

**Reflections of a Beautiful Journey:
*Integrating the Neufeld Approach into Schools:***

By David McFall

On a cold and sunny mid-February day, I ventured onto the playground at lunch to watch the students at play. As I wandered around the senior playground, it was surprising to see so few children outside. How could this be? We have at least 300 students on the senior side and 250 on the junior side. Suddenly, a moment of realization made everything so clear. There was a reason why there were so few students on the senior campus. Either most students were engaged in an activity with a caring adult, or they were taking care of younger students. This moment was quite possibly the most satisfying moment of my ten-year career as principal of Pierre Elliott Trudeau Elementary School (PETES). I had finally reached that still point, whereby I could pause to reflect upon a beautiful journey of personal and school transformation.

Thinking back, the school was so different ten years ago – I was so different ten years ago. At that time, I was a new Elementary School Principal with absolutely no elementary school experience. Eight years as a high school teacher and seven years as a high school vice-principal had woefully prepared me for the responsibility of taking care of elementary-aged children. I can still vividly remember the first day the school bus doors opened and when those tiny kindergarten children disembarked – I was so intimidated. Instantly, I was yearning for the complexity and predictability of those unruly high school students.

The first six months as principal of an elementary school had not fared too well. Each recess and lunchtime, at least 10 to 20 students were sent to my office for aggressive and disrespectful behaviour. Instinctively, each time, I would respond with disciplinary measures – removing recess, gym time or even suspension. I was so busy disciplining kids, that I could not quite see that things were getting worse instead of better. My master plan for recess was quite simple – send all 300 students outside (school has now increased to 550 students), lock the doors, breathe for a few moments, and then wait for the aftermath of another unsuccessful recess time. Teachers seemed happy enough, as they would retreat to the staff room for 20 minutes of respite before having to respond to the endless streams of drama and conflict, which just seemed to be the way things were - or did it?

How could I make sense of these strange and emotionally charged elementary-aged creatures? Then one day, as if a gift from the heavens, I was presented with an opportunity that would not only change my career, but would also change my life (and little did I know – save lives). My school board director (who possibly new I was clueless about early childhood development) registered me for a Dr. Neufeld course called “Making Sense of Children”. After his very first presentation, I gradually began reflecting and thinking (instead of reacting) for the first time in months. I could now begin seeing the landscape differently. First things first, though, I had to sort out recess time.

When reflecting on how Dr. Neufeld presented his attachment-based developmental approach, I realized that I needed to rethink how we could organize recess. After prying my eyes open, I

slowly became aware of the possibilities ahead. The plan began by having my Behaviour Technician (Declan) organize sports in the gym during recess. This new sports program in the gym was exclusively for the 15 to 20 children that I did not want on the playground. This one slight adjustment to recess almost paid instant dividends; as instead of 20 kids being sent to my office each recess, it quickly reduced to about ten. Little did I know that the 15 chronic behavioral 'offenders' on the playground could actually behave well in the gym, when being looked after by a caring adult. This was the moment when I began rethinking traditional school organization. This was the moment I actually became a 'real' elementary school principal.

Each month, we started introducing subtle changes to the recess gym schedule. This was not due to a great revelation; rather, it occurred when a teacher unceremoniously pointed out that good kids were now trying to be bad so they could get into the gym at recess. Was my plan unravelling and doomed to failure; or, could we possibly adjust our approach. When consulting with a few teachers, we introduced the idea of having different grade levels having access to the gym on different days. There would be a sign-up sheet for those that wanted to be in the gym on their grade level's scheduled day. However, the 15 assigned kids would still be assigned to the gym every day.

There were three major discoveries from this approach: First, all kids could play together well when supervised by a caring adult (even 50 kids playing dodge ball); second, kids were falling into deep attachment with the caring adult; and third, kids were getting excited every time it was their scheduled day to be in the gym. Now that I was finally able to see through new eyes (the eyes of a kid), the possibilities were endless.

What happened over the next few years was quite simply extraordinary. We gradually began adding a few new activities during recess to help kids find a safe place in the company of a caring adult. Another unexpected revelation for a sports-daft principal - not all kids love sports! For those younger students who were full of aggression on the playground, we added a 'Lego Club'; and, for those older students who simply wanted peace and quiet, we introduced a reading room. With just a few minor adjustments to recess, we had been able to reduce the number of incidents on the playground to roughly five per day. At this point, the approach was starting to gather momentum with the staff even asking questions about the Neufeld approach.

Another revelation - many kids simply liked helping around the school. As such, I consulted with staff to strategically find care-taking roles for students. Some students asked if they could help with the chef in the kitchen, while others asked if they could help younger students on the playground. Within months, we had successfully organized a 'Playmakers' program to train students how to facilitate games, and had successfully organized a 'mini-chef' program to teach students how to cook and help in the kitchen. Little did we realize that we were now providing opportunities for the care-taking instincts of future teachers, day-care providers and chefs. These simple changes were almost revolutionary in their nature to traditional school thinking. Due to these recent successes, we continued to search for more original and innovative activities for students during recess and lunch.

Approximately two years ago, there was a moment when you could feel the changes within the culture of the school. Teachers and lunchtime supervisors were commenting on the fact that there were fewer incidents on the playground. They were beginning to acknowledge that some of the 'chronic' behavioural kids were changing – those students were becoming more 'mature'. Then, suddenly, teachers and supervisors started to embrace the idea of introducing skipping ropes and sleds onto the playground. Previously, those ideas would have undoubtedly been received negatively – “they will strangle each other with ropes”, or “hurt themselves with those sleds”. However, with a change in attitude, new comments could be heard – “can you believe the exercise kids are getting skipping”, or “can you believe how much fun kids are having sledding”. The cultural shift had taken place and participatory supervision had finally taken root.

Each year, we have continued to improve our collective understanding of the science of emotion and the power of attachment. The greatest breakthrough, however, unwittingly occurred when I announced to students during an assembly that they should consider ideas for clubs or activities during recess. Students simply had to imagine a club or activity and then find a teacher who could help supervise. Little did I know that this would be the catalyst for the greatest transformation in the history of the school.

Day after day, students knocked on my office door or stopped me in the hallway to say, “Sir, we want to start a club”. Even though dozens of clubs never actually get off the ground, it warms my heart with joy every time they ask. To be honest, giving students the invitation to tap into their sense of wonder has been the greatest gift at all. Of course, the clubs are fantastic, but the healthy attachments between students and teachers has been more important. Children now have a sense of identity and a feeling of being taken care of (being at rest during a potentially vulnerable time). This was such a simple concept. Something that has always been there, but something rarely seen or imagined.

As I gaze upon the half-empty playground, I feel a sense of pride and accomplishment. Maybe once in a career you will find that moment when suddenly everything seems to make sense. We are always so busy during school and throughout our life that we rarely get the chance to see the fruit of the developmental process. It moves at glacial pace so we can never truly see the gains. However, when that moment arrives and you find that still point, you can actually see the transformation before your eyes. Thank you Dr. Neufeld for providing me with the eyes to follow the attachment-based developmental approach – what a gift!

As I wander onto the junior playground, I hear the most beautiful sound of children laughing and the most beautiful sight of children playing. Senior students are helping younger students; supervisors are playing with kids; and endless numbers of children are skipping, clapping and rhyming.

Inside the school, I am overwhelmed to see how many children are connecting with teachers in various clubs and activities - knitting (how cool), beading, singing, cooking, dancing, reading, drumming, making comic books, solving Rubik cubes, and I could go on and on. As I reflect upon the incredible transformation, this rookie principal has finally understood the meaning of childhood - *Play and Attachment*.

In conclusion, the theorist Peter Senge once commented that we never actually achieve personal mastery – “but the journey is the reward”. What a beautiful journey this has been!