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## Understanding the Dynamics of Teacher-Child Relationships at School

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper speaks about the power of affective bond between teachers and children at school. Gathered majorly through secondary data, this paper brings together past researches, to understand teacher-child relationship trajectories at school. A large body of educational researches advocates the importance of positive and supportive teacher-child relationships at school. Considering a relationship cannot prove to be positive and supportive without 'affection' as a foundational base, there seems to be an urgent need to explore teacher-child relationship for this element, at school. A positive teacher-child relationship is important to build healthy and happy classrooms. The paper thus is a brief account of various empirical researches and theoretical discussions in this field.*

**Keywords:** Teacher, child, teacher-child relationship, school, affection, happy classrooms

### **1. Introduction**

For humans, relationships play quite an imperative role. However, in children's lives, teachers at school become one of the most significant adults beyond family. Calling education a beautiful risk, Biesta (2014) said, "Education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings. The risk is there because students are not to be seen as objects to be molded and disciplined, but as subjects of action and responsibility" (p. 1). The positive relationships at school help the child to develop cognitively and emotionally. Gable (2002) mentioned "from the children's perspective, however, the single most meaningful characteristic is probably the relationship that children have with their teachers" (p. 42). When teachers form close relationships with children at school, classrooms become supportive spaces where children can actively engage themselves in various learning activities. Compliance, assistance and support were also seen as important elements central to positive teacher-child relationships at school (Ahnert, Milatz, Kappler, Schneiderwind & Fischer, 2013).

Since children spend a large part of childhood in school, it has to be a remarkable experience. However, to make schooling a remarkable experience for children, it is important to bring in the element of 'affection' or 'love' so that children are happy at school. With regards to the need for affection in child's life, Russell (2010) said, "affection...is much more likely to exist where there is happiness and absence of fear. Fear, Conscious or Unconscious, are very apt to produce hatred, because other people are regarded as capable of inflicting injuries. With most people, as things are, envy is a barrier to widespread affection. I do not think envy can be prevented except by happiness (p. 131). A positive relationship therefore could be one that fosters happiness. A positive teacher-student relationship views presence of closeness, warmth and positivity as its important characteristics. Students with positive relationships with teachers use them as a secure base to explore actively, the environment at school (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). This positive relationship between teachers and children is believed to foster child's well being besides the development of students' engagement in learning activities at school. The same is also linked with child's overall and holistic development.

### **2. Theoretical Perspectives**

Studying teacher-child relationships at school, apparently, requires a theory or a conceptual base comprehensive enough to explore various factors that might affect the relationships at school. The ones discussed in this paper are: a) Pianta & Walsh's Contextual Systems Model b) Vygotsky's Theory of Cognitive Development c) Bronfenbrenner's Ecological and Bio-ecological Theory of Development and d) Bowlby's Attachment Theory.

- Pianta & Walsh's (1996) Contextual Systems Model posits that children develop over time within interrelated systems. Systems are "an organized set of interrelated components each of which serves a function in relation to the activity of the whole system" (Pianta & Walsh, 1996, p. 65). These systems are the individual child, family, classroom, and culture. These systems are said to interact with each other, influencing child's development. O'Connor & McCartney (2007) said that "the Contextual Systems Model (CSM) was designed to explain the experiences of children in school, is a good example of an ecological-contextual model of development" (p. 341). At the core of the family system are parent-child relationships, and at

the core of the classroom system are teacher-child and peer relationships. Dennis (2008) also mentioned that “this model represents how the teachers, adults in the school, curriculum and physical setting are interrelated and together comprise the school context within which classrooms exist” (p. 51).

- Vygotsky’s theory of Cognitive Development asserted the importance of social interaction that plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development. In relation to this, Ahnert et al. (2013) mentioned, “Cognition processes in children do not happen in a purely rational domain, separated from social interactions” (p. 563). As Vygotsky (1978) said, “every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people and then inside the child” (p. 57). For him, mind mediates between the external world and individual experience. Mental life first expresses itself in interaction with others. These interactions are then internalized by the individuals that enter their stream of thought (Bruner, 2006). Vygotsky’s focus on the “connections between people and the socio-cultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences” reinforces the importance of contexts (Sehgal, 2005, p 10). In particular, the school context is significant as children spend a considerable time of the day in school. It seems imperative on the part of teachers to design context such as to permit active interactions between them and children.
- Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological and Bio-ecological Theory of Development provides a useful conceptual framework in understanding the school environment and the quality of teacher-child relationships. As also said above, for a child to develop healthy and happy, the immediate environment plays a considerable role. Postman (1994) mentioned childhood to have a biological basis, but which can be realized by the triggers of social environment. Santrock (2007) also explained the importance of contexts when he said, “A person’s emotional responses cannot be separated from the situations in which they are evoked” (p. 359). Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory placed child development in an ecological perspective where the relationships between individuals and their environments are viewed as “mutually shaping.” The bio-ecological theory of development views interactions with environment as significant. This theory talks about process, person, context, and time as interacting systems available within the environment. A child’s development is greatly influenced and shaped by these interactions. Split et al., (2012) mentioned that the students’ interactions with their teachers are proximal processes. These recurring interactions have an influential role to play in the child’s development. Thus, to understand the influences of teacher-child relationships on child’s achievement and well being, it seems imperative to study the effects of these relationships using a bio-ecological paradigm.
- It seems significant to discuss Bowlby’s attachment perspective as well. Attachment is defined as a “lasting psychological connectedness between human beings” (Bowlby, 1969, p.194). It is a bond that connects one person to another. An attachment behavior, on the part of adults, would comprise responding sensitively and appropriately to the child’s needs. At school, children come across teachers more often. Cornelius (2007) mentioned “secure and reciprocal attachments are important for students to engage in their relationships with teachers, peers, and subject matter and develop healthy self-concepts and senses of well-being” (p 115). Similarly, Hamre & Pianta (2001) reported children with secure attachments engage in an active peer interaction. Such children explore school environment actively. They have higher self-esteem and demonstrate less aggression. However, insecure attachments might negatively influence child’s competence, sense of security and self esteem.

### 3. Teacher-Child Relationship Dynamics

To gain a comprehensive picture of teacher-child relationship dynamics at school, it is important to study the classroom interactions between teachers and children. It is significant to make keen observations of teachers and students during their everyday activities at school. Researchers, from all across, have conducted studies to examine the teacher-child relationships at school. They have recognized positive relationships between teachers and children as an important contributor to child's well being and success at school. Defining teacher-student relationships, Bush (1942) said that it refers to “how the student and teacher seem to get along personally” (p. 645). What constitutes the classroom environment is an important question. Affection seems to be the single most important characteristic that should be used to define school, or a classroom environment, in particular. A polite, loving teacher is preferred over the one who shouts and punishes children. For a relationship to be fulfilling, it is important to be sensitive towards the needs of children. To play a multifaceted role, a teacher need to weave together the elements required for building an effective teacher-child relationship. Leading individual and group activities helps teachers to establish supportive and fulfilling relationships with children at school. The teacher must also be observant of children’s thoughts and feelings at school. As Ahnert et al. (2013) also pointed out, “Within the social context, close teacher-child relationships would be expected to offer the child responsive and emotionally supportive stimulation” (p. 554). Gable (2002) also beautifully explained this relationship by saying, “When children experience the security of supportive teacher-child relationships, they know that their basic needs will be met; are confident about expressing their thoughts, feelings, and ideas; and have a foundation from which to explore and develop their own relationships with other children (p. 42). She also mentioned that a positive teacher-student relationship contributes meaningfully to the child’s immediate and future learning.

One aspect that connects teachers and children together is Communication. This connection helps to create a better classroom environment. The quality of relationships in school can be maintained through constant communication. The child communicates interpersonally with the teachers about the subject being taught and about other general things in the class. “The prevailing idea about communication- one that has strongly influenced views about what education is about-sees communication as the transmission of information from one person to another, or in more abstract terms, from one location to another” (Biesta, 2014, p. 26). There does exist yet another type of communication which we call intrapersonal wherein the child communicates within. Johnston (1998) said,

“From what we know about the learning process, brain science and the act of communication, learning is an interactive and intra-active experience. Not only does the learner interact with those around him or her as the learning occurs, but the learner also interacts within himself or herself (p. 232).

The study by Poplin & Weeres (1994) explored the thoughts of students, teachers, cafeteria workers, security guards, parents, administrators and others in close association with schools to find out the problem with schooling. The problem identified was related to relationships at school especially the relationships between teachers and students in school. A poor teacher-child relationship may cause emotional distress in children. Split et al. (2012) reported how “poor relationships with teachers thwart children’s basic need for relatedness and diminish children’s feelings of belonging at school” (p. 1180-1181). For a positive mutual relationship, it is significant for the teachers to understand children’s expectations and feelings at school. Schlechty & Atwood (1977) mentioned that “students have some clear, well- defined role expectations for teachers in the areas of discipline, specificity of subject matter taught, communication of explanations, friendliness and fairness” (p. 286). It is important for the children to feel valued and respected.

Evans (2014) mentioned how teachers should act more as ‘friends’ than experts or guides. Similarly, Ward (2014) also said “the traditional ideas of authoritarian teaching are dismissed in favor of a more friendly approach” (p. 10). Children seem to prefer a friendly teacher over a strict one- one who often laughs with children. Humour plays a very significant role in building up friendly relationships with children at school. It is also a way to tell students that they are being liked, loved and appreciated. A friendly classroom environment works great for both teachers and students at school. Being happy is what actually makes a difference. Bloom (2014) talked about teacher’s well-being and happiness as central to students’ academic development. Happy and optimistic teachers are more likely to achieve higher academic results from their students than those who are stressed and sad. Besides the academic results, teacher’s happiness is seen to have a significant effect on student’s emotional adjustment too. Thus, teacher’s thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, values and prejudices have an important role to play in creating a happy and caring classroom environment. These attitudes and beliefs, apparently, affect different students differently.

Children’s positive perceptions about the school climate seem to have a strong influence on one’s socio-emotional and academic adjustment (Jia, Way, Ling, Yoshikawa, Chen, Hughes, Ke & Lu, 2009). O’Connor & McCartney (2007) examined the effects of teacher-child relationships on children’s academic achievement and found that the positive relationship between the two has a positive association with child’s academic achievement in schools. It was also found that the positive effects of quality teacher-child relationships were powerful enough to relieve the stress of the negative effects caused by insecure mother-child relationships in children. Some research papers examined the longitudinal growth trajectories for teacher child relationship quality. The researchers attempted to find out whether the teacher child relationship quality remains the same or it changes over time. It was found that the average levels of overall relationship quality decreases, over time. Split et al. (2012) examined the trajectories of the change in teacher-student relationships through elementary school. It was found that the normative levels of warmth declines as children grow older. O’Connor & McCartney (2007) suggested that “the interaction and attention individual children received from teachers decreased slightly from preschool through third grade” (p. 340). Variations in the quality of children’s relationships with different teachers were also seen. Apparently, gender differences were also found in the teacher-child relationships at school. It seems that teachers fare well with the girls. Boys are often found complaining how teachers never scold girls. Teachers found themselves to be closer with girls and reported conflict with boys (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Split et al., 2012).

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to re-voice the importance of building positive teacher-child relationship, one that fosters happy classrooms. Teachers however seem to be aware of their power of making a child happy or sad. What is required, on the part of teachers, is to make children comfortable in the school environment. And the best way to make children comfortable and secure at school is to develop quality relationships with them. A caring environment is important for a positive relationship to flourish between a teacher and child. Hamre & Pianta (2001) mentioned children who successfully navigate themselves in their school environment do better in academics. This navigation should be easy and smooth. This ability to navigate or adjust oneself in the school environment is influenced by adult-child relationships, specifically, the teacher-child relationships. Gable (2002) also said, “The comfort of positive teacher-child relationships gives children the security of knowing that someone is there to help them navigate the social world” and underscores the significance of positive relationships with peers as crucial for children’s healthy growth and development (p. 45). The positive relationship that develops between students and teachers is a key to creating an emotionally safe classroom environment, besides promoting better academic performance. Happy classrooms, therefore, should be the most desirable and realized goal of a teacher. An environment which is restrictive and does not permit child’s exploration of place and freedom of speech will make schooling an emotional turmoil for the children. Sylwester (1994) also pointed out that emotionally stressful school environments are counterproductive as they can reduce students’ ability to learn. Thus, an emotionally safe classroom environment is necessary for the child’s cognitive learning, growth, and creative expression.

Plenty of research indicates how supportive teacher-child relationships are meaningful to children’s learning and well-being. Gable (2002) refers the ability to build and maintain positive and supportive relationships as a critical skill and said, “a teacher who understands children’s needs, offers stimulating learning experiences, and encourages positive development creates high-quality early care and education” (p.45). Internet has also taken over the world. Educationists, professionals, teachers, today actively share various ideas of creating happy, safe and caring classroom environments. One can easily find communities made specifically for the purpose of education over various social networking sites like facebook, twitter, pinterest, where they can exchange ideas, learn novel concepts and give feedback on ideas expressed. Similarly, Pigford (2001) have also documented various strategies that might help teachers to develop, establish or improve their relationships with students. He suggested that eating lunch together will allow students to see

teachers from a different perspective. Participating with children in different activities like in certain games, extracurricular activities, school and community events will make children feel safe. It is imperative for the teachers to realize how a positive teacher-student relationship is a key to child's overall development. A realistic, feasible and viable approach to the education for children would therefore require the efforts, from teachers, to provide a loving and caring school environment so as to make possible the quality teacher-child relationships at school.

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