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UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF THE STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP IN
RELATION TO SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS

A MASTER'S THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

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KRISTINA MARIE HALL

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UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF THE STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP IN
RELATION TO SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS

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Abstract

In 2012, more than six million students in the United States were identified as having an educational disability and receiving special education services. Students with disabilities are more likely than their general education peers to experience low grades, class failure, and suspensions. Positive student-teacher relationships have been associated with increased academic achievement and school connectedness, as well as associated with decreased negative behaviors. Research indicates that students value teachers who are caring, accessible to students, open and honest, and display a sense of humor. Through this literature review and application materials, the following reviews the impact of student-teacher relationships and factors that may impact such relationships. Specifically, this paper reviews several ways to establish positive student-teacher relationships including developing an ecological perspective to see students in a wider context by targeting pre-service teacher preparation programs, and looking at individual teacher approaches to discipline and communication. Factors impacting the student-teacher relationship are also reviewed, looking at ways that student perceptions of teacher behavior can create barriers to or pave pathways toward positive student-teacher relationships. Finally, some international factors are considered, drawing parallels between practices in Turkey, Botswana, Ghana, Bangladesh, and the United States.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the current literature regarding the impact of the student-teacher relationship on students in special education. This writer is interested in finding out what impact, if any, positive and/or negative relationships with teachers have on students with an identified disability. Within public education in the United States, there are standard expectations for students to attend class, participate in classroom activities, complete homework assignments, and pass exams given on state mandated standards. There can be several barriers to achieving those standards such as language, social deficits, learning disabilities, cognitive deficits, and health conditions, among a variety of other possibilities. This writer has experienced all of the above scenarios, as well as observed a repeated pattern: the relationship the student in question has with the teacher impacts the student's motivation, understanding, and success at a given subject, class, or social situation. Research has shown that positive relationships between students and teachers play a key role in the positive learning environments and academic outcomes for their students as well as have a positive impact on students' social-emotional development (Capern & Hammond, 2014).

During eight years of working in public schools, this writer has experienced several instances of students struggling to meet the expectations of the mainstream classroom. All students have had an identified disability of emotional behavioral disorder (EBD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), learning disability (LD), or other health disability (OHD). The first example given will be Perry. Perry was a high school student identified as OHD primarily because of his medical diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Perry struggled to sit still in class for more than ten minutes at a time. He preferred to be up and moving throughout the classroom, often jumping, rolling over tables, or tapping his fingers or writing utensil on desks, tables, or walls. He would also leave the classroom often without

permission. When given an academic task, Perry often struggled to understand directions and had difficulty asking clarifying questions. Perry was placed in a program with a smaller student-teacher ratio than his mainstream classes due to his difficult behaviors. Over the course of three years in the smaller program setting, Perry began to make improvements in his behaviors as well as his academics. When asked in an exit interview before he graduated what he thought contributed most to his success, Perry replied, “My teachers. They cared about me.”

While the above story is anecdotal and does not come from a scientific study, it leads this writer to wonder if other students have similar experiences and would credit some of their success to having a positive relationship with their teachers. Capern and Hammond (2014) indicate that students with EBD have a higher likelihood for delinquency, incarceration and school dropout, but point out that the risk can be reduced by having strong, positive relationships with teachers.

The second example of student-teacher relationship comes from another high school aged student named Randall with an identified disability of EBD. Randall was in his sophomore year in a self-contained program for students with academic, behavioral and communication concerns when this writer first encountered him. Randall was quiet, shy, and had attendance concerns. Information in his file revealed that Randall had a history of selective mutism, refusing to speak outside of his home. Though he had overcome this in most instances, Randall still struggled at times to communicate with his teachers and peers. Randall admitted to having severe anxiety and not wanting to be around others in crowded, loud spaces. He often left class without permission. Throughout the year, this writer worked with Randall to create comfortable work spaces and to advocate for his needs with his teachers. By the end of the academic year, Randall was attending school regularly, staying in his mainstream classes, coming before and staying after school to

work one-on-one with teachers, and earning passing grades in all of his classes. At his end of the year interview, when asked what contributed most to his success, Randall replied “Getting to know my teachers and believing that they wanted me to be successful.”

A final example is Dante, a sophomore with an identified disability of EBD. Dante was a sophomore who was placed into a center-based EBD program after having several behavioral referrals and suspensions in a less restrictive setting. Dante was known for running around the halls, shadowboxing with peers, and creating a general ruckus in the halls of his school. One day, when Dante was supposed to be in class, he was in the halls searching for a peer who had made him upset. He found the student in his classroom and lured him into the hallway. This writer was in the hallway attempting to locate Dante and encourage him to return to his classroom. As this writer approached Dante, it was clear he was in the midst of a severe argument with his peer. One of the school’s administrators was also in the hall, walking up to the situation at the same time as this writer. Dante was winding up to take a swing at his peer and begin a physical altercation. The administrator said, “Don’t you even think about it” to Dante. His reply was laced with expletives and seemed to make Dante want to fight more, as he replied, “Watch me!” This writer put her hand on Dante’s back, and said “Hey, let’s take walk; this kid is not worth the trouble you are going to get in for this.” To this writer’s surprise, Dante stopped, turned around, and walked away. He was eventually brought to the office, where the administrator wanted to suspend Dante for his disruptive and unsafe actions in the hall. This writer requested time to speak with Dante without the administrator present, which was granted. During that meeting, it became known that the other student had stolen Dante’s wallet during lunch. He was seeking the student out to get his things back. Dante had not told this to the administrator. When he was asked why he had not shared that information with the administrator, Dante said, “Because she

don't care anyway. She just wants to suspend me." When this writer returned to the meeting with the administrator, it was requested that Dante not be suspended. The administrator replied, "If he's suspended it will add to the data to help move him to a different program." That moment was an eye-opening event for this writer, where it was clear that the student's negative experiences and relationship with the administrator impacted the way that he acted, as well as the administrator's negative view of the student impacting his consequence.

The three examples are stories that impacted this writer greatly as a teacher. Two of the three students, after having so many ups and downs, attributed their success to their relationships with teachers. On the contrary, this writer has also experienced students like Dante who refuse to attend classes or refuse to participate in activities, assignments, or exams because of their dislike for teachers and/or administrators. While it is likely that there are other contributing factors to student success, the student-teacher relationship is worth a review of the literature to understand how this important factor can be emphasized to teachers at all levels.

Definitions

Student-Teacher Relationship for the purpose of this paper, is defined as the relationship between a student and a teacher within the context of the school. A teacher may be a core subject, elective, or special education teacher, a coach, or an administrator. The relationship may be positive or negative.

Special Education is the practice of educating students with exceptional needs including physical disabilities (PD), developmental cognitive disabilities (DCD), emotional-behavioral disabilities (EBD), specific learning disabilities (SLD), autism spectrum disorders (ASD), and

other health disabilities (OHD). Special Education students are protected by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004.

Ecological Perspective for the purpose of this paper, is described as the ability of teachers to understand the complexity of students' lives and to see the student as a part of multiple systems, including school, home, and community.

Reflective Thinking for the purpose of this paper is defined as the ability of the teacher to analyze and adjust teaching methods according to individual student needs. Teachers may assess the impact of their own values and beliefs have on their teaching, as well as analyze their teaching methods and their effectiveness.

Inclusion for the purpose of this paper is defined as the practice of providing special education services to students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment possible, with their same-aged, normally developing peers (Melekoglu, 2013).

Self-Efficacy for the purpose of this paper is defined as “a person’s belief in his or her own competence to execute required behavior successfully to get expected results (Ahsan et al, 2013).”

Pre-Service teachers for the purpose of this paper are defined as students enrolled in a teacher preparation program.

Rationale for Research

In 2014, students with disabilities graduated at a rate of 63%, which is roughly 20% lower than the national average. In 20 of 50 states, the graduation rate is below 60% (Grindal & Schifter, 2016). If positive student-teacher relationships can help to increase students' achievement at school and possibly increase the number of special education students who earn a

diploma, it seems reasonable that school districts would be interested in in research to train their teachers on how to establish and maintain positive relationships with students of all ages.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

According to the United States Department of Education, 12.1 percent of the country's K-12 student population were identified as having a disability during the 2012-2013 academic year (How many students with disabilities are in our school(s)?, 2017). Under the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 6,429,431 students ages 3-21 were receiving special education services in the fall of 2012. Disability categories protected under IDEA include specific learning disabilities (SLD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), emotional behavioral disorders (EBD), speech-language impairment (SLI), visual impairment- including blindness, deafness, hearing impairment, deaf-blindness, orthopedic impairment, intellectual disability, traumatic brain injury, other health disability, and multiple disabilities (Lee, n.d.). The risk factors associated with having an educational disability are well documented. In the largest disability category nationally, SLD, students earn lower grades and experience more class failure than their peers without SLD. One in two students with SLD experienced a suspension or expulsion in data collected during 2011 (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Compared with their general education peers, students with EBD tend to have lower grades, experience greater school failure, and are more likely to be identified as having SLD. Students with EBD also have higher rates of absenteeism, are more likely to drop out of school, and are less likely to graduate than general education peers (Capern & Hammond, 2014). Students with ASD have been rated by teachers as being more anxious and withdrawn than their peers, more likely to be aggressive, and more likely to underachieve when compared to their same-aged, general education peers (Auger, 2013).

Impact of the Student-Teacher Relationship

A review of literature shows that there is a significant impact on student achievement when students have positive relationships with their teachers. Raufelder (2013) states that teachers' interactions with students is the most essential component of being a teacher. Educational theory and practice research has shown that students who do not have meaningful relationships with teachers have little reason to be connected to school or to achieve academically (Shepard, et al., 2012). A positive student-teacher relationship is associated with positive long-term outcomes such as better school adjustment, higher levels of social functioning, and high academic achievement. On the other end of the spectrum, negative student-teacher relationships are associated with school avoidance and absenteeism and low levels of academic performance (Skipper & Douglas, 2015). For at-risk students in particular, positive teacher support can counteract risk-factors which lead to long-term positive effects on students (Spilt, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012). O'Brien (2010) describes the importance of student-teacher relationships, indicating that if teachers are going to make relationships the center of their teaching, teacher must then care about each student's life and story. O'Brien (2010) points out that research shows teachers who show real, genuine interest in their students' lives create more productive learners compared to less interested teachers. Relationship building practices should include encouraging acceptance of others, trust, inclusion of all learners, and open-mindedness (O'Brien, 2010).

In a study of both gifted students and students with EBD, researchers found that in a survey of 4000 students, good relationships with teachers was valued higher than any other aspect of schooling (Capern & Hammond, 2014). Data from a longitudinal study done in South Australia found that teachers who do "ordinary, relational, little things" promoted students'

resilience at school. Of students who were interviewed, “little things” included listening, being honest and open, being positive, remembering personal events, showing humor, and being accessible to students (Capern & Hammond, 2014.) Capern & Hammond (2014) state that literature shows that students with EBD are more concerned with having good relationships with teachers than they are with a teacher’s competence or subject expertise. Capern & Hammond (2014) conducted their own study in which they used a mixed-methods approach to understand what EBD students want from their teachers. They collected data through surveys and focus groups. Their results found that students with EBD indicated that the most important qualities in a teacher related to being patient, listening, and treating students fairly. Students in the study indicated that it was important to them that teachers have a friendly disposition, be supportive of student learning, and to talk and listen to students. Capern & Hammond (2014) conclude that EBD students were readily able to identify teacher behaviors that will increase student motivation and connectedness at school and research into student-teacher relationships in other categories would be beneficial to increase student achievement across disability categories.

A student-teacher relationship that is positive in nature is one in which the student feels as though s/he is “respected, valued, and supported (Conner, Miles, & Pope, 2014). Research shows that students who identify positive relationships with their teachers are less likely to suffer from depression or low self-esteem (Conner et al., 2014). Research also indicates that having strong teacher support may help protect students from engaging in high-risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol use and suicidal ideation. If such behaviors have already been initiated, teacher support was found to have little impact on the reduction or cessation of such behaviors (Conner et al., 2014). This finding demonstrates the importance of the early establishment of positive student-teacher relationships.

Shepard et al. (2012) further describe the impact of building positive student-teacher relationships in the context of an intervention program at a high school for at-risk students comprised of migrant students, special education students, and students with low socioeconomic status. Sixteen students from the intervention program were interviewed, with responses highlighting their experiences. Most students had been previously suspended from school, while more than half had been expelled from previous enrollments. Students who were interviewed consistently expressed the impact of having a teacher in their lives who cared about them as individuals, explaining that the teacher support was paramount in helping them overcome their circumstances. One student described that instead of getting phone calls home for negative behaviors, the teachers called home and reported progress and positive behaviors, which in turn encouraged the student to keep coming back to school each day. Shepard et al. (2012) explain that once students feel supported and become emotionally invested, teachers can then go deeper into content using meaningful activities that connect to student lives.

Building Positive Relationships

Researchers Cook-Sather and Curl (2014) describe the duty of teacher preparation programs to teach preservice teachers to develop an ecological perspective when working with students. An ecological perspective is described as seeing students as “complex beings who have to navigate different contexts.” In order for teachers to truly understand their students, they must put effort into seeing students across multiple settings including at home, in the community, and at school (Cook-Sather & Curl, 2014). To gain an ecological perspective, a group of preservice teachers from two small liberal arts colleges took part in a program called Teach and Learn Together (TLT). Through TLT, the preservice teachers were paired with a secondary student from an urban school. As a part of the methods course in the teacher preparation program,

preservice teachers were given assignments that helped them take a deep look at their student partner's life. Through a series of email exchanges, facilitated discussions uploaded as podcasts, school shadowing, and home visits, preservice teachers we asked to use reflective thinking to analyze the complex nature of students' lives and describe how their knowledge could impact their future teaching (Cook-Sather & Curl, 2014). Developing an ecological perspective and reflective teaching practice in regard to student lives could be considered an important first step in building strong student-teacher relationships.

Student-teacher relationships are vital to students' academic success (Al-Mandani, 2015). Research shows that the environment students learn in must be pleasant and comfortable in order to raise students' mental states. In addition to learning environment, studies indicate that teachers' verbal and nonverbal communication can have a long-lasting impression on students, affecting their academic performance either positively or negatively (Al-Mandani, 2015). Aydan (2015) indicates that one way to pave the way towards positive student-teacher relationships is through the use of humor. Humor is linked to individuals being more tolerant, flexible, and tolerant. Humor has been noted to relieve or reduce the impact of negative experiences related to depression, stress, anxiety, and tension (Aydan, 2015). Aydan (2015) indicates that teachers should pay attention to their own humor styles, as well as their self-compassion styles, as these styles will guide student behavior as well as behavior from families. Positive self-compassion and humor styles help teachers not only establish, but maintain positive relationships (Aydan, 2015). Describing his own practice with students, a professor at the university level discussed the importance of one-on-one meetings with students at the beginning of each semester. Alumni of the same university were interviewed about their experience; the most common response being that the quality most associated with effective teachers was their attitude toward and

relationships with students (Starcher, 2011). Regan (2009) addressed ways for teachers to improve the way they think about students with EBD, indicating that it is of utmost importance for the teacher to establish and build trust with students. Several ways to build trust include sincerely showing students that they are valued as people, providing for their individual needs, and helping to set students up for success. Regan (2009) encourages teachers to begin each day fresh, sincerely forgiving the student for any difficulties or misgivings from the previous day. Regan (2009) also argues that while the traditional method of addressing conflict with a student with EBD in the classroom is to redirect and state expectations, it is important to choose the words with extreme care, explaining that even one comment taken poorly by a student can destroy the relationship, the student's feelings of self-control, and social competence.

Student-teacher relationships have strong impact on students' emotional experiences at school, likely because the relationships are tied to perceptions of connectedness at school (Cooper & Miness, 2014). The extent to which students perceive that teachers care for their wellbeing is central to emotional connectedness to the classroom. Research indicates that teacher behaviors demonstrate teacher care include respect and encouragement from the teacher, assistance with academic tasks, frequent interaction, help with personal problems, and a fair and positive approach to discipline (Cooper & Miness, 2014). It is pointed out that positive intentions from the teacher are not enough, but rather, students expect a "consistent, strategic process aimed at helping another person grow" (Cooper & Miness, 2014). In order to help students grow individually, teachers must make efforts to learn about students individually, including their personalities, learning styles, needs, and goals. Students are more likely to be engaged in the classroom when they feel as though they are valued as individuals (Cooper & Miness, 2014). Through their study on student perceptions of teacher care and understanding, Cooper & Miness

(2014) give recommendations for teachers that include making individual gestures for students during one-on-one interactions, using time with students to understand them personally, and for teachers to demonstrate that they are understanding individuals who understand what it means to be a student. Cooper & Miness (2015) recommend that school leaders should provide ample opportunity for teachers to build relationships with their students, particular those who demonstrate low engagement or difficulty connecting with teachers, particularly those with special education needs.

Factors Impacting the Student-Teacher Relationship

When creating relationships with students, Koutrouba, Baxevanou and Koutroumpas (2012) explain the role of students' perceptions of teacher power within the classroom. International literature describes teacher power in a variety of ways, including the way in which teachers influence student engagement by setting behavioral rules, establish communication expectations between student and teacher, and assigning consequences. If a student perceives that teachers' power is directly related to their interest in advancing the students' education, students will be more likely to be engaged in academics (Koutrouba et al., 2012). In further study of teacher power, Koutrouba et al. (2012) interviews reveal that students are more likely to accept a teacher's power when that teacher works to respect student effort, finds ways to address learning difficulties, and assesses learning in a way that does not increase student stress. The same study found that students are likely to respond negatively to teacher power when teachers coerce students into increasing their academic achievement by threatening consequences, giving an unreasonable homework load, or basing assessment solely off of cognitive tasks, disregarding personal traits and effort. Students are more likely to consent to the teacher power when the classroom is learner-centered, supportive, trustful, and cooperative. In addition to being

cognizant of their power within the classroom, teachers must also pay attention to their use of praise and criticism with students, as these may also impact their relationships with students.

Skipper & Douglas (2015) describe two different types of feedback teachers give students: person and process. Person-feedback consists of using stable factors such as ability level to give feedback such as “you are good at reading” whereas process feedback uses unstable factors such as “you tried hard.” Person-feedback was found to have more negative outcomes after a task failure than process-feedback. Students who received process feedback experienced more positive outcomes after a task failure. In other words, person feedback can cause a student to have a helpless response because it is based on perceived hard to change factors such as innate ability. Process feedback, on the other hand, is related to factors easier to change such as effort. Teachers may use this research to understand the type of praise feedback that would be most beneficial for their students.

Research has found that teachers tend to give more emotional support and warmth, both verbally and non-verbally to students who are seen as high achievers. Teachers may minimize interactions with students who are lower achievers in an attempt to limit disruptions. Teachers may perceive that higher achieving students are more similar to themselves than lower achieving students, and therefore increase liking of higher achievers over lower achievers. This practice may lead to the development of poor student-teacher relationships with lower achieving students (Vieluf, Hochweber, Klieme, & Kunter, 2015).

In a field study, Raufelder, Bukowski, and Mohr (2013) analyze the results of a six-month participant observation. The authors concluded that although schools would likely benefit from integrating “entireness of life,” that is, integrating students’ experiences outside of the classroom, into school-based relationships, it rarely happened. The authors stress that in addition

to the traditional school model of ‘reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic,’ a fourth “R” should be “relationships,” arguing that all learning happens through a relational context, rather than just by direct content instruction.

In a study of 22 young adults reflecting on their youth and urban school experience, McKnight (n.d.) identifies several themes related to perceptions of the school and teachers. Themes included perceptions of discipline in schools, perceptions of competing student interests, and perceptions of caring. Of the interviewed students, many were critical of the quality of their teachers. Specifically, teachers at the middle and high school levels were described as being disengaged, discouraging, and cruel. One student’s take on her teachers included describing them as apathetic, and not caring what is really going in students’ lives. The students interviewed were students who eventually dropped out of school. The researcher describes implications for teachers, explaining that teacher preparation programs should move beyond basic classroom management strategies and focus more on emotional and cultural understanding of students (McKnight, n.d.).

In a different study of 18 students in an urban school district, participants were interviewed about barriers to their success at school. More than half of the students identified teachers and other school personnel as being a barrier to their success. Students described teachers who were insensitive to individual students needs in the classroom in the form of moving through content too quickly without making sure everyone understands first. Students described teachers who did not “care to be involved” in their students’ lives, and instead just give students work to do. Students described a general sentiment of teachers just being at school to get a paycheck rather than develop meaningful relationships with students.

Tucker, Dixon, and Griddine (2010) describe the importance of students mattering at school, indicating that students who feel as though they matter to others in their school is strongly correlated with increased academic achievement. Tucker et al. (2010) looked specifically at how African-American males perceive that they matter at school and how that perception contributes to their individual desire to excel in academic studies and expectations. African-American males are commonly over-represented in special education and are often under-represented in gifted and talented programs. Though African-American males can often be perceived as being disengaged from their education, several studies show results that indicate most African-American males have the desire to succeed academically (Tucker et al., 2010). In a small study of nine African-American males in a small high school, Tucker et al. (2010) conducted one hour interviews with each of the participants. The researchers asked questions regarding mattering to others at school such as, “Who are the people you believe you matter to here at school?” “Who pays the most attention to you here at school?” and “What kinds of things do these people do to help you succeed?” Several participants indicated the importance of teachers who are consistent in their relationships with students, as well as the importance of teachers reaching out proactively to students rather than waiting until a problem is evident. Participants also named teachers who held high academic standards for their students as the ones that held the best relationships with students. All students interviewed indicated that they had at least one supportive relationship with a teacher at school who had helped them through a difficult time (Tucker et al., 2010).

In addition to the literature describing the impact of positive student-teacher relationships, Wilkins (2014) describes some of the difficulties teachers may face when working with students in regard to relationships. Previous research shows that student-teacher interactions

have been identified as one of the top factors contributing to teacher stress and burnout. In addition, it is stated that few schools provide teachers with the necessary support and guidance in regard to establishing and maintaining relationships with students, which in turn leads to conflict and confusion over the boundaries of such relationships (Wilkins, 2014). Though the importance of positive student-teacher relationship relating to student success is well documented, little research has been done to understand teachers' perspective on what makes a positive relationship with students. It is thought that negative student interactions can lead to lower job satisfaction, and eventually, teacher attrition (Wilkins, 2014). Wilkins (2014) sought to understand this question, through a survey of 103 teachers at high schools with more than 750 students, with five teachers giving in-depth interviews. Results from the survey showed that teachers desired relationships with students who demonstrated engagement and interest in their studies, such as being on time to class, consistently attending class, and showing initiative in regard to in-class and homework assignments. Teachers also desired relationships with students who displayed respectful, rule-abiding behavior such as following classroom and school rules and being polite, and finally, showing mature, positive social behaviors such as being honest, trustworthy, and cooperative. The additional in-depth interviews revealed the same desired traits from students, adding in students who have a sense of humor and students who accept that all teachers are individuals (Wilkins, 2014). In this study, the results indicated that teachers who had better relationships with their students had more positive academic outcomes and higher classroom achievement. Teachers in this study indicated that creating positive relationships with students is a central role of their jobs, and linked better relationships with fewer discipline issues and greater academic engagement within their subject area. Teachers also noted that they did not invest their time or efforts into students who gave nothing in return (Wilkins, 2014). This is of particular

concern to the researcher due to studies that indicate students who drop out of school often cite teachers who do not care about them as a reason for their dropout.

International Factors

One area that student-teacher relationship can have a significant impact on is school attendance. In a study done in Turkey, one researcher found that a major cause of student absenteeism was negative teacher interaction. Examples included perceived harsh, oppressive attitudes towards tardiness and too much homework pressure (Sahin, Arseven, & Kilic, 2016). Repeated absenteeism is linked, as several studies have shown, to higher rates of violent behaviors, substance abuse, sexually explicit behaviors, early pregnancy, and suicide (Sahin, et al., 2016). Sahin, et al. (2016) team conducted a case study analysis of 64 principals working at primary, secondary, and high schools in Turkey. The research participants were interviewed and given questionnaires, which were coded and analyzed for common themes by the researcher. The researchers looked at both factors related to chronic absenteeism as well as complete school dropout. The factors were broken down into several categories, including family factors, teacher and administrator behaviors, school setting, and environmental factors. For the purpose of this literature review, the factors related to the school will be discussed. Four main themes emerged from the research participants' responses related to school factors contributing to attendance concerns: student-administrator relationship, student-teacher relationship, in-class behavior of teachers, and attitude towards absenteeism. Factors related to absenteeism related to student-administrator relationship included negative administrator attitude related to the student in general and when students are late, and being oppressive to students with absenteeism issues. Factors that contributed to complete dropouts in terms of student-administrator relationship were similar, including negative administrator attitudes towards the students in general, not paying

attention to students, or being oppressive to students with absenteeism issues. Factors that contributed to both chronic absenteeism and to complete dropouts in relation to student-teacher relationship included teachers being unable to make students love their classes, being oppressive towards students, not giving love to students, not paying attention to students, poor communication with students' parents, teachers being frightened of students, teachers being disinterested in students' lives outside of the classroom, and failure to provide guidance to students (Sahin, et al., 2016).

In a 2013 study also out of Turkey, Melekoglu discusses inclusion of special education students in the mainstream setting. Inclusion is described as providing special education services to students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment possible, with their same-aged, normally developing peers (Melekoglu, 2013). The researcher states the difficulty Turkey has had with implementing quality inclusive education for special education students, citing one of the major contributing factors as teachers with negative attitudes towards students with disabilities. To find out more about teacher attitudes towards students with disabilities, Melekoglu (2013) designed an interaction project where preservice, general education teacher candidates took a special education course in order to gain experience interacting with students with disabilities. The preservice teachers took part in service learning with special education students for two hours per week for five weeks. The preservice teachers were surveyed at the beginning of the program and the end of the program. Baseline data collected from the preservice teachers indicated general fear and confusion in regard to how to interact with students with disabilities at the beginning of the experience. When surveyed again at the end of the experience, participants indicated that they generally had a better understanding of the needs of students with disabilities. Melekoglu (2013) points out that one way to increase general education teachers' attitudes

towards students with disabilities is to target teacher preparation programs to include a service-learning program component where preservice teachers have real exposure to working with students with disabilities.

Researchers in Bangladesh also set out to understand perceptions of self-efficacy of pre-service teachers regarding inclusive education. Ahsan, et al. (2012) studied 1623 students in their final year of teacher preparation programs throughout Bangladesh at both the primary and secondary levels. The participants had varying numbers of years of teaching experience, ranging from zero to more than five years. The participants rated their knowledge of and exposure to persons with disabilities. 94.9% of students had no experience teaching students with disabilities, though 50.4% indicated that they had previously had “significant interaction” with persons with disabilities. Researchers studied the pre-service teachers’ perceived teaching efficacy for inclusive education, pre-service teachers’ attitudes toward inclusive education, and pre-service teachers’ concerns regarding inclusive education. Results found that the participant’s perceived teaching efficacy for inclusive education was relatively high. Specifically, participants perceived that their efficacy was greatest in behavior management, followed by practicing inclusive instruction. Their lowest perceived efficacy was in the area of collaboration. Participants’ attitude towards inclusive education was rated as moderately positive. Specifically, participants had the most positive attitudes toward students who have difficulty with verbal expression, attention problems, and students who fail. Participants had more negative attitudes toward students who need individual learning programs, and the most negative attitudes toward students who require assistive technology. Finally, participants in the study reported low levels of concerns related to inclusive education. Participants reported being most concerned about being able to provide adequate attention to all students within a classroom (Ahsan et al., 2012).

Researchers in Ghana and Botswana also set out to learn more about pre-service teachers' attitudes and concerns regarding inclusive education for students with disabilities. Kuyini and Mangope (2011) completed a three-part survey of 202 pre-service teachers from four different training programs in both Ghana and Botswana. Kuyini and Mangope (2011) state that several factors including having close contact with persons with disabilities, knowledge of policy and law, teaching experience, and confidence levels significantly impact pre-services attitudes toward inclusive education. Kuyini and Mangope (2011) cite literature that states specialized instruction relating to persons with disabilities during teacher preparation programs positively impacts pre-service teachers' attitudes of inclusive education. Findings regarding the attitudes of pre-service teachers toward inclusive education indicated generally low or negative attitudes, with some variation between the two countries. Participants were generally found to have more positive attitudes related to students with disabilities in terms of social needs or behavioral needs, and more negative attitudes towards students who had needs in the areas of academics, high-needs, or sensory areas (such as students with speech, vision, and hearing problems). Pre-service teacher concerns about inclusive education were found to be greater in Ghana than in Botswana, likely impacted by lack of resources and large class sizes. Results showed that pre-service teachers in Ghana were more concerned with personal factors related to inclusive education compared to systemic concerns related to inclusive education in Botswana. That is, pre-service teachers in Ghana were mostly concerned with their own knowledge and skills, as well as their ability to give equal attention to students with varying needs.

CHAPTER III: APPLICATION AND MATERIALS

PowerPoint to school staff



Developing an Ecological Perspective

A MODEL FOR BETTER UNDERSTANDING OUR STUDENTS
AND BUILDING STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS

Background

- ▶ Research shows that relationships between students and teachers play a vital role in the creation of positive learning outcomes and environments.
- ▶ Strong student-teacher relationships can help to improve student academic achievement AND social-emotional development.
- ▶ Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders are at higher risk than their general education peers for delinquency, future incarceration, and school drop out (Capern & Hammond, 2014).
- ▶ Student-teacher relationships impact students' social and emotional experiences at school because of the influence on feelings of connection and belonging (Cooper & Mines, 2014).

But **HOW** can I build those relationships?

- ▶ Let's ask ourselves a few questions (and share with your neighbor):
 - ▶ How do you currently build relationships with students?
 - ▶ Give an example of what has worked
 - ▶ Give an example of something that has damaged a relationship with a student

Taking it Further: Developing an Ecological Perspective

- ▶ What is an Ecological Perspective?
 - ▶ Helps teachers see students as complex beings who exist simultaneously in multiple structures and relationships (e.g. home, school, work, community, student, child, brother, sister, etc.)
 - ▶ Willingness as a teacher to be open to opportunities to learn from students' experiences and translate that into classroom practice
 - ▶ It challenges the separation of theory and practice- it puts teachers in the middle of changes their students are constantly facing
 - ▶ Allows teachers to be better prepared and more flexible with the complex, unpredictable elements of teaching



Teaching and Learning Together (TLT)

Based on the work of Alison Cook-Sather and Heather Curl

- ▶ As part of a methods course in a teacher preparation program at two small liberal arts colleges, TLT pairs preservice teachers with urban, secondary students serving as pedagogical consultants
- ▶ Being situated in the middle of the students' lives offers pre-service teachers the opportunity to challenge many of their own assumptions about students

TLT Continued

- ▶ Structured into four components:
 - ▶ I. Weekly email exchange between preservice teacher and high school student
 - ▶ II. Weekly conversations with secondary students facilitated by school-based educators are recorded and uploaded as podcasts, which are then used as required reading for preservice teachers
 - ▶ III. Weekly discussion takes place in Methods course among preservice teachers on how their email exchanges are going, what struggles they are having, and what they need help with
 - ▶ IV. End of year analysis paper is written regarding previous three components

TLT Continued

- ▶ Pre-service teachers also:
 - ▶ Take part in written and spoken exchanges
 - ▶ Take part in school visits/shadowing
 - ▶ Home visits

Goals of TLT

- ▶ Helping teachers to recognize, value, and foster diversity within their classrooms
- ▶ Conceptualize students as partners in teaching and learning
- ▶ Helping teachers to communicate across different roles and perspectives
- ▶ Reminds teachers that their knowledge of students is always incomplete
- ▶ Use experiences and insight to create responsive classrooms
- ▶ Help teachers build their own pedagogy based on their increased awareness of students' lives

But we are not pre-service teachers!

- ▶ Yes, we are current teachers! But we can use this framework to help us develop our own way to take a deeper look at students' lives to help us reflect on our current practices.
- ▶ Ideas:
 - ▶ Focus Groups
 - ▶ Assemble diverse groups of students to facilitate conversations with and make accessible to all teachers
 - ▶ Make discussions part of a staff-development or workshop days, or PLC work

Ideas, continued...

- ▶ Select small group of teachers to take part in a full TLT experience with a neighboring school for the duration of a semester or school year
 - ▶ Complete email exchanges, student discussions, school shadowing, home visits, final analysis
 - ▶ Staff group presents findings and suggestions insights for teaching to larger staff

This is just the beginning!

- ▶ As teachers, part of our job to to constantly find ways to build strong relationships with our students. I'm interested in hearing from you!
- ▶ Take this Google survey to indicate your interest in TLT:
 - ▶ [Google Survey](#)

▶ Thank you!

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CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

There are more than six million students in the United States who receive special education services for an identified disability. Students with disabilities are at greater risk than their general education peers for lower grades, classroom failure, suspension and expulsion.

Positive student-teacher relationships are associated with positive academic achievement, as well as positive long-term outcomes such as a better school adjustment and higher social functioning. Positive student-teacher relationships are described as relationships where students feel respected, valued, and supported. Students who have positive relationships with their teachers may be less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol use or to have suicidal ideation. Students describe good teachers as those who listen to and support students, are accessible, are open and honest, remember personal events, and have a sense of humor.

One way that preservice teachers at one liberal arts college are trained to have a better understanding of their students is through a project called Teaching and Learning Together (TLT). The purpose of the project is to prepare preservice teachers to develop an ecological perspective, that is, to have a rich understanding of students as complex beings in a variety of contexts. Preservice teachers engage in email exchanges, home visits, school shadowing, and listening to facilitated discussions of secondary students they have been paired with. Preservice teachers are taught the value of practicing reflective thinking, which allows them to use their deep understanding of their students to monitor and adjust their classroom practices.

Some factors that may influence student-teacher relationships include teacher power within the classroom, feedback styles, and personal bias. Additionally, the lack of being able to

integrate “entireness of life” into the school experience may contribute to poorer student-teacher relationships. Student perception of teacher behaviors also plays a large role in student-teacher relationships. In several studies, students reported that teachers were disengaged, apathetic, and cruel.

International research looks at multiple factors related to student-teacher relationship, including absenteeism, dropout rates, and the attitudes and concerns of pre-service teachers in teacher preparation programs in various countries. Research shows that several behaviors of both administrators and teachers can lead to chronic absenteeism and eventual student dropout, including perceived harsh, oppressive attitudes towards students and too much homework pressure. Research also shows that while pre-service teachers rate their teaching efficacy to be relatively high despite not having significant experience teaching persons with disabilities. Studies showed that exposure to and experience with persons with disabilities increased overall pre-service teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive education. Concerns related to inclusive education among pre-service teachers included the needs of students with individual learning needs, and students with sensory needs or assistive technology needs.

Professional Application

As a secondary special education teacher who has worked primarily with students with EBD, ASD and SLD, I have seen on a daily basis how much my students are up against. It seems that they are almost always behind on assignments, frustrated that they cannot keep up, and frustrated with teachers who are unwilling to help them succeed. I have had many students stop coming to school for days, weeks, and even months at time. Most of my students have been suspended from school for multiple days every year for negative behaviors that, in my opinion, stem from negative teacher or administrative interactions.

On the other hand, I have also had outstanding relationships with many students and have seen the mutual trust and understanding lead to great improvements for my students in both behavior and academic performance. I have witnessed many other great student-teacher relationships with my colleagues that have, without question, kept at-risk students coming back to school and working hard. I have had students who have dropped out of school completely who had the ability to graduate, and I have had students graduate who no one ever thought would pass a single class.

After reviewing literature related to impact and implications of student-teacher relationship, I now believe more than ever that school systems need to put as much effort into fostering these relationships as they do into academic content. I particularly loved the Teaching and Learning Together (TLT) program described in one of the studies in my literature review. The concept of having teachers really get to know students in contexts in addition to school seems to be a great way to get teachers to reflect on how their classroom practices may be influencing student lives. Of course, there are some barriers to implementing this type of program in a school district as opposed to a teacher preparation program. At the top of the list is likely the cost; surely the district could not afford to put all teachers through such a program due to the time out of the classroom that would need to be covered by substitutes. There may also be difficulty finding a district, school, or students who would like to partner on such a project. There is also such limited time to meet state academic standards in school year that it would be likely that academic needs would take precedence over such a project like TLT. I would still argue that some form of TLT could be implemented, such as suggested in my application materials. All students, but especially special education and at-risk students, are deserving of the

best possible teachers who are aware of the impact their behaviors, teaching, and character can have on students.

After reviewing several studies done outside of the United States, I found it comforting that many other countries are working toward inclusive education settings for students with disabilities. The research that showed that many-preservice teachers had low or negative attitudes towards students with disabilities is particularly concerning. Often, it is new teachers who are filling the positions with the highest-need populations. If those teachers are walking into the educational setting with inherent bias or negative attitudes, I can only conclude that it will be more difficult for those teachers to build positive, supportive relationship with their students. Additionally, if teachers are overwhelmed by students who have high-needs in regard to behaviors or assistive technology, it is possible that those students could be ignored or disregarded, putting them at higher risk of being chronically absent or even become dropouts. It is therefore crucial that exposure to and real-world experiences with persons with disabilities become an integral part of teacher preparation programs for special education and general education teachers.

The challenges and barriers that special education students face are undoubtedly significant. It seems only right that if we know that a positive student-teacher relationship can have a positive impact on these students' school success, as professionals we put effort and resources into fostering those relationships. At the systemic level, it is necessary that we place high expectations on teacher preparation programs to adequately prepare pre-service teachers with the knowledge, tools, resources, and experiences necessary to establish authentic, sincere relationships with their students. Perhaps with more emphasis put on this human aspect of teaching, we would see greater success of our special education population.

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