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REAL-ATIONSHIPS

AN EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY
ADVOCATING FOR AN INCREASED EFFORT TOWARDS
AUTHENTIC TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

BY

K. Britton

B.S. in Elementary Education (K-8), St. Joseph's College, 1994

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Liberal Studies

In

Education

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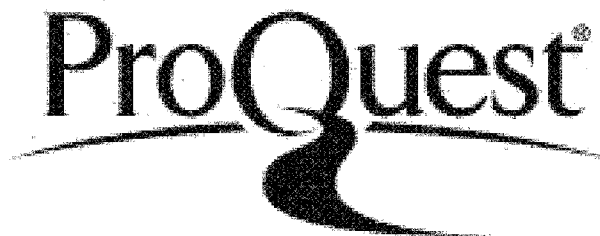


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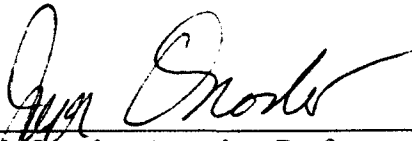


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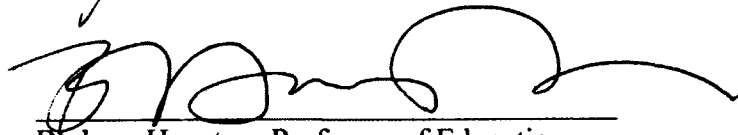
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Thesis Director, Sarah Stitzlein, Assistant Professor of Education



Joseph Onosko, Associate Professor of Education



Barbara Houston, Professor of Education

May 14, 2012

Date

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ABSTRACT

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University of New Hampshire, May, 2012

The impact an educator has on a student's life far exceeds the academic content being learned. The development of positive relationships between the teacher and student fosters the student's feelings of connectedness to their education. A strengthened connection leads to an increase in motivation, effort, and achievement. Unfortunately, positive teacher-student relationships are not the primary focus of today's educational systems. An educational philosophy advocating for *real-ationships* emphasizes the need for positive teacher-student relationships. The *real-ationship's* characteristics and implementation are described in detail, while real-life examples depict the positive experiences I have had as an educator within *real-ationships*. It is a philosophy that can be adopted by any teacher, any grade, at any type of school; it offers a 'way of being' that cultivates healthy, positive encounters, interactions, and connections with one's students.

INTRODUCTION

Accidents, life circumstances, and the experiences resulting from them are the seeds from which memories are born. Some of these memories are placed in the forefront of the filing cabinet within the brain, others are pushed to the very back, hoping to avoid recall, and then there are those memories placed somewhere in between. The experiences which gave fruition to these memories have guided and shaped my personal life, academic career, and philosophical views. These ventures, whether positive or negative in nature, enabled me to grow both professionally and personally. Each experience furthered my knowledge, while simultaneously showing me that my way is not the only way, it is merely just another way. I learned that people prefer talking over listening, yet everyone wants to be heard; that people typically enjoy answering questions and talking about themselves, and that my expression of authenticity while interacting nurtured positive interpersonal connections. Who I wanted to be, what I wanted people to feel when interacting with me, and how I fulfilled these desires is the backbone of this educational philosophy.

A survey by the ING Foundation of 1000 Americans ages eighteen and older highlights the prominent role teachers have played in their lives:

- * 88% said they had a teacher who had a “significant, positive impact” on their lives
- * 98% believe that a good teacher can change the course of a student’s life
- * outside of family, teachers were seen as having the greatest impact on students’ lives while growing up (ING, 2010, p.1).

The worth of an educator goes far beyond the academic subjects they teach, for they

influence whole persons. Schools and teachers endure an immense amount of pressure today. Be it performance on standardized tests, keeping pace in the technological world, intensifying curricula demands, or a dwindling budget, one thing is clear; the development of an authentic teacher-student relationship is not the primary focus. Supportive, interpersonal teacher-student relationships appear to have become increasingly difficult to foster and altogether less likely to exist. Yet, as the statistics above show, a good relationship between the teacher and student has an enormous effect on the student's life. There is a simple, yet effective way to preserve the ailing teacher-student relationship, while still maintaining the schools' stressors: test scores, curricular demands, and financial stability. An educational philosophy based on the development of a distinctive teacher-student relationship provides the necessary solution and a relatively simple approach to redirecting our academic energy.

CHAPTER I

A REAL-ATIONSHIP DEFINED

The focus of this educational philosophy is relational and addresses the dire need for the development of an authentic teacher-student relationship both within and outside of the classroom. In an educational world highly sensitized to maintaining curricula demands, state standards, and standardized test scores, the school systems have neglected the significance of “the relationship between teachers and students, the relationships of students with one another, and the relationship of students to what they are learning” (Rosenberg, 2003, p.XV). The philosophy is targeted towards adolescents in middle school, but it can easily be adapted to reach any grade level. Many educators currently

possess or are already familiar with the qualities and traits required. The desired relationship suggests that the educators explore and seek an understanding of students as multi-faceted persons living within many diverse societies. This relation-based educational philosophy is termed a *real-ationship* and strives to define the interaction between the teacher and student along with the characteristics, cultivation, and benefits of such a relationship.

The *real-ationship* does not imply that the teacher is working towards a friendship, parental relationship, or even a relationship of equal standing. What it does suggest is that the teacher seeks a connection with the student built on a foundation of authenticity, respect, and empathic understanding. These connections start out as simple observations of the student, whether academic or nonacademic in nature. The teacher utilizes the observations as a means of communication to initiate a real-interaction. The *real-ationship* should be recognized as the trunk of the educational tree that supports and nourishes the growth of all other branches of education. By targeting the teacher-student connection, knowledge of one another accumulates and promotes more seamless teaching and learning experiences; this transition is a direct result of a *real-ationship's* positive effect on student behavior, motivation, and performance.

CHAPTER II

QUALITIES CHARACTERIZING A *REAL-ATIONSHIP*

AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity, the quality of being real or genuine, is the first of the three qualities that identify a *real-ationship*. The expectation is that the teacher will be authentic when engaging with students; this includes, but is not limited to sharing real-life experiences, honest thoughts, and genuine feelings. The teacher reveals an authentic self, that nurtures real-interactions between himself and the students. In addition, the teacher must have a genuine regard for the student as a person. This involves the acknowledgement of the person's (student) life, situations, and experiences. Authentically recognizing and supporting the student as a whole person provides the student with a sense of connectedness to the teacher.

Teaching authenticity can be compared to teaching someone how to tie his shoes; being genuine is a quality that is learned best through modeling and practice. One can lecture about the ways to tie one's shoes, but if it is not demonstrated it is going to make it much more difficult. The same is true for being real; it is not something that should be merely lectured about, rather, it needs to be put into practice. If teachers model authenticity while interacting with students and other adults then the students' exploration and discovery of their authentic selves is encouraged.

The teacher's willingness to share his experiences strengthens the connection with the students, opens the lines of communication, and prompts a variety of thoughts. Sharing of this type affords the students a view of the teacher as an individual who

participates in the same world as they, who mingles in various social settings much like they do, and who has life experiences comparable to their own. The teacher's integration of real-life experiences when interacting provides his students with real-life examples that are applicable and meaningful. The students gradually come to recognize a more humanized side of their teacher, that he is not *just* a teacher, but also a person who has a life, family, and interests.

When opening up to others in an authentic manner, vulnerability is an inevitable byproduct. Teachers who can genuinely and honestly accept their personal limitations demonstrate for the students that it is perfectly normal to not always have an answer. This type of authenticity demonstrated by the teacher when acknowledging her boundaries gives the students the freedom and respect that may enable them to expose their own limitations and capabilities. As a result of the teacher's realness and honesty when interacting, trust is fostered. This is proven beneficial because students on average "work hard for people they like and trust" (Johnson & Reed, 2008 p.221). Additionally, the students may become more invested in their work and show increased academic success.

Stories and experiences shared by the teacher are a great way to dialogue authentically and provide the students with examples of how authenticity can serve them in real-life situations. For example, when the topic of verbal harassment was raised during class I used this opportunity to share my own experiences. I described how I felt in middle school when kids tormented me because of a lisp. I brought the issue to life by opening up to the students with a story about my life as an adolescent and explaining the genuine emotional pain and fear I endured. They could identify, whether directly or indirectly, given the similarities in age, issue, and type of experience. In a very real way,

I presented a different facet of myself; I had momentarily stepped into their world and connected with their emotions and ‘typical’ problems. Examples such as this gave me an opening to interact in a real way with the students and also allowed them the chance to reflect upon themselves and their actions (and consequences of such actions). Ultimately, this enabled the class to become a safe environment in which to explore such issues.

The cultivation of authenticity is not limited to oral communication and can be used through the written word as well as physical gestures. Differentiated comments particular to each student, on papers, homework, tests, etc. is a good way to display authenticity through writing. On the other hand, physically demonstrating authenticity requires active listening on behalf of the teacher, an acknowledgement of what the student has said, followed by a response that is based on what the student has conveyed. The teacher’s appearance should display “an open, nonselective receptivity” (Noddings, 2005, p.15), which mirrors Noddings’ use of *engrossment*. Gestures such as direct eye contact along with openness in the teacher’s presence and facial expressions will help the student recognize that the teacher is trying to participate in a real-interaction. An unbiased welcoming and an overt willingness to give the student attention create a real-connection based on authenticity.

RESPECT & “CAN YOU HELP ME TO UNDERSTAND?”

The perpetuation of one’s authentic nature leads to **respect**, which is the second characteristic of a *real-ationship*. A key component of respect in a *real-ationship* is the question “**Can you help me to understand?**” which works in tandem with respect. Respect and “Can you help me to understand?” are equally indispensable when initiating positive interactions and insights. The use of authenticity and respect within a *real-*

ationship parallels Noddings' idea of *modeling* care in her relations. The job of the educator in both philosophies is to model authenticity and respect through their interactions with others. Explaining or lecturing about the need for these qualities is not sufficient; the students need to witness it in action. This is especially true if one has not seen or experienced it previously (Noddings, 2005, p.22). The outward display of respect lets the student know that the teacher is accepting him as a person of value. Respect within a *real-ationship* challenges the educator to put aside prejudices or stereotypes based on first impressions of the student. This proves profitable to both parties; the educator enters the interaction free of presuppositions and the student is granted the fortuity of beginning the interaction with a feeling of respect.

As with authenticity, respect can be expressed physically through facial expressions, eye contact, and the teacher's behavioral demeanor. Actions such as speaking *to* the student and not *at* the student will allow for two-way conversations, moving away from the teacher alone doing the talking while the student listens. Respect when dialoguing should be expressed by a calm nonthreatening tone of voice. Teachers can make comments showing respect regarding the student's effort and participation during class. From my experiences, acknowledgement of the students outside of the classroom (hallways, cafeteria, after school events) is an even better way of showing respect. A greeting, comment, or joke shows the awareness I have of the students and that I am willingly interacting with them as persons, not just as students whom I teach.

Every one of the students entering my classroom at the beginning of the school year brought with them a two year history within the school acquired from sixth and seventh grade. It is not uncommon for teachers to share their experiences and opinions of

[certain] students, thus creating for these students reputations that precede them. These students are very much aware of how they are viewed and come to expect certain behaviors or attitudes from all teachers. As an eighth grade teacher, I found that when I showed authenticity and respect in my interactions my success in forming *real-ationships* increased. Based on this finding, I started the first day of each school year discussing examples of respect and how it pertained to the students' interactions with people, places, and objects. I also emphasized that their conduct in previous years was not my concern; my concern was how they would conduct themselves from this day forward. Regardless of their past, from this day forward, everyone started with a clean-slate and would be both afforded and held to a certain standard of respect. This permitted all students to work towards a positively evolving self; they could start anew behaviorally and academically without judgments.

It is idealistic to think that all students given respect will in turn be respectful, but if the educator has been authentic in her interactions and has established expectations of respect, then the teacher has a common starting point with which to address the student. Often times, students that have acted inappropriately instantly perceive that they are in trouble, which instinctively triggers defensiveness, aggression, or complete shut down. None of these reactions prove useful when trying to work with the student and gain an understanding of her behavior. In a *real-ationship* the first step to diffusing these reactions begins with the question “**Can you help me to understand?**”.

This important question eliminates the sharpness of accusatory-type statements and questions; for the student, this eases the feeling of being under attack. Asking this question impresses upon the student that no determinations have yet been made. The

teacher shows that she is genuinely and respectfully looking for the student's help in gaining a clarification of the problem. This does not mean the teacher approves of the behavior or that the student is exempt from accountability for the questionable behavior; the student is still held accountable for an explanation of what has occurred and why. This particular question, "Can you help me to understand?" gives the time and attention the student needs to explain, rather than defend, her perception of the situation. Additionally, this allows the student to decompress without angst. While listening to the student's rendition of the situation, it is crucial that the teacher "really hear, see, or feel what the other tries to convey" (Noddings, 2005, p.16). The explicit attention given to the student provides her with a sense of authentic support and understanding in expressing herself. The educator's ability to "listen and respond differentially" (Noddings, 2005, p.19) reflects the authenticity and respect found within a *real-ationship*; there is authenticity in the teacher's specific response to the student and respect when listening and allowing the student the time to state her viewpoint.

Previously, I used a real-life example about verbal harassment that gave insight into my authentic self. Using this same example, respect and the question "Can you help me to understand?" will be highlighted. Hypothetically speaking, a few days after sharing my experience with harassment, I overhear one of the boys from class teasing a peer about how she talks with her new orthodontic braces. That day, I discreetly ask the boy to come speak with me one-on-one and let him know I am interested in talking with him. Upon meeting, I begin the conversation by attesting to the positive traits and behaviors he has shown thus far; Noddings' refers to this as *confirmation* of the student, an attempt by the educator to "spot a better self and encourage its development"

(Noddings, 2005, p.25). The development of the *real-ationship* or real-interactions, has established knowledge of one another, and helps me discern what the motivation might have been for his behavior (Noddings, 2005, p.25); this discernment comes “from a knowledge of this particular other and by listening carefully to what she or he tells us” (Noddings, 2005, p.25). Similar to Noddings’ confirmation, I remind and make the student aware that he and I both know he has the capabilities to be a decent person. Up to this point, I have neglected to raise the issue at hand, and have only spoken with the student about his character and previous behaviors. This has allowed him time to disengage from the fight or flight response and to self-reflect. In a respectful manner, I would address the issue by saying “(student’s name), **can you help me to understand why you said those things to your peer?**” At this point, I may choose to bring up the personal experience I had shared in class and how he felt about what I had shared. During the dialogues, respect and authenticity are maintained. The conversation is guided in a direction that prompts the student to reflect on why he behaved in that fashion and the consequences that his actions had on everyone involved. This discussion also identifies the triggers that lead to the undesirable behavior, how he can increase his awareness of these, and the actions he can take to avoid the stimulation of poor behavior. I reinforce the fact that his disrespectful behavior does not define him, but does require consequences.

For those students that do not take responsibility for their actions, a more in-depth dialogue and exploration of behaviors needs to take place. This may require additional time and my protocol is to set up a second meeting time; I make sure the student understands that this additional time is not punitive, but rather a continuation of our

conversation. The student and I will then unpack more thoroughly what thoughts or actions preceded the incident, what triggers were there, and how he felt before, during and after. The goal is to better understand one's behavior through continual dialogue, guidance, and reflection. The reflection is when the student is asked to examine the impact his behaviors had on others and how they might have felt. Vivian Paley used a similar approach in her own elementary classroom, stressing the importance of communication between the teacher-student when a classroom rule is broken. It is not just about disciplining the student, but prompting him to think about his actions (Paley, 1993, p.113). Respectful interactions and the use of the question "Can you help me to understand?" enhance the teacher-student relationship, while developing inter- and intrapersonal skills.

EMPATHIC UNDERSTANDING

How many times have educators heard their students say "you just don't understand"? **Empathic understanding**, the final quality to characterize a *real-ationship*, answers this infamous complaint. The attempt at empathic understanding mirrors the very methods prescribed for actively displaying respect. Empathic understanding challenges the educator to adopt a perception other than her own; specifically, this means the inclusion of the student's perspective. Empathic understanding places an emphasis on the educator's efforts towards perceiving and interpreting the student's experiences, feelings, and thoughts, in accordance with how the student does.

Adolescents are extremely perceptive and intuitive regarding their teacher's demeanor; acting genuine, but not truly being genuine, is more obvious than adults would

imagine. Gable, Reiss, and Downey (2003) found that “within relationships, behaviors, and perceptions are highly intertwined” (B, G, & H, 2011, p.6) and have a profound affect on ensuing interactions between the teacher and student. In other words, a student’s negative perceptions of teachers from previous experiences will influence any present and future interactions. The value of authenticity and respect in the teacher’s interactions becomes a significant factor in student perception, one which also affects how he interprets the relationship between him and the teacher (G, B, & H, 2011, p.6). Empathic understanding encourages the teacher to take the students perspective into consideration as a means to improve the relationship. Looking from the student’s vantage point provides the empathy and understanding necessary to form connections and ultimately *real-ationships*.

From a professional and personal standpoint, for me, empathic understanding when dealing with others seems to be the most difficult tenet of this philosophy to continuously employ. Often, I find myself prone to overlooking and replacing empathic understanding with my own view point, or worse yet, casting an immediate judgment of what I believe to be the other’s perspective. Through empathic understanding, the teacher’s perspective becomes bifocal, to include the student’s vantage point. Her perspective is no longer the only one from which her decisions and ideas typically stem. By taking on this additional viewpoint, she has the ability to attain a better understanding of the student’s motives, thoughts, and feelings. The goal is for the teacher to remain unbiased and incorporate the student’s “social perspective” (G, B, & H, 2011, p.6) into the total picture. Displacement of the teacher’s own perceptions provides reinforcement for the student, leading to a more authentic connection between the teacher and student.

Utilization of the student's perspective gives the teacher insight into her vantage point concerning the *who, what, when, where, and why*. Conclusions from the research conducted by Gehlbach, Brinkworth, and Harris explicitly showed that an educator's ability to exercise perspective taking "generally manifested stronger associations with teacher student relationships" (G, B, H, 2011, p.15). This emphasizes the positive impact perspective taking has on the strengthening of teacher-student *real-ationship*. Empathic understanding, including taking the perspective of another, procures a keener consciousness of the student as a person, his character, background, and thoughts. The student's respect for the teacher increases with the teacher's ability to see her perspective and acknowledge it with empathic understanding; a stronger bond is created and a greater sense of confidence in the connection develops.

Empathic understanding does not mean total unquestioning of the student's actions or behavior; rather, it calls for an acknowledgement and validation of the student's actions, motives, and feelings. Often, the student's desire is to have his voice heard by someone who is willing to listen, recognize his vantage point, and "hear him out" without casting immediate judgment. By way of empathic understanding, the teacher delineates his appreciation for the student's explanation, and guides her towards the recognition of why the behavior is unacceptable. The greater the amount of support felt by the student, the more confident she becomes in the teacher, and the greater the chance she will be willing to accept the teacher's perspective in the future (G, B, & H, 2011, p.15). In sum, empathic understanding caters to a more open dialogue between teacher and student, thus augmenting each other's knowledge of one another and concurrently strengthening a real-connection founded on authenticity and respect.

CHAPTER III

IMPLEMENTATION OF A *REAL-ATIONSHIP*

Jimmy walks into the classroom with a new haircut towards which the teacher remarks, “Jimmy why did you change the color of your hair from blue to green, I like it!” Sonya walks down the hallway with her head down and looking quite unhappy, which is not typical of her. You find an opportunity to speak with her in private and ask, “Sonya you looked bummed out today, are you okay? Is there anything I can do?” The dialogues above seem simple in nature and may, in fact, take time out of your day, but each shows an authentic, respectful, and an intentional empathetic understanding of the students. Each teacher used the two character traits necessary to start a real-interaction and a lead into a *real-ationship*. Execution of the *real-ationship* requires the educator to **observe** his students in various settings and translate these observations into **communications** with the students, which are representative of authenticity, respect, and empathetic understanding. Real-interactions originate from the observations made by the educator, which in turn serve as the catalysts for future communications.

OBSERVATION

Observations help with the initiation of interactions with students and additionally assist the educator in compiling knowledge of the student’s individuality. The educator’s observations should come from a variety of settings, including, but not limited to, the classroom. Hallways, bathroom areas, the cafeteria, and school-related events all provide a first-hand illustration of the student’s world and the different roles she plays in that

world. As a student in the classroom, she may present herself quite differently than she does outside the classroom, her personality, demeanor, and interactions may be totally unrelated to the student who is typically seen in class. The teacher might find that the student is more comfortable revealing her “self” and its various sides outside the classroom. Attention to students outside of the classroom shows the awareness the teacher has for the student, and as mentioned previously, that the teacher cares enough to acknowledge them as individuals. Whether it is a new pair of sneakers, her class work within a group, or a piece of artwork displayed, each observation can be a means to communication representative of a real-interaction.

Although seemingly simple enough, there is one major obstacle the teacher needs to be conscious of while observing; that is, the teacher must confront attempting to overcome one’s initial tendency to evaluate when observing. “An evaluation involves making inferences about the things that we observe” (Rosenberg, 2003, p.18), and for the educator it opens the door to prejudices and stereotypes. Realistically speaking, it is doubtful that many humans can achieve this one hundred percent of the time. Observation without evaluation is a skill that may be difficult to achieve, it is not mastery that is expected, but attempted progress. Looking through the lens without discrimination brings to fruition a true picture of the student, untainted by personal biases. When judgments arise there is the possibility of using them in a positive manner, by which to start conversations. For example, the teacher may use his judgment as an inquiry about the student, her thoughts, or knowledge. A positive real-interaction can occur based on the premise that it is executed with overt respect, authenticity, and empathic understanding.

COMMUNICATION

The **communications** between the teacher and student should reflect the three definitive qualities of the *real-ationship*. These qualities should characterize the fabric of the dialogue and be noticeable to the student. If the teacher has made observations about a given student, the student will already be familiar with the topic of conversation initiated by the teacher; there has been a common ground from which to start and for both parties to participate. The commonly seen and widely expected protocol for conversations between teachers and students is primarily one-sided, with the teacher primarily talking, and the students passively listening. The stimulation of a two-way dialogue, where both teacher and students are active participants, gives birth to connections otherwise not known. The dialoguing fostered by the teacher, whether one-on-one or communal, offers a deeper understanding of others and their points of view. The conversations steward “a common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation” (Noddings, 2005, p.23) and this search for commonality should be purposefully guided by the observations and communications found within the *real-ationship*.

Genuine communications in my eighth grade classroom proved essential in the formation of our *real-ationships*. The conversations were typically spontaneous, ranging from school related issues to home-life to emotions. For example, a student may comment on the weather and how she cannot stand the winter months; this could be used as an opportunity for the class to get to know one another better. I might start with asking the class what type of weather they most enjoy, if they could live anywhere where would they choose, and why? Dialoguing with them about their preferences, interests,

and thoughts is individually thought provoking and incites excitement for most. Each student is capable of sharing if they so choose, with the comfort of knowing that there is no right or wrong answer. Individual reflection takes place and at the same time the class begins to gel as a whole unit, participating in a nonthreatening manner.

This did not mean that every time a topic pertaining to these was brought up they were necessarily entertained; however, it was important that I acknowledged what they wanted to discuss, and I was also able to set parameters for when was the most fitting time to engage the topics. When appropriate, an allowance of time for student-initiated dialogues within a structured open-forum (grounded on the three qualities of a *real-ationship*) gave the students a chance to speak their minds without the concern of being judged. They were privy to various vantage points, possible solutions, and, at times, comfort through identification with their peers. This sense of support and safety in sharing encouraged all to look beyond their own thoughts and try to understand the perspectives of their classmates.

Without fully realizing it, our class had become a community, where the individuals felt safe sharing themselves, their ideas, and thought processes. Through the communication and cultivation of a community, new ideas were born, questions raised, connections uncovered, and oppositions respectfully acknowledged. Even more exciting, the students' authentic selves were growing along with their effective use of interpersonal skills. The "capacity to communicate, share decision making, arrive at compromises, and support each other in solving everyday problems" (Noddings, 2005, p.53) aptly describes the social skills being honed in a setting where communication was valued. Whether in a one-on-one setting or as a whole class, interpersonal skills are cultivated through

communication. Authentic, respectful, and empathic communication within the classroom promoted respect and tolerance for the views of others along with revisions of one's own beliefs or thoughts, rounded out by active listening skills. These were all secondary benefits that arose from authentic participation in an academic forum.

CHAPTER IV

BENEFITS & RESEARCH SUPPORTING *REAL-ATIONSHIPS*

There are numerous benefits to integrating *real-ationships* into our school systems and classrooms. Costs, requirements, developments, and time allotment concerning an educational approach that emphasizes *real-ationships* make it appealing to schools and educators alike. The approach is cost-efficient, in fact, probably the most cost efficient approach because there is no monetary investment required. The schools and educators are relieved of any monetary investments in curricular materials. There are no curricular requirements, so there is no need to manipulate the curriculum that is in place. Educators may determine overtime that the increased knowledge they have of their students, resulting from the *real-ationships*, may effect how they choose to deliver their curriculums. Lastly, time constraints are nonexistent; rather, it should be seen as a continuous process that one improves over time and with practice. There is no certificate that indicates when someone has completed the process or achieved mastery; as previously stated, the teacher is advancing along a continuum, constantly improving her own skills while simultaneously promoting those of the students.

“Indeed, schools are interpersonal settings, in which relationships influence students’ motivation, academic performance, and psychosocial adjustment” (Reddy,

Rhodes, & Mulhall, p.120, 1999). The imperative need for *real-ationships* within today's schools (academically, behaviorally, and emotionally) is not a surprise for anyone in education. The need is even greater during the transition period of middle school when the students are entering new school settings along with experiencing fluctuating emotions, changing bodies, and struggling with finding their identities (personally, socially, and academically). Facing these challenges, students often experience decreased motivation, performance, and self-esteem (R, R, & M, p.120, 1999), which coincides with an increase in depression, anger, and anxiety. Midgley and Edelin (1998) found that students who attended middle schools that deliberately sought to enhance teacher-student relationships usually had fewer adjustment difficulties during the transition (R, R, & M, 1999, p.121). *Real-ationships*, and the qualities identifying them, can provide the guidance, support, and continued engagement, all of which are so desperately needed during adolescence.

The educator's efforts toward authentic interactions and use of appropriate educational interventions are proactive ways of strengthening the student's sense of a positive connection and involvement (Wentzel, 1998, p.207), while simultaneously developing the student's perception of support and empathic understanding (G, B, & H, 2011, p.4). *Real-ationships* with their authentic and respectful interactions, communications, and empathy in perspective-taking provide the necessary ingredients for a solution towards smoother transitions.

In Robert W. Blum's article "A Case for School Connectedness" he borrows Klem and Connell's (2004) statistical research when stating that "By high school, as many as 40 to 60 percent of all students---urban, suburban, and rural---are chronically

disengaged from school (p.262)” (Blum, 2005, p.16). Research has found that adolescents who see or perceive a lack of interest or a harsh demeanor from their teachers are more likely to develop behavioral issues (G, B & H, 2011, p.4) and eventually drop out of school altogether (G, B, & H, 2011, p.4). The research also concluded that students who perceive their relationship (with the teacher) in a positive manner will display signs of self-confidence and an innate respect towards education in general (G, B, & H, 2011, p.5). Regardless of the nature of the relationship, negative or positive, the students’ experiences with their teachers leave a lasting impression.

Unengaged students claim that teachers don’t care about them, are not interested in how well they do in school, and are not willing to help them with problems (Fine 1986; Lee, Ready, & Ross, 1999; MacLeod 1987). Interviews with dropouts as they left school revealed that half said they were quitting because they didn’t get along with teachers and other students (Caterall 1998). Qualitative studies have also shown that positive social relationships can create powerful incentives for students to come to school, even those who report that school work is difficult and expectations are hard to meet (Fine, 1991; LeCompte & Dworking 1991; Lee et al., 1999; Wehlage et al., 1989)” (Lee, Valerie E. & Burkham, David, 2000, p.2).

The *real-ationship* serves as a bridge connecting the teachers and students, providing the care and support they need to stay engaged. The results of such a student-teacher relationship showed positive affects on the students’ attitudes, optimism towards academic subjects, and overall outlooks on education.

Blum’s research led him to the determination that the positive connection between students and school was influenced by three characteristics: “(1) high academic standards coupled with strong teacher support; (2) an environment in which adult and student relationships are positive and respectful; and (3) a physically and emotionally safe school environment” (Blum, 2005, p.1). Each one of these characteristics identified by Blum is inherent in an educational philosophy based on *real-ationships*. The philosophy is characterized by strong support from the educator through real-interactions and attainment of knowledge about one’s students. An environment based on positive

and respectful relationships aligns directly with the two qualities of respect and empathic understanding found in *real-ationships*. Additionally, a safe physical and emotional setting is nurtured when interactions are based on the three qualities of authenticity, respect, and empathetic understanding. The *real-ationship* supports personal growth of the authentic self and confidence in this self, while supporting and respecting other's growth without judgment.

The cultivation of a positive teacher-student relationship is responsible for the decrease in at-risk behaviors such as: experimentation of substances, outward expressions of emotional distress, violent or illegal behaviors, suicidal ideas or attempts, and pregnancy (Blum, 2005, p.16). Correspondingly, there were marked increases: in student achievement, school completion rates, motivation, and engagement in school.

Connectedness to the school is largely derived from the individual actions that teachers take and the care the student perceives to have received from teachers "has been related to student reports of pursuit of goals to behave in socially appropriate ways, responsibly, educational aspirations and values, intrinsic values, and self-concept" (Blum, 2005, p.17). Engagement with and cultivation of the *real-ationship* provides a guide that the teachers can use to start, enhance, or change the way they interact with students.

A newfound exploration of independence, the development of autonomy, and a search for identity makes adolescent life difficult. "As adolescents strive for increased autonomy from their parents (Eccles et al., 1993)" (G, B, & H, 2011, p.3), the need for an adult figure whom they trust and can help guide them becomes especially important. In a teacher-student *real-ationship*, intrapersonal work presents itself through discovery of one's authentic self. Self-awareness and reflection are modeled by the educator and the

sharing of her authentic self. Longitudinal studies have shown that “increases in perceived teacher regard predicted increases in middle-school students’ self-esteem” (G, B, & H, 2011, p.4), and additionally found that perceptions of a supportive teacher correlated with the healthy growth of self-esteem. Self-reflection is an attitude, a skill that will be used throughout one’s life; it has an inherent value that provides insight and growth for all individuals. *Real-ationships* use of the question “Can you help me to understand?” along with the teacher’s guidance leads to incidental self-reflection. The teacher and student enter a dialogue regarding the student’s behavior which makes him aware of his actions, followed by reflection on the impact the actions had and reflection on whether this is the self he wants to be.

One of the greatest challenges our students will face morally is learning how to live amongst others. The relationship between the teacher and student has shown to be influential and the same holds true of the interpersonal connections made in class between students. These connections “can be powerful motivators of children’s interest in school” (Wentzel, 1998, p.203). *Real-ationships* aid in fostering healthy interpersonal connections based on authenticity, respect, and understanding. Reasoning through interpersonal interactions – “the capacity to communicate, share decision making, arrive at compromises, and support each other in solving everyday problems” (Noddings, 2005, p.53) promotes the students’ awareness that they are persons that belong to something (classroom, world, etc.) larger than them individually, yet are interdependent on each other within these societies. The *real-ationship’s* three prescribed qualities ensure the value of the individual and respectful treatment of one another; students learn to tolerate various view points, explore character traits, and make well-informed decisions. The

“support from interpersonal relationships....has documented significant relations of students’ perceptions of support and caring from parents, teachers, and peers to positive aspects of motivation” (Wentzel, 1998, p.203) and academic achievements. *Real-ationships* foster the discovery of one another in order to obtain a more complete comprehension of the “other” and how to best interact.

The *real-ationship*'s requirement that educators work towards an understanding and knowledge of their students mimics John Dewey's idea that “the educator is responsible for knowledge of individuals” (Dewey, 1938, p.56). Dewey believes that knowledge of one's students is one of the factors that enable the educator to construct and apply activities that create the formation of the classroom society. For Dewey, the classroom society is one in which all students should feel as though they can actively contribute. In a *real-ationship*, communication is the director for both parties, serving as a means of understanding one another's needs, goals, abilities, experiences, and interests. There arises a heightened awareness of useful alterations in the presentation of the teacher's curriculum, use of tools, and goals to be set. In meeting the needs of the students, we see that the students gain an increased confidence in their abilities, and engagement is then not as difficult or daunting. Social control, classroom management, and overall undesirable behaviors become less of an issue when the strengths of the students drive the teaching. Interpersonal connections within the *real-ationship* bring about purposeful teaching, worthwhile engagement, increased self-confidence in abilities, along with a strengthened classroom community.

CHAPTER V

CHALLENGES

A philosophy of education based on *real-ationships* is not exempt from challenges. Regardless of how pertinent it is to nurture teacher-student *real-ationships*, there are various obstacles that need to be mentioned and addressed. Reasons have been given and verified as to why adolescents in their middle school years are perfect candidates for teacher-student *real-ationships*. At the same time, the middle school's physical setting, educators, students, and parents all pose problems in the development of *real-ationships*. The shift from the elementary school to middle school setting puts the teachers and students at an immediate disadvantage. The structure of the middle school is such that the formation of a supportive and authentic teacher-student relationship is difficult. Once the students enter sixth grade, they no longer spend their days in one primary classroom with one teacher. Middle school students have multiple teachers, classrooms, and classmates for each subject, limiting the amount of time for interactions.

Educators at the middle school level can, however, successfully foster *real-ationships*. There is, fortunately, a consistent daily contact with the students which provides continuity in interactions, dialogues, and connections. Most middle schools operate within grade-level teams; this is helpful for both the teachers and students. The more teams within a given grade, the smaller the class sizes will be, and the greater the familiarity between students and their team teachers. Teaming in the middle school also provides a micro-society that is more intimate than that of the whole grade. This also offers more opportunities for connections to be made and relationships to form.

Real-ationships for high school educators and students are even more challenging than those in middle school. The most difficult factor is the lack of time the teacher has with the students. Some teachers may only see certain classes and students once a week or worse yet, they may only have the students for a quarter of the school year. With such limited time, the depth of the *real-ationships* must be realistically assessed. High school educators may find that the depth of their *real-ationships* is not the same as it is for the elementary or middle school teachers. The focus for high school teachers should be to have *real-encounters* when *real-ationships* do not seem possible. The teacher can still have encounters with students authentically, respectfully, and empathetically. Observations of all students outside the classroom may be fewer, but the educator can still make herself visible outside the classroom and spontaneously connect with students when possible.

Teachers and parents alike may claim that this is not an approach directly related or focused on academics. They may hold the belief that the relations between a teacher and student should be strictly professional, adding that the ‘getting to know’ one’s students is not appropriate or part of the job. What such a critique overlooks is the proven fact that a positive, healthy teacher-student relationship does, in fact, positively impact the students’ efforts, performance, and attitudes. The research has shown that students who feel more support from their teachers tend to have an increased achievement level “academically both in terms of grades (Goodenow, 1993) and standardized tests (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989)” (G, B, & H, 2011, p.4). Not only have academic expectations raised, but effort, attitude, and motivation all showed increases as well; logically, it seems that the latter group has led to the rise in academic expectations.

For the educator who seeks to form *real-ationships* with a student who does not reciprocate the interest, the goal remains the same. Interactions of authenticity, respect, and understanding should continue from the teacher. There is a level of required reciprocity for successful *real-encounters*; there must be some kind of “reception, recognition, and response” (Noddings, 2005, p.16) from the student. If the student does not perceive the teacher’s attempts as being authentic, respectful, and empathic then it is not beneficial for the student or the teacher. Observations and communication should still be enacted and the teacher should be aware of how he is being received by the student. Based on the teacher’s observations of the student’s reactions, a discussion can be raised regarding the student’s perception of these encounters. This will clarify for the teacher what authentic, respectful, and empathic encounters look like according to the student. Even if the student continues not to participate in the *real-encounters*, at least the teacher knows what best suites the student’s needs. The student will still experience the nature of authenticity, respect, and understanding within interpersonal interactions.

An interaction or brief encounter based on the qualities identifiable in a *real-ationship* may be the only extent to which a teacher can engage a student. It is the hope that more will come to fruition, but it is not expected; instead, it is about teaching and learning how to be in such relationships and how to interact within these relationships. The practice and demonstration of these qualities and skills are still beneficial, regardless of the outcome; the constant and consistent behavior from the teacher still provides for *real-encounters*, even if they are only unilaterally “real.”

There will be those teachers who will find such *real-ationships* or *encounters* as anything but instinctual and even intimidating. If this is the case, they are already ahead

of the game. If they are uncomfortable for whatever reason, they can now use these feelings to empathize with their students when the students are struggling. These teachers will be able to recognize and appreciate those students who are uncomfortable with change, intimidated when interacting outside their comfort zone, or those who lack self-confidence. Research conducted found that “It is not the support experiences themselves, but the cognitive representations of providers as available and supportive that influence outcomes” (R, R, & M, 2003, p.122). Thus, educators should realize that even if they are unsure of their success when interacting, it is the students’ positive perceptions of support from their teachers that really counts.

CHAPTER VI

REFLECTION & CONCLUSION

The relationships people form influence their views of one another, how they interact, and how they perceive themselves. The teacher-student relationship is no exception to this rule. Take a moment; reflect back to your own grade school (K-12) experiences, is there one particular teacher that stands out? What set this teacher apart from the others? Although the teacher you picked is almost certainly not the same teacher the person next to you picked, there is a commonality among the teachers chosen, that commonality is a particular sort of relationship with the student. Even if the relationship was negative in nature, it still constitutes a relationship that resulted in that educator’s actions and behaviors remaining etched in your brain.

The impact of the teacher-student relationship leaves a lasting impression, one that remains far longer than any of the information taught in the class. It behooves the

educators to ensure that the impact of their teacher-student relationships fosters a positive growth for the student personally, socially, and academically. The *real-ationship* serves as a blueprint detailing a 'state of being' for today's teachers that best nurtures the necessary growth for our students in a positive direction.

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