

Human touch in the primary school setting

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Abstract

No touch policies in schools have created a dilemma for teachers. To investigate student, teacher, and parent attitudes to touch at school, ten Pre-Kindy students, seven K-6 students, four teachers and four parents at a small faith-based school were interviewed using a semi-structured interview style. Analysis of the responses indicated the majority of the participants in this study supported the use of 'healthy' physical contact, between teachers and students. Students, parents and teachers were mindful of appropriate ways to touch, arena of safety issues, and that touch may not be for everyone, all concepts which informed a proposition for policy review in schools to optimise student development and wellbeing.

Introduction

Abuse of children is a serious problem and notifications to child protection services in Australia are increasing each year (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017). Many schools are adopting a minimal or no-touch policy with respect to students and teachers are discouraged from physically touching students, or instructed not to touch their students (Bloom, 2017; Graham, Bahr, Truscott & Powell, 2018; Hansen, 2007; Owen & Gillentine, 2011; Tronc, 2011).

The importance and benefits of touching

No touch policies have given teachers a dilemma. Child psychologist, Sean Cameron, along with psychologists from the British Psychological Society have called for schools to change their policies on physical contact (Cameron, 2017). They believe that touch should be an integral part of the teacher-pupil relationship and that what is missing is a

recognition of the importance of touch, particularly for young children (Bloom, 2017). Student well-being and cognitive development and learning are impacted by the relational care that students receive in their classrooms (Noddings, 2013). Relational care requires teachers to demonstrate both empathy and compassion and involves closeness which is delivered through both verbal and physical means (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018; Keane, 2016; Noddings, 2013). In caring situations, physical contact is important as it acts as a pathway for human communication and socialisation (O'Hare, 2017). It is particularly vital to children's social, cognitive, and physical development (Field, 2014).

Professor McGlone, head of neuroscience at Liverpool John Moores University, agrees with this saying that physical contact is absolutely essential for children's brain development (Bloom, 2017). Lack of touch impacts adult emotional growth, and lack of healthy touch can lead to violence and aggression in adults (Hansen, 2007). Appropriate touch has also been found to evoke comfort, reassurance and pleasure (Hansen, 2010), enhance student well-being (Owen & Gillentine, 2011), and encouraged students to develop emotionally and socially (McGlone, Wessberg & Olausson, 2014).

The benefits of touch for children with special needs was highlighted by Daus & Sansone (2001) and Parker & O'Connor (2016). Deep pressure has a calming effect for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder as it helps them to self-regulate. Both Hansen (2007) and Owen & Gillentine (2011) agree that healthy touch is vital between teachers and their pupils. Teachers can use proximity to enhance classroom communication, and show students that they are valued (Hansen, 2010).

Healthy touch in schools

While the literature reveals that touch is important, and provides the students with real benefits,

“*touch should be an integral part of the teacher-pupil relationship ... what is missing is a recognition of the importance of touch, particularly for young children*”

implementing touch into the classroom needs careful consideration. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse released its final report in December 2017, and throughout the almost five-year duration of the findings, the issue of abusive touch has been brought to the nation's attention. The country has been watchful of the findings, and a conservative approach to touch has been adopted by many areas of our society. For example, the school participating in this study has a policy that reads; "never touch a student of either gender, apart from inevitable situations such as PE, giving First Aid, or if requested by an authorised person" (Current Study School's Staff Handbook, 2017, p. 134).

What then is the place of touch in schools? Is it appropriate to implement healthy touch in schools and what should be the guidelines? Australian law permits healthy touch in the school setting, and lists a number of provisos surrounding it. For example, any force made to another person, either directly or indirectly has the potential to constitute a criminal offence (Department for Education, 2019). However, physical contacts made in the education setting, may be considered legal due to consent and lawful authority. Consent also includes implied consent, and this gives teachers the ability to engage in physical contact with a student in the school setting so long as: there is no improper motive; the physical contact is reasonable; and there is no withdrawal of consent. This was shown by a Queensland Court of Appeal case where it was suggested that students tacitly consent to receiving tactile encouragement, such as a pat on the shoulder, as part of normal everyday interactions in the school setting. Neither is it against the law for teachers to comfort students who are emotionally distressed by touching in a supportive way (Department for Education, 2019).

Another Queensland Court of Appeal decision declared that "teaching had to be a 'touching' occupation, with the touching of children a virtually inevitable part of daily classroom exigencies of the teaching process" (Tronc, 2011). However, it should be noted that if the school has implemented a no-touch policy, then employment contracts would usually indicate that teachers are expected to follow that policy.

What are the attitudes of students, teachers, and parents to touch at school? Educators have been debating touch in schools for a while. Carlson (2005) found that children considered the hands, shoulders and upper back to be the most non-threatening. They found that touch also needs to be age appropriate and appropriate to the individual. Permission should be sought prior, and a child must be respected when they decline. Hansen (2007) concurs with

Carlson and adds that it is important to avoid danger zones, for example primary school aged children need to zip up their own zippers on their trousers. Other guidelines include never be alone with a child in a room where others can not see you, and give students a choice, for example a handshake, or a hug.

Are these still the attitudes of students, parents and teachers in 2019 and does school policy reflect these attitudes? Answering these questions is the focus of the present study.

Methodology

To investigate student, teacher, and parent attitudes to touch at school, 25 people were interviewed using a semi-structured interview style. This included ten Pre-Kindy students, seven K-6 students, four teachers and four parents at a small faith-based school. The students were selected for the study from a cross section of the school, with an equal gender balance.

To make the interviews age appropriate, the Pre-Kindy class, which involved students aged 4 and 5 years, was read two similar stories. One story involved healthy touch, and one story avoided and discouraged touch in a classroom setting with regards to teacher/student physical contact. In the first story the main character was a teacher bear called Mrs Hug Bear, where the teacher used touch such as high fives, hugs, snuggling up on the floor for a story, or allowing a student to sit on the teacher's lap. In the second story the main character was Mrs Bear, a teacher bear who avoided touch, however the teacher was kind to her students and loved them. Ten Pre-Kindy children were asked six questions about the stories.

For the Kindergarten to Year 6 students, one student from each year level was interviewed. In addition to the students, four teachers were asked their opinions regarding physical contact with students, and four parents were also interviewed. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was then used to find themes within the text. The various themes identified were then examined to determine the attitudes of the groups.

Results

What did participants think of touch at school?

The students all supported the concept of reciprocal physical contact with their teacher when talking about acceptable touch. They mentioned hugs, high fives, patting the teacher on the arm and in addition in the lower grades, holding hands. Their comments included:

"I love hugs."

"when I feel sad I like hugs."

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The students felt that healthy touch helped them to feel 'nice and calm' from giving or receiving a hug. They saw the benefits of using touch to cheer someone up, making people proud of their achievements, comforting people emotionally, and the benefit of not getting in trouble was mentioned, as healthy touch has less or no chance of conflict.

All of the students agreed that when they witnessed physical contact between a teacher and a student, it gave them a positive message. Students commented that they felt good when they experience physical contact with their teacher because the teacher was proud of them, and there was a sense of achievement. Comments included:

"Well, if a teacher does it to a student, I think it means they are proud of them." (referring to a high five for good work)

"It would tell you, you have done a good job"

"you feel good."

"They are encouraging each other, and they are being happy."

In response to the two similar, but contrasting stories about Mrs Bear and Mrs Hug Bear, most of the Pre-Kindy students responded that the Mrs Hug Bear story was their favourite story. Responses included:

"cos I think she had fun."

"she said, can I give you a huggle?"

When asked if they thought the teacher bear liked her students more in one story than the other, they identified the Mrs Hug Bear story where the teacher gave hugs, high-fives, held hands, and snuggled up together for a story on the floor. The students gave reasons for their evaluations, which included,

"cos she said when she's doing the story she said to cuddle up."

"cos she gave them high fives and hugs"

"she wanted to play with him"

When asked, "If you were a little bear, which story would you like to be in?", almost all of the students selected the Mrs Hug Bear story.

The parents were unanimous with what they thought was acceptable touch in the primary setting.

They all agreed that hugs were acceptable, and offered advice to make them appropriate like side hugs, or around the shoulders.

"if a child needs touch, they should be able to access it."

Other acceptable forms of touch included holding a child's hand, a hand on the shoulder to gently guide a child, patting their head in a soothing way if necessary, high fives, and fist pumps. The importance of soothing touch, when upset or distraught, was also highlighted by the majority of the parents as acceptable forms of touch.

"I think there's a vast difference between saying, 'you'll be right', and putting your hand on their shoulder, and even patting their head, kinda soothing, you know, I guess above the shoulders if you are going to lay out rules, above chest level."

The concept of comforting touch being especially relevant to the younger years was supported by all the parents, and most were concerned that the absence of comforting touch would be detrimental to a child's psycho-emotional development.

"if we are talking the younger years, it can be very detrimental if they don't have any touch"

Parents offered suggestions to make touch safe. The need to make male teacher to female student, or female teacher to male student gender divides appropriate was mentioned, particularly at the upper primary level.

The parents agreed that healthy teacher/student touch provides many benefits including a strong relationship between teacher and student, and provides a nurturing environment for learning, and building trust. The idea of the benefits being the greatest, but not limited to the early years was also highlighted. The benefits of touch when used as a comfort were also highlighted.

"where a teacher is comforting a child with touch, I think the benefits are great and I think there is an unknown effect of comfort with touch, and it's necessary."

Half of the parents pointed out that the arena of safety issues needs to be considered with regards to any form of touch, namely not being alone with a student and perceptions of other students at the upper primary level.

The majority of the teachers mentioned that hugs

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were an acceptable form of touch for Pre-Kindy to Year 2. At the upper primary level, one teacher felt that,

“it depended on the person as to what was appropriate.”

The majority of teachers said that they currently either give or received a hug, a tap on the arm, a gentle embrace to the side, or a pat on the shoulder to say well done. One teacher currently using touch prefaced her use of touch with the fact that it must be in full view of others.

Some teachers did mention that it was best to use the least amount of touch possible, with touch being reserved for things like administering first aid, the shaking of hands for a certificate, and to stop a child from hurting another child. Reasons for this included to avoid possible litigation, and to follow recommendations.

The majority of teachers reported the benefits of touch and relayed how they are currently using touch to cater to their students when the child needs it. The concept that we naturally use touch to acknowledge people, and it is good for rapport, physical connection, and that it provides a part of normal human development was mentioned.

“I think people like to be acknowledged and touched. I think healthy touch is important for building rapport with people, people like to have physical connection.”

The opinion that healthy touch is important, especially for tactile children, was expressed, with the belief that touch was beneficial for students with anxiety. The idea that students' emotional needs must be addressed to maximise learning was raised also.

“I think that allowing the freedom of appropriate touch would definitely be beneficial to some students who walk through into school with higher anxiety issues and this would definitely help work through that.”

However, the recognition of the benefits of touch being beneficial were tempered by the litigious society in which we live. As one participant commented:

“So, personal touch can definitely have its place, but unfortunately, I guess because of the environments I've worked in, I don't even think about it like that.”

Situational response

The results so far suggest that all of the students, parents and the majority of teachers supported healthy touch interaction for the wellbeing of the students. The participants were then asked to respond to questions that explored interpersonal interactions when students were injured or emotionally upset.

In the case of physical injury, almost half the students wanted to be cleaned up and taken to the office without any mention of physical contact from teachers. Similarly, almost half the students relayed that a hug or a pat on the back would help them to feel better, while getting a hand up, and hearing verbally nice things from the teacher, were also shared as methods to comfort students.

“the teacher could give you a little pat on the back”

“by bringing me to the office, and saying nice things, to encourage you to not be sad.”

“if the child is upset, they can hug the teacher.”

For emotional upsets, over half of the students said a hug would make them feel better and noteworthy, one student requested space to be allowed to process thoughts alone. Responses included:

“cheer me up, and maybe give me a big hug.”

“I just need some space.”

“sit next to you, ask you why you are crying or something.”

The parents agreed that they would like their child to be comforted with a hug or an arm around the shoulder. Other forms of comfort included a pat on the back, words of affirmation, and verbally solving the problem.

“I don't think putting a band-aid on their knee achieves the same level of comfort that positive touch does.”

The importance of reading body language was highlighted, and that each child is different in what they need. This, along with the concept of a needs-based, child-centred approach to physical contact was emphasised. One participant thought that teachers need to:

“have the ability to read that child and read the

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situation as to where they are at... being down at their level and feeding off what they are requiring.”

In the lower primary setting, most of the teachers thought that it was appropriate to give hugs, put an arm around the shoulders to calm, reassure and comfort students. When asked what forms of touch are acceptable, responses included:

“a hug, and you would probably end up with them on your lap depending on what they felt they wanted.”

“It would depend on the student and my relationship with them, but I am most likely to comfort them with a hug, maybe a touch on the arm and things like that.”

With regard to the upper grades, a more cautious approach was reported. One teacher felt comfortable comforting a student with an arm around the shoulders, if she had a rapport with the student already, and as long as they were comfortable with it. If she didn't know them, then physical touch would not be considered.

“I would put my arm around them to comfort them, maybe if I had a relationship with them and had a rapport already with them and it would have to be in public view as well of other people.”

“Older students, no, I wouldn't feel as comfortable touching them for a physical thing.”

Instead of using touch, one teacher relayed that she would spend time talking with the student who was experiencing an emotional upset, and would refrain from physical contact.

“I generally, personally, wouldn't be in a hurry to hug them or something like that, only because of my professional background and the advice we are given to be cautious of these things.”

In summary, it seems that at the lower primary level, touch is deemed appropriate if the teacher perceives a need, or the child requests touch. At the upper primary level, some teachers offer touch in a more cautious manner, or choose not to offer touch to protect themselves from possible misunderstanding.

Should schools continue with a no touch policy?

For the parents, the overall response to a no-touch policy was negative. The perception that comforting touch is necessary and needed was expressed. Parents highlighted the notion that to follow a no-

touch policy would be cold and heartless, as

“it would be horrible if a teacher said, ‘you'll be fine’ but kept their distance”

“The maternal or paternal instinct is to comfort a child, and it is a bit cold to say no to touch when both sides of the equation say it's a positive thing.”

Along the same theme, a similar but lesser supported view point was that while it would be disappointing to have a no touch policy, it may be necessary due to the society in which we live, as good touch is often misunderstood or misconstrued.

Teachers were mixed in their responses. Most of the teachers did not support the idea of a no-touch policy, especially in the lower years. The idea of hugs being a normal part of growing up in the school setting was raised, and it was felt it was a positive thing since students in the beginning years of school are often still missing their mum and dad. The need for teachers to be able to respond to a child's needs for physical touch was highlighted:

“if teachers were not allowed to respond it would feel like a very cold and unresponsive place.”

Should there be policy differentiation?

The concept of a no touch policy possibility was discussed as being a necessary thing in the upper primary setting. Therefore, should there be differentiation in policy for different aged children? The majority of the students thought that younger children needed to be treated “more delicately” or more gently.

The majority of parents agreed that guidelines for different age groups was a helpful idea. The concept that even upper primary students can benefit from touch if they are in a distress situation was also highlighted by some parents as they didn't want their child to be treated coldly in a crisis:

“if we look at a Year 6 student, if they have hurt themselves quite badly, possibly a level of distress, both situations they are going to have the same emotional distress which I think can be benefited from some sort of touch.”

The parents talked about forms of touch that would not be appropriate for older students, for example, holding their hand.

“I do think there should be guidelines, especially the pre-teens, like Year 5 or 6, especially for boys, with a female teacher, you know they are going

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through the hormone changes, maybe a full-on hug may not be appropriate. But like side hugs, high-fives, handshakes, everything like that will be ok."

The need to be cautious with 'hormones' at the upper primary level and opposite gender, that is, male teacher to female student and female teacher to male student was raised as an interaction to be aware of, requiring cautious professionalism.

The teachers all agreed that there needed to be different guidelines for different age groups. Reasons for this included younger children need more nurturing and reassurance:

"the younger children, they are naturally drawn to hug you, although older children still like a hug."

"I think that younger children will come up for that reassurance."

"you wouldn't just brush them off because it wasn't appropriate because we are human. We are full of emotion and we need to respond to what students are experiencing at that time."

"I may allow a pre-kindergarten student to sit on my lap, I would not allow one of my kids to do that." (when referring to an older student)

Some teachers raised the concept of commonsense as a necessary element regarding what is appropriate for older age groups, to ensure any touch was not being misconstrued.

"So, I think it comes down to the common sense of the teacher and making sure they are keeping themselves safe."

It would seem from the results of the interviews that the overall consensus of all the groups interviewed, was that younger children need more nurturing touch, and there should be guidelines to facilitate this.

Discussion

From the literature we can conclude that healthy touch is beneficial in the school setting, (Cameron, 2017; Hansen, 2007; Owen & Gillentine, 2011). All of the participants in the current study also saw the importance and the benefits of healthy touch. But, implementation can be difficult. Many schools have a code of conduct policy that reflects a cautious viewpoint, and this is entirely understandable in light of the past four and a half years of findings from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses into

Child Abuse. So, what can we learn, and where to from here?

What is needed is policy clarity

For some of teachers in the current study, the fear of litigation was the underlying reason for not using healthy touch with students.

"We may know what the research says, but we also know what the current climate is about, what parents are likely to do, what the laws allow them to do"

Owen & Gillentine (2011) found that fear of false accusations was an issue for teachers. The teachers acknowledged the benefits of touch for their students, however the majority of teachers were not prepared to take a risk by using touch.

Too often teachers felt confused (Johansson, Hedlin and Åberg, 2018), and where schools do not define safe touch, then all touch becomes suspicious. As all of the teachers in the present study referred to following some kind of guidelines to ensure that touch is appropriate, it was suggested that rather than having a no-touch policy, it would be better to have a 'safe touch policy,' particularly as touch was seen as a necessary part of lower primary school life. The attitudes of students, parents and the majority of teachers supported a safe-touch policy being implemented. Teachers feel that they need more support from policy to properly understand touch in the classroom (Ohman & Quennerstedt, 2017) or in the sports field or playground. Particular instances were raised indicating the need for touch in developing skills, for example putting a student's hand in the right position to hold a pencil, pen, brush, saw or javelin. Having clear guidance as to what policies and procedures will guide appropriate and beneficial touch, does allow teachers to feel more comfortable offering appropriate human contact.

In a Christian school, policy needs to appropriately accommodate the gospel record: "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these' " (Matt 19:14 NIV).

There should be policy differentiation

From the results of this study, the overall consensus was that younger students need more nurturing, comforting and protecting touch than the older students and there is support for the concept of more nurturing touch being needed for younger children (Owen & Gillentine, 2011). Also, the results from this study highlighted the importance of touch with children with special needs. In the present study, children with anxiety responded positively to healthy

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touch, and this should be available to children who need it. The literature supports this notion, as some children with sensory processing disorders can benefit from deep pressure touch that helps them to reach their sense of equilibrium again (Daus & Sansone, 2001; Parker & O'Connor, 2016).

Arenas of safety

The overall consensus was that the majority of the participants believed that healthy touch was important and beneficial, and both parents and teachers offered ways to make it appropriate through the idea of an Arena of Safety. The parents referred to making hugs appropriate by giving a side hug, or a hug around the shoulders.

"I guess above the shoulders if you are going to lay out rules, above chest level."

This view was supported by teachers as they talked about always being in view of others and never being alone with a student. Parents and teachers both referred to appropriate touch between genders, especially as students reach puberty. Seeking permission before bestowing physical contact was also highlighted and this is widely supported in the literature (Cameron, 2017; Hansen, 2010; Owen & Gillentine, 2011).

While this study focussed on teacher-initiated touch of a student, further research and additional discussion should consider the broader arena of touch in forming a school policy: There is a case for students, especially at an upper primary level, to seek permission for a hug from a teacher. There is a need, however, to educate students regarding appropriate ways to hug teachers. A full front on hug is not appropriate, however, a side-hug, A-frame or round the shoulders hug is. With students aware of these guidelines, it may be less embarrassing for teachers and students if a student tries to give a hug to a teacher that is inappropriate (Hansen, 2010).

Social awareness is important

While the present study does support the use of healthy touch, a healthy social awareness is needed. Teachers need to be able to read the situation accurately to ensure the needs of students are met. Teachers must become kid-watchers to familiarise themselves with their students' nonverbal communication patterns (Hansen, 2010).

A parent in the current study concurred with this, and provided insight and regarded the area of touch as a complex area. This was because teachers need to be able to read the needs of the child, in a variety of situations, and at different times.

"It is exceptionally complex. There are so many variables that can be brought into the situation."

It was felt that teachers:

"have to have the ability to read that child and read the situation as to where they are at, ... being down at their level and feeding off what they are requiring."

It is also important to consider, that just like some students may not want healthy touch in certain situations, some teachers may not want to give or receive touch either. As one student in the current study indicated, he did not want any physical contact to comfort him from an emotional upset, and said;

"I just need some space."

Conclusion

The majority of the participants in this study supported the use of physical contact, in a healthy way, between teachers and students. Students, parents and teachers were mindful of appropriate ways to touch, arena of safety issues, and that touch may not be for everyone. It is important to recognize that 'teacher-initiated touching' is only one part of a 'touching' culture and is influenced by that culture.

At the lower primary level, there was an overwhelming support for healthy touch to be integrated into school life. It was noted that some teachers were fearful of being misunderstood or misconstrued when it came to physical contact with students, especially at the upper primary level. They either refrained from touch altogether or were cautious with how they offered or accepted it.

Currently, Australian law does not prevent teachers from touching their students in a healthy way, however, schools are struggling for policy clarity. The abusive forms of touch, physical abuse and sexual abuse, have shocked so many of us, and as a result, current schools' policies have moved teachers toward a no touch approach. Within this environment students may be missing out on the power of positive touch and teachers, especially in lower primary, left to apply their own versions of safe-touch policies. It is time to review current school approaches and confirm that we are delivering education with maximum benefit for all. **TEACH**

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