

Relationship matters: a narrative investigation

by

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Victoria, 2003

Bachelor of Arts, University of Victoria, 2001

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Abstract

This project examines both the social/emotional and academic impact of teacher-student relationships, especially for at-risk students. The quality of the relationship between teachers and their students seems to have a protective effect for some. Through a narrative enquiry, the author attempts to examine her own relationships with students in order to look for any common threads regarding good relationship building skills and to bring some particular elements of daily classroom life to light. This inquiry also examines the effect of place, culture and personality in the relationship-building process. In order to examine these relationships, in their own unique context, the author has employed the use of narrative, specifically stories of personal experiences.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my wonderful, amazing sister, Janice Haskins, without whom none of this would have been possible. Your unwavering support and belief in me is what keeps me going when I don't have the strength to believe in myself.

Chapter 1: Project Proposal

Introduction

I have not been a teacher for very long, having come to this profession as a second career after fulfilling my desire to go to university, and many years in the workforce. I teach in a rural elementary school, in the predominantly First Nations community in which I grew up. We have a total student population that, on average, fluctuates between 60 and 65 students. I am honoured and very grateful to have been able to return to my home community as a teacher, and to be given the opportunity to work with our youth and help them, to the best of my ability, to be successful in the world. For me, this is what makes everything that I do, and everything that I experience, worthwhile.

During the first course in my Master of Education program with Dr. David Blades, I became very interested in the concept of phenomenology. Though it intrigued me, as a theory, I was not certain how to apply it. However, it seemed to me that the “lived experience” of the teachers and students in a classroom was something very important, honest and real. It made me think of my own experiences in my classroom, and I wondered how examining those experiences would be of any benefit to anyone, including myself. I did not value what I had to offer, especially as a relatively new teacher.

So, I come to my project somewhat reluctantly. This is because I feel that I have not yet come to a point in my career where I have anything of great import to contribute to the enrichment, or further understanding, of the amazing teachers with whom I work. I often worry, as well, that I am not doing enough to ensure my students’ success. Yet, even though I still have doubts about the contribution that I can make to the body of knowledge regarding the inner

workings of a classroom, and the job of building strong, supportive relationships with students, I feel compelled to share the stories of my experiences. I offer my own work as a "master" with much trepidation and humility. It is not for instructional purposes that I feel inspired to share these experiences, but as a way of sharing *an* experience, and to question my own practice. I want to better understand and begin to value who I am becoming as a teacher through my own lived experiences. What spurs me on to understand more, and to do better - the very best that I can for the children in my care - is the notion that what I bring to the classroom, not necessarily in content area knowledge, but rather in caring, compassion, empathy and love is what truly makes the difference to many of my students and their learning.

Teaching Students and Teaching Curriculum

One of the things that I struggle with as an educator is achieving a meaningful balance between *teaching students and teaching curriculum*. I once got into some difficulty with another teacher when I differentiated between the two, but for me they seemed to be on opposite ends of a spectrum and I constantly found myself at a loss as to where exactly to place my efforts. I have since realized that they are not separate and independent ends of a spectrum, but rather they are enmeshed in a complex intertwining of interdependence. The basis of much of the learning (teaching the curriculum) that goes on relies upon the relationship between student and teacher (teaching the student). There are many students who do not necessarily rely on this relationship to learn, but for many others it is of paramount importance. For those students, the relationship they have with their teacher not only motivates them to learn, but also, at its very root, allows the student to feel supported and safe enough to take risks. Without that feeling of security, their efforts to succeed can be hindered.

My philosophy now is that relationship building and caring for students' physical and mental well-being are *the* most important tasks that I carry out in a day. If by attending to these needs I can coax a reluctant learner to learn something, while my adept and enthusiastic learners take everything in, then I am making a difference in *all* of their lives, not just the lives of students who are successful no matter what situation in which they may find themselves.

How Can I Do This?

Every day, then, I ask myself “How? How do I reach all of my students?”; especially when they test me every day I am with them. How do I maintain my patience when I feel as if I am juggling ten things at once, especially when I feel that I am barely coordinated enough to be juggling at all? Teaching is not easy, nor is it natural for many of us. It takes work, and lots of it. It takes empathy, and it also takes strength, endurance, and a deep desire to see every student achieve their own personal best.

And I fail...a lot! I become overwhelmed with the administrative demands of the job as classroom teacher. I become vexed by some of the constraints of the curriculum (this was even worse when I was new to the profession). I have my own issues to deal with; family difficulties, financial pressures and life in general. This causes me, at times, to forget these little beings in my class who come to me as they are through no fault of their own. Their various behaviours, positive and challenging, are adapted to their own circumstances and are how they are able to cope with the difficulties in their own lives. Sometimes my students can come to me quite damaged, physically as well as mentally and emotionally. I have found that the single, most important thing that I need to check on a daily basis is my own ego. My experiences, my empathy, my ability to relate to children and my sense of humour are things which allow me to

succeed in my work, but when my ego comes into it, that is when I fail on an "epic" scale as some of my students would express it. It is a difficult thing to do, but absolutely necessary for the success of the vulnerable children under my care.

An Honest Interest

I have discovered something wonderful about my students over the past several years and that is that they can forgive your failings and the occasional bad day, if you are able to show them on every other day of the week how much you love them, care for them, and respect them as people. I have also found that taking an honest interest in things in which my students are interested goes a long way toward building these loving and respectful relationships.

One recent attempt I made at understanding their lives was when I downloaded and tried to play Minecraft. I wanted to try to understand what the big attraction of this video game was for them. I did not really understand its appeal because I could not quite wrap my head around the concept of virtual building blocks. I can understand the appeal of other popular video games because of their amazing graphics; but, Minecraft? But I tried it because at that time in my class, not a day (sometimes hour) went by when someone didn't mention something about the game. My attempt was not a very successful one. I even killed a virtual sheep during my brief sojourn into the world of Minecraft, because that is what I thought I was supposed to do. But I felt terrible and guilty...for days! When I related this to my students they all laughed at me and said that I could have just taken its wool instead of killing it. Besides, it was just a block sheep anyway, they reminded me. Well who knew that you did not have to kill the sheep to get its wool? But even if I had failed, "epically" at my attempt to become adept at Minecraft, I did succeed in forging a connection to their interests just by trying. Not only that, they also got to feel superior because an adult had tried and failed at something which comes so easily to

them. These connections are so very important for gaining students' trust and becoming someone that they can relate to, at least in some small way. This kind of relationship building, I believe, eventually manifests as a positive influence on students' desire to learn.

The Focus of my Project

We all remember the teachers who had a positive impact on us, and also those whose influence was astoundingly negative. I remember some of these negative interactions I had with teachers that happened nearly 40 years ago. Looking back on it now, I can relate to the teacher who snapped at me, or made an offhanded comment that hurt my feelings. Children take these things to heart and their little egos can be fragile. This is why it's so very important to build positive, caring relationships with our students. I also, however, remember with great fondness the teachers and the adults in my young life who were warm and took an interest in my childish ramblings. Those were the people who helped me to have faith and confidence in myself, and I maintain that their influence was the basis from which I was able to achieve my own successes. As educators, and as the people with whom these young people spend so many hours of their week, we have the opportunity to be a force of positive growth in their lives. I believe that we owe it to them to foster the best, most supportive environment that we possibly can in which they too are able to achieve their own successes.

I learn with every failure and every success with my students; what it means to me to be a good, and hopefully one day, master teacher. And I learn much of this from my students. That is why I want to share our stories in my Master of Education; stories of shared learning, successes and failures, and of relationships that strengthen us all. This project will explore, through a narrative inquiry, what it means to teach children and curriculum on the path towards, hopefully, becoming a master teacher.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The relationships that teachers forge with their students can have a marked impact on both the teacher and student. Sometimes these relationships are positive and sometimes negative. Regardless, they have an effect on students which can either facilitate or hinder their academic and social progress. It is a tremendous responsibility to possess the potential to affect another human being so profoundly. We are not all equal in our ability to build strong relationships with our students. Therefore, it is vitally important to not only know what the benefits of a positive teacher-child relationship are, but to also be aware of some of the possible detriments of a negative one. If this teacher-student relationship is indeed as important as the research findings suggest, then it is equally important to become aware of, and learn some of the skills and strategies that exist for building and improving upon, these very important relationships. Therefore, in this literature review I will examine what researchers have discovered about the effects of the teacher-student relationship on students' academic and social development in order to not only develop a deeper understanding of our impact on our students' lives, but also to stress the importance of this aspect of our work.

Rationale for Improved Teacher-student Relationships

There are some barriers that teachers can encounter which makes this a difficult area for them. There can be personal differences which can make the process of relationship building difficult, but there are also external pressures which tend to diminish the ability of teachers to be able to focus on forging good, strong relationships with students. For instance, Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam (2013) state:

In addition to the emotional challenges students bring into the classroom, teachers work with great pressures to succeed with students academically. Accountability measures and their concomitant pressures make it harder for teachers to have time to create or maintain relationships with students (p.21).

Those who have taught in a classroom know about the effects of these outside influences on a teacher's ability to focus on relationship-building, especially with students who are struggling academically and with whom there may be some sort of personality clash. Students' behavioural challenges can also make it very difficult for them to have a positive relationship with their teacher. What is becoming increasingly clear is that the work of building strong, healthy and trusting relationships with students can have a very positive influence on students' experiences at school, as well as their academic and social success.

The research indicates that the impact of teacher-student relationships goes well beyond whether or not a student wants to come to school, or likes or dislikes his or her teacher. There are many ways in which a positive relationship with a teacher can manifest itself positively in the life of a student. It can result in better academic performance, as well as improved engagement and motivation, and a feeling of connectedness which helps the student to feel secure in the school community. This security, in turn, helps students to perform better socially as well as academically. Hamre and Pianta (2006), on the subject of student-teacher relationships, state that they "...provide a unique entry point for educators and others working to improve the social and learning environments of schools and classrooms (p. 49).

Teacher-student Relationships and Academic Achievement – The Research

Some of the studies that are referenced in this paper have concluded that positive teacher-child relationships can positively affect academic performance, behaviour and social success in school. Such positive relationships, built early on in a child's schooling, can be important predictors of their success in subsequent years. Baker (2006) states: “[t]eacher-child relationship quality predicted behavioral and academic indicators of school success during the formative elementary school-aged period, and seems comparably important for younger and older students” (p.223). She goes on to say that, “[t]here are positive associations between a good relationship with their teachers and the academic and behavioural indicators of children's school success across the time period of elementary school” (p.227).

Though the findings of Hamre and Pianta (2001) were correlational rather than causal, they stated that, “it is clear that the processes related to the development and influences of teacher-child relationships are important components of children's success in school” (p. 636). Further, Hamre and Pianta stated that their study, “provides strong, preliminary evidence that the quality of teacher-child relationships is one ... early marker of later academic and behavioral difficulties, available as early as kindergarten” (p.635).

Some studies have found that a strong teacher-student relationship positively effects behaviour more than academic achievement. Of their 2001 study, Hamre and Pianta state that:

As hypothesized, this study suggests that the quality of teacher-child relationships is a stronger predictor of behavioural than of academic outcomes. The results suggest that those children who, despite significant behavior problems, were able to develop relationships with kindergarten teachers marked by low levels of

negativity, were in turn more likely to avoid future behavioral difficulties than were their peers who had high negativity ratings (pp. 634-635).

It is difficult to ascertain whether it is the positive relationship which causes better academic and behavioural outcomes, or if it has more to do with the inherent ability of the child to form that kind of a relationship with their teacher. Regardless, the presence of a teacher with the skills and qualities required, with whom a child is receptive to building a strong, positive relationship, can be the catalyst for student success.

Vulnerable or At-risk Children

For children with significant academic deficits, the benefits of a caring teacher-student relationship do not necessarily lead to stronger academic scores. But such a positive relationship may benefit them with a higher level of social and behavioural adjustment, Baker (2006). If students with academic challenges form strong and caring relationships with their teachers, it does not necessarily mean that they will attain higher test scores or higher levels of academic achievement. Rather, they may still attain a higher level of school adjustment, equalling positive attachment to school and school success. Though this effect is not a direct one, it is a condition that makes student success a higher likelihood.

Children experiencing behavioural or learning problems showed poorer school outcomes and were less able to benefit from a close teacher relationship when compared to peers without such problems. However, a protective effect was noted, such that children with developmental vulnerabilities and a close teacher relationship were significantly advantaged relative to similarly affected peers who lacked such relationships. (Baker, 2006, p.211).

Sabol and Pianta (2012) also found that, “[m]ost strongly supported, close relationships with teachers are associated with improved academic and socio-emotional functioning among children with behavioural and demographic risk” (p. 225).

School Connectedness

Positive relationships with teachers can help students to feel more connected at school, and that connectedness, in turn, can also help students to realize academic success. Not only that, but more connectedness to school was related to less substance use, emotional distress, and violence or deviant behaviour in high school students (Blum, 2005).

According to Blum (2005), critical requirements for feeling connected include:

- High academic rigor and expectations
- Support for learning
- Positive adult-student relationships, and
- Physical and emotional safety.

One of the qualities that influence students’ positive attachment to school according to Blum (2005) was “perceiving that teachers are supportive and caring” (p.7).

How Do We Build More Positive and Beneficial Relationships With Students?

Although the teacher-student relationship is not the only variable for student success, it is one which cannot be undervalued. Intuitively one cannot deny the benefits of a positive relationship with one’s teacher, or the lasting effect that can have on a student. However, we must look at ways in which we can assist teachers in building more positive relationships with

students by offering strategies. It is also important to look at the possibility of interventions that can be put into place for students who are at risk or for whom this primarily important relationship has not had the desired effect.

Specific interventions should be considered for students who are showing problems early on in school. Some of these interventions may have a student placed with a particular teacher for an extended period of time (i.e. multiple years) or perhaps a student might need a fresh start with a different teacher. The important thing to bear in mind is that students with poor-quality teacher relationships will be at a disadvantage without some sort of intervention (Baker, 2006).

One notion that emerges repeatedly in the literature is that it is simply easier for teachers to forge positive relationships with students who are more competent socially, behaviourally and academically (Jerome et. al., 2008). So, how do we forge these relationships with the students who do *not* exhibit these competencies; the students who most need the positive benefits of strong teacher-student relationships?

Blum (2005) recommends that teachers can positively affect students' positive attachment to school with the following strategies:

- Establish high academic expectations.
- Provide consistent classroom management.
- Strengthen parent-teacher relationships.
- Encourage cooperative learning.
- Use behavioural and cognitive-behavioural educational techniques.
- Rely on peer-assisted teaching.
- Create democratic classrooms.

- Develop identified jobs for all students.
- Share positive reports of student behaviour and achievement with parents.
- Develop routines and rituals for the class (p.12).

Entwisle and Hayduk (1988) suggest that the students for whom teachers have high expectations early on, tend to demonstrate a high level of achievement helping those students to transition well into their schooling; an effect which appears to be a lasting one. This correlates to Blum's (2005) recommendation for positively affecting attachment to school by establishing high academic expectations. High expectations of students coupled with a positive relationship appear to have a favourable effect on student performance.

Personality Styles and Teacher-student Relationships

In reading Levy (2013) regarding attachment theory and psychotherapy, I began to ponder the bidirectional relationship between student and teacher, much like that of therapist-patient, and consider what each student and teacher brings to that relationship in terms of attitudes, learning, and past trauma, etc. There may be greater patterns that can be generalized, but each relationship is a very unique phenomenon, drawing out different aspects of each person's personality to create a unique interplay of attitudes and emotions which cannot be replicated.

Further, this leads me to question how past experiences can be beneficial or harmful to an interaction with a student. Individuals all have emotional, behavioural or psychological triggers and attitudes that set us apart from one another. If teachers are looking for ways in which to engage and emotionally support their students, how can educators account for all of these variables? It seems to me that one cannot. Yet, it may be argued that educators should address

their own childhood experiences, some of which may be maladaptive, in order to best help those under their care. How do teachers do that? This introduces a whole new aspect of the relationship between student and teacher, and that is teacher self-knowledge. Educators need to be aware of their own psychological landscape in order to mitigate their potential negative effects on their students. It may not be enough that one cares. It may not be enough that teachers are ‘doing their best’. Educators must strive to know themselves well, as they must also know their students.

By the time children reach late elementary school, they have already established their beliefs about who they are as learners and their capabilities. The role of the teacher in helping to shape these beliefs is a significant one. Citing Wenzel (2002), Baker states, “Children are likely to internalize positive school-related values and goals in a developmental context characterized by warmth and nurturance, such as that provided by a positive teacher child relationship” (p.212).

In their 2001 study, Stuhlman and Pianta used teachers’ narratives along with classroom observations as a measure of: (1) teachers’ negative emotions and experiences in relation to a particular student, and (2) the subsequent effect on the student and behaviour in the classroom. “Teachers expressing more negative affect about a child in their classroom showed a larger number of interactions and more observed negative affect toward the child in the classroom” (p. 160). They also found an interesting correlation between years of teacher service and the degree to which negative affect expressed in teacher narratives resulted in less sensitive behaviour towards students in the classroom. Interestingly, they found that though there was no difference in the *amount* of negative affect in teachers’ narratives, they did, however, find that teachers with less service tended to demonstrate more sensitive behaviour in the classroom than more

experienced teachers. Stuhlman and Pianta suggest that further research needs to be done to shed light on the characteristics of less experienced teachers which might explain this difference in action to the same effect. It seems reasonable to draw the conclusion that newer teachers have not had as much experience with one of the most difficult aspects of the role of teacher: the wearing effects of dealing with difficult teacher-student relationships on a daily basis. This is another possible obstacle to forging better relationships with students: burnout.

Recommendations for Building Better Teacher-Student Relationships

In his book, “Enhancing Relationships between Children and Teachers” (1999), Robert Pianta outlines some specific intervention techniques that teachers can implement in order to build positive relationships with their students, especially those most frustrating of relationships. Part of the process is to also help teachers to recognize their relationship patterns and experiences with students (p.126). Pianta also points out that there are classroom-level changes that a teacher can make in terms of classroom organization and structures put in place in order to enhance positive interactions and opportunities for socialization (149).

Other studies have found that there are specific aspects of the teacher-student relationship which can lead to academic, as well as social benefits. Hamre and Pianta (2001) citing studies by Bryant, Clifford, & Feinberg, 1991; Meyer, Waldrop, Hastings, & Linn, 1993; Pianta, Laparo, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2000), indicate that:

...teachers’ sensitive behavior toward children (e.g., responding in a timely fashion, anticipating of student needs and emotions), as well as the frequency of teacher feedback to the child, provide strong supports for children’s academic and

social competence in the classroom setting across a wide range of child characteristics (p.635).

Pianta, Hamre and Allen (2012) further posit four ‘levers’ producing developmental change for teacher-student relationships and interactions. These include: (1) *teachers’ knowledge and cognitions* related to their interactions with students, (2) availability of ongoing *relational supports for teachers* themselves, (3) teacher’s regular *exposure to individualized feedback* about their actual interactions with students, and (4) *a standard and valid “target” around which to focus* efforts that change interactions (p. 379).

The recommendations given in some studies in order to strengthen teacher-student relationships fall into the category of best practices; to focus on timely feedback as an example (Bloom, 2005). These practices do tend to have a positive effect on classrooms and students, but do these practices actually build a stronger teacher-child relationship? Are these practices going to help teachers build strong bonds with students, especially those at risk, or with significant behavioural issues? These are the students whom I believe have the most to gain from strong relationships with their teachers.

Problematic Responses

An interesting point that Pianta (1999) makes is that our current response to help children, many of whom are at risk, leads to, “...overdifferentiation and lack of integration...” and “...reflects a disintegration of the child-teacher relationships, which itself can be a negative force (p.37). He goes on to say, “[t]o the extent possible, a child can be maintained within the classroom with a focus on using interactions between the child and the teacher to buffer the

likelihood of failure” (p.37). It is the all-important relationship with the teacher that must take precedence. This can be very powerful and beneficial to the child. However, it can also be very difficult to meet the needs of all of the students in one’s classroom. Once again, however, it is the importance of a positive relationship which allows for success. “Children learn not to approach the teacher who is emotionally withholding and hostile; they engage and deepen connections with teachers who comfort and challenge them” (Pianta, 1999, p. 38). “Children who not only have poor relationships with their teachers but also have significant teacher-related behavior problems in the early years of schooling, appear to be a particular group that may benefit from preventative intervention programs” (Hamre & Pianta, 2001, p.635).

Criticism of the Research

According to Pianta, Hamre and Allen (2012), “[i]n too many cases, descriptive studies simply confirm the narrative and theory and do not provide tests that could actually disconfirm hypotheses and helps simplify complexity into actionable models” (p. 381). The ability to reduce the complexity of student-teacher relationships down into concrete terms, and therefore prescribe specific interventions that one can implement in one’s classroom, can be helpful. However, when it comes to building relationships with individual students, in specific situations, these studies and their generic recommendations arguably fall short of the mark. They may provide some good guidelines to follow, but relationships, as well as the people involved in building them, are distinctive; their circumstances and personalities, unique. What might work for a teacher in Vancouver may not work for a teacher in Alert Bay, and what works for one teacher may not even work for a teacher down the hall in the same building. Narrative inquiry might not provide a succinct list of specific interventions that may be carried out by teachers everywhere, but its practice provides insight into a living, breathing relationship. It can also highlight what

works for the people involved in a specific location and cultural context, and there are valuable lessons there.

None of the studies I have read have been able to adequately address the impact of ethnicity and gender in terms of student-teacher matching. Pianta broaches the subject in Hamre and Pianta (2001) and deems it an area for further study. I would posit that a match in cultural beliefs might also be a variable that needs to be studied as well. Cultural matching may not be something that can be easily studied on a large scale as a variable, but perhaps these variables need to be looked at 'in situ,' and evidence gleaned from teacher and student self-reports and observations, and narrative inquiry.

I am also somewhat surprised that I have not read anything in any of these studies about the importance of respect. Caring has been brought up many times as a beneficial quality for a teacher to demonstrate, but never respect. In my school, one of our tenets is respect, or *maya'xala*, from the indigenous language, *kwak'wala*: a word generally meaning respect for oneself, for others and for the community. Strong relationships are built on a foundation of respect, and without that respect the best of best practices may well result in a well-run classroom which agrees with students, but not necessarily the kind of relationship-building that has been found to be so important for student success. The all-important teacher-student bond that spurs students on to work harder, and to care enough to try to work through their difficulties, cannot be reduced to a check list that can be employed universally with universal results.

Teacher Narratives

These relationships are extremely complex and though studies have been carried out which have used different methods to quantify them, there are so many different variables that

must be taken into account. Narrative inquiry is another method of researching this complexity which may also lead to some important insights into the effect of both positive and negative relationships on students' academic and behavioural outcomes. According to Pianta, Hamre and Allen (2012), this kind of research does not go far enough to, "...simplify complexity into actionable models." To an extent, this is true; however, for every "actionable model" there must be many different variables that diminish their value in terms of prescriptive interventions in unique, unreproducible situations. For the above reasons, I have chosen to conduct a project that is informed by narrative inquiry. As seen throughout this literature review, building strong positive relationships with students requires an understanding of self, the students, and the cultural practices of the community. Engaging in a reflective "storying" of such experiences is one way to not only better understand my own experiences, but as an approach narrative inquiry may lead others to the same combination of reflection and action that are required in positive teacher-student relationship building.

In my next section I will share some stories and reflections of my own experiences with students, successes as well as failures, as I have struggled to create these important, supportive relationships in my own classroom. These stories will also endeavour to incorporate some aspects of the unique cultural context in which I live and work, as I believe it is an important piece which has been found lacking in the research.

Chapter 3: Project

Project Focus and Rationale

In my literature review I researched teacher-student relationships and their effect on students. I discovered that, although it makes perfect sense that strong positive relationships between teachers and their students are beneficial to students, these relationships can be of more importance to students with behavioural problems, Baker (2006). I realized that students whom we might designate as ‘at risk,’ are the students for whom this relationship could have a much more profound effect; both positive and negative. The purpose of my project is to examine my own relationships with my students. I have always thought that I was very good at building and fostering these relationships, as my students tend to like me quite a lot. I have a good sense of humour and my students like to make jokes and have a laugh. I also have a classroom which allows my students to express themselves a bit more freely in that regard. All in all, I would say that I have a good rapport with most of my students. I wanted to examine these connections to not only look for any common threads that I could possibly share regarding good relationship building skills, but also to bring some particular elements of my daily classroom life to light.

The research I carried out in my literature review indicated that the quality of the relationships between students and teachers could have a marked impact on not only a student’s academic achievement, but also their social/emotional competencies (Baker, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 1991). It also indicated that ‘at risk’ students may be even more profoundly affected by this relationship than others, perhaps even requiring this relationship to be a positive one in order to increase their chance of achieving personal success (Baker, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2005); Sabol & Pianta, 2012). It has always been my contention that a student who feels safe in his or

her classroom is more liable to take risks in his or her learning than students who do not. After carrying out my research, I have realized that the quality of the relationship between teachers and their students is just as important to a student's ability to take healthy risks.

When I finished my literature review I found that I had some questions about the specifics of place, culture, personality and the situation in which the teachers and students find themselves, and how these factor into the relationship-building process. These questions then lead me to examine how I relate to my own students and how the contexts of our community, culture, school culture and our combined personalities might look different or special here as opposed to others schools and classrooms.

In order to examine these relationships more closely, in my own unique context, I employed the use of narrative, specifically stories of my own experiences – my lived experiences. I chose this format primarily because I was interested in examining my own relationship patterns with my students with an eye to better understanding them and to demonstrate what it looks like from my personal perspective. The purpose of my project was not to prescribe excellent relationship-building techniques, but simply to demonstrate what it looks like for me, in my classroom, in my school and in my community. My intention was to show what relationship-building looked like for me in my specific contexts in order to possibly shed some light on particular aspects of that process which were unique and outside of the scope of the studies I had read. Relationships, after all, are complex entities which I did not feel could be 'boiled down' into generalities, especially when different contexts can be so divergent. I was interested in painting a narrative picture of some specific moments in time, with my students, from my own perspective.

In order to accomplish these goals, I set about writing stories about moments in my teaching career which had had some sort of a profound effect on me, and to examine how they related to my relationships with my students. These were the stories that I was most compelled to write. As much as is possible, I have tried to frame each story into context in order to facilitate the understanding of the relevance of the stories to my purpose.

Relationship-Building in Action

Several years ago, I had one particular student in my class. He drove me to distraction; always talking, always trying to be the center of attention, always managing to somehow take my lessons off task; highly emotional and very volatile. We had the briefest of honeymoon periods at the beginning of the year, but that ended abruptly in October. I had to be away for a couple of weeks because my elderly mother had fallen and broken her hip, and I accompanied her to the hospital and cared for her during her subsequent surgery and recovery. When I returned to my class, this student was out of control. It seemed that my absence had thrown this little guy off so much, that it took the rest of the school year to recover from it.

His academic skills were low, but he was very smart in many other ways. He was adept at manipulating the people around him to get what he wanted, and was not all that interested in being a part of the class. He had figured out rather quickly that if he did not want to be in the class, and he made a big enough spectacle of himself, that he would be taken out of the class by a Special Education Assistant and be able to do something with her instead. I remember vividly one particular time, trying not to give into his demands, attempting to teach a class, whilst he was flopping about on the floor like a fish out of water. As it was happening, I remember thinking, “This is insane!” Here I am, calmly trying to teach a class while everyone, including me, is

trying so very hard to ignore this child while he gleefully goes about his business, and no-one was succeeding one little bit. It was then I realized that he had won the war. I could not teach a class when he was unwilling to be in it.

I continued to try to include him, however. I tried to talk to him, reason with him, and reach him, to no avail. He was operating from the assumption that he was bad and that no-one liked him, as he would often tell me. He felt that all the adults were mean to him and unfair, and everyone went out of their way to make his life a misery. Reaching him seemed impossible. One day it would seem as if a kind of truce had been negotiated and the next it would be back to the screaming tirades of days previous.

Over the next few months, I worked very hard on building a relationship with this child; a child who so obviously had gifts to offer, but who found it very difficult to operate in this world, our community, let alone in our school. I tried to feed his talents as an artist and help him to reach the point where he would feel good about some of his work and save it, rather than rip it up in a fit of anger and self-hatred and throw it into the garbage. I made him a portfolio of sorts and would be quick to ask him if I could put his work into it before it came to that point. I kept trying to push him, ever so gently to try to do some school work, but his skills were so low that it almost always ended in tears: his and mine! We made some progress that year, but it was minuscule compared to the distance we still had to go.

I would like to think that the small steps we made to trust each other at that time paved the way for what was to come later. The next school year came and a different boy appeared in my class. We still had to start at the point at which we had left off, and he was still dealing with many of the same difficulties in his life which had plagued him before, but he was much calmer.

At that point he still was not very trusting, but he did not lose his temper quite as much, or experience quite as much frustration as he had the year before. What happened next has to be one of the greatest success stories of my career thus far in terms of forging a strong relationship with an at-risk student.

This child began to sit in class, and was able to start asking for breaks when he needed them. And more amazing yet, he began to read. Not only did he begin to read finally, but he made the most amazing progress possible. The next challenge we then had to face was having him do school work in class. He was rather distrustful off the start because he did not really understand that since he was able to read, he was now able to do more. It took a long while to teach him that he could be successful; something up to that point he did not really believe he could be. With a lot of encouragement and more exercises in mutual trust, he began to take steps toward risk-taking and participating in class. Each of his little successes led him to more and greater successes. Now it is difficult to match the image of the child I once knew to the somewhat confident child he is now.

This child has his bad days still. Sometimes he comes into school very tired and you know those days he is going to be quiet and reserved, and maybe even prone to a bit of volatility if things do not go his way. I have noticed a tendency as well on those days for him to be extremely hard on himself, more like his old self. This is when he needs someone to be there to cheer him on and to believe in him when he cannot believe in himself. These are the days when his behaviour can be somewhat challenging, making it that much more difficult to connect with him. However, I know from experience, and what I have learned in my review of the literature

regarding teacher-student relationships, especially Baker (2006) and Sabol & Pianta (2012), that vulnerable, at-risk students are much more affected by these relationships, so we must work extra hard at making sure it is a positive one.

Our current success was paved by a great deal of hard work on both of our parts. It was not easy or magical, but there was one moment that could possibly be described as magic. This is the story of one very important breakthrough on our way toward the relationship that we enjoy today.

Jack. *I was a little hesitant when September came along this past year, not only because of starting out the year embroiled in job action, but also because I was going to be getting, from across the hall, Jack. I had been thinking about Jack practically all summer, wondering how I was going to survive the upcoming year with him in my class. From what I could see, Jack didn't seem to adhere to any of the rules set out for him by the school or his classroom, and most of the interaction I had previously had with him was either because he was being disciplined in the office, or he was wreaking havoc on the classroom next door.*

So, September came, and things weren't going so badly and I thought, "Wow, all of that worry for nothing!" Managing Jack's behaviour and keeping his disruption of my class to a minimum was going much better than I thought it might. I often look back fondly on those precious weeks at the beginning of that particular school year when I was in "control" of my class, and Jack was behaving rather well.

Around the end of September, beginning of October, two events occurred which were to shake both of our worlds to the core; Jack's great uncle/father passed away after a lengthy illness, and my mother fell and broke her hip which began a stressful and emotionally draining

journey for me, and my mum. I went with her while she was having her surgery, essentially missing two entire weeks in my classroom. When I got back, things had changed drastically and that sense of being “in control” was not to be seen again for a good, long while.

I was very tired and stressed out, and dealing with all kinds of issues, now being responsible for both of my parents’ entire lives, and I felt very alone. Jack was dealing with the loss of the only dad he’d really ever known, as well as the grief that his great aunt/mum was going through. I’m sure that he was feeling pretty alone as well. He began to act out in profoundly disruptive ways at the same time that I was just barely holding it all together.

At this point, I need to say a few things about Jack. Jack doesn’t get a lot of social cues. In his mind, every instance of touch, accidental though it may be, or even sometimes just a look from another student, is an aggressive act purposefully meant to cause him harm; kids are always “being mean” to him. He is a child who wanders a lot around our community without much supervision, mostly because his behaviour is so draining for those who try to care for him. He knows his own mind and he doesn’t really appreciate anyone telling him what to do. He is cute and he is charming, which is most likely the reason that he’s still alive! I say this in jest, but he would provoke the impatience of a saint given enough time.

Jack became for me during this time a synonym for difficulty. When his behaviour really started spiralling out of control, I would actually grimace when I saw him come through that door in the morning and think to myself, “Here we go!” I’m quite sure that he wasn’t too thrilled by the prospect of being at school either, and it wouldn’t be too long before I was appealing to my SEA to take him to work outside of the classroom. This rarely worked either, as he would routinely come back to the classroom, without permission, to tell me all of the things

that the SEA was “doing to him,” and demand to stay in class. This usually meant that my class would then go off the rails.

There were many more interactions happening on a daily basis which are far too numerous to mention. The point is, Jack was becoming my nemesis; the anti-peace, anti-quiet, anti-joy, anti-learning, anti-teaching, anti-EVERYTHING in my life. I began to see him as my problem and stopped seeing him as a student. I could relate to his situation in an intellectual manner, but emotionally I had closed myself off to him as I dealt with my own sadness, pain and grief. It’s impossible for me to hate any child, but with Jack, I felt I was getting close to that, and for me was that would have been my ultimate failure as a teacher. I can usually find something good in everyone, but with Jack I had just stopped trying.

One day, we had a bit of a turning point though, Jack and I. It unfolded in a way that many other interactions between us had, with him crying and screaming at me in the hallway about something that not only the SEA had perpetrated upon him, but now the principal as well, in asking him to do as he was told, log off of the computer and come back to class. I kept trying to justify their actions as being quite reasonable and all the while Jack kept screaming at me to stop interrupting him, that I wasn’t listening to him, and to just leave him alone. In that moment, I stopped and for the first time in a long time I really listened to what he was trying to say. My own healing had reached a point where I now had something in reserve to give him. I sat down and I waiting for him to finish. There was a long, awkward pause as Jack was waiting for the next idiotic and insensitive adult, ‘teachery’ thing to come out of my mouth, but it never came. After a few moments I quietly asked him if he was finished. A few more times he yelled at me until he once again stopped, and again I waited. Then I asked permission to speak, which he finally granted and then he listened to me. I pointed out to him that he was doing the exact same

things to me that I had supposedly been doing to him; interrupting, not listening and not hearing him. In that moment we heard each other and made a connection – finally! This was May, I think? The school year was almost over.

That is not to say that we became best buddies after that, or that I was always happy to see his face come through that door in the morning, but I no longer held the pessimistic assumption that his primary goal on earth, and in school, was to make my day a living hell. And I'd like to think that maybe Jack felt a bit more heard and included in the classroom that I consistently wanted to send him out of. I began to spend more one on one time with him, and keep him in class as much as possible and our relationship has now transformed into something better for both of us. I'm sure that we have many more hallway "talks" in our future, but now, at least, we have something to build on.

Our relationship is on relatively solid ground now. That is not to say that we always see eye to eye, or that we do not sometimes become frustrated with one another, but after we turned that particular corner, we were able to trust and respect each other enough to a relationship that worked for us both. I have had many more opportunities to show him how amazing I think he is and I hope that he now believes what I say to be the truth. He has made such amazing progress since that time. I cannot credit our strengthening relationship as being the reason for his progress, but it has certainly eased the tension between us and has at times facilitated a bit of positive risk-taking on his part. This is the real benefit of having that kind of a bond with a student; their ability to reach beyond where they are because they trust that someone will be there to support them.

It would be wonderful if this was what happened all the time; however, there are times when I am not entirely aware of my behavior, and like anyone, I can sometimes be quite oblivious to the effect that I have on others. When it comes to teaching young people, it can be hazardous to not be aware of our impact on them. One occasion for deep self-reflection came in the form of an innocuous spelling assignment. I expected to see grammatically correct sentences using proper punctuation, but I never expected to be taught a valuable lesson about myself as a teacher.

Spelling it out. *I love assigning sentences in my class that my students have to craft out of the spelling words they're working on. Since I use a lot of humour in my classroom and have a warm and open relationship with my students, they get their creative juices flowing trying to think of ways to make of fun of poor old Miss May. I've even received ten spelling sentences in a row where the student has managed to use my name in every single one, and not always in the most flattering of ways. They grin as they hand them in, knowing that I will think they're funny too.*

I have one particular student who writes the most imaginative sentences. Sometimes they involve me, and sometimes they centre on other imaginative flights of fancy. I always enjoy reading his sentences. He shows such creativity in his thinking and is a very outside-the-box thinker. However, one day, as I was reading through his work and having a good laugh, I came across one that made me stop in my tracks. It said, "Sometimes Miss May is unfair." I was expecting the usual light-hearted ribbing he often throws my way, and there was some of that, to be sure, but this one sentence stopped me cold. "Sometimes Miss May is unfair." When, how and with whom? This is a student whom I credit with an incredibly keen sense of social justice for one so young, so I knew that I needed to pay attention to this, and I needed to reflect on my

behaviour with my students as well. It may be that this was simply another attempt to make a joke at my expense, but for some reason this one, simple sentence made me sit up and take notice.

There is a possibility that this student saw something and misjudged it because he didn't know the circumstances which preceded it. I felt that was a very reasonable and insightful way to assess the situation; however, the more I thought about it, the more I suspected that it had to be true, at least in some small way. This child is a keen observer and he may be a child, but I think his opinion should mean something.

To this day I don't know of any particular circumstance in which I was unfair. I can pinpoint times when I wasn't feeling well, or was under a great deal of pressure and was probably a lot harder on my students than the situation warranted, but as far as being unfair, I can't think of a single example. I can, however, say that from that moment on, I have been extremely vigilant about this apparent flaw of mine. I am always monitoring my actions just in case I might someday realize myself when I am being unfair and perhaps fix the situation before it becomes something I need to be called on by a nine year old.

I have never asked this particular child why he thought I was being unfair to begin with. I am not sure quite why; however, I suspect it is because I may have been afraid of the answer at the time. Now, after such a long period of time has passed since that assignment was completed, I am sure the question would be met with a quizzical look and a, huh?"

My Cultural Context: Experiences in my home community

Research into building relationships and the benefits to academic and social performance which match students and teachers culturally or racially has so far been rather limited, Bingham & Okagaki (2012); Hamre and Pianta (2001). If building a good relationship does depend on some semblance of mutual understanding, and I believe that it does, then having a teacher who comes from the same culture or race that students do, could be highly beneficial. Perhaps, however, even a small amount of common ground can be enough of a foundation to build upon. I can only share my own experiences which are somewhat unique considering my childhood, growing up in my community.

As I stated previously, I grew up in a small fishing community on the north end of Vancouver Island, called Alert Bay. My community is predominantly First Nations, though I myself am not. In some ways these divisions between First Nations and non-First Nations were rigid, and in others they were very fluid. Together on our tiny little island, and as children in school, we were very much blended to constitute something special in its own right. We like to think we are unique, and some ways we very much are, but we do share aspects in common with other small communities, other small island communities and other First Nations communities. We could make many generalizations, but still, we have our own ways that we feel are unique to us.

Two of my very first teachers were local First Nations women: Vera Newman and Flora Cook. We were also fortunate to be able to have classes in our school in Kwak'wala, the language spoken by the indigenous people of this area with Pauline Alfred, who was also from our community. Beyond that, every other teacher came from somewhere foreign to us. Some teachers came for short periods of time while others stayed for longer periods of time, and a

precious few even made lives here. Some of these teachers had a profound effect on us, but not always in the best of ways.

The teachers who left our school a better place than when they arrived were the ones who accepted us, were able to handle and use our typical brand of humour, and those who joined in, showing us that they did not feel they were above us; they treated us with respect. That does not mean to say that they were always the best teachers or were always kind and happy. I remember one particular teacher who could be very demanding and on whose bad side I occasionally found myself (not saying why) but he was one of the most memorable teachers I have ever had. He left here over 35 years ago, but I can still see his face and remember his name. He was not First Nations and I do not think he had ever lived in a small town before either. Alert Bay was one stop on his way to somewhere else, so it is not as if he could relate to us particularly well, but he had a quality about him that allowed a bond to form between him and us. He earned our respect where countless others had tried and failed. I cannot say that he believed in me personally a great deal, but he did have great faith in some of us and perhaps that is all I needed to see.

I feel extremely fortunate to be able to work in the community in which I grew up. One of the ways in which we feel we are unique is our particular brand of humour. We have a unique way of looking at the world that some newcomers find, well, a bit difficult to get used to. When colleagues join us from elsewhere, we know they have acclimatized when they can throw that humour back at us. As a teacher, I often use humour with my students, a humour that they understand and respond to because it is uniquely ours. In this way, I am able to relate to my students in a culturally similar way. This next story describes my use of humour in the classroom which, though perhaps not entirely unique to our cultural context, would certainly be labelled as typically “Alert Bay.”

"Are you serious?" My new classroom mantra (of late). *Lately, I have been focussing on getting my classroom management in order because I was unable to conceive of another year of poor, disrespectful behaviour from a group of students I teach a few times a week. My stress levels after classes with them were incredibly high and my enjoyment of the classes that I once loved to teach was at an all-time low. Following "the riot act" being "read" to my students by my principal, as well as myself, I have been experiencing a higher level of compliance. The one mystery that I cannot seem to solve is why these students, who seem to like me and from whom I couldn't see a malicious intent of any kind, would treat me the way that they had in the past. Perhaps it's something that I do to encourage the behaviour. I do, after all, tend to gravitate toward the students who are often the more disruptive and cheekier. I see a lot of me in them sometimes. And then I look back on the way I was in school and I think, they're no different than I was. And it's not as if I was a terribly disruptive student, but boy was I cheeky! That is, apparently, an inherited trait, though I digress. So I often feel somewhat hypocritical for calling students out on behaviour that I had engaged in when I was their age. However, I'm now the teacher, and the shoe is very much on the other foot, so to speak, so I feel that I am well within my rights to expect a different standard of behaviour, (i.e. they will need to change!)*

Anyway, lately I have heard these words come out of my mouth more than a few times in my classes, and they are: "Are you serious?" They are accompanied by a look, which we used to call, 'The Hairy Eyeball' when I was going to school. Where that came from I will never know, but it is that look a teacher gives you when your behaviour is outside of the accepted norm. Apparently, according to my students, I have perfected this look. The response that I get is a look of slight contrition from the student to whom I am speaking, and sometimes snickers

from surrounding students. The net result is a humourous way to deal with the fact that so soon after having behavioural expectations explained in a very detailed way, by two teachers no less, the student was already backsliding into habitually poor behaviour.

I don't know if "Are you serious?" is a pedagogically or psychologically sound way to garner students' compliance, but it seems to do the trick without having to break out the heavy-handed, "Leave my room," or "There will be a detention and a phone call home." The call home is something I am loath to do because as much as I want enough compliance in my class to get on with the tasks of teaching and learning, I also don't relish causing trouble for a student at home. I believe that we should be able to manage our differences in our own little classroom community without having to resort to bringing in outside authority figures to solve our problems for us. Maybe this is naive of me, goodness knows I've been accused of that on occasion, but I truly believe that we can build a relationship between us that is mutually respectful and conducive to learning.

I always tell students that there is a time and a place, and this is neither. My mentor used to always tell me that I just needed to expect compliance and to not put up with bad behaviour from students. I never knew quite how to make that happen. My classroom philosophy didn't match up with hers to begin with, and so it was very difficult to make this happen. With a little more experience under my belt I am finding my own ways to manage my classes so that my students have the freedom to be themselves, but I am still able to teach my classes. I know my students highly value teachers who give them a measure freedom to be who they are, but now they need to learn that there are boundaries, beyond which no-one is happy or learning. I remembered that heavy-handedness never worked with us as students, but that honouring our uniqueness, even in some small way, went a great distance with us.

Perhaps we need to not only teach compliance and respect, but also some boundaries and not the kind of boundaries where we say, "beyond this you have irrevocably messed up," but boundaries that they can learn to set for their own behaviour. Our students need to have a real understanding of the consequences of various types of behaviours and their effect on the classroom environment. It's important for them to be responsible for building the environment in which they can be who they are instead of having to simply conform. It's like teaching a concept rather than a fact; the learning is deeper and the chances for real change are much higher. And the best part of all, will be a teacher who is not quite so frazzled after a 45 minute block with them, and one who hopefully never has to bring out 'The Hairy Eyeball,' or utter these words again: "Are you serious?"

Life Impacts

As a teacher here now, I have a much better understanding of the teachers who came here to teach when I was a child and what they faced, and quite frankly I am sorry for what we put them through. Knowing now what a monumental task it is to juggle all of the responsibilities of being a teacher, as well as managing to do a good job at the one aspect of the job I feel is the most important; forging mutually respectful relationships. And when I say respectful, I mean that on a very basic level, a majority of the time, respect has been earned and shown by both parties. If we are unable, as the secondary caregivers in these young people's lives, to show them what *maya'xala*, an important First Nations teaching meaning respect, as in respect for oneself, for others and for one's community, really means in practice, then we fail them on a fundamental level.

As there are many variables which come into play when analyzing how to build good, solid relationships with students, there are also many external pressures which can inhibit, or at least adversely affect, our ability to carry out this most important of tasks. The stresses and pressures that teachers are constantly under, I feel, diminishes our ability to sometimes connect positively with our students. Sometimes, I can get quite wrapped up in the demands of the job and forget about what is truly important: my students. Some days teaching is just that hard; harder than anything I have ever done. These are the days when I am tired or feeling under the weather, when everything that could possibly go wrong pretty much does; the days when kids who are predisposed to going off the rails do, and the kids generally do not, do as well. I call these my 'white knuckle' days; those days when I question the sanity of my decision to become a teacher in the first place. I mean, just what *was* I thinking?

It is when I am feeling this way that the job of building and maintaining positive relationships with my students becomes a very difficult thing to do. It is when I am weak and tired in this way that I am in the most danger of not having enough left of myself to do this most important part of my job. And I believe this is *the* most important part of what I do, because without the foundation of a good relationship with my students, achieving all of our other goals becomes that much more difficult. This final, very personal story illustrates just how I have felt at certain points in my career and reminds me to keep my focus where it counts, even when life gets hard.

Miss Sisyphus. *Sometimes, when everything starts to close in on me and there don't seem to be enough hours in a day to get everything done, I start to think that I may have at least an inkling of how Sisyphus must have felt. You know, the guy with the giant boulder, condemned for all eternity to roll it up a hill, only to have it fall back down again and have to start all over.*

He was a king and this particular sentence was punishment for his deceitfulness. This makes me question, what did I ever do to deserve this? Sure, I get summers off, as well as Christmas and spring breaks, so the comparison ends there, but there are some points in the school year when I don't feel I can roll that proverbial boulder up the hill anymore; not one more time. These are the times when I do exactly the opposite of what I need to be doing, but then again, am I? I withdraw. I pull an imaginary blanket over my head and try to pretend there's nothing requiring my attention, other than the movie playing from my PVR, or the novel on my bedside table. Sometimes it works and afterwards I feel refreshed, and at other times it only succeeds in making me feel further behind and in a worse state of mind.

I'm feeling that way right now. In the midst of my literature review for my Master's, working on my overviews, attempting to get caught up on marking, and trying to figure out what I'm going to set up for the seven I.E.P.s in my class. At the same time, I'm wondering just when I'm going to have time to do all of the reading I need to be doing for my literature review, not to mention the stack of professional development manuals sitting on my desk with their pristine pages left unturned.

I'm trying to be innovative about the way I'm teaching writing this year, and now I've volunteered to be involved in a math inquiry. Don't get me wrong, I'm excited about the math inquiry, but I just wonder how I'm going to fare with such a heavy load; I'm no spring chicken after all. I try to boil it down, to understand why I'm doing what I'm doing. I ask myself if I should be looking for a different job. I ponder the question of whether or not I'm an effective teacher and what that would actually look like. But the question I ask myself most of all? Am I the only one who feels this way? Am I the only one who feels as if I'm not doing a good enough job? And then, pondering what 'good enough' means. Am I the only one who some days wants

to pack a bag and jet off into the sunset to a simpler, happier life somewhere else? I suspect not. I suspect more teachers feel this way than let on because we are supposed to be professionals who do it all, and it would never do to admit that we have these feelings. I suspect our long days and the many demands placed on us take their toll on many of us.

The past five years I've spent teaching have been the most stressful years of my life; however, they have also been the most rewarding. When I first returned home, I came to take care of my aging parents who were both having health problems, so that contributed greatly to my stress levels. I was also starting a new career, and that was a huge contributor. Those five years ended up taking their toll on my health. I'm starting to come back now, and have promised to look after myself better this year. I'm trying to avoid overly stressful situations. I'm trying to focus on the work rather than on the demands. I'm trying to do the best I can for my students without putting myself in jeopardy. I thought I was doing rather well until it all piled up on me again this past week.

I'm struggling and feeling once again like I just can't do it all, but I'm also loath to quit. I hate giving in or giving up, and so I march on, hoping that the coming week will tip the balance between meaningful and demanding. Usually the faces of my students as they file into class Monday morning help, even if they can be tired and maybe a bit cranky sometimes. They are why I'm here after all. They give meaning to it all. And maybe tomorrow that will fill me with enough "fuel" to get through everything I need to do; I hope.

Luckily, these kinds of days are few and far between; however, most other days have at least some of these elements in them. And then there is the problem of feeling perpetually torn in so many different directions. Some days it seems as if there are more demands from more

people than there is either energy, or years left in my life to fulfill. It is when these demands start to weigh on me that I am least able to give the kind of attention I need to, to the students who need it most; especially those who can make relationship-building an exercise in frustration and seeming futility.

And this bothers me – a great deal. I believe whole-heartedly that the emotional well-being of my students is every bit as important as any other aspect of their education. I try, to the best of my ability, every day, to show them they are loved and respected, so when I fail to do this, for whatever reason, it wears on me. I feel the bitterness of my failure when I am not the teacher they need me to be. This is the greatest demand of them all, and also my greatest challenge as a teacher.

Conclusion

If I have learned anything through my research and subsequent self-reflection, I have learned that there is no magic formula for building strong relationships with students which will be guaranteed to further them academically and/or socially. However, there are some strategies and practices that teachers can put into place which can be quite helpful. Robert C. Pianta (1999), one of the foremost researchers into teacher-student relationships and their effect on student achievement, wrote an entire book devoted to the subject entitled, “Enhancing Relationships between Children and Teachers.” In it one may find many excellent recommendations of best practices stemming from his research; a great resource.

I have also learned that though there are best practices which can aid in the relationship building process, there are also many variables which cannot be reduced to a convenient list. Everyone has a different way of conducting their classes and managing behaviour, as well as

different styles of teaching and relating to children; they will all look different depending on the teacher, student, classroom and cultural context. Knowing some strategies is a good place to start but more importantly, as educators we must also critically analyze our style of relationship building and exchanges with students, and ask ourselves what we are bringing to the relationship. Are we acting from a place of frustration or of understanding; are we being calm or reacting? We must bear in mind that although this positive relationship is not necessarily of paramount importance to some students, it can mean the difference, quite literally, between success and failure for others. The research informs us that at-risk students can benefit a great deal from a positive relationship with a teacher. As we struggle with our own personal challenges, and try to make connections with students who are different from us, or who can sometimes make it a very challenging task, we must be very aware of our thoughts and actions and how they may be helping or hindering this process; it is really that important.

At the end of my journey I was left with a niggling feeling that maybe I am not quite as good at the task of building strong, positive relationships with my students as I had originally thought. In general, I have a fairly good and warm relationship with my classes and students, but what I feel I have been failing at is reaching those students who most needed a good, positive relationship with their teacher; my 'at risk' students, which represent, on average, approximately one third of my classes. These are the students with whom positive relationships are quite often not the easiest to build. They can present with behavioural difficulties and sometime seem to try to sabotage any efforts at relationship building, like the student portrayed in the story, "Jack." They are the ones who challenge us. They can often have social/emotional issues which make it difficult to maintain one's patience when dealing with them. Oftentimes, they also have very

significant emotional needs which can be difficult to meet. I began to see that I was doing well with the segment of my class who, according to the research, most likely needed this relationship the least, and doing rather poorly with the students who needed it the most.

This took me down a path of self-evaluation and self-deprecation which made me feel very negative about my project and disappointed in myself. I felt that I was the last person who should be writing about great relationship-building skills. It was not until finally putting my stories together and trying to frame them into this paper that I realized how well I *had not* been doing. It nearly drove me to end this project. I had not set out to demonstrate my failures, yet that seemed to be the end result. However, after having time to reflect on this and to put it all into perspective, I realize that the end result of this project is not failure, but clarity; I see clearly the need to expend a great deal more effort to reach some of my students in a much more targeted and strategic way.

The end result of my project and the stories that demanded to be written was not one so much of analyzing great relationship skills that were not dealt with in the research as I had hoped, but a way of framing what these relationships meant to me personally. In doing so, I opened my own eyes to my own shortcomings. I had some great successes, as with the student, once again, portrayed in the story “Jack.” However, there were many other stories left unwritten that tell a tale of their own; stories of other successes that might have been, but did not come to the fore as moments which begged to be recorded.

After attempting to shed some light on the cultural context of my school and community, I am still not clear as to whether or not cultural matching is as important as the willingness to simply be open and understanding; to be able to give and accept respect. Cultural matters can

sometimes be difficult to navigate; however, as I indicated in my description of a memorable teacher from my past, he did not need to have a similar cultural background or experience, but simply a readiness to understand and to see us, the students of the Alert Bay School as individuals worthy of respect and dedication. In terms of being culturally aware and sharing a similar background to the students I teach, the willingness to see each individual in his or her own right, sensitive to each individual's needs may be the more important and useful goal.

The job of helping students to achieve their personal best requires the sometimes herculean task of putting aside all of one's own issues and focusing on the needs of those children who may even make the process of building a trusting, respectful relationship an exercise in seeming futility. The proverb goes: *"Love me when I least deserve it as that's when I need it the most."* And so it goes with at-risk children who push our buttons and can make the process difficult, but these are the students who, quite literally, need it the most.

A hope, wish and a prayer. *Recently, I had a small group of students in my classroom from "across the hall." They come to my classroom three times a week for a half an hour each time to work on reading skills. One particular child in this group has had many behavioural issues this year and, from afar, I have been drawing some parallels with "Jack." Her behaviour can sometimes be trying for her teacher as well as her classmates. I wasn't sure quite what to expect from her as I hadn't had much contact with her up to that point, but I was pondering ways in which I was going to try to manage her behaviour in this group so that we could stay on task. I had been working hard at trying to be extra funny and entertaining to keep these students' interest and focus. Toward the end of our lesson one day, in which she was participating fully,*

to my great surprise, this student said to me, "I can't wait to be in this class!" I won't lie, she was looking at our toy shelf when she said it, but at that moment I thought to myself, "I sure hope so kiddo, I really, really do. And I sincerely hope that I will be ready for you!"

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