Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

Descriptions and Definitions

Positive student-teacher relationships have been described as relationships that are “mutually respectful and supportive.” (Pendergast & Bahr, 2006) or “Open communication, as well as emotional and academic support that exists between students and teachers” (Pianta, 1999). These relationships have also been identified as one with “empathy, warmth, and genuineness.” (Motshinig-Pitrik, Cornelius-White, Hoey, & Cornelius-White, 2004). Positive student-teacher relationships are “characterized by mutual acceptance, understanding, warmth, closeness, trust, respect, care and cooperation.” (Leitão & Waugh, 2007)

Positive Student-Teacher Relationships are an important component of creating a positive classroom climate. This term is also used frequently in conjunction with the term Person Centered Education (PCE) and Student Centered Learning.

Application in classrooms

To improve relationships with students a teacher can give students autonomy and opportunities for decision making, "by giving them choices in assignments, engaging them in developing classroom rules, and encouraging them to express their opinions in classroom discussions." (Stipek, 2006) It is also important to get to know your students by learning what they enjoy to do outside of school, such as hobbies or sports. Other methods of improving methods of positive relationships between students and teachers could be to organize extracurricular activities for students and teachers to participate together, and develop disciplinary policies that carry high expectations for students while fostering caring relationships. (Stuhlman, Hamre, & Pianta, 2002)

Developing good relationships

Specific actions in developing good relationships can be summarized as follows:

Show the student he or she matters by:

- greeting by name, smiling, showing an interest by comments and questions
- finding something about the most challenging student to like or admire and commenting positively on qualities and strengths. This may position them and their behavior differently – attributing to them resourcefulness, humor, protectiveness, spirit in the face of adversity etc. This may give the student an alternative self-concept to work towards
- giving regular positive feedback that is specific, genuine and brief
- showing belief, trust and high expectations
- showing that their success, safety and well-being is of concern.

Show acceptance of the person but not their behavior by:
• stating what students are expected to do rather than what they shouldn’t be doing – information is much easier to hear than accusation
• using ‘I’ statements rather than ‘you’ statements which comment on behavior
• not labeling people
• offering comfort in distress
• giving choices which give the student some control and promote self-efficacy

Develop a sense of inclusion and belonging by:

• ensuring that there are experiences which guarantee success – however small
• ensuring that there is fairness – giving each their turn
• framing behavior in terms of equity rights e.g. ‘You are not allowed to keep another student from learning and other students are not allowed to keep you from learning’
• encouraging students to take a responsibility and giving positive feedback for this
• using the word ‘we’ and ‘our’ to include not to exclude
• avoiding unfavorable comparisons or put downs
• doing everything possible to avoid sanctions that are about exclusion
• welcoming students back if they have been absent
• speaking about the student positively to others. (Roffey, 2007)

Improving Student-Teacher Relationships

• Don't try to be their best friend. While it is good to have a positive relationship with your students, you are the authority figure and you need to act like it to garner the respect you deserve. By trying too hard to be their friend, you send a signal that it's okay to treat you like they treat their friends. This is not what you want. It may be hard to discipline the students if they are used to palling around with you.

• Don't be a task master. The Authoritarian teaching style is one of the least effective according to most research. If you are too busy yelling or being stern, you miss many opportunities to listen and earn respect. No one really wants to be that teacher all the students fear. Stick to your guns, but don't be totally inflexible.

• A little small talk goes a long way. Greet your students at the door and ask them how their day is going. This technique only works if you are sincere when you ask. Make them feel like you really do care about them.

• Smile at them and actually listen. Eye contact is a great way to show them that you respect them and their respect for you will grow as well. When you are talking with a student, put all other things aside to let them know that what they have to say is important to you.

• Respect is reciprocal. You may think that being a teacher automatically means the students must respect you and your ways. This couldn't be farther from the truth. While it would be ideal, you need to earn the respect of your students just as you respect them if they earn it as well. (Scoville, 2008)
Evidence of effectiveness

Teachers who take the time develop positive relationships with their students will see improvement in their students both academically, behaviorally, and emotionally. Students who have positive relationships with their teachers tend to put forth more effort in class and as a result improve their academic achievement. Teachers also see improvement in their student’s behavior when they take the time to develop positive relationships with their students.

Positive relationships between students and teachers have positive academic affects. According to Pianta, close relationships with teachers lead to higher levels of student engagement and achievement.” (Pianta,1999) In an article entitled Relationships Matter, Deborah Stipek reports that adolescents “work harder for teachers who treat them as individuals and express interest in their personal lives outside school.” (Stipek, 2006) By building positive relationships with students educators can provide the motivation, initiative, and engagement which are essential for success. (Pianta, Stuhlman, & Hamre, 2002)

When teachers have positive relationships with their students, it affects the student’s behavior in relation to school. Students who perceive their teachers as highly supportive have better attendance and avoid problem behavior. (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 2000). Positive relationships between children and mentors were related to reduced levels of teacher-reported externalizing behavior. (Pianta, Stuhlman, & Hamre, 2002).

Alternative explanations due to Diversity considerations

Meehan, Hughes, and Cavell, in their study Teacher-Student Relationships as Compensatory Resources for Aggressive Children, suggest that “aggressive African American and Hispanic children in early school years experience less positive relationships with teachers than aggressive Caucasian students.” The results of this same study found that “aggressive African American students and Hispanic children may be more responsive to teachers’ efforts to establish warm and supportive relationships than are aggressive Caucasian students for whom positive interactions with teachers are more commonplace.” They conclude that, “positive interactions with teachers might, in turn, promote aggressive African American and Hispanic students’ sense of belonging in the classroom and enhance their commitment to academic and social norms.” Their recommendations for this population are to promote a better understanding of the culture of ethnically diverse children, preparing motivating and engaging lessons, responding effectively when academic tasks cause emotional and behavioral challenges, and for teachers to help students work through academic obstacles. (Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003)

Latino and African American students in South Los Angeles state that, "positive student-teacher relationship has an even greater impact on students in low performing schools who serve low-income students and students of color."(Cervantes,2007) Another student in this article stated, in relation to teachers confronting students, "that as long as they were able to confront the student in a positive manner the student would be open to learning and trying harder."(Cervantes,2007)In this article, students also reported that positive relationships with teachers increased their chances of completing work and motivated some of these students to want to go to college.
**Signed “life experiences”, testimonies and stories**

As a special education teacher of students at risk for dropping out, I have found with my own experience that the students who I have developed relationships with are more likely to stay in school. Additionally, I do see a dramatic drop in behaviors with those I have established a relationship with, both in my classroom and on occasion, when providing a separate space for students who are disruptive in other teacher's rooms, as well. This relationship aids in diffusing possible volatile situations between a student and his peer or a student and another teacher. Being open to listening to our students and their perspectives helps in making lessons relevant to their lives. This can only be achieved by building trust and rapport with them.--Marci Andrews, Special Education Teacher

Throughout my tenure as a special educator and an administrator, I have found that building positive relationships with students is truly the foundation that allows quality instruction to occur. Gone are the days where students came into a classroom environment and respected the teacher. Much more commonplace is the situation where a genuine "mistrust" or disinterest in education is present either due to that particular student's experiences or that of the adults in their lives. Building positive relationships with students is essentially as simple as finding a common interest, discussing that commonality, and then following up on that commonality as often as one can. To be a quality educator one must be able to build positive relationships with students, as well as maintain that positive relationship over time. Many high school students are not self-motivated, thus they need extra assistance/attention in order to achieve in school. These at-risk youth have a greater chance of attaining academic and social success if their is an educator in their life who they have formed that bond with that enables them to make positive decisions.---Bryan Kendall, Administrator

My school district has spent this entire year encouraging teachers to focus on establishing strong, positive relationships with their students, and I have worked really hard to do the same as a second year teacher. I have found that when you have a positive relationship with the student, when the student knows that you really care about them, then the student is more likely to succeed in class. Like anything else, when you know someone cares about you and how you succeed, you will put more effort into pleasing them, you will turn to them when you are having a problem, and you will value their opinion. These relationships also benefit the teacher. They make teaching much more enjoyable. -S. Becker