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## **Go, Go, Go, How About Hello?: Building Teacher-Student Relationships within Departmentalized Elementary Schools**

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Go, Go, Go, How About Hello?: Building Teacher-Student Relationships within  
Departmentalized Elementary Schools  
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### **Abstract**

The focus of this Capstone Project is on building teacher-student relationships within departmentalized elementary schools. Departmentalization, beginning at the fourth and fifth grade levels, is an issue because it gives teachers drastically less face to face time with their students than a traditional self-contained schedule. According to the scholarly literature, young students need strong, positive relationships with their teachers to do well academically.

Departmentalization reduces the time to form these relationships. An argument is made that if teachers and schools meet certain criteria, these relationships can still be established, even with less time than what self-contained schedules provide. Upon interviewing the principal, and five fourth/fifth grade teachers at an elementary school where departmentalization is implemented beginning in the fourth grade, three themes emerged as ways to address the issue presented.

Based on the data, an action was chosen as the most effective option for establishing teacher-student relationships within a departmentalized structure.

### **Go, Go, Go, How About Hello?: Building Teacher-Student Relationships within Departmentalized Elementary Schools**

Everyone has a background story, but some are more tragic than others. I am one of the fortunate ones who had a very loving upbringing. From what I have noticed over the years, there seems to be an ever-growing lack in the area of quality family time. I remember having a friend over for dinner. While my family was simply following the daily routine of setting the table to sit down and enjoy a home-cooked meal together, my friend only experienced such a phenomenon in his childhood during Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday dinners. However, his reaction towards my family's interactions with one another was not the first. Being that my parents were youth pastors, there were many teens that filtered through our home in need of familial love. In fact, to this day I still consider them a part of my family. The fact of the matter is, people need love, they need to know that there are others who care and want to see them succeed. It just so happens that I got to witness first hand many young people in need have this need filled and not falter because of it.

Fast-forward a few years from my childhood to my late teen years I am watching t.v. I am watching a show about mystery murders and what I watched that night changed something in me forever. There was an unsolved case for an unidentified body found that had been dead for months. Years went by until the case was finally picked up again and solved. The young man had dropped out of high school and ran away from home, which as far as family life was considered, consisted of a detached mother and younger sibling. The young man traveled with an older man and together they were involved in criminal activities such as stealing. At some point, the older man killed him and left his body in a ditch. The only way the investigators were able to solve the case was because of a unique tattoo the young man had received before his death. This young man's story haunts me to this day. What made his death so mysterious and unsolvable for so many years, was that he had no real relationships, no ties, just death. I could not help but wonder, did this young man have one single person who truly cared about him prior to running away from home? Did he have one person who believed in him before he decided to drop out of high school? On the other side of the same coin, how many people treated him with contempt or disinterest? How many people told him that he would never amount to anything? What if a

teacher had moved on this student's behalf to tell him he was capable of more? I believe that if he had one person who fought against these stigmas and chose to care for him as a person, the course of his life could have drastically changed.

Where parents and families may fail, it is up to teachers to fill these gaps. Young people need to know that there are others who care about them deeply. Whether they come from loving or broken families, all young people have the same internal needs. What an amazing opportunity teachers have to deeply care for all the students that filter through their classrooms. I believe that teachers can fill those voids in their students, just as I saw my parents do for many young people. Teachers can empower students to believe in their own abilities and lean on them for strength. Is not that the concept of school? Education and growth, in order to achieve these things, teachers must promote growth mindsets in their classrooms. Nonetheless, these things do take time. It is within this time that relationships are built, and within relationships, that transformation can begin to take place. Sometimes teachers may not have as much time as they wish in order to establish these positive relationships as they desire. However, this does not mean the task is impossible. Although it must be intentional, I want to simply love my students so that they will always know that there is at least one person in their lives who cares about them and believes in them.

### **Literature Synthesis & Integration: Building Positive Teacher-Student**

#### **Relationships**

Departmentalization is something most recognized for middle school and high school levels, it is not often something we consider for elementary schools. However, schools in California do have this option. Therefore, it is important to consider the benefits and drawbacks this format can bring forth within elementary schools. Additionally, the possible solutions to these setbacks must be explored. For indeed, there are setbacks that directly impact both the students and the teachers.

#### **What is the Issue?**

California's Credentialing and Certified Assignments Committee (CTC) authorizes and allows departmentalization at the elementary school level.<sup>1</sup> This term "departmentalization"

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<sup>1</sup> See C&CA 5B-7

refers to the format in which students have multiple teachers throughout the day, each teacher specializing in specific subjects. However, most schools utilize a “self-contained” structure, meaning that one teacher covers all subjects of the curriculum while maintaining the same group of students (Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014). Departmentalization has its own set of strengths that appeal to schools in that it takes a “subject-centered approach,” which as Strohl et al. (2014) explain, prevents highly qualified teachers from becoming emotionally exhausted to the point of quitting. Correspondingly this is seen to be beneficial to students’ overall academic success. Nonetheless, there are other factors to consider.

The real issue presents itself within the divergence between departmentalization and self-contained formats. Self-contained classrooms are favorable due to their student-centered focus which naturally allows for more time to build and foster positive teacher-student relationships (Strohl et al., 2014). Therefore, if departmentalization extracts the factor of time from which teacher-student relationships are built then the teacher-student relationships are drastically impacted within this format of education. Consequently, the issue is this: while departmentalization offers benefits to teachers and students, it can present negative repercussions in the interpersonal relationships between teachers and their students which can significantly impact student success.

### **Why is it an Issue?**

To understand why building and maintaining interpersonal relationships between teachers and their students is important, one must understand what they are and how they impact student success. Perhaps teacher-student relationships are best described “as the generalized interpersonal meaning students and teachers attach to their interactions with each other” (as cited in Classesns et al., 2017). Relational Schema Theory (Baldwin, 1992) can be used to better understand the way these relationships are built. Patterns of similar experiences transpiring between a student and teacher can begin to give both persons a generalized perception of their relationship based on said experiences (Baldwin, 1992). For example, in a departmentalized school a teacher may struggle managing disruptive class behaviors and have many consecutive, frustrated interactions with a student(s), this can easily cause both the teacher and student(s) to view the relationship negatively. Due to the very limited time departmentalization allows for,

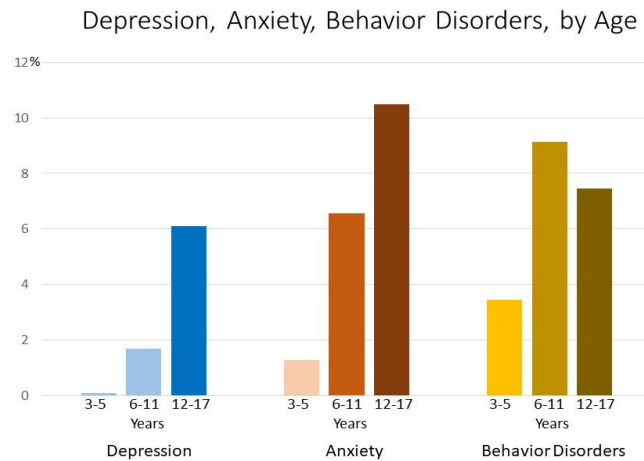
these negative relationships can become easily established. Negative relationships such as these cause teachers great amounts of stress and exhaustion for teachers, which significantly impacts their morale and performance as teachers (Claessens et al., 2017).

Furthermore, having positive relationships between teachers and their students, as opposed to negative ones, are advantageous to student success. Haynes and Emmons (1997) reveal a correlation between school climate and student behavior. Defining school climate as the interpersonal relationships between the school staff and students, Haynes and Emmons (1997) explain that having a positive school climate impacts the “cognitive, social..., psychological..., [and] psychoeducational development and school adjustment of students” (p. 322-323). Additionally, Cadima and Burchinal (2010) stress the importance for young students to receive the caring tenderness from their teachers. Fostered relationships such as these are “critical for later academic achievement” (as cited in Cadima and Burchinal, 2010, p. 458).

The importance for establishing positive teacher-student relationships for students becomes increasingly so when their mental health is examined more closely. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019) have recognized that both depression and anxiety are on the rise in young children as can be seen in Figure 1 below. In fact, it is also noted that mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety, are often diagnosed simultaneously. It is for these reasons that constituting a positive school climate where positive teacher-student interpersonal relationships can take place must be a priority. These statistics show that young students have emotional needs that are not being met, and it is an opportunity for teachers to care for their students in a way that pushes them to success.

Figure 1

*Percent of depression, anxiety, and behavior disorders by age in USA.*



*Note. Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019).*

### **What Should be Done?**

If schools are going to implement departmentalization at the elementary level, then there is a call to action for teachers to intentionally pursue a positive relationship with their students, even when given a limited measure of time with them. In order to achieve this, one must identify and apply successful relationship building techniques. The first and most obvious being “caring,” or as O’Connor (2006) so plainly puts it, teachers must choose to care. Deconstructing the term “caring,” O’Connor presents three caring behaviors: performative, professional, and philosophical/humanistic. Performative caring can be seen as encouraging students to grow towards their own academic success, while the professional caring sets limits and maintains appropriate relationships between teacher and student. Thirdly, it is the philosophical and humanistic caring that needs to be a decision made by the teacher to truly care. It is when “teachers invest in the values that they believe their teaching represents” (as cited in O’Connor, 2006, p. 124). Hence, teachers must approach each day with a caring mentality in order to foster a positive relationship with each of their students.

Referring back to Figure 1, it is apparent that children have emotional needs across the nation, therefore developing emotional relationships within the classroom becomes essential. Both interpersonal and intrapersonal skills are important components in building emotional relationships (Yan, Evans, & Harvey, 2011). Yan et al. (2011) continue to suggest that



“emotional intrapersonal beliefs are intrinsic properties of teachers themselves, [and] they reflect in teacher behavior” (p. 83). For this reason it is essential that teachers recognize their own emotions and beliefs towards their students and act accordingly. Students as young as eight and nine are aware of the emotional elements within teacher-student relationships (Yan et al., 2011) which crosses over back to the relationship between school climate and student behaviors. Students who believed their teachers did not care about them were more likely to exhibit bad behaviors (as cited in Haynes, 1997). These facts highlight the importance of teachers willful decisions to stay in an awareness of their own emotional presence.

Intrapersonal skills are only one side of the coin, interpersonal skills are equally as important to implement. Bronfenbrenner (1994) introduces the term “proximal processes” as the consistent exchanged interactions between a person and the environment that makeup their human development. Expanding on this idea, Bronfenbrenner (1994) describes the significance in having a “face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction” between teachers and their students (p. 38). Therefore, in order for teachers to build such interpersonal relationships they must create settings where the aforementioned activities can take place. Bronfenbrenner’s work correlates with Baldwin’s (1992) relational schema theory where a generalized perception of the relationship is conceived based on many similar types of interactions, positive or negative. Hence, it must be the focus of teachers to create positive interactions with their students as often as possible.

There are many techniques a teacher can implement to build these interpersonal relationships. For example, as Yan et al. (2011) explains there is a set of *interpersonal guidelines* that a teacher should follow to establish a relationship building atmosphere and they are the following: maintain consistency, encourage positive decision-making, and promote the values of respect and fairness. Additionally, teachers should allow themselves to coach students through their emotions. Yan et al. (2011) points out that “the intensity of emotional expression during interactions can serve as an indication of intimacy in relationships” (p. 85). This presents teachers with the holistic opportunity for teachers to help students grow and work passed their conflicts.

Lastly, when a school shifts from self-contained to departmentalized, the teachers are not the only stakeholders. The school as a whole needs to work together as one unit in such a decision. Strohl, Schmertzing, and Schmertzing (2014) provide examples of this such as “piloting the change with a portion of the teachers before implementing on a school level” and “strongly consider personality and teaching styles when pairing teachers for the year” (p. 13). This collaboration between the teachers and administrators provides a growth mindset environment and corresponds to Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) proximal processes. This collaborative process allows for a positive environment where teachers feel well supported and can better invest in their own relationships with their students.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, there are several things that elementary schools can do to address the drawback that departmentalization can bring. While departmentalization may be appealing to some schools they should carefully collaborate and pilot the decision with their teachers before and during the implementation (Strohl et al., 2014). Additionally, it is important for the individual teacher to face each day with the intent to care and make the best of each moment. Even emotional outbursts can be used to build positive emotional relationships between teachers and their students (Yan et al., 2011). Therefore, a large portion of the solution to the limited time for building positive teacher-student relationships that departmentalization offers has to do with the teachers’ mindset throughout each day.

### **Method**

For this Capstone Project, the researcher investigated how teachers view building positive relationships with students and what they thought could be done to improve them. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researcher used what she has learned to formulate an action that responded to the focus issue in a way that inspired, informed, or involved a particular audience.

### **Context**

This research took place at a K-eighth grade school located on the rural outskirts of Hollandaise<sup>2</sup>, California. High Peaks is the only school in its district. According to the school's SARC report, the campus is the best kept as far as cleanliness and maintenance in the entire county. There are 76 fourth grade students and 94 fifth grade students and all the teachers are fully credentialed (High Peaks Elementary, 2019). Within the grades third through eighth, 50 percent met or exceeded the state standards in English Language Arts/Literacy, and 39 percent met or exceeded state standards in Mathematics in the 2017-18 school year. The average fourth-grade class size is 30 students and the average fifth-grade class size is 29 students (High Peaks Elementary, 2019). About 49 percent of the students are socioeconomically disadvantaged and less than one percent are foster youth (High Peaks Elementary, 2019). Due to High Peaks' choice to departmentalize their students beginning at the fourth and fifth-grade level, it is these two grades that are most relevant to this project.

### **Participants and Participant Selection**

I invited the school principal and seven fourth/fifth grade teachers to participate in this study. This group of prospective participants was invited to participate because of their relevant influence and experience as teachers.

**Angela Barajas.** A fourth through eighth-grade math teacher for resource students. Angela is a female math teacher who has been taught for 16 years. Having taught at a total of five schools, the last 12 years she has spent teaching at High Peaks Elementary. Her average class size is 21 students.

**Percy Bertain.** A female teacher for social studies. Percy teaches fifth grade students with an average class size of 30 students. She has been teaching for 23 years and worked at a total of six schools including High Peaks.

**Rose Bakers.** A female, fourth grade teacher for math and language arts. High Peaks is the second school that Rose has taught at. In total she has been a teacher for 13 years. Her average class size is 27.

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations.

**Richard Porter.** A male teacher for fourth grade science. Richard has taught for 22 years. He has taught at a total of two schools. His average class size is 29 students.

**Courtney Beaton.** A female fifth grade math teacher. Courtney has been teaching for 13 years. She has never worked at a school apart from High Peaks. Her average class size is 30.

**Jessica Beasley.** High Peaks Elementary School Principal. Jessica has been the principal for a total of 12 years at High Peaks. She has 14 years of prior experience teaching.

**Researcher.** This concern is personally meaningful to me because I believe that the positive influence of one adult role model can significantly alter the course of a student's life. I come from a very close and loving family. My parents were youth pastors, so all my life our family has welcomed people in and simply built positive familial relationships with them. Therefore, my heart is full of love and compassion and seeks to do this for all my future students. I believe my Christian values are what differentiates me from other teachers who may not prioritize building positive relationships with their students. I believe that it is important to love people in general, so in this way my perspectives and concerns drive me to reach any students who may not have positive adult relationships in their lives.

### **Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions**

1. What are you concerned about when it comes to building relationships with students in the short amount of time given with rotating class schedules for such a young age group?
2. What is currently being done to improve building positive relationships with young students in a rotating class schedule - by whom - and do you think this is good, bad, or indifferent? Why?
3. What do you think should be done about building strong relationships with students in a rotating class schedule?
4. What do you think are the obstacles or challenges to changing the way you approach building relationships with students in a shorter amount of time?

5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about building strong, positive relationships with students in a rotating class schedule and/or the improvement of it?
6. With the mindset that there is always room for improvement, what are some specific solutions you believe could be done to better improve teacher-student relationships due to the shorter departmentalized schedules?

### **Procedure**

Participants were interviewed. All interviews were done individually. When was not possible to interview participants in person, they were invited to complete a phone interview or paper and pencil survey of the same questions. Face-to-Face interviews took less than one hour, were audio-recorded (with participant consent), and took place on the school campus. A semi-structured interview format was used for face-to-face interviews, to allow for follow-up questions to unclear, interesting or unexpected responses. All interviews/surveys were scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee and took approximately 25 minutes to complete.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

### **Results**

For this Capstone Project, the school principal and five fourth/fifth grade teachers were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve upon building teacher-student relationships within a departmentalized schedule. This is important because departmentalization provides teachers drastically less time with their students than a self-contained class. Therefore, the factor of time becomes an obstacle for teachers to both teach their students, as well as build relationships with them in a 52-minute increment of time. Fourth and fifth graders are children who need a strong, positive relationship with their teachers to support them towards academic success. For that reason, finding a solution to support teachers to achieve these relationships is essential. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: time; reach; and effectiveness. Time is already a factor that is working against teachers on this endeavor, as a result, it is important to consider how time

effective the action options are. Reach is an important criterion as it considers the possibility of any students being overlooked. Lastly, effectiveness is a necessary criterion because it analyzes the possibility and extent of success. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

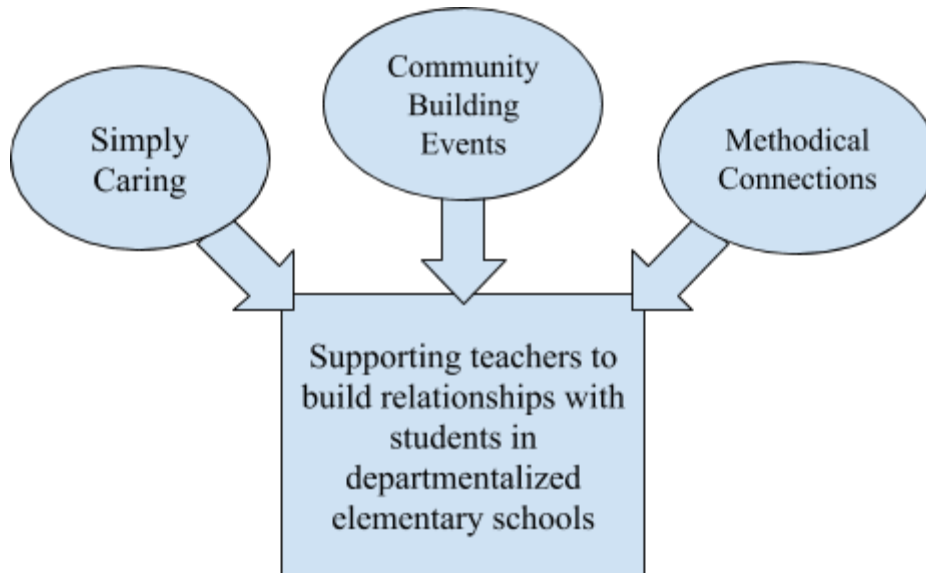


Image 1. Themes which emerged from the data and literature.

Table 1

*Evaluation of Action Options*

	Time required	Reach	Effectiveness
Compassion teacher training: at the beginning of the year and mid-year	Medium	Medium	Medium
Community events: create outside school time opportunity	High	Low	Medium
Methodical Connections: teachers become systematic in making connections with all their students	High	High	Medium

**Simply Caring**

Time as an issue continued to be expressed throughout each interview. Nonetheless, many teachers discussed what they believed to be effective tools for relationship building within their classrooms. Furthermore, this data coincided with the literature on building relationships discussed above. That is, to simply care. As one interviewee conferred, teachers must be vulnerable and expose their hearts (R. Porter, personal communication, October 28, 2019). Teachers must care for their students. This one simple act of caring is directly tied to creating and maintaining strong, positive relationships (O'Connor, 2006). While this theme emerged across the interviews, a complication was duly noted. Not everyone falls easily into this category for simply caring. One teacher explained that it can depend on personality and some teachers are intentionally distant with their students (P. Bertain, personal communication, October 21, 2019). This can cause conflict within the classroom. The literature reveals that students who believe their teachers do not care for them are more likely to display bad behaviors (as cited in Haynes, 1997). Thus, the need for teachers to care for their students becomes clear.

As a result of examining both the literature research and interview data, an action option presented itself, implementing systematic teacher trainings throughout the year. It is not uncommon for teachers to have training at the beginning of the school year, or when they are first-year teachers. However, as the school year progresses, teachers begin to grow tired and look forward to their weeks off. It is precisely during this time that teachers are in need of a morale boost. These teacher trainings will be centered around having compassion towards students. They can also act as a team-building experience where teachers can encourage one another and share insightful knowledge on dealing with behaviors in the classroom. There will be a training both at the beginning and mid-year. This will still require time as it may impede on teacher workdays. As for reach and effectiveness, it will be beneficial because teachers should feel rejuvenated, refocused, and well equipped when returning to their students with the goal of caring in mind.

### **Community Building Events**

While time is not on their side, many of the teachers shared their relationship building approaches that required them to invest time outside of class. This can be seen through the multiple experiences shared by the interviewees. One teacher expressed her attempts at making connections during her yard duty shifts (R. Bakers, personal communication, October 23, 2019).

She was not alone in this confession, another teacher shared similar occurrences, "...because we are limited in time I try to go outside in the playground and go out there and play with them and build those relationships that way" (C. Beaton, personal communication, October 22, 2019).

These attempts at making up for lost time are causing teachers to seek students outside of class time and this is an obvious haphazard. There is too great a risk that not all the students will be reached this way, and that many will fall through the cracks. In correlation to this theme, an interviewee commented on the fact that building strong, positive relationships with students starts with the teachers modeling those relationships among each other (C. Beaton, personal communication, 2019). This parallels with the literature when Haynes (1997) explains that "school staff, parents, and community members must engage in activities that build the connections between and among them" (p. 327). However, there is simply not enough time or opportunity within class time to exemplify such relationships and connect in a consistent manner.

In order to provide teachers with more time outside of class where they can invest in their students as well as model positive relationships among other adults, an action option is revealed. The school must host community building events consistently throughout the year. These events will be outside school times and provide opportunities for the entire school staff to model strong, positive relationships, as well as additional time for teachers to connect with their students in a stress-free environment. The school can use these events creatively ranging from festivals to bowling nights. Naturally, since these community building events are catering to the need for extra time between teachers and students, this action option requires a large amount of time in the planning, preparation, and execution. Additionally, the same groups of students may or may not attend, therefore the reach is potentially low and many students may still go unconnected. However, the effectiveness is decent, because the students that do attend will get to see their teachers and school staff in a new light and feel more connected. According to the literature, this will support the students in their academic paths.

### **Methodical Connections**

A third theme that emerged during the research process was the absolute necessity for making connections with the students. Every single teacher interviewed adhered to this one principle, in order to build a relationship with a student, you have got to connect with them. The interviewees shared numerous techniques for which this can be done including the following:



finding out what their hobbies are, their favorite sports team, writing them a note, or as simple as telling them hello. These connections must be consistent in order for them to come across as genuine. One teacher explained how a relationship with one of his students grew over time due to his own persistence in checking in with him and telling him that he was not going to quit on him. In Porter's words, "I give him a lot of one on one.... I have a deeper connection with this guy because I am giving him so much attention" (R. Porter, personal communication, October 28, 2019). This scenario correlates with the Relational Schema Theory on building relationships. The theory explains that relationships are often perceived on the basis of multiple, similar interactions (Baldwin, 1992). Therefore, when a teacher is making regular connections with a student a relationship is built. Another teacher revealed that in her homeroom class, the only class that is longer than the rest of the 52-minute periods, she has begun a peace circle meeting where students are invited to share compliments with each other. As Bakers explains, "this meeting helps me connect with students as well because they are sharing how they feel with us. Something may come out that I was unaware of" (R. Bakers, personal communication, October 28, 2019). It is these connections that prove to students that they are cared for in the education system and that is what makes the difference for their success. The literature revealed a direct correlation between suspension rates, and whether students thought their teachers cared for them. This detail is significant and must be recognized.

While making connections is the obvious course of action, the teachers all agreed that this can be challenging in departmentalization where 70 or more students are filtering through their classrooms on a daily basis. This creates a strong likelihood that teachers will not be able to make those essential connections with every single one of their students unless there is some sort of course of action in place. Thus, a third action option emerges. Teachers must be systematic in their mission to make connections with each of their students. There is room for creativity in the execution of this task, however, the groundwork is simple. Each teacher should keep documentation to ensure that they are not leaving any one of their students out. An example might be to have a day at the end of the week where students review the new content and the teacher meets one on one with the students to check-in. Another option might be the teacher taking roll face to face at the beginning of class when the students work on transitioning. No

matter what the method is, the teacher should keep a list and document to keep track of who they have connected with. This action option requires an immense amount of time. Nonetheless, it ensures that no student goes unnoticed and therefore has a strong probability to reach everyone. It is also effective because it forces teachers to intentionally strive for making connections with their students regularly.

### **Conclusion**

Of all the three action options given above, I recommend that teachers be methodical when making connections with their students to better achieve positive relationships with them. Based on the literature and the data collected in the interviewing process, I am confident that this is the best solution to better support teachers build relationships with their students. This section will discuss the concessions, limitations, and possible negative outcomes that this action option may entail.

**Concessions.** While I chose methodical connections as the best action option moving forward, the other two action options have considerable strengths as well. For example, the action option which indicates compassion teacher training strategically placed throughout the year aims at the heart of the situation. The literature points to the significance of a teacher that truly cares for the students as a deciding factor, but also admits to the fact that teachers often succumb to emotional exhaustion (as cited in Strohl, 2014). These trainings would empower and encourage teachers to endure the year and be steadfast in their focus to chose to care. After all, if the teachers did not care for their students than no matter what action options are put in place, positive relationships would not be built. As for the community building events action option there are also substantial strengths worth noting. Unlike the other action options, this one provides an abundant amount of time outside class time. This is extremely beneficial as it takes away the stress of making a connection with every single student while simultaneously trying to teach a curriculum. Additionally, this action option allows teachers to be more personable and vulnerable with their students as it naturally creates a fun-filled environment. Undoubtedly, both these action options have noteworthy strengths to offer teacher-student relationships.

**Limitations.** While choosing methodical connections as my recommended action option seems to be the best choice, there are still limitations to recognize as well. For example, time is still an adversary. Regardless of the decided technique, this option requires teachers to attempt

connecting with every single one of their students at least once a week. Each teacher has approximately 70 students a day and taking the time to have quality face to face connections with them during class time will be challenging. Another limitation can be traced back to the genuineness of the teacher. Forcing teachers to be systematic in connecting with their students does not ensure that teachers desire such connections or relationships, and if a teacher is not genuine than this action option will be next to useless.

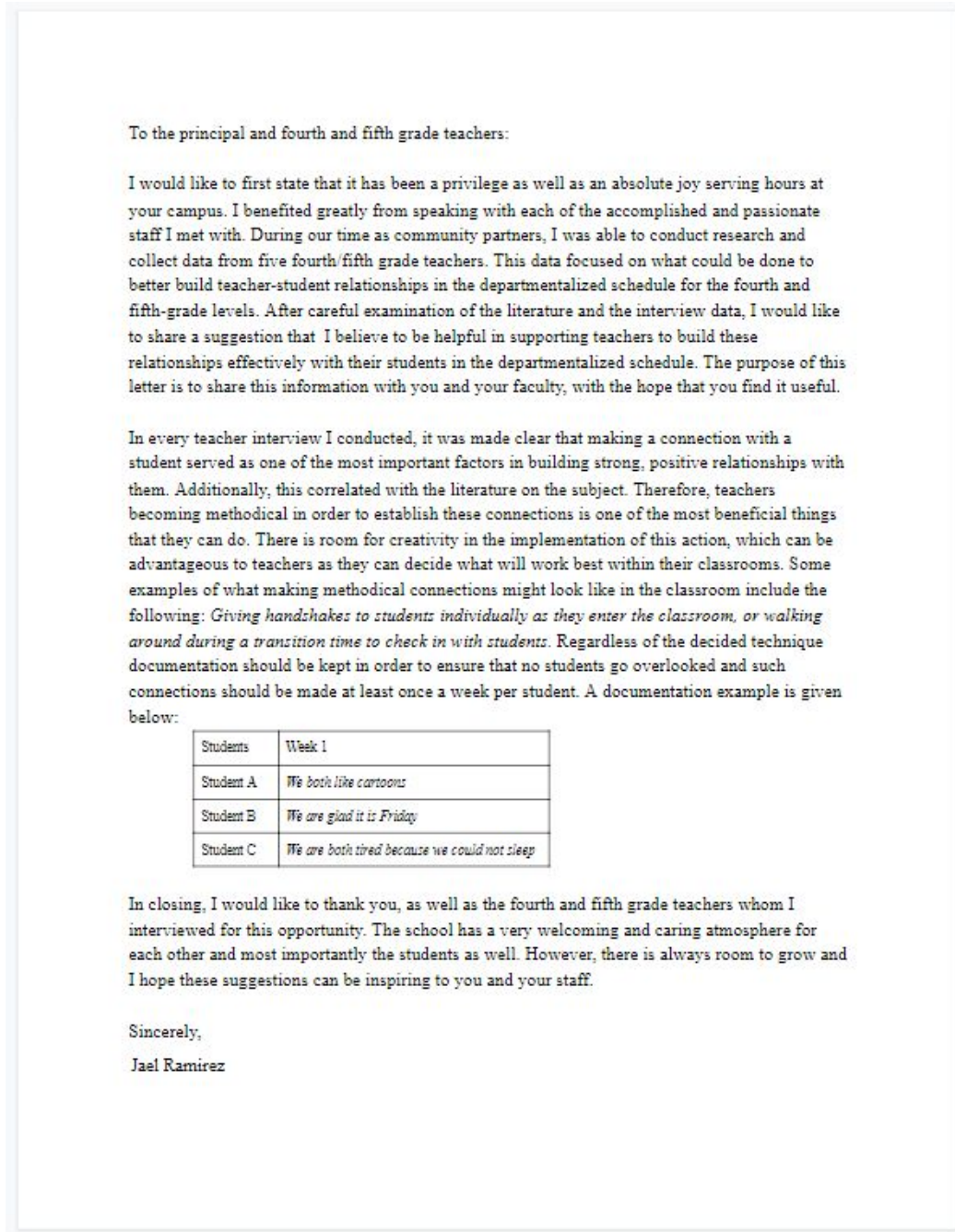
**Potential negative outcomes.** There are possible negative outcomes to consider in this action option. For instance, methodical connections may cause teachers to feel robotic in the way they approach their students. Being systematic and keeping documentation for such a large amount of students week after week can become tiresome for some teachers. This can possibly cause them to lose sight of their own devotion to the students. Furthermore, while they strive to be diligent in this action, they may lose interest and students will easily recognize the disinterest or forced interactions and no real relationships will be established between them.

**Conclusion.** Despite all limitations or potential negative outcomes, I still recommend methodical connections as the best action option to support teachers build positive relationships with their students. This action has the strongest reach of all the actions. Reaching every student should be a priority and the fact that students can easily go unnoticed should be noted. Some of those students may be the ones who need positive adult relationships the most. The fact that this action option does not privilege any students before others is significant. Additionally, I believe that taking the time to connect with students one on one, or face to face is effective and important for all parties involved. This semester has been the first out of all my years of schooling that a teacher has taken the time to check in with me one on one on a regular basis. I can personally attest that this one small act has empowered and encouraged me to continue confidently through one of the most stressful courses I have ever endured. Correspondingly, this action is an anchor for teachers to remember their focus. Their focus is on the students and this action option forces them to visualize this on a regular basis. In this way, the action option rises above the others as the best solution moving forward.

#### **Action Documentation**

Departmentalization is a term most often associated with high school and middle school grades, however, the CTC allows for elementary schools to departmentalize their students as

well. While departmentalization has many strengths that may benefit teachers and students, the fact still remains that there is drastically less face to face time between teachers and their students, thus making it very challenging to make connections and establish strong positive teacher-student relationships. This becomes an issue of concern as the literature shows that teacher-student relationships are directly related to student academic success. After researching the literature and conducting several interviews with departmentalized fourth/fifth grade teachers and their school principal, three action options emerged. The first action option is to have strategically placed compassion teacher trainings, one at the beginning of the school year followed by at least two more. The second action option is having the school host community events throughout the school year, ranging from spaghetti nights to bowling nights. Thirdly, this action option is to be methodical in making connections with students which incorporates documentation to ensure teachers connect with all their students at least once per week. The latter was the recommended course of action. This was the only action option that ensured no student went unnoticed or overlooked by teachers. Moving forward with this recommendation, a letter was written and sent addressed to the school principal and fourth and fifth grade teachers. The letter explained that after carefully analyzing the literature and their interview responses, an action option emerged that would support them build relationships with their students in the departmentalized classes. Additionally, the letter elucidated the action option, listed some examples, and explained the room for creativity in the implementation of methodical connections. Furthermore, an emphasis was put on the documentation aspect of the action option followed by an example. All in all, the letter asserted that it was only suggesting the action option as a means of helping support teachers. As of yet, there has been no response from the teachers or principal.



*Image 2.* Screenshot of the letter sent to the principal and fourth and fifth grade teachers with suggestions and examples to help support teachers build relationships and make connections with all of their students.

### Critical Reflection

Beginning the semester, I did not know what to expect in my LS 400: *Senior Capstone* course. However, I was soon delighted to learn that I had the freedom to choose a topic that was

personally meaningful to me. For that reason, I chose a topic surrounding the importance of having strong, positive teacher-student relationships. The area that surprised me the most was the reluctance from the interviewees to explore potential areas of growth. Nearly all of the teachers, especially the principal, avoided answering direct questions regarding ideas or possible options they had to improve teacher-student relationships in the departmentalized classes. However, all the teachers admitted that time did make building these relationships challenging to do. Having made follow-up questions to be more straightforward and still facing disclination, it was at this point I sought the aid of my professor. Having spoken with my instructor, I realized that there were still emergent themes between the literature and the interview responses and was able to move forward writing my three action options. Afterward, I was a bit reluctant to write a letter to the teachers and principal having faced their prior irresolution. Nevertheless, I realized that this was necessary not because they were doing anything wrong, but because it could be a suggestion that could be helpful and constructive to them based on my findings. It was through this experience that I learned it is still possible to have a professional relationship with others who do not share the same opinions as you, and it is perfectly acceptable to offer suggestions that may or may not be implemented. Moving forward I must have confidence in my own self as a professional and what I can offer others.

### **Synthesis and Integration**

My time as an undergraduate student at California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB) has been at times challenging, but ultimately rewarding. The required coursework, Liberal Studies (LS) MLOs, and this action research project have positively impacted and equipped me in my professional development. Beginning with MLO 1: Developing Educator, I am confident in my skills to think, write, and speak critically regarding the subject matter of my project and in the context of a California public educator. The project itself gave me the opportunities to connect and speak with, as well as learn from other professionals in the field. Additionally, in terms of MLO 5: Subject Matter Generalist, I recognize my newfound experience in completing a coherent depth of a study successfully within my action research project. Furthermore, analyzing the literature has developed my understanding and inspired me to research further in the field of education. To move forward toward the professional career I

desire, I believe that it is necessary that I further familiarize myself with the literature regarding my passions and carry confidence in my own abilities as a professional speaker, writer, and thinker. My greatest takeaway after completing this project is that I have the power to inspire, inform, and educate others.

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