



TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CLASSROOM

Eshboeva Sh.A.

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ABSTRACT

This article is about implementing positive teacher-student relationship in the classroom, its effects on successful teaching and factors which can influence on this process.

For both teacher education and professional development programs, information about teacher-students relationships and how interactions shape these relations is important. The way in which a teacher interacts with students is not only a predictor of student achievement, but also it is related to such factors as teacher job satisfaction and teacher burnout as Gabriel Tatar and Moshe Horenczyk (2003) contend. Appropriate teacher-students relationships are important to prevent discipline problems and to foster professional development. Rather than reviewing all the available studies, this chapter discusses typical studies to illustrate the methods used and the type of results found.

A communicative approach is used to analyse teacher-students relationships. We adopt the most comprehensive of three

definitions of communicative behaviour. In the first definition, behaviour is called communication only if the same meaning is perceived by the sender and receiver. A second definition considers behaviour to be communicative whenever the sender consciously and purposefully intends to influence someone else. The third definition considers as communication every behaviour that someone displays in the presence of someone else. Adopting this definition, Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin and Don Jackson (1967) developed the systems approach to communication that assumes that one cannot not communicate when in the presence of someone else. Our rationale for choosing this perspective is that, whatever someone's intentions are, the other person in the communication will infer meaning from someone's behaviour. For example, if teachers ignore students'



questions because they do not hear them, then students might infer that the teacher is too busy, thinks that the students are too dull to understand, or considers the questions to be impertinent. The message that students take from the teacher's inattention can be different from the teacher's intention, because there is no ultimately shared, agreed-upon system for attaching meaning.¹

In the systems approach, two levels of extensiveness of interactions are distinguished. Short-term interactions are the exchanges of messages of a few seconds each that consist of one question, one assignment, one response, one gesture, etc. Theo Wubbels, Hans Créton and Anne Holvast (1988) assumed that, in interactions over time, redundancy and repeating patterns evolve. Then interactions on the second level, relatively stable interaction patterns, are seen. According to the systems approach, every form of communication has a content and a relational aspect. The content conveys information or description; the relational aspect carries instructions about how to interpret the content. In a class, the teacher and students relate in ways which are outside the subject matter (content).

Teacher-students relationships and interactions can be studied in several ways. To study short-term interactions, usually observations are employed either with hand or notebook computer scoring. Videotaping improves the quality of this

type of data collection because interactions can be reviewed time and time again to get valid and reliable scores. Thus, observer perceptions of these interactions are gathered. For extended patterns over time, these instruments are not economical because they involve a lot of coding and observation time. Instead, other instruments, such as student and teacher questionnaires and interviews, often are used. These instruments map the participants' views of the interactions. It is important to keep in mind that, with these different methods, conceptually different variables are investigated.

Ethnographic (participant and non-participant) observations often are used to investigate the relational aspect of teacher-students interactions. The type of field notes taken depends on the research question. In the data analysis phase, these observations can be categorised under several headings. Usually, after an initial non-structured phase, observations become more focused on a specific topic. An example of this approach is a study by Wendy Nielsen, Samson Nashon and David Anderson (2009) on students' metacognitive engagement in both out-of school and classroom settings, as they participated in an amusement park physics programme. Reflection journals, field notes arising from observations, and formal and informal interviews during post-visit learning activities provided the data corpus on the students' metacognitive engagement.²

¹ Good, T. L., & Brophy, J. E. (2007). Looking in classrooms (10th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

² Scott, R.H., & Fisher, D.L. (2004). Development, validation and application of a Malay translation

of an elementary version of the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction. Research in Science Education , 34 , 173-194.



Classroom environment questionnaires provide information about students' and teachers' perceptions of teacher-students relationships. In order to understand more fully participants' views, open-ended interviews are helpful because they give participants the opportunity to describe the relationships in their own words. In addition, they have been used in several studies to gather data about underlying beliefs, attitudes, cognitions, intentions, the history of the relationship, interpretations of differences between teachers' and students' perceptions, etc. Finally, interviews also are used as a source for developing questionnaire items.

Teacher cognition is often considered an important factor in teacher-students relationships. Teachers' sense of self-efficiency, for example, has generally been found to be a correlate of the quality of teacher-students relationships. The more positively teachers think about their potential to influence student outcomes, the more they achieve a positive classroom atmosphere in their teaching. Similarly, the more teachers think they are able to solve problems in their teaching and the better they think that they can associate with other people, the more they create good student-teacher relationships. For anxiety, the relationship is the other way around as appears from a review by Patricia Jennings and Mark Greenberg (2009). Teachers with a high anxiety level behave in a dogmatic and authoritarian way and lack flexibility. This can produce hostile behaviour in students and make the classroom atmosphere tense and explosive. It is important to keep in mind that, for these kinds of relationships, causality can be in both directions and, therefore, it is most plausible that the relationships are

reciprocal. That is, a good classroom atmosphere will give teachers a high regard of their competence to help students to learn and also this self-perception will help teachers to create good relationships

Conclusion

The research reviewed in this article supports the importance of teacher-students relationships for creating a classroom atmosphere conducive for learning. Affective variables seem to be important in a traditional classroom and even more important in a 'constructivist' classroom, where emotion plays a more prominent role. The observation instruments and questionnaires mentioned in this chapter have proven to be helpful for research, as well as for giving teachers feedback about their behaviour. Based on the research reviewed in this article, the following recommendations for improving science education can be drawn:

1. In their communication with students, teachers should strive to establish relationships characterised by high degrees of leadership, helpful/friendly and understanding behaviours. In order to succeed, teachers' non-verbal behaviour in whole-class teaching should guarantee good visual contact (e.g. by scanning the class) and teachers should 'hold the floor' verbally. When applying open teaching styles, teachers should avoid the risk of disorderly climates.

2. Teachers can use several student questionnaires (general ones, as well as ones specifically for science education) to gather feedback about their relationships with students, as a basis for reflection and improvement of these relationships. It is important not to rely solely on teacher perceptions because usually the teacher's and students' perceptions differ widely.



3. To improve science teaching through staff development and in-service training programmes, it is more important to change teachers' behaviour and not just attitudes. Attitudes are only a weak predictor of behaviour.

4. Middle-aged teachers should be aware of potential detrimental effects on the classroom atmosphere of lower levels of cooperative teacher behaviour. Beginning science teachers should focus their attention on their leadership behaviour. A good beginning of the school year is essential. Teachers experiencing undesirable classroom situations should focus on their own behaviour as a means for improvement.

5. Teachers should self-analyse their attributions for the success and failure of students as an important means to be attentive to potential interaction patterns that emerge from self-fulfilling prophecies. Although many issues around teacher-students relationships have been investigated, many others are still open for research. A lot of work has been done on student-peer relationships in computer-supported learning environments, but the role of the teacher in such environments has been paid too little attention.

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