

An Investigation of Interpersonal Relationships Between Teachers and Students

Application to the School Psychology Research Collaboration Conference

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PERSONAL RESEARCH AGENDA

It is well established that the school environment is a significant part of a child's socialization experiences and affects a variety of developmental outcomes. The peer group has been recognized as a critical influence on many child outcomes. Teachers play an equally significant role in their socialization through strong and positive relationships with the students as well as modeling positive socialization skills.

With increasing empirical attention in the literature, the teacher-student relationship has been identified as a significant influence on overall school and behavioral adjustment (e.g., Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997), as well as positive school affect and attitude (e.g., Skinner & Belmont, 1993), academic achievement (e.g., Birch & Ladd, 1998) and motivation (e.g., Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Pianta and colleagues (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992; Pianta, Steinberg & Rollins, 1995) found that positive teacher-student relationships, defined as "warm, close, communicative," are linked to behavioral competence and better school adjustment. Other researchers found that conflict and dependency in teacher-student relationships are related to unfavorable outcomes such as negative school attitude and school avoidance (Birch & Ladd, 1997), and hostile aggression (Howes, Hamilton & Matheson, 1994).

Given that teacher-student relationships have a significant influence on various outcomes, investigations of how the relationships are shaped and what determines the quality of those relationships are of great importance for intervention efforts. Of particular concern are disruptive, aggressive, resistant students who are especially challenging to many teachers. 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).

In my research, I have identified a set of teacher characteristics associated with teacher reports of negative relationships with students: low self-efficacy, high stress level, and negative affect (Yoon, 2002). I plan to expand my research to include both teachers' and students' perspectives about classroom interactions and interpersonal relationship quality, using an ecological framework. This particular theoretical framework posits that teacher variables, such as these characteristics, would interact with student characteristics in classroom and school contexts, explaining the varying quality of teacher-student relationships.

The specific questions to be addressed in the proposed research are (1) what are teacher and student behaviors that are most salient to positive relationship building between teachers and students?; (2) what are the school characteristics that are associated with positive teacher-student relationships?; and (3) how do teacher-student relationships affect students' perceptions of school climate and teachers' attitudes?

Once individual and contextual characteristics that are important to positive relationships between teachers and students are identified, intervention efforts will be better guided to develop positive relationships and create a positive classroom climate.

RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Students' problem behaviors such as inattention, internalizing, and conduct problems are negatively correlated with the quality of teacher-student relationships (Pianta & Nimetz, 1991). Managing disruptive, oppositional, and interpersonally hostile behaviors is a daunting task for many teachers a significant source of teacher stress (Boyle, Borg, Falzon, & Baglioni, 1995). Teachers often report negative relationships with these students (Yoon, in press).

Although the punishment following a student's problem behavior may be needed to reduce the likelihood of future behavior, the student's repeated exposure to punishment, especially in 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).

This complex and troublesome issue is compounded by the typical teacher's lack of understanding about children's mental health needs and the role of the school environment in their social development. Too often, teachers see a child who acts out as one in need of behavior modification/discipline rather than one in need of caring relationship. It is clearly established that teacher stress is linked to low self-esteem, self-efficacy, a negative attitude, burn out, and attrition. Its impact is even more greatly felt in the urban education setting, where class sizes, resources, teacher support, recruitment and retention issues are at crisis levels.

Considering that the relationship is "a product of combined characteristics of both student and teacher (Greene, 1997, p.240)," the proposed study attempts to examine

teacher, student and context variables and their influence on both teachers' and students' reports of relationships.

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The site that is available to me at this point includes low-SES African American students in urban elementary schools in Detroit area. Three elementary school sites that represent a wider range of student body in terms of ethnicity and SES are desired. The proposed study will involve classroom-wide surveys of students about their relationships with teachers, their perceptions of classroom environments, and teacher behaviors, as well as teacher surveys. A collaborative multi-site research will allow a comparison of school characteristics and school contexts, as well as a better representation of different groups in the sample. No significant challenges are expected.