

Every Interaction of Every Moment of Every Day: Establishing Positive Middle School Teacher-Student Connections

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study, conducted in 2022, invited Canadian middle school classroom teachers (n=4) into a think tank in order to explore ways in which they attempted to positively connect with middle years aged students and helped students become engaged in their classrooms and schools. This study was conducted in a similar manner to earlier studies with high school teachers (Reimer, 2014) and elementary school teachers (Reimer, 2020). The participants who consented to participate in the study met individually via Zoom. Participants emphasized the need to use every opportunity throughout the day to connect with their students. They provided several unique and creative practices in which they attempted to achieve these approaches. Participants also believed that it was every adult in the school's responsibility to make positive connections with students. They noted the benefits of positively connecting with students' families. Finally, participants noted the importance of authenticity, mutual respect, and sincerity.

Keywords: middle school, teachers, students, connection, inclusion, think tank

INTRODUCTION

Positive teacher-student connections appear to be an essential ingredient to student success at all levels (Davis 2001; Reimer 2014; Reimer 2020). These connections assist students in feeling safe and also assist students in connecting with other students (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). While these connections seem to be critically important for students first entering the school system (Baker 2006; Davis 2001; Reimer 2020), it appears that they continue to benefit students as they enter middle and high school. Nasir, Jones, and McLaughlin (2011) stated that "schools play an important role in structuring experiences of connection or disconnection for students" (p.1755). For example, students who "both interpersonally and institutionally [connected with teachers] had higher grades and graduation rates" (Nasir, Jones, & McLaughlin 2011, p.1755).

Although recognized as a critical element of student success, posit that little is known about ways to improve student-teacher relationships, especially as students move into middle and high school (Duong et al. 2019; Prewitt et al. 2019). How do classroom teachers at different grade levels establish these positive relationships with their students? What approaches could be considered universal, no matter the age range being taught? Are there differences based on the age ranges and grade levels of students in the classroom?

In order to better understand some of the dynamics of student-teacher relationships, Reimer (2014) interviewed high school classroom teachers (n=9) and asked what they did to connect

with their students. Reimer (2014) posited that high school classroom teachers believed that the following three factors were essential in order to connect with their students.

- i) Find similarities and shared interests with their students.
- ii) Help students with issues and problems.
- iii) Be viewed as authentic in the students' eyes (p.8).

Reimer (2020) conducted a similar study with elementary classroom teachers (n=8) and shared that elementary teachers tended to connect with students by having the following objectives.

- i) Attempt to meet students' needs.
- ii) Empower students to express themselves and discover their interests.
- iii) Incorporate what they learned from students into their daily interactions and the curricula.
- iv) Create opportunities for shared experiences (p.4).

Student-Teacher Connections In Middle School

What about student-teacher connections in middle school? Middle school represents “a turbulent time for young adolescents...as many students possess increasingly negative attitudes toward school.” (Raphael & Burke 2012, p.1). Therefore, positive “student-teacher relationships are particularly important after the middle school transition” (Duong et al. 2019, p.212). Unfortunately, this is also a time marked by a “normative decline in relationship quality” (Duong et al. 2019, p.212) due to an increase in social, academic, and physiological challenges faced by middle school students. Additional factors inhibiting student-teacher connections include “the developmental shift that children experience as they become more peer-oriented” and “having multiple teachers each day and less time spent together with each teacher” (Prewitt et al. 2019, p.69).

Still, there is evidence that middle school teachers who assist students with academic, social, and emotional needs (Prewitt et al. 2019), support middle school family engagement (Bachman et al., 2021), increase their student praise-to-reprimand (PRR) ratio (Caldarella et al., 2021), and attend professional development opportunities focused on relationship building (Duong et al., 2019) all appear to assist in enhancing positive student-teacher relationships. While the recommendations, as noted above, may be a helpful list, it is certainly not an exhaustive one. More attention needs to be given to how middle school student-teacher relationships can be improved. Despite a multitude of challenges, many middle school teachers are currently developing and maintaining positive connections with their students, and much can be learned from asking what they do.

THE STUDY

This qualitative study (2022) specifically sought out Canadian middle school classroom teachers (n=4) into a think tank in order to explore ways in which they attempted to positively connect with middle years aged students, and helped students become engaged in their classrooms and schools. Participants emphasized the need to use every opportunity throughout the day to connect with their

students. They provided several unique and creative practices in which they attempted to achieve these approaches. Participants also believed that it was every adult in the school's responsibility to make positive connections with students. They noted the benefits of positively connecting with students' families. Finally, participants noted the importance of authenticity, mutual respect, and sincerity.

METHODS

After receiving approval from the University of Winnipeg's University Human Research Ethics Board (UHREB), a Canadian school division was contacted in order to receive consent to conduct the study. Once consent was received, several middle school principals were contacted by letter, telephone, or email. Once consent was received from school principals, the school's teaching staff was invited to participate in the study. Specifically, principals were asked to distribute letters outlining the nature of the study to all teaching staff. Participation in the study was optional. Teachers were instructed to contact the researcher confidentially if they were interested in participating. All teachers were required to give written consent prior to the commencement of the study. Teachers who provided written consent to participate in the study were contacted by the researcher, and meeting times were arranged. Participants were also given a list of questions that may be asked by the researcher.

Four teachers from two schools agreed to participate in this study. Two of the participants identified as female, and two identified as male. All four teachers had taught for more than ten years. The participants indicated that they had experience teaching grades 6, 7, and 8. Additionally, they indicated that they taught the core subjects (Math, Science, Social Studies, and Language Arts). At least one teacher indicated experience teaching in a multi-grade classroom. Participant education levels ranged from having a Bachelor of Education to a Masters in Education. All four teachers preferred to meet individually via Zoom with me to share their thoughts on making positive teacher-student connections in middle school. All meetings were audiotaped. Transcripts of each interview were made and independently reviewed by my research assistant and me. Please see Figure 2 for further information about the participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, I followed the same think tank model that I chose to follow for my high school teacher (Reimer, 2014) and elementary teacher studies (Reimer, 2020). The think tank was based on Caliva and Sheier's (1992) "Center for Creative Community" model.

Figure 2. *Teacher Participant Information (n=4)

Gender	Age (years)	Teaching Experience (years)	Subjects/Areas Taught in Middle School	*Post-Secondary Education (Degrees)
M (2)	20 to 29 ()	11-20 (2)	Math, Science, Social Studies, English Language Arts, French, Phys Ed Grades 6, 7. 8. And 9 Grade 7 Grade 8 Grade 7/8 multiage	Bachelor Education (4)
F (2)	30 to 39 (1)	21-30 (2)		Bachelor Arts (1)
	40 to 49 ()			PBDE (2)
	over 50 (2)			Master Education (2)

Upon completion of the interviews, transcripts of each interview were produced using the speech-to-text software. Each participant was sent a copy of their transcript for review. Each participant agreed with the transcript sent to them, although one participant recommended that some spelling errors be corrected. My research assistant and I independently reviewed each transcript. We also generated independent themes from our reviews. Once completed, we came to a consensus on several themes that emerged.

These themes were then sent to the participants via email for review. Three of the four participants agreed on the proposed themes. One participant suggested that one of the themes be slightly amended, and I agreed. Finally, some of the themes were marginally modified upon further review. A report of the findings was then completed and shared with the four participants for review. Only two of four participants provided feedback on the report, and it was positive.

FINDINGS

The next section focuses on several key findings of the study. Specifically, it highlights several creative ways that middle school classroom teachers positively connect with their students. It also features insights from the teachers as to some of what they consider to be thoughtful approaches to connecting with middle school students. This section provides many direct quotations from the participants. While many of these quotations have been included in this section, some terms such as “like” or “um” or words that were repeated have, on several occasions, been removed. This was done for the benefit of the reader.

Participants highlighted two specific insights (or “themes”) as to how best to build positive teacher –student connections in middle school. At this time the two “themes” will be summarized below, with further discussion on each of them to follow.

1. **Use every opportunity to connect.** Effective middle school teachers maximize each and every interaction with a student as an opportunity to make a positive connection. Although, at times, they are brief, they try to have these interactions on a daily basis. Make positive family connections whenever possible. Consistent messages between school and home are very important.
2. **Be authentic.** Effective middle school teachers understand that relationships need to be authentic/genuine. Most students can sense whether they are or not.

1. Use Every Opportunity to Connect

Participants believed that it was critical for middle school teachers to use every interaction they had with students throughout the day as an opportunity to connect with them. One participant emphatically stated the vital importance of taking these opportunities, saying, “I think that in general, literally every interaction of every moment of every day in a school. Aside from the time that you have...15 minutes when you’re alone in a room, aside from that every interaction [you have] specifically with students.” One participant emphasized that this was critical whether students were assigned to your classroom or not, noting that taking these opportunities was perhaps more important in middle school than any other grade level, as “every single interaction is either an opportunity to connect or, by default, becomes a disconnect.”

Creative Connections

The participants in this study each shared some creative opportunities to connect in the classroom. One teacher shared, “I think the biggest piece that I learned very quickly was that it had to be relationships before content.” When asked to provide examples of how they did this, the participant offered the following examples.

[T]o build a connection with kids, I celebrate birthdays [in my classroom] with a movie and a card, a simple card with a pencil that says ‘Happy Birthday’ on it. Every kid gets to pick a movie on their birthday to watch we just everything. We leave everything. We don’t care about whatever is going on. The one thing I’ve learned after [almost 20] years [is that] kids will still come back and honour that fact that I do that. Because it’s a lot of birthdays.

Every Adult’s Responsibility to Connect with Students

One participant thought that taking every opportunity to connect with middle school students was not just the responsibility of classroom teachers but of every adult working in the building. The participant shared the following point.

If...every adult in the building doesn’t say hello, if [someone] walks by, and they don’t say hello... do you say hi? If you don’t say hello and you’ve walked right by

and it's obvious, you've seen a human being come by you. Right? Do you or don't [you] see the person? The opportunity is lost. The opportunity is lost.

One participant shared how essential it was to connect with students, whether or not they were in their classroom. The participant noted that "It's easier [to make connections] when you don't teach him." Another participant echoed this sentiment, saying, "I'm more comfortable with also building rapport with kids outside of the classroom. Like my core is my classroom. But I have a good familiarity with the kids in the building." One of the reasons why participants found it easier to connect with students that they didn't teach was because there were no academic expectations attached to the relationship.

When asked how they managed to begin to connect with students that they didn't teach, one participant shared that their opening line was often, "You're my favourite student I never taught." One participant shared that they "make a point of saying hello to every student, like when I see if I'm walking by in the hallway, or good morning or whatever. I also have a habit of calling all kids beautiful often." The participant added, "I think people need to hear, even though we shouldn't only focus on the physical... it's not about the physical. It also is that kids need to hear that because they only ever hear it from their parents. And then they don't believe it. So I have that sort of practice." This participant continued to speak about the importance of finding ways to connect with every middle school student in the school.

I make a point of talking to kids [I don't teach and] getting to know them a little bit, and then building on that. I also [engage with] kids who I know struggle coming to school. I make a point of letting them know they should be proud to come to school. I also remind people why we are doing this for them. Because you're [i.e., the student] worth it, not because, you know, it's not a chore. It's challenging. I actually find it easier to build those connections with kids who aren't in my classroom than the ones who are because the ones who are there going into my room, there's an expectation that they're going to work.

Connecting with Families

Participants stressed the need to connect with both their students and their families. One participant noted how they are "constantly contacting and keeping in touch with kids and families." Another participant added that "building a rapport between family and student was key."

Participants stated the importance of schools building in systemic opportunities for teachers to connect with parents. One participant shared how their school implemented an additional parent-teacher interview at the beginning of each school year, which was very beneficial.

We start the year off with interviews. Parents come in and meet the teacher at the start of the year for orientation. That's always helpful. And obviously parent teacher interviews kind of add to that. But there are certain students who I am on, we're

emailing fairly often, and just to make sure that the parents know what's going on in school, and what we're seeing, so that they can kind of be mindful, have a conversation with a child, or, depending on if it's work, say, 'Hey, this is coming up, I want you to really make sure you know'...And that just kind of keeps school and home life kind of on the same page.

Participants expressed that connecting with parents throughout the school year looked different depending on the student. One participant shared the following observation.

It is really good to be able to have a relationship with parents associated with certain kids. Some kids are so independent that you don't need to very often, like if they don't really talk to their parents very often, because they're just so responsible. I can just tell them things and they'll take care of it. Other kids, they're working [on] dialogue with their parents so that we both can be sending the same message and be on the same page in terms of what we hope the students have accomplished and to be focused on. When we do that, as issues come up, you just don't hesitate to call and say here's a heads up on what's been going on [and] what you're seeing.

Participants noted that making contact with students' homes was not just about seeking assistance with school problems but also about sharing good news and positive feedback. One participant stated, "Sometimes when we deal with kids in care, caregivers need that little bit of, you know, positivity...So the more positive it can be, the more impact it has." Additionally, one participant shared how connecting with homes allowed them to help families in ways that didn't necessarily relate to in-school issues. In this way, participants felt they were able to help students and their families in other significant ways. One participant shared that by phoning home on a regular basis, they learned of some significant home challenges. The participant offered that "over the pandemic time, I connected with [a home and] I did make a special connection with the whole family. And I delivered groceries [to the home] a lot. I delivered groceries quite a bit. We...really connected with this family."

2. Be Authentic

Each participant shared the importance of being viewed as authentic or genuine by their students. One participant shared, "Relationships are really important. But they have to be genuine. They can't be fake or artificial." One participant stated that "knowing that they know who you are, and that I know who they're, it makes a big difference in the learning relationship established." Participants wished that some of their colleagues would recognize the importance of being authentic. One participant shared, "Some teachers, I think...they wear a mask all the time. They put [it] on, they come in this room, and they wear a mask where it's kind of not who they are authentically, but who they want the kids to see." This participant ultimately did not think this approach was effective for building authentic teacher-student connections.

When asked how they attempted to be authentic with their students, one participant exclaimed, “I tried to get to know them. I think that’s really important.” Another participant commented, “I just try to be honest; I try to be myself with them and not have to be this authoritative figure at the front of the room.” Another participant noted how it was “really valuable to get to know your kids on a personal level, before you try to have all these expectations and education on them.” A participant expressed that, “I try to let them into my life a bit and give them some personal information about myself, so they can kind of know where I’m coming from.” One participant shared how being authentic with every student was not always easy, stating, “[I]t can be hard. It’s not easy because not every kid...is easy to build relations with every student. Depending on students, depending on your interests, and how you do things that might be off...you got to find that middle ground.

One participant elaborated on why being authentic was critical to connecting with middle school students by stating the following.

The teachers...I remember growing up are the ones I knew I felt [genuinely] cared about me, and my interests, and my future and my goals. Those are the ones I remember wanting to be back in their class. The ones who, you know, [where] I was just one of those students [when I walked] out the door. I don’t even recall them. I don’t have much of a relationship with them...And I think back to my high school teachers and my middle years teachers, the ones that you really connect with are the ones make that make things memorable, whether it be what you learn factually from them, the little lessons, the life lessons, the subject matter. And I think it’s it has to be authentic.

Mutual Respect and Sincerity

While participants in this study emphasized the importance of being genuine with their students, they also shared the importance of creating an environment where their students could be sincere with them, too. One participant provided the following comment.

I also appreciate if a kid can tell me something...that they don’t like doing [in class]. That tells me that they trust me enough to tell me how they really feel without fear of, you know, consequence, or, or anything. And I’m speaking of connecting this again. One of the things I often say to kids, and it kind of does throw them off to, for example, kids who might be struggling or kids who are having trouble off, I’m checking up on them or whatever. [I will ask students,] ‘How are you doing?’ [They will respond,] ‘I’m fine.’ [I will ask,] ‘Are you sure we are whatever’, and then I’ll say, ‘What, were you worried? Did you do this?’ [They say,] ‘No’ [I will ask,]. ‘Would you tell me if you did?’ And then they’ll give me an honest response.

Finally, one participant concluded by sharing the importance of the teacher establishing a classroom environment that focused on genuinely expressing and demonstrating to students that they sincerely had students’ best interests in mind at all times.

Respect is earned; it's not given... Trying to earn their respect, so to speak. And [in] that regards, I connect with them, and make an understanding to know that I'm out for their best interest. And I'm looking out for them. And I'm trying to build community within the classroom so that they know that I'm a person they can relate with someone I can talk to, before teaching happens, I can't be a stranger in front of the class.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the participants in the study believed that any interaction that teachers had with a middle school student should be viewed as an opportunity to connect. They believed that making these connections with middle school students was perhaps even more important than any other grade level. Participants believed that by not taking these opportunities, they were, in fact, disconnecting with the students by default. Participants stated that it was the responsibility of every adult in the building to make sincere efforts to connect... with every student they could, whether they taught them or not. In some cases, it was easier to connect with students that participants didn't teach as there were no additional pressures of academic expectations being part of the conversation. Connecting with students' parents was also highly valued. Participants shared that this helped teachers assist with in-school and home issues and relay positive feedback to the homes. Participants thought that by connecting with students' families, they assisted parents in having better and more informed connections with their own children.

Additionally, the participants in the study believed that one of the most critical ingredients in connecting with middle school students was being perceived as authentic in their words and their actions. They stressed the importance of showing the students that they wanted to be their middle school teacher. Participants indicated that being viewed as insincere put any opportunity for relationship building in jeopardy. Participants shared that they looked for opportunities to get to know their students on a personal level and that they genuinely appeared interested in their students' personal lives and assisted them by providing valuable lessons that extended beyond the subject curriculum whenever possible. Participants also expressed the importance of establishing classroom environments that allowed students to provide sincere and honest feedback to them. Finally, participants shared the importance of creating a learning environment based on mutual respect, community, and trust.

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