

Relationships for learning: using pupil voice to define teacher–pupil relationships that enhance pupil engagement

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Abstract

This paper is a summary of a pupil voice research project conducted to investigate the influence that teacher–pupil relationships have on pupils' feelings of engagement with their school. The study involved two year groups (12–13 and 14–15 year olds) in a rural secondary school in Cambridgeshire. Data sources were collected through a questionnaire and follow-up focus groups and pupil interviews to explore pupils' opinions and experiences of learning relationships and their impact. Findings include pupils' identification of the features of effective teacher–pupil relationships and their perspectives on how these have a positive influence on their levels of motivation and engagement at school.

Keywords

relationships, engagement, motivation, interaction, interest

Introduction

Before motivation can take place, a strong foundation of mutual trust and respect must be laid. That foundation is possible only when based on personal relationships with every student. (Scheidecker and Freeman, 1999)

High levels of student engagement and motivation are undoubtedly key factors to ensuring that pupils thrive and succeed at school. This research article explores how and why teacher–pupil relationships affect pupil engagement. The importance of relationship-driven approaches to teaching and learning arose through pupil voice research into the topic of pupil engagement. This article seeks to identify the attributes, behaviours and interactional traits that can be associated with positive teacher–pupil relationships.

Context

In my capacity as teacher research co-ordinator at a secondary school in Cambridgeshire, I was involved in the SUPER¹, pupil engagement project with the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education and other partnership schools. The research involved a large-scale survey in summer 2007 asking pupils in Years 8 and 10 (13- and 15-year olds) to answer a series of questions relating to their sense of belonging to their school.

Consequences for institutional leadership and management

Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data revealed that teacher–pupil relationships played a key factor in pupils'

sense of belonging. Marked differences between the two year groups' responses were evident in response to the following statements: 'teachers are interested in me'; 'teachers notice when I am good at something'. I followed up these observations, and others relating to students' engagement and motivation, through a series of focus groups, lesson observations and interviews with pupils during 2008. A large number of the pupils' answers were prefaced with: 'It depends on the teacher'. Conversations revealed a large degree of in-school, in-lesson engagement variation dependent on teaching style and relationships with individual teachers, or lack of them.

Follow up focus groups, containing a cross-section of students in Years 8 and 10, elicited the key themes to the following prompts:

I know a teacher is interested in me when they: listen to what I have to say, and seem interested and enthusiastic; make it look like they are happy to teach me; praise something I have said and show that they can relate to me.

I know I have a good relationship with a teacher when they: show interest in me as person rather than just as a student in that lesson; create a comfortable, relaxed and stress free atmosphere – like you both want to be there to learn/teach.

I arranged for six individual pupil interviews of a selection of Year 10 pupils to be carried out by a colleague from the

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Faculty of Education in order to follow up these aspects in more depth. Analysis of interview data identified just how significant the effect of teacher–pupil relationships can be; pupils cited examples of how strong relationships with teachers had helped them to regain interest and belief in their learning potential in specific subjects; some illustrated how positive relationships with specific teachers had helped them to enjoy school more and have more motivation for learning.

A summary of the five key teacher behaviours that pupils identified in creating in helping positive teacher–pupil relationships for learning are outlined below.

1. *Friendly and flexible approach*

Talking to us with respect, like we are more mature. Smiling at us in the corridor and saying ‘Hello’. Involving more choice and freedom in lesson tasks. Incorporating humour and having a laugh with us every now and again; friendly banter makes the learning atmosphere more relaxed. Feeling confident enough to do silly and memorable things to help us to understand something – not taking themselves too seriously. Being happy and cheery, instead of always saying: ‘This coursework is really important, it’s going to affect the rest of your life’.

2. *Enthusiastic and engaging delivery*

An enthusiastic approach helps to rejuvenate interest in the subject that I don’t like or am not interested in. When teachers are confident and focused it gives us faith in them to get us good results. They provide us with a range of activities, e.g. an active starter, discussion, notes, something fun at the end; when a teacher has put effort into the lesson, you want to put the effort in for them. They find out how we like to learn.

3. *Noticing talent*

They recognise good work with personal comments and merit stickers and this makes me put more effort in with full answers. They help me to feel more certain – telling me that I am good at the subject gives me confidence. They listen to what we have to say; by asking us our opinions they seem to value ours as much as they value their own.

4. *Personal interactions*

They make it feel like you can talk to them. There’s time for personal questions and one-to-one conversations. They come round to check that I understand the work and explain it to me. They say things that show that they know and understand me. Their comments show their own personal preference and interests and show that they have a life outside of teaching. They notice when I finish my work or have been absent and give me extra work to do. They ask how I am and ask about my personal interests, outside of their lesson.

5. *Effective classroom management*

They have clear control and direction but their discipline is not forced, it’s more natural. They don’t have lots of ridiculous rules; they let you go when you are ready at the end of the lesson. They talk to you quietly and calmly if you’ve done something wrong. They

create a relaxed atmosphere and get all students involved. They treat students equally and fairly.

Some key quotations from the pupils interviewed are contained in the text box below that exemplify the themes identified.

Showing personal interest: ‘I like it when teachers get interested in what you do besides the lesson. When they ask your opinions on what you are doing and how they can make it better because they care what you think about their lesson.’

Interactions outside of lessons: ‘When you talk to them outside of lessons and when they have a conversation with you. If a teacher has a friendly side you respect them more. If a teacher is nice to you, you have more of a motive to learn.’

Approachability: ‘When teachers are more personal – they are not just teaching, there is a side to them that allows you to talk to them so that if you are stuck with anything you can talk to them.’

Pupil voice research findings, including direct quotations and videos of focus group interviews, were presented to SUPER colleagues through a conference focusing on pupil engagement. Key messages were also shared with the whole staff by the members of the student council at a training day. A number of volunteer departments pursued relationship for learning projects, focusing on developing specific behaviours that the pupils identified as conducive to developing a relationship-driven approach, for example greeting the class as they enter the classroom with a friendly welcome; planning lessons that allow time for teachers to have quality one-to-one conversations with students; making the effort to take interest in pupils’ personal interests and motivations; adopting more positive classroom management approaches. Outcomes were shared at subsequent staff meetings and the phrase ‘relationships for learning’ became commonly used in conversations about teaching and learning, even within formal lesson observation paperwork, thus raising the profile of this important facet of classroom dynamics.

Conclusion

It took careful framing to keep the pupils’ contributions professional and appropriate; providing prompts and open questions about positive practice allowed pupils to identify helpful attributes of teacher–pupil interactions that benefit learning, avoiding personal criticism and condemnation of specific teachers. It was illuminating and fascinating to hear groups of pupils talk so animatedly about their relationships with teachers. The experience of conducting this research made me realise the importance of providing pupils with a forum to talk about this important aspect of their learning experiences and leaves me with the following questions for consideration:

- Do school systems and behaviour for learning policies support or undermine teacher–pupil relationships?
- Should school leaders trust teachers to develop rapport with their pupils or make it a whole-school focus, in recognition of the potential influence that positive

relationships can have over pupils' engagement and ultimately their progress?

- Is it good enough for a few teachers to adopt a relationship-driven approach or is this a fundamental aspect of teaching and learning practice that should be expected of all practitioners?
- Do schools' professional development practices provide appropriate support and training to help teachers to develop a relationship-driven approach in their classrooms?
- Teacher–pupil relationships can be a sensitive topic to handle and one that can potentially undermine teachers' professionalism; how can school leaders and teachers effectively consult pupils about this important aspect of teaching and learning?

A 'relationship-driven' approach to teaching will enable curriculum demands to be met without sacrificing relationships if teachers view relationship building as a complement to academic performance rather than as a competitor with academic goals . . . Despite time and curricular constraints, some teachers are still able to create positive and personal relationships by taking advantage of each interaction that they have with students. (Vitto, 2003)

Note

1. SUPER: The School-University Partnership for Educational Research (SUPER) was created in 1998 by Professors David Hargreaves and Donald McIntyre and a group of local head teachers in response to a national concern about the perceived lack of impact of the outcomes of educational research (usually

produced by higher education institutions), upon policy-relevant and practical day-to-day issues in schools. All partner schools are represented in SUPER by teacher research co-ordinators (TRCs) and headteachers. Meetings with the Faculty team take place at least twice termly to discuss ongoing research, future plans, the SUPER MED and other relevant topics and issues. SUPER also holds an annual conference/residential in June giving partners an opportunity to share, discuss and disseminate their research.

References

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Biography

Helena Marsh is Assistant Principal responsible for professional development at Sawston Village College in Cambridge, UK. She has taught English in four secondary schools and has experience of being Head of Faculty, Teacher Research Co-ordinator and Lead English teacher. She has presented two research papers at BERA and has published two books with Continuum: *The English Teacher's Handbook* and *Resources for Teaching English: 11-14*.