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## Addressing Student Isolation During the Pandemic: An Inquiry into Renewing Relationships and Reimagining Classroom Communities on Remote Instruction Platforms

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# Addressing Student Isolation During the Pandemic: An Inquiry into Renewing Relationships and Reimagining Classroom Communities on Remote Instruction Platforms

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## **Addressing Student Isolation During the Pandemic: An Inquiry into Renewing Relationships and Reimagining Classroom Communities on Remote Instruction Platforms**

### **Abstract:**

*We began this pandemic cycle of inquiry by acknowledging that we all viewed relationships with our students as foundational to the teaching and learning process (i.e., Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2007; Noddings, 2014; Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 2014). While we had well-established strategies for creating caring classroom communities in our face-to-face classrooms prior to the pandemic, we were all searching for new online strategies for keeping relationships vital when faced with the abrupt transition to remote instruction and the isolating effects of the Spring 2020 lockdown, both for ourselves and for our students. Hence, we committed to documenting and sharing with one another, the innovative strategies we were employing across our elementary and secondary school contexts. Through the use of informal sharing time and Zoom breakout rooms, we were able to connect personally with our students and to revitalize teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships in our virtual classroom space.*

### **Who We Are**

During the initial outbreak of COVID-19 at P. K. Yonge Developmental Research School (PKY), Angela, Laura and Dicy worked as a support teacher, Kindergarten teacher, and 3rd grade teacher in the elementary division. Elizabeth, Melanie and Kristin taught science, music, and mathematics in the secondary division. Prior to the pandemic, we were engaged in different levels of inquiry cycles. When these cycles were interrupted by our school's unexpected shift to emergency remote instruction, we discovered a common thread in our early reflections posted to our school's *Remote Learning Inquiry (RLI)* (see the introductory piece to this journal for detailed information about our K-12 school and the *RLI*). We were all focusing on characteristics of our relationships with students in our new online environment. Hence, a new collaborative inquiry was born. Together, we explored the question: "How can we use remote learning tools to re-establish personal relationships with our students and re-create the kind of caring classroom communities that we valued and students needed?"

### **What We Did**

We began this pandemic cycle of inquiry by acknowledging that we all viewed our relationships with students as foundational to the teaching and learning process (i.e., Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2007; Noddings, 2014; Rimm-Kaufman, et al. 2014). While we had well- established strategies for creating a caring classroom

community in our brick and mortar classrooms prior to the pandemic, we were all searching for new online strategies for keeping relationships vital when faced with the abrupt transition to remote instruction and the isolating effects of the Spring 2020 lockdown, both for ourselves and for our students. Hence, we committed to documenting and sharing with one another, the innovative strategies we were employing across our elementary and secondary school contexts. Our goal was to learn with and from one another about how to communicate an ethic of care and keep teacher-student and student-student relationships alive in our new, virtual classroom space.

As we transitioned to emergency remote instruction and tried innovative strategies to reconnect with our students, we posted our lesson plans, reflections and samples of student work to our *RLI*. We also collected samples of students' comments, interactions, and work on the *RLI* to illustrate our experiences. It was through analyzing these data that we distilled three common ways we were able to renew relationships and reimagine classroom communities on remote instruction platforms.

### **What We Learned**

Through informal time on Zoom, structured small group sessions in Zoom breakout rooms, and recreating familiar classroom routines and procedures we were able to re-vitalize our relationships and classroom communities using remote instruction tools.

#### **Informal Zoom Time**

First, we found ways to re-establish personal connections with our students and among students through informal time on Zoom. Many of us began the morning or the class period with an informal Zoom format. For example, Angela described the experiences of her team in one of her posts:

At least for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade team, a lot of us would open the Zoom rooms a little early, so you could just have that chit-chat connection time with students before the lesson actually started. ... The first couple of minutes we might ask, "Just tell me about your life," and they're able to show off their little bird they just got or show the birthday present. We were making sure that there was time to still have the kind of nonchalant, just let me know about you kind of conversation that had been a really big part of the day. [Prompt 2, April, 2020].

In a similar fashion, Melanie described how she began her class period with her high school students:

I login to every class approximately 15 minutes before class starts. As students come into the room, I greet each one. I play music to listen to while we are waiting for the rest of the class to arrive... I am surprised by the number of kids who come into the Zoom classroom early just to chat. [Melanie, Prompt 2, April 2020]

Other teachers found it easier to find informal time after the class period:

I had "sharing time" at the end of my face-to-face (f2f) Zoom classes. I found that it was important to talk to the students about non-academic things so that they had a little bit of socialization - and they seemed to feel more at ease asking me questions about my personal life than they had in my physical classroom. Little stories about what we watched on television, how I dealt with stress by sewing, how we celebrated a beautiful spring day while in quarantine. We had a lot of discussion about movies and just other stuff that we were doing to get through quarantine. I saw that some of my shyer students still didn't contribute as much to the conversations, but they liked to listen in. And that lasted nicely through the end of the year. [Kristin, Prompt 3, May 2020]

These informal Zoom times actually helped us to develop new dimensions of our previous relationships with students. For example, Dicy shared:

I find it hard to not be able to hug and squeeze my eight-year-olds. But, I also am getting to know them in a new way. I'm seeing their families more frequently, meeting their pets, getting to experience their hobbies with them. To me, it seems as if I'm getting to know the students in a whole new light now. [Dicy, Prompt 2, April 2020].

### **Zoom Breakout Room Sessions to Meet Academic and Socio-emotional Needs**

A second common strategy we employed was the use of Zoom breakout rooms to assess and address students' academic and socio-emotional needs. We no longer had the tacit information that we had acquired in our brick and mortar classrooms from observing our students, reading their body language and facial expressions, to check for understanding. Instead, we substituted small group and one-on-one breakout rooms on Zoom to acquire a better sense of students' well-being and their struggles academically. Laura noted:

I am proud of the small group Zoom work I was able to accomplish with two of my struggling readers. I was really

worried about their reading before we moved to distance learning, and through daily work together, they are now reading on grade level, and more importantly, love reading! [Laura, Prompt 3, May 2020]

Similar to Laura, Elizabeth used Zoom breakout rooms to connect with a student struggling with reading:

I have one student who failed the 3rd quarter and was in jeopardy of failing the semester... [One day] he joined a Zoom class late in the period to catch up. We were able to have a good one-on-one conversation, which I count as a success [Elizabeth, Prompt 2, April 2020]

Similar to Elizabeth, Angela stated that it was essential for her to have one-to-one meetings with some of her students, particularly in response to the variety of home settings her students were experiencing as they tried to learn in a whole-class Zoom session:

[One student] is in his room by himself and there's no guidance. ... I know for another student, I have to say, "Okay, make sure your cousins are outside during the lesson because if they're inside, they're going to be distracting you." For another student, it was hard to see all of her school friends [in Zoom] knowing that she really couldn't interact with them in the way that she had when she was at school. It just depressed her so much that we just reduced her whole group time and went to one-on-one or small group time. [Angela, Prompt 2, April, 2020]

Learning of the depression that Angela's student and so many of our own students were experiencing, many of us also placed students in Zoom breakout rooms for non-academic time:

I have learned how important the social part of school is for [my students]. For many, their favorite time of our virtual session is when I put them into Zoom breakout rooms and let them just talk. [Dicy, Prompt 2, April 2020]

In sum, the use of small-group and one-on-one Zoom breakout rooms enabled us to learn more about our students' individual situations and capacity to tolerate whole group synchronous time, as well as provide time for our students to simply socialize with one another. This, in turn, gave us new insights into our students that we could use to better meet their needs.

## Recreating Familiar Classroom Routines

A third strategy we all used was recreating familiar classroom routines and activities used in our f2f classrooms for our online environment. In this section, we provide just one example of the many ways we each recreated familiar classroom routines in imaginative ways by reconstructing activities. Dicy’s story illustrates one of the ways we developed community.

### *Dicy’s Story*

To develop a sense of responsibility for our classroom community, I had begun the school year with developing “class jobs” that my students rotated through once a month. Many of these jobs were no longer relevant in a virtual classroom environment, so when we moved to emergency remote instruction, I brainstormed class jobs that we could do virtually, such as “calendar announcer” or “attendance taker,” and incorporated virtual class jobs into part of our virtual school day (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
*3rd Grade Virtual Class Jobs*

### Virtual Class Jobs

It's time to choose new class jobs. For the month of May, they are going to be virtual jobs!

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What is your name? \*

Short answer text

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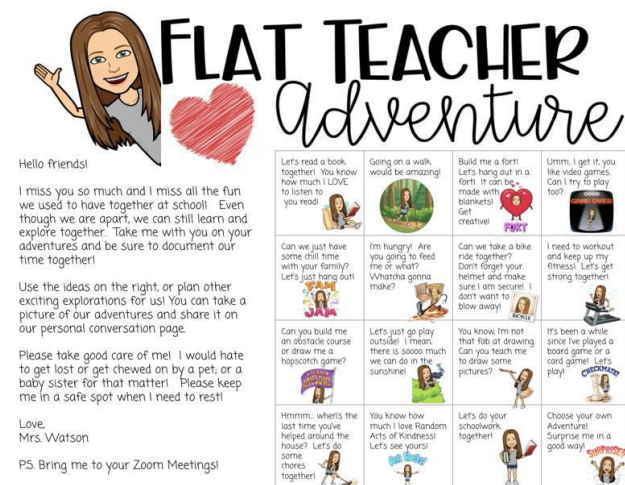
Check AT LEAST three virtual class jobs that you would be willing to do.

- Calendar Announcer
- Teacher Assistant
- Attendance Taker
- Fitness Goal Announcer
- Kindness Goal Announcer
- Z-to-A Announcer
- Specials Organizer
- Activity Chooser
- Share Topic Developer
- Greeting Picker
- Other...

I was also aware that my students were missing the other adults that had normally been in their lives, such as the principal or elementary guidance counselor, who would frequently drop-in for our discussion. So, I started having a weekly “Mystery Guest” join our Friday morning meeting sessions. Throughout the week, I would give the students clues as to who the guest might be. Then on Friday, that guest would join our Zoom meeting with their camera turned off and change their name so it appeared on the screen as “Mystery Guest.” We would make final guesses and then invite the person to reveal who they were by turning on their camera. Mystery guests included our elementary guidance counselor, who then coached the students on breathing and meditative techniques for dealing with the big changes they were experiencing. Our 3rd grade support teacher came to our Zoom Room to play a game with the students, and our principal read a book to them.

I also wondered about student isolation and imagined ways to bridge the gaps between home and school. I developed an activity for students modeled on Flat Stanley (Brown, 1964), a children’s illustrated book. The hero of the book, Stanley, is flattened by a bulletin board to ½ inch in size. As his flatness enables him to be rolled up, mailed, and travel the world, he finds many adventures as Flat Stanley. I sent a flat version of myself, “Flat Mrs. Watson,” home to the students in the mail. I began to receive photos of “Flat Mrs. Watson” washing cars or going to the grocery store. They took me on adventures, took pictures, and then shared these photos as a part of our morning meeting. It was fun to see the adventures that I went on with them as if we were still together. “Flat Mrs. Watson” became an important part of our day and connected us with each other’s experiences (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2**  
*Watson 3rd Grade: Flat Mrs. Watson*





We all drew needed energy from each other and the creative ingenuity that Dicy, and each of us, used to recreate f2f classroom routines and activities in imaginative ways. This energy, in turn, helped to sustain us through the challenges of emergency remote teaching and stresses of coping with the global pandemic.

### **Important Take-Away**

In writings about caring classrooms, Nel Noddings (2012) explained that, “establishing a climate [of care] is not ‘on top’ of other things, it is underneath all we do as teachers. When that climate is established and maintained, everything else goes better” (p. 777). In this unique, pandemic cycle of inquiry, we discovered common ways to use remote instruction tools to re-establish personal relationships with our students and re-create the kind of caring classroom communities Nodding discusses in her work. For example, our informal Zoom sessions provided us with a window into our students’ homes, as we witnessed interactions with their families, pets, and experiences unique to each student. These sessions provided an unexpected benefit to remote instruction. Our small breakout room sessions provided sufficient privacy for students to express personal and academic concerns, in spontaneous ways typical of f2f instruction. As experienced teachers, all of us recognized, similar to Dicy, the importance for students to learn typical routines and procedures for our remote instruction classrooms.

As the pandemic unfolded, sharing our common passion for creating a caring online classroom as well as strategies we employed to do so helped us mitigate the challenges of teaching through COVID-19. While we all had been engaging in different inquiries when the pandemic hit, shifting to this group inquiry played a critical role in helping us all survive the most challenging times in our teaching careers, reminding us of the important role collaboration plays in the inquiry process:

Teacher researchers benefit by being a part of a group of educators who share similar passions for enhancing teaching and learning. As a group, they are able to support each other when they experience challenges in their work (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020, p. 83).

As we continue our careers as teachers and teacher researchers through the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, we will remember the power of collaborative inquiry and become more purposeful and systematic in forming small groups of teachers at our school to tackle some of the most pervasive problems of practice. Based on the way schools needed to be reshaped in response to the pandemic, we believe several initiatives are on the horizon for school reform as we return to f2f instruction. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) noted:

Communities of teacher researchers can play an essential role in school reform. Not only does their work add to the knowledge base on teaching, but their collective power as knowledge-generating communities also influences broader school policies regarding curriculum, assessment, school organization, and home-school linkages. Through teacher-research communities, teachers' voices play a more prominent part in the dialogue of school reform (p. 103).

Our continued engagement in inquiry will enable us to play a more prominent part in shaping ongoing school reform efforts, that will likely include forms of remote instruction in the future. We encourage teachers everywhere to remember the power of collaborating with others to study practice as we continue to encounter challenges in the teaching profession.

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