ESTABLISHING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS IN A VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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"If children feel safe, they can take risks, ask questions, make mistakes, learn to trust, share their feelings, and grow." - Alfie Kohn

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, the vast majority of teachers and schools were unprepared for a shift to virtual learning. The suddenness of the decision to close schools in mid-March left many students, teachers, and schools scrambling to figure out the logistics of online teaching and learning. As Fischer, Frey, and Hattie state in their book, The Distance Learning Playbook, "To be clear, the pandemic teaching of 2020 was really not distance learning…. It was crisis teaching." (p.1). One positive aspect about the sudden change in our teaching and our students' learning was that by that point in the school year, we teachers had already established strong positive relationships with our students. We could use these relationships to develop an attitude that we were all in this together, and we would get through it together.

Now that many districts and schools are using an online environment, whether it is fully online or blended, we have a unique opportunity to be more purposeful about our teaching and our students' learning. We should have learned from our own experiences in the spring and the experiences of others. Additionally, school districts have had time over the summer to create and implement plans for distance learning. However, one big difference we are all experiencing at the start of this school year is the difficulty in developing relationships with our students, many of whom we have never personally met.

Everyone involved with the education of our children, from teachers and administrators to parents and students, will agree that the connection between teacher and student is vitally important. There is great value in building strong, genuine relationships with our students. Having a strong relationship allows the teacher to push students and encourage them to think critically and not simply memorize routines. It also allows the student to feel comfortable in taking risks and making mistakes. This is hugely important in the mathematics education of our students, for it is critical thinking and risk taking that allow our students to stretch themselves as learners and really grow as problem solvers. Students learn from making mistakes. If they do not feel comfortable enough to try something new, make mistakes, and share those mistakes with others, they are losing a great opportunity for learning - the opportunity to turn a misconception into a conceptual understanding.

How can teachers establish relationships with students when teaching virtually? It is clearly more difficult than in a traditional face-to-face environment, yet it is vitally important to establish and build these relationships in a virtual setting. The following list of ideas is borrowed from The Distance Learning Playbook, which includes brief vignettes of the actions of classroom teachers. I would encourage you to

consider how you are currently building strong relationships with your students, and how you could utilize this list as a resource to strengthen those relationships even more.

Teacher Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand the feelings of our students. Consider how our students seek out connections with their teachers, and how you as their teacher cultivates these connections. Teachers can build these connections in a number of ways:

- Begin or end synchronous and/or recorded lessons with a positive affirmation, perhaps a motivational quote or a bit of humor. One teacher ends every synchronous class session with music and allows students to make requests in advance via email.
- Send positive messages home. One teacher makes a goal to send five positive emails per week. Another teacher delivered notes and stickers to every student's mailbox last spring. Establishing a positive relationship with parents and families is a great way to build a positive relationship with students.
- Use students' names as much as possible. Greet every student by name when they check into class, and have brief conversations with them as they check in. Call on students by name during synchronous class times. Have a system to ensure that every student gets called on and speaks during synchronous class times. Additionally, avoid the use of programs that automatically take students' attendance - this automaticity makes it difficult for teachers to see their students as individual learners.

Unconditional Positive Regard

Teachers need to have a positive regard for their students, and students need to know that their teachers care about them as individuals. Teachers can demonstrate their unconditional regard for their students in a number of ways:

- Give your students an interest survey and weave your students' interests into your lessons. Include students' interests in problems that are assigned for students.
- Give useful feedback to students. To give constructive, useful feedback, teachers should limit the number of assessments and/or assignments and make the assessments and assignments that are given more meaningful. Encourage students to utilize their feedback to learn and deepen their understanding. One teacher uses the Mote add-on in Google Classroom to give voice feedback, which allows students to hear the enthusiasm of the teacher's voice.
- Provide polls for students to respond to, and use the poll results accordingly. If you do ask students what is working and what is not working in their online learning, make sure to make use of their feedback - nothing is more demoralizing to a student than to realize that their opinion and feedback is not being taken seriously and not leading to positive change.

Genuineness

We teachers need to project who we are as a professional and as a person. Our students need to see that we care about teaching them, and that we are serious about becoming better every day. Teachers can demonstrate their genuineness to their students in the following ways:

- Dress and groom professionally. Our students need to see that we view ourselves as professionals, and that we view the teaching of our students as being vitally important work. One teacher keeps a collection of shirts and ties at school, and changes into these to teach their live synchronous online sessions.
- Project an optimistic demeanor. Many of our students are struggling with their online learning, and they need to see us as positive role models who truly believe that every student can and will learn in our online environment. Do not be afraid to tell students that you miss them, or that you're excited to work with them, or that you're proud of them for working hard.
- Make it clear that student learning is always the number one priority. Completion of work is far less important than understanding of concepts. If a student can demonstrate understanding in an alternative way, perhaps through an interview, consider using alternate ways to assess their understanding.

Nondirectivity

Nondirectivity refers to the teacher's actions and attitudes that maximize the opportunity for students to direct their own learning. Our students need to know that we teachers hold their abilities in high regard. Teachers can demonstrate this in the following ways:

- Hold individual conversations with students to help them identify their strengths and areas of potential growth. One teacher holds a five minute meeting after class with individual students, and has a rotating schedule to ensure that they have the opportunity to meet with every student.
- Ask questions in class that focus on understanding and building students' thinking, rather than asking leading questions. Ask students, "why?", and have students justify their thinking.
- Be clear, organized, and consistent. Students need to know exactly what they need to do in order to succeed. One teacher uses a consistent weekly template with links to materials that lays out all the students' learning tasks in advance, and students in this class always know exactly where to look for the relevant course information.

Encouragement of Critical Thinking

We should always be encouraging our students to think critically and deeply, and this is especially important in a virtual learning environment where it is easy to regress to lower-level thinking. Teachers can encourage this in the following ways:

- Foster student-to-student discussion among peers. Utilize deep questioning techniques to achieve this. Many teachers use breakout rooms to foster peer discussions. When using breakout rooms, ensure that your students have the tools and training they need to critically think about the task at hand. Model critical thinking conversations so students know what their discussions in their breakout room should look like and sound like.
- Give students opportunities to write about and explain their thinking on assessments. Students should be expected to think critically and explain their reasoning on assignments and tests.
- Build student choice into projects and assign projects that are relevant to your students. Keep in mind that teachers can assess students' knowledge and ability in multiple ways. One teacher who does this related that they were pleasantly surprised at the projects that the students were producing, and the ways that students were able to demonstrate their knowledge.

My Online Teaching and Learning Experience

I was very apprehensive about starting this school year in an online environment. I am a firm believer in building relationships with students, and I feared that teaching and learning online would render strong relationships impossible to develop. What I learned is that although it is difficult to build relationships in an online classroom, the extra effort it takes is definitely worth it.

I start my live synchronous online classes by greeting every one of my students by name as they enter the meeting. This is my way of taking attendance, and it shows my students that I see them and want to get to know them, which is very important for all of our students. I always wear a tie while teaching online, and teach from my classroom at school, because I want my students to know that I view myself as a professional and that I believe teaching mathematics to each of them is a very important task. While teaching, I try to be as optimistic and animated as possible. I do not need to remind my students how unfortunate it is to be learning online - believe me, they are already aware of this! During class, one unfortunate side effect of online teaching for me is that I use much more direct instruction than I usually would. This does not mean that there needs to be more teacher talk than usual, however. I am reminded of the title of the classic article by Steven Reinhart, "Never Say Anything a Kid Can Say". During my direct teaching, I try to talk as little as possible, instead calling on my students to walk through algorithms to solve problems and explain why those steps are important. At the end of a class period, I always let my students know that they are welcome to stay on the call if they have additional questions, and many of them take me up on this offer. To close every class, I play a song as I make any final announcements and wish everyone good-bye. It is amazing to me how much this closing song positively impacts many of my students.

Outside of class, I reach out to my students via email. Sometimes I send brief notes of encouragement, or reminders to turn in work, or requests to meet with me individually. I will even send

notes to thank students for participating in class or telling a student that they gave a wonderful explanation in class. I also send positive emails home to parents when students do well on an assessment or show improvement in their work. I set a goal of sending at least five positive emails each week to parents I have not contacted yet. Building a positive relationship with parents is a huge step in building positive relationships with students.

I require my students to submit one assessment per week, and nothing more. I feel strongly that my job is not to grade my students' work, or to record the completion of their work, but to help them learn the material. In order to do this, the type of feedback I give to my students is of utmost importance. It makes little to no educational sense to have students submit work and then receive no feedback regarding that work. The constructive feedback I offer my students is focused on student learning and improvement, and my hope is that students are using this feedback to deepen their understanding.

During the first semester, I received some unsolicited feedback from my students that reinforced to me the importance of building strong relationships with my students. After I sent him a brief email regarding a positive step he took in class, Brevin B. sent me an email that said, "First of all I want to say thank you. Since quarantine/online school started my interaction with teachers (anyone from school really) has been little to none. When you sent that email about something so small in a class of 20+ kids it meant a lot. I can't stress enough how much you reaching out and mentioning it to me actually meant. You're the best math teacher I've ever had and you make the class a LOT easier for me. Thank you for being one of the teachers that kids remember and hope their kids have in school."

At the end of the semester, Carter J. sent me an email that shared some music recommendations. "I am just emailing you to tell you thank you for being my teacher for Pre Cal this last semester. I had a ton of fun and really wish that I could have done your class in person, also the music choice at the end of class was really awesome. Talking about music here are some bands/songs that I think you would like:..."

Isabella N., a student who had to be convinced to take a math class during her senior year, wrote, "Thank you Mr. Ebert! I am so thankful to be spending my senior year learning math with you! It definitely has been the best part of online school!!" Don't we all want our class to be the best part of online school for all our students? These positive messages from my students remind me that the extra effort needed to build quality relationships with my students in an online environment is definitely worth it.

As Fisher, Frey, and Hattie state, "Quality teacher-student relationships are foundational to learning environments but can be more challenging in a distance learning one." (p.63). Think about the ways you are establishing strong relationships with your students. Now think about additional ideas that were sparked by this article, and how you could implement these in your classes. Building strong

relationships with our students is vitally important in the teaching and learning of mathematics. Having a strong relationship with all our students allows the students to gain mathematical confidence, think and reason critically, and take risks to make mistakes. It is extremely important that our students possess these skills in order to learn mathematics; therefore it is equally important that teachers establish routines to help build relationships with their students, especially in an online teaching and learning environment.

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