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GETTING TO KNOW MY STUDENTS: A STUDENT TEACHER'S REPORT ON
BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

The ability of teachers to build relationships with students has always been a topic in the field of education that has interested me. For my undergraduate honors thesis, I decided to conduct a self-study into my ability to build relationships with my new students as a pre-service student teacher. In my fall student teaching placement, I collected data of my ability to form relationships by journaling every day after my time in the school. Through analysis of these journals, I found that purposeful, deliberate, and conscious decision-making allowed me to consistently communicate and engage in student and teacher vulnerability to form relationships with my class of students. This discovery led to a conversation about how forming relationships, a social skill, can be helpful in forming students into citizens capable of being productive in a global community.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Throughout my career as a student, I have always wondered how each teacher I have had was capable of building relationships with so many students year after year. As I entered the classroom, at Twin Peaks Elementary School, fall of my senior year as a middle level education student teacher, I intended to capture the essence of building relationships through a self-study of my own efforts in my pre-service student teaching 5th grade classroom. Middle level education is a teacher preparation program at The Pennsylvania State University that prepares teachers to teach middle level aged students, fourth grade to eighth grade. In the last two semesters at Penn State, the student teachers, or the young adults going through the teacher preparation program, are placed into schools in the area surrounding Penn State to practice teach and gain experience with middle aged students. It is in my first semester student teaching that I studied myself at Twin Peaks Elementary and my process of building relationships.

To guide my study I asked myself, what am I doing on a daily basis in the classroom to form relationships with my students and how am I responding to students and their vulnerability? To understand and keep data of my findings I journaled every day I was in the classroom to track and discover the secret to successful relationship building. I used these guiding questions to analyze my journals later in the investigation progress. These guiding questions have shaped my writing, journals and my understanding of what it means as a student teacher to teach young students. I wanted to make it clear that throughout this self-study I talk about and name different teachers, students, and schools. However, their names and defining characteristics have been

changed to protect their identities and privacy. However, each person plays a pivotal role in this writing process.

Through my writing I will provide background for my interest in building relationships, relay what the literature says about this area, explain how I conducted the self-study, and provide findings from my self-study and reflection process. I will end my writing explaining how this self-study will affect my teaching in the future.

Chapter 2

Background: Why I chose to study the process of building relationships

Throughout my four years at Penn State I have come to find building relationships as grounds for much deeper personal and professional development. Throughout my education classes, teachers and instructors of all kinds have left an impact on who I am because of the relationship they were capable or incapable of forming with me. As I grew nearer to my final year, and my motivations for education grew stronger, my instructors and professors only started to make more of an impact. Recently, the content and conversation shifted to building relationships with my own students. This ever-important task was transcribed in all the textbooks and in my mentors' minds as something to focus on as I was entering the classroom. This task became more and more daunting until I focused on being reflexive in my time at Penn State and throughout my own personal education. I have come to realize, through reflection, that there are people in my life, including past teachers and great friends, who, in different ways, have helped me understand that relationships are important aspects in understanding how to be a good educator and person.

My Teacher

Upon deciding on my thesis topic, I turned to my memories throughout my time in school to explore topics in the education field that may have relevance to my past experiences. During this reflection process, I thought of all of the teachers I have had and the relationship that I built with each of them. These relationships were the foundations to my time in school as each year the process began again with a new teacher and a new setting. This led me to believe that

building relationships would be a topic that has pertinence to my future but allows me to incorporate experiences from my past.

To understand what I have learned from my relationships throughout my education, I analyzed a relationship with a teacher from high school and the facets of our relationships that could help me better my own teaching practices. Mr. Cerous was a tall, chubby man with more energy than a speeding train. He had blond hair, a slender nose, and a classroom in the 100 wing of the school. Everyone knew that Mr. Cerous cared about his students' personal and academic growth. For example, I remember talking to him about cheerleading competitions, when sitting in his Honors English class my tenth grade year and then seeing him in the crowd watching my team. This was something, as a tenth grader, I thought was so small and trivial. However, as a future educator, this is dedication and love. Mr. Cerous cared about the small things, and the relationships he was building with all of his students.

Mr. Cerous also cared about his content, or subject matter. His class really focused on reading and writing and using it to frame arguments about the world. We read Julius Caesar, watched *The Dead Poets Society*, and participated in Socratic seminars. Mr. Cerous had high expectations for his students, especially as writers. Every day, when entering his room, there was a poster with sharpies and markers for students to respond to a quote or a question in words, drawings, or through a quick conversation. He also had a poster that hung behind his desk for all of his students to write down "golden lines", which were our favorite, the most interesting or the most important lines from the books we were reading.

Mr. Cerous also had a standing five-page journaling assignment due every Friday. He wanted the journals to follow us everywhere; stay in our backpacks, be in our purses at the mall, go to family occasions with us and to after school events. We were supposed to listen to

conversations and write down things that sounded strange or interesting. We could write down things about our life, or write short stories. We could write golden lines from our books we were reading, or create pictures from magazines. It was really anything we could think of besides our classwork for his class. Most students in his classes, including myself, hated the assignment and tried to manipulate our journals by changing the dates and flipping through different pages when he came around to check them on Friday afternoons.

Even though we all hated the journaling assignment, it had a rigorous application in his classroom. It was an English class and he wanted us to write as much as we could and applied a strategy that let us be more creative and innovative. I applaud him for this practice as much as I empathize for the students of this age. Teaching tenth grade students to care about English is hard, but Mr. Cerous used so many forms of learning that let us all shine as individuals. To this day, I cannot understand how we had so much respect for the man who created the assignment but not for the assignment itself. In our teacher preparation classes, we talk about enduring understandings, which are the concepts teachers want their students to take away from their class and think about ten or twenty years down the road. At first, I was thinking that Mr. Cerous fell short through this assignment and making it interesting for tenth graders. However, the more I look at it now, the more I see myself finally realizing the enduring understanding as I write an entire undergraduate thesis, essentially, by choice.

Interestingly enough, though I did not respect the journaling assignment in tenth grade, I chose journaling as my primary source of data collection for my self-study undergraduate thesis. I enjoyed writing these daily journals and was also asked to journal and reflect frequently in our methods courses. Mark Kissling, our social studies education professor, as well as my thesis supervisor, had our cohort create a journal for our class every Friday. In science education, we

had in depth reflections about different assignments and teaching opportunities. In my mind, I am finally paying my dues for cheating on Mr. Cerous's assignment as I have written far more than I ever thought I would, but I also think I just finally understand. I might feel more of a responsibility for my journals because my instructors are reading my journals now, when in contrast, Mr. Cerous let us keep our journals private. It might also be that in tenth grade, I did not see myself as an academic and I just hated how my voice sounded on paper. Nonetheless, at this point in my life, I can finally see the importance of writing and sharing my thoughts. Whether my journals sound put together and thought out or scrambled and clunky, they describe what I was thinking, feeling, and wondering about at the time. I have matured into the process of reflection and journaling and I think Mr. Cerous would be proud to see the respect I have for him and his assignment now. I can say six years post tenth grade that his enduring understanding is coming to fruition.

My past teachers and instructors have led me to my thesis topic of understanding how teachers form relationships with their students. Mr. Cerous has given me an example from my past experience of how relationships are formed and has allowed me to reflect on what it means to be a writer. Although teachers are offering me examples of how to best form relationships, I believe that turning to friendship will also give me a better understanding of the true intimacies of relationships.

My Friend

As I have navigated through the literal and figurative hills of Penn State, I have thought about the relationship Mr. Cerous and I had throughout high school and began to think about what other relationships in my life are helping me create a person I can be proud to present to my future students. No one has helped me foster a love of teaching and seeing my students than my

roommate and friend, Penelope. She has been my roommate since freshman year and we have come to understand each other on a level deeper than even we understand. As we are both education majors, we have accidentally shunned our other two roommates on many occasions to talk about our students. We cry about our frustrations and celebrate our personal and students' victories over our time in our classrooms. By spending time together and sharing our personal stories with each other, we have learned what friendship means. Being able to deepen this friendship with a love for education, I have learned that friendship and the intimacy and vulnerability that accompany it are building blocks to forming relationships.

The more I have learned in my teacher preparation classes, which Penelope takes as well, about the importance of relationships, the more I have realized that *every* relationship is important. As much as Mr. Cerous has shaped the way I view writing and my ability to connect with my students, Penelope has helped me struggle with a major that develops idealistic thinkers and plops them into a system that is not even close to ideal. This forces me to think about my students and the many other relationships they will have from their own lives when they enter my classroom. Through my self-study, I used the inspiration from Mr. Cerous and Penelope to answer my questions regarding relationships.

My Understanding

As I studied myself over the semester, I discovered what relationships mean and stumbled my way through the best ways to form them, maintain them, and make them flourish. I chose to study how I built relationships with my students not only because it's been stressed, in our student teacher preparation textbooks, to be one of the most beneficial ways to maintain a classroom but also because it is one of the ways that seemed to be relevant. I could build from sixteen years of my own experiences in school. What I remember from growing up and growing

through school was the relationships I created with all the people in my life and how they shifted, grew and shrank in some cases, and continued to be molded as I began to understand myself and the lessons along the way. As I looked at my students this past fall and began to get to know them, I realized that as social beings, we are all just learning from social interactions. As abstract as it seems, there is something so concrete in analyzing something that I have been participating in since I was born. Penelope and Mr. Cerous are only two examples of a lifetime of research.

Through my self-study, I will argue that relationships are built through a vast number of small interactions that are purposefully created in a classroom. Even more so, I will say that through reflection, teachers can document the purposeful interactions they are creating to see their students as individuals, and therefore allow for the incorporation of their individuality into the makeup of classroom content and student learning. My experiences in the fall semester of my senior year at Penn State, have given me the opportunity to see the effects of purposeful relationships in a classroom as I began to understand my 5th grade students as people through small, documented, interactions over time.

In the rest of my writing I will discuss what other professional teachers working in the field are saying about building relationships with students. I will later discuss the importance of my journals in discovering the many purposeful interactions I documented. Lastly, I will analyze my journals and share how they support the idea that relationships are built through a vast number of small, purposeful interactions and how reflecting on my experiences led to this conclusion and understanding.

The field of education is filled with professionals that write for many recognized online blogs as well as write textbooks for many student teacher programs. I have consulted both platforms to gain knowledge on how others are going about understanding the phenomenon of

building relationships. Through the literature review, I plan to put teacher bloggers and textbook authors in conversation with each other around the topic of building relationships. Through this conversation, concepts will be revealed to illuminate some of the trends in regards to relationship building in classrooms.

Chapter 3

Literature Review: A Conversation

In the field of education there are an abundance of current teachers and researchers talking about building relationships in classrooms. William Ayers, a school reform activist, for example, shares that a good preparation for teaching is “sustained interest in and deep knowledge of another person” (Ayers, 2010, p. 31). There are the how-to lists, the teacher blogs and student teacher textbooks that are shaping the conversation on the best practices to encourage this “deep knowledge” about the students. I found all of these resources beneficial to understanding how to conceptualize the abstract concept of relationships. The teacher blogs gave an insight that felt original and heart warming. They told stories and gave instances to back up their claims on how to best build relationships. The teacher textbooks, although sometimes robotic, offered an intellectual standpoint to back up different concepts as well.

The resources that I consulted yielded two main concepts that can strongly contribute to fostering relationships with students; consistent communication and vulnerability in the classroom. These concepts could be described and handled in many different ways and I offer a few strategies for each concept that can facilitate the consistent communication and vulnerability in the classroom. I later describe how these concepts and strategies helped me develop relationships in my 5th grade classroom through analysis of my journals and the purposeful instances in the classroom I documented over the semester.

Consistent, Conscious Communication

Communication is important in any relationship. It fosters an intimacy between the parties and encourages conversation that can yield information valuable to a stronger relationship. However, nothing makes communication more powerful than making it consistent. I have learned through many people, but especially my roommate Penelope, that talking to new people as often as possible can create a beautiful relationship. Penelope is the type of person that loves to share her day as soon as she comes home. I, on the other hand, used to keep my day to myself. However, the more I spent time with Penelope, the more we communicated about our lives and shared stories from our pasts as we marched through our years at Penn State. This started by consistently sharing our daily happening and struggles. It took Penelope a while to wear me down, but eventually, the communication was a two way street.

Thinking about the relationships I wanted to build with my students, communicating on a consistent, daily basis, like my relationships with Penelope demonstrated, could create an intimacy and bond that would develop into a complex, rewarding relationship. Complicating this further, “communication requires perhaps the most conscious effort of us in our daily lives” (Ochel, 2010, para. 32). The idea of being conscious and making purposeful conversation will lead to relationships with my students. With friendships the conscious nature of communication comes naturally. However, with my students, being conscious and purposeful is important to be sure I am reaching all of them throughout the day.

Through online stories and my classroom management textbook, I have found examples of a few strategies that allow for consistent, conscious, communication with students in the classroom. These strategies offer concrete benefits to making it a point to reach out and communicate with students in a consistent, conscious manner.

Threshold

One of the first strategies that allows for conscious, consistent communication is threshold. Threshold, a concept in the book *Teach like a Champion* (Lemov, 2015), focuses on the teacher student interactions when each student enters the classroom. The book offers this strategy as a technique that allows for the teacher to have consistent communication with students everyday as they enter the classroom. In the books description, students are to line up outside of the classroom and shake hands with the teachers as they enter the door. It serves as a time to talk to each student briefly and blend this time into the next routines in the classroom. For instance, a teacher can shake a students hand and direct them to the do now on the board or something similar. Overtime, threshold “will naturally take on a feel that corresponds to your own tone and style” (Lemov, 2015, p.354), a concept that I felt was necessary as each student and each teacher is different. Threshold is again “designed to engage in a one-on-one student check in every day before the start of class as well as reinforce expectations and routines already set up in the classroom” (p. 355).

Many teachers, including Amanda Torrence, a teacher and blogger who comments on the effects of *Teach like a Champion* strategies, believes that “just one simple gesture each day can give a student a greater chance of becoming more academically motivated and interested in class” (Torrence, 2018, para.2). This should be a natural goal of every teacher and this technique can help teachers get their students to feel this intrinsic motivation in a school setting.

As I learned about this concept in my education class on campus our class was caught up on the idea of handshakes and the “unnaturalness” of the technique. However, one important thing to note about threshold is that it can be shaped to look different and reflect every teachers’ style. *Teach like a Champion* uses it as a strict entrance to the classroom where a line and firm

handshakes are involved. But, in his online blog, “Doug Lemov’s Field Notes”, Doug Lemov offers an example of an adaption of threshold. In his example, Shannon Benson manipulated the idea of threshold to his advantage and stood outside the school to interact and engage with students as the doors opened instead of by the classroom doors. Lemov labeled this as arrival greetings and said, “the ‘arrival’ greeting gives you all the culture-shaping benefits of threshold but, critically, doesn’t have to be quite so beholden to time” (Lemov, 2016, para. 3). The field note describes an interaction between Shannon and a young scholar that was about three and a half minutes long where he talks to a student who appears upset. Although, this does not seem as long as many educators would have liked with a students who was upset, this was longer and more beneficial than a less than thirty-second handshake outside the door. The student benefitted, the teacher now has new knowledge about the student and the relationship was strengthened in this one small scenario. Through this adaptation, it is easy to recognize many different ways threshold could be used in a school setting.

I personally could see this technique being changed in many different ways. Teachers could stand inside the classroom and as students hand in homework, sign up for lunch or sign in for attendance they could interact with the teacher. Harry and Rosemary Wong, writing a special for Teachers Net Gazette, describe how threshold can be used to foster a schools and students civic leadership. At a school in New Mexico, each student shakes the hand of a teacher and a peer every morning. They address each other and teach younger students the ideals of the school, such as citizenship and communication, each and every start of the school year (Wong et al, 2012, para. 37). Later in the year, just the teachers stand at the doors, but they know every student and the routine as they become more independent with the process. The idea of

threshold, in my opinion, should be used as a framework to acknowledge, “every student, every day,” which is actually the motto at a local middle school near Penn State.

Thinking back to my time in school, Mr. Cerous actually used this strategy, but of course shaped it to his own liking. He used a poster at the entrance where each student could write something in response to a quote, a line from a book or movie, or an interesting picture. He would stand there and talk to us students as well as read the poster afterwards to get a more organic understanding of who we were by what we said, wrote, or drew on the poster. The best part was, we did not know this was happening. It was a fluid, natural routine that Mr. Cerous set up at the beginning of the year that carried through to foster the relationships he was building with us along the way.

Another strategy that has a similar approach to threshold is a technique called, First Five Minutes, created by an Edutopia blogger, Nicholas Provenzano. He says the technique is about taking the first five minutes of every day to talk to the students about non-academic topics to show the students he cares as well as share about his own interests. He talks about the importance of getting to know who is struggling and who is going to act as a leader in the classroom. The First Five Minute technique can be used during do now's to talk to different students during the day. Provenzano states, “as teachers, it's important for us to understand that there is so much more to students than the life they lead in class, and it is important to show interest in a student outside of the day's homework” (Provenzano, 2014, para. 1). This type of communication is a way of showing the students that the intimacy being created, is valued and treasured. Like Mr. Cerous and Nicholas Provenzano demonstrated, these techniques can be manipulated to fit a teacher's personal style, making them strong strategies to facilitate constant communication in the classroom.

Through the strategy of threshold and first five minutes, teachers can consistently communicate with their students. It stresses the importance of reaching out daily and purposefully to form quality relationships with the students that walk into the room everyday. Both techniques require a teacher to make a conscious, deliberate effort to talk to their students. Through my self-study, I found that these deliberate conversations are what can lead to positive relationships with the students. Although these techniques are helpful, there are other ways to be consistent in the classroom and that includes engaging the students in one-on-one conversations in different settings.

One-on-One Conversations

As I reflect on some of the better relationships in my life, one thing that has seemed to strengthen some relationships more than others was the one-on-one conversations that helped others understand small things about me. As an extrovert, talking and sharing ideas has never been an issue for me. However, making sure the conversations are about meaningful concepts was something I struggled with growing up and even now in college. It was not until I met Penelope, that I realized I lacked some natural communication skills. I was comfortable in group settings but she was far more comfortable with one-on-one conversations. On our floor freshman year, my roommate was the person everyone vented too. She had this natural ease with one-on-one conversations that I usually strayed away from. However, as I got to know her more, I understood that she just tried to show that she cared to every person that she talked to by sharing stories back and forth, or nodding along as they vented. As I entered my fall semester student teaching, I tried to take what I learned from my relationship with my roommate and pass along the idea that I cared in any one-on-one conversations I had.

Through the education textbooks such as *Principles of Classroom Management* (Levin & Nolan, 2004) from my teacher education program, building relationships is one of the stressed concepts and is most often accompanied by the idea that teachers need to communicate with their students. One way a teacher can do this is through, at first, deliberate one-on-one conversations. One-on-one conversations can be introductory in nature, for example threshold or during activities during the first week of school. Conversations can also be curricular which would include academic conversations, or extracurricular which could include conversations about sports and weekend adventures. The one-on-one conversations of different types can all happen in different places, from on the playground, to waiting in line for lunch, to walking students to the bathroom or when they have a question after the bell has already rung. These conversations, although yes, can happen naturally in the classroom, are best when used purposefully to engage students at different times in their school day.

The important part to remember during these conversations is to recognize that students and teachers need to share who they are as individuals and get personal with each other. Jordan Catapano, a teacher writing for TeachHub agrees with my notion and says “we must intentionally consider when our prime opportunities are to pause the strict academic focus and engage in sincere, personal conversations with our students” (Catapano, n.d., para. 2). In middle level education, this is especially important as the students are just shaping their interests and understanding their roles as students. Using Catapano’s approach, teachers can talk to their students in many different scenarios about an abundance of topics. However, I would argue that conversations could be sincere, as well as deliberate. Being intentional about when to pause the academic rigor to engage in conversation is important because it shows the students that

academics and learning is the focus while also being able to make choices to create and form intimacy with the students.

An EdWords blogger, Michael Schultz, is in alignment with Catapano and says, “It is important for the teachers to get to know their students because the more they get to know each student the better they can teach them, in a way that they will learn” (Schultz, 2015, para. 4). The reason we want to get to know our students, like Michael Schultz is suggesting, is to help form lessons to better teach each student. By trying to reach the student by engaging them with different kinds of conversation teachers can increase the likelihood of student learning and form a respect filled classroom. Just as threshold and first five minutes were approaches to deliberate, introductory conversations, one-on-one conversations can be purposeful conversations throughout the day that can make teaching each student more fulfilling and easier. All of these techniques can serve to better the trust each student feels with the teacher as well as provide a community that fosters learning and relationships.

During a texting conversation with my mentor teacher this spring semester after a day that she was absent, my mentor touched on the importance of “off task” personal conversations. I talked about how the kids were a little off task and just wanted to talk to me. She said that it is okay for them to be off task for a small amount of time during an 80-minute period as long as they get back on track. It’s okay for you to be off task with them too. Talking to them about “the game”, or about their personal lives, might be more important than redirecting them. They respect the teacher more and eventually will listen when they are asked to do something academic. My mentor says this is in support with her philosophy. Getting to know the students and have them trust the teaching style of open communication can lead to better classroom management and success in school in general. The learning environment my mentor teacher

creates, leaves less room for disruptive students as an intimacy and mutual respect is created through these small conversations. She begins each class by purposefully asking a few students about their basketball game, wrestling match and school play. By doing this the students feel they can trust her and they seem to enjoy being in the classroom and learning from her.

One-on-one conversations suggest an intimacy to building relationships and can be used to increase the background knowledge a teacher has about each student. Overtime, conversations will flow more naturally because of the knowledge gained and the intimacy that has been allowed to permeate the relationship. Because of the relationship that one-on-one conversations can create, the teaching experience will become personal and tender. Students will recognize the efforts being made by the teacher and will create a community of trust and intimacy in the classroom. This learning environment will be positive for student learning.

There are many instances where conversations can create vulnerability in the classroom, however, there are a few other distinct ways vulnerability can be formed, and used in the classroom in deliberate fashions to better form relationships. In the next section, I will describe some of the ways to increase student vulnerability and share in it as a teacher.

Vulnerability in the Classroom

Throughout my school experiences, some of the most influential moments were when I was vulnerable and shared myself with my teachers and my classmates. I would describe being vulnerability as instances where a person shares private, personal information with another person. Through this act of sharing, people are able to understand each other's personalities and subtleties. At the time of the vulnerable circumstances in my past experiences, I may have hated it, despised it even, but looking back at the times where I was vulnerable such as through my journaling, group conversations and conversations about assignments, I have come to appreciate

being vulnerable in the classroom as a learner and a teacher. Vulnerability gives humans the ability to form connections with others through the process of sharing and communicating in subtle ways. Through the vulnerability in the classroom, students and teachers can form relationships with each other that make the learning environment mutually beneficial. This is important because the teacher and the students are sharing the space and learning to work together to gain knowledge and skills for the future. Vulnerability, although is a sensitive topic, can be fostered intentionally in the classroom by focusing on balancing the teacher vulnerability and students vulnerability. Thinking about when to share about oneself and when to let the students open up in structured, planned ways can leave both the students and the teachers happy with the outcome.

Teacher Vulnerability

In many instances, teachers focus on getting to know the students, however, it is just as important for the students to know the teacher. Some of my strongest teachers, including Mr. Cerous, made it a point to share anecdotes about themselves and expose themselves as humans as the year goes on. The best was when teachers would tell the students about the mistakes they have made, big or small. To the student, this can make the teacher feel “real” and allows for a deeper connection between all parties by making the teacher feel relatable and in some cases, fallible. Sharing information about oneself as the teacher can allow “Students [to] see that I am willing to let them into my own life, so they consider this a fair exchange in getting to know them” (Konietzko, 2014, para. 13). Lothar Konietzko, an Education Week Teacher blogger, shares this thought in his article on learning about student culture through writing assignments. He asks his students to share the worst moment of their life in an introductory writing piece. He stresses the “need to let your students know that you too are a fallible human being—and that

even though you are an adult, you have imperfections and have overcome difficulties” (para. 20). He continues to say that he would share his story about his parents divorce to balance the sharing in the classroom. The idea of a fair exchange or balance is important. It makes the relationship feel honest, that a student can give a little and get a little in return. Knowledge of one another is valuable. A teacher can purposely create lessons to get the students to share about themselves throughout the year, such as through writing assignments or sharing their hopes and dreams on posters, while also doing the same for the students. This will create bonds of subtle respect within the classroom.

Furthermore, Howard Zinn writes, “I never believed that I was imposing my views onto blank slates... I wanted only to wheel my little pushcart, offering my wares along with others, leaving students to make their own choices” (Zinn, 1993, p. 8). In his writing, “You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train” (Zinn, 1993), he talks about his inability to shield his political viewpoints from his students. He would share his opinion and encourage his students to disagree, as they are not “blank slates” and do have a mind of their own. To me, this is another way to be vulnerable with students. By sharing the teachers’ opinion with the students, they can learn what it is the teacher values and decide if they too value this goal. I believe William Ayers would agree with Zinn, as he states that a teacher cannot teach “someone completely alien or apart from some sense of a shared humanity” (Ayers, 2010, p. 31). To encourage vulnerability from students, we must acknowledge their lives and their innate desire to understand the teachers as well. In many cases, this can be done deliberately in the classroom. Howard Zinn, choses to make his viewpoints known, just as other teachers can chose to share their difficulties growing up and divorcing parents. All of these conscious decisions lead to a better understanding of the

teacher and offer subtle chances for the students to see the teachers' vulnerability in the classroom.

Yet another instance where teachers can level the vulnerability in the classroom is to share some of their writing with the class. In so many ways, teachers ask the students to share their writing. They either have to turn it in, hang it up, write on the board for the whole class to see or read it to teachers. But many times, teachers do not share in this subtle sharing and vulnerability. Mark Kissling, my thesis supervisor and social studies education teacher has shared his writing with my cohort many times. He shared an "I Write America" poem with my cohort; as well as a piece he had written about splitting his pants. In both cases, my class was surprised by how hard it might have been for him to share this piece of himself with us; one was embarrassing and the other was a task he had assigned to the class. None of my cohort was expecting such vulnerable moments in each of these scenarios. In some instances, I think the surprise of a teacher sharing is special but another part of me wishes it was more of a consistent effort from all of my instructors and teachers over the years.

Melanie Meehan, a blogger for Two Writing Teachers, says, "Straight from the mouths of students—our writing models, motivates, and inspires" (Meehan, 2016, para. 22) in her piece about the importance of teachers sharing their writing. In the article, students were sharing how they felt when the teacher shared her own writing. It gave them validation for the assignment, gave them inspiration to write, and created a sense of community, as the students learned stuff about the teacher they would not have known otherwise. I also believe it is opening the teacher up to share and be vulnerable. Their writing might not be perfect and it might be personal, like Mark's was, but it opened the gates to get students excited about the content and sparked conversation and motivation. Vulnerability does not have to be a bad thing in the classroom for

teachers or students. It also can be a planned strategy to form relationships with students. For instance, teachers can plan when they will share their writing and the purpose behind that chance to share. This conscious effort to engage in the vulnerability in the classroom will be felt by the students and foster a community like Melanie Meehan describes.

Teachers can create instances in the classroom for the teacher *and* the students to share in vulnerable moments. The conscious efforts to create assignments to encourage students to share can foster student vulnerability and encourage maturity in the classroom. I will describe a few instances where students can be encouraged to share their vulnerability leading to better relationships.

Student Vulnerability

There are many instances in a classroom where students are given the opportunity to share vulnerable parts of themselves, which can include writing and discussions. Through these vulnerable instances, their classmates and the teacher can learn subtle nuances about the person and develop a better understanding of what they value and who they are.

I believe one of the most vulnerable parts of school for many students and even teachers is writing. Students are sharing who they are, what they know and discovering their voices on different concepts over time. Writing is a vulnerable process because it may never feel correct, complete, and the skills to do it are constantly changing. Many fear the subject because they get papers back with not so beneficial comments and, if the students are anything like me, just feel they are simply “not a writer.” However, there are many different purposes to writing and that includes being vulnerable with the teacher. To acknowledge the student vulnerability associated with writing, I believe it is important to read the students writing. Not only does it give the student an audience to write for, it also gives the teacher an ability to learn things about the

student they normally would not. Konietzko also says that reading student work is, “helpful to remember details that may continue to affect a student's life” (Konietzko, 2014, para. 22). By being deliberate in reading the students work to understand them as people, teachers are opening the door to build relationship with the students and their work. Remembering what they wrote and bringing it up in conversation later in the year, shows the student they wrote for a purpose, with the teacher as their audience.

Ann Van Etten, a writer and educator with Teaching Tolerance, would agree, as she shares a first day of school assignment to get her students to write anything about themselves. Her goal in the assignment was to remember that she was a *listener* or audience for her students writing and “it was an important start in showing students the power of writing as conversation” (Van Etten, 2011, para. 4). As educators, it is easy to forget the real role of writing and only focus on the grading and grammatical errors in a students writing piece. However, getting students to recognize that writing is another form of communication and serves as a way to get to know others as humans with astounding experiences, each different and unique, is an important aspect to help students understand. William Ayers says that “Teaching” and I will go as far as saying *writing* “is a human activity” and anything human has an underlying aspect of vulnerability (Ayers, 2010, p. 29). It is the teacher’s responsibility to bring out the vulnerable parts of the students, such as “their own unique thoughts, hopes, dreams, aspirations, needs, experiences, contexts, agendas, and priorities” (Ayers, 2010, p. 29) through writing. Carl Nagin who writes for the The National Writing Project says in an article “that writing is a complex activity; more than just a skill or talent, it is a means of inquiry and expression for learning in all grades and disciplines” (Nagin, 2006, para. 5). Reading and working with students writing can strengthen the teachers understanding of the students’ funds of knowledge and intricacies as

humans. Writing is essential to maintaining vulnerability and it is already purposefully set up in many classrooms to encourage sharing, teacher comments and discussion.

Another way for students to share their vulnerability in the classroom is to engage in discussions. To verbalize an argument or a thought process is to purposefully put it out there for others to hear. Many students have a simple fear of speaking up because they may be wrong. Student vulnerability can be fostered, however, by picking discussion topics that “shows respect for student voices and experiences” (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, para. 21). By strategically choosing topics, as a teacher, that do not have a right or wrong answer but merely encourage students to share their opinions and experiences can create student vulnerability in the classroom. They can learn to share in a place that values differences as well as contribute to a class as a whole to make them feel involved and appreciated. Christina Torres, a writer for Education Week Teacher, talks about discussion and says “What [the students] showed me is their capability to make themselves vulnerable. To be willing to share the deepest parts of themselves. To leave behind the worry of how others would react and share these moments and glimpses into their lives with us all” (Torres, 2015, para. 4). This shows that discussion may not be easy for students but as it is established in the classroom to be appreciated and accepted, students will feel they can open up and share parts of themselves with the class. This will build community in the classroom.

Discussion is a concept that teachers can purposefully put into their classroom structure to get to know the students. By being strategic in what time of year the class engages in conversation, how the class combats differing ideas and how students experiences are appreciated, teachers can create a useful strategy to encourage relationships in the classroom between the teacher and the students and from peer to peer.

Student vulnerability is a huge way for teachers to build relationships with the students, however, it seems that it needs to be a subtle sharing process that is equivocal between teacher and student. I believe the teacher and the student need to be vulnerable for positive, healthy relationships to form between the two.

In the next section I describe the process I took to develop this self-study and the context in which I completed it. Later I will show how my efforts to journal have made me vulnerable, but also offered me a way to collect data. Through analysis of my journals I have connected what I have read in the different resources to understand what others are saying to best build relationships in classrooms to what I personally did in my self-study.

Chapter 4

Methods

In the fall semester of my senior year at Penn State, I was placed into a 5th grade classroom at Twin Peaks Elementary School to complete my pre-service student teaching semester. I was teaching in this school on Monday and Tuesday during the week, with classes the rest of the week. There were two weeks during the semester where I was in the elementary school for a full week; one, the first week in October, and the second was during the third week in November.

During this semester, I was going to be collecting data for my undergraduate thesis. My thesis was a self-study of my ability to form relationships with my 5th grade students. I had decided on this topic through exploration of my time in school, described earlier, as well as through conversations with my thesis supervisor, Mark. Relationships were of interest to me because they seemed so abstract and I wanted to see if studying how I formed them could provide some clarity on the topic.

Throughout the semester, I journaled everyday that I was in the classroom. These journals started on Sunday, August 27th, 2017 as I wrote out my wishes, expectations and worries for the semester. They continued throughout the semester as I came into my placements on Monday and Tuesdays each week. During the two weeks where I came into my placement for the full week, I did indeed journal for the full week. These dates included the week of October 2nd, 2017 to October 6th, 2017 and November 13th, 2017 to November 17th, 2017. I journaled until my last day where I said goodbye to my 5th grade students in the hallway on Tuesday,

December 5th, 2017. The journals were anywhere from three pages to three paragraphs. The length differences depended on how much free time I had after my placement to write before my next responsibility that day. For instance, on Monday's, the journals may have been shorter because my cohort had seminar, a class, to discuss our placements. I wrote these journals on my couch in my apartment. I did type my journals. Although, during the school day, I would take quick notes on paper, I would later transcribe and expand on the notes I wrote to complete my journals online. I typed my journals on a Google document.

My journals had two main focus questions: what am I doing on a daily basis in the classroom to form relationships with my students and how am I responding to students and their vulnerability? The daily journals told stories of *my* interactions with students, as it was important to keep the data focused on myself as I was not studying my students.

The process of journaling and reflecting on my days in the school served a two-fold purpose. First, it was to serve as my data for my thesis. I found myself thinking during the day about the events and things that I needed to include in my journal for the day that would focus on the relationships I was building with my students. Second, it was just a smart teaching practice. Questioning and thinking professionally about what I did during my placement to form relationships has affected the way I think about my teaching. I was capable and willing to critique myself and offer myself a deeper understanding of my practices in regards to building relationships. I was also willing to take the time to remember what I did with my students and thinking about the purposes behind each and every choice I make, which allowed me to create strong rationales for each of them. Through journaling, I knew that I could vent my frustrations and think critically about the relationships I was building.

To analyze and make meaning of my journals, I created monthly-annotated memos. For the months of August/September, October, November, and December, I wrote about a page discussing the themes I noticed in my journals about the ways I was building relationships. For instance, in August/September I noticed how I enacted threshold frequently and how in October I began to make conscious efforts to have one-on-one conversations. I grouped August and September together because there were only a few days in August and it did not warrant its own monthly-annotated memo.

I created these memos in my second semester of my senior year as I was beginning the formal writing process of my thesis. To complete these memos I had to read through each of my journals and make comments on the side of the Google document when I noticed a change in a relationship and any deliberate, conscious decision to better understand my students. I initially planned to read my journals as the month transpired in my fall semester, however, because of time constraints, I decided to analyze the journals and create memos in my second semester and track changes overtime. Through these memos I was able to see that I made deliberate, conscious decision to interact with my students and it was through these purposeful decisions that I was able to build relationships with my students over the semester.

My final step in my process was using my journals and my memos to connect to the concepts I discovered through the literature. I focused on the need for consistent, conscious conversations and vulnerability in the classroom to divulge the ways I deliberately engaged with my students in my 5th grade classroom. I was able to analyze my purposeful use of threshold, one-on-one conversations and student and teacher vulnerability to foster relationships with my twenty-five 5th grade students. My findings describe the connection I made between the literature and the discoveries I made in my journals.

Because journaling was my main form of data collection, the next section addresses the importance of my journals to the process of writing my thesis, as well as the importance of the reflection process as a student teacher. My journals will also be referenced in my findings section. I then propose the importance of helping students learn to form relationships in developing them as valuable citizens and offer how these discoveries will be useful when teaching my own future students.

Chapter 5

The Importance of My Journals

Through my stories of my time in high school, it was easy for me to see that I tried to fight journaling and all that it entailed through a lot of my schooling. However, I think it started before high school as well. I remember being young and trying to write in a journal and thinking about what other people would think if they were to find the journal. It was my *own, personal journal* and I was flustered about writing in it because of what strangers, who would never read it, would think of my writing *if* they were to see it. This may have stemmed from an insecurity of being imperfect and not wanting to think about my flaws, in writing, as well as in the events that I was transcribing in these journals. I used to try and compare myself to the movies. I wanted my journals to sound like monologues in a movie with the perfect background song, and the perfect tone and texture to the writing. I did not think I could achieve this with my own writing and it somehow turned to a frustration in all of my writing.

However, through this daily journaling process for my thesis, I lost track of this manufactured voice I needed to create and just wrote for the sake of collecting data and having a place to put this information. These journals are my collection of stories from my first time consistently in a classroom. They are raw in the sense that they are basically unedited and they describe the factual events that transpired through my pre-service student teaching experience. My journals were not elegant to say the least. However, they were informative. As I looked back on them and commented on the sides of the Google document, I recognized that without my journals I never would have come to the conclusion that it was deliberate, conscious, purposeful

interactions with my students that helped me form the relationship I ended up having with each of them. I was able to go back to documented situations to see just how powerful my carefully decided decisions played a role in the next instance I had with the students. The documented instances created an argument that was later backed up by other teachers and described earlier in my literature review.

My journals were necessary to understand the experience as a whole as well as understand the vast power of journaling and the time commitment it was as a student teacher. I wrote these as a new student teacher in a community where student teachers riddle the halls of elementary, middle and high schools. Penn State feeds so many student teachers into the community and although I was new to my kids they know what it means to have a student teacher. Through journaling every day I was able to see just how much time I was actually spending with the students even though I was only with them two days a week. At the end of the semester, I had pages upon pages of stories to look back and remember my students and the time I spent with them.

Through my journals I was also able to see the different things a student teacher faces in comparison to full time teachers. For instance, there were times when I got to walk around and talk to students when my mentor was teaching or when my mentor was filling out attendance. Another instance was when my mentor was filling out paperwork and I was decorating a bulletin board with student work. By reflecting and looking back on my journals, I saw that being a full time teacher will make it more challenging to get to know my students because I will be pulled in so many different directions.

The journaling process has given me even more appreciation for teachers as well as fostered an understanding of what it takes to build relationships in a 5th grade setting. The next

section will describe my 5th grade setting and my mentor teacher to allow my findings to not stand alone, but to have context. My goal was for the context to give more meaning to the students as well as the setting in which I spent my semester. I will then dive into my findings from my ever important journals.

Chapter 6

The Context

In the senior year of the teacher preparation program at Penn State, student teachers are placed into an elementary or middle school in the area surrounding Penn State. In these placements, the student teachers are given a mentor, who is the full time teacher in the classroom they are assigned who is supposed to help them enter the world of education. In the fall semester of senior year, student teachers are in their pre-service student teaching block. This means that two days a week, the student teachers are in their placement at a local school and the rest of the week they are participating in a full semester of coursework, which is fifteen credits. This included a classroom management course and a science, mathematics and social studies methods course. Methods courses are the how-to classes, where our professors and instructors teach our cohort, the future middle level educators graduating in May 2018, how to teach these subjects.

In the spring semester, typically the graduating semester, student teachers are in their full-time student teaching block. This means that student teachers are in their placements Monday through Friday and have a once a week seminar, or meeting similar to class, on Monday to continue to discuss classroom management and teacher techniques. In the middle level education program we switch placements between the fall and spring semesters to give the student teachers a look at upper elementary school students and traditional middle school students. In my fall semester I was in a 5th grade classroom at Twin Peaks Elementary School, which is considered upper elementary, and currently, in my spring semester, I am in an 8th grade civics classroom at Lone River Middle School. My body of work focuses on my time during my

fall, pre-service student teaching semester with my 5th grade students at Twin Peaks Elementary School.

My 5th grade classroom that I speak so fondly of was not actually mine. It was my mentors, Mr. Dave Wilson's. He was a very short man with sleek, grey hair. Behind his desk, which is tucked away in the back, right hand corner of the room was a miniature refrigerator, a microwave, and a George Foreman grill. There were boxes of tea and coffee, chips and crackers, peanuts and granola bars. Mr. Wilson was not a person to go hungry and he was always quick to offer me goodies. He sat in a comfortable rolling chair and spoke of his family, hunting and being apart of the area, his childhood and college memories, which my presence seems to bring out in people being that I am still in college. He cared about his students' safety and behavior and was very well liked in the building, although I think he would disagree.

My desk was in the upper left hand corner of the classroom. It was an odd triangle shape and it was actually just a table so my legs were visible to everyone. When I was sitting in my desk, facing the students, a bench was to my left, cabinets were to my right, and a bluish, greyish rug was underneath me spreading out of the floor closer to the students. The classroom was always lit with natural lighting because Mr. Wilson did not like the harsh overhead lighting, and the right wall was made up of almost entirely windows. The left hand wall was super tall with sky lighting on top. It was a long room, with whiteboards on both ends and it was fitted with a bulletin board made by me in the back when a person would enter. This will always be a classroom I remember with students who filled my day with questions and stories and good morning jokes. The coming analysis of my journals will continue to describe this place and my journey through this self-study as a student teacher at the Twin Peaks Elementary School.

Chapter 7

Findings

Through analysis of my journals, I have been able to see my teaching from a different perspective. At first, I thought that building relationships was a natural process. However, my journals highlighted how building relationship was made easier because of the conscious, deliberate and intentional decisions I made on a daily basis. I found many themes and things I did as a student teacher that are entangled in the two concepts: consistent, conscious communication and vulnerability in the classroom. Overtime and through the use of different strategies, I was able to create relationships that focused on the trueness and tenderness behind each and every student and not necessarily how they are perceived by the school system.

My journals made it clear that understanding the makeup of the classroom, including socioeconomic breakdown as well as the number of students whose parents are divorced has given me an unfair ability to see the students' vulnerability. As a teacher, this makes me question if teachers will even be able to balance the continuum of sharing subtleties of vulnerability.

I also discovered instances where I maintained consistency in talking to my students. I engaged in my own version of threshold from an early start in the year and continued to engage in intimate, one-on-one conversations. By reading my journals I was able to see that threshold as well as many of the conversations I had were a conscious effort on my part to bring up old conversations or start new ones to gain more background information on different students. Although they were planned and purposeful, they were no less sincere or important.

I later dove into the vulnerability that both my students and I engaged in over the semester. I found as a student teacher I was unsure how much I could share with the students and when it was appropriate. However, through my analysis, I found clear times where I could have shared more and balanced the vulnerability continuum.

In the next few sections, I will describe my findings surrounding the makeup of the classroom, the consistent communication and vulnerability in the classroom that I found relevant and pressing from my journals. I have included excerpt from my journals that will also offer a glimpse into how I wrote my journals and their significance to the process.

The Makeup of the Classroom

Throughout my journaling process I was slowly able to develop an understanding of the State College area in terms of socio-economic status as well as an understanding of growing divorce rates and how this can cause disconnects with home life, school, and school work for my students. On my first day, when I was visiting my mentor teacher to help him set up his classroom, he started talking to me about the makeup of this coming classroom. According to my journal,

“Mr. Wilson also mentioned that 9 students in the classroom will be receiving different Title I services which is more than he has ever had in a class before. He also said that because of the area we live in the students are very socioeconomically diverse. He phrased it as some students are basically living in projects, and others are living in mansions. This is going to add a different dimension to getting to know these students and the area in which I am teaching. State College is also a predominantly white area and Mr. Wilson said that his classroom this year may have a few African Americans, but besides that our students will be quite homogeneous.”

On the first day, I do not think I thought much about this conversation. In the teacher preparation classes, we are warned about all of these differences and I would like to think I was prepared to deal with these differences. I later commented on this journal and asked myself if this knowledge affected the way I was teaching the kids I later found out were the ones receiving certain

supports. Knowing I had this knowledge, I have to believe that I was in some way shape or form using this information in the back of my head to guide how I was making decisions regarding these students.

For the most part, I could not visibly see any of the differences in the socioeconomic status of the kids based off of their clothes. This sounds trivial, but thinking and acknowledging the students visible appearance could inform a teacher about their students' home life. The only thing that I did notice was the backpack program at the school. From my journals I remember,

“Right after the morning meeting, Stephanie asked me if she could run her second backpack to the office. It dawned on me this very morning that this was a backpack that gets sent home every Friday with food for the family, and gets returned on Monday's empty. This was the backpack that she was running to the office. Last week, I had seen her come in with 2 backpacks, but it did not phase me until she has asked me a question about it.”

I acknowledged this moment in my journals on Monday, September 11th and I have tried to think back to how this felt. I think when I said she could go to the office, I whispered. I wanted to treat this moment as a secret and looking back I am not sure if this was even appropriate.

Thinking about this and the overall experience of the class, I do not think that it was a big deal, however, as events like this keep happening for Stephanie, will it make her feel shameful of her economic position? As a pre-service student teacher, this moment made me feel unprepared. It was hard to see that one of my girls and her family were struggling, according to poverty lines, to put food on the table. I went about the rest of the day thinking about all of the friends and people from my hometown who dealt with issues like this. For instance, my friend Joy, from home received free lunch during high school. I did not know this until recently when we were reminiscing on our high school cheerleading days. This made me wonder if any of my other friends were struggling financially.

I was also able to connect to Stephanie because of a similar situation with an old boyfriend. My senior year in high school I had a boyfriend whose family received boxes of food around Thanksgiving because of their socioeconomic status. I remember standing in his kitchen with his mom. She was telling us how the school was dropping off food at the same time one of the younger sister's friends were coming by. She was embarrassed that they might both be crossing paths but insisted that food was food and it was all appreciated. I looked outside on the bright November day and two cars pulled up into their driveway. She saw me look and sprinted out the side door to grab the box of food before the friend realized what was happening. Because of my friends from home, I was able to connect to Stephanie and how she might have felt having to ask to go to the office. But it is also challenging for me because I was lucky enough to not have to worry about getting fed throughout my life. Yes, maybe my family was eating unhealthy, cheap food at points in my life but I had lunch for school everyday and a hot dinner every night.

Finances and financial issues are always a tough topic to talk about with peers and friends. Stephanie, as well as my friends from home, trusted me enough to share in these vulnerable moments and bond together because of it. However, these are only small circumstances that are exacerbated when considering an entire classroom or school of students who may be facing their own financial challenges at home. The makeup of State College is similar to my hometown in New Jersey because in the same district there are students who are living in trailer homes and others living in financial luxury. Knowing this about my students lets me understand the vulnerability it takes to share their financial issues but also informs what I can ask of my students and their parents. For example, when planning parties, some students may be able to bring in snacks and goodies but other families may not be able to afford this. This also makes me consider my future classrooms and how different each school and group of students

will be in regards to socioeconomic status. I will have to be cautious when getting to know my students each year and when creating supply lists at the beginning of each year as well.

In other instances, throughout my time in this 5th grade classroom, I was able to see how home life and parental issues were affecting my students. One of my students' parents were going through a tough divorce. She was a great student and was always behaved. However, during the morning meetings, there were times when she just looked exhausted. For example, on Monday, September 11th,

“Mr. W comes up to me and points out Leila. She looks pretty tired, a little out of it, and she was a few minutes later than she usually was. (She typically came in with Patrick) Mr. W tells me that he just found out that her parents are officially divorced and that it has probably been hitting Leila hard. I wanted to try and make a point to notice how she is doing, but without it being super awkward or forced or to make it seem like I know any information about her home life. So I decide to sort of walk over to her table and stand there with my coffee. I mention how I am super tired and that it was hard to get out of bed this morning. She immediately looks up from her book and says that she is too. She said “ I even had Starbucks this morning and I am still tired”.

I felt for Leila at this moment. She might not have been tired because of the divorce but I know that the divorce was changing up her routines and daily life. This in itself is enough to fluster an adult let alone a young girl trying to do her best in 5th grade.

I tried to bond with Leila and purposely created a small, personal moment for us on September 11th. This small one-on-one conversation, although ended up being about Starbucks, could have shown Leila that I recognized what it feels like to be tired and to have a tough day. We created some intimacy in this conversation and she let herself be vulnerable with me. I wish, looking back, that I had taken the moment even further and been vulnerable myself. I wanted to say that I work at Starbucks and could have bonded over this fact even more. However, with it being so early on in the semester, I was not sure what was appropriate to share about myself. Sharing this fact and opening myself up in this situation would have balanced the conversation.

Leila might have felt that we were both sharing instead of just her. This could have sparked later conversations as well. I believe that I was just so focused on trying to reach Leila that I forgot about the importance of sharing myself. But, this conversation made me think about all of my students and what they were facing at home.

On October 16th, 2017, my students became vulnerable with me without even having a conversation. On this day, the students were working in pairs to create goals for the parent teacher conferences. My mentor and I had spent a lot of time talking on this day and he started talking to me about how hard conferences are for some families. Some families have multiple kids to come in for, some parents cannot get away from work, some do not think they are even necessary, and some families are divorced, making the whole situation stressful. This conversation shifted to talking about the families that were divorced and having a hard time. In my journal, I listed some of the issues my mentor was sharing about the students. I wrote,

“Peter’s mom has a brain tumor and is always sick. His dad died when he was young and he spends a lot of time with his grandma.
 Tanner’s parents are together but shouldn’t be.
 Samuel’s parents are together but shouldn’t be either. The dad has taken on so much of the responsibilities while the mom is at school.
 Leila’s parents are split.
 Christopher’s parents are split.
 Stephanie’s mom is trying to get settled in. No solid dad figure but Stephanie has clung to someone else that the mom has been dating.
 Erica’s parents are together but lots of kids in an apartment.
 Harrison has seen their house catch on fire and his brother fall out of a window. He sees a therapist.
 Patrick has two families because both of his parents remarried.
 Shana and Theresa have so many issues going on with their learning.
 There are only 9 of the kids parents who are still together out of 25.”

This conversation really let me understand the difficulties these kids were facing on a daily basis. In this very moment, each and every student was vulnerable without even knowing. They did not make the decision to tell me and yet now I know very personal details about a lot of them. This

vulnerability could never be balanced and yet would still inform how I manage to teach these children. When I read my journals to begin to analyze my time in this classroom, I commented on this journal and said,

“This was super hard for me to hear and for me to write down and read again now. I just want to hug all of the kids and make them feel better. It’s hard for me to relate because my family is still together, but we have our own issues. My parents argue and we all yell at each other but my parents always put my sister and I first. Learning this really was eye opening about my kids. It shows just how amazing they are about getting their work done. There is so much going on at home. How do they focus?”

Even at this very moment, I want to hug every student and put his or her worries behind him or her. However, I had to work with this information and this silent intimacy that was just formed between all of my students and I to create lessons that would distract them from their own distractions. Some of my later lesson focused on group work and in class assignments to ensure that the students were able to enjoy each other’s company and have time to complete assignments without the stress of taking it home for homework.

I tried to be vulnerable in my journal and mentioned my home life and how even though my parents are together, we still have our own issues. In this process of journaling and reviewing them I was in some ways able to share in my students’ vulnerability. Talking about my own home life is hard, even as a young adult. Writing about my family even at this moment feels as if I am spewing vulnerability all over the page. It really makes me consider how hard it may be for some of the students to share their stories with me in the classroom when they write about family vacations and time with their family.

Learning about the makeup of this 5th grade classroom over the semester made it easier to create small, intimate moments with the students. Knowing that when they share about their families in their writings they are opening up to me and letting me into this silent vulnerability. It also put an emphasis on the consistency. Some of the students do not have consistency in their

lives at the moment. Being a person who greets them every morning, talks to them on their level, shares one-on-one conversations with them was my way of being there for them and understanding their silent struggles and need for affection and love as growing adolescents.

Understanding and acknowledging the makeup of my 5th grade classroom gave me insight into my students. This was important because it will be different in every classroom I have in the future. I have learned that I will probably need to speak to past teachers and reach out to family members, as I will not have an in class mentor to help me find out this information. However, I do that it is important to consciously be aware of students' behavior as it may be caused my issues at home.

To think even deeper about the relationships I was building with my students, I have considered the ways I was consistently communicating with my students throughout the semester. I have included some examples to make my analysis clear.

The Consistency in the Classroom

As I was analyzing my journals, I noticed many times where I tried to be consistently communicating with my students to build strong relationships with them. The consistency allowed for me to create conversation that was meaningful. I could remember the story the student mentioned during earlier conversations and could piece together each small conversation to get an idea of who each of them was as a person. Throughout the analysis of my journals to find these instances, I noticed that through my deliberate thought process to jump in on certain conversations, make a comment about a book or ask specific conversations, I was able to quickly and sincerely form relationships with my kids. As a student teacher, I think it was more a conscious effort than it may have been for a veteran teacher.

One of the first things I noticed in my journals was my conscious effort to incorporate threshold into my 5th grade classroom. This was important to me because I was not in the classroom every day. So whenever I was in the classroom, I wanted to make sure that I was a presence for the kids. On Tuesday, September 12th, I made the decision to start the day with threshold. In my journal, I reflected,

“It dawns on me as I am cleaning around the attendance and lunch schedule that I could stand here in the morning and really get to say good morning to every student. As 830 roles around, I do just this. I stand near the lunch sign in sheet and say good morning to the students.”

Even on the first day, this yielded great results. I have a conversation with Leila and Patrick about how they were doing that day. I wrote,

“Leila walks in first, back again to her regular schedule and looks a little bit more lively today. I say good morning and she says it back and smiles. I said that she looks a little less tired today and she responds with a giggle “ I feel less tired but I went to bed even later than yesterday. It was hard for my mom to get me out of bed.” Patrick comes in and I say good morning and he begins to talk about how he doesn’t feel good. He had a fever yesterday and feels crummy today too. His mom said she would pick him up whenever today but that he wanted to try to get through a little bit of the day. I tell him to let Mr. W or I know whenever he wanted to go to the nurse. So far, this spot has been working out well for me to really begin these types of casual conversations.”

These casual conversations were giving me background information on the students. I could make sure that Patrick was feeling better throughout the day because I learned that he was not feeling well as he walked in. I would be able to show him that I cared and could remember our conversation from earlier. With Leila and so many other students, I was able to get a reading on them as they were walking into the room. This was a conscious decision to stand and talk to each student and it was yielding conversations for me to better understand how my students were doing every day.

Throughout the rest of the semester threshold became more and more important to working with these students. I was starting to figure out their routines and could keep an eye on

who was coming into school and at what time they walked into my room. For instance, on October 2nd I wrote, “Samuel was excited to see me- He waves to me as he walks into the classroom.” Samuel was learning to expect me to be standing in this spot. This was weeks after I had started to implement threshold and it was becoming a consistent way to communicate with the students, even if it was just a wave or high five some days. On my last day in my placement, December 5th, I brought in hot chocolate for the kids and instead of having my regular threshold; I was by my desk passing out hot chocolates to the kids. This was an example of how my threshold was creating a positive atmosphere in the classroom. By sharing this time with them on my last day, the students were able to recognize that my time spent getting to know them was appreciated. By making my threshold on my last day something special it acknowledged all of the past conversations I had ever had during the mornings with my kids.

I noted in my journals, that my mentor was not very keen on me conversing with the students in the morning. His teaching style relied heavily on order, routine and following the rules. Throughout my time in 5th grade, I was discovering that my style was more relaxed and relied on conversation to fuel my lessons and create a positive environment. However,

“when I stand by where they sign in for lunch, I notice that Mr. W always tells them to quiet down as they are talking to me. I use this as a point to head back to my desk and get ready to go over the morning meeting with the class. This made me think whether it was beneficial for me to stand over by the lunch sign ups. I didn't want to get the class in trouble and I also didn't want to upset their typical schedule that they have when I am not there. I was pondering this as I was walking around.”

I really enjoy talking to the students and I think the consistency is helping me have a presence in their minds when I am there on Mondays and Tuesdays. I think my mentor and I just have different opinions on what is off task and what is not. I think the conversations are helping us form relationships and my mentor wants the students to get started on their work and get into their routine. I commented when I was analyzing my journals and said “ I don't really have

control over anything and it's a push and pull with how much authority I have and don't have at the same time." At this point in time, although I would say I was still vastly unprepared, I was starting to picture my own classroom and starting to understand my teaching style. If it were not for the threshold technique and journaling, I would not have started to see my teaching style shine through. By making this a consistent, deliberate technique I used every day, I was able to see how it was affecting the classroom and my relationship with my mentor and students.

Consistency also played an important role when it came to one-on-one conversations. Threshold acted as small one-on-one conversation at the beginning of the day and actually gave me conversation starters for the rest of the day as well. For instance when Patrick told me he was sick at the beginning of the day, I was able to incorporate this into different conversations to check up on him. With one of my students, consistency truly led to a great relationship between us. Samuel caught my attention from the first day. When he introduced himself, he said that he loves clocks. In my journal that day I wrote about Samuel and him introducing himself and said,

"Samuel introduces himself next, and to my surprise he says one of the most original things. He says that he likes to work on clocks. Samuel is one of the shorter boys in the class. He is very skinny, pale with jet black hair. He has such a gentle face and he lights up when he smiles. On the first day he was wearing overalls with a light fabric flannel underneath. His answer intrigued me. How did he get into working on clocks, does someone in his family do it? What kind of clocks? Was that bold of him to share that out of the box activity or was it just natural to be honest in this kind of situation, like was it a simple calculation to say clocks?"

Over time I was able to build a relationship with Samuel because I tried to stay consistent with our one-on-one conversations. I have talked about his books, one of which was *Hugo*, which was a book about a kid that is stuck working on clocks. I realized that clocks were more of a theme than I would have originally thought. I was working on having different conversations with Samuel to try to get to know him as a student and as a person. During morning meetings Samuel consistently asked for my help on the math problems. One morning I helped Samuel with

addition of fractions during morning meeting. Samuel added them correctly after a little prompting and I insisted on him reducing them and since we had the time he was more than willing to learn with me. I taught him how to do it privately during a curricular one-on-one conversation. In my journal that day I wrote, “I went up to reduce the fraction and Elizabeth and Samuel looked excited to have been in on this “secret” that it needed to be reduced.” This one-on-one conversation with Samuel was helping set up our relationship.

I remained consistent with Samuel and this included talking to him as we walked out to recess. At first this started because on day he was swinging by himself and I wanted to chat with him. Overtime, it shifted into us talking as we walked out everyday. When we first started talking as we walked out for recess, he would talk to me the whole time about clocks, antique stores and his family. Eventually the time shifted into a 5-10 minute quick conversation and then he would go play with his peers. This was a sign to me that consistency was a key component to my relationship with Samuel. He liked that I was allowing the time for us to talk everyday and it was proving beneficial because each and every time we talked I learned something new about him and his life. These consistent one-on-one conversations both curricular and extracurricular were forming into a relationship that focused on being honest and making time for each other.

Through threshold and one-on-one conversations of different types I was able to form many relationships with the students because I was willing and able to carry conversations over from different instances. I was also able to create a sense of intimacy and community where talking and sharing was important, at least when I was in the classroom on Mondays and Tuesdays. These relationships would not have happened if I were not consistent in my conversations with the students. My conversations every morning with the students, although planned and introductory, lead to great insights about the students schedule and want to share

their personal stories. The students began to notice and appreciate my presence when I was being consistent. The one-one-one conversations with the students at different times during the such as recess and on our way to lunch was allowing me to see the students in a different light. Lighter conversations showed the students that I was not always serious and that I could be let into their world.

As I was communicating with my students over the semester through conversation, I was also communicating with them through their work and daily lessons. By engaging with their schoolwork and giving the students the ability to be vulnerable I saw the importance of planning these situations into the classroom.

The Vulnerability in the Classroom

It was evident that throughout the semester vulnerability played a large role in the relationships I was capable of building with my students. This was done by sharing about myself as well as working with the students and their writing. Through small conversations and intimate moments, both the students and I were able to grow together as the semester progressed.

One of the best examples of a growing vulnerability was with my students Stephanie. Overtime we got really close and were willing to open up with each other. She was a new student and was really quick to form relationships with the adults in the building. She is a spunky tall girl with an attitude streak. I think our relationship began when I had the whole class participate in an activity to share what they wanted to be when they grew up. They had to come up with a picture for whatever their dream was and we were to hang it up. Stephanie was having a hard time figuring out what to put on her drawing. I do not know what it was so hard for her to come up with an idea because most of the class had an idea right away. However, I stuck with her and

talked to her about her options for a while. Eventually we landed on a dentist. The next step was what to draw. In my journal I wrote,

“She finally landed on dentist and traced their tools off of her computer. I was curious as to why she had such a hard time picking something. I spent some time, at her level, working with her on what to draw. I think she was finally happy with how everything had turned out.”

It may not have seemed like a big situation, however, working through what seemed like stress to come up with a dream for her future proved to be a big moment that could bring us together. Moving past this moment, she has consistently come to me to go over her writing pieces. I honestly believe that because we shared this moment early on she had progressively learned to trust me and allowed for her more vulnerable side to show. The act of sharing about the future is vulnerable because students do not know if their dreams will be accepted. By deliberately sticking with this situation with Stephanie, we were able to work through her avoidance and land on a positive instance for her to look back on.

A moment where I really recognized how vulnerable our relationship was was on September 26th. Stephanie came into the room and

“said that she was super excited. I asked why and she said that she could not tell anyone. I tried to make a funny fuss about it and then she decided that she could tell me. She made me bend down and whispered in my ear that she got a boyfriend on the bus today. His name was River and he was in my math class later in the day. I did not know that this was a thing in 5th grade. However, with Stephanie this does not surprise me because she was a little bit socially more mature than some of the other girls in the class.”

The fact that Stephanie was willing and excited to share this vulnerable detail with me made me so proud to be teaching. This was the type of relationship that I have been waiting to form and it had only taken a few weeks with Stephanie. Stephanie has been willing to brainstorm with me, take criticism about her writing and have small moments to eventually lead to her trusting me

with what would be a big 5th grade secret. My journals were allowing me to see many of the decision I was purposely making with Stephanie that were leading to success in our relationship.

With a student named Christopher, our relationship has really grown through the writing process. Christopher is a very smart, tall boy with attention issues. He loves to read action books and go hunting with his dad. He has a lot of home issues and consistently writes about his family members. Every week the students have to go through the writing process starting with a brainstorm on Monday and ending with a final copy on Friday. Christopher loves to write. He has a hard time being succinct but he will tell story after story. One day Christopher came up to me and handed me his rough draft. We have never collected rough drafts, only looked at them to make revisions. However, Christopher says that I can keep his rough drafts from here on out. I commented on my journal and wrote,

“When he gives me his rough drafts, I feel like we are telling secrets. It’s sweet to have this relationship with him. It also feels that he knows something I don’t know, where I will need his writing in the future. Is he right? We laugh a lot, and he tells me small anecdotes about his family all the time because I frequently stand behind him. Do I do that on purpose now?”

Christopher seems to have an intuition about sharing his rough drafts with me. I do not mind because his vulnerability and ability in 5th grade to share and hand over something of his own is ground breaking. Christopher also knew that I was a student teacher and liked to ask me questions about Penn State. This gave me the opportunity to balance the relationship and talk to him as well about myself.

On October 5th,

“Christopher came in with a new sweatshirt that his mom had gotten him from California. His mom had gone for work-- when he came in with the sweatshirt he was all excited to I took the invitation to ask him about the sweatshirt and it led to talking about his family. Parents got divorced less than a year ago
7 stepsiblings
His real brother Abel was named after the bible

We actually had just gotten an email from Christopher's mom talking about how he is an emotional basket case and cannot get his work done.”

Our relationship had blossomed by October, I think because we have been sharing so much through his writing. But the vulnerability sprouted into a conversation. I was able to learn about his family and hear him talk so positively about his family members, especially his brother. I shared that I had a younger sister and he seemed to enjoy talking about our family together. This vulnerability was evident. My journals revealed that I had made the intentional decision to talk to Christopher about his sweatshirt. Through small instances and curricular conversations I was able to bring out vulnerability in Christopher that had grown into a generous relationship that I can be proud to write about now.

One thing I noticed about myself, as a student teacher was that I was drawn to certain students and less to others. I think I enjoy quirkiness and social skills, as I feel I can relate the best to these students. However, Tyler and I, a student who I felt at first I had nothing in common with, had shared in vulnerable moments to form a responsive relationship. For example, there was a scenario at the beginning of the year we were again, working on drawing pictures to represent our dreams for the future. In my journal I wrote about the moment and said,

“ I kept making cycles, seeing how everything was coming along and noticed that Tyler had nothing on his paper. I was not going to let this slide because I knew that he could do this. He liked to doodle; he had done it before so I approached him. I again, got down to his level and tried to talk to him. When I asked what he wanted to be when he grew up he immediately said, “ I don't know, I just want to be a parent” to me this was probably one of the better ones I have heard. It was so honest and so pure. I wanted Tyler to know that this was something he was allowed to say and something that he could actually strive for. I said “Tyler, that is a perfect idea.” I wanted to get him started so I asked if I could write parent at the top and he could just draw the picture. He nodded his head and let me write parent at the top of his paper. As I began to walk away he immediately picked up his pencil and started to draw. I was really proud of him for being honest and I was proud of myself for not just letting him sit there by himself.”

Talking about hopes and dream in general can open a person up to vulnerability, but talking about them and thinking they are not enough or not like everyone else's can be difficult to cognitively understand and share in 5th grade. Tyler was challenging himself and letting himself be open with me during this shared moment. I believe that moments like these helped students learn to trust me and my support in them and their learning. This was a deliberate moment where I chose to walk over to Tyler and engage him about his work. It is becoming clear to me that through these distinct choices, relationships are forming.

In many ways, I as the teacher got to be vulnerable as well. On the first Monday, I was driving to Twin Peaks Elementary School at seven-thirty in the morning and thinking to myself about what I was going to share to the students when I introduce myself that day. What will 5th graders think is interesting? Does it matter if it's interesting if I am just introducing myself? I roll up to the school wondering how I safely got there because I had zoned out on my thinking the whole way there. That morning I introduced myself and later reflected and wrote,

"He [Mr. Wilson] then asks me to introduce myself. First, hearing the words Ms. Gammel come out of my mouth startles me; I haven't really heard this before. I go on to say that I am a Penn State student learning to become a teacher. I say that I was a cheerleader when I was in 5th grade and that I liked math and language arts as well in 5th grade. I also mentioned that I liked go hiking and work out and be active, as well as watch a lot of TV and that I just started all of the superhero series on Netflix as well."

This moment was pure vulnerability. These 5th graders know nothing about me and I just said a few things that describe who I am and what I like to do. I was honestly scared they would judge me or be upset they did not get a cooler student teacher. I wish I had thought back to this moment more when I was working with the students. It is so hard to be vulnerable and share parts of you with other people and we asked them to do it everyday.

I also found myself being concerned what my class would think when I modeled the best friend essay on the board. My relationships are very personal to me and sharing about them at all

can get kind of intimidating and I guess this hold true when talking to 5th graders as well. I

wrote,

“Thinking about the vulnerability needed to share about your best friend is huge. I remember sharing about my best friend from home, Joy, on the board to model this prompt and honestly being kind of nervous people were going to judge our relationship. So to ask this of a fifth grader may have sparked some issues.”

I think being so vulnerable in this best friend essay brought out some issues with the girls in our class getting mad at each other about friendships. I think, in the purpose of building a classroom community, it might have been beneficial to make this piece of writing something that permeated into a lesson on friendship and how we deal with others in school and in this classroom. Because of the drama between the group of girls during this time, I almost think that making our vulnerability known to the class and then in writing may have alleviated some stresses and unfriendly situations with the group of girls.

One of the moments I felt finally let me be ultimately vulnerable with my students was on my very last day with them on December 5th, 2018. It was almost eight thirty in the morning and the announcements have already gone on. I have been sharing hot chocolates with all of my students as I had promised a few weeks earlier. We are all standing around, chatting and Evan and Patrick were asking where I was going to teach next. All of a sudden, the loud speaker comes on again and it is the principal, Stephanie, and Elizabeth. The principal comes over the loudspeaker and says that the students of Mr. Wilson's 5th grade would like to share a message, and the two girls said, “We love you Ms. Gammel!!” I am standing by my desk inbetween Tyler and Christopher's desk and I start tearing up. I had been successful enough in forming relationships with the class that they were willing to say goodbye to me in a public venue and be so heartfelt about it. That day I also received notes from a lot of the students, a G shaped out of clay, a box with nothing in it (yes just a decorated box) and many other things from the adorable, kind,

endearing 5th graders. Although this was my last day, I think it was still important that I was able to share the ultimate vulnerability of tears with the kind hearts of each and every student. I was sad I was leaving my students, however, I was proud of how far our relationships had come since I shared that I liked to watch TV on the first day.

That being said, as the routines were falling into place and the semester chugged along, I started to question my ability to reach the students. In the middle of the semester, when I started to lead more lessons and took over for a week in November, the students started to see me more as the “regular” teacher and less so as the student teacher. I noticed in my journals around this time that the students started to pull away from me, or, they just stopped sharing as much. I thought this was because regular teachers have less time in their regular day to have multiple conversations with the students or lacked the motivation to spend time with the kids as the regular teaching schedule got more demanding. I wrote in my memo for October,

“One thing I did notice that was making it harder to get on the students level was the more I was teaching the more the relationships started to shift. Stephanie was seeing me more as a teacher and it was making it harder for her to want to talk to me about everyday things but it allowed me to see more of her writing, which was important and vulnerable in its own way. Teaching more was giving me an authority in the classroom, but as I saw during my animal kingdom lesson, they respected me from our time when I was not teaching all the time, to participate and respect my lessons.”

As I write my thesis, I am beginning to recognize why so many teachers focus on a strong start at the beginning of their school years. By spending the beginning of the school year focusing on teaching the routines and patterns of the school day and week as well as focusing on community building within the classroom can allow for the relationships to be built and then sustained throughout the rest of the year when the content and daily happenings becomes demanding for everyone. As the student teacher I was able to be subtler in my ability to get to know my students. However, thinking forward to my own classroom, I may not have the luxury

of time. I am going to need to be respected when I teach and I am going to need to know who I can call on and which group of girls will be friends all within the first two weeks or so to be able to successful more throughout the rest of the year. This proves that it is even more pressing to be deliberate and conscious in the decision I will be making at the beginning of the year even as a full time teacher.

Overall, I was able to see instances of purposeful vulnerability in the classroom and consistent communication throughout my journals of my time in my 5th grade placement in Twin Peaks Elementary School. Through these different instances, I was able to create and strengthen relationships with students in my classroom. I struggled and comprehended what a full time teacher might feel and shared stories of my own vulnerability. I saw relationships shift but I also saw every relationship develop in a different way because of how our personalities, and the personalities in the class coincided. By being conscious of our relationships and the changes over time, I was certainly more capable of being purposeful. However, as we all got more comfortable and the classroom started to feel natural, the conversations and the teacher technique of threshold started to feel more and more natural. As I attend career fairs and finish up this thesis, I can picture my own personal classroom and how I will carry this consciousness into the next relationships I try to build.

This spring, I was placed into a new classroom teaching 8th grade civics at the Lone River Middle School. When I entered this classroom on January 8th, I felt that I wanted to run back to my 5th grade class and share in the comrade and familiarity. However, it was time to transfer the concepts I learned from my first class, to my second. The 8th graders walk in and immediately tower over me and enter a classroom they have already been the stars of for a full two marking periods. They were starting a position paper and were about to pick topics. I

immediately try to walk around and talk to them about their topics. Although they all respected an adult enough to engage them in a conversation about academics, the conversations were limited and tough to get out of the young adults who have no idea who I am. Overtime, as I purposefully made conversation about their topics and tried to find their interests, I started to build relationships.

Switching classes made it hard, one hundred students made it hard, 8th grade “I’m too cool for school” mentalities made it hard, but by being consistent, sharing about myself and engaging in their vulnerabilities, I have gained respect with most and relationships with a bunch. I cannot say that they all love me and I cannot say that I have had in depth conversations with all of them, but by learning from the different concepts I discovered in the 5th grade classroom I have made the best of a challenging situation. I noticed that it was easier to share about myself with 8th graders as well as with the civics content. I have shared about my bad behaviors from high school such as car accidents, mischief night, and the many parking tickets I have from the State College police. The 8th graders are able and willing to connect to these things as they have experienced some of them and are looking forward to the privileges of being an adult. I think it would be easier to build relationships with 8th graders from the beginning, but they can be a little bit more wary of a student teachers authority than the 5th graders were.

Taking the ideas of purposeful interactions into my 8th grade classroom was just a small snippet of how this information will feed into my next classroom with my future students. In the next section I will propose the importance of teaching students to build relationships in order for them to be valuable citizens in a global culture. I will then conclude my writing by expressing the important role this self-study will have on my future students and my thoughts regarding purposeful interactions and reflection in building relationships with students.

Chapter 8

Implications and Discussion

One implication of teachers building good, positive, relationships with their students is that it is an essential step in helping students become good citizens. Through the use and processing of communication skills, empathy and vulnerability, and acknowledgement of their own disposition teachers can teach students, both intentionally and subtly, how to behave appropriately as citizens through their ability to build relationships. Citizens need to know how to suitably engage with others in order to have a job, drive, have a family, or travel the world. All of these engagement skills can be learned through the process of appropriately building relationships. The emphasis is usually put on curriculum content such as literature and mathematics. However, I believe that educators should put more emphasis on building relationships inside the classroom and in the community to offer undeniable social skills to the students that will help them succeed later in life.

In many schools' mission statements the words "good citizen", "effective community member", and "the next leaders" are included. For example, my high school, Warren Hills Regional High Schools' mission statement says,

"The Warren Hills Regional School District challenges and empowers a dynamic, diverse student body in a supportive learning environment by providing academic and co-curricular opportunities to become successful, productive members of the global community" (Warren Hills Regional School District, 2018).

To reach these grandiose goals, schools tend to focus on content knowledge. Schools have the content courses, Advanced Placement classes, business and accounting class, financial literacy, physical education and health. However, many schools lose touch with the basic skills that students need as well. For instance, there is research showing that it is just as important to develop students' social skills to increase student functionality in the global community.

According to the POWER-Solving Curriculum, who sites a significant meta-analysis by The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), "Social skills learning improves students' positive behavior and reduces negative behavior. While effectively preventing a variety of problems such as alcohol and drug use, violence, truancy, and bullying, social skills learning promotes students academic success, health, and overall well-being" (POWER-Solving Curriculum, 2018, para. 4). This is just small example of how social skills are used to better students for their future. Learning social skills focuses on appropriate behavior and how it is necessary to function in a school and in the community. Because of the process of building relationships relies on these social skills, build relationships can be used as a catalyst to good citizens.

Even more so, if schools think social skills are important to students' citizenship for the future, there are not many ways for students to develop these skills even further in a natural way. However, social and emotional learning or SEL can be fostered in schools by "embedding it in the curriculum, running a standalone program, or implementing it as a school-wide effort" (Collie et al., 2016, para. 4). But, teachers are always leaders in fostering a school community that believes SEL is a responsive, functional way to help students' transition and function in society. For instance, Twin Peaks Elementary School has a school wide initiative called ROAR, which focuses on respect, organization, attitude, and responsibility to foster these social skills

and positive attitudes in their students. There are also examples of different clubs such as debate club, or student council that allow leaders to strengthen their leadership and social skills to help them in the future. Teachers can use these different instances to deliberately use these skills to help in building relationships. By talking about ROAR with a student or being a faculty supervisor to a club, teachers can work with students to build relationships, foster social skills, and create good citizens.

Through building relationships with my 5th grade students, I was able to informally teach them different ways to build relationships with others through communication and sharing vulnerable moments. However, there are others ways to learn social skills to help with the future. I believe that through service and giving back to the community, students can learn to be citizens through their social interactions with others. By building relationships with others in the community, they can see themselves as part of a community and as a citizen. According to Florida National University, “Volunteering engages students with the community, creates special bonds with the population being served, and increases social awareness and responsibility” (Florida National University, 2013, para.3). Through this social awareness, students can begin to see themselves as functional and helpful to the community.

Taking it a step further, schools could include volunteer organizations, volunteer opportunities or create projects in the classroom to reach out to the community to bring the SEL curriculum into the community. This would combine social emotional learning as well as place learning and social awareness created through community service. Relationship building, leadership and social awareness are all ways students will learn to become responsible, respectable citizens. These social skills are important to developing maturing and cognitive understanding of a students place in the world.

Through my self-study, I only touched upon a miniscule component on how to help students become good citizens. I was never overt about my attempts to help them build relationships, because I was focusing on my own ability to form them. However, there are steps that I can take in my next classroom to incorporate some of these ideas. For instance, developing a community service project as a class that we would later participate in could first, help create community in our classroom, and later, during the event, allow for the students to become social aware of the effects they are having on the community. It would be two fold in the idea that creating the project would create relationships in the classroom and completing the project would create relationships with others in the community.

Overall, I believe that building relationships and my self-study is just a small part of how students should be educated to become good citizens in the global community. Subconsciously my students developed social skills in ways they chose to communicate and respond to my purposeful techniques and decision. As they mature, these skills will continue to grow as they form relationships with their other peers and new teachers. My hope is that in time, students will be helped to build relationships with their community to better their SEL skills and social awareness.

Through this discussion I have discussed ways in which communication and relationship building plays into the role school play in creating global citizens. To conclude my writing I will close with the effect this self-study has had on my thinking and how this will affect my students in the future.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

Throughout my journals and the experiences that I reflected upon, I found and can argue that relationships can be built by purposeful interactions. In many situations described in my findings, I made the decision to act and engage with the students in certain ways to probe their minds and understand different parts of their personalities and interests. It was only through these purposeful moments, such as talking about a book on their desk, or enacting threshold, that situations continued to occur to deepen the relationships. I found and sought out the instances to make a connection with each kid in a different manner but it was purposeful and successful.

I can also argue that reflecting on my thinking and actions every day through journaling drew this conclusion. Without the journaling process, I think I would have taken the relationships I built in the classroom for granted. I would have blamed them on the class and my personalities meshing or the fact that it's natural for 5th graders to bond with their teacher. However, my journals showed that I was taking in the information I was learning about each student and putting it to use in some way. Reading my journals and analyzing them to find instances where I was a consistent confidant for them, listened to their struggles or talked to them about their after school activities has shown me that journaling and reflecting has led to the understanding that through consistent conversations and understanding vulnerability in the classroom I was able to purposefully understand my students on different levels and form relationships with each of them.

I started thinking about building relationships with students because I was intrigued by how teachers can do it year after year. By completing this study, I can see how the veteran

teachers do it. Every year they make the decision to come back on the first day and start over. They will begin by introducing themselves and having the kids introduce themselves. They will chat about their days, they will talk about the books on their desks, they will talk about swimming and soccer after school and they will talk about their writing, math and friends. They will engage in vulnerable moments and share intimate secrets and will learn about their home lives. Every year, the veteran teachers make the conscious decision to come back and begin the cycle of building relationships over again. They do this, not to fill their hearts, even though it does, but because each and every student deserves a teacher who can take the time to make decisions to purposefully get to know them and use this knowledge to inform lessons and create a more positive learning environment. Veteran teachers do this not for themselves, but for their students and their need to feel that their school and the classroom is a place where relationships and human interaction are valued. Students are not just a number in a grade book and person to fill a seat. Veteran teachers know that these kids want to be loved and through purposeful interactions they can get to know each of their intricacies and personalities.

That being said, I will bring this knowledge into my future classroom. To my future students: I will purposefully ask you questions about your day, your night, your weekend, your family vacation and bus ride. I will get to know if you have brothers and sisters and if you love them or loathe them. I will meet your parents and talk to them about how much we love who you are becoming. I will talk to you like you deserved to be talked to, a young adult. I will swing on the swings with you and watch you as you play basketball. I will let you work in groups and write on the board. I will let you pick the books you love and talk to your friends about them. I will let you cry in my ear during lunch and I will tell you whether you are right or wrong. You will learn from me and I will learn from you. I will be vulnerable and so will you. I will tell you

about my best friends and my younger sister and my parents who care way too much. I will purposefully read your writing to learn about your life. I will come to your events and I will share in the sorrows as we part and you all move onto the next grade. I will be new but I will constantly be learning. You will succeed and our relationship will be strong. We might not be best friends but I think we will get along just fine. To my future students, I will be an educator who cares to show up and give it my all.

Being a student teacher was a challenging situation. As a Penn State student with friends in different majors, just having the willpower to get up and show up every morning to a school with young kids running around was a challenge in itself. Add on top of that the students who are struggling or getting neglected at home, students who are having family problems, students with attention issues, students who have learning disabilities and building politics and it can feel like an overwhelming situation. However, there were twenty-five reasons I got up every morning. The group of students I worked with during my fall semester as a pre-service student teacher enlightened my understand of what it means to be a teacher and what it means to see uniqueness in every student. The days may get long and the work may seem tedious and the lessons may not be successful but at the end of the day what is important is that as a teacher, I show up and I care about these students, their well being, and their attitude towards learning. Throughout this study I have witnessed at a small glimpse what it means to be a teacher and I will be forever grateful to the students who have shared themselves, their writing, and their personalities with me.

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Education

The Pennsylvania State University

Schreyer Honors Scholar

College of Education

Bachelor of Science in Childhood and Early Adolescent Education

Middle Level Social Studies (4-8)

Minor in Education Policy Studies

Certifications: Pennsylvania Grade 4-8 Core, Pennsylvania Grades 4-8 Subject Concentration: Social Studies

University Park, PA

Expected Graduation: May 2018

Deans List: 7/7

Teaching Experience

Student Teaching Experiences

State College, PA

- Short Term Student Teaching Abroad in Galway, Ireland: Galway Educate Together School
- Full Time Student Teaching: Park Forest Middle School, 8th grade Civics
 - Planned a full 3-week unit plan on the Judiciary and Criminal Justice System
 - Incorporated student centered formative and summative assessments on a regular basis
- Pre-Service Student Teaching: Twin Peaks Elementary School, 5th grade
 - Fostered positive relationships with 25 students through classroom management skills
 - Lead classroom routines and transitions starting the second week of placement

Related Courses

University Park, PA

- Teaching Secondary Social Studies II: 6th Grade Classroom Leader at Mount Nittany Middle School
- Higher Education in Sweden, Embedded Travel Abroad Program at Jonkoping University
- Teaching Reading in the Elementary School: 5th Grade Reading/Writing Lunch Bunch Buddy
- Introduction to Teaching English Language Learners: 4th Grade Virtual Tutor for Hazelton Area School District

Work Experience

Starbucks Coffee Company

University Park, PA

Certified Barista

April 2015-Present

- Committed to a 15-hour weekly schedule as a full-time PSU Student

The French Family

Annandale, NJ

Nanny

Summer 2016, 2017

- Managed an active calendar of appointments and transportation schedules for 2 children aged 7 and 10

Hackettstown Friendship Center

Hackettstown, NJ

Child Care Taker

May 2015-August 2015

- Established and maintained summer learning and activity schedules for ages 3-12

Activities, Involvement and Service

IFC/Panhellenic Dance Marathon (THON) Involvement

University Park, PA

Overall THON Chairmen for ZTA Fraternity

Spring 2017-Spring 2018

- Motivated 300 sorority and partner fraternity members to raise \$239,000 to fight pediatric cancer

THON Alternative Fundraising Corporate Committee Member

September 2015- Spring 2017

- Contacted over 50 corporations in search of donations for THON

Zeta Tau Alpha Fraternity Involvement

University Park, PA

Director of Community Relations

January 2016- December 2016

- Organized volunteer opportunities for over 200 members

Judicial Board Member

September 2016- Present

- Act as an unbiased sister to discuss termination/rehabilitation for members after reported discrepancies

IFC/Panhellenic Service Immersion Trip

New Orleans, LA

General Volunteer

May 2016, May 2017

- Volunteered on 3 different work sites in the New Orleans Community