# Improving student-teacher relationships to achieve student engagement and motivat...

This research project studied the relationship between student-teacher relationships and the success of reluctant learners on a secondary campus in a surrounding district of the Houston Area.  Given the poor engagement of students who fail to live up to the expectations, teachers were given methods to emote caring with students and develop positive relationships that lead to those same students living up to their expectations. The study included 210 students grouped based on failure rate, ELL status, and individual education plans, then compared their results to those of 176 of students we would consider level-students.  The study was meant to prove that these relationships are important and should be implemented regularly for all staff. Once the study concluded, it was clear that the relationships had a positive impact on the student's success when compared with the on-level students. Therefore, the implementation of a student-teacher training process could help reluctant learners and with further research, on-level students as well.

IMPROVING STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS TO ACHIEVE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION IN SECONDARY RELUCTANT LEARNERS

Our teachers have a strong curriculum in place, yet our students are failing to meet expectations regularly. This leads to the question: How can we motivate our kids to engage more effectively in the classroom?  One aspect of student engagement involves the relationship built between the teacher and the student. Engagement in students that fail to see their potential can be difficult, therefore teachers could be better equipped with tools to connect and relate to their student body more effectively. Teachers who emote caring are more likely to have a positive student to teacher

engagement. The engagement itself can be evaluated through student questionnaires based on the Likert scale, testing result and student discipline. Given the endeavor, it would take time to form proper relationships with the students that allowed them to make the proper connections and become more engaged regularly. Students can become better motivated to engage when their instructors have had time to learn their students thought process, what interests them about the subject, and even the type of working relationship a student wants with a given teacher. With little time to focus on information outside of the curriculum, the student body then fails to make connections to the real world as to why they need to learn the information at hand. Given enough time to focus on these connections, the students could then change their perspective, retain more information and perform better on exams.

The campus that I currently work at is very representative of the socioeconomic culture in the area. The school is 70% Hispanic, 24% African American and 5% white. The student body is also 72% economically disadvantaged. This leads many students to view education as a disadvantage when they must work to help provide for the family. Being the largest school in the Houston area and the 3 rd largest in the state, it would seem that many children would face social injustices regularly, but that isn't the case.

**Background**

Many of our teachers are often untrained on cultivating and growing student-teacher relationships and how to hone their skills to properly establish these relationships. The problem persists constantly throughout the hallways and

cafeterias of our school. Echoing a reflection of what happened in our classrooms.  Students skipping class, falling asleep, not paying attention, failing to do work in and out of class. Until the last moment when grades are due, most students have little to no motivation to engage in the classroom. Teachers often demand the involvement of their students because they are the teacher, and these are the students and that is the way they perceive things to be. Students now demand more in return from their teachers than an authoritative stance, a relationship is now in order.

**Problem Statement**

What impact do positive student-teacher relationships have on the perceived instructional solidarity in secondary reluctant learners? The purpose of my study is to prepare teachers with the proper tools to emote a caring relationship with students who are reluctant to learn in subject with little interest or adverse studies. I hope to benefit teachers with ways to improve the motivation and productivity of students who feel that some subjects are boring or more difficult to understand through building relationships that encourage teacher solidarity in academics.

Significance of the Study

Historically, reluctant learners at north shore high school have had poor attendance and grades in some classes, with high performance in others. While many factors may attribute to the scenario, the key difference here has been attributed to the relationship they hold with some teachers and the lack of a relationship with others. Those teachers who put forth the time and

effort to relate and learn the students, tend to have higher performances outcomes with our students.

The significance of this study is the potential for increasing classroom outcomes and student achievement through building stronger and caring relationships with reluctant students. Beneficiaries include first-year teachers, teachers who work closely with our reluctant learns and administrators looking to increase student outcomes through professional development plans for teachers.

Definitions

*Instructional solidarity* . Instructional solidarity is the idea that what is being taught will relate to or benefit the students immediately or sometime in the future (Bleu, 2011).

*Relational Care* – Relational care involves ministering to the personal needs of students

with certain backgrounds, such as a socioeconomic difficulty, stigmatization or ostracized from

mainstream society (Cooper, Mines, 2014)

*Virtuous Understanding* – Virtuous understanding is defined as understanding the needs

and individuality of your students as a virtue, meaning intent (Cooper, Mines, 2014).

Review of the Literature

Although the fact that adolescence is a period in which students experience decreased teacher support, the quality of teacher-student relationships remains of great concern for adolescence academic engagement (Bleu, 2011). Given the relative infrequency of positive experiences of care and understanding for a student of color, it is believed that increasing effort to exhibit relational care and virtuous understanding are likely to be critical for student-teacher relationships (Cooper, Mines, 2014). Present studies suggest that the dimensions of communication between teachers and students are significant in terms of student outcomes. Positive student-teacher relationships contribute to students' behavioral and academic gains, academic motivation, effort, and achievement (Engels,  Colpin, Van Leeuwen, Bijttebier, Van Den Noorgate, Claes, 2016). Creating emotional relationships with teachers is especially important for impoverished youth because they tend to have weaker relationships with an adult (Smart). Significant positive correlations were identified between student mastery orientation, students' efficacy for learning the subject and their perception of their teacher's leadership and friendly/helping behaviors (Engels,  et. al, 2016). Not only is it important to know one's course materials and deliver information effectively, but it is also crucial for teachers to form emotionally connected relationships with the individuals that they teach (Smart, 2014). Further study shows the importance of teacher-student relationships for adolescence academic engagement.

An environment that supports students' independence facilitates change towards more self-determined motivation. Positive classroom climate and

teacher interactions have a profound influence on student achievement and motivation (Wery, Thompson, 2013). Teachers who communicate positive messages to students about their abilities can foster an increase in students' self-efficacy (Raufelder, Scherber, Wood, 2016).

Subtopic/Theme One

The behaviors that instructors engage in have a significant impact on student perceptions. Students perceptions of instructional solidarity, in turn, impact other outcome variables such as attendance, participation and behavioral incidents (Engels, et. al, 2016). Teachers who communicate positive messages to students about their abilities can foster an increase in students' self-efficacy (Raufelder, Scherber, Wood, 2016). It may be argued that instructional solidarity between teachers and students cannot be developed unless the communication climate is a confirming to such a scenario. When students do not feel comfortable asking questions and participating, the motivation to do so will soon become lacking. This is not necessarily a skill inherent to teachers, it must be learned and honed over time (Engels, et. al, 2016). First, teachers must make personal and academic gestures of care through one-on-one interactions as well as the collective. Second, teachers should use their time with students to develop a personal understanding of their students. Third, teachers must make greater effort to develop and illustrate understanding as a virtue (Cooper, Mines, 2014).

Subtopic/Theme Two

School leaders must provide teachers with opportunities to develop more significant caring relationships with the students. Teachers could also be

encouraged and rewarded for developing relational caring (Cooper, Mines, 2014).  Students tend to learn less when they perceive school personnel and activities as threatening (Wery, Thompson, 2013). The student who perceived the teacher as a helpful, friendly and understanding individual, report higher efficacy for education. Additionally, efficacy has been related to other positive student factors, such as perseverance in challenging tasks and value for the subject matter (Raufelder, Scherber, Wood, 2016).

Subtopic/Theme Three

Differentiation maximizes students' opportunities to learn (Wu, 2017). There are four concrete ways to implement differentiation in the classroom. Content should cover what is set forth by the state and henceforth the district. To be more successful with content, teachers must find a way to differentiate the material so that various levels of Bloom's Taxonomy are covered. Students that are unsuccessful with the material can complete assignments that cover the lower levels to bring them to a satisfactory level over time (Turner, 2014). For differentiation to be successful, instructors must not only learn the learning process of their students but also deliver the information in the student's preferred learning style. Students undergoing this process should also end the lesson with a. product, something that the students must produce to show mastery of the subject matter. Overall, for anything implemented in the classroom to work, the learning environment must be welcoming, productive and overall positive. A positive aspect of differentiation indicates that the process is effective for students with high abilities as well as those with various learning disabilities (Neophytao, Valaindes, & Hakisatereou, 2018). When provided with more options,

students are more inclined to take charge of their learning which leads to a student-centered focus in the classroom. In turn, with students becoming more engaged in their learning, a variable such as a discipline and attendance should decline (Bowgreen, L. & Sever, K. (2010).

Summary

Given the reluctance of our sample group, positive student-teacher relationships would allow for students to gain knowledge in the subject matter that is best suited for their learning style. This engagement style can allow for students to take charge of education and effectively increase their understanding and learning abilities. Instead of the " one size fits all" mindset, our instructors will be given tools to incorporate into the lesson for our student achievement. In the following research, teachers will be guided on how to implement best practices concerning student-teacher relationships, including positive communication, positive student-teacher relationships, and differentiation. As a result of the study, student achievement should go up in all categories being measured.

Action Research Design

Subjects

orParticipants

**The participants of my study include reluctant learners at Title 1 School in the Houston area. Reluctant learners will include groups of students enrolled in Integrated Physics and Chemistry, better known as IPC, Math Models and Applications, better known as MMA, and English 2. the students were chosen based on their success rate in previous classes and on standardized exams. The students chosen had to meet two of the following criteria.**

1.    **Have failed more than one end of course exam as ninth graders.**

2.    **Has not been successful with the Algebra I or Biology End of Course Exam.**

3.    **The student has an IEP.**

4.    **Is an English Language Learner (ELL students).**

Participating teachers were given the task of choosing the class periods with the highest ratio of participants, that would ultimately be evaluated as part of the Teacher-Student Positive Relationships process. The IPC Instructor had four classes to participate and 73 students with a control group of 36 students. The MMA Instructor chose 3 classes with a total of 74 students with a control group of 68 students. The English Instructor chose 3 classes as well, for a total of 63 students with a control group of 74 students.  The scope of the project grew to encompass 210 students, skewing 64% male and 36% female with the control group consisting of 178 students skewing 66% female and 34% male. Further breakdown of the participants showed 71% Hispanic populations and 28% African American and 1% Caucasian.

Participants were briefed on the fact that they would be participating in a study but could not know the details of the student until the debriefing, which would occur at the very end. We did so to not skew the results of the

study by having the students adjust their responses and give us the outcome that they choose. The study would end in December and students would be debriefed in January. Survey and questionnaire information was collected on Google Forms and the students could access the QR code on their phone and answer the questions privately while still being able to directly track their responses.

Procedures

The year opened with a questionnaire designed to set a standard of how well the teacher was received after the initial meeting of the Teacher and Student. The first day of class would go as usual. The teachers we instructed to change nothing about their procedures and approach the first day of the class exactly as they had done before. The following class period would introduce three different procedures that would emote caring for the students.

1. Positive Communication Skills
2. Positive Relationship Building
3. Differentiated Lesson

Once this standard was established, those classes that were chosen to participate would be given the procedures for more positive student-teacher relationships while the other classes were not given the building blocks to have a set control group for each teacher implementing the procedures. Throughout the first semester, observations were made in the classroom of the three teachers participating. At the end of the first six weeks, grades, attendance, and disciple were all gathered for the first-time frame. the same

procedure would be followed for the second and third six weeks of the semester. Observations of test scores would occur during the first district exam and the fall semester exam.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected during this action research was both qualitative and quantitative. The perceived student-teacher relationship was evaluated based on classroom observations and surveys that would be collected throughout the semester. All the instructor's students would be given a survey at the end of the first class. The quantitative data were gathered using a survey that contained a Likert-scale and the students' perceptions of the teacher, the classroom and the relationships they felt they would form with the instructor. Students overall grade in the course, attendance and discipline issues will be analyzed and compared to show results. This qualitative data will be collected periodically during 3 intervals of grading and the District exams, including the mid-semester Curriculum-Based Assessment (CBA) and the Fall Semester Exam. Based on the types of data that were collected, it was decided to use inductive analysis. The interviews, surveys, and observations were reduced to collect and organize the data by patterns and themes. Descriptive statistics will be used to measure the central tendency of students to perform in class based on positive relationships and the relationship between positive student-teacher relationships and attendance and discipline.

Findings

Section Four

Each teacher began the year with introductions as they had done previously. The purpose of the cold start was to give a starting reference point to compare the results of the implementation of Positive Student-Teacher relationship procedures. After initial introductions and one lesson, the students were then asked to answer a survey on the teachers and how they interpret the first meeting. A Likert scale was used for the five questions including student perception of the teacher, clarity of the teacher, communication style, motivation and student effect of the course content. This basis would allow us to measure the growth or decline of the student-teacher relationship based on the procedures that the participating teachers would include.  The next time the classes met, each teacher started the participating classes with Restorative Circles. Restorative circles allow for students and teachers alike to come together and build positive relationships.  The survey was reworded and the questions were asked of the student three more times. The results were as follows

| Teacher | Likert Group | Initial Survey | Follow-up 1 | Follow-up 2 | Follow-up 3 |
|---------|--------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Mr. IPC | Test Group | 69. 4% | 68. 2 | 72. 3 | 77. 3 |
| | Control Group | 73. 4% | 74. 2 | 75. 6 | 79. 3 |
| Mr MMA | Test Group | 58. 8% | 59. 1 | 64. 3 | 66. 7 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Control Group | 62. 7% | 62. 6 | 64. 8 | 66. 3 |
| Mr English II | Test Group | 73. 2% | 72. 4 | 73. 6 | 75. 9 |
| | Control Group | 78% | 77. 4 | 79. 8 | 83. 2 |

Teachers were also instructed to give a baseline test at the beginning of the study, which was also the beginning of the year. This allowed for the measure of knowledge given the subject matter from the beginning of a lesson to the end of the same lesson. This starting point was used as the basis of knowledge for the student, allowing the teachers to focus on differentiation based on the student's success on the entrance exam. This measure was taken after the Fall semester CBA exam and again after the Fall Semester Exam. The results were as follows.

| Teacher | Testing Group | Initial Exam | Follow-up 1 | Follow-up 2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mr. IPC | Test Group | 44. 6% | 47. 2% | 51. 3% |
| | Control Group | 45. 6% | 48. 9% | 53. 8% |
| Mr. MMA | Test Group | 36. 7% | 37. 4% | 41. 6% |
| | Control | 37. 4% | 44% | 49% |

| | Group | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mr. English II | Test Group | 55. 6% | 56. 9% | 61% |
| | Control Group | 46. 5% | 46. 8% | 47. 6% |

Discipline was also taken into consideration. When students have a positive relationship with their instructors, they are more likely to stay engaged and comply with rules and procedures. There was no baseline for this part of the study. While it would have been helpful to see the previous discipline records of the students, it isn't permissible. The teachers were instructed to record the number of times class was disrupted and brought to a stop. This distinction would allow for minor infractions to not skew the results. Major infractions would indicate that the students have disengaged or do not have a positive relationship with the teacher. This factor was recorded at the end of each six weeks grading period.

| Teacher | Group Discipline | 1 st Six Weeks | 2 nd Six Weeks | 3 rd Six Weeks |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mr. IPC | Test Group | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| | Control Group | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| Mr MMA | Test Group | 3 | 4 | 6 |
| | Control Group | 2 | 2 | 4 |

| Mr English II | Test Group | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Control Group | 0 | 2 | 2 |

## Summary

Three outcomes were looked at based on the relationship tools provided to our teachers. Based on the results, there was a direct correlation between emoting caring and Likert results and emoting caring and test scores. On the other hand, there wasn't a correlation between emoting caring and discipline. Students responded that they did enjoy the classroom, the teacher and the subject matter throughout the study. The growth in testing can be seen when comparing the scores of the group involved in our study and the control group. The teachers were given tools such as restorative circles, classroom time and open journaling to better emote caring (Raufelder, Scherber, Wood, 2016). Expectations were that caring would have turned into better student engagement and in turn, higher test scores (Bleu, 2011). The data backs up these assumptions. The longer the teachers emoted caring, it was expected that engagement would go up and when engagement goes up, discipline issues should go down. We did not see this correlation in the data.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Section Five

**Conclusions**

Reluctant learners tend to be students that fail to meet expectations regularly. To combat the lack of motivation, we gave our teachers opportunities to emote caring with our students by learning how they learn, emoting caring and using differentiation techniques. These three indicators were analyzed over one full semester. The results indicated that when the teachers emote caring and the student perceived this, they put forth more effort, shown by an increase in the test scores which became comparable to the control group. If students " like" their teachers, they are more likely to meet expectations. When given the time and guided towards learning their student's learning styles, the relationship between student and teacher can bring out the best in the student body.

**Reflection**

The relationships formed between students and teachers have always interested me. The importance of the relationship has always been discussed but the training on increasing these positive relationships doesn't occur in this regional area. This research answered the question: What impact do positive student-teacher relationships have on the perceived instructional solidarity in secondary reluctant learners. The impact showed that more positive relationships helped to increase the achievement rate amongst reluctant learners.

Although the research has significant results for instituting procedures that help teachers to emote caring and build a strong and positive student-teacher relationship, there is still room to make improvements and continue the study. One limitation is the time given to study the relationships. True

relationship building takes time and would be more representative if the study had continued for the school year. Given the increase in likeness and test scores, another 5 months of research could show even more correlation between the two. Another limitation of the study is the sample size. This study focused on the reluctant learners on campus, but if the sample size were increased to include more level students and even Advanced Placement students, the study may indicate even more reason to including time for teachers to build positive relationships with their students.

The discipline indicator was the most limited of the study and could have benefited more from having previous years of discipline. This would have allowed for more accurate tracking of infractions. It would have also been beneficial to know the exact student that made the infraction.

### Recommendations

For those involved directly in the study, I would like to make three recommendations. The first would be to continue to search for training that can better help them for positive relationships with the students. Being a proponent of positive student-teacher relationships, I have always felt that trainings on how to build and grow relationships with the student body should be implemented regularly. The next recommendation would be to ensure that time is given for these relationships to develop and grow. This means that this time must be allotted for positive student-teacher relationships in lesson planning. Finally, discipline should be tracked over multiple years and the students with the highest discipline rate should build positive relationships with administrators that could rotate as their discipline officer as they move from 9 $^{th}$ to 12 $^{th}$ grade.

**Concluding Remarks**

While training exists in student-teacher relationships, they are not regularly implemented in the classroom. The relationship is crucial for reluctant learners and can bring them to meet expectations set by on-level students. Further study could be conducted into finding what drives a reluctant learner and if positive relationships can help them to better. Overall, more positive results can be achieved with reluctant learners with proper integration on the classroom level.

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