

The Big Picture: Building Student-Teacher Relationships

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Question

What effect does building student-teacher relationships have on high school student readiness to learn?

Context for Research

I teach at a large, crowded high school of 2,600 students in San Francisco. The school has a number of success stories and continues to be a high-performing school. And yet, this year, we have seen an increase in suspensions, referrals, and students needing services beyond the everyday classroom experience. When these struggles have come up amongst the staff throughout the year, many have pointed to the diversity index as the reason for increased behavior problems. Our school population *has* been changing over the years, shifting to a more diverse population (For instance comparing the class of 2005 to the class of 2008 shows a 5.1% increase in Latino students up from 7.3 to 12.4%, a 5% increase in Black students, up from 3.2 to 8.2 %, and a decrease in Chinese population of 6.2 percent, from 56 to 49%. Forty-one point nine percent of our population qualifies for free or reduced lunch). Educators across the country are looking at ways to address the achievement gap between low-income students of color and their more affluent counterparts (Pete and Fogarty, 2005; Kozol, 2006; Noguera, 2007; Haberman, 2006), but yet it is not enough to point out the inequity; schools must be looking at what we can do to address the needs of a diverse population.

As I stated previously many of the teachers and staff feel disempowered to make changes that will begin to address these inequities. This is especially true because we are a large school,

and it is easy for students to feel lost. Though individual classes are also quite large and oftentimes crowded, these classes are the places where smaller communities can be built. I wanted to see if teachers, simply through working to build relationships with students in their classes, could increase student achievement by creating a safe, comfortable learning environment in which all students could buy into the community by feeling a part of it.

I surveyed my five classes consisting of 164 students total (which are representative demographically of the school as a whole). The classes are all regular education classes (i.e. not honors, etc.). The survey asked questions regarding their views on student-teacher relationships and sought any correlation that exists between grades earned and perceived quality of student-teacher relationships. I also targeted six students (2 Latino, 2 biracial students (Black/white and Black/Samoan), and 2 white students) to work on building relationships with, and I kept anecdotal records of these students' responses and achievement.

Research

The educational research which addresses the achievement gap looks beyond the obvious factors such as curriculum and instruction. As a way to address the achievement gap and create schools that address the whole student body's varied needs, researchers look at issues of student "resiliency" (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and cultural relevancy of schools. Students need to feel comfortable, safe, and supported in their learning.

Search Institute (2007) lists 40 developmental assets—positive factors that lead to healthy, conscious growth in youth. These include caring school climate, school boundaries, adult role models, high expectations, achievement motivation, and school engagement. These 40 assets fit the following eight categories:

- support
- empowerment
- boundaries and expectations
- constructive use of time
- commitment to learning
- positive values
- social competencies
- positive identity

The authors suggest that these assets are among the most important factors in predicting academic success. Within each of these categories, they list a number of asset-building ideas for teachers. Some of their suggestions include,

- Greet students by name when you see them.
- Empower students by encouraging them to tell their stories through written and visual autobiographies
- Attend concerts, programs and activities your students are involved in.
- Congratulate successes with a written note, a call home, or verbal praise.

Ultimately, teachers need to recognize the positives that students bring into a class and highlight these. Students need to see that teachers care about them as people, not just as test scores or receptacles for knowledge.

Jeff Duncan Andrade (2007) identifies what he calls the “five pillars of effective practice...” one of which is trust. He writes that good teachers have “a distinct commitment to building trust with their students...Evidence of their commitment to earn the trust of their

students was clear in every aspect of their teaching, from their curriculum, to their grading, to their classroom management policies, to their pedagogy. As with their sense of duty, their activities were driven by a long-haul commitment to their students and the community”(633).

Bonnie Bernard’s book *Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision for Changing Beliefs and Practices* (2003) argues for teachers establishing caring relationships with their students and holding them accountable to high expectations at the same time. She also argues for students’ meaningful participation in the classroom and school community and calls teachers who can successfully integrate these aspects of teaching into their practice “turnaround teachers” for their ability to turn traditionally low-performing students around. She provides checklists teachers can utilize to ensure continued reflection on their efficacy in bringing these aspects into their practice.

Tools

I used an anonymous questionnaire administered to 164 students in my five classes in order to gauge my students’ attitudes towards the importance of student-teacher relationships (see Appendix1). The survey was distributed and completed during class time.

I also kept regular teacher notes as I observed my targeted students, my practice, and their academic achievement. Some of the note-taking was part of my regular practice of documenting individual meetings with students, sometimes immediately after class, but more regularly, at the end of the school day. Some of the anecdotal data came out of email or otherwise written communications with students.

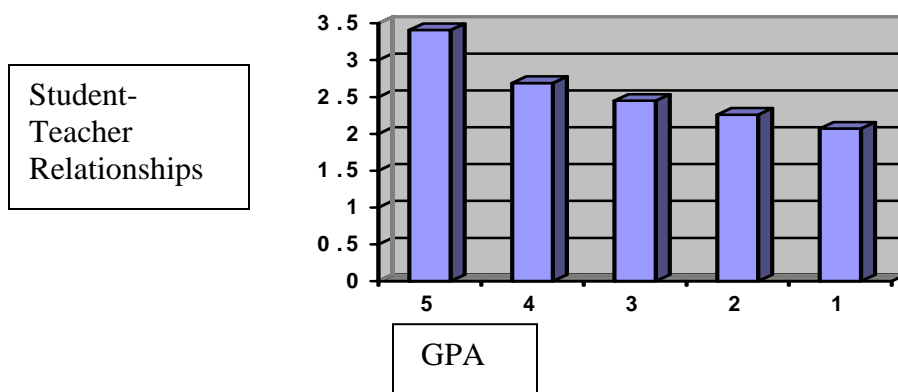
Data

According to my survey, students find having good relationships with their teachers to be important. On a scale of 1-5, 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree,” the statement (#1), “It is important to me to have good relationships with my teachers,” scored a 3.72. On the open-ended question (#4), “Briefly explain why it is or is not important to you to have good relationships with your teachers,” 34 students out of 164, approximately 21%, said something to the effect that good relationships are important because students feel more comfortable in asking questions or communicating well.

There is also a strong correlation between quality of relationship and high academic grades. For example, students who rate their relationship with their teacher as “good” earned, on average, a 3.41 GPA, versus students who said their relationships were “neither good nor bad” (2.45 GPA) or “bad” (2.07 GPA).

Figure 1.2 is based on question 5 of the questionnaire. The X-axis represents student assessment of the quality of the student-teacher relationship, and the y-axis represents the average grade point average based on their self-reporting of grades earned in each class.

Figure 1.2



Total number out of 164 students taking an average of 6 classes per semester of each ranking and average GPA for each number:

5 = 215 total, 3.41 GPA

4 = 243 total, 2.69 GPA

3 = 265 total, 2.45 GPA

2 = 63 total, 2.26 GPA

1 = 38 total, 2.07 GPA

For question 6, the four most salient characteristics respectively are “friendly,” “makes material understandable,” “fair,” and “funny.” These categories are further broken down in Figure 1.3 and further can be recognized in the eight categories of assets (Search Institute, 2007). Specifically, friendly teachers who make the material understandable offer support and empowerment; fairness suggests boundaries and expectations; and “funny” suggests social competencies.

Figure 1.3

92 available to help outside class

140 friendly

121 funny

87 shares personal stories or information

65 seems to have similar interests as you

83 easy class

19 hard class

14 strict

114 easy-going

47 involved in activities outside class

123 makes material understandable

122 fair

99 teaches a subject you find interesting

90 tries to get to know you as a person

54 challenges you

These categories can fit into the eight asset categories mentioned above (Search Institute, 2008) in a variety of ways, but one lens to look at the categories is described below. Student comments are included as examples of each category.

Support

90 tries to get to know you as a person

47 involved in activities outside class

“[Accept] late work because there are a million reasons why the work is late and understand it’s not easy being a student.”

“Willing to help each student individually.”

“Is open to why I don’t understand mat[erial] and will work to fix it.”

Commitment to Learning

123 makes material understandable

92 available to help outside class

54 challenges you

“Easy going, and good environment, but you WILL learn alot [sic] and remember it.”

“Test you once in awhile, if failed = teach until you understand.”

“Teacher provide more attention on the student who need extra help. (Don’t have to use class time: lunch, email, [instant message]).”

Positive Identity

87 shares personal stories or information

65 seems to have similar interests as you

99 teaches a subject you find interesting

“Puts it in terms that relate to my life.”

“Relate material to everyday life.”

Social Competencies and Positive Values

140 friendly

121 funny

114 easy going

Boundaries and Expectations

19 hard class

14 strict

122 fair

Empowerment

83 easy class

The Stories

The student surveys tell only one story. They are theoretical; they indicate what the students believe to be true and important, but these data do not tell the stories behind what it means to build relationships between teachers and students, nor do they fully reflect the implications of these relationships.

Over the course of my research, I targeted a handful of students that I felt would benefit from developing stronger, more holistic relationships with me as their teacher, and I observed what happened both academically and socially. To be clear, as a teacher, I already focus much of my instructional energy on interpersonal relationships. I teach English literature and focus on the four domains of communication and language—reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Therefore much of what we do is already rooted in communication, which is very much tied up with relationships. My students, for instance, keep journals as writing practice, but invariably the journals become emotional outlets. They write personal narratives and discuss literature from the standpoint of values and personal experience. Much of the way I approach curriculum is focused on connecting with the students' experiences and identities.

However, in a large classroom of 35, many of my students don't get the personal attention they deserve. When I talk about working to develop stronger relationships with students, what this means for me is that I tried to connect in as many ways as possible with the whole student; I made a point of talking with them about non-classroom related topics: their work, family, free-time. I made contacts with parents and guardians to learn more about the

students and their needs. I tried to give them one-on-one feedback and support around curriculum, and, when possible, I tried to engage in extra-curricular activities that the students were involved in. My approach varied from student to student, which makes sense since part of building relationships means dealing with individual students as individuals, not merely as part of a class. In some ways, this was difficult research to do because I strive for this type of holistic thinking with all my students; it was difficult to really pinpoint a few to track. The following stories will help to highlight some of my strategies as well as the outcomes.

Nikki

Nikki (white) started her senior year off very well. She is outspoken and articulate. She always seemed confident in sharing her ideas with the class and was quick to ask for help from me if she needed it. All this led her to a strong “B” for the first marking period of the year.

Soon, though, she began skipping class regularly and missing work. She ended up missing nearly the entire second marking period and received an “F.” Throughout this time, I was calling home. At first, I called simply to see if Nikki was sick; as she struck me as such a serious student; I couldn’t believe that she would willingly miss so much school. I was shocked to discover that this was not the case, that she was cutting my class. Talking with her mother made me realize that perhaps I wasn’t getting the full picture of who Nikki was. Over a series of conversations, her mom told me that, in fact, Nikki has very low self-esteem and doesn’t tend to think of herself as smart or academic. Her mom felt that Nikki had felt overwhelmed by school and had become very unsure of herself. I assured her that this was not at all the perception I had of Nikki and that I felt she was very capable of still finishing the semester with high grades.

Despite the conversations, Nikki was still reticent to come back to my class. I made contact with our school's Wellness Center, as I had discovered that Nikki was a teacher's aid for one of the counselors and also had a close relationship with him. He tried to talk to her to urge her to return to class. Finally, after she had already failed the second marking period and was on her way to failing the third due to continued absences and missed work, the counselor called me to set up a three-way meeting between us. He said that Nikki wanted to talk to me but was scared of my reaction; so he had agreed to mediate the conversation.

It was clear to me that I had to think well about how I would approach talking to Nikki. Through the conversations I had with her mom and her counselor, I knew I was dealing with a student, who, despite outward appearances, was somewhat fragile. It felt important to me to not take a "tough love" approach, but to really try to talk to Nikki in an affirming and encouraging way. When we met, she immediately started crying; she told me she was scared of coming back to the class. She was worried about how the other students would think of her regular absences and that I might think she was just a failure. I assured her that this was not at all the case. I told her I knew she was capable of finishing strong, that she is smart, an articulate writer and an intelligent reader. I also made a deal with her about being able to turn in late work. We agreed on a date that was realistic for her to finish the work, and I promised her I would grade it fairly and without penalty. This was a tough decision for me to make, as it ran contrary to my late policy; however, in this instance, the needs of my individual student seemed to outweigh this policy, and we were able to negotiate what was fair. I also gave her my email address and phone number and told her to call or write without any hesitation if she needed help or needed to talk.

I would like to say the rest of the year was smooth sailing. But it wasn't. Nikki did end up passing both semesters of my class, but with "D's," much lower grades than I think reflect her

actual ability. She came to class much more regularly but still continued to have bouts of cutting. However, I feel successful in that she did pass, something that was clearly in question in the middle of the year. Towards the end of the first semester, she emailed me and said, “I am really sorry for not coming to class this long but I am glad you gave me your e-mail address. You have helped me feel better about the whole situation. Thank you for recognizing me as a smart person...I always see...in you that you are trying to help. Out of all teachers I can say that you are one of the most genuine...I really appreciate you being a teacher that talks to their [sic] students not at their [sic] students.”

Kenyatta

Interestingly, despite my being aware of how important the needs of individual students are, I had my moments of blindness throughout the year. My developing a relationship with Kenyatta is a perfect example of this. Had it not been for his mother, I might not have realized that I was missing the bigger picture of who this young man is. Kenyatta was a tenth grader of mixed racial background: his father is Black, and his mother is white. Early on in the year, his mother introduced herself to me and expressed how excited she was that Kenyatta would be in my “Ethnic Experience” literature course. I had mentioned at Back to School Night that we would be reading works by authors of varying ethnicities, including the memoir of a bi-racial man, and Kenyatta’s mother was excited that he might see himself reflected in some ways in the literature.

Despite his mother’s enthusiasm, however, Kenyatta quickly came to my attention as a difficult student. He was often inattentive, working well below his ability, and occasionally disrespectful. In the first semester, all of this still allowed him to finish with a final “C,” but his

progress went significantly downhill at the beginning of the second semester. He failed the first marking period. One day shortly after report cards were sent home, Kenyatta was particularly disrespectful to me, and I planned to call home. It turns out that I didn't have to; his mother showed up after school to discuss his "F."

Our conversation was a reality check for me. While she was upset and made no excuses for his disrespectful behavior, she did urge me to see past that to the complex young man who is her son. She explained that he is more shy and sensitive than he may appear, and that he is reticent to ask for help or admit he doesn't understand something. She also said that he had made very clear that he thought I did not like him. She urged me to try to be understanding and show him that I also saw the good in him.

I immediately made a conscious effort to build the relationship with Kenyatta based on strategies I had been using with other students. I encouraged and complimented positive behaviors and work. I went out of my way to talk with him individually and less as a teacher; for instance I asked about his weekend, the book he was reading, a movie we had both seen. I backed off on reprimanding him on behavior except in egregious cases, which, not surprisingly, became much fewer. At the same time, I stayed in regular contact with his mother. I would email her every week with an update on his progress, and I tried to emphasize all the positives.

Kenyatta's behavior and grades improved significantly. He again passed second semester with a "C," probably lower than what he is truly capable of, but much better than where he had been earlier in the semester. In Kenyatta's case, his progress was clearly not just the result of my attention, but also of his mother's. Her willingness to engage with me was instrumental, but it's clear that she also was supportive of and helpful to Kenyatta in his academic progress.

Mikhail

Mikhail was a sophomore who struggled from day one in my class. He is a Russian immigrant, but even though he has been in the United States for most of his life, he seems to still struggle with English class. He regularly complained about reading and had some minor discipline problems. He sat with a group of three other boys, all of whom had been low-performing in my class. Two of the students exhibited good capability but lacked follow-through on homework assignments or class work; Mikhail, however, simply seemed to struggle. Early in the year, he did a major project on a book. From grading the project it was astoundingly obvious that he had not read the book at all, but when I failed him on the project, he was indignant, claiming that he had read it. He passed the first semester, but barely. He and the other boys were often disruptive, not blatantly so, but simply talkative and off-task. He had been respectful and even, at times, communicative with me, but he had also expressed feeling that he thought I disliked him.

I began consciously trying to reach out to Mikhail, both in simple ways and in larger ways. For instance, I went out of my way to compliment him or give him praise, even for the smallest details.

One day, I handed back an assignment to the class. It was a creative story which retold an important event in the life of an adult close to the student using a creative voice, figurative language, and “showing not telling.” Mikhail had earned an F on the assignment. His story felt rushed, only a paragraph long, at times illegibly written, and confusing. He stayed after class to talk to me about his work. He said, “I understand your comments, and I know what you want me to do, but I just don’t do it.” I pressed him for why he thought this was, and he said he didn’t know. I asked him to take out the assignment, and we went over it. It quickly became clear that

his story's incoherence was due to a minor detail—a misnaming of one object at the heart of the event. We talked through how to fix it, which he promised to do, and I promised to re-grade it.

The next day, he came into class and told me he wanted to sit separately from his friends so that he wouldn't get distracted and voluntarily moved himself. I thanked him.

Mikhail resubmitted his assignment, and his grade went from an "F" to a C." He remained sitting separate from his friends, and continued to make improvements in his work. His grade was still low, but I truly saw a concerted effort on his part to improve; he began participating more in class for instance, and I continued to work on acknowledging him for his progress.

Mikhail ended up with a D- for the marking period. He was extremely frustrated, and stayed after class to talk to me about why. I felt his frustration. He had done a lot of the work after our conversation, but he still hadn't been able to overcome an extremely low test score prior to this conversation, and then he had turned in his journal, a major assignment encompassing the whole six weeks of writing, two days after the deadline, a week late. I could not accept it because my grades had already been turned in; though I read it and made comments so that he could incorporate these suggestions for improvement in subsequent writings. When I pressed him about why it had been so late, he said that he had worked so hard at re-writing it to make it neat, to write well. And it was clear that he had worked hard. He likes to write raps and poetry in his journal, and his writing, though not traditionally brilliant, is fluent and real for him. It is evident that he loves to write. Had he turned in the journal, his grade would have been a C+. It is evident that some of his frustration was frustration with himself, but he asked me, "Well, what good has it been for me to sit over there [gesturing to the other side of the room from where his friends sit]? It didn't matter." And I tried to encourage him, to tell him that I really had seen

improvement, which I had. He had been much more focused, participating more, and much more communicative with me. While I felt frustrated for him and fearful that this would result in hopelessness, I hope he can see that he's making strides, and if, next time, he can follow through on work on time, he will bring his grade up. I also hope that he continues to want good grades and to push for them.

He finished the semester with a final "D." Like Nikki, I wish I could say this grade had been higher, but, in some ways, the strides Mikhail made regarding his attitude and choices about his learning were success enough. I feel successful in that he started to think about what he could do to improve, rather than simply getting mad at me, his teacher. I am hoping this carries over to success next year.

Damon

I will finish my anecdotal evidence with the story that, for me, reflects the most success. "Success" is, perhaps, a misleading term here, but Damon is very much a story of success, both for me as his teacher but also for him as a student. While he still only passed my class both semesters with "D's," he grew so remarkably as a student and a person.

Damon, a bi-racial Black and Samoan student, began his senior year angry and on the edge of dropping out. He was an astounding one hundred units short of graduating, and most people in his life figured that hurdle was simply too high, including his mother who continually urged him to just drop out and get a job.

Damon brought his anger and cynicism into my class. On the very first day of class, he wrote me a letter calling me naïve and telling me he figured he would hate my class. Despite this, he stayed with us. My seniors' first assignment was to work on a personal statement—this is the

paper that many of them would use for their college applications, and even the students who were not going to college were required to write the essay as a way to reflect on who they are as students and what they had accomplished.

Damon wrote a difficult account of his abusive father and how, due to this abuse as well as other hardships, he had come to realize that the world wasn't worth much, and he himself wasn't worth much. It was a heartbreaking account, especially for an essay that was meant to "sell" the student and all his good points. My feedback urged him to look for the positives in all this, to highlight the ways he grew stronger from his adversity, but Damon took my feedback as a slap in the face; he wrote his response to me in his journal, telling me that he had put so much into this essay, but it clearly wasn't good enough, that he thought he could write, but really it was now clear that he couldn't.

It was so evident to me that this frustrated response came out of a deep desire to be a powerful writer and also to feel that I saw him as a good writer. I wrote him back, urging him to forget the personal statement, that the personal statement was clearly not the right venue for telling his life story. I urged him to keep writing and gave him positive feedback on other pieces he had written.

Damon began writing avidly in his journal. He joined the creative writing club, of which I am a co-sponsor, but was reticent to share his work with anyone. At one point, the club had an opportunity to attend a local high-energy, renowned youth poetry reading, and Damon joined us. When he showed up at the event, he had his journal in hand and wrote the entire intermission and told me he had spent the day at the library writing. At the end of the evening, he thanked me profusely for reminding him that "poetry is good."

The second semester started, and Damon came to me asking to be my lunchtime teacher's assistant. He said he was taking night school every night of the week and an overloaded schedule during the day but still wouldn't have enough credits to graduate if he didn't also get credit during lunchtime. I agreed to take him on, and, when he didn't have any work to do, he would sit at the computer and write. He slowly began opening up to me even more, telling me stories of growing up, how his mom wanted him to drop out of school. He told me at one point, "She doesn't understand that I don't want to do the easy thing; I want to do the right thing—I want to graduate." Within a few weeks, Damon had written me a thirteen page essay that was eloquent, powerful, and showed a deep-rooted desire to be a positive force in the life of his little sister and to make something of himself. It was honestly stunning, and, with my urging, he submitted it to be published in the literary journal. He then began working in earnest on other essays for other competitions.

The end of the year came. Damon had a "D" in my class, despite the fact that he was one of my most avid participators and insightful readers. He told me that, due to the amount of school he was trying to complete, he had to really pick and choose which assignments to finish just simply to pass. His graduation had still been very much in question, but as the last day came, it was clear he would graduate, just barely. It was an emotional day for both of us. On the day of his graduation, he gave me a letter in which he wrote, "How am I supposed to thank you? You are the most influential person in my life. You were always there when I needed someone to talk to...Thank you for being my friend as well as my teacher...Thank you for giving me the faith in myself that I needed to graduate this year, because I would have failed for sure if it wasn't for you. I'm going to be a writer, you've given me enough confidence to say that..."

Data Analysis

It is clear from the questionnaires, comments, and anecdotal data that, generally speaking, students want to feel like they have allies in their teachers. It is not that they want friends—though many appreciate friendliness and may even thrive if they feel a friendship bond—but more importantly, they want to feel like a teacher is on their side, willing and able to help them learn and be successful.

This was what struck me as I monitored my relationships with individual students; they did not want to feel that I had given up on them. No matter how much they struggled, they wanted to feel like they could still turn it around, still succeed, or as one student put it, not feel “like an unknown speck of dust...” This means recognizing individual successes, making contact when a student is struggling, and helping students problem-solve individually how to meet their academic and personal goals.

Further, being a cheerleader for individual students truly means relating to each as an individual, trying to understand all the pieces that go into making the student who he or she is. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers take the time to talk to students as individuals, learn what motivates them, contact parents and guardians, and help students reach individual, personalized goals. It does not mean lowering expectations for achievement, but helping each student to forge her or his individual path to meeting those expectations and finding success.

Students would also benefit from more concentrated, less fleeting time with teachers in order to forge relationships. Many students stressed the importance of extra “tutorial” time with given teachers in subjects they are struggling in.

This kind of holistic thinking about each student is incredibly challenging given the current approach of most public schools in this country. I generally have a total of 170 students

each year, all of whom could benefit from this kind of individualized attention. This is true for students at or above proficient in meeting academic standards, but it is particularly true for traditionally low-performing students. It's clear to me that strong student-teacher relationships are most possible in smaller classes; the smaller the student-to-teacher ratio is, the more time and energy teachers have to give all students good, positive attention, and the more time there is for the kind of one-on-one that seems so vital.

This is particularly important when we look at why students fail. It is clear that students succeed or fail for a variety of reasons, some of which have nothing to do with individual teachers or classes. Throughout my years of teaching and throughout my research, I have been frustrated when I have felt that I have been investing a lot of time and energy with students—working with them one-on-one, counseling them, conferencing with parents and guardians, contacting other resource providers in the school—and the student still fails my class or fails school altogether. Looking back over my notes on my anecdotal data, it is clear that if I analyzed these students on a strict grade point average basis, it would look like there was absolutely no correlation between quality of relationship and grade point average; most of these students passed with only average or below average grades, not necessarily reflecting the above average energy I put into building relationships. However, as I hope I made clear throughout the stories, what I considered academic “success,” became much more broadly defined than simply grade point average. In fact, my initial question, phrased, “What effect does building student-teacher relationships have on high school student readiness to learn?” takes this into account. Here it is clear that “readiness to learn” involves student confidence, willingness to engage and ask questions, ability to overcome failures, and self-responsibility.

The student surveys do suggest that a correlation exists between a “good” student-teacher relationship and a “good” grade. However, these data leave some questions for further pursuit. For one, the causal relationship is unclear; do students do well in a class because of perceived “good” relations or do students have the perception that the relationship is good because they received a good grade? Regardless of the correlation, the data suggest that students value good relationships, even if the relationships are not a salient factor in predicting the grade earned.

A further question that arises is how the results may vary depending on race/ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and educational background. I didn’t ask for any of this information on the surveys in an attempt to keep them as anonymous as possible (I felt students would more accurately self-report their grades and perceived quality of relationship if they felt secure in their anonymity), but these questions are worth pursuing, especially given that much of what interests me in educational trends has to do with closing the achievement gap.

Given these complex issues around grading, schools and individual teachers need to look at potential alternatives or different ways of evaluating student progress. Even in looking over my own data, I feel the need to rethink my grading policy in a way that highlights student growth. This, however, is particularly challenging as schools move towards more standardized and standards-based assessments. Many schools give thorough written evaluations to describe students’ progress rather than simple letter grades. This would afford teachers the opportunity to showcase academic and emotional growth and readiness.

Policy Recommendations

The policy implications are great.

- Class-size reduction is key. Reducing class size requires money and a commitment by policy makers, a commitment that was made several years ago in California for ninth grade classes through the Morgan-Hart Class Size Reduction Act, setting a cap on twenty students in math and English classes as well as any other class required for graduation with majority ninth grade students. This act is up for repeal in 2007 and should not be lost. Further, ninth graders are not the only grade level that would benefit from such a cap. All grade levels should seek to reduce class size. Twenty students at the secondary level seems ideal; twenty-five seems desirable.
- Further, schools could look at ways to encourage better relationships by funding work that teachers would do after class, tutoring or working with students on a more individual basis.
- Schools and school districts should think creatively about scheduling. For instance, block scheduling, though it would not increase the amount of time spent with each teacher, would allow for more concentrated time with each teacher, and could include tutorial time. Ideally, professional development would also help teachers utilize this time well.
- Professional development, regardless of scheduling shifts, should emphasize building relationships as well as curriculum. It should provide teachers with many of the published suggestions and checklists for teachers to focus on the whole student.
- Building and funding programs that treat the whole emotional being of the student is crucial; schools need to focus holistically, not just on curriculum but also on services and school-community related activities and programs that nurture the emotional well-being of the

student body. Further research could look at the impact of school-wide programs that work on this level.

- Schools and districts could develop alternatives to the traditional letter-grade system. Descriptive evaluations or even more thorough rubrics could highlight student growth and progress in a more complex way.

Conclusion

Many teachers already know that our job is more than instruction. We are often called on to be therapists, advocates, friends, and cheerleaders, and, as my and others' studies suggest, how we relate to the students is just as important as our curriculum in building successful students. Many of us became educators because we knew that having an impact on students' learning really meant having an impact on the future, and we felt excited by all that challenge entailed. And, though the demands on us professionally are profound, we have the opportunity to positively impact all our students' through hard work, support, compassion, and love. Building relationships with the young people who come through our classes every day is one piece of the whole big picture.

References

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Appendix 1: Student Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions as honestly and thoughtfully as possible. Circle the number which best represents your opinion: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree somewhat, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=agree somewhat, 5 strongly agree.

1. It is important to me to have good relationships with my teachers.
1 2 3 4 5
2. I try to develop good relationships with all my teachers regardless of the class.
1 2 3 4 5
3. In general, in the classes where I have good relationships with my teachers, I tend to get good grades.
1 2 3 4 5
4. Briefly explain why it is or is not important to you to have good relationships with your teachers

5. Please fill in the following chart for your grades and classes for last semester. On the left, put only your letter grade, and on the right, put the number which best indicates your relationship with each teacher: 1=bad, 2= somewhat bad, 3=neither good nor bad, 4=somewhat good, 5=good

<u>Period</u>	<u>Relationship with Teacher</u>
1 st _____	_____
2 nd _____	_____
3 rd _____	_____
4 th _____	_____
5 th _____	_____
6 th _____	_____
7 th _____	_____

(more on back)

6. What teacher qualities make you feel like you can have a good relationship with that teacher (check all that apply)

available to help outside class

friendly

funny

shares personal stories or information

seems to have similar interests as you

easy class

hard class

strict

easy-going

involved in activities outside class

makes material understandable

fair

teaches a subject you find interesting

tries to get to know you as a person

challenges you

other _____

7. Any additional comments regarding teacher/student relationships:
