Navigating Connection: Exploring how Ontario elementary teachers cultivate relationships in synchronous grade 7 and 8 online classrooms

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Abstract: Synchronous online elementary learning has evolved as an educational option within public school boards in Ontario. The ongoing success of this mode of learning relies on teachers who are able to nurture relationship building in an online environment. This multiple case study explores the methods utilized by five grade 7 and 8 teachers to establish rapport and connections between themselves and their students within synchronous online classrooms during non-emergency learning in 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. Thematic analysis was conducted on semi-structured interviews to generate four themes: developing intentional connections, building digital communities, teacher authenticity, and learning online as a safe space. The findings outline the teaching skills and perceptions shared by the participants, as well as how these teachers considered complex student needs and navigated technology when teaching synchronously in online spaces with grade 7 and 8 students.

Keywords: Teacher-student relationship, Synchronous online learning, Online teaching, Teacher perceptions, Case study

Introduction

"Be genuine and human and loving and somehow, it's magical, but somehow it translates across the screen. I didn't think at the beginning it would, but it does. You're able to develop relationships with people sight unseen and through a screen and it's valid" (Participant 1). Elementary online learning in Ontario currently focuses on synchronous, real-time communication between teachers and students, delivering classes using virtual meeting technologies (Peel District School Board, 2025; Toronto District School Board, 2025; Thames Valley District School Board, 2025). Synchronous learning helps online schools meet the social and emotional needs of elementary learners (Blaine, 2019; Daum et al., 2021; Liao et al., 2021), with online teacher presence (Lindsay & Redmond, 2024) and the connections these teachers foster with their students being key to learning success (Duryee, 2025; Martin, 2019).

Several of the highest enrolment, publicly-funded school boards in Ontario continue to offer elementary classes via synchronous at home programming, with confirmed programs for the 2025-2026 school year offered in the districts of Durham (DDSB, 2025), Ottawa-Carleton (OCDSB, 2025), Peel (PDSB, 2025), Thames Valley (TVDSB, 2025), Toronto (TDSB, 2025), Upper Grand in combination with Avon Maitland , Grand Erie, and Bluewater (UGDSB, 2025), Waterloo (WRDSB, 2025), York (YRDSB, 2025), and Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB, 2025). School boards incorporate direction from Policy/Program Memorandum 164: Requirements for Remote Learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020), in developing and maintaining these programs.

Terminology

Online learning is a general term used to refer to learning using the internet. *Synchronous online learning* refers here specifically to students who are using meeting technologies to attend live classes with a teacher and other students. The terms *remote learning*, *virtual school* and *online learning* are all interchangeably used by Ontario school boards to describe *synchronous online learning* within elementary learning contexts. *Asynchronous online learning* occurs when students access previously developed audio, video, or text-based information at a time and place of their choosing. *Meeting technologies* refer to synchronous audio-video platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. *Elementary learning* in Ontario is inclusive of children ages 4 to 14.

Researcher Positionality

I taught grade 7 and 8 in synchronous online classrooms for three years, 2020-2023, after teaching in-person intermediate classrooms for 17 years. I continue to teach in synchronous online environments outside of traditional classrooms. Synchronous online teaching and learning has allowed my pedagogical practice to become more inclusive, utilizing online strategies and spaces to better meet individual needs (Anis, 2023). My practice as a teacher has always put relationships first, and I believe the soft-skills adolescents develop within school environments (Berry, 2019) will serve them in practical ways throughout their lifetimes. Synchronous online options assist students in practising valuable communication skills (Daum et al., 2021; Duryee, 2025) in ways asynchronous learning cannot (Martin,

2019). Developing trust and communication online, where many teachers do not see or hear their students (All participants), presents new challenges to teachers, myself included.

I approached these interviews as a former online classroom teacher with specialized knowledge regarding the synchronous online learning format (Holmes, 2020). I established rapport with participants based on our commonalities, sharing mutual understandings and parallel experiences, while recognizing the possibility of overlooking alternate or outsider interpretations of the same events. I brought with me the optimism, and intrinsic bias, that educators who chose to continue working in online roles shared similar mindsets regarding the importance of connecting with students. This perspective made it important to study and share knowledge about the synchronous online learning format.

Problem

Grade 7 and 8 students, 11 to 14 years old, are often learning synchronously from home while otherwise unsupervised. The relationships online intermediate students establish with their teachers within virtual school environments are vital for sustaining student motivation (Dimaculangan et al., 2022; Liao et al., 2021), habits of mind (Teeple & Benolken, 2023) and engagement with the curriculum (Fiock, 2020; Howard, 2023). Demand for elementary online schooling options continues to increase (Archambault et al., 2022; Howard, 2023), while educational research and theory have yet to catch up to this rapidly developing learning mode.

Purpose

This study examines how grade seven and eight synchronous online teachers establish connections and build relationships with their students, identifying the strategies used to develop rapport and communicate with adolescents while utilizing online synchronous meeting spaces. The goal of this work is to provide insights into teacher communication and relationship building with students.

Importance

Building relationships with students assists teachers in creating positive learning environments (Howard, 2023; Miller, 2021; Robinson, 2022), encouraging student comfort and engagement (Archambault, Vandenbossche-Makombo & Fraser, 2017; Rautanen et al., 2022), and facilitating student-teacher and student-student communication (Berry, 2019; Dimaculangan et al., 2022; Liao et al., 2021; Raby et al., 2021); factors that led to improved student learning outcomes (Blaine, 2019; Hodges et al., 2020; Robinson, 2022). How Ontario's grade seven and eight teachers foster connections in synchronous online learning environments represents a specific empirical gap in the existing literature, teacher training, and pedagogical practice.

Literature Review

Online Education

The Covid-19 pandemic saw remote online learning implemented ubiquitously in Ontario for emergency at-home learning from March 2020 until June 2020 (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). While secondary online education is standardized through asynchronous e-Learning courses (Ontario Ministry of Education 2022, 2024b), synchronous elementary online education continues to be developed ad hoc by teachers (Daum et al., 2021, Raby et al., 2021), reflecting teacher preferences and their perceptions of student interests and needs. There are few, if any, requirements for teachers to have specialized training to teach in online learning (Barbour & Azukas, 2021; Macur, 2022; Miller, 2021; Wake & Mills, 2022), beyond the certifications needed for in-person teaching (Daum et al., 2021). Elementary teachers do not receive specialized training or preparation for instructing synchronous online learning, creating a pedagogical gap that educators and policymakers need to address.

Teacher curiosity and comfort with technology are identified by Lindsay and Redmond (2024) as essential to successful online pedagogy. Ideally, teachers and students approach synchronous online learning with open minds and positive dispositions toward the learning format (Lindsay & Redmond, 2024); however, recognizing the discomfort and anxiety experienced by some individuals when accessing online learning (Barbour & Azukas, 2021),

and making space for multiple perspectives to be heard (Duryee, 2025), are important parts of building competencies within online learning (Teeple & Benolken, 2023).

Relationship Building

Building relationships online requires the conscious allocation of time by teachers (Barbour & Azukas, 2021; Wake & Mills, 2022) and a myriad of instructional strategies to promote community and communication (Daum et al., 2021; Howard, 2023). Teacher-student connections in online learning have been described within several theoretical perspectives, primarily with a focus on post-secondary students (Archambault, Vandenbossche-Makombo & Fraser, 2017; Berry, 2019). By contrast, theoretical perspectives regarding online elementary education are in their infancy. A gap continues to exist for non-emergency synchronous online relationship building with elementary students in Ontario, Canada.

Theoretical Framework

There is no singular theory or framework for pedagogy within synchronous online learning. Online learning was first described by the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework, where social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence domains (Blaine, 2019; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000) create the conditions for learning in asynchronous, text-based electronic environments. The Motivating Teacher-Student Relationships (MTSR) (Robinson, 2022) explains the motivational and self-efficacy benefits of teacher-student relationships, and how these are best achieved by teachers who see relationship-building as part of their active role with students. Both COI and MTSR have roots in Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, with students actively creating knowledge when interacting with their teachers and peers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Harrasim, 2017).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) directs educators to create more accessible, inclusive, and interactive learning spaces through instructional design (Rose, 2000). The UDL framework references the use of online technology to adapt information for easy access by students, and lists some strategies specific to elementary learners (CAST, 2022). The methods students and teachers use to collaborate and interpret information themselves create new processes of communication (Negi, 2020), generating new interpretations of what elementary educational practice looks like in virtual spaces. This study provides early insight into how these frameworks are utilized by teacher participants, nurturing relationship-building with their online students.

Methods and Study Design

Approach

This study used a qualitative multiple case study approach to describe the experiences and contexts (Cresswell & Poth, 2018) of teachers leading to relationship building in synchronous online elementary learning. This allowed for the exploration of online learning via the viewpoints and descriptions of key stakeholders (Billups, 2021), providing insight into future practices. This study sought to provide a snapshot of the strategies utilized by teacher participants to relate to their adolescent students in synchronous classes, acknowledging that each brings their own valued perspectives and experiences. Ethics approval was obtained prior to conducting interviews (WLU REB #8938).

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was conducted to find participants who were Ontario Certified Teachers (OCT), employed as full-time, online, elementary, grade 7 and/or 8 classroom teachers within the 2022-2023 and/or 2023-2024 school years. Teachers needed to have worked with the same group(s) of students for at least one full term (20 weeks), allowing time to stablish rapport and connections. This purposive sample included five teachers educating within publicly-funded Ontario school boards, ensuring a variety of perspectives to compare within the coding process, while being a manageable number for the scope of this graduate course-based study. Recruitment took place via posts on social media and snowball sampling.

Data Collection Method

Data collection was done via semi-structured online interviews using guiding questions and allowing for flexibility in the topics and experiences shared by participants (Billups, 2021). Interviews provided participants the opportunity to reflect on their online practice and articulate an otherwise unvoiced topic of discussion. Recorded interviews were transcribed and shared with the participant within three weeks of the interview for member checking to help ensure credible results and trustworthiness within the project (Billups, 2021; Cresswell & Poth, 2018).

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Demographic Information

The five female participants were each teaching as specialists within their area(s) of certification; all had additional qualifications beyond teaching core classes within the intermediate division. Two were engaged in classroom teaching as a second career. All individuals had worked in online classrooms for more than a year (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Information

Pseudonym	*Years Teaching*	*Years Teaching Online*	*Grades Taught Online*	*Subjects Taught Online*	*Online Teaching Setting*
Participant 1	13	3	5, 6, 7, 8	Language, mathematics, science	School building
Participant 2	30	3	5, 6, 7, 8	French	School building
Participant 3	12	4	5, 7, 8	Language, mathematics, history, geography	Home 2 years, school building 2 years
Participant 4	31	3	6, 7, 8	Language, French, mathematics, history, geography, science, drama, art, music, dance, health, physical education	Home 2 years, school building 1 year
Participant 5	20	3	6, 7, 8	Language, mathematics, history, geography, social studies, science, drama, dance, art, health, physical education	Home

Data analysis

Case studies rely on "analyzing data through description of the case and themes of the case as well as cross-case themes" (Cresswell & Poth, 2018, p. 105). Descriptive coding via inductive data chunking and memoing (Bhattacharya, 2017), portrayed the general ideas, concepts, and events (Grad Coach, 2024), while structural coding assisted in aggregating categories to establish patterns and themes (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Data analysis resulted in four dominant themes representing areas of intersection within participant experiences, sharing how each developed connections with their students.

Results

Thematic Analysis

Four themes developed from the analysis of the data: developing intentional connections, building digital communities, teachers being their authentic selves, and learning online as a safe space.

Theme #1: Developing intentional connections. “You are having to be more intentional about getting to know them as individuals. Banter doesn't happen the same way online, but I feel like I know them better than when I taught in person” (Participant 3). For relationships to develop, mechanisms were put in place to generate immediacy of feedback and the intimacy of shared experiences within the classroom group. Teachers shared the ways they established mutual communication with their students, both synchronous and asynchronous. Participant 1 elaborated: “Students could send me an email. They could type in the chat, while I’m teaching. They could put private comments on [Google] assignments. I would do private breakouts.” It was important to teachers that their students knew how to reach them, and to provide timely responses. This theme emerged from the subthemes of tracking student engagement, focus on interactions, and providing semi-structured time.

Tracking student engagement. Participants strategically used notations to encourage participation from every student, helping to establish and maintain connection and engagement within their virtual classrooms. Tracking helped these teachers remember students they had, or had not, heard from, allowing them to make conscious efforts to connect. “Sometimes I'll even keep tally lists of who I've talked to and who I haven't yet” (Participant 3). "It was almost easier, in online learning, because you could almost have like a little list, right?” (Participant 5). “When I had kids that I would invite to speak and they wouldn’t speak, I would document that. If I had students that were online and participating often, I documented that. Just in case someone ever said to me they were on all the time, [I had it in my notes]” (Participant 2).

Focus on interactions. Scheduled time to interact with students during the school day provided opportunities for all class members to get to know each other as individuals. "We would spend a lot of time talking in the mornings. I really had to shift from being focused on academic stuff and the curriculum to being more focused on the kids in front of me" (Participant 4). This substantial investment of time helped forge strong connections with and between students, providing an anticipated daily opportunity for discussion. “One of my students had a pet lizard, and I'm like, 'I don't even care about math. I just want to see more of your pet lizard! Something interesting is happening right now. Let's just stop and invest in this moment, and we'll get to the rest of the math lesson later’” (Participant 3). This teacher was acknowledging and validating the importance of the student's pet, while also verbalizing their thought process as the classroom facilitator, explaining why they were taking this time, and letting the class know they would return to schedule once they had experienced that moment, together.

Providing semi-structured time. All five participants made use of breakout rooms for students to work in small, frequently self-selected groups. These fostered strong peer connections. “I find that more in the breakout rooms it would be kid-led, student-led, and I would kind of just sit back and listen to what they were trying to figure out and then help when I need to” (Participant 4). Intentional building of connections continued beyond school hours. Each participant shared the extra time they spent with students; opening the classroom meeting early (Participant 4), staying online during breaks (all participants), running extra-curricular groups (Participant 4, Participant 5), and after school groups (Participant 2, Participant 4). "Sometimes kids stayed after class and just wanted to tell me a story or connect and share" (Participant 2).

Theme #2: Building digital communities. Building digital communities was seen by all participants as critical to the successful delivery of remote learning. This theme developed from the subthemes of routines, communication tools, and checking-in with students. "There was actual relationship building, it is hard to explain to someone outside [of online learning]" (Participant 2).

Routines. "Establishing routines happens a lot faster online than in-person... they literally have their name right there" (Participant 1). The software tools that make online learning accessible to student learners are equally helpful to teachers, with names and profile pictures always available in classrooms. Participant 4 said that each morning "there was always a game or something in the classroom that [students] had to email me the answer to," while Participant 3's school day started with "our morning routine when they come in, we listen to a podcast together, write in our journals, and then we move on to the lesson." One online school shared live morning announcements with all classes. "I think routine is a big thing that helped to build connection" (Participant 4). In terms of curriculum, "I would always have a slide deck to talk to. Because I think that that visual is helpful. I'm trying to do multiple modalities" (Participant 5). Posting schedules, social activities, and instructional materials within classrooms for students to access was common practice for all teacher participants.

Communication Tools. The teacher participants were unified in their approach to communicating with students: all teacher cameras and microphones were always on, and most responses provided to students were verbal, even if the question was posed by chat or email. "I was always working with students. I was either talking in the class, giving instructions or I was working. But I felt like I did a lot. You just keep talking" (Participant 1). "Sometimes I felt like a radio DJ" (Participant 2). Each teacher spoke about the experience of teaching to students where most had their cameras turned off, the student use of chat or emoji reactions, frequently in lieu of voice responses, and the desire to get to know and support their students. "My big thing is I need you to respond to me when I speak to you, but I don't care how you do that [by voice or chat or emoji or email]" (Participant 3). Sometimes, teachers struggled to keep up with the communication options. “I found it very difficult to read chat, look at faces on camera, look at the list of students whose mics may or may not be turning on and off, and at the hands up. It was just very challenging” (Participant 2).

Participant 3 chose to “Slow down before adopting things. Really evaluate technology and resources. Often using fewer things is better.” Each participant expressed the desire to learn about and implement the communication tools that worked best with their students. While some participants also expressed frustration with a personal lack of technology skills, they all persisted in finding strategies to communicate with their students.

Checking-in with students. Teacher participants valued one-on-one communication with their students. They all used email with students and families, and each made use of breakout rooms to check-in with students individually and in small groups. Phone calls were reserved for speaking with family or reaching students who were not in the classroom meet, and impromptu family meetings to help support students frequently occurred in breakout rooms. A key difference when teaching online is that teachers have limited visuals with their students: “I don't know if you're overwhelmed, I cannot see over your shoulder. I can't see how you're keeping up as easily. People are reluctant to let you know that they don't really understand what you said, and online a lot of them are trying to multitask, poorly. So they're not getting the instructions, and a lot of them are not good at reading the instructions. It's a multiplied problem, like a really bad game of [broken] telephone” (Participant 1).

In these situations, teachers relied on their personal connections with students, peer communication, and family supports to ensure student needs were being met. Academically, online tools allowed for frequent check-ins, gathering feedback from, and sharing suggestions with, students. Participants 1 and 5 commented on documents, Participants 3, 4 and 5 used forms and surveys. All utilized email and curriculum-based slide shows. Participant 2 used a tracking and communication app. No two online teachers checked in the same way. “Students could put a private comment in Google Classroom. These little things that get tagged to that assignment and it would also send me an e-mail. But it was lovely when I went to mark, to see a record of a conversation that I had with that student via the private comments” (Participant 1).

Theme #3: Teachers Being Their Authentic Selves. Every participant in this study shared that they enjoyed teaching online. Two teachers preferred it to teaching in-person, while the other three balanced the advantages and disadvantages of both modes, showing no preference. All participants chose to teach online instead of teaching in-person classes during the 2022-2024 timeframe of this study. "I was myself on the screen. I was just honest and consistent. I was there every day and built a relationship" (Participant 2). Participants described themselves as positive and relaxed, even when addressing challenges with technology and classroom management. “I would say when I'm online I'm like a nice person, almost all the time. Maybe not even 5% of the time do I get like, 'We've got to shut something down. We've got to be serious. These are the rules,' like in-person. But I didn't need to do it. I hardly had to do it last school year. My students liked me. That was great” (Participant 1).

Participants felt appreciated and generally liked as teachers by their online students, and perhaps because of this were able to share more of themselves and their personality than in an in-person classroom. “Simply because you are going to be the voice in everyone's ears, I just try to be genuine, just be myself. And I don't think what we do in schools should be a secret. I think it should be out there and families should be really aware of what's going on and online learning really gives a window into that” (Participant 3).

It was almost startling how similar the language was between participants: "I think as soon as you put yourself online, you're vulnerable. When all of a sudden here's my face, you're in my house, and I just go back to being transparent, being myself" (Participant 5). Those teachers who had recently returned to in-person learning were wistful about missing the friendly, caring personas they were able to share when teaching online.

Theme #4: Learning Online as a Safe Space. Learning online was perceived as a safe space by all participants. They described a variety of reasons their students and/or students' families chose to learn online, such as cultural or religious reasons. Some were multilingual learners, experiencing learning in English for the first time. A few were unhoused or involved in custody situations with no set school location. Several students had anxiety about school or social situations, were experiencing attendance issues in-person, or had mental health considerations. A minority were medically fragile, had temporary medical needs their physical school could not accommodate, or were concerned about Covid-19 infections and were bullied for wearing a mask at in-person schools. Student athletes with variable coaching schedules and families in the process of moving also found attending class online to be more consistent for them.

Many teenage members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community chose to learn online, "We got a segment of those kids who were transitioning and were being bullied at school for that, right? They got bounced back-and-forth and the in-person school couldn't handle their transition, and kids were being mean to them. So they ended up in our space because it was perceived as a safer space" (Participant 5).

There were students in every class choosing online learning because of their learning needs, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and/or being on the autistic spectrum. Participant 2 described their online class as primarily "kids who are quirky. They have ticks, motor issues, visual differences. They were able to flourish online. They were able to be themselves, with that visual taken away, their personality could shine more, and their knowledge could shine, could come out."

Part of being in a safe space was never making students feel called out. Participants felt this was easier to achieve online, using breakout rooms and email to communicate with students as part of the normal routine of the classroom. "Online it's basically all just praise. It's calling out the good behaviour, and the good behaviour, and the good behaviour. And there's much less need online to call out the bad behaviour unless it's like, 'hey, we need to go have a chat in a solo breakout room' and then no one else can hear it" (Participant 1). None of the teacher participants reported any issues using one-on-one breakout rooms, though all of them were aware of professional boundaries when working individually with students.

Discussion

Rapport and trust are foundational to student engagement and learning outcomes in any learning format (Robinson, 2022), and building strong relationships is a key strategy in effective online teaching, where face-to-face cues and prompts are frequently absent. Elementary online teaching remains a novel environment where the Motivating Teacher-Student Relationship framework could help guide online teachers, emphasizing Robinson's understanding that the teacher responsibility of relationship building is a significant and vital part of creating and sustaining student engagement (2022). Theme 1, developing intentional connections, showed methods that are familiar to elementary teachers, applied in unique ways to connect with students in synchronous online learning. Teachers created a relational environment incorporating pets, toys, interests, and family members as part of the classroom setting daily; an educational relationship-focused framework that incorporates the context of students beyond the teacher-student and student-student dichotomies should be considered for development in this context.

The COI constructivist-based framework delineates the potential for community-building through learner discourse and collaboration (Anderson, 2008; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000), relating to all themes, particularly theme 2: building digital communities. However, it requires updating beyond the asynchronous post-secondary learner focus where it originated to be effectively applied to synchronous online learning. Certainly, real-time engagement with students during lessons and breakout rooms (student presence), while coordinating multiple communication formats, requires specific teaching skills and teacher presence.

While teaching online was described by all participants in positive language, they were honest and transparent about what they could not do, what they needed to learn, and what they would do differently in the future, encapsulated in theme 3: teachers being their authentic selves. Each teacher, knowingly or by chance, was utilizing Experiential Learning (Dewey, 1938; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2024a), learning about how to create relationships with online students through the act of co-creating and inhabiting virtual learning spaces with their students. The reflection and feedback they experienced with their students led them to increased understanding of digital pedagogy.

Learning online as a safe space, theme 4, presents a critical teacher perception. Learning online from home allowed many students to meet social, emotional, academic and personal needs that may not have been possible to accommodate within physical school environments. Eliminating extraneous sensory stimuli in an environment with one area of focus, a teacher on a screen, assisted students in adapting to cognitive loads (Sweller, 2010). Safe spaces grow out of trusting relationships: in classrooms where teachers developed connections with students, those relationships improved engagement. Engaged students ask more, share more, and learn more, in a positive feedback loop (Pierce, 2025).

Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2022) was present in teacher-design of instructional materials and student choice of communication modes. Teachers in this study played essential roles in creating these relational, community-focused, authentic, safe spaces, by being flexible and reflective in forming connections with students, and how they approached and adapted to student needs. Elementary teachers who continue to work in virtual environments have technical and relational skills that are unique to synchronous online learning and warrant greater study within our increasingly digital educational system.

Summary

Synchronous online elementary learning in Ontario continues to be a developing format in education. This study explored the phenomenon of teacher-student relationships in online learning from the perspective of those who know it best: the teachers. These five interviews revealed four themes: developing intentional connections, building digital communities, teachers being their authentic selves, and learning online as a safe space. How elementary teachers communicate and build relationships with their adolescent students through online meeting technologies is a modern educational format requiring continued investigation.

Limitations

The small, relatively homogenous sample of five elementary educators addressed in this study represents a starting point for further research. A larger sample size inclusive of greater diversity among Ontario teachers and a wider range of school boards would better represent overall online teacher practices and perceptions within the province. There are voices and perspectives that have yet to be explored in the literature in understanding the efficacy when building relationships in online elementary learning; students, family members, administrators, and online support staff could each contribute valuable insights to the process of building online relationships.

Implications for Online Pedagogy

This research confirmed that the teacher participants felt online learning with grade seven and eight students requires strong teacher-student relationships to ensure clear communication and student engagement. Instruction in digital literacy for teachers, including classroom software tools (Zhang et al., 2024), should be incorporated as part of pre-service teacher education (Jung, Choi, & Fanguy, 2024), as well as regular and ongoing in-school teacher professional development (Rong & Estaiteyeh, 2024). Most relevant to this study, teacher education would benefit from explicit instruction on how to develop intentional connections with children (Robinson, 2022). Continued investigations into relationship-building practices within synchronous online learning will help support teachers in building connections within their online classrooms. Establishing relationships in online synchronous classes requires time, energy, and intention on the part of teachers, ultimately building a novel context to relate, teach and learn.

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