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Creating and Cultivating a Multitude of Relationships in an Elementary Classroom

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by

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Chapter One

Overview

In a typical school year, a classroom teacher and their students spend one hundred and seventy days with each other. In that time span, the members of this classroom community see each other more than they may see anyone else, family included. For some students, the relationships they form in the classroom are more stable than the ones at home. Thus, relationships are vital to a student's experience in school, whether they are negative or positive. When it comes to relationships, some researchers would argue that they are just as important as academics due to the role they play in the social experience (Mosley et al., 2021).

In today's learning environment, relationships are harder to develop and maintain due to the nature of education in a pandemic. This makes it even more vital for teachers to form these relationships. Since I feel that relationships are this important, the question I will explore for this capstone project is: *How do relationships, both in the classroom community and with teachers, affect student achievement, primarily in the elementary school environment?*

The purpose of this project is to create a resource for teachers as they work to implement different ideas, techniques, and best practices for relationship building with their students. The hope is that teachers would then be able to use these resources, build relationships, and then utilize these relationships to promote academic growth and

success. This project will explore ideas for both traditional learning, as well as distance learning.

Chapter One will delve into why I am passionate about classroom communities and teacher-student relationships, why this topic is important, and the direction of this project. My personal experiences as both a student and a teacher will be shared. These will portray where I am coming from, their impact on my current outlook, and why this is worth researching.

Rationale

With the pandemic uprooting the traditional infrastructure of school and student learning, classroom relationships have become more critical than ever. Instead of having an in-person interaction, teachers have been forced to find new and different ways to bond with their scholars. It has been found that student-teacher relationships decline in quality as students move through elementary school (Split et al., 2011) so it is even more important that teachers have tools and techniques at their disposal to form these relationships.

My experiences in multiple buildings and with multiple grades have demonstrated to me the different priorities various teachers have to construct relationships. Some teachers dismiss relationships and put them on the backburner--an opinion I once shared--while others put them forefront into their practice. In developing my own practice, I have come to immensely value relationships and see building relationships as a necessity for effective teaching and learning. Quin (2017) has shown that positive

teacher-student relationships enhance student engagement. This makes it even more critical that relationships are built so engagement is increased and teachers are able to capitalize on this increased engagement.

The pandemic not only disrupted the student-teacher relationship, but the student-student relationship as well. When children have interactions with their peers only through a screen, are they able to grow their relationships with their peers as effectively? And even when students are in the same room, teachers need to be able to form an effective classroom community so students can experience positive relationships with their peers. This can be a challenge when children come from such diverse backgrounds and may not be able to relate with one another initially due to different customs and values. When students have positive relationships with both their peers and teacher, it stands to reason that they will be more comfortable and thus successful in school.

Background and Teaching Experience

When I look back at my own journey through school, I can identify several instances where relationships either had a significantly positive or negative impact. These were not just relationships with my educators, but also with my peers. I grew up attending school in a large southern Twin Cities metro district. My elementary class sizes were around 23-25 students, depending on the year and each class was mostly made up of students like myself: white and middle class. I loved school as a child and had close relationships with all my teachers from kindergarten to fourth grade. Looking back on

these years, my relationship was strong enough with each classroom teacher enabling recall of specific conversations or actions taken by each teacher. This lead to a motivation to learn, further leading to academic success as well. Despite not being a "popular" kid, decent relationships with my classmates developed in those years. However, the student-teacher relationship was not present in fifth grade along with a concurrent feeling of isolation from classmates due to a lack of strong friendships. It is notable that I cannot remember any specific interaction with my teacher from fifth grade, and that my academics were in flux far more than in previous years.

In middle school and high school, similar experiences took place depending on relationships with each subject matter teacher. There were teachers with whom academic excellence occurred due to our strong relationships. Heaven and earth would be moved to not disappoint, and they would continually challenge me. Looking back at classes where I struggled academically, they almost all share one thing in common--there was no relationship (or even a negative one) between the teacher and myself. In fact, memories exist of being turned off to certain subjects previously loved, fully because of interactions, and lack thereof, with teachers. I also was alone during these years, not sharing many connections with my classmates.

I decided to become a teacher after time spent in a white-collar job and not feeling fulfilled. I started student teaching later than many of my contemporaries and did not have much volunteer time in the classroom due to simultaneously taking classes while working. Student teaching took place in another large, affluent, mostly white district in the Twin Cities metro. This school prioritized academic results and teachers were often

nervous about what would happen if the standardized test results did not match expectations. When I took over my own classroom the following year, I came into the year heavily focused on academic performance. It was what had been drilled into me, and I had adopted these academically focused values from student teaching as my own. Relationships were on the backburner, and my own experiences were forgotten. The purpose was to teach, not make friends.

My first year of teaching was for fourth grade in an extremely diverse school located in central Minnesota. The school itself was reflective of a changing community with 40% of students classified as English language learners and 88% qualifying for free and reduced lunch. My class contained the high achievement cluster, leading to pressure from external sources to make sure that my class academically performed as expected. This was in addition to the pressure of being a new teacher approaching their first round of standardized testing. Looking back at my teaching, there is a teacher who did not really get to truly know their students. While the surface level information and discourse was there, our relationships never spanned more than that. Furthermore, it was a fractured classroom community that in many ways took its cues from my own relationships with students.

My second year started off in the same vein but sparked change in my own practice. My school shifted to a K-2 model, and I shifted too, going down to 2nd grade. This class was the biggest challenge in my career needing not only the touch of a teacher, but also of a confidante, a friend, and in many cases, just a stable and dependable presence. Many students in this class had many underlying mental health issues which

resulted in challenging behaviors. The difference in this year was the realization that my kids were not able to accept this heavy academic manner previously used. Instead, I kept expectations high, but spent a great deal of time truly getting to know students. I had lunch with them, solved problems with them, and by the time the pandemic hit my relationships with my class were stronger tenfold than the previous year. We were able to start pushing heavy academic content because relationships existed between students and teacher, as well as the relationships they had with each other.

This lesson stayed with me into my third year of teaching. I moved to teaching 1st grade at a school that mostly served a small town in central Minnesota and took over the classroom in mid-October. The immediate focus was on setting up a classroom community and building relationships. Because of the pandemic, building relationships was deemed critical due to the looming threat of distance learning. I wanted students to have a reason to stay engaged while we were at home, and felt like having that personal connection with them was key. My genuine and authentic self was on display with each student, and by the time we came back from distance learning in January, I was able to take the trust built with that class and turn it into academics. By taking the time and putting effort into relationships, this relationship was capitalized into academic progress.

The pandemic has given educators a perfect opportunity to look back at their methods and find what constitutes best practice. Relationships are critical to human beings, driving both interactions and experiences. As teachers, it is important to recognize and then capitalize on relationships, using them to our advantage to help students flourish. The student-teacher relationship is vital, but pupil-pupil interactions can

play just as much of a role in shaping an educational experience. Thus, my question is *how do classroom communities and relationships affect student achievement?* I feel as though there is a solid link, but I want to explore how substantial it may be and what determines best practices in forming classroom communities. How do the best teachers capitalize on their relationships? Is it better to focus heavily on relationships at the start of the year and then pivot, or should relationship maintenance be consistent throughout the year? Do cultural differences play a significant role, and how can a teacher successfully bridge cultural differences?

The goal of my research will be to create a resource surrounding classroom relationships that is shared with other educators and gives them strategies to use in their own classrooms. My focus will be on figuring out how relationships affect the student experience and what techniques educators can use to maintain and cultivate those relationships. While each class is different, I believe that there must be a set of standards and methods that would be most effective.

Summary

I believe that relationships are the key to the creation of successful learning opportunities and knowledge acquisition by students. Humans need relationships to thrive, and it is no different in a school setting than it is in the "real world." My belief stems from my experiences as a pupil in the school system and were cemented through my classroom teaching experiences at two different institutions. These experiences showed how relationships can both hinder and cultivate student growth depending on the

nature of said relationships. I hope to be able to provide my fellow educators with tools they can use to develop and nurture positive relationships in their own practice to best serve their young scholars.

Chapter Two of this work will focus on a review of academic literature and research regarding relationships in education. Furthermore, it will delve into what makes some classroom cultures successful and the steps educators took to bring out these results. Chapter Three will explain my project design and how I intend to fill a need in our educational system. Finally, Chapter Four will consist of a reflection of my project where I evaluate its effectiveness and my contributions.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

How do relationships, both in the classroom community and with teachers, affect student achievement, primarily in the elementary school environment?

Chapter One went into detail describing experiences in the elementary classroom that drove me to further explore the importance relationships have in the academic setting. Chapter Two will review a variety of literature to attempt to clarify, expand, and enhance understanding surrounding this research question.

The research reviewed and analyzed in this chapter serves as a vessel to better understand the correlation between relationships in the classroom and student achievement. The literature reviewed is broken into four sections, the first two focusing on relationships that occur in the classroom community: peer to peer and student-teacher relationships. The third section will then delve into the intricacies of the modern multicultural classroom and how the different cultural backgrounds of all participants contribute to community. The fourth section delves into distance learning, the effect of the pandemic on relationships and how teachers can maintain relationships through remote learning. The final section will explore the measurement of student achievement

today and how different approaches to relationships influence a student's academic

progress. The insights and information gained from this literature review will then be

used to develop a resource devoted to assisting teachers with relationship building

techniques in their own classroom.

Peer relationships in the classroom

This section reviews literature surrounding peer relationships in the classroom

community to determine ways and methods teachers can encourage and grow relationship

building in their classrooms, particularly in an elementary setting. It will describe

findings in the literature from which best practices will be pulled. First, it will look at the

influence teachers have on peer relationships in a classroom community, followed by

how the classroom climate affects peer relations. The influence peers have on each other

will also be examined since these are the relationships where students learn to develop

socially. When together, these areas will be pulled together to show the power of peer

relationships. As discussed by Rucinski, Brown and Downer (2018), human development

indicates that children can be swayed and influenced by situations and interactions with

peers.

Teacher influence. Teachers are akin to a Sherpa when it comes to helping students with

peer relationships. It is the teacher's responsibility to guide, conduct, and help students

adjust to social interactions. They can show students how to collaborate and work

together in a community (Morcom, 2014). Teachers who prioritize group work, creating opportunities for social interaction, cultivate students who are adjusted and want to support their peers, creating positive relationships (Morcom, 2014). Other teacher moves can prove crucial to peer interactions amongst students. Interestingly, students who had teachers that were knowledgeable about the peer interactions taking place in their community reported a greater sense of belonging and were more likely to combat bullying that took place (Gest et al., 2014). Further research by Gest et al. (2014, p. 55) confirmed this showing that a teacher's efforts to grow and cultivate positive friendships can "foster social and academic adjustment."

Sette et al. (2019) found that students' perception about which students teachers favor or were close to influences their acceptance from peers. Students who believed that their teacher liked them were more likely to be included over the course of a school year by their peers. The implication here is that students may be subconsciously taking cues from their teacher and treating their peers based on how they think their teacher treats them. This finding makes it vitally important that teachers are extremely aware of their actions because this study shows that their actions have consequences for a student's social relationships outside of the student-teacher one.

There are also direct actions and moves teachers can take that affect peer relationships in the classroom. For example, studies have shown that by altering classroom seating arrangements, teachers can change patterns regarding with whom

students get along (Gest et al., 2014). As the teacher is the head of the classroom, they can influence peer relationships by providing activities, avenues, and implementing techniques to benefit the overall classroom environment. Gest et al. (2014) found that students who made efforts to downplay status extremes were positively linked to peer community and that peer community had a significantly less decline when students took specific moves to reach out and include isolated students. This makes sense with the best practices teachers are taught in professional development and as they work towards licensure. The values of togetherness and inclusion promoted in society have an impact on the academic experience. Overall, teachers who strive to create community see positive results from their efforts.

Classroom community. When looking at a classroom community, researchers look to define it by a measurement of emotional climate. The emotional climate of a classroom is the amount of emotional support a child experiences on average in a specific classroom (Rucinski, Brown & Downer, 2018). A positive emotional climate is usually marked by respect, positivity, and a generally warm atmosphere. Teachers in a classroom with a high-quality emotional climate are student centered, sensitive to student needs, and use low levels of traits such as sarcasm (Rucinski, Brown, & Downer, 2018). This idea of emotional climate has been linked to academic achievement, both math and reading, and as a predictor of behavior in children. Furthermore, classroom climates with low levels of conflict have shown to positively affect student areas of experience such as learning

engagement, self-regulation, and aggession (Rucisnki, Brown, & Downer, 2017).

Cusack (1995) argues that the key to a successful, open, and harmonious classroom

community is by teaching peace to each learner, resulting in the qualities of patience and

listening.

There are a multitude of other positives from successful classroom climates.

Classroom climates where students support each other have been found to grow discourse

and critical thinking because the students and teachers are working together to grow

(Farmer et al. 2018). To establish these positive classroom climates, teachers must

establish a sense of community so that students feel comfortable and safe. Students who

were part of positive classroom communities and climates tended to express themselves

by drawing pictures expressing positive affect towards community in both a social and

academic sense without prompting (Farmer et al., 2018).

For all the benefits of a positive emotional climate in a classroom community, it is

not perfect. A classroom with a high emotional climate is one where respect,

collaboration and acceptance are practiced regularly. In one study, researchers found that

a high emotional climate did not help or change the experience of students who had lower

quality relationships with their teachers (Rucinski, Brown, & Downer, 2018). This

demonstrates just how vital the student-teacher relationship is to a child's school

experience. That relationship is so dominant that it overpowers successful relationships at

the peer level in determining outcomes. Rucinski, Brown & Downer (2018) also showed

that in classrooms where students tended to have a low-quality relationship with teachers, emotional climate was also low. Furthermore, Legkauskas and Magelinskaite-Legkauskiene (2021) found that 1st grade students who had low social competence (as perceived by the classroom teacher) had a significant link to bullying by the time they had reached 3rd grade.

Peer Influence. Negative peer influence is buffered by classrooms with a positive emotional climate, decreasing potentially disruptive behaviors that might occur (Rucinski, Borwn, & Downer, 2017). Teachers who leveraged the peer group of the classroom community reported less instances of student aggression (Gest et al., 2014). The implication here is that students do have an influence on their peers, and that children want to be a part of the bonded group. Marti and Ramirez-Iniguez (2012) found that peer to peer relationships strengthen social ties and lead to inclusion for students in the classroom community. These researchers also found that peer relationships are vital to academic performance. Peers that have stronger friendships with their classmates benefit from both cognitive and social scaffolding, and improved performance, both social and academic, in school (Marti and Ramirez-Iniguez, 2012).

Student-teacher relationships

The student-teacher relationship serves as the cornerstone for success. Over an academic year, many elementary students will interact with their classroom teacher more

than any other adult besides their parents. It serves as a bridge that teachers utilize to help

convey information and lessons to students, both academic and social in nature. In fact,

studies show that great student-teacher relationships have tremendous effects on behavior

and academic success (Mosley et al., 2021). It is for this reason that looking at the

student-teacher relationship is crucial to understanding the overall effect relationships

have across the academic experience. This section of the chapter will look at best

practices of student-teacher relationships and the importance of student-teacher

relationships.

One method of looking at the student-teacher relationship is a measurement called

TSRQ or Teacher-Student Relationship Quality (Mason et al. 2017). The two major

components that make up this measurement are Teacher-Student Closeness and

Teacher-Student Conflict. Closeness can be described as the warmth and positive

connection that exists between student and teacher, whereas Conflict is defined by the

lack of rapport between the student and teacher. In a study connected by Mason et al.

(2017), researchers found that over the elementary school experience, Teacher-Student

Closeness varied significantly from year to year, making it less effective in predicting

measurable achievement. This makes sense as students go from teacher to teacher every

year and a student might have a good relationship with one teacher but not another.

However, Teacher-Student Conflict is more stable, due to it being more of a student-level

variable (Mason et al. 2017).

Best Practices. When looking at building relationships, there are many ways in which the student-teacher relationship can come into play, with teachers needing to be aware of all of them to successfully manage their interactions with students. Mosley, Broyles, and Kaufman (2021) found that there are five themes that show how student-teacher relationships develop. In their research they found that the way a teacher goes about designing and structuring their classroom affects the strength of student-teacher relationships. Teachers can spend months agonizing over how they are going to set up their classrooms, not only in the physical sense, but in a management sense as well. Thus, teachers must be extremely conscious of how their decisions will affect their relationships with students. The second theme discovered by Mosley, Broyles, and Kaufman (2021) was that the actions teachers take affect student motivation. Interestingly, the authors also found that students must want the relationship to develop or the student-teacher relationship will never take off. Teachers serve as leaders in the classroom and "their actions set the pace for the development of teacher-student relationships" (Mosley et al., 2021, p. 17). These actions they take affect the motivation of their students. Rucinski, Brown and Downer (2018) found that the student-teacher relationship had more effect on academic and behavioral outcomes than peer relationships.

A third theme regarding student-teacher relationships found by Mosley, Broyles, and Kaufman (2021) was that teachers prefer students who succeed in academics and pose few behavioral challenges. While all teachers want to treat their students equitably,

it was found that their preferences seeped out into their interactions (Mosley et al., 2021).

This is crucial for teachers to realize as they go about their practice. As well intentioned

as a teacher may be, student success and behavior may color how they see each of their

scholars and thus influence the relationship between teacher and student. Teachers then

need to take appropriate actions to minimize this as necessary. Tying into theme three,

theme four of student-teacher relationships is that relationships improve with greater

interactions (Mosley et al., 2021). This plays to some common sense, in that the more a

teacher and student work with each other, the more opportunities their relationship will

have to grow. Thus, student motivation will increase and is tied to the quality of the

student-teacher relationship (Mosley et al., 2021). Mosley, Broyles, and Kaufman's

(2021) final theme of student-teacher relationships is that genuine and successful

relationships are "caring, trusting, and mutually respectful (p. 56)." Successful

relationships see teachers cheering for student success and setting them up with instances

where they can succeed in the school environment. This study by Mosley, Broyles and

Kaufman sets the stage for different actions teachers can take to create and develop

healthy relationships with their students. When designing their practice, teachers should

be asking themselves how a particular action will serve a student, and if it is beneficial to

the development of the teacher-student relationship. Murray and Murray (2004) advocate

for a larger discussion around teachers' attitudes about hot topic discussions such as

behaviors, gender, race, and disabilities. These attitudes can have a major impact on how

teachers approach their relationships with students. Teachers should be reflecting on how their individual opinions and biases contribute to the strength or weakness in their relationship building endeavors. Since the evidence indicates that positive student-teacher relationships can lead to desirable behavior and academics, it seems obvious that teachers should be prioritizing generating successful relationships.

In addition to advocating for teacher education around relationships, Murray and Murray (2004) argue for student education focusing on relationship skills. They found that social-emotional curriculums and programs are beneficial in providing students who may lack skills with the tools to create and maintain supportive relationships with others, and especially with their teachers. The benefits from this then influence other facets of education, such as a student's peer relationships. In the end though, the student-teacher relationship is a two-way street. Both the student and the teacher must put in the effort for these relationships to flourish (Murray & Murray, 2004). As will be discussed later, the benefits on both sides are too much to ignore for either party with lasting impacts that can transcend beyond the current school year.

Importance. Common wisdom says that relationships are key to both the student and teacher experience. As explained by Mason et al. (2017), healthy and supportive student-teacher relationships are vital to fostering and keeping a sense of belonging in school, leading to desired academic and behavioral experiences. Cline and Weaver state

"Students want to feel like the teacher likes everyone…not just a certain group" (2019, p. 17). By prioritizing relationships, teachers can attempt to make school as positive an experience as possible for the student, while also potentially boosting their academic performance and improving their social experience.

An interesting finding by Zee & Koomen (2017) is that teachers and students were more likely to agree about the level of conflict in their relationships compared to when questioned about the closeness of their relationships. Their findings were inconclusive when it came to looking at teacher experience versus quality of relationships and teachers of both genders tended to experience more closeness with girls than they did with boys (Zee & Koomen, 2017). D. Evans et al. (2019) found that relationships can both be a boon to teacher's emotional wellbeing, but a threat as well linking student behavior and teachers' emotions. This is extremely important when looking at teacher retention but also at how teachers view their students.

Multicultural classrooms

As we head into the near future, classrooms are becoming more and more racially diverse. By 2050, 36% of all American school children will be Hispanic, 36% Caucasian, and 28% African American, Asian, Pacific Islander and Native American (Downer et al ., 2016). This increased heterogeneity means that teachers will need to have tools to effectively create and nurture relationships that bridge different cultures. In this section, I

will examine research that looks at both peer and student-teacher relationships between different ethnicities as well as culturally relevant pedagogy to grow these bonds.

Relationships across ethnicities, peers. As talked about earlier, students who have positive relationships with peers and teachers generally are more engaged in learning and have more of a sense of belonging (Abacioglu et al., 2019). With classrooms becoming more and more diverse, this is a topic worth a deep dive. Abacioglu et al. (2019) does just that, conducting a network analysis to map out all the interactions between students and teachers in multicultural classrooms. Some of their findings lined up with common sense- children from majority and minorities groups all sought a safe, tolerant, welcoming classroom. These are qualities that all children seek for from school as it should be a safe environment. Thijs, Keim, and Geerlings (2018) found that peer relationships are not dependent on the ratio of students from their ethnic group that are in their class.

When looking at negative peer interactions, students experience less victimization (teasing, bullying, etc.) in response to teachers addressing acts of discrimination (Abacioglu et al., 2019). However, when issues of fairness surrounding different ethnicities are promoted by teachers, the amount of victimization increases. It is fascinating to look at how a teacher's actions, both in pursuit of equity amongst students, can have widely different effects depending on the approach. Finally, students of both

majority and minority groups tend to have a higher amount of motivation when there is a higher amount of integration in the classroom (Abacioglu et al., 2019).

L. Hornstra et al. (2015) found students in classrooms with higher levels of ethnic minority students possessed a higher sense of belonging. This is interesting but it is not as multicultural as one would think. Hornstra et al.'s (2015) study concluded that this happened because the classes were made up of a mostly homogenous group of students. Instead of looking at more integrated classrooms, Hornstra's (2015) study looked at classes that had so many ethnic minorities that they had become almost segregated from the white majority. Rjosk, Richter, Ludtke and Eccles (2017) had similar findings with relation to classroom belonging. They found that students had less of a sense of belonging in their classroom when there was a higher number of minority students. This lack of belonging also persisted in classes with a greater number of different minorities. Furthermore, a higher percentage of majority students led to a greater sense of belonging for majority students, and weaker sense of belonging for minority students (Rjosk, Richter, Ludtke, & Eccles, 2017).

Relationships across ethnicities, teacher. Ethnic minority groups are severely underrepresented in the teaching profession. Often students will have a classroom teacher who is of a different ethnic or cultural group than their own (Thijs, Keim & Geerlings, 2019). For example, in Head Start Pre-K from 2003 to 2004, 57% of African American children had a preschool teacher of a different ethnicity and 53% of Latino students

(Downer et al., 2016) Therefore, it is important to look at any potential effects that could occur in a student-teacher relationship between two individuals of different ethnicities. Thijs, Keim and Geerlings (2019) looked at this issue and found mixed results. They found that students of the ethnic minority are more likely to have a lower quality relationship with their teacher. This wasn't exclusive to a certain ethnic minority; instead it held true for whatever group was the local ethnic minority, or the underrepresented group in the classroom.

When looking at a racial or ethnic match/mismatch, the results can be rather revealing. Downer et al. (2016) found that African American teachers saw less growth in behavioral challenges from male African American students than their Caucasian counterparts. They also had a more positive view of the initial skills of black students than white teachers (Downer et al., 2016). While these don't speak to the specific relationship between students and teachers, it speaks to the relations between the two parties and the role ethnicity may play between the special student-teacher relationship. Verhulp et al. (2019) looked at student-teacher relationships in the Netherlands and found that teachers experienced more conflict in their relationships with one specific ethnic minority group than the others and the majority. This speaks to the potential for conflicts between different cultures, especially if there is a significant cultural divide in a school's location. Murray and Murray (2004) found evidence of this in that the highest level of conflict in relationships was between teachers and African American students. These two studies

can show that race might play a role in forming teacher perceptions regarding strength of their relationships with pupils.

Culturally relevant pedagogy. Cultural mismatch is prevalent in instruction of minority groups in the U.S., including Muslim students (Sabry and Bruna, 2007). Cultural mismatch theory is around the idea that academic failure occurs because of the differences between the culture students experience at home and the culture students experience at school. Muslim students can experience cultural mismatch in instruction through such aspects as unconscious prejudices limiting the time or attention they receive from teachers, and through the individualistic focus of U.S education versus the collective focus in the Muslim community (Sabry and Bruna, 2007). This example demonstrates how a one size fits all approach to teaching isn't effective for all our students. If they are experiencing cultural mismatch, then it is a teacher's responsibility to meet them where they are and adjust to them, instead of expecting students to conform. Conformity strips students of their identity and it is our job as teachers to promote students' individuality and to show the world who they are.

By changing pedagogy, teachers can potentially increase and improve their relationship with minority group students. Abacioglu et al. (2019) found that teachers who engaged in more multicultural pedagogy elicited stronger motivation in their students from minority backgrounds. As Abacioglu et al. (2019, p. 100) says "The more frequently teachers engage in multicultural education, the more motivated children are,

especially children with an ethnic minority background." This makes sense, in that

teachers who take the time to tailor their pedagogy to their audience will be able to

connect with them more than if they taught with a "one size fits all" approach. Finally,

with regards to teaching about ethnic diversity, the strength of the student-teacher

relationship is more important than how much a teacher teaches about diversity (Thijs,

Keim, & Geerlings, 2019).

Distance Learning

This section will review literature and research surrounding relationships in the

context of distance learning. As the COVID-19 pandemic forced a generation of students

into learning remotely, teachers had to become creative with how they cultivated and

formed relationships. Discussed in this section will be the effect of the pandemic and

innovations in forming relationships remotely. The challenges of creating a relationship

with students who the teacher has never met, or who have never met their peers, will also

be explored as well as engagement in the classroom community during remote learning.

Pandemic. In 2020 a once in a lifetime event occurred ushering in an era of education

that few had experience with prior to its occurrence. The COVID-19 pandemic forced

teachers to become creative and innovative as many were driven from the classrooms into

their homes. While distance learning had existed in a variety of forms prior to the

pandemic, COVID-19 brought it to the forefront and millions of children and teachers

experienced it for the first time. Close to 80% of the world's enrolled students- 1.6 billion

children- were out of school in the spring of 2020 (A. Page et al., 2020). Teaching and

learning remotely ushered in a whole new set of challenges with regards to relationships,

especially due to the lack of proximity.

One of the challenges presented by the pandemic was as simple as lack of access to

technology, or troubles using the technology on the part of students (A. Page et al.,

2021). In 2017, roughly 14% of children from six to 17 didn't have access to the internet

(Morgan, 2020). When students couldn't access the technology, then they couldn't access

learning and teachers had no opportunities to build or maintain that relationship.

Relationships that flourished at school didn't get the constant reinforcement due to lack

of interaction. Furthermore, since students were at home and many were frustrated at the

struggles resulting from remote learning, they lost opportunities for positive school

bonding, resulting in a reduction of willingness to learn (A. Page et al., 2021). Even

though the circumstances can't be pinned on the student or the teacher, the relationships

suffered because of the stress and frustration at the overall situation.

Innovations with regards to relationships. A popular way teachers innovated to maintain

relationships in the school environment was through the online meeting programs Zoom

or Google Meetings. In some environments, teachers explicitly went out of their way to

refer to these Zoom meetings as their "writing community" (Nunnery et al., 2021). Even

the change of simple words- from school to community- help students feel more

connected in the uncertain times of remote learning. Teachers also provided online

meetings or chats so that students could still have the time to interact with each other and

have the peer interactions they were missing out on from not being physically together

(Nunnery et al., 2021). Recommendations to keep up relationships also included using

the postal mail and landline phones, depending on the home situation (Correia, 2020).

Furthermore, providing timely and detailed feedback on student work has been shown to

convey a level of caring and interest on the part of the teacher, showing students that they

still matter to their teacher.

Another way that teachers strove to keep the sense of community and relationships in

their now virtual classrooms was to keep as many things the same from physical to

virtual as possible, including routines, groups, and expectations (Nunnery et al., 2021).

Teachers all over the globe met the moment by finding ways to innovate to preserve the

crucial school relationships.

Engagement. Technology issues contributed heavily to a reduction of student

engagement in learning during the pandemic (Morgan, 2021). Furthermore, because

students were no longer physically in school, they struggled with adjusting to the new

reality that home was a viable place to have school, and thus their engagement in their

education declined significantly (A. Page et al., 2021). According to one study, female

students spent 15% less time on remote learning during the pandemic than males, and older students spent more time than younger students (Q Nguyen et al., 2021).

With students at home, best practices for engagement relied around having students on camera and in active participation, keeping learning as similar to in-person school as possible. The work should be engaging as possible, with students either in a video chat, or a live text chat so they are able to interact with each other and achieve that social interaction they are missing out on (Morgan, 2020). Video based mini-lessons hook in students and help build the relationship with their teachers. because they see them on the screen and have face to face interaction. Even prior to the pandemic, teachers who taught remotely reported struggles with building relationships between them and their pupils (Hilli, 2020). This further demonstrates how the advances in video conferencing and interaction are even more important and vital to relationship building when students and teachers can't physically be together.

Student achievement and relationships

This portion of the chapter concerns a review of literature discussing relationships in the classroom and the academic achievement that may or may not result from it. As relationships are central to the school experience, it would make sense for relationships to have a significant effect on achievement. The section will first look at how the

student-teacher relationship contributes to academics and then will follow with a look at

the effects on achievement from the perspective of peer relationships.

Student-teacher relationships and academic achievement. When diving into student

competence in both reading and math, Teacher-Student Conflict had a statistically

significant correlation with reading achievement in 3rd grade, but not 1st or 5th (Mason et

al. 2017). These researchers noted the correlation of 3rd grade with the transition students

go through of learning to read to reading to learn. Furthermore, Teacher-Student Conflict

had a significant correlation with math achievement at the 5th grade level, a grade that

also sees significant change in complexity with regards to math (Mason et al., 2017).

Further research backs up these findings, empirically demonstrating that conflict can

impede student growth and achievement, whereas there has yet to be a firmly established

link between closeness and achievement (Zee & Koomen, 2017).

Some studies have similar findings, that strong student-teacher relationships do

not have a significant effect on achievement. A. Flieller et al. (2016) found that

teacher-student relationships did not affect test scores in mathematics or languages for

high school students. This study looked at individual students' results, not as a whole

class, but then measured the strength of interactions based off whole-group experiences,

leading the authors to theorize that this was one of the reasons for the discrepancy

between their findings and other research (A. Fieller et al., 2016). These authors further

contend that growing relationships in the whole class setting is critical, but that their

research indicates targeting relationship building interactions during whole class instruction is an ineffective method for encouraging individual growth (A. Fieller et al.,0216).

While not explicitly academic achievement, academic motivation can have a significant role in a child's academic performance. Guay et al. (2019) explored this idea in a study looking at students going from kindergarten to first grade. They found that students' intrinsic motivations to succeed at reading were related to their relationships with their kindergarten teacher, a finding that transcended ability levels. The successful relationship cultivated by kindergarten teachers led to students experiencing more joy and contentment when reading compared to those who did have strong relationships with their kindergarten teacher (Guay et al., 2019). Furthermore, the research implies that the benefits from strong student-teacher relationships aren't confined to one academic year. This means that a high-quality relationship between teacher and student could pay dividends much further in an academic career (or social experience) than the present moment. When creating and building relationships, teachers would be remiss not to consider the idea that their actions could have long-term effects on a student's experience. Guay et al. (2019) also found that this relationship wasn't just one-sided. Strong relationships with students were found to evoke beneficial teacher practices due to a desire to look out for the student. The relationship is symbiotic in a way- the teacher helps the student learn, while the student helps push teachers to their highest ability.

Peer relationships and academic achievement. The student-teacher relationship is not the only relationship that influences academic achievement. Sette et al. (2019) found a direct effect between a pupil's academic achievement and their inclusion from peers. Students who were more popular and felt included by their peers showed significantly higher academic achievement over the course of a year compared to peers reporting lower peer inclusion. Sette et al. (2019) theorized that this could be that peers were more likely to interact and have high-level academic discussions that peers could understand. If students have a higher level of peer inclusion, then they would have a greater chance of being involved in these discussions and reaping the benefits. On the flip side, if students aren't included by their peers, then they would have less of a chance to engage in relevant academic talk. Furthermore, as discussed earlier in the chapter, there is a link between a teacher's liking of students and their peer inclusion. Sette et al. (2019) further found that this in turn led to greater levels of academic achievement. This finding has a dramatic implication that a teacher's decision whether they like a student or not can lead to a significant increase in academic achievement. Again, this just further stresses how important that student-teacher relationship is to a student's academic experience. Not only is there a direct effect, but an effect through peer inclusion as well.

Conclusion

The professional literature discussed in this chapter looked at the power of relationships in the school setting and best practices for the maintenance of such relationships. The literature also spoke to the power of the student-teacher relationship and the peer relationships every student takes apart in daily. The necessity of remote learning and the moment teachers across the country were faced with was reviewed through the lens of maintaining relationships during a pandemic. The power of relationships and the effect they have on student achievement was explored as well.

Chapter Three will dive into a discussion around the research design for a project that will provide teachers with a resource to help build, maintain, and improve relationships in their practice. This project will be available in the form of a website that can be accessed digitally by teachers as needed, or in a professional development sense. Teachers can hopefully use this resource to improve their practice and the learning experience for their students.

Chapter Three

Chapter Overview

It is easy to forget that academics are not the sole part of a child's school experience. The relationships they experience day in and day out have the potential to shape many different aspects of their experience. Thus, this project's purpose is to examine the following research question: *How do relationships, both in the classroom community and with teachers, affect student achievement, primarily in the elementary school environment?* My project will be a website, designed to be a resource for teachers looking at growing and improving existing relationships in their classrooms. The website will consist of resources for teachers looking to cultivate community in their classroom, best practices for creating relationships with students, and culturally relevant pedagogy in interacting with a diverse set of young scholars. Relationship building is not a one and done skill; it is a practice that takes time to hone and changes constantly depending on the situation, making it even more necessary for teachers to prioritize a focus on relationships in their classrooms. Using this resource, teachers will be able to make this focus a reality.

The following sections will describe the plans for and development of the website. Furthermore, I will describe the research that supports this project, along with the intended setting and audience. Finally, the timeline of my capstone project will be laid out and discussed.

Research

Research stresses the importance relationships, especially those between the student and teacher, have on a student's education. Healthy student-teacher relationships foster an environment with both desired academic and behavioral outcomes, as well as a sense of belonging in the individual student (Mason et al., 2017). For them to succeed however, there needs to be effort made by both the teacher and the student, otherwise the relationship will crumble (Murray & Murray, 2004). The quality of the relationship helps determine the motivation of the student, the implication being that lower quality relationships lead to less motivation on the student's part (Mosely et al., 2021).

Along with student-teacher relationships, peer relationships are shown to affect student experience in the classroom. Students being influenced by peer actions and influences is indicated by human development (Rucinski, Brown, & Downer, 2018). It has been shown that classroom communities with low levels of conflict have higher levels of academic engagement and self-regulation (Rucinski, Brown, & Downer, 2018). Classrooms with strong peer to peer relationships generally lead to more inclusion for all students in the community, and tie into improved academic performance. (Marti & Ramirez-Iniguez, 2017). However, research does assert that the teacher can set the tone for peer relationships and the student experience (Gest et al., 2014). This highlights the importance of teachers being skilled in cultivating and maintaining relationships.

Furthermore, it has been shown that teachers who have a more multicultural approach are able to cultivate stronger relationships with their students. Students from

minority groups were more motivated and excited to learn under teachers who implemented culturally relevant pedagogy (Abacioglu et al., 2019). This is extremely important because in general, students who are from local minority groups have a lower-quality relationship with their teachers (Thijs, Keim & Geerlings, 2019). In the United States, this situation can happen quite frequently as demonstrated by 57% of African American children having a teacher of a different ethnicity (Downer et al., 2016). With this information in mind, developing techniques to connect with students from all types of backgrounds seems crucial to the modern-day teacher.

Project Description

Since research has shown the importance, both academic and social, that relationships have on the student experience, I felt that it was necessary to create a project to assist teachers in relationship maintenance. My project will be in the form of a website that can serve as a reference for teachers, providing knowledge, best practices, and suggestions. This website will be built using either the Squarespace or WordPress platforms, with an address of relationshipsinclassroom.wordpress.com. Both platforms have pre-designed layouts which determines formatting such as color, fonts and more. The website will focus on the key aspects of student-teacher relationships, peer relationships, relationships in diverse classrooms, and relationships in distance learning.

The first section of the website will focus on the student-teacher relationship. There will be an individual hyperlink to this section, and it will display a summary of research about the benefits of the student-teacher relationship. Sub-sections will include

best practices, academic benefits, and various ideas. Along with their own written content, each section will have links to resources such as articles and YouTube videos that further demonstrate either the benefits of relationships or best practices. Any linked content will be included if it can be consumed in a short amount of time- my goal is not to bog down teachers with pages upon pages of research, or 30-60-minute-long videos. The purpose of this content is to provide teachers with the information, and then give them the ability to research beyond if they so choose.

The second and third sections of the website will be similar in structure to the first, but focus on peer relationships and multicultural relationships, respectively. Each section will open with a landing page that contains a summary of the section and then links to subsections that will each get more specific. The subsections for peer relationships will talk about the teacher's role, classroom climate, and building a classroom community. The multicultural relationship subsections will look more at different cultures, specifically Somali, Hispanic, Hmong and African American, giving teachers ideas and best practices on how to reach across cultural divides, develop culturally relevant relationships, and different needs for each community. Further resources will also be included for both main sections as in the first.

The fourth section of the website, which focuses on relationships in distance learning, will look like the first three, but have a few key differences. It will be more hands on, with links to Seesaw activities, videos, and Schoology courses that are all

relationship builders. I will be including some that worked well for me in my own practice, as well as those from colleagues and other sources.

This website's purpose is to be as teacher friendly as possible, allowing teachers to access information that may help them in their practice. By writing and compiling resources, suggestions, and ideas, I believe that this project can serve a need that isn't specifically addressed in formal teacher education.

Considerations and Setting

As discussed in Chapter Two, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced individuals all around the world to adapt to new methods with teachers at the forefront. In a pre-COVID world, I would most likely have chosen to develop a PD instead of a website, as in person meetings were the norm and an efficient way to convey information. But as meetings have moved increasingly online, I feel that it is important to adapt to the current situation. Designing a website resource fits the current climate because it is something that can be accessed from anywhere by anyone. It does not require a code to get in, or presence in a physical space. Like a book or journal, it can be visited whenever and returned to as the user desires. The ability of websites to highlight sections and allow simple navigation means that users don't have to peruse pages upon pages of text or listen to long lectures in an uncomfortable environment or shaky internet connection. This website can be accessed without having to worry about COVID precautions, and as a website, can be updated in the future to acknowledge new information or techniques. For all these

reasons, it felt obvious to me that designing a resource using the medium of the internet made the most sense for the times.

Audience

In reflecting on my first years of teaching, I went into the experience confident about my knowledge in academics and their instruction. As I learned though, teaching is far more than just about academics, and one area that I felt particularly unprepared for was that of building relationships, not only between myself and students, but between students and their peers. In designing this project, I had in mind teachers who were new to the profession. This website is meant for teachers who have just graduated from school, license in hand and are going to wade into their first teaching job. My hope is that this resource will supplant what they have learned in teacher education, and provide them with techniques, skills, and knowledge that they can use right out the gate with their first classes. It is also intended for teachers who may have gone through their first year without being as strong in relationships, such as myself, and want to change or grow their practice so that they can be more effective with future students.

Furthermore, the section of this website targeted around culturally relevant relationships and pedagogy is designed for teachers who may be teaching a new community for the first time. In my career, I had experiences with co-workers who were used to teaching a homogenous set of students and when their classroom diversified, struggled to connect with the changing backgrounds of students. It is my hope that this website can be a resource for that set of teachers who want to connect with their students

of different backgrounds and may just need additional information to help forge those precious connections.

Assessment

When constructing a project such as this one, it is crucial to design a method or measurements to gauge its effectiveness. Thus, a survey will be sent out to users of the website to engage them in a discourse about what helped them and what was lacking. The survey will be designed as a pop-up that interfaces with the user as they browse throughout the website. Furthermore, it will be sent out to a list of known users who either registered with the website or were recommended to access the project.

Instead of just simple yes or no questions, it is important to ask higher level questions to truly understand if this website is a valuable and helpful resource. One question set asked will be "What one specific piece of information provided changed your outlook or practice? In what manner did your practice change due to this new information?" The questions deviate from easy answers to provoke a thoughtful response. Answers to this question can then provide insight to what information presented resonated with teachers and how they then used that information in the field. Another set of questions will be "What information provided surprised you? Upon reflection, does it track with your experiences?" This set would garnish insight to what on the website was unique and covered gaps of knowledge that teachers didn't previously possess. Furthermore, the reflection will then give me feedback on if the website matches what currently is taking place in classrooms. Finally, demographic information will be

collected from respondents. This is vital to looking at the effectiveness because it will verify if the project is reaching the intended audience, or if it's reaching a group that was previously unforeseen.

Timeline

The project started development in June of 2021 and will be completed by December 2021. The seven months of work consisted of research, development, revising and will culminate in publishing by the end of the calendar year. Chapters One through Three were written and revised primarily between June 2021 and August 2021. Chapter Two was an intensive labor of love due to the intense research demands, revising, and coordinating findings across all aspects of the project followed by committing these findings to writing. The project portion, the website resource to support educators in cultivating classroom relationships, will start active development in September 2021. Final revisions of Chapters One through Three will take place simultaneously with a target completion of early November 2021. As the project itself nears completion, Chapter Four will be drafted to reflect on the effectiveness and process of the project's development. Finally, I am aiming to complete the project by late November or early December of 2021.

Summary

Chapter Three revolves around describing the project website as fulfillment to the question *How do relationships, both in the classroom community and with teachers, affect student achievement, primarily in the elementary school environment?* The initial

sections of Chapter Three introduced the project, explained the reasoning behind its creation, and then described the project's content. The considerations around the project and the intended audience for the website were then discussed. Finally, Chapter Three ends by reviewing how the effectiveness of the website will be measured and the timeline for project completion.

Chapter Four will be an examination and reflection of the development of this website. The accomplishments will be celebrated, and the limitations discussed to achieve a comprehensive overview. It will offer a conclusion to my research and the efforts undertaken.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

Overview

Throughout the development of this project, I have strived to answer the following question: *How do relationships, both in the classroom community and with teachers, affect student achievement, primarily in the elementary school environment?* The goal was to create a resource that could be readily available and accessible to teachers, providing them with the information needed to help make their practice more successful and fulfilling. Thus, a website was chosen under the belief that it was the best possible way to present the information discovered. By creating a website, I was able to address four different areas of relationships that are present in the classroom and tie my resource into a variety of others across the profession. My hope is that it will be a resource that both new to profession and veteran teachers use to enhance and reflect upon their own practice.

This chapter will explore the process of crafting the project and reflect on not only its creation, but the discoveries made along the way as well. The key literature responsible for helping mold the project will be revisited, presenting the information, and examining the influence each piece contributed. The implications of my work will be discussed as well as the limitations that may be present in the work, leading into how the

work could be expanded on in future ways. This project will close by delving into the benefits this project may have for other teachers and wrapping up the entire work.

Reflection

I was drawn to this topic and project based upon my own experiences in my first year of teaching as well as my student teaching. In my first year of teaching, I felt such a great deal of pressure to have my students perform academically that I didn't take the time to focus on creating authentic relationships with all my students. It was one of the biggest regrets of my first year, and one that has stuck with me throughout my career, making me determined to help other new to profession teachers not make the same mistakes I made. While professional developments, motivational speakers, and administrators all talk about the importance of relationships, it seems that tangible reasons on why they are important can be hidden, as well as actual strategies to create them. Thus, the idea of creating a resource designed around providing these tangible reasons and strategies was born. The project was further enhanced when I reflected upon my experience in student teaching at a school with an ever-diversifying population. The teachers struggled to connect with their students from backgrounds they had never encountered, creating a divide between teacher and student. This experience encouraged me to target veteran teachers with my project as well as those who might be teaching a community new to them and need ideas. This decision helped enhance the project overall and give it more weight then it might have had originally.

As the website was constructed, the structure of the project underwent a few changes. Initially, the project was going to consist of a home page leading to four main topic pages, which further lead to roughly three sub-topics that were each made up of their own page. As I was playing around with the website's tools and structures, I found that this format made the website unnecessarily complicated. By separating each of the sub-topics, the flow was interrupted, and it became a pain to go between each sub-topic. Therefore, in consultation with my content expert, I made the decision to put the information in each sub-topic onto the main subject page (for example, "Student-Teacher Relationships"). When I did this, I found that the information flowed better, and that this format still promoted the easy to access design I had in mind when I envisioned the project. This change was most profoundly felt in the "Multicultural Relationships" section. The original vision had many sub-sections, based around different cultural backgrounds teachers may encounter in the classroom. However, I ended up folding this information into the main topic page as discussed above and then providing links and resources. This change also helped me personally feel better about the presentation of the information due to a concern if it was my place to speak with authority on skills and strategies that are effective for each type of background. As a white male, I hold great privilege and wanted to be extremely conscious of that fact. Therefore, this responsibility was given to the resources written and produced by individuals who were members of the communities discussed. By presenting these resources, they were introduced to educators, but didn't co-opt the original ideas as my own. This change made me feel better about the section, and potentially more authentic.

One of the biggest discoveries that I made during this project was about how passionate I truly am about the importance of relationships in the classroom. As talked about above, I had a connection to the topic from the start, but as I delved into the research, I found myself increasingly excited about the topic. It was surprising to me in that it cemented in me how much my ideas and practices around teaching had evolved since I started in the profession. Furthermore, as I researched and worked on the project, I found I was using my discoveries in my daily practice at my new school. This was a nice bonus to the project, and as I look forward in my professional career, I am further excited with centering my practice around relationships of all shapes and sizes.

Literature, Revisited

The teacher's role in cultivating relationships being critical to the student experience was a main theme that frequently cropped up in my research for this project. Mosley et al. (2021) laid out the five themes for developing successful student-teacher relationships: structure of teacher practice, teacher actions, teacher biases, relationships improve with greater number of interactions, and successful relationships are "caring, trusting, and mutually respectful (p.56)." These five themes had a major contribution to the capstone project's creation, as they set the lens that I viewed resources through. As I wrote suggestions for teachers, I thought about how they fit within Mosley's five themes to make sure that they were sound advice. This process was also followed when embedding videos, resources, and links throughout the website. Murray and Murray's (2004) finding about how the student-teacher relationship is a two-way street also played

a role in advocating for giving students agency in the relationship. While the teacher can do many different things to set the relationship up for success, a successful end result requires effort from both parties.

Even though the student-teacher relationship is supreme amongst relationships in determining school experience, peer relationships also have an influence. Rucinski et al.'s (2018) research found that the teacher can execute a series of moves to build a positive and successful classroom community. Successful classroom communities have then been linked to academic achievement and as predictors of child behavior. Gest et al. (2014) detailed specific moves such as altering seating arrangements and taking the time to understand the peer dynamics taking place in the classroom, such as which students are friends, where drama is, and the overall mood. Like Mosley, Rucinski and Gest's work helped me write and frame my suggestions for teachers primarily in the section of the website surrounding peer relationships; as I wrote suggestions, I would continuously reflect on how it affected the relationships between students in the classroom. It even influenced my own practice as I now regularly think about how my practice affects my own students.

The most surprising and interesting aspect of my research concerned the disagreements between multiple sources surrounding the connection between student-teacher relationships and academic achievement. Mason et al. (2017) exemplified this disagreement best when showing a statistically significant correlation between relationships for reading students in 3rd grade, and math students in 5th grade, but not in 1st

or 5th, or 1st or 3rd respectively. Mason posited that this had to do with the difficulty of the material in those two grades, namely concerning the shift from learning to read to reading to learn in 3rd. Flieller et al. (2016) backed up parts of Mason by finding that teacher-student relationships did not affect mathematics or language arts test scores. One study that is critical to this conversation, however, is Zee & Koomen (2017) who could not establish a positive relationship but firmly established that conflict in student-teacher relationships can impede student growth and achievement. This just confirms that while the positive connection isn't fully confirmed, it is still important for teachers to focus on relationships because if they cultivate negative relationships, the results will show in student growth and achievement. The negative relationships finding makes sense to me based upon my own experiences and makes me want to work harder in my own practice to cultivate the best relationship possible with my own students.

Implications and Limitations

The implication of this project is that teachers will need to look inward to best understand if they are engaging in practices that best serve relationship creation. Relationships are so prevalent in the school experience that teachers cannot afford to ignore them; they must take the time to prioritize them in the same way they would prioritize academics. As discussed, academics can be boosted if relationships are successful. Thus, after utilizing this resource, I hope that teachers are reflective, asking questions such as: Do my experiences and biases affect my relationships building? How could my teacher actions be impacting the relationships between peers in my classroom?

What about my current practices could be adjusted to produce a more desirable outcome regarding relationships? Is what I am doing to build relationships with one community of students successful with students from another background. If teachers can take the time to have high quality reflection surrounding these topics then I will have found my project to be successful.

There are some limitations to this project as well. A potential limitation is that a major part addresses distance learning. The future of remote learning is in flux as political climates change, COVID-19 evolves, and understandings of best practice develop further. Remote learning existed before the pandemic and will exist after the pandemic, but the sheer number of students and staff participating in distance learning will most likely never approach the levels it did in 2020-2021.Thus, devoting a significant portion of the project around strategies to make remote learning successful might not have as much future value as the other sections in the project.

Another limitation surrounds the multicultural relationship section of the project. As a white male, I can only speak to my experiences and am not an expert on other cultures and backgrounds. Thus, this section does not contain much material solely created by me to help other creators. To address these limitations, I included resources written and developed by community members and experts of these different cultures and backgrounds to create authenticity. This section is truly more a curation than a creation. While a workaround was found to potentially address these limitations, they still need to be considered when reviewing the project.

Moving Forward

This project presents many intriguing possibilities about how to move forward when looking at relationships. One of the areas that would benefit the most from further exploration is around multicultural relationships in the classroom. Research into the quality of teacher relationships with students from specific cultural backgrounds, such as Hmong or Somali, with their peers and staff would fill a void of information. As America's schools grow more and more diverse, this information could help educators plan and reflect on their practice to best serve their students from these cultures. If I were to continue researching, my next step would be a qualitative study comparing the relationships of students from different backgrounds with their teachers. Finding out what works and doesn't work with students would be enlightening, especially to see if a relationship building technique works with one culture but not another.

I would also find it extremely interesting to look back on relationships in remote learning after three to five years. Do students who reported a strong relationship with teachers during distance learning have greater academic achievement than those who did not? Did the quality of relationships during this time affect students' outlook on their overall school experience? The uniqueness of distance learning provides an area ripe for reflecting on and studying its lasting effects, or lack thereof. As an educator, I am extremely intrigued to be able to see the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students.

Benefits to Profession and Distribution

I firmly believe that my website has the potential to enhance the teacher experience from the information they can take away and use in their own classrooms. I have researched and curated information that will help teachers in their quests to be successful in fostering positive relationships throughout the classroom. Both new to profession and veteran teachers can use the information provided to either adjust or add to their practice. The information is presented in an accessible and quick format that teachers will appreciate for its succinctness. The work itself highlights how important relationships are and gives ideas on how to foster them in the classroom, hopefully creating benefits for the intended users. Teachers are not just tasked to teach academics-they teach how to be members of society and using the material presented in the project will help them accomplish this task. What's more is that as our country ages, the classrooms will further diversify, creating situations in which teachers may be working with students of backgrounds they never had before. This capstone will benefit those teachers by giving them suggestions and strategies to differentiate their relationship building processes to reach each one of their students. My hope is that teachers who use my project will be intentional and reflective on how their practice enhances the relationships present in their classroom communities.

One of the target audiences for this website are teachers new to the profession. To distribute the website, I plan on reaching out to my colleagues who are new and letting them know of this project's existence in case they would be intrigued by the information.

Taking that a step further, I also plan to connect with teachers who are mentoring student teachers or practicum students and encouraging them to share this with those under their guidance. My hope would be that this website would spark ideas in those individuals currently training to be teachers that they could utilize in their practicums and then refine when they have classrooms of their own. Another way to reach both new teachers and current teachers will be to post the website on social media sites such as TikTok, Instagram, and Pinterest to maximize the number of interactions. Furthermore, colleagues at my current school have also requested for it to be sent to them for perusal, further increasing the project's exposure. Finally, my capstone project will be posted to Hamline University's Digital Commons web portal when approved. This posting will allow others to see it, and hopefully they will be intrigued enough to explore and use the information provided.

Summary

The capstone project process is one for which I am extremely grateful to have gone through as it has given me a better understanding of my role as a teacher and helped me develop better practices to best serve my students. I have created a project that can help new teachers who might find themselves in the same position I did in an efficient and accessible manner. To achieve this result, I had to put in an amount of effort and time that is reflective of how much this project ended up meaning to me. The excitement when I realized my hard work could be useful to others was one of the best feelings I've had in my own education. My literature review spanned many sources and delved into the

different types of relationships and their effect on the classroom. I took this research and used it as the bedrock of a website that helps teachers cultivate and build relationships in their classrooms. This chapter discussed the research and creation process, implications, limitations, future research, the project's benefits, and how it will be disseminated. This is the end of a chapter, but it is not the end of my growth as an educator. I hope to take my learnings from this project and continue to evolve and grow to best serve my students and myself. It is my hope that this project will help other teachers grow in their own practice as much as it has helped my own.

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