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Furthering Educational Outcomes through Relationship Building

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Abstract

The literature clearly articulates the importance of developing and nurturing constructive teacher-student relationships. Positive relationships between the student and teacher can lead to increased motivation and improved academic outcomes. Although educators face many demands associated with teaching and learning, the ongoing process of learning about students maintains priority. However, relationship building takes time and deliberate effort. Given the finite amount of instructional minutes, how are teachers to create a sense of connectedness with their students? In what ways can teachers gain meaningful knowledge of their students? How can teachers foster relationships with students whom may be disengaged or unmotivated? As the way forward, this article answers such questions by offering strategies to establish and maintain relationships with all students and families, regardless of socioeconomic status, culture, ability, gender, or language.

Benefits of Quality Teacher-Student Relationships

It is well known that teaching is both an art and science, and therefore begins with human interaction and relationship (Dewey, 1938; Marzano, 2007; O'Brien, 2010). The daily interactions teachers have with student's impacts them socially, emotionally, and academically. Positive teacher-student relationships have been associated with better academic performance, student engagement, motivation (Marzano, 2003; Wilkins, 2014), and have particular impact on students with a low socioeconomic status and those transitioning from alternative schools (Bergin and Bergin, 2009; Powell & Marshall, 2011). However, benefits of positive teacher-student relationships are not solely for students. They predict greater organizational commitment for teachers, lower stress, and greater job satisfaction (Wilkins, 2014, p. 53). Teachers can also appreciate that positive classroom relationships can reduce discipline problems and assist in making the classroom run smoothly (Skiba, Ormiston, Martinez & Cummings, 2016, Wilkins, 2014; Thompson, 2015). Conversely, poor teacher-student relations can decrease a teacher's commitment to the organization, adding to teacher attrition, which is disruptive to students and the school (Wilkins, 2014).

Known Strategies for Building Teacher-Student Relationships

While maintaining a positive classroom environment is critical to student learning, it is certainly not an easy task. Many years ago, Kounin (1970) revealed the importance of integrating teaching and discipline in the classroom. Today it is well-known that creating a positive and organized learning environment begins with classroom management (Kounin, 1970; Marzano, 2003). Classroom management, or the ability to establish, maintain, and restore the classroom as an environment suitable for teaching and learning (Brophy, 1986), is germane to teacher effectiveness.

Skiba, Ormiston, Martinez & Cummings (2016) later determined classroom management to be a collection of teaching strategies that promote the self-regulation of behavior by students, thus enabling them to take full advantage of the learning time. Given the focus on the instructional climate and student achievement, research clearly emphasizes the importance of the teacher's role as a classroom manager (Skiba, Ormiston, Martinez & Cummings, 2016). Teachers of well-managed classrooms tend to be organized, articulate expectations, rules and procedures, and link curriculum and instruction to student's skill and ability level (Marzano, 2003; Skiba, Ormiston, Martinez & Cummings, 2016). Moreover, they cultivate and maintain positive teacher-student relationships. In fact, without such relationships, students commonly resist rules and procedures, as well as consequent disciplinary actions (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003).

Building quality relationships with students occurs through measured and intentional choice making. In the book *Classroom Management that Works*, Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering (2003) describe the work of Wubbels and his colleagues (Wubbels & Levy 1993; Wubbels, et. al., 1999), which discloses that the right combination of dominance (or clarity of purpose and strong guidance), and cooperation (or concern for the needs and opinions of others and desire to function as a member of a team), provides the ideal teacher-student relationship for learning. In addition to establishing rules, procedures, and disciplinary interventions, there are specific ways in which appropriate levels of dominance can be displayed in the classroom. Teachers can use assertive body language, speak clearly and deliberately, and avoid ignoring inappropriate behavior (Marzano, Marzano & Pickering, 2003), moreover establishing clear learning goals and providing feedback also work to this end (Marzano, Marzano & Pickering 2003, p. 50). In order to establish appropriate levels of cooperation, teachers may consider incorporating student-selected learning goals, and showing interest in students beyond the classroom (Marzano, Marzano & Pickering, 2003). Phrased differently, positive teacher-student relationships are formed by behaviors and strategies used by the teacher (Beaty-O'Farrell, Green, & Hanna, 2010).

There has been an emerging focus on balancing clear structure and expectations with compassion and respect (Skiba, Ormiston, Martinez & Cummings, 2016). Effective teacher-student relationships become possible when teachers are respectful, demonstrate care, and create a sense of community in the classroom. The art of teaching is applied when teachers are approachable yet authoritative, and loving yet firm (Skiba, Ormiston, Martinez & Cummings, 2016). In fact, few factors in education have a greater impact on a student's educational experience than a caring relationship with his or her teacher (Zakrzewiski, 2012). Respect and care in the classroom are blatantly expressed when students are corrected privately, spoken to calmly, greeted daily, and are consistently listened to (Marzano, 2003; Thompson, 2015; Cotnoir, Paton, Peters, Pretorius & Smale, 2014). Moreover, when efforts are made to understand student's lives outside of school, students are likely to believe their teacher cares about their feelings and welfare.

Learning about students is a preliminary step to creating a strong sense of community. The encounters and exchanges in relationships have the potential to permanently alter us, for the better (Palmer, 2007). That said in order to get to know students, teachers may use surveys, encourage presentations, have informal conversations with students, and attend non-school related activities. By utilizing a Chrome book or iPad, for instance, a teacher can use SurveyMonkey, a free survey customizing tool, to gain valuable information about students. Through the completion of an online survey, teachers can learn of student's interests and/or needs. This tool can also be useful in garnering family information. Teachers have the potential of making better instructional decisions when they have pertinent information about family traditions, and the parent's perspective of student's strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, Survey Monkey provides quick and reliable, real-time results. At a minimum, data gathered could assist with communication and collaboration during the school year. This online tool is useful in helping teachers gain a general sense of their students, a basis for establishing a sense of community and connectedness (Palmer, 2007). The class community is advanced by allowing students to interact with one another, through collaborative group work and other discussion opportunities.

Gaining Deeper, Meaningful Knowledge about Students

After gathering family data, Garcia, Frunzi, and Dean (2016) share the value of deeply examining demographic data, to gain relevant information pertaining to student's familial structure and cultural background. Gaining an understanding of the environment by which the student was nurtured provides the teacher with greater insight about the student. A teacher's knowledge about students can be furthered through purposeful interactions and dialogues around student's thoughts, ideas, values, and opinions. Hall (1976) developed the iceberg analogy of culture, which delineates surface from deeper level cultural understanding.

This analogy shows how some aspects of culture are visible but others are hidden beneath the surface. An awareness of student's underlying beliefs and perceptions can help teachers more effectively teach the diverse students of which their classroom is comprised. Hall (1976) advises we get to know one another through interrelating and intermingling with those different from us; it is through these interactions we learn the values and beliefs that underlie behavior. Creating rich opportunities for diverse teachers and students to participate in the sharing of ideas, and about themselves, is the type of meaningful engagement that warrants respect and understanding.

While Hall's cultural iceberg could be used to deeply know students in middle and high school, heritage projects, can be used to learn about students in Kindergarten through fifth grade. Students should take part in class presentations, where each child shares about his or her family history and cultural traditions. In doing so children become aware of their historical and ancestral origins through project completion, and the teacher and students get to learn more about one another (Cohen, 2009).

Introducing Trust

It's important to note that the implementation of research-based practices alone, such as becoming an effective classroom manager, demonstrating respect and care, and learning about students both generally and deeply, does not guarantee the type of fruitful teacher-student relationships necessary for sustained academic, social, and emotional growth and development. Developing and sustaining trust is foundational to positive teacher-student relationships. In her study of principals in Chicago schools, Tschannen-Moran (2004) shares the importance of trust building to school success. Based on her site-based research, it was concluded that schools with high levels of trust, between the principal and staff, and teachers and students, tended to be more successful. Tschannen-Moran (2004) explains that vulnerability occurs when an individual or group displays respect, understanding, care and concern to the other party involved. According to Hoy & Tschannen- Moran (1999), the five aspects necessary for such vulnerability are as follows:

> **Benevolence** *the confidence that one's well-being or something one cares about will be protected by the person or group. One can count on the good will of the other to act in one's best interest.*
> **Reliability** *the extent to which one can count on another to come through with what is needed.*
> **Competence** *the ability to perform as expected, and according to standards appropriate to the task at hand.*
> **Honesty** *speaks to character, integrity, and authenticity…acceptance of responsibility for one's actions and not distorting the truth in order to shift blame to another.*
> **Openness** *the extent to which relevant information is not withheld; it is a process by which individuals make themselves vulnerable by sharing information with others* (Hoy &Tschannen-Moran, 1999).

Students pay attention to the actions of their teacher. In order to show they are trustworthy, teachers should consistently function with student's best interest in mind, and exemplify a character that is respectable, decent, and upright.

Building Relationships with Challenging Students

Developing and sustaining positive teacher-student relationships is not only one of the most important aspects of being a teacher, it is also the most challenging (Feimann-Nemser & Remillard, 1996). It is often the case student's positive character traits are eclipsed by challenging classroom behavior. In notes from the Classroom Strategy Study, an investigation of strategies used for dealing with challenging elementary school students, Rohrkemper and Brophy (1980) described twelve patterns of troublesome classroom behavior (p. 2). Those identified were failure syndrome, perfectionist, underachiever, low achiever, hostile aggressive, passive aggressive, defiant, hyperactive, short attention span/distractible, immature, rejected by peers, and shy/withdrawn (p. 3). The twelve syndromes were later categorized into five groups (Brophy, 1996). Students that fall into these categories may exhibit behavior that impacts their learning and ability to focus in the classroom. This study sought to gather self-reported data from teachers in the Lansing and inner-city Detroit areas. The researchers found that high-ability teachers commonly used supportive, comforting, reassuring behavior, including rewards and contracts, while less effective teachers were less supportive and quick to punish (Rohrkemper & Brophy, 1980, p. 20; Brophy, 1996). While administering consequences for misbehavior may be appropriate in some cases, it shouldn't be the only tactic used to manage students, as effective classroom managers use different strategies for different types of students (Brophy, 1996; Brophy & McCaslin, 1992).

This in mind, when working with students who may be unmotivated, undisciplined, or unstable, teachers may need to teach prosocial behavior, use behavioral management plans, and express empathy and humility.

It is incumbent upon teachers to make efforts to model and instruct students in behavior that is not only good for children, but also schools and society at large. That said, in addition to teaching grade level content, they may also need to teach prosocial skills, or skill in having positive and appropriate interactions with others. These necessary people skills enable students to be successful at school. Student socialization involves the teacher taking direct action to minimize conflict through modeling and instruction, communication of positive expectations, and reinforced practice (Brophy, 1996). By way of example, a teacher may teach a specific social skill, through role play and providing feedback. As is the case with role play, the teacher would (1) select a skill to teach, (2) assign roles, (3) discuss possible ways of handling the situation, (4) role play, and (5) provide feedback to the student. The skill will need to be practiced until it becomes a habit. Given the small group or one-on-one nature of prosocial skill teaching, teacher-student relationships can be advanced, whereby creating an open door for counseling and advice-giving (Brophy, 1996).

Student behavior could also be addressed through the use of behavioral management plans. These plans are useful because they're completed cooperatively, between the teacher and student, and ultimately seek to correct the behavior that interferes with student's academic and social success. Identifying the target behavior is the first step to completing a behavior management plan, followed by determining why the student is exhibiting disruptive behavior (Burley & Waller, 2005). For instance, the impetus for disruptive behavior could be either for attention or to avoid an assignment or task. Once this is determined, a behavioral management plan can be designed in order to increase engagement and decrease off-task behavior. Burley and Waller (2005) share how various plans can be successful with low achieving students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (p. 3). To complete the plan, there is clear discussion about the desired classroom behavior, and clearly articulated rewards and consequences for misbehavior, which are agreed upon by the student (Marzano 2003; Burley & Waller, 2005). Allowing the student to select the rewards for desired classroom behavior has proven to be successful (Burley & Waller, 2005). Such behavioral interventions, as behavioral management plans, involve making special efforts to negotiate solutions with students to help them improve their behavior. Moreover, teachers may need to work closely with other school professionals, such as a school psychologist, in order to ensure the student receives necessary and appropriate support.

Given that today's classrooms are comprised of diverse students, with academic and social-emotional needs, teachers require both a deep seated knowledge and understanding of student's complexities, as well as a genuine care and concern for students. That said in order to build relationships with students, as a means to teaching and managing them, teachers may consider the frequent display of empathy and humility (O'Farrell, Green & Hanna, 2010). These character traits are not only essential for relating to young students, but they also foster the type of environment students need in order to take risks in learning. Moreover, when teachers are well-suited to manage their emotions, they are less likely to be offended by students, and when they show empathy, students feel understood. When there's a mutual understanding, between the student and teacher, there's the potential for the development of respect and appreciation (O'Farrell, Green & Hanna, 2010).

The Optimal Learning Environment

It is clear teachers play a significant role in creating a positive learning environment. Effective teachers manage their classrooms by balancing dominance and cooperation and by prioritizing teacher-student relationships. Teachers may need to think creatively and wisely about ways to help and maintain relationships with challenging students, including the use of behavioral management plans. Finally, positive teacher-student relationships build on a rich foundation of trust. When teachers are benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open with students and families, they are more likely to build the types of relationships that advance educational outcomes.

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