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The Therapist Approach to Instruction: Perceptions and Practices of Teachers

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## Abstract

Shifts in attitudes towards disabilities is one example of a change that has led to inclusion, which has in turn led to a greater diversity of student need within the classroom environment. Although teachers are mandated to focus on their academic role, non-academic issues also affect the life of the school and inevitably involve teachers. Some educational theorists support the instructional responsibilities of teachers in a role beyond academics, or what can be referred to as therapeutic instructional practices of teachers. The therapeutic instructional role seems to have three components: the teacher-student relationship; focus on developing social, emotional and behavioural skills; and direct skill instruction. This research is built upon the framework of instructional theory, humanistic psychology, the hidden curriculum, and its provincial educational policy context. Its overall purpose is to answer the primary questions: Are teachers using a therapist approach to instruction? Do teachers feel they are taking on a therapeutic role in the classroom? How do teachers feel about the student-teacher relationships? How do teachers intervene in personal social, emotional and behavioural issues? How do teachers instruct social, emotional and behaviour skills? This research provides theoretical and practical illustrations of the therapist approach to teaching by using a snapshot of the responses of teacher participants in an initial survey and follow-up conversations.

## INTRODUCTION

The following information provides a brief background to research The Therapist Approach to Instruction: Perceptions and Practices of Teachers including a problem statement, purpose, significance, and a brief background discussion of related instructional approaches, humanistic psychology, and the hidden curriculum.

Societal shifts in attitudes towards people with disabilities, and progress towards social desegregation, have led to significant educational reform, labeled as integration, mainstreaming, or more recently, inclusion and the advent of the regular education initiative / least restricted environment (Lupart & Webber, 2002). Inclusion fits in with a transition away from a medical model, sometimes referred to as an expert model, where educational and teacher deference to an outside expertise is accepted (Hayes, 1995; Weber & Benett, 2004). It is intended to be a unified system of education with two main features: education within mainstreamed settings and in local school environments (Edmunds, 1998), with an overall goal of “equal access to free and appropriate schooling for all children in every community” (Lupart & Webber, 2002, p. 13).

The practice of inclusion has led to a greater diversity of student needs and abilities in the regular classroom environment, and remains an approach which teachers find challenging (Edmunds, 1998), particularly with the advent of inclusion of students with severe special needs (Avramidis, 2002). Meeting the needs of a diversity of students who may have pervasive and multiple needs, both educationally and beyond purely academic skills, has also led teachers and schools to collaborate within and beyond the school environment, providing school and community services that surround a child and family from an interagency perspective (Duckworth et al., 2001). Within the school environment, a range of models of collaboration exists, and within and beyond the school environment, teachers take part in what Hobbs (1978) referred to as an ecological approach. The ecological model emphasizes the home, school and community-based needs of children, with the teacher in the centre. In turn, it relies on a combination of the skills of local educational professionals, the abilities of individual children, and on the surrounding support systems to enhance those abilities (Hobbs, 1978; Shatz, 1994; Weber & Bennett, 2004). Interagency collaboration leads to both a better understanding of the needs of a child in and beyond the classroom, and to increased responsibility on the part of the teachers. As an element of this service provision trend, teachers may be part of an unfolding and overlapping of professional roles, which has been referred to as transdisciplinary collaboration (Mackey & MacQueen, 1998; Ryan & MacInnis, 2003). Teachers have also been referred to as

“carryover agents,” who take on roles and responsibilities from other governmental or community agencies that may be involved with a child (Valletutti, 2004).

Such shifting of role boundaries has affected the role and assumed responsibilities of teachers within the school setting. One of these seemingly affected roles is a changing emphasis in the intervention of non-academic issues or personal development, including social, emotional and behavioural concerns. Are these areas of concern part of the expected instruction role of teachers, or are they regularly intervening in these areas without appropriate training? Although professional teachers are mandated to focus on their academic role in classroom instruction (Tucker, 1997), non-academic issues also affect the life of the school and the individual lives of each student, and inevitably involve teachers (Pellitteri, 2000). Social, emotional and behavioural issues can be found in the goals of provincial education bodies and in official government policy, but are not emphasized in the defined role of the professional teacher in Newfoundland and Labrador, the context of this research (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2004c; Tucker, 1997). Some educational theorists, on the other hand, do encourage the instructional role of teachers in non-academic, or what can be referred to as therapeutic, practices of teachers (Hayes, 1995; Morse, 1992; Nichols, 1998). Teachers themselves have stated the essential nature of their role in more than just academics, and both their desire and need to focus on the whole child, beyond an academic role (Maich, 2004).

This research assumes, as Ellis and MacLaren (1998) have stated, that feelings, thoughts and behaviours are inextricably intertwined. In addition to, or as part of instructing the academic curriculum, it is likely that teachers do take on a therapeutic instructional role in the classroom, which according to a review of relevant literature, seems to have three main components: the importance of the teacher-student relationship; the focus on personal development of social, emotional and behavioural skills; and the direct instruction of social, emotional and behavioural skills. Within literature related to the topic of the therapist approach to instruction, five groups emerge as predominant where such therapeutic instruction may take place: typical students, students with transitory needs, students with medical needs, students with special educational needs, and students with emotional/behavioural disorders. The first group is comprised of typical classroom students, who are dealing with common, everyday social, emotional and behaviour issues within the classroom environment (Radd & Harsh, 1996; Soltis & Fenstermacher, 1992). The second group is students dealing with intense but transitory needs in the social, emotional or behaviour domains, such as those coping with family trauma (Christiansen, 1997). The third group is those students with severe medical conditions who have a resulting need for support in the social, emotional or

behaviour domains (Brown & Madan-Swain, 1993; Valletutti, 2004). The fourth group of students is those with other special educational needs, such as those with learning disabilities or autism spectrum disorders, who may struggle with social, emotional, or behaviour issues on a long-term basis (Peach & Keeny, 1991). A fifth and final group are those students with emotional / behavioural disorders who typically have severe social, emotional, and behaviour issues (Kube & Shapiro, 1996; Nichols, 1998).

#### *Planned Instruction*

Specific social, emotional or behavioural programs within school-based practice do exist to meet personal growth objectives in these five groups, such as teaching thinking skills (Nichols, 1998), social skills, self-knowledge, and behaviour skills (Radd & Harsh, 1996; George & Cristiani, 1995). Such therapeutic instruction is shown in the use of various instructional strategies, including the use of game (Barnes, 2000), writing (Sevald and Kantner, 2003), and reading (Bauer & Balius, 1995). Viewing the therapist approach to instruction categorically, it is obvious that such an approach potentially affects both teachers working with students accessing general education, as well as students with special needs. As such, both approaches are proposed as essential to this topic, and are addressed through humanistic psychology, the ecological model, and hidden curriculum.

#### *Humanistic Psychology*

Rogers referred to “therapy as a mode of learning” (Joyce & Weil, 1986, p.143), a view which he sees as applicable to education, and Miller (1969, cited in Hayes, 1995) believed that therapy can be described as empowerment within relationships, that can take place in a school environment. Soltis and Fenstermacher (1992), also made use of therapeutic principles applied to education, and envisioned what they termed as the therapist approach as one of three basic approaches to teaching. The therapist approach focuses on developing the personal characteristics of students. It is a general instructional approach intended for all students, with the overall purpose of instruction as enabling authenticity, to assist students in choosing to acquiring knowledge, and supporting that process in the pursuit of the student’s “advancement of self” (Soltis & Fenstermacher, 1992, p.27). A similar instructional approach that merged therapeutic characteristics with teaching, has labeled teachers as psychological educators, proposing that education should have a deliberate psychological base, that schools do teach a non-academic curriculum, and that teachers should intervene in mental health issues (Hayes, 1995; Nugent, 1994). The educational therapist approach, likewise, proposes that teachers should make an intentional use of psychoeducational interventions, as a merging of education and mental health approaches (Morse, 1992). The psychoeducator model,

which also supports teachers having a deliberate, direct role in therapy, suggests that educators take a sideways step and focus on the curriculum of thinking, feeling and doing, or “educating the psyche... the spirit or the soul” (Nichols, 1998, p.1).

Instructional approaches that focus on the personal development of the student as a foremost concern in teaching are often based on characteristics found in humanistic psychology. Humanistic psychology, in its current state, emerged in reaction to the stringent view of human nature that behaviourism provided. It also has a relationship with psychoanalytic psychology, but with the caveat that humanistic psychology gives more credence to the idea of human self control and potential, rather than their control by the internal forces dominant in psychoanalysis or the external forces dominant in behaviourism (Crain, 2000). Soltis and Fenstermacher (1992) call it a psychology which encompasses both mental health and emotional health, as well as focusing on personal growth. The therapist approach to teaching, as proposed by Soltis and Fenstermacher (1992), refers to Rogers, a humanistic psychologist, for its pedagogical implications. Rogers summarized learning as personal: self-initiated, self-evaluated, pervasive, and its essence, meaningful to the learner (Rogers, 1983). Teaching, then, is carried out within a caring teacher-learner relationship, by an authentic person who takes on the role of a director, guide, or facilitator of learning (Soltis & Fenstermacher, 1992). Similarly, Rogers (1983) emphasized that all individuals, including teachers and learners, are searching for identity, or the “real self” (p.34), which is a lifetime process of becoming fully functional people.

Proponents of a therapist approach to teaching have similarities to these characteristics of humanistic psychology. Two examples are Ellis’s Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy [REBT] and Glasser’s Reality Therapy. Gladding (1999) described Ellis’s REBT as a humanistic therapy that focuses on both behaviour and cognition, and stipulated that thoughts about events lead to both feelings and behaviours, rather than what is external to the person. REBT has been described as a postmodernist, constructivist approach to cognitive-behavioural psychotherapy that focuses on active-directive individual change within a social community through a process that encourages insight, responsibility, flexibility and the development of rational beliefs (Glasser, 1985; William Glasser Institute, 2004). Glasser’s reality therapy, although described as an example of non-traditional psychotherapy, also concurs with basic tenets of humanistic psychology (Glasser, 1990). Glasser believed that therapy and its principles can and should be applied widely. He advocated schools as a place for preventative psychiatry, and both home and schools as a place to teach responsibility. He proposed that teachers and their

personal relationships with students are very important and do have a role in therapy. Reality therapy stipulates that people who are in need of therapy are denying reality, are not able to fulfill their personal needs, or are what Glasser called irresponsible (William Glasser Institute, 2004). To fulfill personal needs, Glasser emphasized the existence of “a caring involvement with others, at minimum one other with a reciprocal emotionally involved relationship that may change because of the warm, human contact the teacher is able to establish” (Glasser, 1990, p.157); in this way, environment is significant. The ecological model, below, also emphasizes the significance of the environment.

### *Ecological Model*

As Glasser (1990) has emphasized, the environment of children is essential to their learning, and as humanistic psychology emphasizes, relationships are essential to learning. The ecological model encompasses the importance of the role of the social context in which a child functions, emphasizing relationships in all social contexts in a child’s environment. It places importance on the total social context including the child’s home, the school community, and the wider community beyond school (Shatz, 1994). According to Hobbs (1978), whose work in behaviour intervention using the ecological model has been considered significant (Shatz, 1994), each child is part of a unique, variable ecosystem that changes over time. If this ecosystem has an overabundance of discord, that child will be “in trouble.” The goal of any interventions, in this case termed ecological interventions, is to address the whole ecosystem and to balance the system with the developmental needs of the child in mind, retaining or restoring the family as the central unit (Hobbs, 1978).

For the purposes of this research, the ecological model is complementary to the underlying premises of humanistic psychology, and is intended as an adjunct that emphasizes the instruction of students with special needs, although it is relevant for any child. The ecological model fits in well with service delivery through the inclusive classroom, interagency collaboration, the changing roles of teachers, and the Newfoundland and Labrador special education policy context which emphasizes the centrality of the child, surrounded by community supports (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2003).

### *Hidden Curriculum*

Jackson (1997) emphasized the importance of the everyday, unnoticed, seemingly mundane aspects of the school day, pointing out that in reality, schools have an unmatched social intimacy. He described the hidden curriculum of learning to deal with complex situations such as crowds, praise and power in classrooms as a second curriculum, in contrast to the academic or official curriculum, yet inextricably linked to the academic curriculum in

which teachers and learners are expected to engage. Mosher and Sprinthall (1970, cited in Hayes, 1995) similarly stated that instruction in the hidden curriculum, such as self-worth and competition is inevitable, but rather than being inadvertent and potentially damaging, it should be a “deliberate psychological education” (p.157). Teaching about social, emotional and behavioural skills can be considered part of this hidden curriculum. The therapist approach to teaching, though, brings this curriculum to the forefront. This research will also look at the hidden curriculum versus the academic curriculum in Newfoundland and Labrador, especially in the context of individualized curriculum that can be designed to focus on such issues for students with special needs.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, for example, a fundamental commitment outlined by the Department of Education is “to foster intellectual, moral, social, emotional, and physical development” (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2004c, p.4), and the formal mission statement emphasizes personal growth and value development, and the “development of the person” (p.4) is part of the provincial philosophy and mandate. Conversely, a corresponding focus beyond “promoting goals and standards applicable to the provision of education” (Tucker, 1997, p.19) does not exist in the instructional role of the teacher, which currently emphasizes duties that are limited to general instruction, evaluation, reporting and discipline (Tucker, 1997).

#### PROBLEM STATEMENT

Are teachers taking on a role of a therapist with their students; and, if, so, what does this role look like? According to a review of recent theoretical literature (Hayes, 1995; Mackey & McQueen, 1998), applied programs (Carlson, 2001; Maguson, 1996) and empirical research (Franklin, Biever, Moore, Clemons, & Scamardo, 2001; Quinn & Cowie, 1995), teachers may assume a therapist approach to instruction, which for some, seems to transverse what might be viewed as a conventional student-teacher relationship and academic instructional focus (Nichols, 1998). Such approaches can be deliberate, informal, inadvertent, or may happen more with students needing special education assistance or greater individual attention (Barnes, 2000; Hayes, 1995; Peach & Keeny, 1991). Although teachers may be taking an instructional role that focuses on the social, emotional and behavioural domains, this expectation is not prominent in the role of the teacher (Maich, 2004, Tucker, 1997). It is not clear whether teachers describe themselves as taking on a therapist approach to instruction, and if so, what this therapist approach encompasses.

## QUESTIONS

Scant literature is available that outlines how teachers themselves see their role in the application of therapy in schools, through the instruction of social, emotional and behavioural skills. In collecting, analyzing and synthesizing a range of interview data related to the perceptions and practices in such an instructional approach, this research hopes to provide both illustrations of teachers view of themselves as therapists, their approach to teaching, as well as a comparison between the approaches of classroom teachers and special education teachers, or approaches to various groups of students including typical students and those with special needs. Its overall purpose is to understand complex phenomena (Newman, Ridenour, Newman & DeMarco, 2003) through answering a range of primary questions: Are teachers using a therapist approach to instruction? Do teachers feel they are taking on a therapeutic role in the classroom? How do teachers feel about the student-teacher relationships? How do teachers intervene in personal social, emotional and behavioural issues? How do teachers instruct social, emotional and behaviour skills?

## METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out using a volunteer sample of participants in Newfoundland and Labrador for this research solicited through both public advertisement in the provincial professional field and by word of mouth, following ethical approval from the Research Ethics Board at Brock University. It is guided by a constructivist paradigm, intended to investigate and interpret a complex, socially constructed reality, with the assumption that such social realities are developed by the participants themselves (Glesne, 1999). A constructivist paradigm is essential, based on the nature of the topic of the therapist approach to teaching and its personally constructed instruction and individual learning in three areas of emphasis: the importance of the teacher-student relationship; a focus on personal development of social, emotional and behavioural skills; and the direct instruction of social, emotional and behavioural skills. This study approaches research using a multiple methods approach, defined by Mertens and McLaughlin (2004) as research with one worldview but with more than one method, and includes four distinct steps: initial survey data; survey scenario data; case study data, consisting of both interviews and written narratives; and, lastly, document review data.

## RESULTS

The main purpose of this research is to provide results of the twenty survey participants' and the four case study participants' understanding of their possible role as therapists, through responses to the following primary questions:

- (1) Are teachers using a therapist approach to instruction?
- (2) Do teachers feel they are taking on a therapeutic role in the classroom?
- (3) How do teachers feel about the student-teacher relationships?
- (4) How do teachers intervene in personal social, emotional and behavioural issues?
- (5) How do teachers instruct social, emotional and behaviour skills?

The below responses are compiled in a framework from the primary questions as addressed through participants' responses to survey questions, including supporting or disconfirming information from survey scenarios, case study conversations, case study narratives, and document analysis.

Are teachers using a therapist approach to instruction?

In order to obtain a sense of the issues that potentially impact teachers in the school environment where teachers might potentially employ a therapeutic approach to students, participants were asked, "Has a student ever approached you for support for extremely personal issues?" Fourteen of twenty survey participants (70%) responded positively to the initial question "Has a student ever approached you for support for extremely personal issues?" and provided further details about their experiences in dealing with such self-designated extremely personal issues in the school environment. All fourteen of these positively responding participants were able to provide specific examples of the types of extremely personal issues they have been approached with, including all prompted examples - parental problems, pregnancy, suicidal thoughts - as well as abuse, death, and sexual issues. The most common issues reported by participants relate to suicide: of those fourteen participants who responded positively to being approached about personal issues, six participants (43%) reported to have been approached about suicide-related issues. Four participants (29%) have been approached about parental-related problems, for example, "I had one, actually when I was teaching grade six, that had ... many, many parental problems. There were many issues there ... for whatever reason I kind of got him on my side and school became his safe haven. Home was a nightmare and school was his place where he could be" [Participant 19]. Abuse in general, suicide, pregnancy and death were mentioned by a single participant each.

When questioned about their related provision of support and/or referral, all 14 participants who took part in further questioning on this issue indicated that they provided supports in varying manners. When participants provided support, a wide range of diverging ways or support provision are indicated within the 27 examples of supports given. The most common types of support are both listening and talking (5 examples each; 18% each). One example of support by listening is:

After awhile, after they realized that, yes, [name] really does care. And ... they used to stay after school and linger around, and then they'd tell me, they'd open up little by little, but it wouldn't happen in one day ... I think [for] this one young girl it happened over a couple of weeks. She would stay after school and, "You need any help?" And I'd say, yes, and as we were talking she'd tell, and I was like, "Oh yeah." Like I wouldn't pry ... I just let her open up and finally she ... expressed. [Participant 7]

In further discussing support for extremely personal issues, Participant 1 noted that offers of further support in the form of a referral, including actual accompaniment to a referral source also occur, such as, "Would you like me to ... go with you to the guidance counsellor to initiate this conversation and I'll leave the room so that you can continue to have the conversation or do you want me to mention it ... so that you can approach it later?" [Participant 20] were common. Almost all participants reported that their support included a referral for extremely personal issues, in addition to providing support, as noted above. Thirteen out of fourteen participants who have been involved with extremely personal issues (93%) noted providing further referrals to professionals beyond themselves. Two participants, though, noted difficulty with their attempts to provide further follow-up referrals, even though it was the preferred route of the involved participants. For one participant, this occurred due to the student's unwillingness to discuss the topic beyond, "No, [it was] off limits to everybody else" [Participant 19]; another did provide referrals in other circumstances, but did find difficulty referring in some specific cases: "A lot of these are young females and they're dealing with issues, birth control, and things like that. And our guidance counsellor is male. So they're not very comfortable in going to him. And ... he's a new staff member, so the kids haven't established a rapport with him yet" [Participant 4]. When participants provide referrals, it is typically to the school-based guidance counsellor, or school administration. Participants also provided various rationales for referring students beyond just themselves for support. In total, 13 participants asserted 17 different examples of reasons for referral in five areas; most commonly, because of either an obligation to refer, or for reasons of personal comfort (5 of 17 examples; 29%). When participants provide an obligation rationale, some provided examples of

factual obligations, whereas others simply perceived an obligation to refer without having a formal framework. Participant 4, for instance, shared that, “I pretty much try to stick by the book .... I’m an untenured teacher .... I’m walking a fine line when I do any communicating with a child. But I think it’s important for me to have that door open, and that confidence, etc. ... but .... there are things that I run by my administration on a regular basis, and get their support, and where I should go from there.” In other cases, referral reasoning comes from legal obligation: “Legally, you are obligated, as a teacher, that if you feel that the child is in a situation that’s not beneficial to the child, or some type of a threat to the child, they have to legally disclose any information that they may tell you to the proper officials” [Participant 1]. Alternatively, when participants provide a rationale of personal comfort, it is consistently based on self-judgments of individual ability. For example, one participant clarified it this way: “I do what I can for the immediate and certainly ... not try to deal with the things I’m not qualified or capable of dealing with” [Participant 10].

The common reality is that participants typically do deal with extremely personal issues, and do provide direct support to students around these issues, as well as referrals. Overall, the typical profile of the participants in this study is to be approached by a student with an extremely personal issue, typically suicide-related, provide support primarily by listening and talking together, and often supplement their support with a formal referral, typically to a school-based guidance counsellor, for reasons of either personal comfort level or a perception of obligation.

Do teachers feel they are taking on a therapeutic role in the classroom?

From self-generated definitions of both teacher and therapist, 95 percent of participants answered positively to the following inquiry: “In your teaching career, do you recall ever feeling like you were taking on a role of a therapist with a student?” Participant 19 elaborated on a positive response to taking on a therapist role in this way:

The definition of teacher and therapist are ... getting to be one and the same. And the sad part is and when we go through training ... we get all the policies and we get all the things we’re supposed to do, like mark in the register and do all these things. We don’t get the training that allows us to know how to relate to the children and deal with these difficulties as they come up ... we deal with children now who ... [come sic] to school with a lot of baggage .... might have a learning disability, might have family problems, those who are divorced, those who have been sexually abused and the teachers are on the front lines, and we’re the

one's that have to deal with that. And in many cases, we have to be a therapist; we're kind of thrust into the role whether we like it or not.

One participant in a special education role believes that the proximity in her role makes a difference in her involvement in the therapist role:

You're in the classroom, every day ... with this child one on one, or ... in a very small group. I think your position as a teacher does change and I think you have to. I think sometimes kids with problems that have some ... little special issues and they kind of need a little bit more emotional support than you would like probably give ... to a person in a regular classroom (Participant 9).

Case Study Participant 2 describes in detail how she handled a death in the family of a student, as an example. Much like other participants in this study who describe areas like social skills and emotional awareness as transcending the curriculum, she sees these issues as similarly embedded in the daily life of the classroom, ones that teachers are forced to deal with in the "everyday life of the classroom." She gives the example of a death in the family:

You have to deal with that, whether the child breaks down in class and cries, whether you take them aside, and, and give your condolences, you can't ignore what's happening in children's lives. Social, emotional, behavioural, you can't ignore it ... and those override curriculum, because you're not going to be able to teach curriculum, or children aren't going to be able to ... meet outcomes, unless they deal with these first, because I think these are the things that block children from learning.

Although a referral to the guidance counsellor was already in process in this situation, this is obviously not sufficient for this participant. In the interim, she continued to provide an open door policy, and supportive talk, emphasizing her availability to listen and help. She further emphasizes the importance of her instructional role beyond subject specific curriculum to personal growth.

My philosophy is, we're not teaching children math, or, over and above teaching children math, and reading, and writing, more important than that is to teach them ... the values ... the things that you need to get along in life. Dealing with stress, dealing with grief ... I think when you're teaching kids, you're teaching them to be citizens, and you teach them to be healthy, and you're teaching them to be well, physically, mentally, emotionally. I think that's as big a part of the curriculum, because if ... you can't do

that, how are kids, who are going through grief, and can't deal with it, or have no one to rely on, or no one to talk to, how ... are they even going to get to curriculum?

This outlook translates into action in a way that the Case Study Participant Two mentions may be beyond the typical comfort level of many teachers. As well as expressing condolences and offering support, she reports paying careful attention to the student's comfort level, eye contact, initiation of contact with her, reciprocity, comfort levels, and even gathering information about his progression in the grief cycle, beyond the school community. She carefully develops a relationship with him, is pleased when that relationship seems to be effective, and reacts emotionally to his successes – all beyond not only any provincial curricular goals, but even beyond a formal instruction role. She willingly shares her view on her limited preparation:

And I [did] the psychology courses ... but, they're not practical ... of all the things I could spew at you about Freud and Skinner ... none of it is practical experience ... you want to be able to do something, to let that child know you're there, you're gonna be there ... you can be approached ... you can listen to them ... they can cry, it's okay ... all these things are okay ... no course I've ever done has said ... do this, this, and this, now maybe along the guidance area ... they get into that, but I mean, I certainly didn't get it in my course.

Later, when she expresses her joy about her student excelling in an extra-curricular activity where a previously latent talent lay. Mimicking a Visa advertisement, she quips, “Math, \$9.99, English, \$12.99. The cost of finding out you're worth it, and you have something? Priceless.”

How do teachers feel about student-teacher relationships?

All participants provided a response to the open-ended inquiry, “What do you feel is the most important part of your instruction?” The second most dominant theme emerging from participants' responses, beyond instructional style, is relationship building, as Participant 11 explains: “The most important part of my instruction is connecting with the students, because if you don't connect with the students, then it's ... a waste of time for both you and student, if you don't have that relationship established.” All participants agree that the student-teacher relationship does affect learning, usually in a positive way, with the potential for negative outcomes, as well. If the student-teacher relationship has problems, student learning also has problems, according to five participants (25%). Participant 8 explains:

Teachers, like most adults, can make or break a child. And I've see children in the class [say] "I hate that school, I just hate it!" And what it comes down to, it's because – and I'm not going to blame it on the teacher or the child, because I don't think that we can -- that we fit with everybody in society ... there [are] going to be times .... they've gone through schools, and have a teacher that they hated that school.

Participant 18 also corroborates with: "If you come in day by day and you're ... always in a sour mood or you're always in a ... negative mood, then I think that's going to be put off on your students. It's not going to cause a positive learning environment." Most participants, however, focused on – or also on – positive outcomes of student-teacher relationships. In total, 16 examples of positive outcomes of a positive-student teacher relationship are provided by survey participants.

The most commonly indicated positive outcome is general positive learning, indicated by seven participants of these sixteen participants (44%). Some examples are: "A positive relationship with students in my experience ... has enormous affect on their potential for learning. And I think that's the biggest key is having that mutual respect, having fun in the situation, but at the same time ... that whole feeling of well-being that they feel in that context just allows learning to take place." [Participant 20] and "I think the more positive relationship you have with them, the more positive learning experiences that you will ... encounter" [Participant 4]. Four participants in this group (25%) link student effort with positive student-teacher relationships, such as:

Well I think they want to learn, or they try. Because I think once they develop that relationship with me, I think they're probably a little bit embarrassed sometimes when they don't put their best into it. I mean, I think they know, all I want is their best. Their best doesn't have to be 90. But as long as they put their best into it, and I say that right up front, of course. And [if] I feel they don't, they don't feel so good when they get a mark back that they know they're going to be embarrassed by [Participant 2].

Participant 9 concurs with, "If you get on the good side of them and then ... when I say get on the good side of them, I don't mean ... letting them get away with things, but I think ... if they get that good rapport with you ... they really like want to please you and like to try their best. And I think ... it's a good way ... to teach, because ... I think if you butt horns with people ... you don't get very good results."

Relationships that have extreme importance to students, can have a downside, though, as indicated by a single participant of the three that provided examples of supporting students inside and outside of the school environment:

There was one negative thing, I would say that came out of that relationship. She became extremely attached to me, which I didn't expect ... [it] kind of ... backfired, and I didn't expect that, and I didn't want that. And I had to actually ... ask her to be transferred out of my [area of responsibility] ... which made her very angry at me. And now she understands what I was trying to do, but it was too much, and ... in the process we can ... actually hurt ... the growth of the child if you get too involved ... too close, and I didn't want that. I'd still like for her to see me as a teacher, not a ... surrogate mother, .... and eventually the mother actually came back ... to ... the bosom of the family .... [I] never wanted to know ... what was going on there. And she ... eventually ... moved away. Now she's in university, but that's ... one thing I made a difference in someone's life .... she does keep in contact with me .... sometimes if I am online, she comes on, and MSN, and said, " [name] I miss you so much!" But she doesn't have the time now to chat and ... to be much involved, because she's [attending university]. So she needs to apply ... a lot of herself .... it was good for me as well because ... I also learned how not to ... talk a certain way with a student, because then we ... send mixed messages .... I used to talk to her like I want to talk to a daughter, and ... and that was not a good thing .... I think we should always keep in mind that line of demarcation, and we have to watch ourselves. That was a very good experience for me and for her. [Participant 5]

How do teachers intervene in personal social, emotional and behavioural issues?

All participants provided responses to the question, "What is your role in the social, emotional, and behavioural growth of students?" Only a single participant responded with a lack of knowledge about their role. Typically, participants provided information about their role in either direct or indirect instruction to students in the areas of social, emotional or behavioural needs. A few noted this type of instruction as being beyond their sole responsibility, and others provided qualifiers as to the importance of their role.

Case Study Participant 3, a special education teacher with some classroom teaching responsibilities, discussed many ongoing social, emotional and behavioural issues in her classrooms and the school environment. Like Case Study Participant 1, she sees some parallels to parenting, and like Case Study Participant 2, she believes that teaching is beyond academics:

I basically treat my students as the way I would treat [them] if I had a child, and I look at, well, I'm a teacher, but parents send their children to me, and they expect me to give them the best care I can, and

that's the way I treat them. I take care of a lot of ... emotional and other needs ... besides just being taught ... how to add.

A number of these seem to have arisen from her attempts to emphasize and maintain an open door and a listening ear, both informally, and more formally through a teacher mentoring program. In one case, a student approached her with a locker-sharing issue that needed resolution. She reflected on this:

It's nice to know that they can trust me and if they are upset, that ... they don't ... let it linger ... that they'll come and, and actually ask for help. But, like I told you in previous conversations, I do that in all my classes ... my door is always open no matter when, come see me if you need me. Can't find me, well ask somebody where I am. With any problem, didn't matter what it was.

She discussed two incidents of students who she teaches academically on a regular basis approached her about aggression, and asked her help on, in one case, potentially reporting the problems, and in another, reporting. She came to similar conclusions about why she is approached with these types of issues:

I'm open with them and I tell them that if they need me for anything, or ... if they're being bullied, or if [they] just need some help with their work or whatever, that I'm down in [room number], or they can find me in the school. So maybe it's just that they trust me ... I don't know. I've had a lot of them in that [Language] class come to me and ask me for some help.

Reflecting on her first classes with these students, she admits that instruction was not a focus; in fact, she spent her time “getting to know them a little bit: what they're like, what their interests were, and actually getting to talk to them ... what they like, and that kind of thing, it sort of settled them down.” She believes this initial approach has a number of benefits: to assist with behaviours; to build relationships; and to assist her choices in future learning materials. She notes deliberately ensuring that this rapport-building was in place with one student with behaviour issues prior to placing any expectations on him: “I kinda got to know him a little bit, and let him know what I was like.” Yet, she is still unsure why students seem drawn to her for personal issues. One example of her thoughts is this:

A lot of students are asking ... can they come in my class and stuff like that. I guess it's just [in] relation to what they need. I don't know. I'm easy-going, I'm not really, really strict, but ... I'm strict enough that they know they ... have to follow the rules and stuff, but, I don't know. Maybe it's just a caring environment, in there.

### How do teachers instruct social, emotional and behaviour skills?

All 20 participants responded to a range of questions about the instruction of important social skills and emotional awareness. Teachers first responded to their beliefs regarding the role of schools and teachers in the instruction of both social skills and emotional awareness. Almost all participants noted that they believe that teaching social skills (95%) and emotional awareness (80%) is part of the roles of schools, and 90 percent of participants believe that instructing social skills (90%) and emotional awareness (80%) is part of the instructional role of teachers. Participant Five explains this importance well:

One of things that I ... say about social skills, that it's the source of everything. It doesn't matter if you are a toddler or if you are eighty-five years old. It's not taking anybody for granted. And that's ... the source of everything. If you could ... make people understand that, whatever reason, whatever way, the world would be a much better place for us to live.

One anecdote justifying the instructional role of teachers in the area of emotional awareness is shared by Participant Eight:

I think it's more important now than it was a number of years ago, probably when we were growing up .... it seems, that a lot of things that we took for granted or got from our own or being at home with brothers and sisters. And ... I think that's the other thing, most kids today ... they might have one sibling; some people are alone. But even a lot of things that happen in a family, you learn from that, but if you don't have that family life, you don't learn those things. So it's probably more important to actually have it as ... something being taught.

Case Study Participant 2 carefully details how the process of individualizing social skills might work. Taking the example of one student, she notes that this student has – and continued to have – social skills instruction in within the context of the Health curriculum, but that this instruction was not sufficient for the student's needs, necessitating the development of an individualized program. She points out that just because such facts are memorized for a class test, does not mean that the true meaning of the concept has been understood and can be applied. She feel teacher self-disclosure is essential, and notes that she will also complete class activities, which may entail sharing personal information: “If the teacher takes risks, they pick up and they take risks.” It is important, for all students, she believes, in school and beyond school, and cannot then be constrained by the time-limited learning that the curriculum defines:

Yes, we have to teach them the academics, but there's so much more to life ... to be successful students, than the academics. Or to be successful in life ... you need social skills. You need to know, not to lie and cheat, or you don't stay in too many jobs ... whether you go to university, or[ ] whether you're working in a fish plant, you get up there and you start stealing the fish, and you're gonna be fired ... you go to university and ... become a lawyer and you start robbing the accounts and you're gonna be fired and you're gonna end up in jail ... the lessons that we teach them in school are life lessons. They're not just something that's finished in grade two, or grade three, or grade five, or grade six, and ... I believe they're just as important as curriculum.

Participant 3 took a unique position, in this study, when she voiced some ethical concerns about the instruction of social skills:

I don't necessarily think it's our role, or even our ... business, or our right, to try to change all children and make them be what we think they should be. I don't know where we're starting to play God with all of that sometimes, but ... at the same time, a child has to live within the school. And if we're trying to teach that child, and the child has to live with five hundred other kids ... for thirteen years, then ... at the very least we need to work on ... that is like a small version of society within the school, then ... we need to work on those kinds of things to ... help the child to actually be successful, and get along, and ... have some positive experiences within the school. But I mean, honestly, I don't know; sometimes I just feel that you know the school is expected to play God, and do so many things, either that we're not qualified for, or don't have within a five-hour day, the control over ...

Case Study Participant 4 provides a detailed narrative of how this is similarly addressed in her primary classroom. Like incidental issues translated to special education instruction, she describes how four issues in her classroom resulted in instruction that is what she describes as "somewhat" related to the curriculum in a variety of subject areas. First, bullying emerged as an continuing issue in her classroom, which she addressed in the context of the regular classroom and the Health, Social Studies, and Language Arts curricula. To address bullying, being a friend, and interacting with others, a combination of books, scenarios, guest speaking, discussions, and activities and behavioural contracts, took place. Second, hygiene emerged as a concern with many students, and was address through the same subject areas, including a visit from a health professional, a reward program to reinforce new

skills, story, and the creation of posters and visual reminders. Third, personal space understanding was also a concern addressed through Health and Social Studies.

Eight (40%) participants note their role in incidental instruction as a response to the perceived need for essential support in social, emotional or behavioural domains rather than a curricular fit: “I guess it depends on the child and their need.” [Participant 1]. Case Study Participant 2 describes this area as not related to overt individualized or government-mandated curriculum. She describes an issue with lying in a primary student, which affected the whole class and resulted in a loss of instructional time; therefore was addressed as a whole class. Much like Case Study Participant 4, she used story, discussion, role play, and behavioural contracts to meet objectives related to the consequences of lies, the feelings of others related to lying, and its link to bullying. In some cases, then, the difference between what participants perceive as curriculum-based instruction related to social, emotional and behavioural issues, and interventions beyond the curriculum may be related to a difference in perception of fit, rather than the realities of cross-curricular objectives.

## CONCLUSION

### A Can of Worms

Like the 70 percent of participants who have been approached about extremely personal issues, Case Study Participant Three shares a curriculum-based discussion that quickly became extremely personal: “It opened up a can of worms.” Such personal discussions are not uncommon in the case of this case study participant, who believes that self-disclosure not only from students, but also of the teachers, is effective: sharing “stories and [getting] personal instead of just reading from a book and allowing them to share.” It’s a give-and-take of “expos[ing] some of my personal things” to develop trust and provide an environment where students can feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences. Government curriculum, in one case she describes, was used as a vehicle by the teacher to suggest places and people that can help in the school environment, and as a time to ensure students that someone is always available to them. She takes an even further step by offering herself as one of those people who is always available to them. According to Case Study Participant Three, she does this because she sees her role as being “not just someone who's in there to educate from the curriculum,” believing that building trust will lead not only to better effort on the part of students, but to an understanding that, “This teacher is here for the goodness of us,” emphasizing that, “I’m there for service ... I want them to know that, it's not just me teaching them health and

religion, there's me there as I'm very interested in ...how they get the best of their education, and how they feel in the school.”

The following example illustrates how teachers can regularly become involved in such personal discussions even in the midst of an academic subject, following a question in an instruction guide supported by government curriculum and recommendations for instructional practice. Such issues are gaining attention in the mainstream media, such as the example of Izenberg's Maclean's article entitled, “Does therapy belong in class?” Although the viewpoint of this article differentiates between educational and therapeutic interventions, an important point is raised in the metaphor of opening a wound, mirroring the above experience of Case Study Participant Three's experience of what she describes, similarly, as opening a can of worms. Mendlowitz (cited in Izenberg, 2007, p.35) notes that “If you're going to open a wound, you need to know what to do with it” and the article further warns further warns that “Teachers aren't necessarily equipped to navigate the raw territory that kids could get into” (p.35).

This study has shown that social, emotional and behavioural topics are the intervention and instructional territory of the participants in this research project; even extending into extremely personal areas. Like the above example, this terrain can emerge from classroom expectations, particular subject areas, a student approaching a teacher, or a teacher responding to perceived needs of a student. Given that teachers in this study view relationship-building as second in their instruction only to instructional style, it is safe to assume that effort is put into relationship building on the part of teachers. It is not surprising, then, that students and teachers who have positive relationships – which participants in this study report they are striving for – end up intervening in issues beyond simply the academic. Like Case Study Participant Three and Izenberg (2007) explore, building a relationship opens the door to life beyond the lesson, but it is unpredictable what might emerge from behind that open door.

Background from Martin, Romas, Medford, Leffert and Hatcher (2006) support this assertion. They consider that when examining the helping qualities that adolescents prefer in adults that “adolescents will perceive qualities of adults in non-therapeutic helping relationships that are generalizable to their alliance with therapists” (p. 130). In other words, they feel there is likely a commonality between helping qualities in different adult roles.

#### Propping Open the Door

Once a student-teacher relationship is formed, perhaps similar to the adult alliance relationship needs reviewed by Martin et. al (2006), further issues can emerge. As teachers are, as this research indicates, providing front-line support and attempting some type of therapeutic interventions in the school environment, it is necessary to

provide teachers with a basic framework to help guide that initial response which is occurring prior to further professional referral, perhaps an expansion of what one participant in Acikgoz's (2005) study on teacher characteristics suggested for teachers in general: "There should be a teacher training course which teaches teachers to be nice to us." Dwairy (2005) proposes one such framework for verbal conversation with children from the premise that "despite all the time spent talking to children and directing them, only a few studies provide instructions on how to listen to children and how to encourage them to think and describe their own personal skills" (p. 144). Dwairy suggests a model entitled Problem Solving Conversation (PCS) which is built upon Rogerian principles and focuses on interviewing skills to create a "humanistic climate amongst parents, educators, therapists and children that facilitates revision, insight and change" (p.149). It consists of four directive yet flexible steps intended for both teachers and counsellors on simply "how to manage a conversation with a child about a problem in which he or she was involved" (p.145) and is intended for diverse issues and ages in individual or group settings. Like the participants in this study have indicated is so essential, relationship building begins with rapport and understanding, and ends with follow-up.

The four stages outlined in this model are:

- (1) Genuinely understanding the child, which provides ideas about verbal and non-verbal language, settings, questioning skills, and the expression of empathy.
- (2) Probing reevaluation of the past, including suggestions on language to seek genuine re-assessment of the situation in question, with advanced skills for therapists including confrontation, reframing and interpretation.
- (3) Exploring new alternatives and making a plan. This third steps focuses on developing a new action plan that is concrete, specific and realistic, using skills such as examining the logical consequences of suggested actions, providing feedback to the student, and well as advice.
- (4) Setting the relationship and follow up: outlining responsibilities to follow up on planning outlined in Stage 3.

Dwairy (2005) has intended this model as an process for ongoing engagement among many partners – both parents and a range of professionals – who are supporting children in exploring their emotions and their behaviours.

Case Study Participant 2 voiced an unusual concern, pointing out that teachers are not even trained to recognize the basis of students' concerns. When considering students who struggle with academics and also social, emotional, or behaviour issues and her likely response to them, she responded that, "We needs skills because we don't want interventions to be built on baloney" again supporting a call for further training in this area of

discriminating a true need for support. Informal supports, referrals and instruction of skills can be invalidated without a strong foundation of needs, resulting not only in inappropriately matched interventions, but also to the detriment of other more needy students, when professional support is being exhausted unnecessarily.

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