Teacher Relationships
by
Margaret C. Wang and Genev a D. Haertel

Teachers link together students, other teachers, school administrators, families, and community members to foster the learning success and healthy development of their st udents. The nature of these interactions among different stakeholders varies depending on the teachers' intent and the needs of their students. Students, particularly those at risk of school failure, can benefit from certain "protective supports provided by teachers" (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). The teacher's role in creating an environment and building relationships conducive to learning goes beyond the traditional academic duties to include the provision of additional support and care. By devel oping nurturing, positive relationships with their students, teachers can buffer the impact of certain basic factors that may negatively impact on a student's academic achievement.

This *Spotlight* describes key relationships in which teachers pa rticipate when fulfilling their official roles. Research-based understandings about the nature, quality, and effectiveness of the teachers' interactions are presented within the key contexts of the classroom, school, home, and community.

TEACHERS A ND STUDENTS

The relationship between teacher and student has been a focus of inquiry for over 2000 years, since Plato, Socrates, and Confucius established much of the philosophical guidelines for teaching. By emphasizing the acquisition of knowled ge through dialogue, each philosopher stressed a commitment to the teacher-student relationship.

The 20th century has witnessed the proliferation of ideas fostering teacher-student relationships. In the early 1900s, John Dewey and other progressive ed ucators theorized that children flourish if allowed to grow

freely in their own way at their own rate without being forced or limited by too much teaching. Maria Montessori similarly argued that children should discover knowledge for themselves and learn by doing with a clear emphasis on sensory perceptions.

At the other end of the continuum, B. F. Skinner and other proponents of stimulus-response learning theory defined teachers as transmitters of knowledge and students as passive recipients. Accordi ng to their respective theories of associationism and behaviorism, the classroom teacher presented content to children and conducted drill-and-review as children memorized the material.

The relationship between teacher and student was redefined with t he advent of cognitive psychology. Following the principles of constructivism, teachers and students were said to construct knowledge jointly. Teachers and students were believed to constitute a community of learners which engages in social discourse and produces common understandings. Teachers were seen as facilitators who guide and enrich children's learning activities, with students serving as co-contributors to the learning process.

Psychologists have recently addressed the psychosocial dimensions of teachers' relationships with students. Research on resilience indicates that caring teachers who express concern for students and act as confidants, role models, and mentors can contribute to children's capacity to overcome personal vulnerabilities and environmental adversities (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994). Focusing on the psychosocial aspects of teaching is especially important with older children. Close, caring relationships with teachers facilitate children's successful transition from elem entary to junior high school. Unfortunately, while teachers are relatively well-connected with elementary-aged children, as children get older, teachers have less close contact with them and fewer resources are available to promote healthy development of the teacher-student relationships.

TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF

Teachers' relationships with their peers, other school staff, and school administrators have been researched for decades. These studies reveal that teachers are often isolated fro m their peers and other school professionals. Thus, increasing teachers' opportunities for interaction and collegiality has been a goal of recent efforts to increase teacher professionalism.

Research shows that while teachers may participate in organi zational-level activities, curriculum and classroom practices are usually unaffected

by participation in indirect activities such modifying budgets and/or school policies (Smylie, 1994). Other research has found a positive relationship between participati ve decision-making and classroom instruction, noting an increase in innovations adopted by schools, professional development activities, teacher exchange of ideas and knowledge, and improved understanding of learning and classroom instruction (Lieberman, Darling-Hammond, & Zuckerman, 1991).

Research on teachers who play leadership roles and increased opportunities for professional relationships demonstrates that there are benefits for these teachers, but there is little evidence that they are able to provide much support or benefit to other teachers. This lack raises organizational and policy questions on the extent to which conferring teachers with additional roles and responsibilities for professional development of peers can be effective in mak ing specific changes in teacher practice at the organizational level.

Professional relationships among teachers adhere to norms that govern the ways teachers ask for and provide help. Research on professional development reveals that interactions amo ng mentors and their paired teachers are often reserved, non-problematic, and uncritical. These studies show that in the beginning of such supervisory relationships, the content of the interpersonal interactions is informational and focuses on district po licies and procedures, not classroom practice. Relationships between mentor teachers and novices tend to be about maintaining harmony and support, rather than developing competence. Further research indicates that increasing the quality of teachers' work- relationships requires professional and organizational change through, for example, the establishment of professional communities, including professional development schools, where teachers' work is collaborative, coordinated, and interdependent. Educatin g new teachers into the field should focus on strengthening interpersonal relationships among new teachers and their mentor teachers. Professional development programs should stress collegiality and the creation of shared standards of practice in the hope s of creating and sustaining communities of learners.

TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Teacher-parent relationships impact students' learning and well-being and many teachers attempt to involve parents in school management or classroom activities. Thes e parent-involvement efforts help establish and foster parent-teacher relationships, and include parents in educational interventions, which are significantly more effective than those without parent involvement.

Parent involvement programs promote a number of desirable student

outcomes, including: decreased teen pregnancy and drop-out rates, increased graduation rates, and improved achievement and school attendance. Teachers can encourage and support parental involvement through home visits and paren t teacher conferences. Parents who participate in these programs are more likely to further their own education by attending classes and are more able to provide increased support to their children and their children's learning needs.

Caring parents and teachers who act in concert can strengthen the effects of educational and social interventions. When there are positive relationships among parents and teachers, the resources of the home and school contexts are amplified, providing a greater likeliho od of positive outcomes for children.

TEACHERS AND THE COMMUNITY

To create rich, nurturing educational environments in the classroom, schools need to maximize the use of resources available in their communities. Teachers can incorporate par ents' skills and knowledge and local organizations and programs into their curriculum to offer students supplementary information to complement their basic course work. Many teachers collaborate with local universities, museums, and community service orga nizations to expand the cultural resources available to students and enhance their educational experience. Teachers can forge relationships with outside agencies and community members to provide children with the best possible learning environment.

T o meet the diverse needs of students in our public schools, community services and service providers are often connected to the children's school experience. As organizations, schools have the advantage of having the most frequent contact with students an d therefore the potential to truly benefit children through the integration of school-linked services in meeting the children's needs (Kirst & Kelly, 1995). Teachers may work with social workers, family counselors, local health care providers, and oth ers to address and fulfill the needs of their students.

REFERENCES

Kirst M., & Kelly, C. (1995). Collaboration to improve education and children services: Politics and policy making. In L. Rigsby, M.C. Rey nolds, & M.C. Wang (Eds.), *School-community connections: Exploring issues for research and practice* (pp. 21-43). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lieberman, A., Darling-Hammond, L., & Zuckerman, D. (1991). *Early lessons in restructuring schools*. New York: National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching, Teachers College,

Columbia University.

Smylie, M. (1994). Redesigning teachers' work: Connections to the classroom. *Review of Research in Education, 20* , 129-177.

Wang, M.C., Haertel, G.D., & Walberg, H.J. (1994). Educational resilience in inner cities. In M.C. Wang & E. Gordon (Eds.), *Educational resilience in inner-city America: Challenges and prospects* (pp. 45-72). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.