of humans to cooperate effectively” (Harari, 2017, para.1). Teachers in this study seemed to create shared experiences that focused on imaginative exercises (like novel reading and play) as their own “mysterious glue” to make connections with their students.

CONCLUSION

This study provided a small glimpse into what elementary school classroom teachers do to connect with students in their classroom. After completing this study, a number of recommendations focusing on making better teacher-student connections emerged. First, I recommend that universities place more time and emphasis on teaching creating connection skills to improve positive student-teacher relationships. Regarding teacher in-service professional development, I recommend that schools and school divisions also place more time and emphasis on professional development for teachers that focus on creative teacher-student connecting strategies.

I recommend that schools and school divisions seek out ways to arrange for teachers to meet together and share information about students and successful teaching strategies (including teacher-student connection strategies). Participants in this study seemed to find the think tank sessions to be worthwhile and enlightening and creating further opportunities for such collaboration is encouraged.

I recommend that further research be conducted that would have teachers from several school divisions participate, rather than teachers from only one division. It would be interesting to compare and contrast the perspectives of teachers from different divisions. Additionally, it might be interesting to gather together a collection of elementary, middle years, and high school teachers, and ask them the same question as I did. Policymakers, Superintendents, school administrators, and teachers could also gather together into think tanks. Parents and social agencies could also be added to these groupings. Finally, a think tank of young students, or students and teachers, might provide some incredible insights. The combinations of connecting all of the stakeholders together are seemingly endless. Finally, it might be interesting to conduct

a think tank of elementary school teachers, and follow up with an observance of them in their classroom in order to compare and contrast their claims with their practices.

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