"It's Such a Good Age":
The Importance of Wanting to Teach in Middle School

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Abstract

The purpose of this 2022 study was to better understand what makes Canadian middle school classroom teachers successfully make positive connections with their middle school students. Participants (n=4) were interviewed individually via Zoom and asked to share examples of how they positively connected with their students. provided many thoughtful suggestions and recommendations for in which they attempted to achieve these approaches. Participants highlighted that the most effective middle school teachers tended to be those who especially want to teach in middle school. They also shared that the best middle school teachers tended to be those who embraced the "middle school" model.

Keywords: middle school, teachers, students, connection, inclusion

1. Introduction

There are many reasons why people decide to enter and stay in the teaching profession. When teachers are asked why they chose the profession, some of the reasons that elementary, middle school, and high school teachers provided included the enjoyment of teaching young people, having an interest in the subjects they teach, collegiality within the teaching profession, and the vacation time they receive [1]. In terms of ranking a multitude of different reasons for entering and staying on as a teacher, "The importance of teacher-pupil relationships received the highest percentage of teacher responses" [2, p.70]. This article examines the relationship between positive middle school teacher-student connections and having teachers who want to teach in middle school.

2. Teacher-Student Relationships

It is important as teachers who have positive relationships with their students tend to want to stay in teaching. Shann interviewed 92 middle school teachers in 4 schools, and focused on the "professional satisfaction of urban middle school teachers, whose retention is of special concern" [2, p.67]. Shann contends that, "Getting and keeping good teachers is a difficult challenge" and that,

"Teacher job satisfaction has been shown to be a predictor of teacher retention, a determinant of teacher commitment, and, in turn, a contributor to school effectiveness" [2, p.67]. Shann concluded that, "What the middle school teachers liked first and foremost about their jobs was their students. Teachers felt that teacher-pupil relationships were most important and reported that they were more satisfied with this aspect of their job than any other." [2, p.72].

This element of job satisfaction is good because it seems that everyone benefits from schools with positive teacher-student relationships. Positive teacher-student connections contribute to student academic and social-emotional success [3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. Carlisle contends that, "students who have positive relationships with their peers and their teachers will experience a heightened sense of belonging to their school and can contribute to a positive school community" [8, p.21].

Nasir, Jones, & McLaughlin note that students who positively connected with their teachers "had higher grades and graduation rates" [5, p.1755]. Carlisle posits that, "Fostering the development of healthy relationships in any school can help build a positive school community where teachers, students, and school staff can work with one another in a culture of learning and affirmation" [8, p.18]. Carlisle adds, "Adolescence is a time of rapid change and development. As adolescents move from childhood to adulthood, their relationships with others, including peers and teachers, are a key component of this developmental stage." [8, p.20].

3. Are Relationships Easier Said Than Done?

While there is little doubt that positive student-teacher relationships are important, this does not mean that they are easy to achieve – especially in middle school [9]. Raphael and Burke describe middle school years as "a turbulent time for young adolescents" [10, p.1]. Braun et al. state that, "Evidence suggests that the middle grades are particularly difficult to teach" [11, p.245] because "[i]n secondary school settings, teachers interact with students at a unique and critical time. Students enter puberty, peer sub-cultures become stronger, and students experience an increased need for autonomy." [11, pp.245-246]. In middle school, one can expect a "normative decline in relationship

quality" [12, p.212] due to "the developmental shift that children experience as they become more peer-oriented" [13, p.69]. It is little wonder that teaching middle school can certainly be a "stressful profession" [11, p.245].

Carlisle notes that one of the reasons why middle school students do not connect as easily with their teachers is due to the fact that, "Middle school students no longer have one teacher with whom they spend the majority of their time; their day is divided into blocks with multiple teachers and new subjects. Middle school teachers teach a greater number of students compared to elementary school teachers and, therefore, may spend less time with individual students and thus have less of a connection with individual students" [8, p.20].

Although it may be more difficult to form positive student-teacher relationships in middle school, it is critical that teachers do everything they can to try and make them. The question that must be asked is, "Given all the challenges that middle school presents, how do middle school teachers still find ways to successfully connect with their students?" The purpose of this paper is to highlight a 2022 study I completed to better understand how Canadian middle school classroom teachers make positive connections with their middle school students. In order to achieve the goal of my study, I essentially asked middle school teachers (n=4) how they did it.

4. Methods

After receiving approval from my university's ethics board to conduct this study, I reached out and received permission from a school division superintendent to conduct this study. I then contacted the principals of several middle schools in the division by letter, telephone, or email, and received consent from a few of them to contact their teaching staff. Teachers from these schools were then invited participate in my study. Teachers wrote me by email if they consented to be in the study. who consented to participate in the study were given a list of questions that I may ask. Participation in the study was optional and anonymous. All teachers were required to give written consent prior to the commencement of the study. While I hoped to get 8 to 12 volunteers, four teachers from two schools contacted me indicating their willingness to participate in the study.

After participants provided written consent, I attempted to find a way to gather together. Due to COVID-19, participants preferred to meet individually via zoom videoconference. I made the decision to continue with the study, albeit remotely and individually rather than in person and as a group. Each participant participated in one zoom videoconference. They were provided with a list of potential questions I may ask prior to the interview.

Each interview was audio taped. I also kept detailed written notes in order to help record participant's ideas and responses. After all the interviews were completed, I used the software Otter.ai to produce transcripts of each interview. Each participant was sent a copy of their transcript and asked to review. All participants agreed that the transcripts were acceptable.

Upon completion of the interviews, I sought out and retained a research assistant. The research assistant and I independently reviewed each transcript. After much discussion, the research assistant and I agreed upon several main themes/highlights. These themes were sent to the four study participants for review and feedback. One of the four participants asked that one of the themes be slightly amended. I agreed to amend the theme as requested. Additionally, there were some minor changes to the themes as a final study report was being written.

For the purposes of this paper, two of the study's themes are highlighted. They are as follows:
1. The best middle school teachers are those who, "believe, eat sleep, [and] breathe middle school practice."
2. Effective middle school teachers need to learn how to "let go of what you can't control."

5. Findings

5.1. Theme 1: "Believe, Eat, Sleep, [and] Breathe Middle School Practice"

Participants in this study tended to believe that the most effective middle school teachers tend to be those who especially want to teach in middle school and are best suited to teach in the middle school model. Several participants in the study stated that in order to connect positively with middle school students, teachers first and foremost should want to teach in middle school. Participants each shared that teaching in middle school was exactly where they wanted to be. Please note that I insert many direct quotations from participants in this section, but have chosen to remove words that participants repeated. I also have chosen to delete terms such as "um" or "like" as participants expressed their thoughts and ideas. I chose to do this in order to benefit the reader of this study.

In one interview, a participant claimed that they knew early on in their studies and career that teaching in middle school was their first choice, stating, "The [middle years] age group was such a neat group that I loved it so much that I was like, when I teach I want to teach in a middle school." One participant shared why they were immediately drawn to middle school early on in their postsecondary studies.

[T]he middle school program…was what I was so excited about [as a university student] because it was specific to the age group. It was specific, it wasn't an elementary [and it wasn't] high school. It was it was a very deliberate 10 to 14 year old group of kids…I learned a lot about how middle school functions and how you build community across the 10 year old range to 15 year old kids within a school culture and it was what kind of drove me here and here. It's 20 years later and I wouldn't change anything.

Participants strongly believed that middle school was much more than just a holding ground for young people between elementary school and high school. One participant expressed that this study provided them with an opportunity to share this point, stating, "There is a need to hear the voice from people who firmly believe, eat sleep, breathe middle school practice." One participant expanded upon this, stating, "There's a middle school model that needs to be celebrated. One of those things being social emotional connections, and routine for the kids." It was apparent that participants were proud of being a middle school teacher, and felt eager to share why they valued middle school.

There were a number of reasons why participants thought that teaching in middle school was the best choice for them. One teacher shared, "There's a culture of elementary teachers who are a very elementary minded…and then you get to high school where again, it's a whole other culture of adult high school teachers say they would never teach in middle years…There's this whole weird range. But where we are situated in the middle is so significant with making sure that the kids feel socially emotionally and physically connected."

In general, participants loved working with students in the 10 to 14-year age range of students. One teacher shared that they loved the energy that students in middle school brought, sharing, "Okay, this age group [middle years] is where I'm at. I kind of like working with alive people, not dead people." Another teacher noted, "It's such a good age, because when they get to high school, that's when they get busy with the job, extracurriculars and all these other things, that when you're asking them to take on this new thing, or take, you know, when you challenge them, they're just already have so much on their plate."

5.1.1. Middle School Model. One teacher elaborated on how the middle school model provided them with more time to connect with students compared to the high school model.

In the high school, I see my grade nines for like, roughly an hour a day for the whole year, which is great, but then I don't ever see them again…And then they're all the pressures of like, preparing my grade 12 for university. And so it didn't for me, it

didn't allow me to kind of as much as I like to, I question how much I was like, working on connecting with them. So whereas middle years, you have all this contact time there with me…They're with me all day…And that contact time with the students is really, really important.

One participant further compared the high school model of connection time versus the middle school model.

I don't see having one teacher teach all the subjects [in] High School is a good thing, either, in terms of just like the nature of high school and wanting expert teaching. But that's…one difference, I think, similarity to have unique kids personally is where…you can have really good conversations with them both in the high school [and] in the middle years level, where you can have really good intellectual discussions with them, as they get older towards grade eight.

One participant discussed their reasons for teaching in middle school, saying, "I find that middle years provides that flexibility where the kids are ready and mature enough to some degree to start taking on views and building relationships and being challenged in some ways. versus high school where they're very more inwardly focused on their goals and their kind of career path." Another participant stated, "I don't know what it is, but there was a purpose for me to be here [in middle school] and to do this, and the kids that I work with are feeling the impact of it and that's powerful to me. And at the end of my career I'll walk away and just be completely happy with what I've achieved. But knowing that curriculum didn't drive practice - it was good philosophy [that] drives practice." Based on the interviews, it was apparent that several participants thought that, while they were meant to be teachers, they were specifically meant to teach in middle school.

One participant disclosed the nature of some of the conversations they might have with middle school students compared to high school students regarding their immediate future and what to be prepared for.

And you can talk about the future and like I've talked to my kids now is great. We know what high school is [going to] be like and what they're looking forward to sharing them wisdom. I talked to my grade twelve [and] elevens, about, you know, my experience in university. So you can have really good conversations because they have the maturity to do that, and have those conversations, which is really nice. And I think that's a strong similarity of the types of conversations you can have with the kids in the middle years and high school level.

Still, there were differences in the ways in which middle school classrooms were constructed that better lent themselves to building positive teacher-

student relationships. One participant spoke of the tendency of middle school classrooms to be less populated than in high school classes.

> [T]he need to connect with kids is very different in high school. [Speaking with] colleagues and friends who work in high school and they work with so many kids. And I understand that my [middle school classroom] community is 20 [students]. I've had as many as 30. But often it's 20 to 23. But we see them for everything and we see them [throughout the day]. And that probably allows for a better learning relationship to happen, if that makes sense.

In summary, the participants in the study believed that teachers were most successful in connecting with middle school students if they first and foremost wanted to teach in middle school. Participants thought that teaching in middle school was a more of a calling than a placement, and that teachers needed to love to teach students in the 10 to 14-year age group. Participants thought that the age range of students they worked with on a daily basis provided opportunities for rich and relevant conversations to occur. Participants believed very strongly in the middle school philosophy of focusing on meeting the needs of the whole child (i.e. not just academic/curricular needs but also personal/social-emotional needs), and thought that the middle school structure allowed them to have valuable contact time throughout the day with a smaller group of students.

5.2. Theme 2: "Let Go of What You Can't Control"

Participants in this study posited that effective middle school teachers cannot control lack of technology, difficult family situations, and students not always being ready to learn. As a result, they needed to be flexible and responsive. Participants shared that one of the realities of their jobs is that there are many situations, issues, and circumstances that are out of their control.

One participant stated, "There's constant curveballs in the path, you go can change in any direction." One participant spoke of the wide variety of needs in their school, sharing that there, "are the kids that come with certain attachments to them, whether they've come into the into the city for [medical treatments], or whether they are kids in care, or whether they are kids with high needs [such as] kids living with Autism, [or] kids living with Down syndrome." One participant offered that due to the many needs of several students, one class in their school has "five adults in the room, because…there are three kids with living with Autism, and then there are other vulnerable students."

5.2.1. Flexibility. When asked what their solution to facing so many uncertainties on a regular basis, one participant responded, "flexibility". One participant was asked how they cope with teaching a classroom of students where so many have diverse needs, and offered, "If you can celebrate that and kind of go, 'Okay, let's make this a good thing and not a negative, weird thing' everyone wins." One participant noted that their primary concern was not their own perceived lack of control, but that students in their classroom also felt a lack of control in their own lives. In response to this, the participant shared, "I do a lot of healthy lifestyle teaching with the kids…they need to have sort of tools and strategies…in a world that's so unpredictable."

5.2.3. Gauging Student Thermometers. Participants recognized that they often don't know what mood students will come into their class on any given day. They stated that difficult home lives, lack of sleep, or mental health issues often contribute to unpredictable behaviours and attitudes. Oftentimes teachers have no way of realizing what their students are dealing with, and students may be hesitant to share. One participant responded to the uncertainty of students' readiness to learn by implementing personal "thermometers" in their classroom for each student.

One participant made "social-emotional thermometers" with magnetic name tags for each student. The participant shared, "[W]hen they come in, there's a ten to one [scale], and so you have to put where you're at for the day at that point. So you come in and you're super grumpy. You put a 'one', you don't want to talk to anybody. But it gives me and then the other kids in the room are radar to say, 'Hey, you know what, maybe avoid so and so for a little bit'." Students came in everyday and adjusted their thermometers to indicate the mood they were in, and whether or not they wanted company or be left alone. Students were encouraged to adjust their thermometer throughout the day. The participant added, "they'll move them up and down based on where they're at through the day, I've noticed most kids end up in the day with an average about five to eight." This thermometer provided both the teacher and students with a quick visual of each student's mood and needs. The participant shared the following.

> And that simple thermometer thing…that's a tool that I can gauge right away in the start of the day where kids are at, and how through the day they pivot or change based on either an interaction they've had with other kids, or an interaction they've had with another adult, whether positive or negative. It gives you a visual, and then the whole class a visual of…let's respect that person's space, or let's go hang out with them. So that's one of the tools that I use that helped me gauge

their social emotional level. And it's a range and but the kids respect it, which is really nice, too. No one goes around and rips the magnets off or throws the magnet out. But that's a big tool that I use to just start the day. And we never know what to expect when the kids come into the building. And I've gauged that thermometer and said, 'Okay, here's where they're at right now, here's where I'd like them to be'. Maybe we're not going to go over that math activity today, because it's not the right time and place that we need to have a conversation.

5.2.4. Students and Uncertainty. Although the participants seemed to realize that having a certain lack of control of what may come their way during the course of a school day, some noted that whenever uncertainty about anything did arise in the classroom it was best to attempt to resolve it as soon as possible. This was especially true when students were feeling a lack of control in their lives. The participant shared the following example.

> Last week we had an incident where someone was taking photos of somebody unprovoked and unrequested. And we had to have a conversation about digital foot printing and, and remembering that your digital footprint does include taking pictures of people unwanted. And if you post it, it goes up into the cyber world. And that had derailed entirely my plan to do some social studies [and] science work. But it gave the class a reminder. That connecting. I recognized it, I felt the need. I knew the need. And I put everything else aside.

The participant recognized that middle school students may find themselves in situations where they really feel that they have no control. Although they realized that it was not always practical or possible to 'stop the world' to resolve every uncertainty they encountered on a daily basis, they did take a pause from scheduled classroom activities when deemed necessary to resolve a conflict. The participant offered that this was the reality in middle school.

> I think that that's a big part of the middle school philosophy. The structure of the school day has to reflect the position of where the kids are. The kids drive the curriculum at the end of the day. Because it's not a healthy environment [if] something's gone wrong, or I've had issues where family members have passed away or run away. And there's usually a lot of family dynamics that impact how kids approach the start of a day…I can read body language very clearly. And one of the things I can tell is, if someone had a rough night, maybe they didn't sleep very well, it's evident. And we can't necessarily jump into heavy content until we've addressed that. And maybe if

one person's feeling that other people are feeling it.

In summary, participants recognized that uncertainty and having a lack of control of what they may face each day was part of the reality of being a middle school teacher. Their response to this reality was to face each day with a flexible attitude and to celebrate the wide diversity of situations that arise. Teachers needed strategies in response to the reality that students often entered classrooms in different mood states. Finally, while participants acknowledged that one of the realities of their job may be uncertainty, that if students feel uncertain about something it was best to 'drop everything' if possible and deal with the issue.

6. Conclusion

Kelly, Gningue, and Qian posited that that the people who ultimately stayed in the teaching profession, "are determined, love and believe in the children with whom they work, understand their students' needs and backgrounds, and internalize rewarding experiences while continuously searching for new strategies" (p.156). Participants in this study seemed to encapsulate this sentiment. They seemed to love teaching in middle school, and understood the unique needs of middle years students. They each provides many examples demonstrating their commitment to middle school. In short, each participants emphasized the point that the most effective middle school teachers tended to be those who especially want to teach in middle school. It seems reasonable to conclude that teachers who are happiest teaching in middle schools likely results in more young people happy to learn in middle school.

7. References

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