

Reflecting on Teacher-student Relations- A Case Study

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Abstract: Since the days of yore, teachers are holding the prominent place in the academic field of our society. The main goal of any education system is to make a student socially well-adjusted and self-reliant. The best productivity in a classroom comes from effective co-operation between the teachers and the students. Student-teacher relationships have been studied by numerous researchers from various perspectives. Teacher-student relationships are typically defined with respect to emotional support as perceived by the student and examined with respect to their impact on student outcomes. (Wentzel, 2009). Research in general education suggests that relationship-building is at the core of quality learning experiences. Yet relationship-building has not received the attention it deserves from researchers in the field. Teacher-Student relationship has been identified as a significant influence on overall school and behavioural adjustment (Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997). This paper studies the perspectives of five experienced teachers on teacher student relationship and the nature and importance of personal and emotional investment in relationship-building, elicited during group discussions in a teacher reflection group.

Key Words- students, teachers, school, relationship etc;

1. Introduction

Research in general education has revealed that teacher-student relationships are at the core of any quality learning experience (Bullough 2008). In addition, research has also indicated that different teachers will have differing conceptions of such relationships and many may not be consciously aware of how they build, negotiate and maintain them. It is indisputable fact that student teacher relationship has a long lasting and widely dispersed impact on students' life both within and outside the classroom. This impact has its effect on the overall life of any student.

2. Teacher-student relationship

With increasing empirical attention in the literature, the teacher-student relationship has been identified as a significant influence on overall school and behavioural adjustment (Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997). Teacher-student relationships are typically defined with respect to emotional support as perceived by the student and examined with respect to their impact on student outcomes. (Wentzel, 2009). Pianta, Steinberg and Rollins (1995) found that positive teacher-student relationships, defined as "warm, close, communicative," are linked to behavioural competence and better school adjustment. Other researchers found that conflict and dependency in teacher-student relationships are related to unfavourable outcomes such as a negative school attitude, school avoidance (Birch & Ladd, 1997) and hostile aggression (Howes, Hamilton, & Matheson, 1994). Resilience literature further indicates that when there is no emotional connection to a caregiver at home, supportive school experiences play a critical role in students' adaptations. More specifically, teachers who "provide emotional support, reward competence, and promote self-esteem" are considered to be one of the factors that decrease the vulnerability of high-risk students in response to stressful life events (Werner, 1990). Given that teacher-student relationships have a

significant influence on various outcomes, investigations into how the relationships are shaped and what determines the quality of those relationships are of great importance for intervention efforts to foster nurturing, warm relationships between teachers and students. So far, a number of student characteristics have been linked to teacher-student relationships. For example, students' social skills and low internalizing scores are positively related to warm, open relationships with kindergarten teachers (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992). Students' problem behaviours such as inattention, internalizing, and conduct problems are negatively correlated with the quality of teacher-student relationships (Pianta & Nimetz, 1991). Furthermore, disruptive, aggressive, resistant students are especially challenging to many teachers. They are frequently noted as a significant source of teacher stress (Boyle, Borg, Falzon, & Baglioni, 1995). Teacher interactions with these students tend to be critical and punishing in nature (Coie & Koepl, 1990), and are often characterized by high conflict and low warmth (Itskowitz, Navon, & Strauss, 1988). Although the punishment following a student's problem behaviour may be needed to reduce the likelihood of future bad behaviour, the student's repeated exposure to punishment, especially in the absence of positive attention from teachers, is more likely to perpetuate a sense of alienation from teachers and school, which may in turn lead to intensified anger and defiance (Baker, 1999; Van Acker, Grant, & Henry, 1996). Investigative efforts specific to teacher characteristics that may affect the quality of teacher-student relationships are scarce in the current literature. It is not surprising that teachers who are emotionally responsive to students have better relationships with them.

The teacher student relationship is very important for children. Children spend approximately 5 to 7 hours a day with a teacher for almost 10 months. A positive relationship between the student and the teacher is difficult to establish, but can be found for both individuals at either end. The qualities for a positive relationship can vary to set a learning experience approachable and inviting the students to learn. A

teacher and student who have the qualities of good communications, respect in a classroom, and show interest in teaching from the point of view of the teacher and learning from a student will establish a positive relationship in the classroom. Though much research has been done but still their remains gaps which need to be fulfilled. This paper will study the perspectives of five experienced teachers on teacher student relationship and the nature and importance of personal and emotional investment in relationship-building, elicited during group discussions in a teacher reflection group.

3. The Study

This study involves five teachers of Kidwai girls inter colleges, Allahabad, in a teacher reflection group, reflecting on their practices, ways and methods of teaching, behaviour in classroom, ways of dealing and approaching the students and their perceptions towards their students and teaching profession.

4. Participants

The names of the participants has been kept confidential, instead they are referred to as – T1, T2, T3, T4 and T5. The other relevant details are displayed below-

	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5
GENDER	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
TEACHING EXPERIENCE	21years (approx)	10years (approx)	20years (approx)	12years (approx)	12years (approx)

5. Data collection and analysis

Qualitative research procedures were used in the collection and analysis of the data in this study. Data were collected during the first semester of the academic year through weekly group meetings. All the teachers fully supported the research and knew each other from before. They had a warm cordial relationship among themselves and were comfortable in each other's company. The researcher also built a good relation with them gradually through the research duration. There were 16, three hours (on average) meetings in total and all of the proceedings were audio-recorded. The meetings were semi-structured. Though the researcher went to the meeting with the prepared but was flexible in approach as per the demands through the course of meetings and the environment therein. Each group discussion focussed on the areas related to teacher-student relationship. The teachers also contributed to the topics to be discussed in the next meeting.

The data were analysed with the following research question in mind: all the experienced teachers talked regularly on many topics requiring productive thinking concerning teacher-student relationship like- the problems, obstacles and sudden unexpected happenings, (especially with students at the centre) that the teachers had faced in their lives. The ways and the approaches they adopt to overcome them. How do they deal with mischievous students? What measures do they adopt to go close to the introvert type students? What are the major problems that students face in and outside the classrooms and the role a teacher can play in resolving them

etc. the researcher observed the whole discussion among the teachers and noted how they approach teacher-student relationship in their practice. At the end all the data were studied and examined many times by the researcher for appropriate interpretation of pattern and themes. The data were also triangulated to ensure whether the findings were credible: each piece of evidence was compared and cross checked with other kinds of evidence (such as researcher notes, audio tapes and transcripts of group discussions).

6. Findings

The findings are the answers to the main research questions as noted above and they arose from the group discussions related to teacher-student relationship-

- Getting closer to the students and building warm relation with them
- Mischievous students and the responsibility of teachers and students
- Boundary setting

Getting closer to the students and building warm relation with them-

According to T1 a teacher should have flexibility in his/her approach towards their students. Teachers need to be supportive. A supportive teacher is one who creates efficiently a positive classroom environment, who encourages students to behave well in and out of the classroom and to be motivated. Supportive teachers also are teachers who emphasize the importance of good habits by giving all the students the chance to construct their positive habits, and be engaged with the content. Teachers must fulfil a wide range of roles and responsibilities and some of these involve motivating the students to learn and keeping the lessons interesting. According to T2 conducting small projects for students on the topics to be taught to them keep them active and this also brings the teacher and students close to each other plus keeps the environment lively and full of positive energy. Involving children in different activities during the drives such as organising classrooms, performing streets play etc keeps them charged and full of energy. T3 elaborated how she used 'play enactment' with her students as a way of getting emotionally closer to them and as a means of keeping student anxiety level low. This also made learning 'a fun activity'. She recalled that as the result of adopting this approach she was even called a 'fun person' by her students which was a great achievement for her as the teachers are usually thought of as 'boring and serious personalities'. Though, at this point T1 and T2 differed slightly in their approach from T3. According to T1 and T2 a teacher should not be labelled as a 'fun person' and there should be a boundary set as to 'how much of entertainment should be given during a lesson by a teacher'. There were questions from their side like- will the classroom not become a chaos? How will the syllabus be completed? What about the discipline of the student?

According to T4 conducting group discussions, workshops for students on emerging topics of concern make them aware of recent happening in the world and keeps them well informed. Organising debates and essay competition in this area can be a useful way in this field. While teachers do not

need to develop deep friendships with students, they may interact on a friendly level. Such positive interactions will encourage students to learn and succeed.

T5 put forward the idea of appreciating and awarding the students for their good work and conduct, will not only encourage those particular students who receives the award and appreciation, but will also encourage the other students as well. T4 warned T5 and the other teachers on excessive use of awards as it may lead to greed, jealousy and harsh competitions among the students. T3 also agreed with the views of T5.

T2 suggested and once a month every teacher should devote one of his class to hearing the problems the students face in and outside the classroom and the environment of that class should be informal so that every student may feel free to come up with their problems. Introvert children should be called separately by the teachers and should be encouraged to speak up. This will also lessen the fear the students feel towards their teacher and will help to shorten the gap between a teacher and his students. This idea was supported by all the teachers.

Many such ideas were bought up by the teachers but due to constraint of the space the researcher has to pen down in short. In summary, though the teachers may have differed with each other in some methods but they all agreed to the fact that 'learning should be fun', students should be regularly motivated, teachers should be friendly and should be always available for the students. There should be a strong emotional bonding between the teachers and their students.

Mischievous students and the responsibility of teachers and students

Teacher-student relationship is by its very nature unequal because the teacher has almost exclusive responsibility for providing opportunities for students to learn. Thus, the teachers generally take lead in encouraging, motivating, preparing the students and showing sensitivity towards their learning. Such huge responsibility taxes on the teachers' mental and physical health if the students do not reciprocate properly. T2 recalled an event when she was teaching her class and one of her student was busy drawing the face of a newly married girl with sindoor. This was not the first time when that student was creating mischief in the class. She was always up to some or the other things to disturb the whole class. Once she even got up from her seat and started roaming about the class. Although T2 was frustrated with that student she did not give up on her and she kept on trying to calm down the rash behaviour of that student. T4 also recalled a student whose father died few years back and the student was not able to accept the fact. That student became very explosive in her behaviour and would get angry over trivial things and react strongly and violently. She would even give angry glances to the teachers if she would fail to understand the lesson. She would not even obey what the teachers ask her to do. All the teachers of the school had sympathy for her and would try to get closer to her but she kept on 'withdrawing emotionally'. T4 was frustrated but was still hopeful. She even had a few meetings with the mother of that student and was working in unison with her in this matter.

T1 noted that teachers need to 'draw some lines with students who do not take responsibility for their own learning'

according to her a student as an individual should be responsible for his/her learning. She stated that a teacher's errand is to present, guide, manage and give the students opportunities to learn but a teacher is not responsible for them to actually do the learning.

In summary, though all the teachers agree that it is their duty to provide as many opportunities as possible for their students to learn, they also agreed to the fact that students should be treated as efficient enough to take some responsibility for their own learning.

Boundary setting

The above discussion led to further discussions on how and where the teachers should set boundaries to help them limit their emotional involvement and exhaustion while maintaining positive teacher-student relationship. Nearly all the teachers felt that it was difficult for them to decide as to where to set the boundary. T5 felt that though a teacher should be friendly with her students but should also be aware of getting 'over friendly'. She said that being friendly with students' do not allow the students to put hands on the shoulder of their teacher as gesture of friendship. There should be a strict boundary set for the student which they should not cross as maintaining discipline is also equally important. Boundary setting in fact leads to betterment of teacher-student relationship.

In summary, all the teachers agreed that a boundary should be set at the point where both the teacher and student feel comfortable and enjoy the positive environment of the school as school is the second home for not only the students but for the teachers too.

7. Discussion

The case study outlined in this article offers some insight into the complexity and importance of teacher-student relationship. Teachers act as a role model and come forward as a helping hand. The theory of Bandura (1997), social learning theory, stipulates that 'people learn from one another via observation, imitation and modelling'. This means that students often learn a lot by observing their teachers conduct and performance at work. Teachers are students' role models therefore students are likely to copy teachers practices that they admire, therefore teachers should watch out their habits and activities and be very conscious. The job of a teacher is not at all easy. A teacher invests heavily in trying to develop a good relationship with his/her students. The results indicate that such relationship building was rewarding but also exhausting. This result is in agreement with the other researches in general education that pointed out to the teachers that on one hand such relationship may be a source of professional satisfaction, but on other hand they may become a source of disappointment, anxiety and even anger for many teachers as well (Isenbarger and Zembylas op.cit.). The result of the case study also indicated that the often conflicting teacher-student relationship can result in dilemmas and tensions. This finding is supported by other researches done, like a finding of a previous research was that if we consider teaching to be caring work that is premised on having a reciprocal relationship between teachers and students, where the 'carer' and 'cared for' should both contribute appropriately, we need to ask what is 'appropriate'

(Isenbarger and Zembylas op.cit.). Different teachers have different point of view as to 'how much caring is too much' and to 'where to set the boundary'. Different teachers have different conceptions of teacher-student relationship and ways of improving it. Teachers do not articulate these relationships explicitly. Yet it is important that the teachers to reflect on such issues as such issues have important implications on the quality and strength of teacher-student relationship both inside and outside the classroom. Teacher education programme should also address the issue of teacher-student relationship with more focus and encourage the student teacher to discuss and reflect on how they intend to develop, strengthen, reciprocate and maintain their relationship with their students in future without getting frustrated, exhausted and irritated. Today's educational arena needs to focus on this issue with more vigourousness.

8. Conclusion

Teacher-student relationship is the pillar on which the whole learning environment rests. If this will weaken then we cannot dream of a positive learning environment. So, much needs to be done in this area. The present case study revealed that though teachers invests much in developing a strong bond with their students, in fact, they adopt various methods and ways for developing it but they also get exhausted and frustrated while doing this. Therefore, we need to sympathise with the teachers. We need to understand that teachers are also a human being and they also need a break. They are also allowed to do mistakes and undergo failures. To sum up, it can be said that building a strong teacher-student relationship is not a one day, one week or a one year procedure. It is a never ending procedure in which ups and downs are bound to occur. The thing important is that each and every teacher needs to be committed for building a strong teacher-student relationship and take positive steps for it without fearing the results.

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