Human contact in the classroom: Exploring how teachers talk about and negotiate touching students

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Abstract

In a “risk society,” as defined by Beck [(1992). Risk society, towards a new modernity (M. Ritter, Trans.) Newbury Park, CA: Sage, see also Castel, R. (1991). From dangerousness to risk. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon & P. Miller (Eds.), The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality (pp. 281–298). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press], teachers are risky individuals who, “must become permanent objects of their own suspicion” [Jones, A. (2003b). Touching children: Policy, social anxiety, and the ‘safe’ teacher. Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, 19(2), 112]. The purpose of this study was to explore how four experienced, female teachers for whom “touching” students is a natural component of their teaching, talked about how they made choices about when and how to engage in the risky behavior of touching children. Findings are organized along two axes. The first represents how participating teachers perceived contexts as facilitating or constraining human contact. The second illustrates what conversations about human contact revealed about participants’ teaching selves. This study contributes to the literature on teacher–student relationships as well as the literature on teachers’ decision-making. Implications for future research in teacher decision-making, teacher–student relationships, and teacher education are discussed.

Keywords: Teacher–student interaction; Teacher–student relationship; Decision making; Risk management; Touch; Teaching self

1. Introduction

1.1. Teacher–student relationships

In the United States, concerns about the performance of students in K-12 schools have prompted sweeping initiatives to improve teacher quality, like the Federal No Child Left Behind Act. These initiatives have primarily focused on improving teachers’ mastery of content specific knowledge and their knowledge of methods for teaching content. However, findings by the Commission on Children at Risk indicate a critical area of supporting students’ cognitive, social, and intellectual development may have yet to be implemented in attempts to leave no child behind. In a report titled Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities, (Commission on Children at Risk, 2003; see also Resnick et al., 1997) leaders from across medicine, developmental psychology, psychiatry, and youth agencies argue we are facing a crisis in terms of the “deteriorating mental and behavioral health of US children.” At the heart of
the crisis, experts argue, lies the failure of social institutions to meet the inherent needs of children and adolescents to connect with adults (Goldstein, 1999; Noddings, 1988).

This argument parallels findings in educational psychology which suggest students who fail to develop a sense of “belongingness,” or social connection, to their schools and teachers are at a greater risk for poor school performance. The benefits of positive, caring teacher–student relationships throughout every phase of schooling are well documented (Alder & Moulton, 1998; Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Cothran, Kulinna, & Garrahy, 2003; Davis, 2003; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Pomeroy, 1999; Wentzel, 1997, 1998). Students who feel supported by their teachers have higher school self-esteem, are eager to please their teachers, and therefore, experience greater motivation for learning. Additionally, research suggests warm and trusting relationships between students and teachers are key elements in building classroom environments wherein students feel comfortable taking creative and intellectual risks (Davis, 2006; Turner et al., 1998, 2002). Furthermore, students who feel connected to their teachers are more likely to seek help when it is needed to understand content or complete a learning task. These findings indicate a heavy-handed focus on academic content, instructional methods, and student performance which underplays the importance of relationship quality in classrooms may result in unintended consequences for student development.

### 1.2. The role and risk of human contact

Inasmuch as the importance of teacher–student relationship quality is minimized in the current educational climate, the role of human contact in building those relationships appears to be overlooked altogether. In this paper, we define human contact as the attempts teachers make to connect with students both emotionally and physically. These efforts include inquiring about the students’ feelings, expressing empathy, and disclosing details and narratives regarding their own lives. Human contact also includes episodes wherein teachers come into physical contact with students in order to help them understand a concept, comfort them, or celebrate with them. Additionally, we consider the influence metaphorical language such as “designing moving lessons,” “being touchable,” “embracing all students,” “touching the life of a child,” or “having a hands-on approach,” has on teachers’ decision-making to be evidence of human contact in their classrooms (see Sobchack, 2004 for discussion of embodied metaphors in popular culture). Although this kind of figurative language is commonly used by teachers, its meaning has not been explored in the literature. Similarly, the impact touch and other forms of human contact can have in aiding instruction and building classroom culture is not well understood.

This lack of attention to and understanding of the potential of human contact to enrich classroom interaction largely stems from a taboo in educational discourse regarding bodies and touching (Pillow, 2003). The nature of this taboo is evidenced by the fact that a search of the literature in the United States revealed very limited research regarding touch in teaching. This limited presence in education stands in contrast to fields such as nursing, social work, and counseling wherein the subject of touching is widely investigated and discussed. The taboo nature of this topic in education also contributes to a K-12 culture wherein touching students in many teaching contexts is often either implicitly discouraged or explicitly prohibited by district/school policies. As Jones (2003a) points out, “touching children is now well embedded as one of the risks which must be managed as an aspect of proper contemporary teacher practice” (p. 192). Jones (2003a) found many teachers in New Zealand share a very narrow conception of touching. Particularly, that touching is somehow equivalent to only expressing affection, and that that expression of affection is somehow inappropriate and sexual in nature. She further posits that touching is not only a risky behavior, but that the behavior is embedded in what Beck (1992, see also Castel, 1991) refers to as a “risk society.” Specifically, she argues teachers cope with an environment in which energy and attention are myopically focused on defense from high cost, low probability threats such as the unlikelihood of students being physically or sexually assaulted by a teacher as opposed to risks such as students falling on school playgrounds—a risk with higher probability but lower cost. Because teaching necessarily involves unhindered access to children, all teachers are perceived as risky individuals and touching children always poses a risky situation. As a result of acknowledging these risks of teacher–student interactions, “good teachers must become permanent objects of their own suspicions” (Jones, 2003b, p. 112).

Most of the teacher trainees who participated in the Jones (2003a) study were frustrated by these
ramifications of living in a risk society. They were troubled that their desire to be a nurturing, comforting, and touching teacher—a desire based on altruistic intentions—automatically marked them as untrustworthy. They were also disturbed by the expectation that they monitor or alter what they felt to be natural inclinations to comfort or assist children through the use of touch. These feelings may be particularly salient in teaching contexts such as dance, early childhood, physical education, or special education wherein touching students is considered a necessary and effective pedagogical tool.

In addition to the use of touch as a pedagogical tool, Goldstein (1999) argues “touching” can be used as a tool to create classrooms with a warm, caring interpersonal culture. As part of this culture, inclusive classrooms depend on teachers and students to acknowledge each other as individuals. Writing about the holistic nature of this acknowledgment, Wolfe (1991) states, “Sensing a kid’s true presence, that part of him or her that is immutable and mysterious, commits the teacher to look ... into the heart of relationship where teacher and child meet” (p. 299). Miller (2000) elaborates on this notion when he asserts this true presence, which is synonymous with his notion of the whole person, is comprised of layered and inextricably related elements of the self including: the intellectual, creative, aesthetic, social, spiritual, emotional, and physical. From this perspective, how can you acknowledge a student, their true presence, their whole person, if you do not acknowledge their body and the impact of their body in the classroom?

1.3. Teachers’ decision-making regarding instruction

In seeking to understand teachers’ decision-making about touch in the classroom, we were guided by the literature on teachers’ instructional decision-making. When considering this literature, pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) currently serves as the cornerstone for analysis and discussion of the ways teachers make instructional decisions. Shulman (1986, 1987) defines PCK as a form of knowledge based on the integration of subject matter knowledge, pedagogy, and understandings regarding student learning. Extending Shulman’s conception of PCK, Ball (2000) argues the teaching task can be understood as the transformation of content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge into PCK. Ball’s argument is represented and elaborated in Fig. 1 which shows how content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, PCK, and the relationships between them are commonly written about in the teacher education literature. Additionally, Chen and Ennis (1995) argue this process involves four phases of decision-making: clarification, interpretation, choosing representations, and adaptation. Teachers must clarify and interpret the content for themselves. They must also choose representations and/or adaptations of the content which will be accessible. Moreover, in the requirement that teachers make content accessible, it is implied that
they make it accessible to their students. Commonly used models of teacher practice emphasize knowledge of general learning and development theory as the foundation for making content accessible to students. They do not generally highlight the need to know or consider the learning needs of particular students, individually or collectively.

McCaughtry (2005) claims, however, that knowledge of particular students should be considered an integral part of PCK. He argues that although the PCK literature has attended to the need for teachers to understand student learning, it has, “overlooked a great deal of additional ways that teachers may know students that equally contribute towards teaching” (p. 379). McCaughtry references the following ways of knowing students beyond simply being familiar with learning and development theory: becoming aware of students’ community and family backgrounds, querying students’ social and political worldviews, and paying attention to students as emotional and physical beings.

McCaughtry’s (2005) article points to a limitation of the existing models regarding teacher decision-making. The existing models with their focus on instruction, assessment, and classroom management fail to give adequate weight to the interpersonal knowledge teachers possess and the degree to which this knowledge shapes and informs instructional decision-making. Additionally, these models often overlook the influence of teaching selves on instruction and classroom interaction. An extension of these models which addresses these limitations provided the framework we used to explore teachers’ decision-making regarding touch (see Fig. 2). Using this extended model of PCK helped us to be continually mindful of the multiple and layered ways in which touch may play an important role in classroom practices. Specifically, we were interested in the potential roles of touch related to subject matter, pedagogy, and classroom management. Additionally, we felt strongly that it was important to highlight both the interpersonal and the intrapersonal elements of classroom decision-making and PCK.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore practicing teachers’ understandings of human contact, and specifically the role of touch, in their teaching. This study was guided by the question: How do teachers make decisions about how to connect physically and emotionally with their students? This study was further guided by social constructivist and holistic perspectives. The former led us to investigate both shared realities—commonly held perspectives on touch in the field of teaching—and unique realities—understandings individual teachers hold about the power and benefit of human contact as a relationship-building and pedagogical tool. The latter led us to question in what ways teachers and students are disenfranchised by taboos about touch. The participating teachers evidenced rich discourses about their multiple conceptions of touch, their understanding of risk, their touch decision-making in their classrooms, and their conceptions of themselves in the role of teacher. As a result of identifying the most salient, common elements of teacher touch decision-making across the four participants, we have developed a heurist model (see Fig. 3).

3. Methods

3.1. Researcher subjectivities

Our interest in issues related to human contact and touch in the classroom grew out of our program of research in the areas of teacher–student interaction, specifically with regard to the ways in which relationships are cultivated or stifled in the classroom (Davis, 2003, 2006). From our experience as K-12 students, we were drawn to teachers with whom we felt “connected” in the classroom. Frequently, these were teachers who we remember
touching and being touched by. As university instructors, we feel this cultural taboo about touch and struggle with these same concerns about how to interact with our students who we “read” as reaching out to be touched. Lastly, as women who attended women’s colleges, we were moved to question structures in educational systems that disenfranchise “the feminine” in the classroom. We see touch metaphors and language, as well as touch practices reflecting nurturing, feminine archetypes (see Dixson, 2003 for discussion of “mothering” in education).

3.2. Participants

This study was an exploratory, qualitative study employing convenience sampling methods for recruiting K-12, practicing teachers. Participants included two veteran and two experienced female teachers working in urban/suburban public schools in a large city in the Midwest United States. Due to the taboo nature of discussions of touch, we began by recruiting a dance educator who we felt would be comfortable discussing her decisions regarding touch. Because “touching” is a commonly used pedagogical tool for teaching dance technique, we assumed that a dance educator would have a language for discussing touch as well as concrete examples on which to draw when talking about touch in her teaching. For these reasons we considered the dance teacher to be a key informant regarding teachers’ touch decision-making. We also considered the other three participating teachers, who were recruited from graduate classes and volunteered to participate in the project based on their interest in the topic, to be key informants. All four teachers were currently practicing in K-12 public schools. Though their populations, content areas, and espoused instructional methods varied greatly, each of the teachers viewed “touching” students as a natural component of their teaching. Additionally, we attempted to recruit four other teachers who were initially interested in participating in the project, but declined after reviewing recruiting materials. The following information regarding each of the four participating teachers is available in Table 1: teaching experience, the touch metaphor having the strongest influence on their teaching, the ways in which they use touch, a quote that summarizes their stance on connecting with their students, and their individual contributions to the model regarding teachers’ touch decision-making.

3.3. Procedures

3.3.1. Data collection

Data consisted of four audiotaped, open-ended, qualitative interviews lasting approximately 90-min. The overall research question guiding our inquiry
Table 1
Table of participants including teaching experience, dominant metaphor for touch, reported uses of touch in classroom, representative quote, and estimates of coder agreement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching experiences</th>
<th>Touch metaphor</th>
<th>Use of touch</th>
<th>Representative quote</th>
<th>Contributions to the model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Penny Veteran, high school dance teacher</td>
<td>“I’m probably a pretty hands-on teacher.”</td>
<td>• Content of dance &lt;br&gt;• Pedagogy of dance &lt;br&gt;• Tool for relating to students &lt;br&gt;• Dominant Risk Posture: Willing</td>
<td>“I feel like it’s important to have sort of a pseudo-personal relationship in our particular program.”</td>
<td>• 52 codes for touch contexts; 100% agreement &lt;br&gt;• 46 codes for teaching-self; 100% agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue Veteran, middle grades physical education and wellness teacher</td>
<td>“We can establish an environment where we support one another.”</td>
<td>• Recognize potential of touch as a content of wellness &lt;br&gt;• Pedagogy of coaching &lt;br&gt;• Tool for relating to students &lt;br&gt;• Dominant Risk Posture: Cautious</td>
<td>“As hard as I try to be myself, which I feel like I am maybe 90% myself, but there’s still maybe 10% of me who’s guarded and who might be more open and honest if I felt like it would be ok…”</td>
<td>• 89 codes for touch contexts; 99% agreement &lt;br&gt;• 50 codes for teaching-self; 90% agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jen Experienced, kindergarten teacher; Coach middle school boys’ golf</td>
<td>“They’re just in close contact.”</td>
<td>• Recognize potential of touch as a pedagogy in coaching &lt;br&gt;• Tool for relating to students &lt;br&gt;• Dominant Risk Posture: Dutiful</td>
<td>“Some people will follow the guidelines from the district, and I think that I do that academically-wise. I try to make sure I fit everything I teach and follow what I’m supposed to be doing, but nurturing is just part of the job, I think, with 5 year olds.”</td>
<td>• 94 codes for touch contexts; 97% agreement &lt;br&gt;• 53 codes for teaching-self; 96% agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy Experienced, high school teacher in emotion and behavior disturbed classroom</td>
<td>“I need to be touchable.”</td>
<td>• Not touching as the content in EBD classrooms &lt;br&gt;• (Not) touching as a pedagogy in EBD classrooms &lt;br&gt;• Tool for relating to students &lt;br&gt;• Dominant Risk Posture: Censored</td>
<td>“They also need to learn positive touch. That’s where there’s such a fine line because these kids have been… Touch has been so negative. They don’t know positive. And who’s gonna teach ‘em if we don’t?”</td>
<td>• 49 codes for touch contexts; 96% agreement &lt;br&gt;• 38 codes for teaching-self; 82% agreement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Column six includes initial estimates of coder agreement between authors.

was: How do teachers make decisions about how to connect physically and emotionally with their students? During each interview, participants were asked to reflect on their philosophy of teaching, human contact in their classroom, constructing classroom culture, norms about touch, the (potential) uses of touch in education, and their fears about human contact (see Appendix). Follow-up questions asked them to reflect and elaborate on actual instances of touch, metaphors of touch, and their strategies for connecting with students and helping students to connect with content.
3.3.2. Data analysis

Data analysis was ongoing, beginning with the transcription of the first interview. We began by looking for themes within each participant. Each participant was profiled with regard to her understanding of human contact, and specifically with regard to the use of touch in the classroom. The overall research question guiding our initial open-coding pass was: How do these teachers make decisions about how to connect physically and emotionally with their students?

Several passes were made through the data in an attempt to exhaust the shared meaning and themes across participants. Through iterations of thinking about, coding, and attempting to organize data we identified two different conversations that made sorting data into mutually exclusive categories impossible. One conversation centered on the teachers discussing the contexts that facilitated or constrained their connecting with and/or touching students. The second conversation centered around how the teachers constructed who they are and who they wanted to be with their students (i.e. their teaching self) and the impact of those constructions on connecting with and/or touching students. We felt that in order to make sense of the data, as a whole, we first needed to parse out what the teachers were saying in each of these conversations.

As a result of that decision, we made two separate passes through the data. In the first pass we were guided by the question: under what conditions do these teachers touch (or allow themselves to be touched by) their students? For this pass we only coded portions of the interview where teachers were discussing interactions with their students. In the second pass we were guided by the question: What are these teachers saying about their teaching self? For this pass, we only coded portions of the interview where the teachers were discussing who they are as a teacher and the impact of those constructions on their interactions with students. Sometimes this involved making contrasts with who they are in other roles such as mother/guardian, colleague, or friend. Because teachers frequently embedded two thoughts in a single phrase (i.e. describing themselves as a ‘risky person’ while simultaneously commenting on whether their teaching context provided a safe space to take risks), it is important to note that sometimes the same portion of data (i.e. sentence or phrase) was coded as reflecting the teacher’s perceptions of context and their teaching self. This method of making two separate passes through the data allowed us to code portions of the interview more systematically.

Using this method we were able to code approximately 83% of the interview data into 16 mutually exclusive codes. The portions of the interviews which did not sort into these 16 codes were statements about the participants’ general character traits, the content area they taught, or their commonly used methods of instruction that did not involve touch. In order to examine inter-coder agreement (see Column 6, Table 1), we enlisted a third, outside coder who was familiar with the topic but who was not involved in the design of the project. She coded all of the interviews except the one with Penny. We learned two things about our coding. First, across the three interviews she generated fewer total codes for each participant. In other words, we learned we were more sensitive coders. Second, in instances where there were disagreements about how to code the data, the disagreement occurred between the two authors and not the outside coder. In these cases, disagreements were discussed and reconciled.

In an attempt to understand how our codes were related to each other, we generated data matrices that were used to examine the frequency of each code, to assess the representativeness of codes across the four participants, and to draw connections amongst the experiences and understandings of each participant. Through this process we developed a grounded model (see Fig. 3) for understanding how the teachers in our study made decisions about touch in the classroom. This model contains 16 mutually exclusive codes around four themes (Assessing Impact, Risk Postures, Boundaries, and Reading Students), two core themes (Navigating Risk and Negotiating Touch), and one umbrella theme (Teachers’ Touch Decision-Making). Table 2 contains exemplary quotes representing each of the 16 codes.

4. Findings

4.1. How do teachers make decisions about how to connect physically and emotionally with their students?

We organized findings from the interviews into a grounded-model of Teachers’ Touch Decision-Making (see Fig. 3). Specifically, we learned the

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1The outside coder was a doctoral student in educational psychology and teacher education who worked as a nursing educator and was familiar with the nursing literature regarding touch.
process of teachers’ touch decision-making is layered and complex. In all cases, the decisions our teachers made about touching students came at the intersection of their assessment of who they are as teacher and their consideration of their classroom, school, and community contexts. We portray these two dimensions of our teachers’ decision-making as axes in the figure that intersect with decision-making in the center. When discussing the role of context in their touch decisions, teachers described four types of risks touching presented (Assessing Impact). They described risks ranging from the most local impact (e.g. To Student) to risks that are more far-reaching (e.g. Societal). Likewise, the teachers in our study also described the ways in which they evaluated the context of the student by “reading” their cues (Reading Students). Their ability to read cues ranged from tangible, tactile experiences (e.g. Feeling) to more intangible sensations (e.g. Intuition). We organized the eight codes for risk and reading students along the Elements of Context-Axis with the most tangible, local codes portrayed closest to the center and more intangible, global codes at the extremes.

When discussing how their self, as a teacher, contributed to making decisions, our teachers frequently described the boundaries they both explicitly and implicitly held regarding touching students and having students touch each other. These boundaries ranged from subtle, personal emotional boundaries they held that transcend the classroom context (e.g. Emotional) to actual spatial and temporal boundaries used to negotiate their classroom (e.g. Spatial/Temporal). Teachers also described what we have named a Risk Posture; in other words, a general stance towards engaging in risky touch behaviors. These postures ranged from construing themselves as the kind of teacher who takes risks to touch students because they viewed connecting with students as a responsibility and touch as a vital tool for making connections (e.g. Dutiful). In this case, the teaching self was constructed around relationships and touching students. In other cases, teachers described themselves as “touchable” people who had to repress their natural inclinations because their teaching context was too risky (e.g. Censored). As with the Elements of Context, we organized the eight codes for teaching self along the Elements of Self-Axis with codes that reflected the most personal boundaries and postures with the greatest emphasis on self at the origin. Thus, movement towards the extremes reflects, on some level, a distance from their teaching-self.

Lastly, when thinking about how the axes were related to each other, we identified two core themes: Navigating Risk and Negotiating Touch. Each of these themes helped us to understand how the teachers weighed each axis when making a touch decision. For example, though each of our teachers had a dominant risk posture (see Table 1), each teacher described times when they shifted from their dominant risk posture to another posture given their assessment of potential impact of touch. Most commonly, our teachers described the ways in which they shifted into a cautious posture. In these instances teachers evaluated and weighed the perceived risks and determined touching students was needed or necessary, but risky. Thus, we learned that one way our teachers navigated their perceived risk cues was by choosing an alternate risk posture. In the following sections, we describe the four themes and two core themes as our participants talked about them. For the sake of clarity, we have chosen to describe these themes as they relate to the two guiding questions we used to analyze the data. Before specifically discussing the themes, we have provided a brief portrait of each of the participants.

4.1.1. Participant portraits

Penny: As we decided to first interview a dance educator, someone we assumed would have a great deal of experience with touch in her classroom, Penny was the first participant recruited and interviewed for the study. She was a veteran dance teacher with more than 15 years teaching experience. At the time of the interview, she was working with juniors and seniors, ranging in age from 16 to 19 years old, in a public high school career center. The majority of her students hoped to pursue dance as a career. Although most high schools in the United States do not offer dance, there are a few states wherein teaching licenses are available in dance. In these states, it is most common for dance to be offered in performing arts high schools and career centers. Penny feels respected and trusted by her colleagues but is constantly aware of school policies regulating how, when, and where teachers are permitted to be with students. As a “hands-on teacher,” she views touch as playing an integral role in her teaching. Specifically, she perceives touch to be part of the content of dance, an appropriate pedagogical strategy for dance, and a tool for building supportive relationships with students. We
Table 2
Exemplary quotes of teachers’ decision-making regarding human contact in the classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Navigating Risk</th>
<th>Assessing Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Risk to student</strong></td>
<td><strong>Risk of student</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One of my particular girls... came by and I would hug her, but that’s also a personal choice. And I would hug her knowing I could get in trouble for it. That’s what she needed. (Kathy)</td>
<td>I had a little boy that had Asbergers, and he didn’t want anybody to touch him... or he, he literally would start screaming... He set his own boundaries for everybody. (Jen)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Risk Postures</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dutiful</td>
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<tr>
<td>I try to make sure I fit everything I teach [into the standards] and follow what I’m supposed to be doing, but nurturing is just part of the job, I think, with five year olds. (Jen)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negotiating Touch in the Classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading Students</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If... you touch them on the shoulder, and they kind of jerk back from you, that’s a pretty nonverbal cue that that is just not something that works for them.... But another student you might touch them on the shoulder and you just feel the tensions go out of their body. (Penny)</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Boundaries</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When children go to school upset all learning stops... If they don’t tell me first thing then they... might have aggressive behavior. So I encourage sharing in the morning. (Jen)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sue: Sue, the teacher we labeled as Cautious, teaches physical education and wellness in a middle school. She works primarily with sixth graders, most of whom are 11 or 12 years old. As a veteran teacher with more than 15 years experience, Sue was pursuing administrative licensure and aspired to be...
a school principal. While she recognized the role touch might play in the content and instruction of physical education and wellness, she was very concerned with maintaining administrator and colleague support. Additionally, she was concerned with the need to “not rock the boat” so that wellness would continue to be part of the middle school curriculum.

Jen: Jen filled two primary roles in her school community. She was a kindergarten teacher, working with 5- and 6-year-olds, as well as a middle school boys’ golf coach. In this latter role, she worked with boys ranging in age from 12 to 14 years old. Although she was more guarded as a coach than as a kindergarten teacher, due to the students’ age and gender, Jen was a Dutiful teacher. This means she felt touching students and being affectionate was a part of being a good teacher. Although a novice at coaching golf, Jen was an experienced kindergarten teacher with more than seven years of experience.

Kathy: Kathy, like Jen, was an experienced teacher who had worked in special education for more than 5 years. At the time of the interview, she was in the middle of her first year in a high school environment working with special education students who have emotional and behavioral problems. These students spent most of the day in regular classrooms, but came to Kathy’s class for approximately one hour during the day for additional academic and behavioral support. Prior to this year working in a public high school, Kathy spent 3 years working in an alternative high school for students whose emotional and behavioral problems were so severe they needed to be self-contained. Kathy was struggling to adjust to the norms of her new environment. Part of this adjustment was learning how to effectively incorporate touch into her teaching practice as touch was categorically forbidden at the alternative school. Kathy recognized the potential of touch as a tool for relating to students but was anxious about using touch because of the student population with which she worked. Because of this, we categorized her as Censored.

4.2. Question 1: How Does Context Shape Teachers’ Decision-Making about How and When to Touch Students?

4.2.1. Reading students

Deciding to touch a student, for all of the participants, involved some means of determining what their students’ touch needs and preferences were. Teachers talked about interpreting four different types of information they received from students. The first type of cue, Feeling cues, represent tangible, tactile experiences our teachers had with touching students. For example, in Table 2, Penny described the ways in which students might pull back or shy away from touch as a way to communicate their discomfort with being touched. She also noted how students’ reactions to touch could communicate that touch was welcome, wanted, and soothing. Kathy frequently used touching and not touching as a classroom management tool to help students learn to regulate their own behavior. In the following quote, she described reading a student’s physiological response as evidence that her touch helped him to calm down and refocus: “I just automatically held his hand because he was goofin’ off and tellin’ jokes... but as soon as I held his hand [his body] was like, ‘Oh, yeah.’ And then we could talk.”

Another way of determining what students need is hearing what students say. Sometimes students simply ask for what they need. Spoken communication, however, is not always clear. As Kathy expressed, “I don’t think they’re [always] able to tell me what they want, but... I know what [they’re] saying.” To “hear” is not only to literally listen to students, but to “see beyond words and see the behavior.” Related to the ability to hear what students are truly communicating verbally is the ability to see what students are communicating through nonverbal cues such as eye contact, gestures, and postures. Similarly, Neill (1986, 1989); Neill, Fitzgerald, and James (1983) and Robertson (1989) found that the use and interpretation of nonverbal communication is an essential component of establishing classroom culture including norms and expectations (see also Hoy & Davis, 2006).

In concert, reading these three kinds of cues: those felt, those seen, and those heard, indicates a need for teachers to know their students, as suggested by McCaughtry (2005), and to be “with-it.” Withitness, as defined in the classroom management literature, means constantly being aware of all that is occurring in the classroom. It also means communicating this awareness, through both words and actions, to students (Brooks, 1985; Charles, 2002; Woolfolk, 2004). Considering the findings of this study, we now believe withitness is not only an essential component of making sound classroom
management decisions, it is also essential to making good decisions regarding teacher–student relationships and human contact in the classroom.

While withitness requires an external awareness of what is happening in the classroom, the fourth kind of cue participating teachers used to make decisions involved an internal awareness of their own physiological and emotional reactions—their intuitions. Sue pointed to how this intuition can evolve over time when she said:

I think prior to my many years in wellness, I would have thought that everyone was just like me—everyone would want a hug in this situation, everyone would want somebody to hold their hand... and I'm realizing that some people don't want that physical touch. So, I feel like I've had to learn more that it's appropriate and safer to keep your distance and to ask about those things than to assume that anyone would be comforted by that method of comfort.

Although none of the other three participating teacher specifically discussed how their intuition changed, each of them mentioned consulting their “gut” or “instincts” when deciding whether or not to touch a student.

4.2.2. Assessing impact

In addition to reading students, participating teachers referred to the need to weigh the risks and benefits of engaging in touching students, the need to read the context. Participants spoke about managing this assessment in two ways: asking who is at risk and in what way and deciding whether the benefits of touch outweigh the potential harms. In terms of assessing impact, each of the participants mentioned different and multiple kinds of risk. There are risks to students, both in touching them and in not touching them; there are risks of students, students with whom interaction is risky; and there are personal risks, both contained within the school context and extended into the community.

The latter two categories of risk, those that are Professional and Societal, have been previously explored in the literature. Particularly, Jones (2003a) has documented that teachers in New Zealand are aware of and influenced by stories, however rare, of teachers who have been dismissed from employment because they are likely to misinterpret touch and either respond inappropriately or raise questions regarding a teacher’s professionalism. There are risks to these students because misinterpreting touch or associating it with prior negative experiences of touch can be damaging. However, as mentioned in Table 2, Kathy also pointed out how not touching students can pose a risk to students when she shared a story about a female student who had been assaulted and needed the solace of a sympathetic hug from a caring adult. In this situation, Kathy believed the choice to not hug this student would have been harmful.

Additionally, our teachers mentioned risks to and of students related specifically to physical safety. Penny and Sue were the participants most likely to discuss these issues as they teach physical content: dance and physical education, respectively. Penny referred to the need for clarity and vigilance when teaching students how to partner. She said:

That has to be taught very technically. “This hand goes here. This is what needs to happen. This is how your weight needs to be so that
you’re able to lift.” … in that instance, I make it very clear. “Do you understand that if you do not take this seriously, that a career could be ended before it’s even begun?”

This statement indicates that although Penny felt partnering is an essential element of the art of dance, she realized there are risks involved when students lift one another, and these risks must be carefully managed. Similarly, Sue shared that there are some instances where sports, such as field hockey, have to be taught in a somewhat inauthentic manner in order to reduce the likelihood that students will come into contact with and subsequently hurt each other.

4.3. Question 2: How Does Teaching Self Shape Decision-Making about How and When to Touch Students?

4.3.1. Risk postures

After assessing the risk, teachers must decide whether or not it is worth taking. This process involves taking an inventory of their stance towards the contexts and risks involved. We have called this stance a Risk Posture. Teachers, like Jen, who are most likely to accept the risks and who, at times, perceive touching to be part of the job, are referred to as Dutiful. As Jen commented, “A hug’s ok ‘cause we’ve gotten so carried away with, you know, we can’t hug kids anymore, and all, and I think it’s hard for children to learn empathy if they don’t see others doing that.” On the other end of the spectrum are teachers like Kathy who perceive themselves to be affectionate people but, because of the circumstances in which they work, adopt a Censored posture. These teachers suppress their inclinations to touch students and seek ways of, “[touching] without touching” and “being intimate remotely” (Jones, 2003b, p. 103).

It is important to note that while the participating teachers did exhibit a dominant risk posture (see Table 1), these postures are not static. Each of our teachers mentioned some circumstance that caused them to shift from their dominant posture to another. For example, Sue, whose dominant posture of Cautious was evidenced when she said, “You just want to be sure that what you do and the way you say things and the way that you would touch someone is exactly called for,” acknowledged that when children are hurt or afraid, she was usually willing to comfort them with touch. Similarly Penny, who we characterized as a willing teacher, referred to touch as a pedagogical necessity when students require correction in dance technique class and verbal feedback has not been effective.

4.3.2. Boundaries

Participating teachers also discussed the importance of establishing appropriate boundaries with students. Some teachers, like Penny, spoke about these boundaries as being primarily relational. She referred to the need to maintain “pseudo-personal relationships” with her students, and, as indicated in Table 2, she was insistent about distinguishing between her role as a teacher and her students’ roles as students. Others spoke about boundaries as being related to behavior—what is acceptable, what is not acceptable, and with whom. For example Sue made some touch decisions based on boundaries she had established regarding the age and gender of the recipient. She said:

Before I guess they’re going through adolescence, it feels different to me to be giving a hug to a student. I wouldn’t just go up to give a male student a hug or a female student a hug right now… I wouldn’t feel at all funny hugging another teacher, female teacher… I’d do more of a sideways hug with a male teacher.

On the other hand, some teachers eliminated boundaries regarding touch and their students as Jen mentioned, “I don’t tell them they can’t be affectionate with other children…. We don’t say you can’t hug somebody.” Additionally, participants referenced the need to create and maintain boundaries related not only to behavior and relationships but also to space or time. For example, Kathy expressed her position when she said, “As the teacher, where I’m coming from is, ‘I’m touchable, but you need to respect me, and you need to have respectful touch and you need to respect my space.’”

There is research to suggest that this creation and maintenance of boundaries related to time, space, behavior, and relationships is an integral part of the teaching task. However, research also suggests teachers may differ in their view about the “best way” to manage interactions with students (Martin, Yin, & Baldwin, 1998). For example teachers may adopt either a custodial or a caregiver orientation (Finkelstein, 2001; Willower, Eidell, & Hoy, 1967). Teachers exemplifying a custodial orientation tend not to concern themselves with trying to understand the reasons that underlie student behavior. We believe these teachers are likely to have rigid
boundaries regarding their interactions with students. Teachers who embody a caregiver orientation, however, tend to hold more humanistic perspectives and view students as capable of learning to self-regulate their own relationships and behavior. It is likely these teachers view boundaries as malleable and mutually constructed.

When analyzing teachers’ responses to beliefs about the teacher’s role, whether custodial or caregiver, in promoting the types of intellectual and interpersonal interactions they desired in the classroom, Martin et al. (1998) found teachers’ responses fell into three categories which parallel these three kinds of boundaries. Specifically, teachers tended to view the task of classroom management as composed of interactions needed to facilitate orderly and organized instruction (Spatial/Temporal boundaries), interactions needed to facilitate the development of supportive teacher—student relationships (Relational boundaries), and the interactions needed to prevent opportunities for student misbehavior (Behavioral boundaries).

While the need for each of these three kinds of boundaries is well represented in the literature, the nature of and need for the fourth kind, Emotional, has not been discussed. Our teachers discussed emotional boundaries in several ways. The clearest were boundaries created to keep emotions about students and their personal situations from having an influence on classroom interactions. For example, Penny shared a narrative about one of her students who was going through a very difficult time personally. She did not, however, share the details of the situation because she was not aware of them. Penny chose not to learn about them because she believed, “[they have] no place in the classroom,” and that in order to continue to provide a space for this student where she could feel productive and safe, Penny had to remain uninformed regarding the particulars of her situation outside of school. Other forms of emotional boundaries were related to remaining authentic with students and their personal situations from having an influence on classroom interactions. For example, Penny shared a narrative about one of her students who was going through a very difficult time personally. She did not, however, share the details of the situation because she was not aware of them. Penny chose not to learn about them because she believed, “[they have] no place in the classroom,” and that in order to continue to provide a space for this student where she could feel productive and safe, Penny had to remain uninformed regarding the particulars of her situation outside of school. Other forms of emotional boundaries were related to remaining authentic with students and their personal situations from having an influence on classroom interactions. For example, Penny shared a narrative about one of her students who was going through a very difficult time personally. She did not, however, share the details of the situation because she was not aware of them. Penny chose not to learn about them because she believed, “[they have] no place in the classroom,” and that in order to continue to provide a space for this student where she could feel productive and safe, Penny had to remain uninformed regarding the particulars of her situation outside of school. Other forms of emotional boundaries were related to remaining authentic with students and their personal situations from having an influence on classroom interactions.

4.4. Navigating risk

In addition to the two axes—context and self, findings are organized by two core themes. The first of these is Navigating Risk which is comprised of Assessing Impact and Risk Posture, the two themes most directly related to the risks of touching students. Interestingly, regarding these themes, closeness to the center regarding Risk Posture (i.e. Dutiful) seemed to indicate a focus on the more far-reaching professional and societal risks when assessing impact. Conversely, distance from the center regarding risk posture (i.e. Censored) corresponded with a preoccupation with risks to and of students which are more proximal. Regarding these relationships, it may be helpful to contrast Jen and Kathy.

Jen, a kindergarten teacher and coach for middle school boys’ golf, generally held a dutiful posture as indicated by her statement in Table 2. She believed touching students, particularly in affectionate, celebratory, or comforting ways, is part of the job of teaching 5 and 6 year olds. Moreover, she often discussed how touch can be used as a pedagogical tool. Specifically she spoke about holding children’s hands to help them form letters and having students touch each other when learning to cooperate. When discussing the risks of touching children, however, she mostly referred to the threat of being publicly misunderstood, and although it rarely altered her behavior, she was very concerned about misperceptions of her touch that could affect her standing in her school and community.

Kathy, on the other hand, was the most censored of the four participating teachers. Although she described herself as an affectionate person and acknowledged multiple possible uses for touch in education including: relationship-building, classroom management, and instruction, she often felt the risks outweighed the potential benefits. Given that she primarily worked with students with behavior disorders and emotional disturbances, she felt they were a population for whom and with whom touch was too precarious. Consequently, she focused primarily on risks to and of students and generally decided not to touch students or allow them to touch each other.

4.5. Negotiating touch

The second core theme is Negotiating Touch which includes Boundaries and Reading Students. Again, it may be helpful to compare two participants: Sue and Penny. Sue, a physical education and wellness teacher in a middle school, tended to discuss boundaries as being clearly defined and
established. In fact, she referred to them as rules or norms and seemed most intent on those related to behavior such as rules for sports or games, norms regarding school decorum, or district policies. Alternatively, Penny seemed most concerned with boundaries related to relationships, both those between her and her students and those among her students (see quote in Table 1). She stressed the need to distinguish between personal relationships and professional relationships but also seemed to recognize that these distinctions were, at times, very ambiguous. Her comfort with this ambiguity suggests she viewed boundaries as flexible.

These two teachers were also quite different in terms of the methods they used to determine whether or not students needed or wanted to be touched. Penny, perhaps due to the physically expressive nature of dance, her discipline, relied primarily on feeling and seeing students. She was confident in her ability to appraise students’ comfort with touch based on their body language and physical reactions to contact. Sue, however, relied primarily on “hearing” and intuition to read students although for her, “hearing” is a literal description. She often asked students, or colleagues, if they wanted or would be comfortable with her touching them. In instances where she did not explicitly ask permission, she usually relied on her intuition, which she connected to her role as mother, to assess what students need.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this project was to explore how four female teachers for whom “touching” students is a natural component of their teaching, talked about how they made choices about when and how to engage in the risky behavior of touching children. In the current climate, where touching students is perceived as a risky undertaking, it is our hope that this project will serve to illuminate teachers’ decision-making regarding their interactions with students, the role touch may play in constructing classroom climate and instruction, and the ways in which taboos and policies regulating touch may disenfranchise teachers.

As a result of having completed this study, we feel the taboo surrounding touch in education leads to a blatant disregard for issues related to human contact in classrooms. Furthermore, we believe this lack of exploration tends to create contradiction or conflict in the thinking of teachers. Each of our four participating teachers disclosed such a struggle in their teaching lives. Penny insisted on dividing the personal and the professional but referred to dance as a personal business. Kathy censored behavior based on what she read to be students’ needs at the expense of her own desire to be an affectionate teacher. Sue believed touch is important to healthful living and characterized herself as an affectionate person but had not really considered the place of touch in wellness curriculum, and Jen was unwilling to address critiques of her touch behavior while she openly worried about the appropriateness of touching the golfers she coached. Each of these inconsistencies could be resolved, or at least addressed, if these teachers had a forum in which they felt comfortable discussing the issue of human contact in the classroom.

The absence of this kind of forum for practicing teachers is likely related to its absence in teacher preparation. Within the field of teacher education, there exists little coursework for teachers to reflect on and develop their decision-making strategies regarding interactions with students. There is coursework about classroom management, but this coursework is largely focused on managing the problems of student misbehavior. A preventative model of classroom management including establishing classroom culture and creating shared expectations based on mutual respect is not well-represented in the literature or the coursework for teachers. Moreover, we believe teachers need to feel empowered in their classrooms. A significant contribution of this paper is that the model it describes can be used to generate discussion with teachers. By providing teachers, both practicing and preservice, with an opportunity to share their experiences with touching and the use of touch in the classroom and an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which bodies shape classroom interactions and learning our study gives voice to a population silenced by current education policy and practice.

One limitation of our study is the small sample; the size of our sample necessarily means our findings are not generalizable. However, our intent was to explore the experiences and understandings of key informants, teachers for whom touching students is a part of their teaching practice, and to develop a heuristic model of teacher touch decision-making (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The heuristic model we have developed is very neat and symmetrical, and we have concerns that it is too neat to truly represent the layered and complex nature of
the data. On the other hand, issues related to touch in classrooms are really challenging to talk about as there is no readily available discourse. The two axes and the ‘neatness’ of the model provide some helpful structure to an emotionally charged topic. What is more, the structure of the framework may help as a tool for discussing these issues with preservice and practicing teachers.

Additionally, some might argue that the gender homogeneity of our sample is also a limitation. We felt, given the complexity of this issue, that only interviewing female teachers was an appropriate approach for this initial, exploratory study. That said, gender, both of the teacher and the students, is likely to have an effect on teachers’ decision-making regarding human contact. We are, therefore, currently recruiting male teachers from various content areas and grade levels to participate in future studies regarding human contact in the classroom. Furthermore, in order for the findings of this study to have a significant, practical impact on preservice teacher education and practicing teacher professional development, this study needs to be extended. Future interview studies need to focus on how teachers have learned to read students, set appropriate boundaries, and assess and negotiate risk. Moreover, connections between touch behavior, teacher–student relationship quality, and student achievement need to be explored. Lastly, studies involving much larger samples need to be conducted in order to assess the extent to which our heuristic grounded-model maps onto the understandings and experiences of practicing and preservice teachers.

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Appendix. Interview guide

1. Philosophy of teaching and relating to students.
2. The role and nature of human contact in my classroom.
3. Classroom culture both between teacher and student and among students.
4. Norms about touch in the classroom including boundaries and expectations.
5. How touch is, or can be, used in the classroom.
6. Fears regarding touch in the classroom.

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