Teacher-Student Relationships and Student Achievement

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Abstract

Although the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has set the laudable goal of increasing student achievement, its limited focus on standardized testing detracts from the other essential components of enhancing student performance. Students spend a great deal of their waking hours at school; this investment of time indicates that their feelings about the learning environment will impact their learning. Research consistently indicates that to be true. This research brief will explore the teacher traits that serve as indicators of students’ like or dislike for school, as well as the impact of teacher-student relationships at both the elementary and secondary levels. This research brief will also discuss implications for the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium (MOEC).
Research Question

What impact, if any, do teacher relationships with students have on student achievement?

Introduction

Parents and educators quickly accept that students need to be taught from an effective curriculum in order to be successful in school. However, although most parents would say that they would want their children to have positive relationships with their teachers, they may view a close teacher-student relationship as less than necessary. Research suggests that this variable has a significant influence on student achievement. In order for students to learn what is offered from an effective curriculum, they must be able to access support from their teachers (Klem & Connell, 2004).

In this age of high stakes testing and accountability for both students and teachers, it is important to examine the evidence to determine if these relationships are indeed a factor in raising student achievement. Advocates for the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act assert that the way to improve student achievement is to focus on test scores. However, learning is a process that involves cognitive and social psychological dimensions, and both processes should be considered if academic achievement is to be maximized (Hallinan, 2008).

An extensive examination of the variables that impact learning should include studying the factors that impact students’ attitudes regarding school and the relationships they form with their teachers. Two arguments can be made for the identification of these factors. First, if students like school they reap important social advantages such as building friendships, gaining respect for peers and adults, and learning social skills. Second, if students like school their
academic performance is enhanced (Hallinan, 2008). Regardless of if a teacher-student relationship is close or fraught with conflict, that relationship seems to both contribute to, and be an indicator of, a child’s adjustment to school (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). It is important to note that during the research process this author relied primarily upon juried sources.

Summary of Findings

Adults often assume that children like school due to the opportunities it offers for peer interaction. Although previous studies support that notion, research also indicates that certain teacher traits serve as strong indicators of students’ like or dislike for school (Montalvo, Mansfield, & Miller, 2007). Hallinan (2008) states that when students’ needs to be valued and respected are met, their attachment to school increases. Research by Montalvo et al. (2007) has shown that students will put forth greater effort and demonstrate a higher degree of persistence if they like their teachers. In addition, findings indicate that students attain better grades in classes taught by teachers they like (Montalvo et al., 2007). The evidence linking student-teacher relationships with student achievement has been consistent across grade levels.

Given these findings, it is important for all students to have equal access to establishing positive relationships with their teachers. It would seem that is not the case for all students. According to Jerome, Hamre, and Pianta (2009), some subgroups of kindergarten children, including those who were Black, male, lower in ability level, and higher in exhibiting externalizing behaviors experienced teacher relationships with more conflict than their peers. Conversely, it was found that children who were female, came from higher socio-economic backgrounds, and were higher in ability level enjoyed closer teacher relationships (Jerome et al., 2009).
Teacher-student relationships also appear to be impacted by how smooth the transition is to a child’s first school experiences. In a study made in a kindergarten setting, Mantzicopoulos (2005) found that kindergarten teachers reported lower teacher-student conflict when schools coordinated activities designed to ease the transition between preschool and kindergarten, such as communicating kindergarten expectations to parents, arranging kindergarten preview experiences, and encouraging parent involvement. Perhaps these strategies resulted in closer relationships because teachers were given the opportunity to better understand their students’ skills and appreciate their families’ backgrounds (Mantzicopoulos, 2005).

It would seem that teacher-student relationships are also impacted by what teaching methods are utilized in elementary classrooms. Teacher-student conflict was higher when certain instructional practices were observed, including activities that were more teacher-directed, rote-learning experiences, and skills taught in isolation. Teachers who have an effective skill base for developmentally appropriate instructional practices may be able to decrease the probability of teacher-student conflict (Mantzicopoulos, 2005).

Research indicates that the consequences of conflict in teacher-student relationships can be long term. Children who experienced teacher-student relationships with conflict in first grade demonstrated lower achievement in mathematics over the following two years (Buyse, Verschueren, Verachtert, & Van Damme, 2009). Teacher relationship quality is especially important for children with behavior difficulties or learning problems. When these children have close relationships with their teachers they show significant advantages compared to similar classmates without such relationships (Baker, 2006). Students who had positive teacher relationships demonstrated positive adaptation to school, regardless of their gender or grade level, across the elementary age range (Baker, 2006).
As students enter middle school and high school, their relationships with teachers change because they transition from spending time primarily with one teacher to working with as many as six to eight. Several researchers have investigated how this change impacts the teacher-student relationship in secondary schools.

Murray and Malmgren (2005) matched African American high school students, identified with emotional or behavioral difficulties and living in a poor, inner-city area, with teachers in order to build a positive teacher-student relationship. The interventions included weekly meetings, regular home phone calls, teacher praise, and consistent communication of high expectations. Results indicated a positive effect in the grade point averages of participants, replicating the findings of previous research on this topic.

Although it is widely accepted that disengagement is linked to lower academic achievement, few researchers have directly interviewed students in order to determine the reasons for their disinterest. When Daniels and Araposthasis (2005) had conversations with alternative high school students and asked what teachers could do to help keep students engaged, they learned that the students wanted teachers to establish trust, design lessons that students find interesting and relevant, and decrease the emphasis on extrinsic rewards such as grades, which have little meaning for at-risk students.

In another study at the high school level, Montalvo et al. (2007) showed a difference in student motivation, depending upon the student’s like or dislike for a teacher. Teachers liked by students shared characteristics such as constructing a classroom setting with an emphasis on learning, giving effective feedback, and encouraging tenacity when work becomes challenging; these traits all increase student achievement.
What emerges from the research from both elementary and secondary students is a set of striking similarities. When students perceive that teachers are supportive and that they are participants in a classroom where expectations are appropriate, fair and clearly communicated, students demonstrate better attendance and score higher on assessments; these are predictors of high school graduation rates and the number of students pursuing a college education (Klem & Connell, 2004).

**Application to MOEC**

Because of the significant social and academic implications for students, it is important for educators to examine ways to enhance the quality of teacher-student relationships. Research indicates that all children do not have equal access to the opportunity to develop close relationships with their teachers. Certain factors such as gender and ability level cannot (and obviously should not) be altered, but is well within our locus of control to provide staff development for teachers, educate them about their personal biases and show them how to improve the quality of their relationships with all students (Jerome et al., 2009).

Teachers’ abilities to form positive relationships with students are impacted by their personality type, experiences, and the quality of their own personal relationships (Baker, 2006). Since stress relates to an individual’s assessment of their circumstances as being overwhelming, it is important for those in supervisory roles to respond when teachers voice concern about their workload. Mantzicopoulos (2005) found that teachers who described their classroom assignment as challenging had higher levels of conflict with their students. Administrators could provide additional support for these teachers through the use of mentoring and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). It is also crucial to address teachers’ needs for mental health interventions
(Buyse et al., 2009). For example, employee assistance programs can be very effective in providing assistance in the diagnosis and treatment of conditions such as depression.

Currently the emphasis in most schools on improving teacher-student relationships has focused on addressing difficulties between individual teachers and children. Attention should also be paid to assisting teachers in the development of authoritative, rather than authoritarian classroom management styles (Buyse et al., 2009). According to Wu, Hughes, and Kwok (2009), teachers may find it challenging to establish positive relationships with children who display an overly confident demeanor. Teachers tend to view these children as deliberately non-compliant and are apt to react harshly. Helping teachers to realize that these students are seeking a way to assert an insecure sense of self might allow them to feel more empathy (Wu et al., 2009). Jones (2008) proposes that school leaders should even use the term “relationship building” in lieu of “classroom management,” to shift the thinking away from the idea of managing students and toward the notion of collaborating with them. Ensuring that this philosophy is embedded in training for both pre-service and cadre students at the University of Nebraska at Omaha will assist them in creating supportive and effective learning environments.

Many schools have recognized the importance of teacher-student relationships and have sought to maximize the benefits by utilizing multi-age looping, and assigning teachers to work with the same students for two consecutive years. In schools which use looping, it is important for administrators to realize that although students who have positive relationships with their teachers will benefit, students who have experienced conflict with their teachers will be at a profound disadvantage without the ability to experience a clean slate with a new teacher (Baker, 2006).
Student mentoring programs should be considered in secondary schools to address the findings that the proportion of student disengagement increases with the transition from the elementary to secondary level, when it becomes more difficult for students to have one-on-one time with teachers (Klem & Connell, 2004). Check and Connect is one such program; it pairs teachers who volunteer to meet weekly with at-risk students.

It is important for educational leaders to recognize that student-teacher relationships are only one component of the broader issue of student engagement. Jones (2008) advocates for all schools to implement an engagement-based learning and teaching (EBLT) approach, in order to increase student engagement as well as enhance the overall learning environment. The author emphasizes the need for teachers to acknowledge that they are responsible for engaging their students (Jones, 2008). Teachers can be assisted in this endeavor by principals who build a “culture of engagement” that is pervasive and by district leaders who use professional development to maintain that culture once established (Jones, 2008). In order to address this need, MOEC members could use one of the monthly task force meeting times to share information about what strategies they are currently utilizing to address student engagement. That dialogue could provide insights into whether there is a common need among the MOEC districts for additional professional development in this area. If such a need exists, next steps could be planned.

In closing, when students have a positive teacher-student relationship, they adjust to school more easily, view school as a positive experience, exhibit fewer behavior difficulties, display better social skills, and demonstrate higher academic achievement (Buyse et al., 2009). They are also more active participants in class, express a greater interest in college, and maintain higher grade point averages (Hallinan, 2008).
The words, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care,” have been attributed to both Teddy Roosevelt and John Maxwell. Regardless of who said it first, it is an often-used adage in education that has been proven to be true. If teachers develop close relationships with students, it is a win-win scenario; teachers are able to teach more and students are able to learn more. The bond that is forged between them serves as a powerful connector through which knowledge can be transferred. As Pat Roschewski, Director of Statewide Assessment with the Nebraska Department of Education states, “If the relationships aren’t there, nothing else matters. If ever there was a message to give, it would be keep the learning first. Principals need to be giving that message, not hammering away at increasing test scores” (P. Roschewski, personal communication, June 16, 2011).
References


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**Other Resources**

Author’s Information

Ruby Larson currently serves as principal at Hillside Elementary School in Westside Community Schools. Prior to her present position, she had teaching experiences at both the elementary and middle levels. She holds a Master’s degree in Educational Administration and Supervision from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is pursuing an Ed.S. and Superintendent’s Endorsement from the University of Nebraska at Omaha.