

The Significance of Teacher-Students Relationship and Students' Academic Achievement

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ABSTRACT

Students at risk for school failure often experience a sense of alienation from school in addition to the more task-related problem of poor academic achievement. The hypothesis of this study is that the results will suggest that the social context of the classroom influences students' appraisals of school as a likeable and satisfying environment. The purpose of this study was to determine if the student-teacher relationship impacts students' academic achievement. This research includes a quantitative methodology with respect to the perceptions of students/alumni of English Education Study Program regarding teacher- student relationship factors that impact academic achievement. Data gathered through a questionnaire, interview and relevant documents. Twenty-nine respondents participated in this study by filling out a questionnaire, and five students were interviewed to obtain more information related to their response to the questionnaire. This study resulted in three major conclusions: Teachers' attitudes about students must be designed based on the needs of all students; the current structure of public education and professional learning communities must continue to increase student engagement in learning; and teacher education programs must incorporate the development of interpersonal skills and build meaningful student relationships within the classroom.

1. INTRODUCTION

Students at risk for school failure often experience a sense of alienation from school in addition to the more task-related problem of poor academic achievement. Students who express more satisfaction with the school experience have more caring and supportive relationships with teachers than their peers who express the least satisfaction with school. These groups also have different patterns of behavioral interactions with teachers in the classroom, although these do not seem as important as the general perception that they are cared about and supported in school.

Over the past several decades considerable interest has been directed toward factors that affect the schooling of at-risk children. Risk is a construct used to designate a high probability of poor developmental or school outcomes (Werner, 1986). Much research has explored the factors that influence the tasks of teaching and learning in schools, with students' academic achievement the primary outcome of the interest (Stockard & Mayberry, 1992). The current achievement gap between different ethnicities and socio-economic status groups is unacceptable and must be examined. Within this literature, both school-related factors, such as the instructional and administrative structure of the school, and student characteristics, such as academic and personal competencies, have been found to influence academic achievement for at-risk students (Wang & Gordon, 1994). Less attention has been paid to the psychosocial outcomes of schooling, such as students' affective status or satisfaction with school.

Within the school climate literature, there has been research on the socio-psychological environments of classrooms (sometimes termed the classroom learning environment) and their effects on student outcomes. This research generally has shown that positive classroom environments are associated with improved academic achievement and affective outcomes such as motivation, self-concept, and academic engagement. Teachers' interpersonal behavior is an important facet of the classroom learning environment. Within the relevant literature, teachers' support, friendliness, and the facilitation of a cooperative, academically engaging, and task-oriented ethos in the classroom are associated with improved affective and cognitive outcomes for students (Wubbels, Brekelmans, & Hooymayers, 1991). Noteworthy in this literature is the importance of caring teacher-student relationships and relational approaches to schooling for students at risk (Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997). Caring teacher-student relationships may be related to learning outcomes in important ways. From a theoretical perspective, it is posited that the experience of social connectedness helps children internalize social values and become committed to societal institutions, such as schools (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The development of an academic orientation and the intrinsic motivation to learn is promoted by social relatedness to others who share those values.

Children at risk may not have the academic or behavioral competencies to withstand an increased academic focus. Elementary school students spend extended periods of time with one teacher, thus enhancing the potential for interactions and relationships with that teacher that influence school attitudes and appraisals. Programs targeted at improving student-teacher relationships or enhancing the classroom social climate during elementary school are one means of early intervention for students at risk of poor school outcomes. Attention to the classroom-

based contextual variables that differentiate groups of students who like school from those who do not within the same classroom can provide information for teachers about their interactions with students at risk, and permit an analysis of the development of satisfaction and its relation to the enactment of best practices to ensure the success of all learners.

In a quest for ways in which teacher expectations can be communicated to students, much of the earlier literature concentrated on the direct exchanges that occurred in the classroom. Brophy and Good (1970) designed their classroom observations instrument to record teacher-student interactions, and then conducted observations in four separate classrooms. Their observations in first grade classrooms enabled them to identify 17 different behaviors that teachers used with high and low expectation students. They found, for example, that teachers were more likely to praise correct answers from high-expectation students than they were to praise answers from low-expectation students even though the latter frequently occurred. They further reported that low expectation students were criticized more often when answers were incorrect, and that teachers accepted poor performances more often from these students than they did from the high- expectation students.

Based on the descriptions on the background above, the writer formulates some questions as follow:

1. To what degree does the relationship between the teacher and student impact student academic achievement?
2. To what degree does the student's perception of respect and care impact student academic achievement?
3. To what extent does the teacher's cultural connectedness to students impact the teacher-student relationship?
4. To what degree does the teacher's expectation impact academic achievement?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Teacher Expectancy Model and Teacher Disposition

Teacher expectancy models have the following stages in common: Teachers form expectations about the future performances of children. These expectations are communicated to children through differences in teacher behavior, particularly toward high versus low achievers (Kuklinkski & Weinstein, 2001). When teacher expectations are expressed in salient differences in student treatment that consistently favors high over low achievers, conditions are favorable for stronger effects. High achieving students consistently receive more positive feedback from their teachers, have more autonomy, and obtain high expectations; low achievers fare less well in these dimensions of classroom life. The dimensions of classroom experiences could include calling on students during direct instruction, assigning duties such as door monitor, proximity of location, computer usage, and procedures for sharpening pencils. Often, low achieving students (as viewed by the teacher) are excluded from these dimensions of classroom life because they are thought of as not worthy of participation in such activities (Kuklinkski & Weinstein, 2000).

b. The Teacher-Student Relationship

Craney-Gallagher & Mayer (2006) reflected on what it means for teachers to make relationships with students a priority. They presented four themes that they believe are at the heart of a good relationship: (1) recognition, (2) familiarity, (3) respect, and (4) commitment. Riddle (2003) lists four similar essential components that establish a positive teacher-student rapport from day one: trust, respect, communication, and discipline. Craney-Gallagher & Mayer (2006) emphasized that teacher-child relationships are important for social-emotional and cognitive development as well as for later academic learning. Positive relationships between teachers and children, constructed in a context of warm and, respectful interaction are central to developmentally appropriate practice. This is especially true in developing relationships that establish a positive rapport with students.

c. Culturally-relevant Pedagogy

In ethnically diverse schools, practices should not be levied uniformly across the student body without attention to how members of different ethnic groups might experience them. A one-size-fits-all approach silences a pluralistic philosophy of reaching out to a diverse population of students. It also disables a methodology that addresses and accommodates multiple intelligences and learning styles in the classroom (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

d. Related Study

Researchers have conducted studies that focus on the effect of cultural deficit thinking and the academic achievement of students of color. African-American elementary school students were more vulnerable to negative expectancy effects than their European American peers (McKown & Weinstein, 2002). Bobo (as cited in McKown & Weinstein, 2008) suggested that overt racial prejudice persists, with African-Americans and Latinos the targets of negative stereotypes about intellectual ability, while European Americans and Asian Americans are the beneficiaries of neutral or positive stereotypes about intellectual ability. The relatively unfavorable impression that White teachers have of African-American students coincides with national survey evidence of the substantial receptiveness among the White population to a “symbolic racist” sentiment—the view of African-Americans as insufficiently industrious and self-reliant (Tuch & Martin, 1997). This stereotype threat, which refers to the possibility that, in situations where students perceive that stereotypes might apply (e.g., black students with white teachers, female students with male teachers), can cause an apprehension that retards students’ academic identification and subsequent achievement (Steele, 1997).

In their literature summaries of Black-White student evaluations, teachers consistently report lower academic expectations, and lower personality, behavior, motivation, and classroom performance outcomes, for Black students (Change & Sue, 2003). The evidence of anti-black bias among White teachers, and the absence of such sentiment among African-American teachers, affirms the presumption of self-concept theory regarding the potentially harmful implications of racial dissonance (Rosenberg, as cited in Oates, 2003). Educators must move beyond a deficit orientation in order to adequately recognize students’ strengths. The absence of

culturally sensitive teacher preparation may result in many minority students being misunderstood (Madhere, 1998). The complex and substantive demands of culturally relevant pedagogy pose urgent challenges to teacher preparation programs, especially since the demographic reality is one of an increasingly diverse student population and a considerably homogenous teaching population (Ryan, 2006).

Brophy and Good (1970) designed their classroom observations instrument to record teacher-student interactions, and then conducted observations in four separate classrooms. Their observations in first grade classrooms enabled them to identify different behaviors that teachers used with high and low expectation students. They found, for example, that teachers were more likely to praise correct answers from high-expectation students than they were to praise answers from low-expectation students even though the latter frequently occurred. They further reported that low expectation students were criticized more often when answers were incorrect, and that teachers accepted poor performances more often from these students than they did from the high- expectation students.

The present study hypothesis is that children who like school and those who do not like school experience a different social ecology in the classroom. Students who dislike school will experience more difficult behavioural interactions and have worse relationships with teachers. The researcher used self-report questionnaires to obtain information about teacher-student interactions. This research, by focusing on the classroom processes that schools have control over, could inform the construction of school environments in which students at extreme risk of school failure could be successful, and can significantly contribute to the body of research on the impact of student-teacher relationships on student achievement.

3. METHODS

The researcher chose descriptive-quantitative research methods in order to fully examine the phenomenon of the student-teacher relationship and the impact it has on academic achievement. By using the research design, the researcher was able to more readily search for patterns in student responses, and further explore the depths of the lived experiences of students. By eliciting the perspectives of students on their relationships with their teachers, the researcher attempted to understand their experiences and give a voice to the impact of their educational environment. The participants will be they who had engaged the IIC class of Halu Oleo University. The Teacher-Student Relationship Questionnaire, henceforth referred to as TSRQ, was created and prepared to be used as the data collection instrument in this study. The TSRQ was modified from an established instrument called the Comprehensive Assessment of School Environments (CASE, 1987) to achieve the specific research objectives of this study. The TSRQ consisted of 60 items in a four-point Likert scale. Each item correlated with one of three constructs: (1) Teacher-student relationship, (2) Teacher expectancy and disposition, and (3) Culturally-relevant pedagogy. The researcher will welcome the participants and provided explicit instructions for completing the survey questionnaire. The 60-item survey questionnaire will be administered to all participants at the same time using the following procedure:

- a. Each item will verbally read by the researcher using slow fluency and clear enunciation. This process will ensure consistency of instruction and

accommodate the participants with low reading levels and/or low auditory functioning.

- b. After each item read by the researcher, participants rated each survey item as “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Disagree”, or “Strongly Disagree”, participants circle their selected choice.
- c. At completion of the survey administration, the researcher gives explicit instructions to the participants as to the procedure for turning in the survey questionnaires.
- d. The researcher collects each participant survey, row-by-row.
- e. Participants will be dismissed.

The participant responses will be linked to student test score data from the IIC Final Test. The linking of participant responses and test score data will allow the researcher to conduct a descriptive study of the effects of the teacher-student relationship on student academic achievement. The survey responses the survey response was linked to a unique code that only the principal investigator and research team had knowledge of. The unique code was attached to the participant’s name on the principal investigator’s database, allowing easy procedural access for the correlation study.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher analyzed the results first by categorizing the Questioner statements (60 statements) into some themes. The themes were *Teacher Support*, *Teacher Attitudes*, *Teacher’s Instructional Delivery*, *Treatment from Teacher*, *Teacher’s Cultural Proficiency*, *Teacher’s Classroom Learning Environment*, and *Teacher Perception*.

The clear connection to students’ perceptions about the support they receive from their classroom teacher and their academic achievement was noted. In response to the statement, *My teacher is patient with students when directing them to learn appropriate behaviors* (Item 57), 84 percent of the upper score students agreed with this statement, whereas 50 percent of the students in the lower score agreed with this statement.

A resounding voice was given to the effect of teachers’ attitudes on academic achievement in this theme. In response to the statement, *My teacher has low expectations for my success* (Item 36), 8 percent of the upper score students agreed with this statement whereas 31 percent of the lower score students agreed with the statement.

The way students learn in response to the perceived relationship with their classroom teachers and the instructional learning environment proved significant in this study. For example, in response to the statement, *My teacher lets students take risks in classroom learning activities* (Item 27), 77 percent of the upper score students agreed with this statement, whereas 56 percent of the below basic students were in agreement.

The responses to the students’ perceived treatment by their teachers was evidence of the possible correlation to achievement. For example, in response to the statement, *My teacher is sensitive to all students* (Item 22), 54 percent of the upper score students agreed with this statement whereas 37 percent of the lower score students agreed with this statement.

With response to cultural proficiency, there was evidence of a connection to an understanding and appreciation for culture and academic achievement. In response to the statement, *My teacher believes that everyone's culture is an important part of the classroom environment* (Item 44), 85 percent of the students in the upper score agreed with this statement, whereas 78 percent of the students in the lower score were in agreement.

The classroom environment according to student responses was important in relationship to student learning within this theme. For example, in response to the statement, *My teacher encourages student feedback* (Item-25), 85 percent of the students in the upper score agreed with this statement, whereas 69 percent of the students in the lower score agreed with this statement.

Student responses indicated that the perception of teachers was linked to student achievement. For example, in response to the statement, *My teacher is caring to my needs* (Item 56), 84 percent of the upper score students agreed with this statement, whereas 56 percent of the lower score students were in agreement.

In summary, Regarding the characteristics of a strong teacher-student relationship, the students' responses in this study affirmed that a positive teacher-student relationship positively impacts academic achievement. The students' perceptions of their teacher's respect and care for them aligned with a solid correlation to academic achievement. In the same vein, the teacher's cultural connectedness positively impacted their feelings of belonging and acceptance by their peers. Additionally, the connection between teacher expectation and academic achievement according to the students' responses was equally resounding.

5. CONCLUSION

The study resulted in the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. The way of teacher teaches, as related to programs and structure, must be revisited and redesigned in order address the needs of all students. While the results of this study indicate there are differences between perceived teacher-student relationships with lower score and upper score on the IIC Final Score Tests, the differing factors that influence engagement can be present within all levels. Purkey (2007) contends that current public education settings must be changed in order to provide opportunities for personalized attention and long-term relationships between teachers and students. Yazzie-Mintz (2007) concurred that by listening to what students say about their perceptions of their school experiences and engagement, educators may better understand what students need, and school improvements can be made. This was supported by ninety-eight percent of the advanced students in this study who responded that their teacher listened to their needs and recommendations for improving the school environment. Seventy- six percent of the students in the below basic band agreed that their teacher responded to their needs and listed to recommendations about their school environment.
2. Students recognized the importance of a more personalized setting in schools which provided them with opportunities to fully engage in their education. In other words, students perceived that educators in elementary school were able to form relationships with them that allowed for a feeling of care. Thus, students

felt more supported in terms of the impact of their lived-experiences on their educational outcomes. From an educational justice perspective, when teachers care enough to understand students' lives, backgrounds, and cultures, they can build caring relationships with students and foster further engagement by ensuring that their classroom represents students' instructional needs, cultures, and ownership (Freire, 2009; Giroux, 2009; McClaren, 2009). All teachers must respect and want to help children obtain a genuine education regardless of social class; that is what will enable social change, widen the possibilities for students in life, and ultimately, engage students in school (Aronowitz, 2009).

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