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Cultivating Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

From my office I could hear a commotion as staff were attempting to calm and contain an agitated student. One of the security guards yelled, "I'm not about to have some kid treat me like I'm a fool! I'm a full-grown man and I deserve some respect." The student replied, "Look I ain't going to have you talking to me any kind of way! We can go into this bathroom right here, right now and settle it!" As luck would have it, I was scheduled to complete psychoeducational assessments with this student for his three-year re-evaluation for eligibility for special education services. I asked myself, "How in the world am I going to convince this kid to come with me, a complete stranger, and sit through a psychological assessment battery?" I waited until the situation had cooled down a bit and found the student pacing the floor in the social worker's office. He was ruminating about being called out for misconduct by the security guard when he had the teacher's permission to leave the room. I affirmed his frustration by saying, "It must be tough to do the right thing when people seem to always assume the worst about you." We continued a brief exchange of me listening to the student vent about his interaction with the security guard while I withheld any judgement about the student's behavior during this interaction. Once the student and I had developed some rapport, I explained the re-evaluation process for eligibility to receive special education services and the personal relevance to him for his participation in this process. During the hour or so we spent in my office, this student shared several pieces of personal information with me. However, what I will never forget is how he described himself as risking his life every day to come to school. He explained that he wore a ski mask to and from school to avoid being recognized by members of a rival gang. He said, "I just want to get these little high school credits so I can move on out of this neighborhood, you feel me? And go to community college and eventually college." "What do you want to study?" I asked. "Art." he replied. He continued, "People just don't know how much of a struggle it is for me just to get to school. I know dude [the security guard] has a job to do and he doesn't want to look soft. But, when people go off on me and they don't even know me, or what I'm dealing with, I just lose it." (Jennifer Rose, Loyola University Chicago)

Key elements of positive student-teacher relationships

The preceding vignette describes how perceived disrespect on the part of the student and staff quickly escalated to a verbal altercation. At the core of this negative interaction was the student's feeling that the adult lacked empathy. The verbal altercation with the security guard also reinforced the student's misgivings about the adults in his school. Student-teacher relationships are integral to the learning process (Hamre et al., 2013). Positive student-teacher relationships are considered by theorists to be the key ingredient in student motivation and academic engagement (Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008). However, given the multiple demands placed upon educators, making the investment of time to build relationships with students, especially students with challenging behavior, seems overwhelming. Student-teacher relationships have been conceptualized by teachers as consisting of warmth, absence of conflict, and appropriate help-seeking behaviors from students (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Students also recognize the willingness to approach their teachers for help as a sign of a good student-teacher relationship (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Students also tend to emphasize the emotional connection with a teacher and having a sense of belonging and acceptance as being indicative of a positive student-teacher relationship (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Hamre et al. (2013) conceptualized student-teacher interactions as consisting of three domains consisting of observable behaviors: Emotional support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. The Emotional support domain contains elements that are considered as key contributors to student-teacher relationships and is described by the following elements: Positive Climate, Negative Climate, Teacher Sensitivity, and Regard for Student Perspectives and Overcontrol. The chart below provides a description of each dimension:

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Hamre et al. (2013)
Emotional Support

Dimension	Description
Positive Climate	Reflects the overall emotional tone of the classroom and the connection between teachers and students
Negative Climate	Reflects overall level of expressed negativity in the classroom between teachers and students (e.g., anger, aggression, irritability)
Teacher Sensitivity	Encompasses teachers' responsivity to students' needs and awareness of students' level of academic and emotional functioning
Regards for Student Perspectives	The degree to which the teacher's interactions with students and classroom activities place an emphasis on students' interests, motivations, and points of view, rather than being very teacher-driven
Overcontrol	Assesses the extent to which the classroom is rigidly structured or regimented at the expense of children's interests and/or needs

Why are student-teacher relationships important?

Teacher expectations can influence student achievement

The significance of the student-teacher relationship is substantial, "A youth's emotional connection with adults is perhaps the single most important factor for fostering positive development, including higher levels of engagement, motivation, and academic performance" (National Research Council, 2004). Brophy and Good (1970) demonstrated that teacher communication of expectations (e.g., positive vs. negative teacher comments about academic performance, non-verbal behavior) contributed to a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. Teachers were more likely to anticipate and demand higher quality academic performance from students for whom they held higher expectations. Children are astute observers of teacher behaviors and use this information to interpret how their teacher views them as a student. Weinstein (1986, 1989, 1993) interviewed fourth graders who were able to provide specific examples of teacher behaviors that they used to determine what their teacher thought of their learning potential. Based on the expectancy theory, students are influenced to perform in ways that they believe are consistent with the teacher's appraisal of their abilities. A cycle where good academic performance leads to continued positive teacher communication becomes part of the child's expectation for future teacher-student interactions and shapes their perception of relationships with teachers. Recent studies (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; McKown & Weinstein, 2007; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007) confirm the earlier research of Brophy and Good (1970). Teacher expectations have been found to have the strongest influence on the performance of students of color, students from low-income families, and students who struggle academically (Gill & Reynolds, 1999; Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996; Kuklinski & Weinstein, 2001).

Resnick et al. (1997) found that students who were at-risk were more likely to be academically successful when they had a strong relationship with at least one teacher. Joshi, Doan, and Springer (2018) found that

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African American students in 3rd-8th grades in Tennessee experienced gains in math when paired with an African American teacher. Gershenson, Hart, Hyman, Lindsay, and Papageorge (2018) found that having at least one African American teacher by third grade increased the likelihood of college enrollment by 13%, and having two African American teachers by third grade increased college enrollment for African American students by 32%. It is not feasible to match students and teachers based on race and ethnicity since the majority (80%) of U.S. teachers are non-Hispanic Whites (Taie & Goldring, 2018). Nor would it be unilaterally preferable to match students with teachers based on race and ethnicity. However, these results suggest that identification and use of strategies, such as Culturally-Responsive Teaching, that foster positive academic outcomes from same-race student-teacher assignments are warranted.

Positive student-teacher relationships can sway youths' responses to discipline

In terms of the role of student-teacher relationships relative to discipline, there is evidence that taking an authoritative, relational approach to discipline can strengthen bonds between adults and children while maintaining classroom order. Authoritative, relational discipline approaches that incorporate support, structure, and student voice could help mitigate the effects of implicit bias for students of color. Authoritative and relational discipline frameworks such as restorative justice provide educators with opportunities to build authentic relationships that allow them to see past stereotypes associated with students' race, ethnicity, or gender (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016). Furthermore, discipline practices that honor student voice strengthen teacher relationships with all students but especially with students of color. Having regular opportunities to share their story is critical for building trust between educators and students from marginalized groups who, historically, have had their voices suppressed (Gregory et al., 2016). There is research (Gregory et al., 2016) that links high-fidelity implementation of restorative practices in high schools with student perception of teachers as respectful and reductions in the discipline gap between Asian/White and Latino/African American students.

How do student-teacher relationships differ across age groups?

Student-teacher relationships are both grounded in attachment and developmental theories (Hamre et al.,2013). Young children are believed to internalize their conception of relationships with teachers based upon their relationships with their primary caregivers (Jerome et al., 2008). Children, before adolescence, rely heavily upon adult direction. Having a relationship with a teacher who assumes more of the responsibility in the decision-making process is developmentally appropriate for children in preschool through early elementary grades. Teachers of young children with poor parent-child relationships have an opportunity to reshape the child's internalized view of adults by consistently interacting with the child in a positive and supportive manner (Sabol & Pianta, 2013).

Jerome et al. (2008) observed that middle school/junior high students typically have fewer meaningful student-teacher interactions while, developmentally, they actually need more support as they transition into larger, more competitive learning environments. These students also frequently encounter challenging social situations with peers that can be difficult to navigate without receiving adult guidance during the school day. Adolescents, however, thrive when provided opportunities for autonomy, self-expression, control, and leadership, which allow them to test their developing sense of independence while having a safety net of trusted adults for support when needed (Pianta & Allen, 2008). Unfortunately, students of color and students from lower income families are often schooled in environments that enforce stringent adult control (Jerome et al., 2008). In these spaces, when adolescents attempt to exercise their developmentally-appropriate sense of

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agency, it can be interpreted by adults as defiance, and the response is often some form of harsh discipline (Pianta & Allen, 2008). When teachers are able to build relationships with their high school students and create a classroom environment that is structured, yet meets the adolescent need for exploration, autonomy, and self-expression, these students are more likely to respond to corrective feedback (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Gregory et al., 2016).

How does race/ethnicity influence student-teacher relationships?

The race and ethnicity of students has also been identified as a factor in the development of student-teacher relationships (Jerome, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008). Tenenbaum and Ruck (2007) found in three separate meta-analyses of published research that teachers expressed higher expectations for Asian students followed by Whites, made more referrals for discipline and special education for African American and Latino students than their Asian and White peers, and provided less praise for African American and Latino students compared to other students. Relative to discipline, African American students are frequently referred for defiance (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008), disruption and noncompliance (Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011). Differential treatment that is unfavorable to students of color could be perceived by students as communication of lowered expectations. Andrews Gutwein's (2017) qualitative research examined the perspectives of adolescent students regarding teacher expectations and the effect on student-teacher relationships. Students of color shared experiences with teachers that communicated themes of White privilege applied to White students, selective attention focused on noticing the disciplinary infractions of students of color while ignoring academic contributions of students of color (e.g., comments made during class discussions by students of color), lack of academic support, deficit beliefs about intellectual potential based upon stereotypes or previous interactions with students of color. These experiences led to students of color feeling marginalized by a hostile school environment and less connected to their teachers. One strategy to increase a sense of inclusiveness for students of color is for teachers to convey genuine empathy, build trust, and communicate high expectations for all students (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008).

Approaches for strengthening teachers' relational skills with students

Pianta & Allen (2008) identified four areas associated with building teachers' capacity for building meaningful relationships with students:

- Teachers' knowledge and thoughts about their interactions with students.
- Teachers' access to relational supports among colleagues.
- Opportunities for teachers to receive regular structured feedback about their interactions with students.
- Specific objectives for improving interactions with students and provision of strategies to assist in meeting goals.

Three research-based interventions that address building teachers' relational skills with students are: Double-Check, My Teaching Partner (MTP), and Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR).

Double Check

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Double Check is a professional development and coaching model developed to reduce referrals of students of color for exclusionary discipline and special education in schools implementing school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (Bradshaw et al., 2018). Additional goals are to increase staff cultural proficiency, increase student engagement, and increase teacher classroom management skills (Hardee, 2018). Double Check targets strengthening Tier 1 school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports implementation. Participants receive supplemental Tier 1 training focused on data-based decision-making especially with regard to use of disaggregated data. Emphasis on student engagement and incorporation of culturally-responsive practices are also integral to enhancement of Tier 1 implementation within the Double Check model. The training process includes five professional development sessions centered around the organizing principles of CARES (Connection to the curriculum, Authentic relationships, Reflective thinking, Effective communication, Sensitivity to students' culture). Individual coaching based on the Classroom Check Up (CCU) model for classroom teachers is used to help develop teachers' skills. Key components of the CCU model are: 1. Rapport building between the teacher and their assigned coach, 2. Teacher-collected data using the Classroom Ecology Checklist, 3. Teacher feedback, and 4. Goal-setting (Bradshaw et al., 2018). In a randomized clinical trial in 12 elementary and middle schools, teachers participating in the Double Check professional development and coaching referred fewer African American students for disciplinary infractions than teachers who did not participate in coaching (Bradshaw et al., 2018).

My Teaching Partner (MTP)

My Teaching Partner was developed at the Curry School of Education and Human Development at the University of Virginia (https://curry.virginia.edu/myteachingpartner). The overarching goal of MTP is to help teachers improve the quality of instructional interactions with students. This goal is addressed via coaching and teacher reflection across three domains (Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, & Pianta, 2015): Emotional Support (positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspectives); Classroom Organization (behavior management, productivity, and instructional learning formats), and Instructional Support (content understanding, analysis and problem solving, and quality of feedback). MTP, a year-long program, is comprised of three components: 1. College coursework providing teachers with instruction on best practices in student engagement and instructional delivery, 2. Video library with examples of teachers engaged in best practices, and 3. A web-based, video coaching experience. The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is used to establish goals and to assess progress. MTP has demonstrated effectiveness in pre-k through high school settings (Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning).

Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR)

Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR, Duong et al., 2018) is focused on enhancing teachers' strategies for developing positive relationships with students. It is comprised of a three-hour training and ongoing teacher consultation. The conceptual framework for EMR is the Emotional Support domain (Hamre et al. 2013). During the Establish phase, teachers are trained to generate interactions with students using positive, nondirective communication. Teachers in the Maintain phase are trained to maintain positive interactions with students by focusing on delivering a 5-to-1 ratio of positive to negative interactions. The purpose of the Restore phase is to teach educators the signs that a student-teacher relationship has been harmed (usually through a negative interaction) and engage in a restorative communication with the student. The unique characteristic of the restorative communication is the aspect of the teacher demonstrating willingness to listen to the student's point-of-view. Teachers taking ownership of their role in the conflict is another critical piece

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in the restorative communication process. Initial research has shown EMR to be effective at improving student-teacher relationships in elementary (Cook et al., 2018) and in middle school (Duong et al., 2018). Additional benefits of the EMR approach was reductions in disruptive behavior and higher levels of academic engagement especially with students who had poor relationships with their teachers prior to EMR implementation (Duong et al., 2018).

The following sections provide real-life examples from Wisconsin educators addressing the question of "How do teachers develop positive relationships with their students?"

How do I go about it?

The importance of authenticity of staff and individual connections with students cannot be understated. This symbiotic relationship is critical to helping students understand that everyone matters in the classroom and larger school environment, and that as a community everyone is it in together. Through these relationships and interactions, students learn that everyone has good and bad days, including teachers, and that a true community operates in such a way to support one another. As one teacher noted, *"To personally establish and maintain relationship with my students, I start day one out making sure we laugh together...more than once! I want them to know our year together is going to me than just "Errr...follow my directions at all times," but that we can also be ourselves and have fun together too. From there, I work to find and acknowledge as many of the great things my kids already know how to do. Another aspect (of building connections with students) is genuinely having an interest in their personal lives and asking them about what they are doing outside of school."* (T. Hart, Holmen School District WI, 2018).

Second, educators must accept the charge to educate students, rather than committing only to teaching a grade or a specific subject. This point is especially salient now in the time of increasing emphasis on student outcomes, accountability, and school report cards. While holding ourselves accountable to student outcomes is critical, we must begin where the student is at, honoring what they come to us already knowing, their unique individual selves with unique learning styles. It requires effort to provide differentiated instruction. As another teacher noted, *"Meeting students where they are at is a skill I've learned over the years. I can't teach them all the same. In doing this, I've also found ways to learn more about each student and their personal life… Learning is the next progression once they know you care."* (M. Peplinski, Eau Claire Area School District WI, 2018).

In fact, this point lives in psychology of human development. As illustrated in Maslow's hierarchy of needs; people can only attain the highest level of functioning and self-actualization (which is a goal of education!), if certain conditions are met, in sequence, including safety and belonging. Meeting students where they are at, honoring who they and their families are, and fostering a sense of connection, belonging, and safety are essential steps that must occur before any learning can take place.

The remaining question then is how to begin this work. Many schools and districts have mission statements that indicate student learning is their highest priority. For the majority of students (think 80% of the triangle), this is true. In order to support the remaining 20% and enhance the educational experience of the majority, any actions taken must be intentional and deliberate. Actions that lead to positive teacher relationships with students and create a sense of belonging for students include, but are not limited to: learning students' names (pronunciations and the stories behind them); learning who the students are as people; learning about students' families and interests both inside and outside of school; determining each student's unique learning style and connecting learning to what they already know; and learning about students' preferences. These actions and the authentic connections that will result from them require sustained effort beyond beginning of

the year ice-breakers. Students show up every day and each of them will do their best provided we build a supportive environment. School staff must make supportive environments a reality and actively work to maintain them.

What question/challenges might we anticipate and plan for?

Developing systems that foster relationships between staff and ALL students can only be done when these systems consistently connect to the mission and vision of the school. What do we have planned? Why is it important? How does it connect to our mission and vision?

In this manner, when faced with criticism about students who "don't deserve special attention" or whose families "don't value education", or that the efforts are "too touchy-feely," peer-leaders and administrators are well-equipped to discuss the connection of said efforts to the essential work of the school.

Another challenge is the pressure that schools feel to fill every instructional minute with academic content, due to an increased emphasis on student outcome data in the evaluation of education efficacy. It is true that schools must maximize instructional minutes; however, sacrificing time spent building relationships often results in a short-term gain of minutes and a long-term struggle with student engagement in instruction and undesirable behaviors. As mentioned earlier, students cannot focus on education unless their other basic needs are met, including safety and connection. Applying prevention logic to this challenge demonstrates clearly that by investing time up front in building relationships, connection, and a safe space, we will gain instructional minutes and engagement by eliminating time needed for repairing and intervening as academic work becomes more difficult.

Lastly, educators have an ever-increasing list of demands placed on their time. As this list grows, things like relationships and relationship building, "softer skills," tend to lose a sense of urgency. This lack of attention and urgency is frequently evidenced in even the most meaningful adult relationships as well, despite our best intentions. The solution to this critical issue is a systematic plan that is intentional, creates time and space for relationship building to occur, rewards such work, and includes built-in accountability measures for school staff.

One administrator noted this need for a plan and accountability in how her school's plan for fostering student-teacher-family connections worked. She noted, "Each year I organize 'Hello, Hawks!' event in August where the staff goes out into the neighborhoods and in one day does a home visit with every single one of our students to welcome them to the new school year and answer any questions/concerns that they or their families might have… I provide ongoing PD about the importance of building positive student-teacher relationships, as well as specific strategies for how to do that." She concluded by noting that part of their process was to do plan fidelity checks; staff needing to submit evidence that they took the steps identified. (J. Grandt-Turk, Janesville School District WI, 2018)

Strong and authentic student teacher relationships are the foundation on which education occurs. These relationships are not something that will be built or sustained without active work on the part of educators and cannot be taken for granted. Student teacher relationships and a student's sense of belonging and safety

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in school should be essential priorities to school systems and must be deliberately and intentionally installed and nurtured.

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