The Balanced School Day and Teacher-Student Connections: Canadian Classroom Teachers' Perspectives

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***Abstract*—Positive teacher-student relationships can be a critical component for school success (Nasir, Jones, and McLaughlin, 2011; Davis, 2001; Hamre and Pianta, 2006; Reimer, 2020a, 2020b). This (2018) study invited Canadian elementary teachers (n=8) into a focus group and asked them how they successfully connected with students in their classrooms. Participants shared many strategies on how they connected with their students and their families (Reimer, 2020a, 2020b). On one occasion, participants noted that the establishment of consistent routines in the classroom played an essential role in connecting with students. While all teachers independently brought in many types of routines into their classrooms, some shared how the introduction of a school-wide "Balanced School Day" assisted them in finding an optimal 'rhythm' (Wilson, 2011) to their day.**

***Index Terms*—elementary, teachers, students, connection, routine**

I. Introduction

For elementary teachers working in Canadian schools, making positive connections with their young students is a critical component for school success [1]. A positive teacher-student relationship is a valuable resource for teachers. This appears to be especially true for elementary students [2], as it significantly contributes to increases in academic performance and reductions in behaviour issues [3]. Reference [4] contend that, "Forming strong and supportive relationships with teachers allows students to feel safer and more secure in the school setting, feel more competent, make more positive connections with peers, and make greater academic gains" (p.59).

It is little wonder that teachers in Canadian schools place a high priority and take responsibility to make positive connections with students [5]. Still, teacher-student relationships are tricky, as there doesn't appear to be one "magic formula" that teachers can rely upon to create positive relationships with each and every student that enter their classrooms. Reference [4] posit that, "Student-teacher relationships develop over the course of the school year through a complex intersection of student and teacher beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions with one another" (p.59). While there may not be one quick solution to creating positive teacher-student relationships, are there specific routines or practices that teachers can build into their school day in order to create optimal conditions for positive relationships to form?

II. Classroom and School Routines

Teacher establishment of clear routines appears to be a key element for student and classroom success, particularly at the elementary level [6]. Typically, routines that teachers are asked to improve upon often have focused on "room arrangements, equipment storage, and other physical aspects of classroom life well before school began" [6].

While the teacher should be responsible for the management of the classroom and teaching specific curriculum, Reference [7] proposes that a "student-centred approach" to classroom routine may hold the potential to increase student success. According to [7], the student-centred approach to instruction provides a better opportunity for students to positively connect with the curriculum, as teachers and students need to collaborate in order to construct knowledge together. Reference [7] explains that, "In contrast to traditional instruction, a student-centered approach focuses on meaning making, inquiry and authentic activity. The instructional goal in student–centered classrooms, based on constructivist principles of learning, is to create a learning environment where knowledge is co-constructed by the teacher and students rather than transmitted directly by the teacher" (p.34). While the student-centred approach may better connect students to curriculum, is it possible that this approach can also better connect students to their teachers? Can a student-centred approach increase the probability of more authentic teacher-student connections?

Still, it can be very difficult to balance the expectations that society places on teachers to take charge and manage classrooms, while also promoting student-centred learning environments [7]. Teachers should not be solely responsible for making this balancing act work and could use some help. Reference [2] emphasises the many duties teachers already have, noting, "For the elementary school student, the teacher wears many hats such as friend, protector, mentor, disciplinarian, and gatekeeper to academic success" (p.431). Therefore, while the onus of

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responsibility for making connections is in the hands of the individual teacher, creating optimal conditions for teacher-student connections and student-centred learning environments requires systemic, school-wide planning. Reference [8] claim that the community building should be the priority for every school, as it "provides a powerful focus for improving educational practice, and especially for practice aimed at helping children become caring, principled, and intrapersonally and interpersonally effective" (p.189). Reference [4] assert that teacher-student "relationships should be explicitly targeted in school-based prevention and intervention efforts" (p.59). If this statement is valid, are there systemic, school-based routines that can be put in place to assist with positive teacher-student connections and student success? Can schools institute a school day that can bring about the benefits that student-centred classrooms may hold?

A. Typical vs. Balanced School Day

Typical School Day: In Canada, most elementary classroom teachers tend to teach a designated group of students in classrooms located within one specific school classroom. Elementary schools seem to have a general, universal approach to the typical school day. Reference [9] summarize a typical day as follows, "Children arrive at school in the morning and leave in the afternoon. While there, they study state-mandated core subjects, such as language arts, science, and mathematics and enrichment subjects, such as art, music, and physical education, as well as eat lunch." (p.318).

In Canada, [10] has outlined a typical elementary school day as follows. For students in grades 1 to 6, the school day begins at 9:00 am and concludes at 3:30 pm. Students have a one hour lunch break between 12 noon to 1:00 pm. Students also receive one 15 minute recess break in the morning, and one 15 minute recess break in the afternoon [10].

Balanced School Day: In contrast to the typical school day, [11] propose that schools consider adopting the "Balanced School Day". Reference [11] describe one version of a Balanced School Day as follows, "The BSD schedule… consists of three 100 minute blocks of instructional time, separated by two 'nutrition breaks'. The 'nutrition breaks' are typically 40 minutes in length; 20 minutes is allotted for healthy eating and 20 minutes for outdoor time. The breaks are followed by five minutes for entry or transition time." [11] (p.2). Table I highlights an example of a typical school day compared to one version of a Balanced School Day.

It appears that the Balanced School Day does have some benefits. Woehrle, Fox, and Hoskin (2005) found positive results or trends in terms of transition time, instructional time, school cleanliness, and rates in student learning. As there were fewer transitions with the Balanced School Day, students received approximately 13 additional minutes of instruction per day (p.3). Many teachers also "liked the longer learning blocks in the BSD. Teachers were able to plan for longer lessons and had 'time to do more things'. Children spent less time dressing/undressing to go outdoors, which allowed for more instructional and recreational time." [11] (p.4). As there were fewer transitions with the Balanced School Day, students also received over 13 additional minutes of instruction per day [11] (p.3). While these 13 extra minutes in the classroom may not at first sound like much, this really is a significant amount of time. In fact, it adds up to 65 minutes of additional teacher-student contact time per week, or over 40 hours of additional teacher-student contact time over the span of a school year (based on a minimum 185 days of in class instruction). It is logical to assume that a reduction in transition time can mean more time can be spent on teaching and learning. Is it possible that a Balanced School Day can also contribute to more opportunities for authentic teacher-student connections?

TABLE I. TYPICAL VS. BALANCED ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DAY

Typical School Day	Balanced School Day
8:50 a.m. - Entry 9:00 a.m.– Classes begin 10:40-10:55 a.m.– Recess 10:55-12:00 noon – Entry and classes resume 12:00-1:00 p.m.-Lunch Hour 1:00 p.m.-Afternoon classes 2:05-2:20 p.m. – Recess 2:20-3:30 pm – Entry and classes resume 3:30 p.m. - Dismissal for all students. [10]	8:50 a.m. - Entry 8:55 a.m. - 9:45 a.m. Period 1 9:45 a.m. - 10:35 a.m. Period 2 10:35 a.m. - 11:15 a.m. Nutrition Break #1 11:15 a.m. - 11:20 a.m. Entry 11:20 a.m. - 12:10 a.m. Period 3 12:10 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. Period 4 1:00 p.m. - 1:40 p.m. Nutrition Break #2 1:40 p.m. - 1:45 p.m. Entry 1:45 p.m. - 2:35 p.m. Period 5 2:35 p.m. – 3:25 p.m. Period 6 3:25 p.m. Dismissal [11]

III. METHODS

The purpose of this (2018) study was to find ways that elementary teachers in Canada successfully connect with their students. Elementary school classroom teachers (n=8) working in Canadian schools were invited into a "think tank" type focus group and asked how they successfully made connections with their students. Elementary classroom teachers are very familiar with the nuances of the elementary school system, and have daily, significant interactions with young learners. These educators hold vital information about what causes students to become and remain engaged with curriculum and connect with their teachers at an early age.

The reason I chose to create a tank of elementary teachers in Canadian schools was to provide opportunities for participants to candidly share their experiences and knowledge. In essence, I wanted to create a "professional thinking community" [5] of elementary teachers in Canada. The think tank approach was used for a similar study with high school teachers [5] This study successfully made use of [12] Centre for Creative Community think tank model, as it "provides logical, sequential steps to organizing think tanks, and seems especially sensitive to working with volunteer participants" [5] (p.78). I wanted to replicate the 2014 study, except this time with a small group of elementary teachers teaching in Canadian classrooms.

Procedures: Once approval was received from the ethics review board at the University of Winnipeg and a Canadian school division, the Superintendent's office

forwarded the research proposal to elementary school principals in the division. Principals who consented to having their teachers participate signed consent forms. The principal then invited teachers in their schools to participate in the study. Teachers who were interested in participating in the study contacted Reimer. Eight teachers from two elementary schools volunteered to participate in the study.

Participants: In total, the teacher participants (n=8) were employed in one of two Canadian elementary schools. Each participant was teaching in a grade 1-6 academic classroom. One participant identified as male and seven identified as female. Four of the eight participants were between 20 to 29 years old, two participants were between 30 to 39 years old, one participant was between 40 to 49, and one participant was 50 years of age or older. Teaching experience varied among the participants, as three of the teachers had less than 5 years of teaching experience, four teachers had between 5 and 10 years of teaching experience, and one participant had between 21-30 years of teaching experience. Every participant had earned a Bachelor of Education diploma. Every participant had experience teaching in multi-age classrooms. One participant taught French Immersion, one indicated experience in Learning Support, and one had experience teaching Physical Education.

Data Collection and Analysis: Participants had the option of meeting individually or as a group. Six teachers from one of the schools met as a group. Two teachers from a second school preferred to meet one-on-one with me. All sessions were recorded with transcripts were produced. I secured a research assistant, and we independently reviewed these transcripts. We met after completing this review agreed upon several key themes that emerged. These themes were then sent to the study's participants via email. There was no participant disagreement with any of the themes. After completing a report of my findings, I sent an electronic copy to each participant for review. I made a few edits based on participant feedback, which focused upon some minor grammatical issues. Each participant in the study received a version of the final report. I also sent the final report to the school division that provided consent for the study.

IV. Findings

Participants in this study highlighted a variety of creative strategies they independently adopted in order to successfully engage and connect with students in their classrooms [13], [14]. One of the unique themes that emerged was the significant role that classroom routines that they implemented can play in creating successful connections with young learners. Participants also emphasized the critical role that school administrators play regarding the overall structure of the school day and year (such as balanced school days, school routines, spring open houses, flex time after reporting periods, and teacher connecting time) and its significant impact on the classroom teacher's ability to connect with their students. I have inserted several direct quotes from the participants throughout this paper. In order to benefit the reader of this paper, I decided to remove some words that participants repeated, or expressions such as "um" or "like".

Connecting with students was a high priority for every participant in this think tank. In each of the think tank sessions, elementary school teachers shared many examples that demonstrated their creativity connecting with students. They revealed ways in which they connected with students by attempting to meet students' needs. For example, one teacher noted, "When the child's needs are met. Like social needs, emotional needs, physical needs…when those needs are met…everything else is a lot easier."

Still, while teachers acknowledged the need to be prepared for these 'spur-of-the-moment' opportunities, participants highlighted the need for structure and routine in the classroom as a means of connecting with their students.

A. Importance of Structure and Routine

The elementary teachers in this study spent time speaking about the importance of structure and routine in their classrooms. This was incorporated in the classroom by each classroom teacher, but also integrated into the school day and calendar by school administration. While some teachers were wary of incorporating too much structure throughout the school day ["I value unstructured (time), like play"], they also recognized how it was necessary to make the classroom function. For example, the teacher who valued unstructured time also stated, "Some kids come to school with not a lot of structure in their lives. They have a hard time working within certain bounds, and sometimes as a class we have to work within in certain bounds…There [are] 20 children in the classroom and we have to be respectful of others. You know, space and needs and attitudes. So, that helps to build understanding structure and your limits and your limitations."

Although some teachers seemed to initially hesitate discussing the importance of structure and routine, they still thought it was a key ingredient to connecting with their students. One teacher sheepishly shared, "I have been accused of being too structured." Another teacher then stated, "I find that if the kids know what their day is going to look like, they come into the classroom with less anxiety. That is just my personal theory because when they don't know what is going on in the day, or there is a change, that is when you see the behaviours."

When I asked if teachers thought schedules were important, one teacher responded, "Every one of us has a schedule up." Another teacher added, "I know I am going to start with morning meeting, I know I am going to end the day with an agenda. I know in the middle, we are probably going to do math or literacy centres, and I will even have a schedule up the day before at the end of the day so they can even see what their day will look like. . .

Teachers shared that their schedule included both words and pictures. One teacher stated, "[Students] will have their words and also a little picture… I know I have been accused of being too structured by teachers that come, and sub for me, and or cover my class."

Following this response, one teacher shared the following statement.

I am not as structured as (the last teacher whom I quoted), and I think that predictability is something that is reassuring to kids if they know what is going to be expected of them for a majority of the day…I've noticed that my kids I had last year, that I have again this year, are even more comfortable with the routines and expectations, and are almost proud that they know something that is coming up. Because they have done it. You know last year and…just have more confidence with routine. and it and I don't know, you worry if they going to get bored kind of doing the same kind of things everyday but, I think, especially for kids that might not have a routine elsewhere outside of the classroom, I think that is something that they can look forward to.

When asked why students might look forward to routine, one teacher stated, "If a kid doesn't have like much routine in their home-life, like if they are moving between homes or whatever. At least they know what to expect at school. It is not going to be something completely different every day or different expectations of them every day. They know to come in and how their day is going to start."

One teacher shared a story about one of her students.

Kids don't know and don't have the same rigidity and scheduling [at home] that we do at school...There is one girl [who said], 'Well, I don't really know who's house I am going to be at on the weekends…sometimes we don't have dinner. There are different conversations that come up out of that, and you realize, wow, they are so much more comfortable talking about their week and what happens during the week because they have been confident…I asked them to talk about their weekend, [and] there are so many of the kids that are just thrown for a loop, because they don't have any sense of control of their own weekend or any sense of routine on the weekend.

One teacher stated that some students don't know, "which house they are sleeping at. But, yes, it is comfortable in school, because even on a day [at school] where something is not routine, there is still a visual schedule."

The teachers in this think tank spoke about at great length about routines, but seemed to emphasize routines that promoted stronger teacher-student relationships, rather than ones that met the requirements for a teacher-centred classroom management approach. For example, teachers highlighted the routine of warmly greeting students early and often. They emphasized the importance of regularly greeting their students and reading to their classes every day, and making time each week to play with their students. Teachers also frequently made time to serve as students' scribes, regularly brought in their pet dogs, and consistently took and displayed photographs of students engaged in a variety of activities in and out of the classroom.

Some teachers also made it part of their practice to connect with students outside of the classroom and school day. Some made it a habit to watch students at sporting events during the evenings or weekends and spoke of the importance of consistently connecting with students' families.

The "Balanced School Day": According to many of the teachers in this think tank, one structural change that the school recently incorporated seemed to address providing more opportunities for extra-curricular type activities. This was a switch to a "Balanced School Day". Rather than each school day having the more traditional two 15-minute recesses (one in the morning and one in the afternoon), and a noon hour lunch period, the day is filled with 90-minute teaching "blocks" separated by a 50-minute mid-morning break and a 55-minute mid-afternoon lunch break. During the mid-morning break, students typically eat a snack for the first part, and then go outside to play. One teacher immediately saw advantages to this school day and opportunities for clubs and activities. "Being on a balanced school day where we have a longer recess makes it easier to do a club too."

Teachers in the think tank seemed to positively regard this structural shift to their day. One teacher shared that, "It's like two half hour recess times outside, and then twenty to twenty-five minutes of eating before that." Another teacher explained, "(Eating opportunities) twice a day, so blood sugars don't spike through. Normally, you are just ready to eat something before lunchtime...And then again by the end of the day, you are done and hungry and grumpy. This way kids are eating snacks throughout the day and this just eliminates that, right?

Another teacher shared personal reasons why a balanced day was a better option. "We have half an hour", she stated. "We can actually do something, like not wait in line for the washroom and then run and copy something." Other teachers agreed, saying, "It seems like 15 minutes is just too quick. By the time you get them out, especially in the winter in this country and get them dressed and they are out." Another teacher noted, "The day seems more productive, like the class times seems more productive and the day goes by faster." One teacher saw an added benefit for some children, saying, "It is one less transition. That was the sell for me, is looking at the kids who you are struggling [with] every time there is a change in the day. Now there (are) only two changes in the day, instead of three. If there is a squabble [during] the first five minutes of recess, it is solved half an hour later. It seems they just find something else to do."

The positive reviews for the balanced day continued. One teacher commented, "Way less issues in behaviours." Another teacher shared, "The worst time of the day as an elementary school teacher was always 1:00 pm, right after lunch." A third teacher added the following.

I was struggling to get my kids motivated, struggling to get myself motivated. Everyone is sleepy after lunch, especially grade 1. They wanted to take a nap, and it was just hard to get work done. I just hated that part of the day, and now being on the balanced day, we come back [from] lunch at 2:00 o'clock. There is really only an hour and a half left in the day. It honestly has eliminated that whole

problem because even the kids are kind of in that mindset of 'there is only just a short time to the end of the day'. I am in that mindset and by the time we do the agendas at the end of the day, they have a little bit of free time at 3:00 o'clock. So, really it is from 2:00-3:00 pm, is that learning time, which goes by so fast.

Teachers shared that under the old schedule, afternoon recess was too late in the day, "and then you came back with about 45 minutes (left), and that seems like a waste because you couldn't really do anything." Teachers thought that building in 90 minute teaching blocks was, "more productive. You can get something done in each of those blocks of time and to have a 90-minute block that is uninterrupted. If you don't have gym or dance or music class in there, you can run a whole thing of centres and complete it, and have that time for transitions. That's nice."

Teacher-Teacher Connections: Teachers noted one problem with the balanced day schedule, and that was the half-day kindergarten program could not join in on such a schedule. One teacher stated, "I find that I can barely see our kindergarten teacher this year, which is the downside. And that's losing a connection, because she is not on the same schedule, so her breaks aren't with us. So, I barely see her, which is too bad because I enjoy her company." Teachers saw advantages to connecting with each other, and appeared that they wished that more time could be scheduled during the school year to allow for these opportunities.

Division-Wide Teacher Talk Time: On a positive note, teachers then shared how the school division had implemented something called "Teacher Talk Time". One teacher explained, "We have what's…called Teacher Talk Time. Every teacher…forms groups within a school, and then you are given a certain amount of time throughout the year to just meet and talk. It's supposed to be about math and literacy, and just have good discussions about what you are doing in classes and what problems you are facing." Teachers in this think tank hoped this practice could continue, and appreciated the efforts school administration did to provide such opportunities.

V. Discussion and Analysis

A. *Structure, Routine, and "Rhythm"*

Individual interventions introduced by classroom teachers are critical: The teachers in this think tank spent time discussing the importance of establishing classroom routines in their Canadian schools. They emphasized the importance of routines when working with young children, particularly for those students who appear to come from homes filled with turmoil and uncertainty. The teachers in this think tank spoke about at great length about routines, but seemed to emphasize routines that promoted stronger teacher-student relationships, rather than ones that met the requirements for a teacher-centred classroom management approach. For example, teachers highlighted the importance of warmly greeting students, reading to the class, and taking the time to play with their young learners. They also made it part of their practice to connect with students and their families outside of the classroom and school day.

Each of the teachers provided examples of how co-constructing curriculum with their students was beneficial to academic success. In this way, teachers seemed to incorporate practices that more closely aligned with a more student-centred-classroom management approach (rather than the more traditional teacher-centred one). Many of these approaches aligned with student-centred classroom routines [7].

As stated earlier, teacher establishment of clear routines has long been considered to be a crucial element of successful classrooms, particularly at the elementary level [6]. Still, these teachers didn't focus on traditional interpretations of classroom management [6], but more on what [7] refers to as a more "student-centered approach" (p.34). While it can be a difficult challenge to balance the expectations that society places on teachers to take charge and manage classrooms, while also promoting student-centred learning environments [7], it seems like the teachers in this study are capable of meeting both requirements. This may be because the manner that the teachers approached establishing structures and routines seemed to be less about teacher control and order, and more about what [15] describes as finding the ideal "rhythm" (p.33) of the day for their students to thrive in several ways.

It could be argued that some of the teachers in this study took [7] interpretation of the student-centred approach a step further. For example, [7] describes the student-centred approach as one which, "focuses on meaning making, inquiry and authentic activity" (p.34). For the teachers participating in this study, student centred also involved focusing on students' well-being. The teachers in this study placed a high priority on connecting with their students and their families inside and outside of the school day.

Inside of the classroom, they tried to connect curricular activities with interpersonal connection opportunities. For example, they also set scheduled time aside to read aloud to their students and play with them. While teachers shared how these activities created wonderful opportunities to connect with their students, it also assisted them in meeting curricular outcomes. Reading aloud to children is considered to be one of the most important activities in creating successful readers [16]. The opportunity for children to play has long been recognized as one of the most fundamental ingredients for academic and social student success [17]. Therefore, teachers incorporate these practices into the rhythm of their day in order to advance learning, not take pause from it.

School and division-wide initiatives are very beneficial: Still, teachers in the study expressed the need for systemic supports in order to fulfill both objectives, and were excited to share about several that existed. These systemic supports were seen by the teachers as providing excellent opportunities to connect with children, their families, and colleagues. Whether or not many of these

supports are ultimately initiated and maintained in schools is dependent upon school and divisional administration. It seems that while finding a positive student-centred rhythm in the classroom is dependent upon each elementary classroom teacher, the optimal student and teacher-centred rhythm for the school is based in large part to the decisions made by the school principal.

Teachers highlighted the importance of school and division administrators setting aside time for teachers to connect with one another. For example, teachers spoke favourably about collaboration opportunities that came with division-wide teacher talk time. Based on the responses from participants, having time built into their schedules for teachers to connect with each other was as highly valued as teacher-student connection time.

Balanced School Day: Finally, participants spent a significant amount of time emphasizing their preference for the Balanced School Day (BSD). Comments made by teachers aligned with some of the benefits that [11] posited about the BSD, in terms of transition time, instructional time, and rates in student learning. The teachers preferred having longer learning blocks in the BSD. Teachers were able to plan for longer lessons and had 'time to do more things'. Children spent less time dressing for recess, and this did allow for more instructional and recreational time. Therefore, it appears that a Balanced School Day appears to hold great promise in contributing to more opportunities for teacher-student connections and student-centred classroom routine.

VI. Conclusion

Based on the responses of the participants in this study, it appears that elementary teachers view authentically connecting with their young learners to be a critical component of student success in their Canadian schools. They provided many creative examples of how they attempted to build in routines inside of the classroom that supported these connections. Teachers also provided examples of making time to connect outside of the school day and the importance of finding ways to connect with students' families. They seemed to be student-centred in every regard. The difference between how the teachers in this study approach "student-centred" and [7] interpretation is that the teachers seem to place the student's well-being as their top priority, and build in routines that help ensure the best opportunities for this while still creating learning environments where knowledge is co-constructed with their students. Based on this study's findings, further studies exploring the benefits and challenges of teachers connecting with students' families is recommended

It appears that school and division-wide structure and routines in Canadian schools certainly can help teachers achieve these successful connections with students. Teachers appreciated time to meet with teachers from within their schools and divisions to share ideas and best practices. Building in teacher connection time (rather than the traditional practice of school administration just providing individual teacher prep time) is an area that warrants further research. Teachers also appreciated the "Balanced School Day" and made them feel like it provided them with the best opportunity for student success. Further studies of the benefits and challenges to the Balanced School Day should be explored.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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