

Why Teacher-Student Relationships Matter

New findings shed light on best approaches

By Sarah D. Sparks

March 12, 2019

Students spend more than 1,000 hours with their teacher in a typical school year. That's enough time to build a relationship that could ignite a student's lifetime love of learning—and it's enough time for the dynamic to go totally off the rails.

Education watchers have long known that the relationship with a teacher can be critically important to how well students learn. But emerging research is giving a clearer picture than ever of how teachers can build and leverage strong relationships with their students.

"People sometimes mistake a kind of casual familiarity and friendliness for the promotion of really deep relationships that are about a child's potential, their interests, their strengths, and weaknesses," said Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Southern California who studies the effects of emotions and mindsets on learning.

"A lot of teachers ... have really strong abilities to engage socially with the students, but then it's not enough," she said. "You have to go much deeper than that and actually start to engage with students around their curiosity, their interests, their habits of mind through understanding and approaching material to really be an effective teacher."

In a forthcoming longitudinal study with Bank Street College of Education, Immordino-Yang is tracking how the highly effective teachers of low-income students set classroom norms and feelings of trust and safety for students—but also leverage that foundation to promote students' deeper thinking and engagement.

Why are teacher-student relationships important?

"The relational part of teaching may very well be its most underrated aspect. ... When teachers are good at building relationships with students, the skill is seen more as cover for a lack of content knowledge or wherewithal to instruct with rigor," James Ford, the 2015 North Carolina State Teacher of the Year and the program director for the Public School Forum of North Carolina, told *Education Week*. To the contrary, he added, "Our first job as teachers is to make sure that we learn our students, that we connect with them on a real level, showing respect for their culture and affirming their worthiness to receive the best education possible."

A Review of Educational Research analysis of 46 studies found that strong teacher-student relationships were associated in both the short- and long-term with improvements on practically every measure schools care about: higher student academic engagement, attendance, grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower school

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dropout rates. Those effects were strong even after controlling for differences in students' individual, family, and school backgrounds.

Teachers benefit, too. A study in the *European Journal of Psychology of Education* found that a teacher's relationship with students was the best predictor of how much the teacher experienced joy versus anxiety in class.

How does a teacher's approach affect that relationship?

In a 2018 study, Arizona State University researcher Victoria Theisen-Homer found different teacher-training programs prioritized different kinds of relationships with students:

- An *instrumental focus* involved a limited, one-way relationship in which teachers cull bits of information about students specifically to motivate them to behave well and focus on teacher-directed tasks. The relationships "were structured as a controlled means to a particular end: student compliance," she found. "Students learned that their value was tied to the degree to which they worked hard and behaved in line with what mostly white authority figures demanded."
- A *reciprocal focus* required teachers to gather complex information and develop a holistic understanding of their students, inviting the students to grapple with content and problems together. "These students not only learned to think for themselves, but also had adults who affirmed and responded to their thoughts and experiences. Such interactions prepared them to engage with authority figures, and to someday hold positions of authority themselves," Theisen-Homer said.

The study also found in an analysis of two of these programs that teachers trained in the instrumental focus were more likely to go on to teach in low-income, high-minority schools, while those trained in reciprocal relationships ended up in schools with more high-income and white students. It was not clear why teachers ended up sorting in this way, but it raised concerns about differences in the kinds of relationships high- and low-income students might experience with teachers.

"Sometimes teachers don't understand the importance that their relationship with each student has on that student's identity and sense of belonging," said Vicki Nishioka, a senior researcher with Education Northwest who studies teacher-student relationships. "What gets in the way of that is a more authoritarian kind of discipline and interaction approach with students, which really doesn't work."

For example, a 2016 study randomly assigned teachers to increase their positive interactions with students. Students of teachers who boosted their ratio to five positive comments and interactions for every negative one had significantly less disruptive behavior and more time on task academically than the students of a control group of teachers.

How can teachers improve their relationships with students?

In a word: Empathy. Across several recent studies, researchers have found that teachers who cultivate empathy for and with their students are able to manage students' behavior and academic engagement better.

Nishioka finds that trying to suppress biases or stereotypes about students can sometimes make them worse, but practicing perspective-taking—actively imagining how a student might perceive or be affected by a situation—can reduce bias and deepen teacher-student relationships. She recommended teachers:

- Talk to students to understand differences in their perceptions and expectations in class.
- Research cultural differences between teachers and students to head off cultural misunderstandings, particularly around norms, styles, and language.
- Teach and model perspective-taking for students in class.

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How can teachers maintain healthy boundaries with students?

Experts caution that for teachers and students, "relationship" does not equal "friend," particularly on social media. Many districts have rules against teachers following or friending current students on Facebook, Twitter, or other platforms, in part because it might open teachers to liability if they see inappropriate behavior from students online.

Teachers also should be upfront with students who confide in them that they are required by law to report evidence of abuse and can't keep secrets that could put students in danger.

Teacher and education author Starr Sackstein, whose blog is hosted on the edweek.org website, also recommends that while teachers can and should share personal stories if they are "purposeful and appropriate" to the discussion, they should use these to model for students what level of detail is appropriate for sharing in social conversations.

How can relationships with students support teacher quality?

While student feedback is often incorporated into teacher evaluations in higher education, it is rarely a direct part of K-12 teacher evaluations. But that doesn't mean districts can't use student feedback to improve teaching practice, and in particular, such feedback can be used to help teachers build deeper relationships with students.

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For example, the High Tech High Media Arts charter school in San Diego trains students using a six-week course to act as observers. The students met regularly with the teacher to give feedback about their communication skills and engagement in the classroom, and to brainstorm better ways to reach out to students. Teachers and administrators found that going through the training gave students better understanding of the teachers' roles. School staff members said that teachers also "developed deeper relationships with students, interacted with students in a more positive way during class, communicated information about projects and assignments to students more clearly, generated better questions to stimulate student dialogue during Socratic seminars, and created more collaborative learning environments for students."

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Jon Eckert · 5 months ago

This is great to have empirical evidence of what we know as teachers and students. Thanks for this piece. I am wondering if you could provide links to the studies or at least the citations - particularly the Review of Educational Research analysis. Thanks.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

BarryStern → Jon Eckert · 5 months ago

The late Prof. Martin Haberman, who received the AERA Legacy Award for lifetime achievement in 2009, authored many studies over 30 years that verify the importance of teacher-student relationships and how these affect student performance. Bottom line, you don't get rigor without first establishing relationships and relevance. (see www.HabermanFoundation.org)

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

SarahDSparks → Jon Eckert · 5 months ago

Hi,

Apologies! Here are the citations:

The review of Educational Research study: <https://journals.sagepub.co...>

European Journal of Psychology of Education study:

<https://www.researchgate.ne...>

Arizona State University study:

<https://blogs.edweek.org/ed...>

2016 study on increasing positive interactions:

<https://experts.umn.edu/en/...>

Study on increasing empathy:

<https://www.pnas.org/conten...>

Developing healthy boundaries:

<https://blogs.edweek.org/te...>

Thanks!

Sarah

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Jon Eckert → SarahDSparks · 4 months ago

Thank you, Sarah!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

MROUNTREE · 5 months ago

I agree, but with caution. Parents will come to attack any relationship they do not like, and see money where there is none. I am speaking from professional experience as I have been disciplined for trying to help students. The relationship cannot extend beyond the school day for any reason, period. Do not give incentives that you purchase, period. I will only talk with and offer nothing that is personal, even if it is appropriate and has not specific details. Punitive

measure that look to take away from staff that gives so much to students, will cost in the student- teacher relationship.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Yvonne Godber · 5 months ago

Thank you for this very important and interesting read. I found the difference between instrumental versus reciprocal focus especially disconcerting in that once again, relationships with low income, minority students focus on compliance versus holding high regard for student perspectives and a sensitivity to their needs. Who out there wants a relationship based on the former? Can that even be called a relationship? And how are these teachers, in turn, supported in settings that operate under conditions fostering these kinds of hierarchical interactions? The research on joy versus anxiety in this respect was especially noteworthy - and makes me wonder how that plays out in instrumental versus reciprocal settings.

I'd like to add to the conversation research from the coaching literature and the What Works Clearinghouse that shows how an evidence-and strength-based coaching intervention (MyTeachingPartner 1:1 Video Coaching - based on the Classroom Assessment and Scoring System) resulted in student achievement gains and a reduction in exclusionary discipline practices for middle and high school African American students -- not by focusing on behavior and discipline, but by improving teacher capacity to notice and respond to student academic and social needs. True relationships - and the interactions supporting those - really do matter.

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