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Introduction

All great teachers love their students. Just ask their spouses, who hear about those students every day at home! Caring for students is the basis of connecting with students, whether you find this easy or difficult. You might not always like students' behavior—for example, when they decide to put the dead mouse they found on your desk. But despite their behavior, you choose to love them. It is a choice, often a difficult one. To choose to love a student who is, say, constantly physically hurting others, including you, takes sacrifice. This book is a call to love the students you find difficult to like.

At this point, it's good to remind yourself why you became a teacher—to make a difference. Loving students makes a difference. You can be the teacher your students remember as the one who made a difference in their life. The one they shared their lottery winnings with (one can always dream...). If we wanted an easy job with lots of money, we would have become sky-diving instructors instead of teachers!

Of course, you are good at reaching, teaching, and connecting with your students. Getting to know students has always been one of the best parts of your job—talking with them when they come in, asking them questions, and having fun together. It comes easily and naturally to you; it's partly why you became a teacher. But there is that student who is perhaps more difficult to connect with. Or that one situation. You've tried everything you know and still it's difficult. That's where this book comes in.

There are many tools we use to connect with our students. We use body language, humor, and shared experiences. Of course, one of the main tools we use is the curriculum. As we get to know our students, we get to know what they like, what their strengths and interests are. We look at students who truly love an aspect of the curriculum and see how to connect with them. By better understanding their desires and needs, we can then help these students better connect to us and each other.

We are not social workers nor counsellors, which are what our students really need sometimes. But we are what they have—teachers. When a student's mom dies, when their parents are getting a divorce, when they think the principal doesn't like them, and when they are being bullied, we are the ones who are there and help them. How are we supposed to do this? I'm pretty sure I never learned in teacher's college what to say to a student the next day after they swore at me.

There are really difficult times in students' lives and we are the ones who are there for them. We are the ones who help them. Sometimes we are the only ones.

Then there are the class clowns who yell out, "underwear" when we say, "unaware," the shy students who won't say their names for the first week of class, and the daydreamers who excel at fiction writing, albeit two weeks late. Connecting with these students and helping them to learn has always been difficult, even more so now when there are so many students in our classes and there is someone who needs our attention at any given time. Using understanding and humor, we can help these students connect with their learning, their peers, and the world.

And how do we teach when integration in the classrooms is being rolled out and when support and resources are being rolled back? How do we connect with students who are integrated when we have little or no special education training and all of a sudden have autistic children, children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) in our classes? How do we connect with and teach these children? With respect, dignity, and love, that's how. It might be that you are looking for more strategies to teach and more strategies to connect with the students in your class—all the students in your class. There are so many children with so many needs, no one book could cover them all; however, this book covers some of the most common needs seen in schools today while recommending strategies that will work for children with needs not necessarily listed in this book.

Forming connections with our students is not only part of teaching students but also part of loving our students. Connections establish good communication between students and ourselves, communication that allows them to learn not only math and language, but also good self-esteem and conflict-resolution skills. Connecting with students means that we see them as our allies and that we are their allies. As teachers, we help them build bridges of connections to their learning, to other people, and to the world. Building bridges of connections is hard work, and sometimes the hammer hits your thumb instead of a nail. But the result is worth it—a connection between two parties and the ability to reach and teach them all!

Connecting Through...

The First Meeting

As a substitute teacher for more than 12 years and a teacher for more than 20, I have met a lot of students for the first time. I have taught classes from Kindergarten to Grade 9, meeting four-year-olds on their first day of school ever, classes full of teenagers learning English as a Second Language, and everything in between. I have been a classroom teacher, music teacher, dance teacher, drama teacher, art teacher, physical education teacher, ESL teacher, and substitute teacher (aka the “what am I teaching again today?” teacher). I have loved every single one of my students. Okay, okay. I have *tried* to love every single one of my students...

See page 33 for the First Meeting Checklist.

It’s much easier to connect with students if you make a great first impression. My strategy is to try to get students on my side in the first ten minutes after I meet them for the first time. I do this by telling gross facts and scary or funny stories. The older students especially love the scary stories. But as I tell students so that those who don’t like really scary stories don’t worry—not too scary, as I get nightmares!

It also helps make a good first impression if you give something. When students come in the classroom, I give an incentive to the first one who sits down quietly. I give a sticker or some other small (and inexpensive) thing; for older students, perhaps a five-minutes-free-time card to be used that day. Then I loudly announce that I have given a prize to the student because they are sitting down quietly. I give out a couple more incentives to other students who are sitting down quietly, announcing it loudly each time. Soon, all the students are sitting down quietly.

Then, I give a very quick self-introduction speech. I tell them that my name is Ms. Yuill —pronounced like “*You’ll* do your homework.” Only adults laugh at that joke; kids never do. I show them where I’ve written my name on the board so they won’t forget and ask me 50 times that day what my name is. It doesn’t usually work. Then I tell them that I am an excellent teacher because I tell gross, funny, and scary stories and I ask if they would like to hear one. The students always answer yes.

Whether or not they seem to be, students are concerned about what kind of teacher you are. They are looking and watching carefully to see who you are and what you’re like. For this reason, I try to smile a lot and to use humor or

incentives instead of a stern voice to get students to sit quietly and listen. This puts the students at ease and helps them want to listen and want to do what I ask.

Getting Their Attention

Gross Facts

As I've promised them, I tell students a gross fact. Here is a gross fact I often use: When tiger sharks are pregnant, there are lots of babies in the mom's belly, but only one baby shark is born. I ask students if they can guess what happens to the other babies. The answer is this: The strongest baby eats all the rest inside the mom's belly, so it's the only one left to be born!

Scary Stories

Older students love scary stories, and so do younger ones! When an intermediate classroom is very loud and I'm having difficulty getting students to listen, I tell them that I will tell a scary story as soon as it is quiet. I often promise to tell stories if the class works quietly for the whole period.

I tell them that this story really happened.

A couple with a baby moved from their apartment into a house. They wanted to celebrate when they finished moving by going out for dinner. They hired a babysitter—a high-school student who lived down the street—to look after the baby for the evening. Since the baby was already sleeping, all the sitter had to do was listen to the baby monitor.

The sitter was downstairs watching TV and the baby was upstairs, asleep in the nursery. The sitter thought she heard the baby moving. She had been told that the baby hadn't yet learned to turn over. She got her phone and took it upstairs so that, if the baby had learned to turn over, she could take a video for the parents. But the baby wasn't moving, so she went back downstairs.

A bit later, she thought she heard the baby moving again. This time she ran up the stairs to get the video before the baby stopped moving. But the baby wasn't moving, so she went back downstairs. A little while later, she thought she heard rustling or whispering in the room. She was starting to get freaked out, so she tiptoed up the stairs and peeked into the baby's room. The baby wasn't moving. She checked to see if the window was open and the wind was moving the curtains or something, but it wasn't. So she went back downstairs and turned the TV volume down and the baby monitor volume up. A few minutes later, a man's voice came over the baby monitor whispering, "Come upstairs, the baby's sleeping." The baby was in danger! She ran upstairs but nobody was in the room. She picked up the baby and ran downstairs and out the door to her parents' house. From there she called 911.

The police came and checked the house but nobody was there. The doors and windows were all closed. They asked the sitter if maybe she had fallen asleep. She said she hadn't, but they didn't believe her. They thought she dreamed it, and that's what they told the parents when they got home.

The next day the baby's father was at work and the mother was in the kitchen. The baby was upstairs for an afternoon nap. Over the baby monitor came a man's voice whispering, "Come upstairs, the baby's sleeping." The mother freaked out because now she knew that the strange man who had been in her baby's room the night before was there again. She ran upstairs to

make sure her baby was safe but nobody was in the room. She got the baby, ran downstairs, drove to her parents' house, and called 911.

The police came. This was proof the sitter hadn't been dreaming and there really was a man in the house, so they checked the whole house thoroughly. They checked the basement, attic, and shed. They checked for false floors or secret passageways. But there was nothing. Nobody was in the house. The mother told her husband that they couldn't stay in a haunted house and they stayed with her parents that night.

The next day, the mother sent her husband back to the house to get things that they needed for the baby. The husband was in the kitchen, where the baby monitor was still on. Over the monitor came the man's voice whispering, "Come upstairs, the baby's sleeping." The father got his baseball bat and went upstairs.

Nobody was in the baby's room. He checked the whole house: under beds, in the laundry hamper, in the dryer, behind the shower curtain. There was nobody in the house. He went back into the baby's room. One end of the baby monitor was in his hand and the other end was on the shelf. There was nobody in the room but him, but over the baby monitor came the same man whispering, "Come upstairs, the baby's sleeping." This time the father thought he recognized the voice.

He went next door and knocked on the door. His neighbor answered. The father asked, "Do you have this kind of baby monitor?" and he showed him the monitor. The neighbor said, "Yes, we do." Then the father asked, "Were you just whispering to your wife to come upstairs because the baby was sleeping?" "Yes!" said the neighbor.

Both baby monitors were on the same frequency. It wasn't a ghost or someone threatening the baby, but the next-door neighbors talking to each other over their own baby monitor.

Funny Stories

Another tool I use to connect with students quickly the first time I meet them is to tell a funny story about myself. Getting to know me and laughing at me usually helps!

I lived in Japan for seven years. Now I speak Japanese but, when I first arrived, I did not know any of the language. I didn't know the difference between "sushi" (raw fish on rice), "mushi" (bug), and "moshi" (what you say on the phone to say hello). Think about what using the wrong one of these words would be like!

One of the funniest mistakes I heard was made by a classmate of mine. We were in Japanese language class, learning the grammar pattern, "I don't _____ anything"; for example, *I don't know anything, I don't hear anything*. The teacher asked the guy sitting next to me if he wore anything special on a date. When he answered, he meant to say that he didn't wear anything special on a date, but he left out the word "special."

Magic Tricks

Finally, when I'm first meeting students, I often show them a magic trick. I know a substitute teacher who was a magician and who used magic all the time in class. The students loved him and always asked for him. For any teacher, it's very much worth learning one good magic trick.

Check out the video entitled, "How to Make a Penny Disappear, with example" on my website amandayuill.com. Students love this trick—even intermediate students—and they often ask me to do it over and over again.

Games and Activities

Even though some students act too cool for games, deep down in their hearts, everyone loves games! On the first day, games help students to relax and help you build a relationship with them as you get to know them better. Students go home thinking you're a great teacher when you have lots of short and fun games and activities. It helps to start out the year on the right foot. Here are a couple of my favorite games.

The Alliterate Animal Name Game

In this game, the class sits in a circle. As the teacher you go first: pick an animal with the same first letter as your name, say your name and the animal, and do an action to go with it: e.g., say, "Ms. Yuill, Yak," and make a chewing motion like a yak. The next student does the same thing, then repeats what I said and my action. Students take turns saying their name and animal with an action, then repeating the ones that have come before. This continues on around the circle until it gets back to you, and you say everyone's name and animal with all the actions. All this game needs to be really funny is a student who is a ham. And most classes have at least a couple. They exaggerate the actions and add in their own funny take on the animal actions and noises. If no students do, I ham it up when it's my turn. Of course, I'm not going for the "cool teacher" vibe, as I'm too enthusiastic to be cool.

Two Truths and a Lie

This is a common game and a great way to get to know each student a little better. Students take turns telling three things about themselves, except that one of the three is a lie. Other students have to guess which is the lie. Because students often know each other already, they pick things that nobody knows about them; students get to know each other better as well! As the teacher, I often go first. My two truths and a lie: I have gone bungee jumping off a bridge; I have swum in the ocean with dolphins; I have driven inside a volcano. The lie is that I have never gone bungee jumping. I wouldn't, not for a million dollars—okay, maybe for a million dollars...

Rules and Routines

On the first day, don't enter your classroom blind. School secretaries are a fount of valuable information; take them a coffee and ask a few questions about your students. They can also suggest rules and routines to establish in your class the first day. The principal, the teacher from last year, and student records can all give you a leg up on the year. For example, it might be good to know that Renee in your Grade 6 class always has an extra bag of clothes with her in case of accidents; you can figure out rules and routines around not embarrassing her when she needs to use them.

You want the first day to end with your students going home and telling their parents they have the best teacher this year—and not just because you told them so! Part of this is establishing rules and routines quickly. I always have students work together to make up the classroom rules/promise/behavior expectations on the first day. All my classes have the same three rules every year: *Be responsible*; *Do your best*; *Have fun*. Everything students suggest as a rule will fit into one of these three categories. When we have discussed what the rules mean, I have stu-

Most rules students suggest come under *Be responsible*; e.g. no hitting, no gum, be polite, no drawing on the desks, no name calling.

dents sign the list and we post it in the classroom. I also have students discuss the consequences of not following the rules/promise/behavior expectations, a progression that might look like this:

1. warning;
2. loss of a privilege like free time;
3. be sent to the office;
4. a call home.

Of course, there are times you might vary these consequences, but they serve as a base line for the class to which you can refer. At this point, I also often read the board policy about which behaviors are an automatic office referral: swearing, racial slurs, violence, etc. I then continue with ridiculous things that they will know is not in the board policy; e.g., bringing your pet pig to school, nudity, etc.

I find being firm and fun is the best policy. I don't let things go the first day. I let students know what is and isn't okay, and I try to do it in a fun way. It's easier to be firm first and loosen up later than the other way around. Of course, it's always important to know where the office call button is in your classroom. It's the first day of school—anything can happen!

Body Language

When I lived in Japan, people sometimes thought I wasn't that smart. That's because I would forget that the "okay" hand sign we use here means "money" in Japan with a slightly different hand position. If I forgot and used the "okay" sign, it was confusing for people because it didn't make sense in the conversation to say "money." And I was doing it wrong anyway! We need to be aware of our body language, because it carries a lot of what we communicate. This is especially true with smaller children, as we are so much bigger than they are, we can be intimidating! It may seem that this is all common sense; however, often we don't even realize what our body language is saying. That's because we can't see ourselves.

With our body language, we want to show we are as open to and connected with our students as possible. We want to have a relaxed body posture, leaning slightly toward students. We want to smile and look at students (use your eyes to smile; smiles that don't use the eyes are seen as insincere). We want to use a strong, confident voice that can be heard but isn't too loud. We want to be engaging when we are teaching a lesson, using hand gestures and moving around the classroom, using all the space (note that this also helps us see if anyone is on their phone). We want to be facing the students and appear open, not with arms crossed or hands in our pockets. Noticing our body language will help us to realize more about ourselves, our teaching, and how we interact with our students. It can help us realize problems we may not have considered and help us resolve problems with a few, easy changes.

See page 34 for Body Language Checklist.