



Why Classrooms need Rituals of Togetherness – Just like Families

Written by Hannah Beach (January 30, 2020)

<https://hannahbeach.ca/why-classrooms-need-rituals-of-togetherness-just-like-families/>

Most of us already recognize the benefits of creating a classroom which feels enjoyable. We understand that humans flourish when we feel liked, enjoyed by others, and comfortable in our environment.

In knowing this, we might show up to our classrooms every morning, full of warmth and ideas for creating a connected learning community. Building a culture of enjoyment in the classroom feels natural when we have students that are curious and eager, students that look to us as their mentors. However, our ideas don't always land in the ways we hope, so when faced with students who are difficult and derail our best efforts through rude and unruly behaviour, our own sense of passion and enjoyment dampens (understandably!)

In our frustration, we might experiment with every way possible to get our students to listen. Some of us may try threats and punishment, like taking away recess. Others might try incentives, such as Pizza Friday, if a class is "good enough" for a week.

The problem is that for the most difficult classes and the most challenging students, these tactics rarely work. They may work once or twice but not in the long term. The class may begin to identify with being the "bad" class and feel discouraged. Or students might simply not have the emotional or developmental capacity to be "good enough" to ever get the reward. **And most importantly, these tactics don't get at the heart of what actually drives human beings to want to behave.**

Our enthusiasm for creating an enjoyable classroom atmosphere is easily derailed when we face challenging behaviours – but this is exactly when we need to double down on our commitment to creating an enjoyable learning community.

This is where establishing rituals of togetherness comes in. These are established routines that provide us with constant and regular points of connection. And these points of connection are vital to healthy classrooms, families...any group that is going to live or work together!

We live in an era of disconnection

Humans crave connection. Connection means survival and safety.

Think for a moment of all the ways we now have to "connect" with others—through our phones, our devices, social media... you get the idea. We are more "connected" than ever. And yet this is not the kind of connection that we actually need or that brings us to a place of internal rest. These modes of "connection" often lead us to a place of more disconnection. They can be wounding, and lead to obsessive yearnings for superficial connections like "likes" on our social media posts, which don't actually satisfy or fulfill us.

Suffice it to say that children, more than ever, need healthy real-life connections with those who are meant to be caring for them (their parents, their teachers, their grandparents), as well as healthy connections with nature, with themselves, and with the world and everyone else around them.

Connection is our superpower

When we create classrooms in which our students feel connected to us, our students are more likely to listen and engage. When we have students who are difficult, the last thing we may feel like doing is connecting with them. Their behaviour may make us want to withdraw our warmth, push them away, or teach them a lesson. Yet it is these students and these classes that need to feel connected to us the most.

It can be so hard (at least I can find it very hard!) to dig deep and remember that connection *trumps everything* – **that when my students are at their most challenging, this is the time to increase our connection, not turn away from it.** But remembering this is hard, especially when things are falling apart and we are stressed.

Embedding rituals of togetherness

The wonderful thing about rituals is that they are embedded in our classroom “routine”, no matter what. **These embedded rituals take away the having to remember.** They are there even when we don’t have it in us to initiate a connecting experience with our students because we feel stressed or less close to our students. They provide a structure for us to lean on, in good times and bad.

These embedded rituals of togetherness contribute to creating a culture of enjoyment. Just like the nightly family dinner can keep a family close, these rituals can keep the classroom system from falling apart. They become what holds us together.

We can initiate rituals of togetherness in our classrooms in small ways that bring us together as a class. These might be gentle rituals that help our students to feel relaxed and connected to us, as their teachers. They might also be rituals that bring us all together – students and teachers alike, across lines of difference, age, background, and ability...to come together in a relaxed and enjoyable way.

Simple activities, such as:

- Having a **Friday afternoon storytime**. (This can be especially fun for older students who tend not to get read to as much as children learning to read.) You could ask the students to each bring a pillow, get cozy and relax while you read to them! Closing the curtains can help to make it feel cozy and set apart this time of the day as special and magical.
- Picking a **communal singing time**. Select a day of the week to sing together for even 10 minutes and give it a name. Melody Mondays! Or Tune-time Tuesdays...
- Heading outside together for some type of outdoor experience. A **weekly nature walk or gardening time together**.

You get the idea. It doesn’t really matter what these activities are. Each of us as educators will find our own ways that we feel comfortable creating rituals of togetherness for our learning communities, depending on the students we have, our resources, and our own inclinations.

What is important is that we embed them into the class culture

Our students then know to expect and rely on these rituals. More importantly, they will realize that we want to have fun with them, that we enjoy their company and we value our connection to them. And even if they don’t realize that right away, over time, their sense of connection to us will grow. **And, we can lean on this structure to help us keep our class together and our students close, even when times get tough.**

Many times in my own family, we have had a challenging day because of the disagreements and misunderstandings that are a normal part of human relationships. When I reflect on those times, I think about how, no matter what, we always sit down together for dinner and we play our daily “high/low” game, in which we each tell each other our high and low moments of the day. Even if there is initially disconnection, or even tension at the start of dinner, we listen to one another. There is eye contact. And eventually we soften and we feel connected. This is true as well for our Friday family movie night and our seasonal celebrations.

I don’t know how we could operate as a family without these connecting rituals. Without them, I am sure that I would experience much more resistance from my children when I am trying to guide them; and I imagine that we would end up floating in our separate universes, without a real sense of one another. **We need these rituals to hold us together as a system.**

In this era of disconnection, we need to remember that our students need rituals to help them know that we value our connection to them as well. Very, very much. Students are more likely to listen to us when we nurture a sense of connection with them on a regular basis. This connection with us helps them to feel safer. Through these regular experiences held by our warmth, our students start to feel noticed, enjoyed, and like they belong. As educators, we can lean on these rituals of togetherness to keep our students close, keep human connection alive, and build connected and enjoyable learning communities where everyone can flourish.

Some of my most beautiful memories as an educator come from these times in which I enjoyed being with my students in this very human way. I’d love to hear about the rituals you enjoy in your classroom with the children in your care. Feel free to share your own experiences or ideas for us to try!

Warmly,

Hannah Beach



Hannah Beach is an award-winning educator, author, and keynote speaker. She was recognized by the Canadian Human Rights Commission in 2017 as one of five featured change-makers in Canada. She is the co-author of *Reclaiming Our Students: Why Children Are More Anxious, Aggressive, and Shut Down Than Ever—And What We Can Do About It* (released April 2020). She delivers professional development services across the country and provides emotional health consulting to schools.

Find her online at <https://hannahbeach.ca>

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Hannah Beach, author of *Reclaiming Our Students* and the book series *I Can Dance*, member of the Neufeld Institute, as well as director of **Emotional Growth for Children**, a counselling and family resource center. For more information, please visit www.hannahbeach.ca and www.neufeldinstitute.org