Relationships in Education

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Abstract

Throughout my teaching career, I have believed it is important to develop positive relationships with my students and help my students develop positive relationships with each other. In my personal and professional experiences, I have observed the positive differences strong relationships have on how my students engage in class and how comfortable they are taking reasonable risks in their work. Many students enter my class either feeling they are not good math students or are outright fearful of math. I believe one of my jobs as a teacher of math is to help those students who feel uncomfortable or fearful of math become aware that they can be successful math students. The COVID-19 pandemic complicated all learning processes throughout the world and created unique issues for teachers to build positive relationships with our students. In this article, I discuss some of the issues caused by remote learning and my efforts to overcome those issues. I wish I could say I was 100% successful in my efforts, but sadly, I cannot. What I can say is that I believe I made a positive difference for many of my students in terms of building stronger relationships and helped some students. As one mother told me, her child "looked forward to math class for the first time." My efforts were not perfect, but they were constructive and useful for my students.

Keywords: student-teacher relationships, engagement, personal connections, motivation

RELATIONSHIPS IN EDUCATION

Relationships are the backbone of effective teaching in the 21st century and are key factors influencing students' emotional connection to school and even their academic performance (Toste et al., 2015). Making personal connections with students allows teachers to build trust, encourage engagement, and raise motivation. Sustained positive interactions can help students develop a lifelong love of learning and promote positive attitudes that last throughout students' day. Teachers who have built upon the trust and goodwill they have with their students can serve as mentors for students and help them develop many needed skills to be successful members of a global society. This role of teacher mentor can be especially meaningful for students who are identified as being at risk and can encourage self-regulation and promote the development of socially appropriate behaviors (Toste et al., 2015). Creating and sustaining positive relationships is imperative if we wish to be the most effective teachers we can be!

The most important thing I do as a teacher is to make my students feel comfortable in their learning environment. Laying the foundation for strong, positive relationships in the classroom is essential for ensuring student success, and it is something I feel I do well. In years past, I would spend the 1st week of class playing the obligatory "get to know you" games that were sure to win me an eye roll or two. There would be sharing circles and team building as well as collective expectation building and corny dad jokes. My start of the year routine was a time when I could begin to show students that I cared about them as people and thought of them as more than just names on a roster. That 1st week of school was my time. Math instruction could wait. The pandemic amplified that.

Relationship Building During Hybrid Learning

In a regular year, I would spend time at the beginning of the first term setting up the foundations for positive relationships using all the get-to-know-you games and circle of power and respect conversations. Then, as the year went on, I would build upon what I learned about my students while being a mentor and positive adult role model during class time. I also engaged with students after school as a club advisor. Fast forward to my COVID adventure, and I was more available to my students than in any other year. When we first came back, we were in a hybrid model where I saw 50% of the students in person Monday and Tuesday and then the other 50% in person on Thursday and Friday. I would also have an hour after school when I would sign onto Google Meet, and any student who needed help could sign on and chat. Wednesdays were virtual days where students would have assignments, and teachers would have office hours throughout the day students could access if they had questions or needed assistance. It was during these extra hours where I got to know the students who showed up.

For the students who rarely or never came to office hours, I had much less time than I usually would in a regular year to bolster those relationships. I am not ashamed to admit that, because of the circumstances of the year, while I was still teaching math, I focused on students' well-being more than curriculum content. It was much easier for students to get me off topic during class, because I welcomed opportunities to get students to chat about their lives, encourage them to discuss the struggles they were encountering throughout the year, and allow them time to share their thoughts and concerns with a caring adult. We also played a lot of Kahoot and GeoGuessr together at the beginning or end of class and went outside as much as possible. Students played kickball or wall ball (with masks on), went on walks in the woods (appropriately distanced), or just sat in the sun (apart from each other but close enough to chat).

Although this took away from academic time, I felt it was good for relationships because students saw that I recognized them as people, was empathetic, and cared about their mental well-being. The goal of education in the time of COVID was still to support students' academic achievement, but many teachers chose to shift pedagogical priorities from academics to supporting students' socioemotional needs (Guzy, 2020).

Relationship Sustaining During Remote Learning

In the middle of November, the decision was made to go fully remote with our teaching until after Thanksgiving break. COVID numbers in the area were steadily climbing, and several members of the school community had tested positive. The administration decided, "out of an abundance of caution," to pivot to virtual instruction until the number of cases in the area had subsided. By the end of November, however, it was clear remote learning would continue until after the December break.

I felt a twist in my gut for what this meant to our relationship-building efforts. Not only was the normal routine for solidifying the foundations of those positive relationships not implemented at the beginning of the year, but now teachers would have to contend with blank screens and muted microphones. It was not looking good. Due to some schools moving to a virtual learning environment, educators were forced to rebuild their relationships in a virtual format that they may not have encountered before, which required teachers to practice care and exude connectedness by being warm and responding to students' emotional needs as they manifested (Miller, 2020).

The virtual schedule was, at least on paper, a step up from the hybrid classes. Teachers would have their 50-minute core classes with the A and B pod students together. Students would go to four courses a day, plus an allied arts class, all mixed together. I could not wait for students

to have more classmates with whom to interact, albeit online, during learning activities. In my head, this meant branching out our team-building efforts and including students who may have had strong connections in previous years or during after-school activities.

Unfortunately, as the time our school spent in completely virtual mode continued, many of my students began to disengage from the class. This became apparent to me quickly as I started to see more and more blank screens coupled with less talking or typing in the chat. I had envisioned sending students into breakout rooms to work in small groups, but as I rotated between rooms, I found many of the rooms lacked full participation as students were reluctant to talk to each other or even me when I asked how things were going. It was frustrating for me but also for the small handful of students who were ready to participate in a group and who wanted to work on the day's assignment. I vowed to double down on my attempts to sustain the fledgling relationships that had been born at the beginning of the year.

One wonderful thing that happened during the fully virtual time was when a few students who were shy and quiet when in person began to carry the conversations during our virtual meetings. During one lesson on similarity, as I was sketching a picture on a Jamboard presentation and getting ready to explain the steps to solve the problem, I had a student volunteer to model how to solve the problem for the class. I was happy to take a backseat as this student, who had much better penmanship on this virtual board than I did, explained the process while illustrating their thoughts as they went. I am always grateful when a student takes the initiative like that, but what made it particularly delightful for me was knowing this student had avoided bringing attention to themselves during in-person classes. This student continued to volunteer and eventually became my scribe any time I needed something illustrated on the Jamboard. It was easily one of my top five experiences during our virtual learning time.

Office Hours – Academic Help Turned Socialization Buoy

Ever since my 1st year of teaching, I have offered to meet with students before or after school to get extra help. This year, I made myself virtually available for an hour each afternoon so, if someone needed help, they could join Google Meet, and we could work through the issue together. Students would still email me their questions sometimes, and I would do my best to answer, but I felt more successful when they attended the virtual meeting.

From September to November, only a small handful of students would attend my office hours, and those who did worked through their problems quickly. After observing students and collecting data for the 1st month of school, I reached out to many families to invite students whom I thought needed extra help to the afternoon virtual meetings. My endeavors were somewhat successful at first, but soon, only a handful or regulars were seen on a given afternoon.

During the virtual period from the middle of November to the beginning of January, I noticed changes in students who came to my office hours. A student would come to ask their questions and get help on something we had talked about in class, but, once the work was done, they would linger behind their blank screens with muted microphones while I assisted other students who were waiting. Some days, I would have two or three students hanging around, which I assumed meant they were interested in the explanations I was giving to others. However, once the math talk was done, students who were waiting around would ask a question completely unrelated to the math we had done or to school in general. The first time it happened, we all ended up talking for 10 minutes past when office hours were done. I realized these students were craving attention, a sense of belonging, and some socialization beyond what they were getting while having to stay distanced from everyone who was not a part of their family.

My first hint that students were looking for more socialization was a cold November morning in the middle of my first block of office hours. I had finished helping a student when they asked if I liked hot cocoa. My response to the cocoa question was a resounding, "Yes!" I immediately jumped up, grabbed the big container of hot cocoa mix I kept in the kitchen, which was close to where my computer was, and showed the students who were on the virtual meeting. One thing led to another, and eventually the four of us who were still on the office hour meeting ended up drinking cocoa together. This incident led to an almost daily ritual where students would come to my office hours, sometimes with math questions, but often not, and we would drink cocoa and talk.

Similar to socializing around mugs of hot cocoa, students also wanted to talk about food and what they were watching on TV. My enthusiasm for food, television, video games, and movies was well known to my students because that was how I introduced myself at the beginning of the year. I also used stories involving my interests to sustain my relationships with students. There were many students who loved talking to me about video games and movies, and I milked those conversations for everything they were worth. One student had been given a stand mixer for their birthday and would ask me what kinds of things to make. This eventually led to them baking things and showing their finished products to those of us who were on the virtual meetings. I must be honest and say I was a little disappointed that more students did not want to talk about math or get help on some of their assignments, but being there for my students to help them through the uncertainty and anxiety that accompanied virtual learning was deeply fulfilling for me, and I suspect and hope it was meaningful for my students.

Parents also appreciated the conversations I was having with students, as I found out when I was contacted long after our school came back from a virtual environment to hybrid

learning. During the food and television conversations that occurred over nice mugs of cocoa, I was also shown many students' pets. My natural love for animals caused me to be vocal about the cuteness of all their dogs, cats, lizards, turtles, bunnies, hamsters, and even a couple of fish. One student had seven bunnies and showed them to me on multiple occasions. I asked lots of questions about them, and the student would answer with tons of information and make sure I saw each one before they signed off. This happened regularly throughout the year. When I was contacted by the student's mother, the first line of the email was, "I've been listening to your conversations during your office hours." I immediately thought of all the time I had spent with students talking about non-math-related things and thought I was going to get chewed out for being a math teacher who does not talk about math; however, I did not need to fear! The mother told me how great she thought it was that I was taking time to get to know my students and talk to them about their interests and issues. This parent explained that their student had been scared in math because they thought they did not understand a lot, but because we had been talking about the bunnies, the student became more comfortable asking questions in class and getting help during my office hours. The parent told me their student looked forward to talking to me every day, felt more confident, and now loved going to math. Her message filled me with a sense of accomplishment, and I felt validated by everything I had been doing with my students to sustain those positive relationships, even at the expense of traditional academics.

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