

## Supporting Teachers in Relational Pedagogy and Social Emotional Education: A Qualitative Exploration

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We examined the beliefs and experiences of three elementary school teachers who, over one school year, participated in bi weekly, guided discussions of attachment and care theories that introduced them to relational pedagogy as a way of supporting students' positive social, emotional, and academic growth. Teachers' beliefs about the aims of education were assessed at the beginning and end of the study and for the duration of the study they each kept a journal to document and reflect on their classroom interactions. Findings revealed teachers' understandings of the aims of education reflected a more relational perspective at the end of the study than the beginning. Seven themes emerged from the journals capturing the teachers' commitment to fostering caring relationships in their classrooms; their hesitancy to fully implement relational pedagogy as well as missed opportunities to do so; the frustration they experienced leading to abandoning relational pedagogy; awareness of their "mistakes"; their feelings of isolation as they realized relational pedagogy required a supportive school environment and their successes. Implications for pre- and in-service teacher education are discussed.

**Keywords:** Teacher-student relationships; relational pedagogy; social-emotional learning; social emotional education; professional development

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### Introduction

With growing concern about the prevalence of childhood social-emotional problems, teachers are increasingly expected to take on pedagogical responsibility for students' proficiency in the social-emotional domain (Selman, 2003). A frequently used term to refer to this area of pedagogy is *Social Emotional Learning* (SEL),

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a term that emphasizes the learner and her acquisition of social-emotional knowledge and skills. Possibly as a consequence of this emphasis on the learner in SEL, little attention has been given to the preparation of teachers to be knowledgeable and competent in this area (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Waajid, Garner & Owen, 2013). We prefer the term *Social Emotional Education* (SEE) to SEL as it places greater emphasis on the processes by which such knowledge and skills are acquired, shifting the focus away from individual students and onto the contexts in which they learn and grow. In this qualitative study, we explored one method to support teachers in their efforts to foster their students' positive social-emotional growth with the hope that our findings might inform both pre- and in-service professional development in SEE.

As noted by Le Mare (2011), discourse and practice in SEE falls into two broad approaches. The dominant, *competence promotion* approach (see Durlak, Weissberg, Dymniki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011) includes a wide array of programs addressing various aspects of social competence. While differing in foci, common to these programs is an emphasis on directly teaching children discrete cognitive and behavioural skills that are believed to mitigate negative and support positive social interactions. Such programs typically comprise add-on 'scope and sequence' type materials that have measureable learning outcomes. As such, they often are not integrated with the academic curriculum. This approach to SEE has the benefit of requiring minimal teacher preparation and readily lends itself to program evaluation.

Research on the effectiveness of the competence promotion approach is mixed. Based on their meta-analysis, Durlak et al. (2011) concluded that compared to controls, students exposed to such programs significantly improved in social and emotional skills, behaviour, and academic performance, but others (e.g., Ryan & Smith, 2009) have questioned the value of these programs. Indeed, many studies have found negligible effects of these programs, very few have found even moderate positive effects and some have found negative effects (see Baldry & Farrington, 2007).

A second approach to SEE that has received less attention is the *relational* approach. A basic tenet of this approach is that children's positive development depends, to a considerable degree, on whether the contexts in which they develop, including schools, are reliable sources of supportive relationships (Noddings, 2002, 2005; Pianta, 1999). The creation of such relationships largely depends on the ability of adults to accurately read and appropriately respond to children's cues. Hence, rather than focusing on children's knowledge and behavioural skills, this approach emphasizes the interpersonal skills of adults (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Relational pedagogy therefore, is manifest in teachers who are aware of and explicitly focus on the quality of their interactions with students to develop classroom communities that promote academic, social, and emotional growth.

A considerable body of research is supportive of the relational approach to SEE in as much as it shows that positive teacher-student relationships are associated with a variety of desirable child outcomes. A particularly important finding from the perspective of SEE is that high quality teacher-student relationships can mitigate the effects of various risk factors in the lives of children leading to more positive outcomes for children with social-emotional problems (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Although it is clear that positive teacher-student relationships are beneficial for students, it is not clear how relational pedagogy can best be encouraged in teachers. Unlike the competence promotion approach, the relational approach to SEE does not

lend itself to standardized instructional scripts or scope and sequence curricula. Since genuine relationships require attunement to individuals and their expressed needs, practices that instantiate them are necessarily emergent and variable rather than pre-determined and fixed (May, 1992; Noddings, 2005). As such, how to support teachers in creating positive relationships with students is worthy of consideration.

### *Professional Development*

Research on professional development (PD) within general education indicates that changes in teaching practices are most likely to occur when specific training is combined with on-going on-the-job support (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009). Although research on PD for SEE has typically been disjointed and unsystematic, often yielding small effects, consistent with the findings from general education, Sabol and Pianta (2012) report that a PD opportunity whereby teachers were provided support within their own classrooms, improved interactions between students and teachers. In the project described herein, we offered teachers a PD opportunity that we hoped would encourage them to adopt a relational approach to teaching. Based on previous findings we reasoned that teachers would be most likely to engage in relational pedagogy if they were knowledgeable of the relational conditions that encourage positive child development and received on-going support in creating those conditions within their classrooms. Hence, our approach was two-pronged, providing both specific knowledge and continuing support. Given the focus of the knowledge component on attachment and care theories, a very brief overview of each follows.

*Attachment Theory.* Attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1969; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999) purports that beginning in infancy, the degree of sensitivity and responsiveness of the caregiver to a child, particularly when the child is in need, lays the foundation for the child's 'internal working model'; that is, her set of expectations regarding the safety and support to be found in her social environment and her worthiness to receive it. Children with histories of sensitive and responsive care develop a sense of security and accordingly tend to be more positive, cooperative and flexible in their interpersonal interactions than children with inconsistent or insensitive care histories. Although attachment patterns established early in life are believed to be foundational to subsequent development, internal working models are considered dynamic meaning that new relationship experiences can shift one toward a more or less secure state of mind. This is critical for teachers to understand as it implies that a sensitive and responsive teacher can potentially alter a student's insecurity and associated social behaviours.

*Care Theory* Care theory asserts that caring relationships provide a powerful catalyst for positive development (Noddings, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2012). According to Noddings, children who are cared for by people who genuinely model social and ethical virtues are likely to develop these virtues themselves. Education from a care perspective entails demonstrating care to students (modeling), two-way communication with students (dialogue), giving students opportunities to care (practice) and acknowledging the value in all students (confirmation). The caring teacher must be able to shift focus from self to other in order to be attentive and receptive to students' needs and understand the support they require. Finally, for care to occur it must be acknowledged and received by the student.

### *The current study*

In the present study we engaged teachers in bi-weekly dialogue meetings, focused on attachment and care theories. We sought to support the teachers' learning of theoretical and practical content as well as motivate them to find caring relationships with their students to be personally meaningful. Our aim was to help teachers more deeply understand the important role of interpersonal interactions in children's development with the hope that this would translate into changes in pedagogy.

## **Method**

### *Approach.*

We adopted a narrative approach acknowledging that reality is created as we use narrative to make sense of our experiences and tell other people how the world is for us. Accordingly, we sought to understand how teachers made meaning of the dialogue meetings by examining the stories they told about enacting what they had learned in the meetings in their interactions with their students and colleagues.

### *Participants*

Two female and one male teacher voluntarily participated in this study. All three taught full-time in regular classrooms, each in a different public elementary school. All held Bachelor degrees and teaching certificates. Their pseudonyms are Maud, Vick, and Anna. Their ages were 55, 34, and 35; they had 9, 9, and 10 years teaching experience; and taught grades 3, 4/5, and 7, respectively. Their schools were situated in a predominantly White, middle-class suburb in Western Canada but included students from a range in socioeconomic backgrounds.

### *Bi-weekly dialogue meetings*

From September through May the teachers participated in 14 bi-weekly, 2-hour, open-ended dialogue meetings facilitated by the first author, a PhD candidate with 25 years teaching and counselling experience in general and special education. Teachers were informed that these meetings were to provide a confidential and supportive venue for sharing professional concerns and reflections, discussing classroom experiences, and working together to understand attachment and care theories as they relate to promoting students' growth. The early dialogue meetings focused on introducing attachment and care theories through a presentation and discussion format. 'Learning to Trust' (Watson, 2003) and 'Educating Moral People' (Noddings, 2002) were used to guide these sessions. Participants were offered short theoretical readings to guide subsequent discussions, which they declined on the basis of time constraints. Thereafter, the content of the meetings was not predetermined beyond focusing on attachment and care theories as they related to the teachers' classroom experiences. Teachers presented events and interactions from their schools that were discussed and deconstructed through a relational lens guided by the tenets of attachment and care theories. Importantly, the meetings were also intended to provide an opportunity for the teachers to experience first-hand the development of a caring learning environment.

### *Data Sources*

To determine how these teachers made meaning of the dialogue sessions and if they impacted their teaching practice, we examined two data sources: i) a set of standardized interviews conducted with the teachers prior to the first meeting in September and again after the last meeting in May; ii) and journals that each teacher maintained throughout the study. The May and September interviews comprised the following two questions from the Teacher Interview Protocol that Selman (2003) has reported to be most useful for tapping teachers' perspectives on supporting students' interpersonal growth and social development: *What is the most important part of teaching to you? How do you define student success?* At the outset of the study, teachers were given a journal and a guide to help them focus and reflect on their teaching experiences throughout the period of the study. Teachers were encouraged to write in their journals at least once a week, and were asked to include observations and feelings about themselves and their students.

### *Coding*

*Teacher interviews.* The Teacher Interview Protocol is a relatively standardized procedure that yields data that are coded according to a priori categories. Teachers' interview responses were transcribed and coded for the three levels of awareness of the aims of education as described by Selman (2003). The first and least sophisticated level is an external orientation, which is evident when teachers' comments focus on children's social competence as being required for academic learning. The second level, an internal orientation, is represented by an understanding that within schools the support of children's social-emotional development is of equal importance to the support of academic learning. The most sophisticated level, a relational orientation, is represented by an emphasis on one's own capacity to utilize the relational context naturally present in teaching to promote students' social-emotional development. Fostering autonomy, caring, and trust in the classroom are emphasized and these capacities are seen as necessary for children's active participation in society over the long term.

*Journals.* Teacher journals were carefully examined for content focusing on feelings and actions around interpersonal interactions and relationships. An interesting first observation was that all three teachers were inclined to write about their interactions with and concerns for their more challenging students. As we carefully read the journals multiple times, we engaged in an interpretive process as we decoded the meanings embedded within each of the teachers' stories. In contrast to the Teacher Interview Protocol, codes for the journal data were generated by asking, 'What is the participant saying here? What is this entry about?' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A comparative process was undertaken whereby each coded entry was compared with every other similarly coded entry, both within and across participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As this process continued, codes were sometimes collapsed into broader, higher-level themes.

## **Findings**

### *Teacher Interviews*

When asked in September, 'What is the most important part of teaching to you' every teacher mentioned relationships with students, which is perhaps not surprising in teachers who volunteered for a study on

relational pedagogy. For example, Maud replied, “The critical part is relationship. I don’t think you can teach somebody until you have a positive relationship”. Vick stated, “Getting to know the kids. It’s way more important getting to know the kids and making connections. It is not getting up in front of the class and reading curriculum”, while Anna said:

Trying to get the kids to learn and think for themselves, to be able to direct themselves rather than me telling them what is most important. Making sure the kids know that I am on their side, so I think actually trying to have relationships with the kids is the important part.

Each response indicates an appreciation of the influence of relationships on the learning process and although not deeply articulated, there is indication of an internal pedagogical focus in each. The teachers’ responses to, ‘How would you define success for a student in your classroom’, provided further information:

The kids are all working on what they need to improve on and it’s not all the same stuff. Some kids need to develop social skills and they need to be able to use them in the classroom and on the playground – not in a counsellor’s office. This is just as valid as needing to learn place value (Maud).

This response reflects an internal orientation as it demonstrates awareness that social relationships are as important as academic skills. It is important to this teacher that her students learn to manage social issues, but there is no indication in her responses that she has considered the importance of this in any long-term way:

Having them take a risk. True success is when you grow and I believe to truly grow you have to take a risk. I have to provide the environment for the kids to be able to take a risk (Vick).

Here, Vick indicated an awareness of his influence in the classroom and his obligation to provide a context for promoting growth, but there is no explicit reflection of whether this includes both academic and social growth. Further, there is no evidence in his responses of consideration of any long-term vision for his students.

Anna said, “When you can almost step out of the picture and the kids can take it [their learning] and run with it.” Although Anna mentioned the importance of relationships in teaching, this response represents an external orientation with its emphasis on academic achievement and little reflection on promoting relationships and social competence of students.

At the second interview every teacher indicated a more in-depth awareness of the importance of relationships in education. Responses to the question, ‘What is the most important part of teaching to you?’ in May were much more detailed than they had been in September. For example, Maud replied:

The most important part about teaching and learning is building relationships. You are not going to make any progress academically, socially, or emotionally or any of the ways we are trying to work with kids without them feeling part of a caring relationship. Anybody could teach the academics I think, but to retain things and grow as a person depends on the relationship... And it’s kind of funny because we don’t actually talk a whole lot about relationships in teacher training.

Moreover, a concern for students beyond their time in their current classrooms that was not seen in the September interviews was apparent in May. When asked, ‘Define success for a student in your classroom’ in the second interview, Vick said:

I want all of us to be happy to be there, have positive self-regard and feel cared for. Straight A's on a report card to me is not a success for a student because not everybody can get straight A's.... Feeling cared for and respected makes good people. And good people beget good people.

Anna commented: As I said, I want the kids to be thinking about who they want to be as people. Knowing how to be a good person, knowing how to make good choices, being thoughtful...this is the stuff that's so important and makes a successful student.

In May all teachers expressed a deeper appreciation of children's social-emotional development and the role of caring teacher-student relationships in supporting children's growth than they had in September. Moreover, they expressed greater confidence in themselves to attend to the needs of children in their classrooms. Despite this apparent shift, the interviews told us nothing about how these beliefs were enacted in classrooms. For this, we looked at the teachers' journals.

### *Teacher Journals*

Seven themes emerged from our analysis of the teachers' journals.

*Commitment:* The teachers' commitment to relational pedagogy was evidenced in their willingness to participate in the on-going dialogue meetings, write at length in their journals, and participate in the interviews. Within their journals their commitment was conveyed in the activities they described including classroom meetings, thoughtful and reflective interactions with staff and students, and attempts to utilize school support staff in non-traditional ways in order to develop relationships and support their students' interpersonal growth. A particularly poignant example of commitment came from Vick who spoke of his new-found willingness to take a stand against the all too common practice of speaking negatively about children in staffrooms. In his words:

The things I hear in the staff room make me... I am starting to remove myself from some conversations that are going on in the staff room...or speak up at the risk of being asked to remove myself from the conversation. I am always amazed at how some people discuss children. Some people come into the staff room to 'air' all of their complaints in a very uncaring manner. I am the first one to admit that I will come into the staff room and discuss a situation with a child because I care and I am struggling with what to do. But when a teacher walks into a room and all they have to say is negative with no real questions or obvious attempts to work through whatever happened or ask for advice, I see it as uncaring complaining.

It is difficult to go against the flow in a workplace and to stand up to colleagues. That Vick was able to do this speaks to his growing commitment to relational pedagogy.

Further evidence of Vick's commitment was seen in his efforts to create a trusting respectful classroom through having class meetings that focused on belonging. As he described in his journal:

We got together again today in a class meeting format. As we began the class meeting I reiterated to the kids what I had said the other day "I want everyone in the class to feel welcome and cared for and one way we will do that is by getting to know more about each other." It is just rolling off my tongue... "I want to do everything I can to make everyone in this class feel welcome and cared for each and every day' [...] I think they are actually starting to believe me.

Anna's explicit commitment to relational pedagogy in the classroom was apparent when she wrote:

I'm going to stay calm and remember what's really important. The most important thing I can do in my class is to care. If the students know I care about them and can learn to care for themselves and each other, it will all be O.K.

Her commitment was further conveyed when she extended it beyond the classroom context. Anna described how:

I went to the movie portion of a student's B-day party. The whole class was invited. The kids were really happy to see me. I'm glad I went because I could drive the 4 biggest trouble-makers home (and spare the B-day girl's mom having to escort them on the bus) and the boys were happy to come with me and we got to bond a little more.

This is a strong example of a teacher's willingness to develop meaningful relationships with students. By attending the birthday party she gave her students the message that they were worthy of her time beyond the confines of the classroom. Her willingness to drive home the potentially disruptive students further demonstrates that her commitment was not limited only to children who were easy to get along with.

Despite a clear commitment to relational pedagogy, there were also many examples in the teachers' journals indicating that consistently engaging in relational pedagogy was not easy for them. Their struggles to maintain a relational stance were captured in the themes: Hesitancy, Missed Opportunities, Abandoning Relational Pedagogy, and Reflection on Mistakes.

*Hesitancy:* Hesitancy about consistently maintaining a relational approach was seen in Maud's feelings about moving needy children closer to her. She had difficulty imagining that she could uphold this practice over time. In her words:

I took the risk of moving him and his learning partner closer to me. He does not seem upset by the move, perhaps because he has more access to my attention... my desk is now surrounded by four boys in need of support and relationship building. I need some time to think about how to handle such a needy group of children though, because I simply cannot have half the class clustered around my desk.

Vick too showed hesitancy regarding his decision to spend part of his lunch hour with his students when he wrote:

I've donated 30 minutes of my lunch break to sit with groups of them. We talk about everything from what we did on the weekend to why they shouldn't call each other 'gay' or 'losers'. I'm quite inspired by these lunch meetings. I still believe that the best relationship building happens when the children know that you're with them when you don't have to be. Of course, these lunches can't always happen because sometimes I have another meeting or something.

*Missed Opportunities:* Interestingly, there were experiences shared in the teachers' journals that reflected a lack of awareness on their part that a particular situation was an opportunity to take a strong relational stance. Anna's summary of a team meeting reveals an example of one such missed opportunity:

I have a concern about Sherry. I've noticed that she tries to stay in at recess and lunch because she doesn't have any friends. Also, she is from a poor family and she doesn't have much nutritious food and often wears the same clothes. She's a nice enough girl, but she doesn't seem to have the social skills she needs to make friends. We had a team meeting and we're going to try to get her to be a phone monitor so that she'll boost her skills. We'll have the

counsellor see her individually for at least a few sessions. Also, our principal said we've got some gift certificates for stores like Old Navy and Payless Shoes.

Anna's reflection shares some well-intentioned ideas aimed at enhancing the self-esteem and social skills of the student. However, consideration of providing meaningful relational support from a caring adult so as to give the student a greater sense of belonging and worth was missed. Such relational support could have fostered the very skills that this student appeared to be lacking.

*Abandoning Relational Pedagogy:* The teachers' journals also revealed that, when dealing with the behaviour of particularly challenging students, they sometimes defaulted to using punishment and isolation, rather than maintaining a positive relational stance through dialogue and active listening. This is evident in the following journal entry by Anna:

I returned to the classroom to find Ricky sitting at the back of the room making loud BLAH, BLAH noises (sort of like a beginning to vomit noise) and no one was doing anything about it – well I lost it and sent Ricky to the office and explained to the principal why he was there.

Here Anna defaulted to punitive measures. Although she clearly set a limit by her reaction to the student's behaviour, the support and guidance he needed to be successful was not forthcoming from her.

*Reflection on Mistakes:* At times journal entries revealed teachers' awareness of abandoning a relational approach. An example of this was when Maud expressed concern regarding her resorting to a behavioural management technique in an effort to support a struggling child. She wrote:

Mary's not coming to the carpet, hiding in the cloakroom during lessons, coming in late after recess and lunch, stealing, bugging the other kids etc. are all cries for help. I'm thinking about using a group point system as another way to promote prosocial behaviour.

In a later entry, Maud recounted, "I tried the group point thing today. It was a bit less than successful to say the least... at Mary's table things were even more unsuccessful. She came to me crying because no one would listen to her" and then:

One week later...I wonder about the competition I have introduced into my classroom with these group points because no matter how evenly I divide the pods, Mary's team is seriously handicapped. I've talked to some of my colleagues, but they have not run into some of these problems when they use behaviour mod.

We can see Maud recognized the point system she had implemented was not having the intended effect, which led her to question the use of this strategy. The competition that often accompanies behaviour management techniques was discussed during our dialogue meetings. Although no one in the group felt that all competition was harmful to children, we did agree that the classroom was not a place to promote it. It can limit student's access to learning and create an unfriendly atmosphere, as appeared to be the case in Maud's classroom. It was commendable that she observed her mistake and was grappling with it.

In the next excerpt, Anna reflects on over-reacting to the transgression of one of her students:

I re-acted too strongly when a student broke a 'no buying' rule at the aquarium. When my student teacher caught the student buying a pop from the vending machine he told me and I said that I'd handle it. I was burning up inside because I felt like this student had blatantly disregarded the rules and had been sneaky about it. I went over to him, asked if he had bought a pop and when he admitted it instead of asking why I said something like, "Guess where you

won't be tomorrow?" and proceeded to tell him I didn't think I could trust him enough to take him to camp either. Then I walked away. I felt horrible, but he had broken the rules.

Back at school we talked about what the rules were. He knew, but didn't think he'd get caught. We talked about whether it was worth it and he agreed it wasn't. We also talked about how it will take time to re-build the trust that had been lost and I asked him how he wanted me to view him – as the kind of kid only who does what is right if he has adults around or if he wants to be counted on to do the right thing even if he knows he won't be caught. I felt a lot better after our talk and so did the student. He seemed to have learned his lesson.

Often consequences are designed to teach children that cooperative, good behaviour brings rewards and uncooperative behaviour brings penalties. Invoking consequences may produce immediate results, but, as Watson (2003) argues, this is a mistrustful stance based on the assumption that children must be manipulated to behave in desirable ways. This is in contrast to relying on collaboration with children, which assumes the desire of children to do well. As seen in the above excerpt, when Anna took time to discuss the incident with the student, the student responded with cooperation. It is hard to say whether the student "learned his lesson" but it seems the opportunity to discuss the incident helped both the student and the teacher go from feeling badly to better.

*Isolation:* Reasons for these teachers' struggles with maintaining a consistent relational approach are likely many and potentially include the models of teaching they were exposed to as students, the classroom management approach that was emphasized in their teacher training programs, and the dominant approach in the schools where they currently taught. One potential explanatory factor that was clearly identified in their journals was the isolation they experienced at their schools. Reflecting on that isolation, Maud lamented: "Who is out there to give me advice and guidance as to the best approach when trying to teach empathy, compassion, care, and belonging to a child" while Anna dreamed:

Imagine a whole school where the teachers are all working together to make schools a fun, safe place where kids feel important and respected above all else, where we work together to support the kids emotionally, not just with their school work.

Vick too said, "I feel quite isolated and unappreciated. This job is too hard to go at it alone. I think principals should get training in this stuff [attachment and care] and on how to build a cohesive staff."

As the study unfolded the teachers began to see the impact that collaborating with like-minded staff in their own schools would have on creating caring relationships. It is interesting to note that although the bi-weekly meetings were meant to provide collaboration and support for the teachers as they grappled with relational pedagogy, these meetings were not enough to mitigate their feelings of isolation in their own schools and support them to be consistent in a relational orientation.

*Successes:* Despite the teachers' struggles with consistently enacting relational pedagogy there were also moments described in their journals in which they were able to establish a caring context through their sensitivity and responsiveness to students' needs and perspectives, and enhance the experience for both themselves and their students. One example is an exchange shared by Maud:

I told him to go into the hall and calm down until I could come out to talk to him because in this class everyone had a right to feel safe and he looked pretty mad. When I got there he was sitting sullenly on the floor. I sat down fairly close to him because I wanted our conversation to be private.

He immediately said, "I don't see how Jimmy wasn't safe, I didn't even threaten him."

Typically, he was on the attack before I could even say anything, so I sat for a moment to think about what I should say that would diffuse the situation without getting defensive.

I finally said, "I wasn't talking about Jimmy's physical safety. I know that you weren't going to hit him or anything like that. I was more concerned with his emotional or psychological safety. That he was feeling safe inside. That his feelings weren't hurt and that he felt like he belonged in our class."

To my amazement, Damien looked more down than angry when he said, "Oh."

We sat for a moment and I said to him, "Do you think I'm angry right now?"

"No."

"Well, you're right. I'm not angry. I just want both you and Jimmy to feel like you belong. And I also want you to know how much I like you, even when I'm feeling frustrated. Everyday I look forward to coming to school to see you and no matter what you do, I'm still going to feel that way."

Damien was beaming now. I invited him back into the class. It felt like one of those moments when you're connected for a few moments and you're not sure which stars had to be aligned to get you there.

## **Discussion**

The present investigation aimed to explore how participation in a process-oriented PD opportunity designed to support teachers' understanding of and engagement in relational pedagogy impacted their beliefs about the aims of education and their teaching practice. The study revealed what we believe to be three important findings. The first is that providing teachers with such an opportunity can lead to changes in how they understand the aims of education and the role of relationships in supporting students to become happy, healthy and productive citizens. This was seen in the shift in the participants' pedagogical orientations as assessed by the Selman interview in September and May. In the May interviews the teachers expressed a deeper understanding and appreciation of their role in creating positive student-teacher relationships so as to support the development of children, both academically and socially. Further, in their May interviews they expressed more confidence about attending to relationships in their classrooms and why it was so important.

The second main finding is that knowledge does not always easily translate into practice. Although by May all teachers expressed a relational orientation in their interviews, this orientation was not consistently evident in their behaviour as described in their journals. We saw evidence in the journals of teachers resorting to expressions of anger and the implementation of punitive measures in their responses to students' behaviour. At times, even when their explicit intent was to meet the needs of a student, their responses failed to include a strong relational component and at other times they focused on relationship building in their responses but expressed hesitancy to sustain such an approach.

Reasons for teachers failing to enact their relational beliefs included stress and fatigue, which led to a reduction in their tolerance for non-compliant behaviours. An additional reason was the teachers' sense of isolation. Indeed, as this study unfolded the participants began to see the value of collaborating with other like-minded staff in their own schools in creating caring relationships and supporting students' social-

emotional development. Of note, although the bi-weekly meetings were meant to provide such collaboration and support for these teachers, they were not enough to mitigate the teachers' feelings of isolation in their own schools and support them to be consistent in a relational orientation.

The third main finding is that despite a lack of consistency in the teachers' efforts to engage in relational pedagogy, there was abundant evidence that they were trying to put their beliefs about the value of relational pedagogy into practice and that these efforts yielded rewards for both themselves and their students. This was evident through the commitment the teachers displayed in providing class time for community building activities and meetings, having uncomfortable conversations with colleagues, and through offering emotional support to students during instructional time. Further, the teachers expressed a deep reflective capacity and a desire to more fully understand the dynamics of their interactions with students when they did not achieve caring, trusting, relationships. This finding provides us with optimism that teachers have a strong desire to do best by their students and, given appropriate support, they will.

Our results have several implications for both in-service PD and pre-service teacher education. First, relational pedagogy is likely best supported by a whole-school approach. As this study unfolded the participants began to see the value of collaborating with other like-minded staff in their own schools in creating caring relationships with students. As concrete suggestions for supporting such collaboration we recommend that time and opportunity be created for substantive matters, such as the aims of education, which include creating knowledgeable, caring, responsible citizens, to be discussed collectively among school staff. Opportunities for formalized conversations regarding teachers' feelings and beliefs about their relationships with children would encourage teachers to look more closely at their roles in enhancing teacher-student relationships. A further suggestion is that teachers be supported and encouraged to visit each other's classrooms as part of their on-going professional practice. Co-planning and/or co-teaching may be explored as ways of bringing teachers together. Such collaborations may help reduce the feelings of isolation that teachers in this study reported. Although many teachers would welcome such opportunities, it is important to remember that additional demands on teachers' time may negatively influence this interest. Therefore, these kinds of opportunities need to be built into organizational structures including timetables and models of PD.

As concerns in-service PD, it seems unlikely that the creation of collaborative environments for relational pedagogy will be supported through isolated PD workshops or seminars, even if they are attended by the whole staff. This view is supported by our finding that even with an 8 month intervention, motivated teachers struggled with enacting relational pedagogy and literature indicating that traditional forms of in-service teacher PD, with guest speakers and 'one shot' workshops, meet with limited success (Brown-Easton, 2004; Lieberman & Wilkins, 2006). On-going PD that allows for collaboration, inquiry, and support as well as feedback from other knowledgeable, skilled practitioners has been emphasized to be most effective (Elmore, 2004).

Such professional development opportunities should begin during pre-service training. Traditional pre-service teacher training tends to focus predominantly on the academic curriculum and what educators can do to enhance children's academic skills through instruction. Our results suggest that knowledge of development, including social and emotional processes, in addition to learning processes, is important for

teachers to become proficient in providing appropriate support for children. This conclusion is consistent with the work of others suggesting that teacher-training programs need to include curriculum on children's social-emotional development as well as analysis of structural components and procedural skills that affect relationships between teachers and students (Hymel, Schonert-Reichl & Miller, 2006; Pianta, 1999; Zins, Weissberg, Wang & Walberg, 2004).

## **Conclusion**

Here we have suggested that in approaching the pedagogical responsibility of promoting students' growth, teachers use a relational lens. Consistent with others (Noddings, 2012; Pianta, 1999; Zins et al., 2004), we have argued that relational pedagogy can address the whole curriculum, including SEE. Viewing SEE from this perspective removes the need for add-ons to the curriculum that may already be overloaded. A relational perspective involves establishing a climate of care in the classroom, "such a climate is not 'on top' of other things, it is underneath all we do as teachers. When that climate is established and maintained, everything else goes better" (Noddings, 2012, p. 777). With this in mind, we must ensure that pre- and in-service teachers are properly supported to develop a relational pedagogical orientation so as to foster positive social, emotional and academic development and life success for children.

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