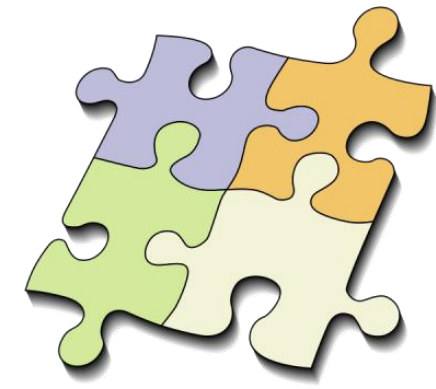


The Power of Relationship Building: Students' Sense of Belonging & Behavioural Regulation

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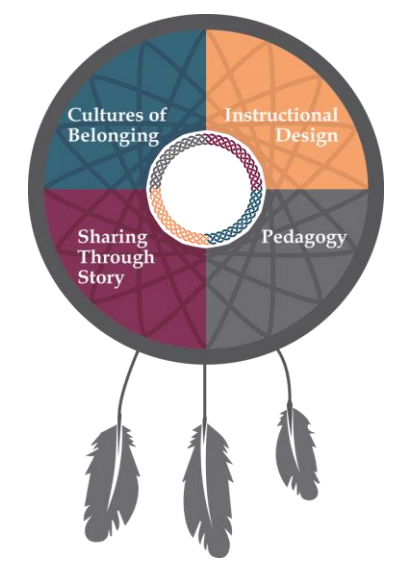
Theoretical Framework

This study draws on constructivist, indigenous, and critical perspectives to understand learning as relational, social, and grounded in connection.



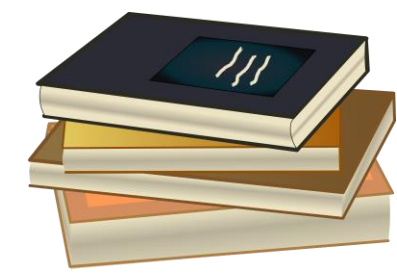
Constructivism

Learning is socially constructed through interaction and relationships. Lev Vygotsky emphasizes that cognitive development occurs through social interaction (1978). Strong teacher-student relationships support engagement and behavior.



Indigenous Perspectives

Indigenous frameworks emphasize relationality, interconnectedness, and community responsibility, viewing learning as holistic and rooted in relationships. Marie Battiste highlights that knowledge is rooted in relationships, reciprocity, and connection (2013).



Progressive & Critical Theories

These perspectives reinforce the importance of relational experimental learning. John Dewey views education as lived experience, while Paulo Friere emphasizes dialogue as essential to learning (1970) and Bell Hooks highlights teaching grounded in care, respect, and student well-being.

Together, these frameworks position relationships as central to student engagement, belonging, and behaviour.

Literature Review

Research consistently examines how intentional relationship practices strengthen belonging, enhance behavioral regulation, and supports learning by responding to the complex realities students bring to classroom.

Diverse Student Context

- Tesolin et al. (2024) note that students from diverse and gender diverse backgrounds "may face more barriers than their peers in school" (p. 2).
- Roorda et al. (2011) found that relationship effects are strongest for students experiencing greater risk. These findings highlight that context is not neutral, but directly influences how students experience relationships, discipline, and engagement.

Relationship Building Practice

- Treene (2025) found that students respond positively to teachers who "are present, listen attentively, promote autonomy, and demonstrate respect" (p. 15).
- Martinez et al. (2025) found that "daily conversations emerged as the most effective approach" (p. 7), showing that small, consistent actions have significant impact.

Sense of Belonging

- Uslu (2017) defines belonging as students feeling "accepted, respected, included, and supported" (p. 24).
- Osterman (2000) states that "lack of belongingness is a primary cause of a wide range of psychological and behavioural problems" (p. 327).
- Tesolin et al. (2024) further highlights that experiences of discrimination negatively impact belonging and engagement.

Learning & Engagement Outcomes

- Roorda et al. (2011) found that teacher relationships strongly influence engagement, which in turn supports achievement.
- Treene (2025) links belonging to "greater academic motivation" and positive school experiences (p. 5).
- Bradshaw et al. (2010) further demonstrate that reducing behavioural issues increases time and opportunity for learning.

RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE DRIVING FORCE that connect students' diverse contexts to belonging, learning & behavioural regulation.

Research Topic & Question



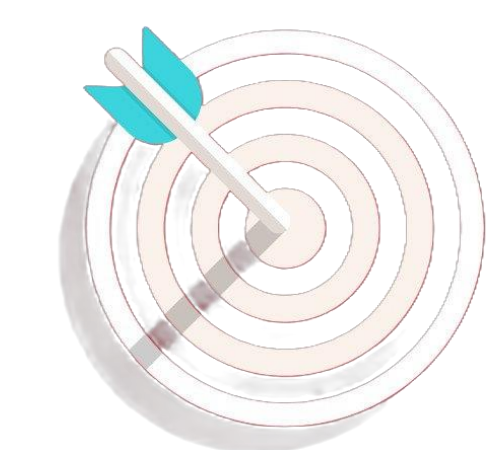
Research Topic:

The importance of relationship building [practices in culturally diverse middle school classrooms.



Central Research Question:

How do school-based relationship building practices influence students' sense of belonging and behavioral regulation in culturally diverse middle school classrooms?



Purpose:

To examine how intentional relational practices shape student engagement, behaviour, and inclusive classroom environments.

This study responds to the need for learning environments where relationships and a sense of belonging are prioritized as essential components of student success.

Recommendations

Grounded in both research and classroom practice, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Prioritize intentional relationship building

Consistent, meaningful interactions, the inclusion of student voice, and culturally responsive practices foster trust and a strong sense of belonging. As Hooks (1994) emphasizes, meaningful learning is rooted in care, respect, and connection.



2. Implement relational discipline approaches

Establish clear expectations alongside relational practices such as restorative conversations and ongoing support. Brown (2021) highlights that clear boundaries are essential for fostering empathy and compassion.



3. Integrate relationship focused school wide systems

Framework such as PBIS should prioritize connection in addition to behavioral expectations. Research indicates that relational approaches within PBIS improve both student behavior and overall school climate (Bradshaw et al., 2010).



4. Address barriers and feasibility

Challenges such as time constraints, large class sizes, and diverse student needs can be addressed through small, consistent relational strategies aligned with evidence-based practices (Martinez et al., 2025). These recommendations reflected a strong integration of research and practical classroom application.



Conclusion

Relationship-building is a foundational aspect of effective teaching. When students feel connected, respected, and valued, they are more likely to engage in learning, regulate their behavior, and develop a strong sense of belonging.

Consistent with the research, belonging supports both emotional and academic success. Prioritizing relationship-centered practices fosters more equitable, inclusive, and effective middle school learning environments.



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