Student And Teacher Relationships:
The Effect on Student Learning
In Matina Central
Elementary
School

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Abstract — This research study explored the affective domain of 10 teacher-learner relationships using a qualitative study design. This qualitative study produced a synthesis of information that guides classroom teachers in the development and maintenance of the relationships with the learners in Matina Central Elementary School in Matina Crossing, Davao City. The resulting analysis and interpretation provided a description of major themes that developed regarding strong teacher learner relationships, as well as, specific components to the interactions considered essential for the learner's learning environment. The outcome of this study is an account of experiences that guide the development and maintenance of relationships between a teacher and her learners. Based on the findings, four themes emerged with supporting elements that were critical components of each category. These four themes represent an interpersonal framework for the learning environment The qualitative method in this study is derived from a constructivist viewpoint with a focus on deeply understanding this specific case of teacher-learner relationships. My goal in conducting this study was to provide more specific examples of and empirical findings for how teacher-learner relationships are created. Identifying specific factors associated with teacher-learner interactions could provide valuable information to an educational learning community. Implications for how these findings can impact the learning environment are discussed.

Keywords — Teacher-Learner relationship, experiences, components, lessons learned

I. Introduction

Mohrman, Tenkasi, and Mohrman, (2021) assert "lasting change does not result from plans, blueprints, and events, rather change occurs through interaction of participants." Strong teacher-student relationships may be one of the most important environmental factors in changing a child's educational path (Baker, 2021). This qualitative study explored the environmental factors that are deliberately created by the study participant as she interacts with the student on their educational path. As Cazden (2021) asserts, the establishment of social relationships can seriously impact effective teaching and accurate evaluation in a classroom.

My role in this qualitative study is shaped by my previous experience working in the field of elementary education for the last few years, those years as a teacher in districts with diverse student populations. My teaching experience as an educator afforded me the opportunity to be embedded in a variety of classrooms, working alongside teachers in elementary, providing student support. I believe these experiences have given me unique insight, understanding, and knowledge of teaching and learning.

I also know that these experiences have shaped certain biases, although every effort will be made on my part to remain neutral as a qualitative researcher and let the data shape my analysis and interpretation. I have chosen the school where I came from ten (10) teachers from this school to gather the needed data for my study.

Many in the field of education recognize the importance of the relationships that teachers develop with their students that result in positive academic outcomes. My purpose is to conduct a study of information-rich classrooms that demonstrates teacher-learner interactions in an authentic instructional environment. Responsive interviewing procedures were used by this researcher to identify the thought process of the teachers as they are developing student relationships and delivering instruction. Downey (2019) writes that "teachers need to know how their daily work in classrooms can be infused with interactions and instructional strategies that research has shown can make a positive difference in the lives of students who are at risk of academic failure."

This qualitative study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of teachers in building their positive relationships with the students?

2. What specific components of the teacher/student interactions are essential to a learning environment?

3. What are the lessons learned by teachers in their positive relationships with the students?

A teacher's personal interactions with his or her students can make a significant difference for students. The importance of teachers' relationships with their students cannot be overstated. Teaching is in the service of students, which creates the expectation that teachers will be able to come to understand how students learn and what students need if they are to learn effectively – and that they will incorporate that into their teaching.

A student-teacher relationship in the classroom is a positive relationship between the teacher and the student in efforts to gain trust and respect from each other. This relationship may consist of getting to know your students better, providing choice and encouraging the students to become stronger learners every day. By doing this, teachers are showing respect to their students, valuing their individuality and being polite. Having a positive relationship with your students helps

them become more successful in the classroom as well as makes your classroom a safe and welcoming environment for all.

Student- teacher relationships have displayed many advantages in the classroom. To start, students who share a positive relationship with their teacher develop stronger social-emotional skills. In addition, these students are more likely to absorb an increased amount of academic knowledge (Positive teacher-student relationships have cascading benefits, 2021).

The result of a strong student-teacher relationship is that it allows students to feel confident through exploration and taking risks in their academic tasks. In short, students who have a positive student-teacher relationship demonstrate a stronger performance in the classroom (Positive teacher-student relationships have cascading benefits, 2021).

However, one of the most important impacts of a positive student-teacher relationship is the production of an environment that incorporates mutual respect. One way an educator can produce a strong relationship with a student is to explicitly define learning goals and expectations in a positive manner. This could look different for groups of students or individual students. The strong relationship will allow for educators to be aware of their students' learning and adjust their learning goals and expectations as needed. In the same manner, the educator should allow opportunities for students of all learning styles to participate in class discussions through oral and written communication.

In addition to academic advantages, positive student-teacher relationships improve mental health and assists students in developing self-worth. Oftentimes, students look up to their educators as mentors. With this in mind, students are likely to feel pride when the educator encourages them in their learning and social interactions.

Social competence, problem-solving abilities, autonomy, and a feeling of a bright future or purpose are protective elements that boost resilience, these all can be developed in a supportive teaching atmosphere (Bondy et al., 2021). As noted, students benefit from positive student-teacher relationships.

Likewise, educators benefit as well. While creating strong relationships with their students, educators are strengthening their own interpersonal and professional skills (Admin, 2019). By strengthening their interpersonal communication skills, educators are more likely to respond effectively to stressful situations. In addition, educators are able to form relationships with parents and coworkers. In summary, it can be noted that students and educators equally benefit from the creation of positive student-teacher relationships.

The Importance of Student-Teacher Relationships: Short and Long Term

As stated, student-teacher relationships are highly essential in an effective classroom. Specifically, student-teacher relationships are important for students in their short term and long term education.

Student-teacher relationships are important in the short term because it creates a thriving classroom environment, helps students develop self-worth and improves student mental health (Buffet, 2019). In the same manner, these positive relationships may decrease behavioral problems and promote academic success.

Student- teacher relationships help foster the academic success of students. With this being said, student-teacher relationships assist students in the short term. These relationships support students for the specific year they spend in that educational setting with the educator (Buffet, 2019).

Likewise, a positive student-teacher relationship is very important in the long term because it gives students confidence as well as ensuring that they know that their ideas are valuable. In turn, this allows students to carry this confidence throughout their future years pursuing academics.

Also, this confidence and recognition of self-worth can be seen in social and emotional aspects of the students' life. Another long term effect is that positive teacher relationships teach students that mistakes are an indication that they are learning. Learning is ongoing and students are able to identify this through the production of positive student-teacher relationships. This type of relationship will foster confidence in the long-term for the student.

Causes of Poor Student Teacher Relationships

Poor teacher-student relationships result from the instructor's lack of awareness. Some students require tailored educational approaches since they do not respond to learning in the same way as others. When a teacher fails to regard an individual student's educational needs, relationship problems between teachers and students arise. Each student's ability to learn and interact with educators is influenced by their personality, family backgrounds, mental processes, learning styles, priorities, maturity levels, and academic ambitions (Tucker, 2021).

When possible, teachers should treat each student as an individual who deserves one-on-one attention and specialized, concentrated education. In addition, a poor student-teacher relationship will develop if the educator's main or only priority in the classroom is academics (Tucker, 2021). In correspondence with academics, students need to feel cared for and have the chance to feel strong emotions.

Educators are responsible for building relationships with students that are not surface level or academically focused. Students should feel that their educator is someone they can trust and

communicate freely with. The lack of empathy displayed by an educator can result in a poor student-teacher relationship.

Educators, psychologists, social constructivists, and sociologists have all contributed to the growing interest in targeting interventions toward improvements in the quality of teachers' interactions with children. Hamre, Pianta, Burchinal, Field, Crouch, Downer, Howes, LaParo, & Little, (2019) posit that "teachers need to be actively engaged in interactions with children in order for learning to occur."

In 2001 the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) began the intense focus on standardized testing as the measure of, not only student success, but teacher performance as well. It mandated that every child would perform at grade level and achieve high academic standards. NCLB was intended as a means of supervision for public schools with the guarantee of success for all students regardless of race, gender, or ability. High stakes testing is the vehicle through which student achievement is measured according to NCLB and does not take into account any other means for measuring student or teacher success.

As a result, the current educational climate emphasizes school accountability through standardized test scores as the primary method for determining an effective learning environment. Regional, provincial, and local educational policy requires that schools and classrooms should be held more responsible for the outcomes they produce (e.g., student achievement). However, the process for ensuring accountability rests on standardized testing of children, typically starting in third grade (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2021). The focus on accountability and standardized testing should not confuse the contribution that the social quality of teacher – student relationships has on academic development (Hamre & Pianta, 2019). Hamre and Pianta contend that strong student- teacher relationships "provide a unique entry point for educators working to improve the social and learning environments of schools and classrooms."

I, too, believe there is an important role that the quality of teacher and student interactions plays regarding student learning. Hamre et al. (2019) hypothesized that "it was not sufficient for teachers to be able to gain knowledge about effective teacher-child interactions; they needed actual skills involving identification of effective interactions with a high degree of specificity in order to be most likely to transfer the coursework into changes in their practice."

While researching the effects teachers have on student learning, Good, Biddle, and Brophy (2019) determined that teachers do make a difference. A large contribution to what brought about that difference was the affective component to teaching that the teachers used. Good et al. found that students who held a sense of futility toward school had the worst achievement record. These students needed teachers who believed in them and were willing to work with them. Good et al. cite several studies by Aspy (2019) that demonstrate the importance of teachers' affective behavior. What Good et al. (2019) found was that teachers who showed an interest in their students by indicating they were listening to them and understood students' need completely and accurately,

had students who obtained higher scores on a standardized test of learning -- "the evidence was impressive." The following review of the literature will further reveal impressive evidence of the effect that teacher-student relationships have on a child's learning environment.

Perspectives on Teacher-Student Relationships

There is a diverse range of perspectives in the area of interactions between teachers and students that have been researched over the past few decades; however, they share several core principles. What follows in this literature review is a sampling of those perspectives as they relate to the effect teacher-student interactions has on the learning environment including findings and implications, organized by categories of researchers.

"What do positive teacher-student relationships look like in the classroom?"

Downey (2008) conducted a study synthesizing educational research on factors that affect academic success. The rationale for the study was to examine classroom practices that made a difference for all students, but in particular, for students at risk for academic failure. What was determined was that a teacher's personal interaction with his/her students made a significant difference.

The recommendations from Downey's analysis were that "students need teachers to build strong interpersonal relationships with them, focusing on strengths of the students while maintaining high and realistic expectations for success." These interactive relationships should be based on respect, trust, caring, and cohesiveness. A sense of belonging is another important byproduct of a strong teacher-student relationship that is critical to a student's success in school. Downey concludes by saying "the study served as a powerful reminder that everyday teacher-student interactions in the classroom matter."

Ravitch (2020) writes that "the goal of education is not to produce higher test scores, but to educate children to become responsible people with well-developed minds and good character." She says that "accountability as it is now is not helping our schools because its measures are too narrow and imprecise, and its consequences too severe. NCLB assumes that accountability based solely on test scores will reform American education. This is a mistake." Overemphasis on test scores to the omission of other important goals of education may actually weaken the love of learning and the desire to acquire knowledge (Ravitch, 2020). The significance of the affective domain in determining effective teachers and teaching practices is a component that the current teacher evaluation system does not give enough credence to. Student learning outcomes (measured by test scores) are considered, overwhelmingly, to be the deciding determinant of a highly effective teacher and a highly effective school.

Langer (2019) writes "if the source of information is someone we respect, we are more likely to be influenced and retain the information than if we view the source as untrustworthy." Initial gathering of information relies on the source of the information. "When we have learned

information mindfully, we remain open to ways in which information may differ in various situations." In effect, by building solid relationships with students, teachers are creating discrimination, as well as lifelong learners. Although, over time, the source of the information may be forgotten, the information received is retained (Langer, 2019).

Cazden (2021) states that "children's intellectual functioning, at school, as at home, is intimately related to the social relationships in which it becomes embedded. Familiarity facilitates responsiveness which plays an important part in learning." Cazden believes in the importance of creating a learning environment that incorporates building an effective interpersonal relationship with students. Creating a learning environment that all the stakeholders are invested in will have a positive impact on the learning that will take place. As Cazden writes, "What counts are relationships between the teacher and each student, as an individual, both in whole class lessons and in individual seat work assignments. Now each student becomes a significant part of the official learning environment."

Marzano (2019) suggests a useful question for anyone wishing to understand factors that improve student achievement is to ask "What influence does an individual teacher have on a student apart from what the school does?" He indicates that all researchers agree that the impact of decisions made by an individual teacher is far greater than the impact of decisions made at the school level. Marzano writes "the core of effective teacher-student relationships is a healthy balance between dominance and cooperation." Showing interest in students as individuals has a positive impact on their learning according to Marzano. McCombs & Whisler (2019) posit that the need for the teacher to show a personal interest in their students is vital to their learning. All agree that the interaction between teacher and student has a significant impact on student learning in the classroom.

Constructivism is a theory of learning. As such, a constructivist approach to learning sees the learning environment as a "mini-society, a community of learners engaged in activity, discourse, interpretation, justification, and reflection" (Fosnot, 2019). While constructivist theory of education indicates that knowledge is constructed individually by the student, that learning occurs in a social environment (classroom) with experiences that have been carefully constructed by the teacher. In biological theorists' terms, there is "an active interplay of the environment to evolution and to learning." The constructivist teacher encourages a consideration of others' points of views and a mutual respect, allowing the development of independent and creative thinking. From a constructivist perspective, meaning is understood to be the result of individuals (in this case, teachers) "setting up relationships, reflecting on their actions, and modeling and constructing explanations."

Contemporary theorists and researchers' beliefs have shifted from isolated student mastery of concepts to ideas that real learning is about interaction, growth, and development (Fosnot, 2019). New information from the realm of cognitive science tells us that students learn through progressive structuring and restructuring of knowledge experience, "that deep conceptual learning

is about structural shifts in cognition; without exchange with the environment, entropy would result." That knowledge is actively constructed is a pervasive tenet of constructivist thinking. The way a teacher listens and talks to children helps them become learners who think critically and deeply about what they read and write. By frequently engaging with the student collaboratively, a teacher increases his/her understanding of how a particular learner acquires knowledge and therefore becomes responsive to the learner's needs.

Constructivist theorists DeVries and Zan (2020) write "the preoccupation in most schools with subject matter content has led to a situation in which affective development is negatively influenced." Ironically, they say this one-sided preoccupation has created a situation in which intellectual development does not flourish either – they contend that "in order to foster intellectual development, a certain kind of interpersonal framework must be created." It is their opinion that a primary focus of a constructivist education is the development of a network of interpersonal relations that will dominate the child's school experience. They contend "interpersonal relations are the context for the child's construction of the self, of others, and of subject-matter knowledge."

Bruner (2019) writes that the process of education requires that "schools must also contribute to the social and emotional development of the child if they are to fulfill their function of education." Bruner develops four themes he considers essential to the process of learning – one of them relates to stimulating the desire to learn, creating interest in the subject being taught, and what he terms "intellectual excitement." He suggests studying the methods used by 'successful' teachers as a way of determining effective practices. Constructivism provides a natural and best frame for this study because a major tenet of a constructivist researcher is to look at the processes of interaction among individuals in the context of where they live and work.

II. Methodology

In this research study, I seek to explore the affective domain of teacher effectiveness using a qualitative study design. Qualitative study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection (Creswell, 2013). Yin (2009) writes that the qualitative study's unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence sources such as documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations – beyond what might be available in other types of qualitative methods.

In this qualitative study, I used purposeful sampling with an illuminative case, interviewing, and observing this district 'lab teacher' who exhibits highly effective teaching strategies. In this school, Lab Teachers are regular education classroom teachers who have been specially trained in teaching strategies by the math and literacy coaches in the district, in specific content areas such as Mathematics and Language Arts. In addition to the content area training they have received, these lab classroom teachers are also continuously mentored by the math and

literacy coaches, whereby their instructional practices are observed and critiqued. After the periods of observation, the teachers receive specific feedback designed to move their classroom practice forward.

The teachers in this study are elementary school teachers. This distinction means that they are recognized, in the school they teach in, as innovative and efficient teachers in one or more instructional areas. Teachers with this distinction have been specially trained and coached in a content area, such as math, in order to open their classrooms for other teachers in other schools to learn from. I have worked with these teachers in my capacity as a co-teacher and have seen first-hand their teaching practices.

A general interview guide was used with semi-structured interview questions in an emergent design format developed to gain information from the interviewee. The questions for the interview guide were designed to be interpretive and were drawn from a review of the literature.

Data were analyzed following the steps outlined by Rubin & Rubin (2005) for Responsive Interviewing analysis techniques: 1) Recognition: finding the concepts, themes, events, and topical markers in interviews; 2) Clarify and Synthesize: through systematic examination of the different interviews to begin understanding of the overall narrative; 3) Elaboration: generating new concepts and ideas after clarification and synthesis; 4) Coding: systematically labeling concepts, themes, events, and topical markers, giving them a brief label to designate each and then marking in the interview text where they are found; 5) Sort: sorting the data units and ranking them and building relationships toward a theory.

III. Results and Discussion

Experiences of teachers in building positive relationships with the learners

We interviewed teachers all in the different grade levels of the school. We asked them a series of questions on student-teacher relationships. The interviewees requested to stay anonymous, but all are familiar with different roles within the education community. The researcher recorded their narratives, comments, examples and illustrations. There were four specific themes that were identified: *Classroom Climate, Classroom Layout, Teacher Interaction, and Instructional Delivery.* These themes were carried out through narratives in the interviews with teachers. The teachers were asked to freely speak in either English and the dialect, whichever were comfortable to them.

Specific components of the teacher-learner interactions which are essential to a learning environment

In answer to research question 2, the study participants had this to say as they described the specific components for building relationships with the learners. The narratives and

illustrations were grouped into themes: *building trust and rapport with learners at the beginning, establishing rules and behavior in class, system of privileges and motivation, and knowing learner's behavior to respond appropriately.*

Lessons learned by teachers in their positive relationships with the learners

Effective teachers form authentic, caring relationships with their learners. In the best of times, forming these relationships can be a challenge; in a post-pandemic world, where many teachers are engaging with learners remotely, building relationships can feel impossible. Fortunately, educators can learn the skills necessary to build strong relationships, both in person and online such as *learn the science behind strong relationships, embrace the power of empathic listening, practice genuine vulnerability, provide educators with opportunities to do their own healing, and the relationship have many advantages.*

Discussion

Teachers are encouraged to learn about learners' lives outside of the classroom as a way to connect with learners on a deeper level in order to build a relationship with them. They contend that an emotionally and socially positive school climate contributes to an atmosphere of cordiality in learner-teacher relationships. The study participant described her process for building relationships with her learners. Her 'atmosphere of cordiality' is created by building trust with her learners, collaboratively creating class routines and procedures based on respect, active listening, and sharing her own personal stories with her learners.

There were characteristics of good teachers that could be observed while the teacher interacts with learners so the educational community could learn from them. This study provided the opportunity to interview an exemplary teacher yielding a wealth of data for analysis and application to classroom practice. Implications of this qualitative study for the field of education are to serve as further support for the inclusion of teacher-learner interpersonal relationship strategies into teacher preparation programs as viable classroom strategies worthy of study. It is recommended that having teacher prep programs that include core knowledge are important, but teachers also need to be prepared to recognize learners' diverse ways of learning and develop the ability to continually adapt their teaching to effectively respond to the multifaceted nature of the classroom.

I, too, believe that effective teaching has many facets to it that some teachers use quite successfully and that other teachers can learn from. The results of this qualitative study showed how the purposeful interaction of teachers created a learning environment that learners felt supported in and that guided learner learning. The purposeful design of their classroom environment served to enhance the learning and learner engagement in their instruction. Learners were able to anticipate their next steps in the learning process because teachers deliberately designed the physical space of the classroom allowing for a continual flow in the instructional process.

Emotion in classroom practices discovered patterns of interactions among learners and teachers for building and supporting classroom contexts associated with positive affect and learning goals. The themes revealed in this qualitative study and the essential components embedded within the themes serve as evidence of effective teacher practices for building a relationship with learners that has a positive effect on the learning environment. For evidence of the positive effect this teacher's purposeful design had on learners, learner work samples were reviewed and learner responses to the teacher's interaction were observed and recorded.

Essential components of these themes can also serve as support to motivate learners to experience personal and cognitive growth. I found that study participants deliberately looked for ways to motivate their learners by actively listening to them and incorporating their interests into their instruction to promote their continued engagement in the lesson; thereby enhancing cognitive growth.

In theory, many teachers are aware of a cadre of effective practices that educational researchers have been discovering and promoting. However, practical application of these strategies can be an elusive concept without knowing the specific steps to take to implement these strategies. The findings of this qualitative study provided several strategies for practical ways to successfully build a relationship with learners that could have an impact on their learning environment. It is an opportunity for effective practices to move beyond pockets of excellence into the larger educational realm to reach a greater proportion of teachers and learners.

My recommendations, as a result of this qualitative study are to begin incorporating elements of teacher-learner interactions into instructional strategies. Using a purposeful design of their classroom and their interactions with learners allowed participants to create a learning environment that was meaningful to learners as they worked on instructional tasks.

Implications for me, as a teacher, would be to inquire about the design of the classroom and how it enhances the learning environment of the learners. I will also incorporate how a teacher interacts with learners during instructional, as well as non-instructional time to establish the effect that has on learner learning and whether or not it is purposeful.

IV. Conclusion

When writing about teacher-learner relationships, we remember the admonish "don't leave relationships to chance." They recommend that by using strategies supported by research, teachers can influence the dynamics of their classrooms and build strong teacher-learner relationships that will support learner learning. The particular strategies that my study participant used are well grounded in educational, sociological, and psychological research as described in the literature review.

Through my qualitative research, I found that the essence of a strong teacher and learner relationship revolves around how it affects the teaching and the learning going on in a classroom. Each theme that was created as a result of this qualitative study includes specific components of the teacher and learner relationship that affect the classroom learning environment in a meaningful way as evidenced by learner work samples and learner responses to teacher interaction. The participants and the resulting findings of this qualitative study serve to support the contention that everyday interactions in the classroom do matter. It is my hope that this study will help promote an emphasis on the value of effective strategies in the classroom that advance the acquisition of knowledge.

This study afforded me the opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge of teacher-learner interaction and teacher thinking that has a positive effect on the learning environment. The starting point of all learning is to know the minds and hearts of your learners. This qualitative study provided teacher-learner relationship strategies that, when incorporated into a learning environment, supports the value of knowing the hearts and minds of the learners. The purposeful design of a teacher-learner interactive learning environment enhances the educational experience for learners.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

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She is 34 years old and the second child of Dominica A. Rivero and Rogelio Z. Rivero. Currently, she resides at 216 Bilusa Bolton Isla, Davao City. She completed her Bachelor of Elementary School majoring in General Education at the University of Southeastern Philippines in 2010 and passed the Licensure Examination for Teachers. Furthermore, she furthered her education by earning 36 units in a Master of Education in Language Teaching, majoring in English, at the University of Southeastern Philippines.

She began her professional journey as a Senior Kindergarten Adviser at Davao Jones Academy in 2011. Seeking to broaden her experience, she transitioned to the role of Nursery Adviser at Davao Marianne Pre-school Inc. Eager to contribute to the public education system, she accepted a position as a Grade Three Teacher at Matina Central Elementary School.

In eight years of experience as a Grade Three Teacher, her commitment to student success, coupled with her diverse experience, has contributed to the positive academic and social growth of her students. In her role as Teacher II, she was appointed as Araling Panlipunan Grade Level Coordinator and Child Friendly School (CFS) Coordinator. To pursue her professional development opportunities, she is currently pursuing a degree in Master of Arts in Educational Management at Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc. in Davao City, Philippines.

Aside from teaching, she is also passionate about exploring different places, traveling abroad, engaging in extreme adventures, and climbing various mountains. These experiences not only challenge her physically but also help her develop resilience, courage, and a sense of accomplishment.