Improving Working Relationships Inside the Classroom*

Good schools and good teaching are essential to achieving the mission and aims of public education. Foundational to all this are the transactions between the learner, the teacher, classmates, and the learning environment in general.

It is easy to list out a set of ideals related to what students and school staff would desire their experiences in the classroom and school-wide to be like. Such a list encompasses being welcome, safe, included, respected, cared for, guided and supported in learning, and treated fairly. These qualitative features are seen as enabling openness, trust, engagement, participation, and enhancing the "fit" for effective learning and positive growth.

Relationships at school exert a powerful influence on student and staff perceptions of the experience of working together and on cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement. The focus of the following is on factors affecting *working relationships between teachers and students and among classmates.* This in no way is meant to diminish the importance of working relationships among teachers and with other staff and with parents; these simply are beyond the scope of this set of practice notes.

About Teacher-Student Working Relationships

Working relationships at school are not to be confused with friendships and family relationships, although many of the characteristics are the same. The quality of working relationships between teachers and their students emerges from daily interactions, both formal and informal.

Good teacher-student working relationships can be measured in terms of their contribution to processes for facilitating learning, effective student outcomes, and a positive climate in the classroom. While these factors undoubtedly are influenced by the degree to which a teacher and student like each other, a measure of liking is insufficient. And of course, all such measures also are influenced by classmates and other experiences at school and beyond.

> Student-teacher relationships develop over the course of the school year through a complex intersection of student and teacher beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions with one another. Forming strong and supportive relationships with teachers allows students to feel safer and more secure in the school setting, feel more competent, make more positive connections with peers, and make greater academic gains. In contrast, conflict with teachers may place students on a trajectory of school failure in which they are unable to connect to academic and social resources offered within classrooms and schools.
>
> Hamre, Pianta, Bear, Minke (2006)

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Working Relationships Among Classmates

The desire to feel connected to peers is a major driver of behavior. Sometimes it seems like there is nothing more important to a student than her/his relationship with other students – at least some other students. If a teacher can capitalize on this by establishing and sustaining positive working relationships among classmates, this can facilitate student academic, social, and emotional learning and minimize student misbehavior.

Toward these ends, the focus is on creating a strong sense of community and positive and authentic interpersonal connections in the classroom. Each day provides natural opportunities to promote feelings of connection and community, and such feelings can be solidified through a regular focus on activities that involve cooperative learning.

Classroom interactions sometimes result in disagreements and arguments. These can become teachable moments for guiding students to learn effective ways not only to resolve such matters, but how to minimize future occurrences. Discussions, modeling, role-playing, and other strategies can help facilitate student learning about how to work and grow together.

Interpersonal Barriers to Good Working Relationships

What sometimes gets lost in discussing ways to improve working relationships is the need to address interfering factors and to do so from the perspective of staff and student perceptions. Some interfering factors stem from interpersonal barriers; some are the result of poor conditions for learning.

Differences and Dynamics

Differences and dynamics become barriers to effective working relationships when they generate negative attitudes that are allowed to prevail. Differences that may become sources of unproductive working relationships if ignored include variations in sociocultural and economic background, current lifestyle, primary language spoken, skin color, gender, power, status, intervention orientation, and on and on.

In addition, common dynamics arise as people work together. Examples of interfering dynamics include excessive dependency and approval seeking, competition, stereotypical thinking and judgmental bias, transference and counter-transference, rescue-persecution cycles, resistance, reluctance, and psychological withdrawal and psychological reactance.

The reality is that individuals bring different backgrounds, capabilities, and motivations into the classroom. Such differences can be complementary and helpful – as when staff and students from different backgrounds are willing and able to learn from each other. Differences become a barrier to establishing effective working relationships when negative attitudes prevail. Interpersonally, the result generally is conflict and poor communication.

For example, differences in status, skin color, power, orientation, and so forth can cause one or more persons to enter the situation with negative (including competitive) feelings. And such feelings often motivate conflict.

Many individuals (students, staff, family members) who have been treated unfairly, been discriminated against, been deprived of opportunity and status at school, and in society use whatever means they can to seek redress and sometimes to strike back. Such individuals may promote conflict with the intent of correcting power imbalances or in hopes of at least calling attention to problems they view as needing to be addressed.

In classrooms, those with negative feelings tend to act and say things in ways that produce significant barriers to establishing a working relationship. Often, the underlying message is that the situation is unfair and the teacher and/or classmates are part of the problem.

Negative attitudes about working together require special attention by those committed to improving the learning environment. And an intensive effort must be made with respect to those who are having chronic difficulty interacting effectively with others.

Fortunately, many barriers are preventable and others can be dealt with quickly if appropriate mechanisms are in place to design and implement problem solving strategies. Such mechanisms focus on assuring classroom experiences are designed to address interfering factors and promote, build, and sustain productive working relationships.

Conditions for Learning that Interfere with Working Relationships

As noted, conditions for learning need to be addressed from the perspective of the directly involved parties. For example, a teacher may think a working relationship is good and the student may not. Moreover, the desire for a good working relationship rests in the motivational system of those directly involved.

The constant problem is how to create a classroom environment that engenders teacher and student perceptions that classroom experiences are a good "fit." (This is often referred to as the problem of meeting students where they are.) A good fit for the student is one that is neither too easy nor excessively challenging in terms of her or his current capabilities (e.g., knowledge, skills, current state of being) and motivation (e.g., values, expectations, attitudes, interests).

Classroom programs tend to do better in matching capabilities than they do in matching motivation. In addressing differences from the perspective of intrinsic motivation, there are two sets of fundamental concerns:

- *minimizing* experiences that threaten feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to significant others
- *maximizing* experiences that enhance feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to significant others

These are key matters to focus on in developing working relationships.

Exhibit 1 provides examples of experiences that can threaten such feelings and thus interfere with positive working relationships. It is generally recognized that practices for overcoming the impact of such experiences requires re-engagement efforts that go well beyond practices teachers are taught related to student engagement.

Exhibit 1

**Examples of School Experiences That Can
Undermine Classroom Working Relationships**

• Instruction that gives short shrift to accounting for individual differences in motivation and capability

• Instruction that encourages counterproductive competition, includes unrealistic expectations, and demands unattainable standards

• Instruction that provides students with too few choices and little opportunity to participate in decision making

• Providing too few enrichment opportunities

• Establishing over-controlling rules and using physical and social punishment for noncompliance

• Overemphasizing social control and underemphasizing helping those in need in responding to student misbehavior and to problems such as bullying, neglect, rejection

• Providing students and their families with too little essential supports and special assistance

• Overemphasizing high stakes testing and using toxic accountability

• Providing too little personalized continuing teacher education and few essential supports and help for teachers when problems arise (e.g., from colleagues, student support staff, administrators)

• Offering few opportunities for teacher involvement in school decision making

• Too little attention to the physical environment, especially if it is deteriorating

Building Authentic Working Relationships

Exhibit 2 highlights conditions that can enhance positive perceptions and feelings and thus help establish and sustain positive working relationships. Much of building good working relationships involves preventing barriers by taking affirmative steps related to specific concerns.

Exhibit 2

**Examples of School Experiences That Can
Enhance Building Classroom Working Relationships**

- Ensuring accommodations for individual differences in both motivation and capability (e.g., personalizing instruction to ensure an appropriate fit – neither too easy nor too hard – for each learner, building on a student's strengths. providing special learning assistance when needed)

- Providing a broad range of options from which learners can make choices and participate in decision making (e.g., with respect to learning content, activities)

- Implementing cooperative learning in ways that promote academic, social, and emotional learning and peer connectedness

- Using natural events as opportunities and teachable moments

- Frequently, consistently, and authentically conveying welcoming, respectful, supportive, nurturing, and validating messages and encouraging students' appropriate expression and participation related to decision making about classroom concerns and making contributions to their own and others learning and development and to a positive climate

- Using individual conferences to promote communication and connection with each student (e.g., regular use of informal and formal conferences for discussing options, making decisions, exploring learners' perceptions, and mutually evaluating progress)

- Pursuing classroom management primarily in terms of practices that guide and support and establishing a sense of community (e.g., mutual caring and responsibility)

- Mutually (staff and students) formulating rules and logical consequences with an emphasis on safety, social and restorative justice, guidance, and support, rather than social control

- Using preventive steps and teachable moments to minimize noncompliance with rules and interpersonal crisis situations (ensuring and encouraging safe interactions between students; monitoring high risk areas, such as bathrooms and playgrounds)

- Monitoring applications of consequences for noncompliance to ensure fairness and due process and to use them as teachable moments

- Regular reevaluations of decisions, reformulation of plans, and renegotiation of agreements based on mutual evaluations of progress, problems, and learners' perceptions of "fit"

- Ensuring support for the wide range of transitions that occur daily and over time

- Outreaching to enhance home involvement and engagement

- Providing student and family assistance as soon as feasible after a problem arises

- Structuring school staff as a community of colleagues – teachers network, collaborate, participate substantively in school decision making, have opportunities for personalized professional learning

By countering interpersonal barriers to working relationships and addressing factors exemplified in Exhibits 1 and 2, schools provide an essential foundation for staff and students to experience a sense of community, feel connected and engaged, and build working relationships.

Of course, in building working relationships, constant attention is called for with respect to establishing and maintaining rapport and connection. Here are a few specific matters for teachers to consider about establishing rapport and connection:

- Eliminate as many threats as is feasible to feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to others

- Increase experiences that can enhance feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to others

- Minimize negative prejudgments about students and between students

- Make time to establish authentic connections

- Be certain that students understand what can be gained from working together

- Enhance expectations that working relationships will be productive – important here is establishing credibility with and among students

- Establish a classroom structure that provides support and guidance for strengthening working relationships

- Provide regular feedback about the positive outcomes that are resulting from working together

- In all communications the emphasis is on talking with, not at, others – use and teach active listening and dialogue (e.g., being a good listener, avoiding being judgmental, not prying, sharing experiences as appropriate and needed)

- In all contacts convey and teach students to convey

  > empathy and warmth (e.g., the ability to understand and appreciate what others are thinking and feeling and to transmit a sense of liking)

  > genuine regard and respect (e.g., the ability to transmit real interest and to interact in a way that enable others to maintain a feeling of integrity and personal control)

Getting students involved in their education programs is more than having them participate; it is connecting students with their education, enabling them to influence and affect the program and, indeed, enabling them to become enwrapped and engrossed in their educational experiences.

                                                                            Wehmeyer & Sands

And the same is true for all school staff.

Concluding Comments

As a leading writer of the twentieth century, John Steinbeck was asked to address a convention of teachers. Part of what he said to them was the following:

> "School is not easy and it is not for the most part very much fun, but then, if you are very lucky, you may find a teacher. Three real teachers in a lifetime is the very best of luck. My first was a science and math teacher in high school, my second a professor of creative writing at Stanford and my third was my friend and partner, Ed Rickets.

> I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist and that there are as few as there are any other great artists. It might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit.

> My three had these things in common-they all loved what they were doing. They did not tell -- they catalyzed a burning desire to know. Under their influence, the horizons sprung wide and fear went away and the unknown became knowable. But most important of all, the truth, that dangerous stuff, became beautiful and very precious."

Clearly, connecting with what a teacher is teaching can be life-shaping. Good connections benefit from authentic working relationships.

This set of practice notes has just touched upon the complications of establishing authentic working relationships in classrooms. As with all classroom practices, what has been outlined above requires growing expertise and potent collegial supports.

Finally, in emphasizing working relationships between teacher and student and among classmates, there is no intent to suggest these are sufficient. Good schools and good learning are a whole school, whole family, and whole community concern. This calls for a range of institutionalized collaborative arrangements and working relationships and the weaving together of all available resources.

For more on all this, see list of center resources listed on the following page.

Center Resources

See the Center's Online Clearinghouse *Quick Finds*. For example:

Collaboration - School, Community, Interagency; community schools –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p1201_01.htm

*Classroom Climate/Culture and School Climate/Culture and Environments that
Support Learning*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/environments.htm

Classroom Focused Enabling –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/classenable.htm

Classroom Management –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/clssroom.htm

Social and Emotional Development and Social Skills –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2102_05.htm

Listed in the Quick Finds are a wide range of free and online accessible resources – some
developed by the Center and many from a variety of other sources. See, for example, the
following prepared by the Center:

>*Improving Student Outcomes, Enhancing School Climate: Teachers Can't Do it Alone!*
>*Supporting Teachers in Classrooms and School-wide to Address Barriers to Learning
and Teaching*
Both in the Center's Winter 2013 e-journal –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/winter13.pdf

>*Designing School Improvement to Enhance Classroom Climate for All Students*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolclimate.pdf

>*Fostering School, Family, and Community Involvement. Guidebook.*
In the series on "Safe and Secure: Guides to Creating Safer Schools." –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/publications/44 guide 7 fostering school family and
community involvement.pdf

>*Engaging and Re-engaging Students and Families* –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/engageii.pdf

>*Natural Opportunities to Promote Social-Emotional Learning and MH* –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/naturalopportunities.pdf

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