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GOLDEN AREAS



BUILDING RELATIONS

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The importance of teacher-student relationship

The caring relationships are one of the most important “protective factors” building children resilience, especially the ones growing up in dysfunctional families. Werner and Smith’s (1989) study, covering more than 40 years, found that, among the most frequently encountered positive role models in the lives of resilient children, outside the family circle, was a favorite teacher who was not just an instructor for academic skills for the youngsters but also a confidant and positive model for personal identification. Furthermore, a caring relationship with teacher gives youth the motivation for wanting to succeed.

The role of teachers is crucial in the perceptions of students, and their relationships with students have a huge impact on the processes in the classroom. Teachers are rated on the third place, in relation to self-esteem (Harter, 1996); in this sense Nordalh (2002) found that this relation is related to the social competence of students, in the general attitude towards school, in the involvement in problem behavior, and in pupil’s attitude toward teaching practices. In the same sense, the research of Bru and Thuen (1999) conclude that the positive relation between the pupils and the teachers reduces problems behavior in the classrooms as well as it increases the pupil academic concentration.



Klem and Connel (2004) studies show a link between teacher support, student engagement and academic performance for both elementary and middle school students. Students who perceive teachers as a caring, well-structured learning environment in which expectations are high, clear, and fair are more likely to report engagement in school. Middle school students were almost three times more likely to report engagement if they experienced highly supportive teachers. Adolescents need to feel teachers are involved with them, know them and care about them. They also need their autonomy support. In conclusion, authors proposed school reform models and developed strategies for creating personalized environments for youth.

Noam & Fiore (2004) in overview show the essential role of relationships in growth, learning, and healing of adolescents. The most academically successful schools are those where students feel attached to and respected by teachers. Students respond best to teachers who make them feel “cared about”. Positive relationships with nonparent adults gave students a sense of belonging; help them to create a cohesive identity, and to learn psychological and social skills. Clinical and developmental theories argue that positive relations with teacher are particularly significant for students who face socioeconomic, emotional and educational disadvantage. It may help alter children’s negative views of themselves and of others, even if these views have been created in negative family. In author’s opinion, teachers often don’t understand the meaning of the term “positive relation building”. Many teachers think it is a kind of group therapy which requires special competencies and methods.

Also Stuhlman, Hamre and Pianta (2002) suggest that many students’ problems, as lack of motivation, disengagement and misbehavior respond with the absence of support, highly controlling management and discipline policies in middle school. On a basis of results of large studies they point the importance of building maintaining supportive, caring relationships between teachers and students, and benefits for adults and adolescents.

Birch and Ladd (1996) proposed three distinct features of the teacher-child relationships that are particularly important for young children: closeness, dependency and conflict. These features could be applied to adolescents, in particular in the transition to elementary and secondary school. High Closeness is reflected in the degree of warmth and open communication that is manifested between a teacher and a child and may function as a support, as the children seem comfortable approaching the teacher, talking about feelings and experiences. This closeness may facilitate positive affect and attitudes towards school. Supportive teachers will increase school motivation and involving in school activities and in this manner may encourage children’s learning and motivation. Low Dependency can be constructed as a relationship quality that interferes with children’s successful adjustment to school.



Optimally in supportive relationships, it is considered to be adaptive for closeness to increase over time and for dependency to decrease.

Wentzel (1996), trying to find out what student believes as supportive teachers, examined a sample of middle school students. He asked them to write down three things that teachers do to show that they “care” about them, and three things that show that they “don’t care”. Responses were categorized into four dimensions:

- Democratic interactions as a demonstrated respect
- Recognition individual differences (social and academic)
- Right expectation for achievement
- Positive encouragement and feedback

Targeting At-Risk Students and Teachers

Stuhlman, Hamre and Pianta (2002) claim that more focused intensive strategies can also improve relationships between specific teachers and students who might be considered at-risk. At-risk students may include those who are disciplinary problems, who have particularly stressful home situations, or who appear alienated from their peers. At-risk teachers may include first-year teachers, those with particularly difficult students or classes, or those showing signs of burnout. Teachers who work with at-risk students need to become more aware of how their own thoughts and feelings about those students may either prevent them from meeting the student’s needs or help them to ameliorate their difficulties. With an increased awareness of student potential, teachers are able to make productive changes in their interactions that can contribute to their growth and development. For example, the Cleo Eulau Center, a nonprofits agency in Palo Alto, California, sends mental health workers into elementary and middle schools, where they spend time in the classrooms, develop relationships with teachers, and work with teachers on such relationship issues as:

- Understanding student’s challenging behaviors and preventing those behaviors from interfering with successful relationships
- Enhancing awareness of and belief in the abilities of students
- Developing a repertoire of ways to convey the highest possible expectations for students
- Becoming more aware of, and having increased belief in their own abilities
- Recognizing the importance and power of one-on-one encounters with the students.

Providing support to specific teachers usually benefits all students, even the support is focused on a teacher’s relationship with a particular student. Since the



classroom is the setting where students are asked to perform on a daily basis, making it a more supportive environment may have more immediate and longer-lasting effects on outcomes such as attendance, motivation and behaviour.

Positive relationships with teachers are important tools for promoting the success of adolescent students in and out of school. These relationships become particularly important for students in meeting increased demands for self-reliance and the developmental challenges associated with adolescence. There are a number of steps that principals can take in improving the quality of relationships between adults and students within the school environment. Whichever steps they choose should help promote school success for young people making the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Teacher-student relationships across the teaching career

Brekelmans, Wubbels and Tartwijk (2005) in longitudinal research explored the importance of teacher experience for building and sustaining relationships with students. The longitudinal data set included data on perception of teacher-student relations of 343 teachers that were collected each year during 2-20 years of their teaching career and data on perception of relations with this teacher of a few thousand students. Teacher experience was compared with the amount of his/her influence and proximity in the relationship. The results show that teacher's self-perceptions and student's perceptions of proximity in their mutual relations were rather stable. Student's and teacher's perception of the amount of teacher influence on average grew in the first six (mainly the first three) years of the average teaching career. In students perception young teachers are more empathic, permissive, uncertain and tolerant. Simultaneously teachers with an Uncertain/Tolerant interpersonal style have relatively low Influence scores. Teacher proximity decreases towards the end of the career. Many teachers working more than twenty five years become less empathic and more restrictive.

Authors explain that young teachers have not yet an adequate behavioural repertoire and cognition that are necessary to play a role of a leader. They have a lot of trouble with a control and discipline in class. Due to growing influence most of them learned to cope with problems in providing structure and maintaining order in classroom in the first five years. Some very experienced teachers also have a problem in relations with students. They become more dissatisfied with youngster behaviour and stricter when they get older. Because of the distance, both emotionally and in age, older teachers don't understand and don't accept the students' life style and may be less connected with young people. They prefer passive methods of teaching and don't agree for student's activity and responsibility. These high demand and low connection with youth can provoke students protest and stimulate a negative communicative spiral.



Huberman (1993) described the modal sequences in the professional engagement of teachers during their career:

1. Phase (1-3 years) called “Survival and discovery”. The teacher experiences a “reality shock”, concern with discipline and management, wide swings from permissiveness to excessive strictness; learning by trials and errors.
2. Phase of stabilization (4-6 years). Teacher has already got the fundamental educational skills and she or he feels to be a real and effective teacher.
3. Phase of experimentation with new methods (7-18 years).
4. Phase of serenity and (or) conservatism (19-30 years). This last phase is also called “Disengagement phase”. The diminish involvement with a job may result in less interest in the lives of students.

All of these authors point out that the insight in the changes that teachers go through during their careers can help in designing professional development activities for teachers who have specific needs in specific parts of their careers. The first and the last phase seem particularly important. The training and support concerning teacher-student relationship are essential for very experienced as well as beginning teachers. Young teachers need training in dominant behaviour rather and how to establish the limits for student’s behaviour. Training to give students freedom and responsibility may be a prominent part of in-service education for very experienced ones. In addition, training on setting norms and standards in a clear, but not provocative, way may be useful.

GOLDEN5: Proposals of key-steps

As a summary, we aim to establish a good and safe relation between the teacher and the individual pupil based on mutual respect and involvement. Good relationships with the students will benefit adults as well as adolescents and it will influence the social climate of the class and the school. Positive relationships with teachers are important tools for promoting the success of adolescent students in and out of school.

As the most academically successful schools are those where students feel attached to and respected by teachers, the role of the teacher is crucial. To be a “golden” teacher, it is important to recognize qualities in the individual pupils, to like to be with them and use time together, to show interest and understanding (cultural competences) to the individual student world. It also means to develop personal qualities such as friendliness, emotional stability, externality and some personal attraction.

We propose four basic competences and different key-steps for creating personalized and comfortable environments for everybody and especially for the youths:



Competence 1. Caring and closeness is reflected in the degree of warmth and open communication that is manifested between a teacher and a child. Caring contributes to the development of the self-confidence of the student. It's important for the teacher to recognize his qualities and to demonstrate respect. Students respond better to teachers who make them feel "cared about".

- Use name when addressing child.
- Smile and show positive recognition when you meet the student outside the classroom.
- Use golden moments to show interest in the child and talk of out-of-school matters.
- Remember things that the child has told you. Repeat them and show interest.
- Be sure to "see" the child at least one time each lesson. (Look at, stay near, praise, help her or him etc).

Competence 2. Supporting the student means to recognize individual differences (social and academic), to expect high achievement and to give positive encouragement and feedback. Supporting is connected with caring. As the adolescents need to feel that the teacher is involved with him, knowing him and caring about him, he also needs his support with certain autonomy.

- Use blank sheets: every day and every lesson is a new possibility.
- Give constructive and positive feedback to the child.

Competence 3. Modeling and expecting appropriate behavior. It is important to realize that clear differences of power exist within the teacher-students relationships. The teacher will create an environment where norms for appropriate social behaviors are clearly stated, taught reinforced and modeled (referred to Focus 1 - class- management). Such environment provide students, a sense of consistency, stability and predictability, which can enhance the quality of teacher-student relationship.

- Use social profiles, pupil's quality or specialty, good work or good behavior as a common reference in class.

Competence 4. Developing skills to build positive relationships and satisfactory classroom interactions. Since a conflict teacher-student relationship function as a stressor for students and may impair successful adjustment to school, a constructive relationship between teacher and pupils is needed, related to the social competence of the teacher and the student. It is important for the teacher (as for the student) to develop basic skills of communication and conflicts resolution. Teachers who work with at-risk students need to become



more aware of how their own thoughts and feelings about those students may prevent them from meeting the student's needs or help them to ameliorate the relationship. Positive relationship and the ability of the teacher to reduce problems behaviour in the classroom (Focus 1) will increase the student academic concentration.

- Use humour in classroom.
- Try to take pupils perspective in situations of problems and be willing to listen.
- Talk positive of the child when other adults or children are listening.

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