

Teacher-Student Relationships: The Foundation of Student Learning

by

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Bachelor of Arts, Vancouver Island University, 2004

Bachelor of Education, Simon Fraser University, 2006

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This project focuses on the vital role the teacher-student relationship has on student success. The quality and quantity of interaction between a teacher and his or her students seems to have a significant impact on student learning, and the effects of these interactions appear to remain constant as students make their way from elementary school to high school. Taking a writer's workshop unit previously taught to grade eight students, the author applies some of the findings on the importance of the teacher-student relationship to another group of students from the same high school to increase the quality of relationship with all students. Comparing the experiences of the second writer's workshop to the original writers workshop, the author can ascertain the significance of the teacher-student relationship on student learning.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my loving wife, Natasha Ubriaco, for her incredible support over the past two years. Her selfless desire to do whatever it takes to help me achieve my goals in life is just one of many reasons why I fell so deeply in love with her. Without the support and incredible patience of my wife, achieving my Master of Education degree would never have become a reality.

Chapter 1: Project Proposal

I think it is only human nature to reflect back and ponder how different one's life could have been if, as a child, one had known what they know now. The sense of supremacy and control over true understanding of what could only be acquired from experiential living gives me goose bumps just thinking about it. Believe me when I say that I understand how possessing such knowledge during childhood simply cannot exist without living life first, for that would be analogous with putting the cart well before the proverbial horse. However, reflecting back on what I have coined my "wonder years," between my pre-adolescence and graduation, and comparing my challenges and experiences with students whom I have taught in the past and present, I can't help but sense an uncanny similarity. In fact, the more I get to know my students, the further similarities I realize I share with them. At times I feel like I am looking at a mirror – providing me with a sense of familiarity and a better understanding of my students as I relate to them on a sometimes unique and deeper level.

On The Move

Between kindergarten and grade seven I rarely experienced the luxury of becoming familiar with my surroundings. It was uncommon for me to begin a school year in the same school I attended the previous year. Growing up in the vastness of the lower mainland, it wasn't just a new school I had to adjust to either. Schools I attended between my grade one and five years covered New Westminster, Burnaby, Port Coquitlam, and Coquitlam, thereby resulting in me facing difficult adjustments to new communities as well. What I remember about my elementary

years is that even under some very challenging circumstances such as poverty and alcoholic parents, I survived them - quite well, in fact. A latch-key child for the better part of my elementary school year, my grades remained in the higher echelon, I was a curious and engaged learner, I was kind-hearted with a great sense of humor, and I had a very strong and healthy social life.

Reflecting back on how I was able to remain strong and positive while facing my ever present childhood challenges, what comes to mind are the relationships that gave me strength at the most critical of times. Such relationships came from many sources, and those sources I valued and fully embraced and absorbed like a sponge. Though my biological father was divorced from my mom and living just off of Hastings Street near downtown Vancouver, I always looked forward to seeing him on weekends. He was always someone who had my back, and as his only child, he cared deeply for me and wanted nothing but the best for me. My five older siblings, with whom we only had a mother in common, were role models I had secretly placed on a pedestal and idolized. At a time in my life when friends were anything but constant, my family became a stabilizing force. Living a nomadic lifestyle leading up to my teens made it difficult to develop deep and meaningful friendships. The few times when closer bonds would form, I remember feeling like I needed to push them away and isolate myself from them out of fear that I would move away yet again and feel the pain of losing them. As a retrospective adult, I can now understand how my behavior was nothing more, nor less, than a defense mechanism to deal with the reality of my life at the time.

My Elementary Teachers

Having both parents and all my siblings living in the Vancouver area enabled me to be very close with them, which helped me to acquire a healthy sense of identity, confidence, and self-esteem. However, there was one other group of people who were of vital influence in my life: My teachers. While attending Viscount Elementary in Port Coquitlam, my grade four teacher, a very kind and soft-spoken man, would always engage in conversation with me about what I wrote in my weekly journal. He would promote conversations between us by writing “*lets talk further about this*” in the margin of my paper. He was a huge Vancouver Canucks fan, so whenever I would write about a game I watched on television or listened to on the radio, we would often engage in quite lengthy conversations about even the minutest details of the game. I remember times when we would share fishing stories as well. As any typical fisherman would do, I didn’t hold back telling others about a big fish I caught, and now humbly admit to even embellished the truth once or twice. My teacher would ask where I caught my fish and what lure I used to catch it. Maybe his purpose for engaging in conversation with me was to find a better fishing hole so he could catch more fish. I now recognize that his motive didn’t matter. My teacher gave me his time, and for me to recall so effortlessly a man who more than three decades ago gave me his time is an amazing thing. Even more so remarkable considering that my memory isn’t always the greatest.

During the middle of my grade four year my mother informed me that we were moving yet again. I remember being devastated that I had to leave Viscount Elementary and my grade four teacher with whom I had established a great relationship. Though my fourth move in as many years was only a few kilometers

west to the other end of Port Coquitlam, the move felt much greater. Being displaced yet again had me feeling frustrated and like I was back at ground zero as far as relationships with my teachers and friends were concerned.

Upon my arrival to Meadowbrook Elementary to finish grade four, it didn't take me long to realize how fortunate I was to have a new teacher who was such a sweet and kind lady. Like my teacher at my previous school, she also included journal writing as part of her pedagogy. I remember how she would also write comments in the margins of my journals. Her purple comments felt magical, and demonstrated to me that my teacher cared about what I was sharing with her. I happily perceived this teacher's comments as invitations to approach her and share in conversation.

My grade seven year is still the most vivid of them all. I had two absolutely amazing male teachers co-teaching my class on a full-time basis for the entire year. I remember sitting on the floor in a great big circle with my peers and both teachers and just talking like we were one big happy family. I can still recall what both teachers looked like, and the fact that one liked the Vancouver Canucks, while the other liked, to my dismay, the Montreal Canadians. Though I adored both teachers equally, I must admit that I did find more opportunities to communicate with the Canucks fan.

One thing I remember most about my grade seven year was the amount of group and individual projects I completed. I was so engaged and motivated to work on these projects because my teachers gave us the freedom to choose our own topic and demonstrate our learning in whichever way we wanted.

Early on during my elementary years I, for whatever reason, became highly captivated by marine life – especially curious about sperm whales because of their uniquely square-shaped head. Approximately halfway through grade seven both teachers requested that I complete a science assignment on an animal. I was disengaged from this assignment because I didn't have a desire to learn about any animal. After a few days of getting nowhere my teacher approached me and asked, "Don't you like fishing and marine life, Peter?"

I remember that day being one of the most exciting of my year. After some serious collaboration with my teachers and a classmate, I spent a couple weeks constructing a magnificently detailed diorama out of various colors of cardboard and clay. From clay I crafted a pod of very intricate sperm whales hanging from wires while my partner created a giant squid with long legs and tentacles. Together we demonstrated further creativity by adding numerous shellfish on the ocean floor. Once our diorama was fully complete, we researched to gather information about the sperm whale and the giant squid before presenting our findings to our classmates.

Transition Time

My transition from elementary school to high school was extremely tumultuous. Shifting from one teacher in one classroom to several teachers in several different classrooms created anxiety and, for the first time, made it problematic to build deep relationships with my teachers. I often struggled to retain even the most basic information such as my teacher's names. Realizing now that most of my teachers taught well over one hundred students during a semester, it must have been just as difficult for them to retain the names of their students.

Early on during my grade eight year, I often entered my English classroom soundlessly wishing my teacher would include journal writing or sitting in a sharing circle in as part of her pedagogy. However, it didn't take long for me to perceive my teacher's time as being more precious, or limited in high school. Entering high school I would have done almost anything to be given the opportunity to write in my journal and read my teacher's purple comments in the margins.

Turning Point

Entering my teenage years, I began to experience deterioration or total loss of many highly valued relationships. Outside of the realm of school, a key relationship taken from me was with my father after he succumbed to a sudden and unexpected heart attack. While struggling to adapt to the loss of the one man that always had my back and my best interest at heart, the strong relationship I had with my mother also began to deteriorate as the demands of life reduced the already limited available time she had for me. Suffering from stress and anxiety, due in part to the pressure of working six days a week just to meet our basic needs such as pay the rent and put food on our table, exacerbated this deterioration. At the same time, I also began to lose some of that connective tissue with many of my siblings as they also grew up, found life partners, and diffused away from home.

Within the realm of school, my high school years were nothing short of a disappointment. When I was not skipping school to go to the arcade, hang out at a local park, or sleep in, I lacked motivation, was often disengaged, and sensed little attachment to any adult figure. Teachers often called me by the wrong name, and rarely pronounced my last name correctly. My high school teachers were, for the most part, never privy to the key relationships I had lost in my life or why I had lost

them. Furthermore, my teachers often failed to understand the passions and interests I had developed throughout elementary school. Inadequate relationships between teachers and myself, and all my peers for that matter, contributed to the deliverance of prescribed material in a stale and universal nature. Opportunities for personal and meaningful project-based learning that tapped into my interests and passions became scarcer because my teachers typically failed to understand me to any depth relative to my elementary school teachers. My high school setting also lacked a sense of accountability relative to the various elementary schools I attended. The rare times I skipped school in grade eight and nine, teachers rarely showed concern nor did they hold me accountable for failing to attend school. In fact, my parents for the most part were never even aware when I missed a class. I viewed my teachers not taking the time to contact my parents as a lack of caring, and once I began to perceive this deficiency I skipped classes more frequently. It didn't take long for me to tumble academically to the point where I faced Mount Insurmountable. Moving through the ranks of my senior years, skipping classes developed into a defense mechanism to cope with the fact that I was no longer able to keep up with my teachers and peers. My confidence, self-esteem, and resiliency shifted from a position of strength to a detriment.

Why Study Teacher-Student Relationships?

So just how important are relationships? I would like to postulate that relationships are fundamental to success for all people in all aspects of life. However, being that 'all aspects of life' is over encompassing and broad, I will suggest that within the parameters of the school setting, relationships are key to the overall development of students. My experiences as a successful elementary student and a

struggling high school student, and the recognized impact of having (and not having) key relationships in my life, have fueled a deep passion towards illuminating the importance of relationships with respect to the teaching profession. Lest I forget to share in the irony that for ten years running I have been educating students in the same high school that I once attended for all my high school years over three decades ago.

The desired outcomes for this project are twofold. First, I aspire to enhance teacher understanding of the critical importance that relationships can have on overall student development. I also view this project as a valuable opportunity to further develop my own understanding of the importance of relationships through a synthesis of current literature with my personal experiences as a teacher.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

In recent decades there have been a growing number of studies concentrating on teacher-student relationships and their impact on child development. Increasing dropout rates coupled with a decline in graduation rates and overall academic performance have all necessitated a further understanding of the effects of the teacher-student relationship. Current research has targeted understanding the importance of the classroom teacher, and in particular the impact of the student-teacher relationship on overall student success, in an effort to seek remedies to such concerns. This chapter begins by identifying how the dynamic teaching role is changing. Current literature will then be examined in order to define, through the experiences of teachers and students, what constitutes a positive and healthy teacher-student relationship, and the impact that perception of 'care' has on such relationships. The effects of both positive and negative teacher-student relationships on overall student development will also be examined. Finally, this chapter will conclude by illuminating some of the many ways teachers can create and maintain relationships with their students in an effort to positively influence overall student development.

The Morphing Role of Teachers

Developmental researchers, and attachment researchers in particular, have centered almost exclusively on parent-child relationships as the primary context of children's development (Jeffrey, Auger & Pepperell, 2013). However, some may interpret a reduction in overall quality time between parents and their children as being largely accountable for classroom teachers serving as *ad hoc* attachment figures themselves. With this shift, the focus on adult-child relationships has been

broadened to include teacher-student relationships (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). This broadening could be understood to originate from children receiving less family support at home due to current societal realities such as increased prevalence of single parent families, or parent absenteeism from the home caused by increased time spent at work. Whatever the case, viewing teachers as attachment figures is important because it recognizes the influence that teachers can have on the overall development of a child. Within the context of a variety of major influences on children's development, Myers and Pianta (2008) recognize that "teachers seem to have an influence over and above that of parents and peers, and this influence is particularly linked to school outcomes" (Jeffrey, Auger, & Pepperell, 2013, p. 1). Twenty-first century researchers have begun to recognize several similarities between teachers and parents when it comes to their mutual attachment to a child. With parents becoming increasingly absent in the lives of school age children, current educational researchers believe that 21st century teachers should be considered ad hoc attachment figures at the very least (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012).

Noddings (2007), a renowned scholar of teacher caring, pointed out that "we learn from those we love," and asserts that "teachers must demonstrate caring in order to teach them well" (Phillippo, 2002, p. 445). Supporting this idea and attachment theory perspectives whereby children tend to feel safer and more secure when in the presence of a parent, Hughes (2008) adds, "a close and supportive relationship with one's teacher should also be considered foundational to providing emotional security and confidence in children" (p. 6). On the basis of parenting and motivational literature, Noddings further suggests that "children who

experience warm and close parent-child relationships are more motivated to please their parents” (p. 3). How student motivation to please transcends from parents to teachers, based on *attachment theory* perspectives and the changing roles of teachers, will be further discussed in chapter two.

From Start to Finish: Positive TSR Through The Grades

When it comes to improving the overall relationship between teachers and students, the current literature clearly identifies the importance of teachers taking the time to get to know their students. Pianta and Allen (2008) comment that, “positive relationships between teacher and student are perhaps the single most important ingredient in promoting youth development” (as cited in Gehlback, p. 692). This comment encapsulates a good portion of the current literature regarding the importance of positive and caring teacher-student relationships.

The benefits acquired when students perceive that their teachers take time to get to know them as individuals and care about their well-being provides students with an enhanced ability to develop and learn. In fact, “positive social relations can be a powerful incentive for students of any age to come to school” (Davis & Dupper, 2008, p. 183). Current research also provides important evidence that the need for positive and healthy relationships between students and teachers continue right through from kindergarten to graduation. The results of a study by Hamre and Pianta (2001) indicate “early teacher-child relationships are unique predictors of academic and behavioral outcomes in early elementary school, with mediated effects through the eighth grade” (p. 634). Emphasizing the importance of getting off to a good start has value because “children’s ability to form relationships with their teachers forecasts later academic and behavioral adjustment in school”

(p. 634). What this suggests is that later academic and behavioral success in school is in part predicated upon the academic and behavioral history of a particular student.

Myers and Pianta (2008) cited Wentzel (2008) as saying, “The need for positive relationships with teachers does not diminish as students mature” (p. 204). A study by (Barlie et al., 2012) identifies how “a positive teacher-student climate was significantly and negatively related to the average log odds of student dropout in their senior year” (p. 262). Similar findings exist in a qualitative study by Davis and Dupper, whereby “one of the most frequently cited reasons students gave for leaving school prior to graduation was a poor relation with teachers. Students who dropped out of school claimed that teachers didn’t care about them, were not interested in their success, and were not willing to help them with problems” (2008, p. 183).

Defining Positive Relationships

Elementary learners’ perspectives. In order for teachers to best understand what constitutes a healthy and caring student-teacher relationship, it is crucial to understand what students perceive as the most important attributes of such relationships. As others have also articulated (Birch & Ladd, 1997), “understanding of teacher-child relationships and their influence of child development also require a focus on children’s perceptions of relationships with teachers” (Hamre & Pianta, 2001, p. 636). The importance of teachers acquiring an understanding of students’ perspective on what constitutes a caring relationship is further noted:

Noddings highlighted the need for the cared-for’s acknowledgement of the

care directed toward him/her if the relation is to truly be a caring one. This helps educators understand that they need to be aware of how students are actually responding to enactments of care and to adjust them accordingly (Sinha & Thornburg, 2012, p. 29).

Though school-based research on care is limited, the majority of research on care has been conducted within the context of elementary schools (Alder, 2003). A pervading theme derived from the literature on what elementary school students perceive a caring teacher was one who was 'helpful.' For example, Noblit, Rogers, and McCadden were cited in a qualitative study (Alder, 2003) illustrating that a caring teacher was one who was able to give his or her time to help students and engage in conversation with them. Their findings also stressed the importance of reciprocal dialogue:

Talk cannot be overemphasized, since it was through talk that children revealed their lives and teachers supported and nurtured them. Talk was reciprocal, requiring each to listen and hear as well as to speak. Talk became the currency of caring; each opportunity to talk came to have a history and a future (p. 245).

Middle school learners' perspective. As cited in an article by Alder (2003), Bosworth (1995) conducted a study that asked middle school students how they defined care and where they saw a teacher demonstrating care. Both Bosworth and Alder studies reiterated helpfulness as the governing theme in caring relationships, with most students viewing attitudes of respect and kindness as also important. Teachers they saw as caring were "attentive to individual student's needs and enjoyed helping students. Furthermore, caring teachers were involved, polite, and

concerned with student success” (p. 245).

When similar aged participants were asked to describe qualities of their most favorite teachers (Sander et al., 2013), comparable themes emerged. The most common positive teacher trait was that he or she provided individual attention or seemed “to really care” about the adolescent (p. 299). Examples of teacher caring included behaviors such as taking time to explain homework; thereby further emphasizing the relatedness between helping and caring. Treating the class fairly, speaking in a pleasant tone, and recognizing student effort were other forms of caring recognized by participants (p. 300).

High school learners’ perspective. Though older with typically increased academic pressures, it should not be overly surprising that ‘helpfulness’ is also a perquisite among high school students in order for a teacher to be perceived as a caring. When 33 grade 9 – 12 students were interviewed in a study conducted by Cooper and Mines (2014), many students “expressed frustration with teachers who were unavailable for help, interpreting inaccessibility as a lack of care” (p. 275). Furthermore, in all instances when “students perceived a lack of care, they spoke unfavorably about their teacher and reported negative academic experiences in their classes” (p. 276). Though more research needs to be conducted with regard to student-teacher relationships in high school, it is plausible that teacher time and the characteristics of caring continue to be important due in part to the challenging nature typical of most high school curriculum.

Including Teachers’ Perspectives on Positive TSR’s

Jeffrey, Auger, and Pepperell (2013) applied qualitative methodology to

create a study to ascertain the differences in students' and teachers' perceptions of what teacher-student caring looks like. One group of elementary teachers and another group of fourth grade students were broken into focus groups to give the participants a voice and stimulate conversation among participants. The degree of similarity between both teachers and students perceptions on what caring looked like to them were examined in depth. Groups were audio-recorded for future transcription. Data then went through an initial open coding process to break the data into discrete parts, followed by the researchers themselves engaging in a round of axial coding. The involvement of all three researchers in the axial coding followed triangulation; a process Creswell (2013) recognizes as important to any qualitative study to increase the overall trustworthiness of the data.

Students clearly believed it is important for teachers to care about them, and further believed students tend to work harder and create less management problems for teachers who clearly communicate that they care. Students also reported that when they perceived a teacher as not caring, they in turn did not care about or pay as much attention to class-management strategies or classroom rules (Jeffrey, Auger & Pepperell, 2013). One student spoke on behalf of several when cited that, "students liked it when they connected with their teachers on a personal level. In particular, students enjoyed hearing personal stories about their teachers" (p. 9). Another student paralleled those thoughts by adding, "My teacher in third grade, um, used to share life experiences and stuff with us and that was really fun" (p. 9). As expected, teacher participant responses towards the meaning of caring were quite similar to student responses. One teacher shared his personal views on what made him a caring teacher:

When they walk through my classroom door, it needs to be a haven from what's outside that door for them. So they get their needs met when they're there and if they're hungry I give them something. I mean, you can't learn if you're hungry. If they're tired they are going to go to the nurse and nap because they can't learn if they're there and can't keep their eyes open (p. 12).

There were numerous similarities between teachers' and students' perceptions of caring. Even though some minor differences were present in what teachers and students perceived as safe and caring, "teachers and students agreed that a positive teacher-student relationship was fundamental to student success" (p. 12).

Bridging the gap in the TSR

Another recent study by McHugh et al. (2012) further delved into seeking an understanding of the thoughts students had towards their notion of a good student-teacher relationship. This phenomenological study attempted to identify those specific processes which adolescents report as fostering positive student-teacher relationships; referred to later as "bridges:" processes that close the gap between student and teacher, bringing them closer together. Data was first gathered into mechanical codes, followed by conceptual codes, and finally structural codes. Focus groups were employed throughout the coding process in order to stimulate the data and increase its overall validity (Creswell, 2013).

One qualitative data set was gathered as students played the role of teacher. As students were being video recorded in their new adult role, they explained what teachers needed to know about them as students and how to go about obtaining such information. A major thematic category that arose from this study was the

need to create the aforementioned bridges that brings students and teachers closer interpersonally. The most commonly discussed bridge was coined “effortful engagement,” which can be defined as an instance in which “one person actively and deliberately engages another on an interpersonal level” (McHugh et al, 2012, p. 19). It is important to note that the researchers also recognized student support as a critical component in the building of strong and healthy relationships with students. Some examples of support were “providing advice for students, helping students with learning tasks, and discussing possible future goals and career options” (p. 19). This study provided the students with a voice, enabling them to delineate what students perceive teachers require in order to reduce the gap between teachers and students. Interestingly, during the bridging process many students wished to strengthen relationships with teachers, and the discussions of such bridging reflected “the students’ desire for these processes and interpersonal experiences to occur with greater frequency” (p.20).

Students also emphasized the importance of teachers voluntarily sharing their time with students in order to help build positive student-teacher relationships. When Alder (2003) sought to discover what urban middle school students perceived as the meaning of care, many of the students interviewed agreed that providing time for their students and interactions with their teachers were highly valued. The following student noted that teacher’s caring is symbolized through her taking time to interact and help students:

Like, if she didn’t care, she wouldn’t stay back after school with us. Like, if somebody be having a problem, she would take her time and stay back. I got

two favorite teachers, and I be telling them the truth. And sometimes I tell [the principal] because I be calling him daddy. Sometimes he be taking me out. Like last year, there's a girl named [Ann] and her mom's on the school board. Like, we go to dinner or something. And sometimes, if he sees me playing basketball on the streets, he stop and talk (p. 254).

The teachers that students cited as caring in this study placed a strong emphasis on teachers willing to engage in conversation and give their time, and valued getting to know both their students and their parents. "The personal nature of care lends even greater credence to the notion that teachers must get to know their students on an individual basis" (p. 258). Communication, talking with and listening to students, is vital in the process of getting to know them. The urban students in the Alder study expressed the value they placed on communication and personal contact with teachers. Individual students come to teachers with individual needs and personal conceptions of what it means to be cared for. "Talking with teachers and being heard by them were highly valued commodities to the students" (p. 258).

Relational Effects on Students' Perspective

Paralleling research by Noddings, the literature on attachment theory suggests that students engaged in close and meaningful relationships with their teachers are "more motivated to please their teachers, leading to improved classroom behavior and overall academic success" (Myers & Pianta, 2008, p. 602). Findings from a study by Montalvo et al. provided qualitative support to back up claims made by Noddings, Myers and Pianta, and others by identifying that higher

levels of effort and persistence in class existed in classrooms where students liked their teacher. Not surprisingly, “higher levels of academic achievement were also realized in such classrooms” (p. 154). With over 40 years of research in the field to back up his thoughts, educator Martin Haberman suggested that, “many teachers fail to engage and create deep student learning because of their lack of ability to connect with students and build relationships with them” (Milner, 2013, p. 348). Support for a deeper and more emotional connection between teachers and students is further advocated by Ottewill (2003):

Teaching and learning should be emotionally charged activities in which it is appropriate to engage students by appealing to their hearts and heads.

Strong emotional bonds and understanding between teachers and students are the basis for high quality learning (Beutel, 2010, p. 83).

Research by Ottewill and his supporters parallels the claims of Haberman, making it abundantly clear that teachers really can make a difference in overall student development. Myers and Pianta (2008) demonstrate their understanding of this reality, “A sizable literature provides evidence that strong and supportive relationships between students and teachers are fundamental to the healthy development of all students in schools (As cited in Birch & Ladd, 1997, p. 601). In addition, Hughes and Chen suggest that, “teacher-student relationships form the basis of the social context in which learning takes place” thereby suggesting that the TSR has should, to some degree at the very least, be viewed as foundational to student development (As cited in Liberante, 2012, p. 7).

Time and Management in Maintaining the TSR

A qualitative study conducted by Alder (2003) examines how caring relationships are created and maintained between students and their teachers. Urban students' perceptions of caring were acquired through face-to-face interviews, classroom observations, and holding focus group sessions. More than 100 hours were spent at investigation sites observing classes, personal planning time, parent-teacher conferences, team meetings, interviewing students, teachers and administrators, and leading focus groups. As Creswell (2013) suggests, the researchers in this study were rigorous in their data collecting procedures in part because of the large amount of time the researchers spent observing and collecting data prior to triangulation.

Interestingly, a key theme uncovered from the Alder study was that the teachers who were viewed as most caring were those who allotted a sufficient amount of time and energy "to be strict, maintain control over disruptive behavior, and pressure students into getting work done" (2003, p. 250). Though this theme failed to surface in the aforementioned Jeffrey et al. study, both studies did emphasize the importance of teachers giving one-on-one time, and talking with them individually and privately as further signs of caring.

Can Grading Get In The Way?

The historical assessment practice of assigning grades and percentages to assignments and tests has been recognized by some students as being an obstacle to building strong and caring relationships with teachers. Interestingly, a qualitative

study conducted by Ping Liu (2014) recognized differing perspectives between teachers and students on grading as an assessment practice. Although teachers did not view grading as going against the student-teacher relationship, students in the study perceived grading as impersonal, which resulted in students “viewing teacher-student relationships less favorably” (p. 33). According to results from another study by Jaing (2007), another student concern was that “grading allowed teachers to show favoritism and pay closer attention to those who did well academically and earned good grades” (p. 23). It is important to acknowledge that whether teachers do, or do not, show favoritism is not what seems as important here, but rather students perceive teachers existing under such a light. It seems plausible that a heightened understanding of the negative effects grades appear to have on student-teacher relationships could be influencing an apparent revolution in how teachers assess and ultimately report out on student progress. Recognizing that many school districts and teachers continue to employ a grading system as a means to assess assignments and tests, more research needs to be conducted at all grade levels to verify whether the employment of grades could be counter-productive to the bigger picture of teachers building positive and healthy relationships with their students.

Negative Perception Of School: A TSR Obstacle

The importance of the teacher-student relationship can be further supported in a qualitative study conducted by Sander et al. (2013) which focused on how school failure relates to delinquency and, more importantly for this paper, why students themselves perceive schools as negative environments. A sample of 16

juvenile adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 years were interviewed, and one key theme that surfaced related to student boredom and a disconnect with teachers. Lack of a strong relationship in a transitional year from elementary to high school was viewed as of critical importance. While some students shared feelings of boredom, others were frustrated and sensed a lack of care from their teachers. Referring to her teacher, one student shared that, “She didn’t help me with anything so I just stopped doing my work” (p. 304).

Myers and Pianta (2008) suggest “relationships with teachers may be particularly important for students who display early academic or behavioral problems” (p. 601). When adolescents identified with behavioral issues were asked during individual interviews what they thought was the most important teacher trait to construct positive teacher-student relationships, a key theme dictated by students was when teachers provided individual attention or seemed to “really care” about his or her students. Common themes among these adolescents of what caring looked like to each of them included behaviors such as being personal with students, treating the class fairly, and being there when you need them (Sander et al., 2013). One student (Javier) summed it up best when he said, “I particularly liked it when teachers, like they just talk to you, help you, instead of just trying to be in control” (p. 300). From Javier’s quote, and many other students in this study, a key argument was that the student should come before the curriculum. Paralleling the thoughts of Chhuon and Wallace (2012), “failing to put kids before curriculum could result in students perceiving their teacher in a negative fashion, as he or she adheres to an impersonal ‘just teach’ approach that is unsatisfying and often leads to disengagement” (McHugh, 2012, p. 20,).

Providing a caring and supportive environment for students with behavioral issues could be of particular importance for student development. As Jeffrey, Auger, and Pepperell state in their qualitative study, “it is important to provide caring and support to students who deserve it the least but need it the most” (2013, p. 2). It could be even more important that children with low academic output or special needs have a positive outlook on school. One teacher emphasized the importance of teacher-student caring when she revealed “it is particularly important to show caring for students when they make mistakes, and are vulnerable” (p. 2). As the number of students who struggle academically or are categorized as special needs seems to be on the rise, understanding the factors that create negative perceptions of school could go a long way towards improving children’s perception of school. Furthermore, such knowledge could go a long way in helping teachers build positive relationships with these particular students in the process.

Relational Effects On Teachers

The impact that teacher-student relationships have on the teacher should not be overlooked. The type of relationship a teacher may have with a student can have a profound affect on one’s overall teaching experience. In fact, analogous to parental caregivers, it is contended that teachers construct mental models of their relationships with students that represent teachers’ views, feelings, and inner world regarding their teaching (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011). Therefore, if a teacher’s undeniable and pre-defined *mental schema* of a student can influence how teaching is delivered to that student, it can be argued that the creation of positive and negative teacher-student relationships can significantly impact a teacher’s approach

towards that particular student. Supporting that line of thought, Spilt, Koomen and Thijs (2011) state:

the notion that teachers internalize interpersonal experiences with students into representational models of teacher-student relationships could explain the frequently stated view that professional and personal identities are closely interrelated and shaped by the relationships with individual students (p. 473).

There is also support indicating that teachers tend to have closer relationships with children whom they perceive as having more positive attitudes towards school. Teachers may feel closer to children who express liking school and who seem to enjoy most of the activities in the classroom. Children who share a close relationship with the teacher may also “perceive the school environment as a supportive one, and this may promote positive attitudes towards the teacher, and the school in general” (Birch & Ladd, 1997, p. 76).

Similarly, “negative and disobedient behavior is more likely to be appraised as challenging and threatening – especially when the teacher already has internalized negative feelings towards a student” (Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011, p. 467). One would expect that this unfavorable pre-determined schema could amplify the teachers’ stress response with a student. Negative interactions can then begin to create a mental representation of the student as “difficult.” Once a teacher has created such a mental schema, “that student is more likely to become a source of chronic stress and conflict” (p. 467).

Being that teachers are required to play more of a parenting role in the classroom, it is interesting to note that research into mothers’ relationships with their children indicates that the internalization of negative affect predicts their parenting

behavior (Button et al., 2001). In a sample of kindergarten teachers, Stuhlman and Pianta (2002) demonstrated that teachers' negative feelings towards a child were significantly related to displays of negative behavior (Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011). However, it is somewhat surprising to note that the results of their study failed to recognize a strong causation between positive feelings among students and positive behaviors exhibited by them. These results are not meant to negate the impact that positive teacher feedback and positive feelings may have on a student. In fact, Davis and Dupper (2008) recognized in their study the importance of teachers expressing confidence in their students and providing positive feedback by noting, "teachers who praise students and create positive feelings set the foundation for building positive relationships and learning experiences" (Davis & Dupper, 2008, p. 183). The lack of correlation in the Spilt, Koomen and Thijs' study between positive feeling and positive behaviors may suggest that a teacher's negative feelings could be perceived as even more impactful on students than positive feelings. This distinction could be an important one that warrants more research.

Positive teacher-student relationships afford children the opportunity to openly express feelings and concerns, and therefore elicit appropriate help and guidance in their attempts to adjust to the school environment (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Positive and supportive TSR may therefore help to develop more self-motivated and self-directed students. Therefore, it is plausible to anticipate that increased student motivation and independence may help provide teachers with a more favorable schema towards a particular student that further helps to maintain a close and positive relationship. As we can see from the literature, such relationships benefit both teacher and student.

Teaching is a dynamic and demanding profession that holds the ability to heighten teacher's stress level, and the amount of stress realized by a teacher can have profound effects on the teacher, as well as their overall relationship with students. Though there are a myriad of factors that can influence teacher stress levels, two key sources of stress and eventual burnout come from student misbehavior and discipline problems (Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011).

The purpose of a study conducted by Yoon (2002) was to investigate the influence of teacher characteristics on relationships between teachers and students. Supporting the notion that teachers can affect their students, the results recognized that "teachers' stress levels did predict the number of students with whom they had negative relationships" (p. 490).

Focusing On The Foundation: Goals For Positive TSR's

We know that the TSR is important through the grades, maybe more now than ever because of the morphing role of the teacher in today's society. We know that the effect of a positive TSR is imperative to both the success of student as well as the teacher. Therefore, where do we go from here in developing the TSR within the 21st century classroom?

Reflecting back on the aforementioned determinants of caring, creating a classroom environment perceived by students as 'caring' should be viewed as the highest priority for teachers. In order to achieve this objective, teachers need to be aware of what caring looks like in the eyes of the children both individually and collectively. As Noddings suggests, "personal manifestations of care are probably more important in children's lives than any particular curriculum or pattern of pedagogy" (2007, p. 3). Reflecting back as an adult, the fact that relationships with

people seem to trump any curriculum ever taught parallel Noddings' suggestion.

Furthermore, as traditional structures of caring seem to be deteriorating:

Schools must become places where teachers and students live together, talk with each other, and take delight in each other's company. It is obvious that children will work harder and do things for people they love and trust (Bernard, 1995, p. 3).

All teachers demonstrate caring and form relationships with students in different forms and to varying degrees. Though some teachers exhibit caring characteristics more than others, students tend to view most teachers as being caring simply because of who they are. In fact, Cooper and Minees revealed in their study, "the majority of students asserted that teachers were supposed to care as part of their job" (2014, p. 283). However, their results also supported the need for teachers to get to know their students on a deeper level in order to create a TSR more based on "relational caring." The study supported the idea that persistent efforts by the teacher to understand the child from a more moral standpoint based on relational care were believed to provide a stronger and more caring TSR, thereby enhancing the overall relationship between teacher and student (Cooper & Minees, 2014).

Teachers cannot simply understand their students because they want to, or because they have put in some level of effort to try and get to know them. Getting to know each student as an individual takes time. Though teacher time is often limited, the importance of teacher's finding time to get to know students can become even more clear, yet more challenging, in middle and high school settings where teacher contact with student typically increase. By recognizing the role of teachers in

creating a positive TSR, the critical role of students should not go amiss.

Regardless of grade level, the framework of the TSR should consist of the teacher and student working together to “co-construct” the relationship. As Cooper and Minees (2014) suggest, “ Students possess agency that enables them to moderate how teachers understand who they are by regulating the degree to which they allow teachers to know personal details about them (p. 265). Therefore, after a thorough review of the literature, it stands to reason that those teachers who work diligently in a co-constructivist manner with students can create a more caring and more positive relationship with their students. Relationships between teachers and students can be improved by teachers taking their time to get to know students, teachers engaging in meaningful and sometimes personal conversations with students and teachers demonstrating characteristics that students deem as helpful and caring. Furthermore, teachers may enhance the TSR by replacing traditional grading practices with other forms of assessment that focus more on helping individual students progress and enjoy their learning journey rather than have them perceive it as a negative experience. With the current literature as the framework of this chapter, it can now be hypothesized that student success, and overall student development, is to some degree dependent on the TSR.

Chapter 3: Focus and Rationale of Writer's Workshop

The role teacher-student relationships (TSRs) can have on student academic performance clearly stresses the importance of teachers and students co-constructing a bond to ensure that each student feels connected. Though this theory may seem simplistic, the pressures teachers face daily makes this reality difficult to consistently attain with all students.

During the earlier stages of my teaching career I was fortunate to acquire valuable experience teaching children covering primary, middle and senior high school levels. At all levels I perceived a pressure to fulfill academic requirements that, reflecting back, clearly overrode the human component of teaching. However, through experience I learned that the importance of building positive TSRs begins in the primary grades and does not diminish as students enter high school (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

As I acquired more teaching experience I began recognizing that by over-emphasizing the curriculum, some students may have perceived me as caring more about my job and less about them as individuals. With time and classroom experience, I have come to recognize the negative impact that such a perception may have had on my teaching efforts and my students' educational experiences. Reviewing past mis-relationships is particularly disheartening because, as educationalist Nel Noddings suggests, "personal manifestations of care are probably more important in children's lives than any particular curriculum or pattern of pedagogy" (2007, p. 3).

It wasn't that I didn't care about my students. However, there may have been moments where my priorities failed to indicate to my students how much I did care. At times it seemed that the more I pushed the curriculum the more students experienced or perceived a lack of caring on my part, which would have resulted in my efforts becoming

counter-productive to what was most important. My Master's program has taught me a great deal, as well as validating so much of what I have learned through my own experience in the teaching profession. With this realization, I have worked feverishly this past school year to create relationships with every one of my students.

When students walked into my classroom for the first time this year, I knew as little about them as they did about me. Typical of every year, I expected one or two of my new students to be designated as gifted; with five times as many possessing some sort of a learning disability. Though counselors do their best to supply me with individualized educational plans (IEP's) to get me up to speed with many of these students, I often received these documents further into the the school year which made for difficulty in providing optimal individualized lesson planning and assessment. This reality coupled with my new focus on building relationships with every student I taught altered the manner in which I conducted my classes during the first month of school compared to previous years.

Along with the typical start up requirements such as setting up students with lockers, signing out of textbooks, and other more general routines, I placed more emphasis on getting to know my students and creating a more caring learning environment by fostering a sense of belonging and students being valued as individuals (Noddings, 2007). With grading recognized as having adverse effects on the TSR (Jaing, 2007; Liu, 2014), I attempted to improve my classroom environment by focusing more on assessing "for" student learning rather than assessing "of" student learning during some key assignments; leaving the summative assessments to be completed further along in the curriculum. Supportive feedback was provided on student work more promptly than in past years, with conversations and anecdotes aimed at facilitating growth and

providing opportunities to connect with each student. Through increased conversations, discussions and assessments I sought to identify the zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) for each of my students to enhance my ability to support and guide my students in ways custom-tailored to the specifics of his or her learning situation.

History of Personal Experience

Whenever I have the opportunity to reminisce about my first couple of years in the teaching profession, a chill continues to rush through my body as goose bumps form on my arms. It was arguably the most challenging and stressful time of my teaching career. The countless hours of university training could not have prepared me for what awaited. I remember standing in front of my grade eight students with such profound trepidation that the only day I looked forward to was Friday because I so desperately needed a reprieve from my classroom. I recall my stress level being so elevated that I acted, and re-acted to some students in ways that even surprised myself and had me questioning who I was as both a teacher and a person, and whether or not I belonged in the classroom. Even in the early stages of my career I knew something was amiss.

Though I have experienced many highs and lows over my career, I consider myself to be a very good teacher overall. I have a solid rapport with my students, am well-liked, and receive more than my fair share of positive feedback from both parents and students. However, since I began my Master's program two years ago I have begun to evaluate myself more critically as a grade eight teacher. Becoming less content with what I have done in the past, I now seek ways I can grow within my profession.

The gains I seek to make begin with building relationships with each of my students. There is no doubting that in past years I have made great relationships with

many students. However, over the last couple of years I have become more conscious of those names I once struggled to remember, and the students whose lives remained a mystery. I have also come to realize more than ever before the commonalities that I, as a boy entering high school, share with many of my students. Reflecting back and recognizing those students who have “fallen under my radar” will help to facilitate my own professional growth as well as benefit my future students.

My ability to relate to students in my school has many seeking me out before school, at lunch, or after school just to hang out and talk, while others express their desire to have me as their teacher. Four years ago a colleague became aware of my ability to relate to, and interact with, students and how much students liked me; so much so that she somewhat embarrassed me by calling me “The Relationship Guy” while in the presence of several other colleagues. What I hadn’t realized at that time was that the majority of students I built great relationships with were the motivated and engaged students who were easier for me to connect with as their teacher. These students typically come from fairly stable environments and are what I like to call “academically motivated.”

As we all know, one would be hard-pressed to find a public classroom anywhere comprised of only academically motivated students. The reality of the inner-city middle school I work in is that in any typical year at least one third of the students walking through my classroom door are unmotivated for a variety of reasons. Similar to my own childhood, these students worry more about their basic needs such as when they will eat next, whether they will have to move again, how to deal with an abusive or dependent relationship, etc.. Recognizing how fortunate I am to have attended the very same school that has employed me for my entire career, I am very aware of the clientele and struggles that many of these families face. Being a long time sports fisherman, I developed an

analogy specifically for this project to express the precariousness of my profession and how I have often felt as a middle school teacher:

It is a beautiful and sunny July afternoon. A man out in his boat salmon fishing spots something concerning in the distance. Looking through his binoculars he identifies a boat overturned with what appears to be debris floating nearby. He pulls up his rods and pushes the throttle to the floor. As he approaches the site of the overturned boat his heart begins to race as he realizes that some of what he thought was debris was actually people floating in the water. He hurriedly surveys the area and recognizes four people struggling to keep their heads above water. He navigates his boat beside the first person and helps a man climb into his boat. He then cruises about 50 meters to the second person and as he hauls the man's wife into his boat she uttered in a shaking voice, "Thank you so much." The fisherman then looks out at the water again and identifies the third person struggling and barely able to swim. He quickly approaches this person, a 14 year-old boy, and retrieves him from the frigid water as hypothermia begins to take hold of him. Once this boy is safely in the boat alongside his parents, the mom screams, "Where is she? Oh my God! I can't see her!" The fisherman frantically looks around but she is gone.

Rather than feeling a sense of satisfaction for saving the lives of three people, the fisherman is distraught over the fourth he failed to save. The fisherman in this scenario stimulates feelings analogous with experiences most teachers face at some point in their careers. Though teachers want to see all of their students succeed, the reality is that there will always be some students who find school more challenging than others. As a teenage student, I perceived high school as long and torturous right up to my senior year;

usually because I could not see any relevance in what was being taught, or because my teachers failed to understand me. Becoming a teacher with a strong ability to relate to high school students, it became more and more apparent over the years that too many of my students were poised to follow in my footsteps as a disengaged learner.

The Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships: Learning Along The Way

Working on my Master's program and reading literature on the important role TSRs can have on student success (Myers & Pianta, 2008; Davis & Dupper, 2008) has changed me profoundly as a high school teacher. It is through the literature that I have become more cognizant of the factors that precipitated strong relationships with many of my past students. However, even more importantly, I have become more mindful of those students with whom I struggled to build strong connections. Coming to view these students synonymously with the girl in the aforementioned fishing analogy whom the fisherman failed to save has empowered me and provided me with a desire to grow within my profession to meet the needs of each and every one of my students.

Most recently, I have begun to question what is most important to me as a teacher and why I chose to enter the teaching profession in the first place. Was my motive for choosing a career in teaching derived from the grandiose expectation of creating a classroom full of A+ students? Pondering such a question, and reflecting back on my own path as a student, my elementary teachers came to the forefront of my thoughts very quickly because it was these teachers who, even after more than three decades, I so easily remember. It was mostly these same teachers who I laughed with, who understood me, and who permitted me to tap into some of my creativity to make my learning journey more relevant and enjoyable. It is also these same teachers who I recognize as having a

huge positive impact on my life and who I have come to identify as key reasons why I embarked on the path to become a teacher.

Many demands within my profession are out of my control and can create a pervasive cloud with the power to disorient. However, I have come to agree with and accept wholeheartedly that I am the “Relationship Guy.” That is who I am and that is why I decided to become a teacher in the first place. It was always about having fun and building relationships. Through this recognition, and a deeper understanding of how foundational TSR’s are to student success, I feel like I have been gifted with a magic key that has both rejuvenated my career and motivated me to get to know all my students.

I have become more aware of my students as unique individuals whom I help teach based on their own uniqueness. This has allowed me to recapture more of the human aspect of my profession to the point where student academic success parallels student needs for a safe and caring environment. With these foundational aspects firmly in place, my teaching focus has shifted towards a personalized learning pedagogy facilitating differentiated instruction that will best support my students and their learning.

Recognizing A Unit With Potential

While attending a professional development seminar eight years ago I was introduced to a writer’s workshop that I quickly gravitated towards. Academically speaking, this unit provided every student with a unique and creative opportunity to develop their writing skills using a highly individualized approach. From a relationship standpoint, I perceived the framework of this unit creating occasions for teachers to connect with individual students and provide students with opportunities to share their personalized stories with me as their teacher. I was so impressed with this workshop that I waited patiently in a lengthy lineup afterwards to ask the presenter questions to further

my understanding and gather any resources that were offered for teachers to take with them. I walked out of the workshop so excited that at the very beginning of the following school year I opened my year teaching this unit to my grade eight English class.

Teaching the writer's workshop unit for the first time eight years ago was moderately successful. Half of the class expressed that they really enjoyed the unit, and these kids demonstrated solid writing skills by the end of the unit. However, there were also a large number of students who remained disengaged, unmotivated, and unwilling to do much work. These students were dragged through the process, accomplishing little and learning less. This frustrated me because they had missed out on what I believed was a great learning opportunity.

My eight years of classroom experience that followed, coupled with a deeper knowledge acquired from reading literature on the influence TSRs can have on academic success, shed some light on key mistakes I made which may have contributed to the writer's workshop failing to meet my expectations. For example, teaching the writing unit so early in the year meant that I didn't yet know my students and hadn't had a chance to understand their needs or build relationships.

Offering opportunities early in the year for students to write journals and read my anecdotal comments may have helped to positively influence my relationship with some students not unlike how journal writing helped me build relationships with my teachers. With my paradigm shifting towards TSRs as the foundation for student learning, I believe that by employing some simple modifications, this once moderately successful writer's workshop unit could become a platform that demonstrates the powerful positive effect that positive TSR's can have on student learning and overall success in the classroom.

Original Writer's Workshop

When I first introduced the writers' workshop it was with an extremely specific goal in mind: *To have my students develop better writing skills.* I taught my students the definition of a sentence, and how to implement certain punctuation rules such as quotation marks, commas, semi-colons and colons, into their writing as well as how to conclude sentences appropriately using a period, exclamation mark, or question mark.

During this unit, a typical English class began with a ten-minute mini-lesson teaching the "concept of the day," followed by the students working on worksheets in their writer's workshop booklets for about thirty minutes. Students working on their booklets frequently provided me with opportunities to catch up on other duties I felt pressured to complete such as taking attendance, reading the dozens of e-mails that typically flooded my inbox on an hourly basis, or preparing for the next group of kids about to enter my classroom to do math, or possibly even a science lab.

The last ten minutes of English class would contain either a review or some form of summative assessment that would involve all students receiving either a score or letter grade that was often recorded. Once sufficient instructional time had been spent covering the mechanics and grammar of writing, students wrote notes and were provided with further worksheets that taught the components of a plot line such as exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, and conflict.

To deepen understanding of these components, I chose to have my students watch the movie titled *RV*, starring the late Robin Williams. Not only does this movie possess an easily identifiable plot, but the captivating style of humor that made Williams so famous provides an opportunity for my students to learn in an enjoyable environment that promotes laughter.

The workshop culminated with students being awarded opportunities to work in a computer lab as a group consisting of between three and five co-authors to develop their own plot line and write their own novels. Each plot line would be drawn with the appropriate components labeled on a two by three foot sheet of paper before being divided into chapters. After students illustrated a clear sequence of events, students dissected their plot lines into sections that would become individualized chapters to be claimed by members of each group.

With each student clearly understanding at the outset of the unit that they would be evaluated and graded on any chapters they were responsible for writing, the next twelve English classes involved students working independently on their chapters, yet collaboratively as a team of co-authors to create a meaningful story that adhered to the learning objectives set out at the beginning of the unit. Though I often made attempts to interact with students and help them become better writers, I remember often feeling frustrated over the fact that many students were closed off, unmotivated, and reluctant to receive help. I often heard defeating statements such as, “I suck at writing!” or “Writing is stupid!” The more I probed my students the more surprised I became when I realized that some bitterly disliked writing. While a limited number demonstrated very strong writing skills and earned high grades, it became apparent by the end of the novel writing process that the overall experience for myself and my students was lacking.

Why I Gave The Writer’s Workshop A Second Chance

Being a perfectionist who endeavors to succeed in pretty much anything I do, I remember having very high hopes during my writer’s workshop unit. However, upon completing this unit with my grade eight students, I remember feeling so irritated and dissatisfied that I placed the writers workshop folder bearing all of it’s contents near the

back of my filing cabinet, and that is where the unit lied untouched for seven years. It wasn't until just a few months ago when I first asked myself why this unit failed to meet my expectations, when I began connecting dots and making connections between the knowledge acquired from my Master's program and my inability to make my writer's workshop fly.

Failing to cultivate strong TSR's with some students coupled with my perfectionist personality and desire to succeed, became the impetus to consider my first attempt seven years ago at teaching the writer's workshop as a promising Master's project. With a renewed sense of the potential the original writer's workshop unit bears, I excitedly excavated the folder from the back of my classroom cabinet and separated the mix of files. I stumbled across a list of notes I had jotted down on a piece of lined paper years ago to reflect back on in case I desired to teach my writer's workshop a second time. Some notes I attached to the writer's workshop unit were as follows:

- 1) *Many students were disengaged.*
- 2) *Difficult motivating students to complete worksheets.*
- 3) *I spent way too much time managing disruptive and off-task behaviors.*
- 4) *Students in general failed to achieve a level of writing that met my goal.*
- 5) *I found this unit fairly boring to teach, and understand why many students found it boring as well. This unit requires serious revisions.*

As I looked through my folder and read the aforementioned notes, I could not help but ponder how different my writer's workshop unit could have been if I had "known then what I know now." I admit that mimicking pedagogies of other colleagues, focusing on my students meeting prescribed learning outcomes, and simply surviving my day took precedent. Working towards the completion my Master's program has provided

me with what I have come to recognize as an exceptional opportunity to take what I have learned from my literature review and put it into action. Reflecting back on some of the literature previously discussed in chapter two indicating the importance of the TSR (Myers & Pianta, 2008; Jeffrey, Auger & Pepperell, 2013; Birch & Ladd, 1997), I endeavor to apply their findings into my classroom. I optimistically hypothesize that by allocating more time and effort towards the development of positive relationships with all my students, a more caring, trusting, and accepting learning environment will be created and this in turn will result in more students being academically successful.

Project Implementation

An Early Focus On Relationship Building

With a newfound mindset that TSR's are foundational for overall student success, I began my current teaching year extremely pro-active by allocating much more time forging positive relationships prior to embarking on a second opportunity to teach my writer's workshop. During the first week of school my students and I shared opinions and co-constructed classroom expectations on what a successful classroom looked like. I laminated their ideas on a poster board and placed it on the front wall of the classroom. Acknowledging the negative effects grading can have on TSR's from the likes of Ping Liu's aforementioned study (2014) provoked me to also inquire whether my students would rather see me apply grades to their assignments or provide simple anecdotal and verbal feedback in lieu of grades with the understanding that grades would be provided as they worked deeper into the unit. Even with the results obtained from Liu's study, I admit I was still caught off guard over the majority of students voting for the latter.

Reflecting back and recognizing the positive impact journal writing had on my ability to manufacture relationships with my own teachers, I decided to maintain that tradition by introducing a six-week journal-writing unit during the second week of the school year. Mondays offered opportunities for my students to write about their past weekend, while Fridays provided students with time to either reflect on and write about some of the events of their past school week, or what they were looking forward to for the upcoming weekend. Based on the vital role journal writing played in me building relationships with my elementary school teachers, I read my students journals, embraced conversations when opportunities arose, and wrote in the margins of my students' papers – typically with a purple pen and a smile on my face.

I looked to embrace new ideas that would further develop positive TSR's in a fun and expedient fashion. One new idea that my students and I co-created this past September was what they appropriately coined the “walk and talk.” With our school being located so close to the ocean, once every couple weeks my students and I would partake in a fifteen minute walk downtown to our local fishing pier to watch sports fishermen performing their craft, or to a nearby beach where kids could skip rocks in the water or explore the shoreline. Not only did this small excursion provide kids with a chance to explore their community and receive some physical activity, it also provided me with valuable time to converse with students away from the school grounds. These spontaneous conversations enabled students to just be themselves without the constraints and context of the school community, which relaxed and humanized the students as well as myself.

To further develop positive TSR's I gathered signed permission forms early in the school year so my students could attend an adventurous road trip to Victoria, British

Columbia. In early October fifty-four students along with a half dozen parent chaperones departed from Campbell River by bus and travelled for nearly four hours to visit the Royal Museum and I-Max theatre in downtown Victoria. So many students sitting in such close quarters for long stretches of time provided me with ample opportunities to make my way up and down the corridor of the bus to chat with dozens of students. I was pleasantly surprised at how easy and comfortable it was to engage in conversation with so many students. Furthermore, many students opened up and shared stories that I recognized as important building blocks for constructing positive TSR's that may not have materialized had our class remained within the confines of the school.

A key difference between the original and second writer's workshop was the time during the school year in which the unit was taught. Like I stated previously, the original unit commenced during just the second week of the year. Conversely, during this project I delayed in starting the writer's workshop in order to better establish positive TSR's before expecting my students to believe in the writer's workshop process.

The early stages of both writers' workshops were identical; both consisting of students working in unit booklets to develop an understanding of grammar and plot line components. However, when it came time to teach the components of a plot line, watching the movie *RV* was supplemented with additional learning opportunities to further promote the development of positive relationships with my students. For example, I decided to share a lengthy personal story of getting lost while chanterelle mushroom picking in the woods. Ironically, when this story unfolded I was the same age as my audience, which in turn made it easier for most students to relate to. In the story I fittingly titled *Get Lost*, I expressed myself in a highly dramatic nature; yelling and crying at the appropriate times to re-enact my true feelings at particular points in time.

Though I shared this story with a curricular goal of improving my students understanding of the components of a plot line, an underlying purpose was to share a personal aspect of my life to humanize myself and reinforce that the journey of learning can be a fun and enjoyable one.

The lesson following *Get Lost* being shared with my class, I read a fictitious story to further enhance student's understanding of the plot line components while continuing to positively develop relationships with my students. This involved me tapping into the crazy and goofy aspects of my personality to act out all the different character voices using funny and dramatic voices while reading to the class the story, "*Lamb to the Slaughter*." I was extremely pleased with this particular lesson because virtually all students were captivated, laughing, and highly engaged. Sharing my personal story and my somewhat goofy personality permitted me to feel more connected with my students. By improving relationships with my students and taking the necessary time to create a safe, caring, and fun learning environment, I began to sense that I had vastly improved the learning environment for my students during this writer's workshop.

A New And Improved Learning Environment

Something that became evident quickly this year was the level with which students were willing to work for me compared to past years. As a group, I felt that students were more motivated to improve their writing skills, and more engaged when it came time to work. Though teachers may feel a pressure to provide grades, the absence of grading seems to relax the learning environment and maintain a higher level of student engagement. The absence of grading may also result in students becoming less fearful of making a mistake; thereby demonstrating more resilience and an increased tolerance for failure that can aid in the learning process.

On most days my classroom was alive with a synergy as kids collaborated and shared ideas with one another, as well as engaged in countless discussions with me to help facilitate their learning. I often felt overwhelmed because of the large number of students who approached me at what appeared to be any and every opportunity. Students would enter my classroom simply to hang out or ask questions regarding their writer's workshop project before school, at lunch, or even after school. As I would make my way to the staff room to eat my lunch or to photocopy work, my hands would often turn red from all the kids requiring an all-important high-five from me as I made my way down the hallway.

This year I also noted an increase in the amount of positive feedback from parents. Whether during parent-teacher interviews, unscheduled meetings, or communication through phone calls or e-mails, parents informed me how happy their child was to be in my classroom. They also expressed their pleasure because their child had been more excited to come to school this past year. I couldn't help but perceive statements such as these as interestingly ironic considering that during my project I placed an equal amount of emphasis between building relationships and academic achievement.

Influence of TSR's On Student Learning

What I've learned from my experience teaching my writer's workshop eight years ago was how numerous students initially struggled sitting together in the computer lab to write their novels. With that history still fresh in my mind, I was pleasantly surprised over just how quickly most students logged on to their computer during the second writer's workshop and just started writing. While the class was typing, I had time to circulate and engage with a few struggling writers who trusted my suggestions and

perceived my feedback as non-threatening and constructive. This improvement in learning environment helped me to create a healthy balance between student struggle and success that aided in maintaining student interest and progress.

By the second day in the computer lab I could sense a difference in the room compared to when I taught the same unit seven years ago. I felt that students entered the lab more confident and comfortable, which led to an increased number of students being focused and engaged in the creation of their novels. In fact, I experienced a memorable moment whereby I recognized every single student deeply engaged in his or her writing; a pleasant surprise considering a typical classroom is filled with such an array of needs and unique personalities.

In assessing the writing skills of my students at the completion of my project, I felt that the quality of writing had improved. I enjoyed the teaching of this unit much more than I had during the original unit and the opportunity to complete my project strengthened my skillset as a teacher in terms of delivering academics while focusing on developing a positive TSR within the classroom.

Chapter 4

Summary

The effects that both positive and negative teacher-student relationships (TSR's) have on student learning appear to be so influential that many researchers now recognize positive TSR's to be foundational to student success in school. The pressure teachers face to carefully cultivate positive TSR's appears to only be growing as 21st century teachers continue to morph into the dual role of teacher and parent. The duality of teachers is significant because children tend to work harder for people who they are attached to, and who demonstrate a sense of caring towards them. Caring is recognized as a key component in a student's perception of the TSR. Interestingly, the positive effect caring teachers have on students are present during the primary grades and do not significantly weaken with age. Though students' need for caring remains constant as students make their way through the grades, time constraints, increasing academic pressures, and greater number of student-contacts with more teachers all pose challenges for teachers.

The application of grades on student work is also becoming increasingly recognized as an obstacle teachers face when working to construct positive TSR's. With many students, grading becomes counter-productive to the relationship-building process, and this holds particularly true for students with academic or behavioral problems. This reality is important because it is often those students who struggle who require positive TSR's the most in order to be successful in school.

While working on my M. Ed. project, I worked to cultivate positive relationships with all my students while at the same time keeping in mind those forces recognized as

counter-productive to the relationship-building process. In order to accomplish this, I placed my students ahead of any curriculum I taught. Following the mantra “we learn from those we love and trust” (Noddings, 2007), I took my students on field trips and walks beginning very early in the school year to foster relationships away from the social construct of the school setting. With students recognizing teacher’s time as being a vital prescription of caring, I devoted a tremendous amount of time engaging in both written and verbal forms of communication with my students. Talking and listening permitted me to get to know my students while demonstrating that I not only cared about and accepted my students collectively, but more importantly as unique individuals.

A Paradigm Shift

Teaching grade eight students for the past ten years in the same school I attended three decades ago has helped me to acquire and maintain some awareness of the importance of teachers and their ability to influence student learning. Recognizing that my own disengagement and subsequent academic struggles during high school was partially the result of waning relationships with my teachers has furthered my understanding of the importance of TSR’s. My lived experiences as both a student and a high school teacher were the driving force behind my desire to delve into current literature and learn more about the importance of TSR’s. Choosing a Master’s of Education project focusing on the impact of TSR’s on student success has profoundly revitalized my career. During the course of my project, each time I engaged in conversation with one of my grade eight students, I couldn’t help but appreciate the numerous similarities between so many of them and myself while at that stage of life. Taking the time to complete my Master’s program allowed me to acquiring a deeper

understanding of the impact teachers have when giving time to their students and the value in creating a caring learning environment. My project in particular made me much more cognizant of those students I was engaging with, as well as those I interacted less with. Attempts to strengthen my relationships with my students, especially some of my more challenging students that I honestly may not have otherwise made such attempts, impacted my students and myself so profoundly that I have experienced a professional paradigm shift. Witnessing attitudes of some of my more challenging students changing for the better became synergistic; affecting not only the way I taught, but also the manner and degree to which I interacted with my students. My own lived experience coupled with the literature on the importance of TSR's and my Master's of Education project have taught me that the relationship between a teacher and his or her students is much more than what I originally thought it to be. For highly motivated students a positive TSR is important in order to engage, motivate, and help effectively. However, as academic or behavioral needs of students increase, the effects of positive TSR's will also generally increase. The efforts I have put towards my students during my current year of teaching have resulted in captivating results – especially amongst some of my most challenging students. With a typical public classroom being so dynamic and composed of students with such a wide range of needs, the ability for teachers to build relationships with their students is becoming an increasing necessity. The future of public education is such that in order for teachers to maximize the potential of their students, and themselves, healthy and positive TSR's will be required. I recognize my students as being more successful during my M. Ed. project in large part because of the time and effort allocated to building positive TSR's with all my students. It has also made my own teaching experience a more enjoyable and rewarding one; positively impacting my career so profoundly that I

already look ahead to the next school year with great anticipation.

The Affects Of My Masters Journey

Two things I have learned while working through my Master of Education is that though I know a great deal, I still have so much more to learn. The experiences I have acquired in the teaching profession have permitted me to grow and learn through an incalculable amount of successes and failures. I now feel driven to combine my classroom experience with the knowledge I have acquired through my M.Ed. to convey to others the incredible significance of the teacher-student relationship. An opportunity I am already considering is helping to develop a mentorship program within our school to help my colleagues realize the important short and long-term benefits of building positive TSR's. Sponsoring a student teacher is also something that I am looking into. I feel that by helping new teachers understand the foundational importance of TSR's I can make their transition into the teaching profession a less challenging one.

I would also like to pose difficult questions to administration at both the school and district levels regarding some of the obstacles those teachers working in the trenches typically endure while attempting to build positive TSR's. Questions dealing with class size, composition, funding, district and provincial assessments, and the pushing of reporting too frequently take away valuable time from teaching and is counter productive to the TSR. I strongly believe that by not accepting the status quo, but rather challenging it, it will push the boundaries of our public education system and deliver expedient change in a rapidly changing world.

Recommendations

In concluding what has been an empowering personal journey, I would like to propose three recommendations for both existing teachers as well as those considering or preparing to enter the teaching profession. The first recommendation I propose is to remain conscious of why you decided (or are contemplating) to become a teacher in the first place. Few teachers enter the profession because their primary goals were to cover curriculum and supply grades. I don't mean to negate the professional responsibility of teachers, but it is important to remember that there is so much more to teaching than just delivering curriculum and assessing student learning. The extremely high level of interaction required by teachers to meet the needs, emotions, and desires of such a dynamic range of students makes teaching a very unique occupation that requires time, patience, understanding, and caring at the most basic of human levels. I have witnessed teachers blessed with relationship-building skills as well as those that may have lost some perspective; forgetting those personal reasons for choosing a career to educate the youth of our society. By remembering the driving forces behind one's decision to become a teacher, one is more apt to hold a healthy perspective on teaching that, in the long run, benefits everyone.

For my second recommendation, I refer back to a comment I received from a colleague just prior to registering for my Master's in Education. Like I mentioned in chapter three, one of my colleagues approached me and in front of several other colleagues called me *The Relationship Guy*. Upon hearing this I vividly remember experiencing mixed feelings. Though on the one hand it sounded positive because that meant I possessed positive connection with my students, I also perceived a negative

connotation that I was less of an academic. I want to inspire other teachers to strive to be the Relationship Guy - or Girl. Provide the necessary time to get to know your students as individuals. One of many things I have come to learn from my Master's journey is that being called *The Relationship Guy* meant I possess the ability to best meet the needs of my students. It was one of the greatest and most inspiring compliments I have ever received by anyone since I entered the profession, and for that I am forever grateful.

Finally, I strongly recommend that whether you are a practicing teacher, or aspiring to be one, you delve into the current literature with an open mind and read the findings made by prominent researchers such as Robert Pianta, Nel Noddings, and others. I don't profess to know all there is to know about how to build positive TSR's or the impact of them. However, what I have come to learn is that by applying their findings to my own practice, I have witnessed a significant improvement in the climate of my classroom, my own desire to come to work each day, and the increase in both quantity and quality of work produced by my students. I now view my future in teaching profession with invigorating optimism. I look forward to the opportunity to meet with and build positive relationships with my future students, for these relationships are the foundation for learning for my students - and as I have come to learn, for myself as well.

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