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COMMENTARY: THE FOUNDATIONAL ROLE OF TEACHER–STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

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Inevitably, the answer to most important social science questions seems to be "it's complicated and it depends." Yet such is not the case in assessing the import of teacher–student relationships. Unequivocally, students with more positive teacher–student relationships attain a myriad of more desirable student outcomes than their counterparts with less positive relationships (Roorda, Koomen, Split, & Oort, 2011). The handbook chapters in this section underscore how much teacher–student relationships matter and present new theoretical frameworks to organize this rich empirical knowledge. The next logical evolution for this area of research requires translating this scholarship into usable knowledge for practitioners. Wise collaborations between scholars and practitioners can accelerate this evolution by focusing on three dimensions of teacher–student relationships: how we understand, cultivate, and assess them.

For the scholarship in this area to impact practice on these three dimensions, teachers must conceive of teacher–student relationships as a foundational part of their role. Researchers must provide corresponding support to facilitate teachers' understanding of the nature and quality of their relationships with students, to offer strategies for improvement, and to assess the efficacy of such strategies once implemented. In an age of immense testing pressure and accountability, how might teachers learn to prioritize these relationships? First, teachers need immersion in the evidence-based knowledge about the benefits and the impact teacher–student relationships can have on student outcomes. To realize the full potential of these social bonds, they need to be seen as a key pathway to learning, not a form of "extra credit" that some teachers can pursue if they so choose. In turn, scholars must press beyond correlational investigations to develop and cultivate interventions that improve these relationships. Finally, researchers must develop accessible, precise assessments to measure these relationships that practitioners can use in their routine practice. To the extent that researchers and practitioners can collaborate across these three important tasks of understanding, improving, and assessing these relationships, we might hope to shift attention increasingly toward relationships as a core aspect of what it means to be a teacher.

WHY TEACHER–STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS NEED TO BE FOUNDATIONAL TO TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLES

In commenting on the chapters in this section of *Perspectives on Teacher Influence*, we focus explicitly on how teachers' conceptualize their roles with respect to their social interactions and relationships with their students. Social psychologists have long argued that behaviors follow beliefs: In order to understand people's behaviors, we need to understand how they make sense of the world (Lewin, 1946)—for instance, how teachers perceive their roles in the classroom influences their behaviors (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992). In the case of teacher–student relationships, how teachers conceptualize their duties will affect their interactions with students. As McPartland (1990) suggests, teachers who view their professional responsibilities as focusing on the "whole-child" may value their social bonds with students differently than their colleagues who see themselves as "subject matter specialists."

As it stands, we know little about how teachers conceive of their roles with respect to their relationships with students. Some research touches upon teacher–student relationships and teacher roles tangentially through a focus on how teachers view their teaching practice. For example, pre-service teachers' visions of themselves as educators tend to influence their perceptions of classroom practice (Calderhead & Robson, 1991). This qualitative study asked pre-service teachers how they viewed themselves professionally. Participants tended to emphasize one aspect of their teaching and were more likely to call attention to that aspect when providing feedback on another teacher's lesson. Similarly, Brophy (1985) suggested that teachers view themselves primarily as socializers or instructors, and those conceptions impact the way in which they act with students. Teachers who view themselves as socializers respond more negatively to students they view as hostile or aggressive, while teachers who view themselves as instructors respond more negatively to students who they perceive to be unmotivated learners.

As researchers and practitioners work to raise the prominence of these relationships for teachers' identities, three key questions will move the field forward. First, what do teachers need to know about teacher–student relationships? Second, in what ways might teachers improve these relationships in their classrooms? And third, how should teachers measure progress in improving these relationships? As we learn more about how teachers understand, cultivate, and assess their relationships with students, we can begin to distinguish more and less promising ways to improve these important social connections.

Understanding Teacher–Student Relationships: What Do Teachers Need to Know?

Each chapter in this handbook section highlights unique aspects of teacher–student relationships and the corresponding influence on student outcomes. These chapters could serve as a cornerstone for teachers' knowledge in this domain. This core knowledge about teacher–student relationships could help convince teachers that relationships represent an essential part of their role as educators. Furthermore, this knowledge might impress upon teachers the broad network of factors affecting and affected by these social relationships, and begin to inspire theoretically grounded strategies to improve their relationships with students.

Martin and Collie (this volume) provide a compelling example of a framework that could be particularly beneficial in helping teachers appreciate the importance of

teacher–student relationships to their role. Their idea of a "personal proficiency network" underscores that teacher–student relationships lie at the nexus of a constellation of factors important to students' well-being. Specifically, they describe how these relationships are inextricably linked to students' motivation and engagement, resilience and adaptability, and goal setting and growth, as well as learning and teaching. As just one of many examples, they note that if students have a teacher who is more accepting of them and confident in them, those students are likely to have greater self-efficacy. Although the causal directions of these associations are yet to be disentangled, given that positive teacher–student relationships appear to underlie so many crucial factors, improving these relationships will likely improve at least some student outcomes within this broad network. The centrality of these relationships across such a broad network of factors may compel teachers to deeply consider how to prioritize their social bonds with students.

Wubbels, Brekelmans, Mainhard, den Brok, and van Tartwijk (this volume) provide a focused treatment of three theories of teacher–student relationships. In doing so, they underscore why these relationships are so important and so worthy of a central position in teachers' conception of their roles. An especially important contribution of this chapter to teachers' knowledge base is the description of the differential effects of teacher–student relationships on students at different ages and with different personal characteristics. For instance, with respect to the associations with achievement, they describe how these relationships play out differently for: elementary versus secondary students, girls versus boys, minority versus mainstream students, and at-risk youth. Thus, not only do teachers need to see perceive the importance of their relationships with students as a key part of their role, but they need to realize that these relationships may be *particularly* important for some students.

In reviewing the associations between teacher–student relationships and behavioral engagement, Gregory and Korth (this volume) similarly build off the ideas that multiple factors are affected by these relationships and that subsets of students may be differentially affected by positive (or negative) relationships with teachers. However, they also extend the network of factors implicated by emphasizing another critically important point—many *teacher outcomes* may also be improved by more positive (or impeded by more negative) teacher–student relationships. They specifically discuss student misbehavior as a key factor in behavioral engagement, which can have potent effects on teacher outcomes such as career longevity. This content seems especially critical for teachers to know. Although many teachers might easily buy into the idea that fostering good relationships should be part of their role, some may require more convincing. Illustrating how positive teacher–student relationships might benefit teachers' own outcomes might be compelling for those educators who remain skeptical.

Continuing the theme of teacher–student relationships potentially having broad ripple effects, Hamm and Hoffman (this volume) describe the intriguing potential for downstream effects on students' peer relationships. These effects may occur through the "invisible hand" of the teacher setting up norms, orchestrating groups strategically, or modeling behavior and discourse patterns for students. In this way, teachers can have a powerful indirect impact on students by way of students' relationships with each other. In addition, teachers may explicitly address social dynamics between students in their classrooms. Particularly for issues of inclusion, bullying, and social status, teachers may wish to tackle these issues head on. Presumably direct and indirect pathways might be used to effectively address classroom challenges. For teachers determining how to prioritize teacher–student relationships, weighing the potential

consequences for students' peer relationships and the broader classroom climate is an especially important consideration.

Meyer (this volume) raises the important issue of the interplay between teacher–student relationships and students' ability to regulate their emotions. These associations reinforce the breadth of the network of student outcomes that teacher–student relationships are a part of, but they also begin to highlight an important factor for interventions to improve these social bonds. Highlighting teachers' powerful socializing influence on students, Meyer differentiates the teachers' relationships with individual students from teachers' broader whole-class relationships, the latter particularly impacting the classroom climate. Her distinction is particularly useful for teachers as they think about how to model emotional reactions, facilitate emotion regulation, and directly teach strategies for how to manage emotions (one's own and those of others). However, her chapter also implies that there might be two, potentially quite distinct, types of interventions: those aimed at improving relationships with an individual student and those aimed at improving relationships with a whole class.

Fox and Dinsmore (this volume) focus less explicitly on teacher–student relationships. However, their review of teachers' influence on the development of students' interest raises another important point with respect to strategies for improving teachers' connections with students. Building from Ford's idea that multiple motivation pathways might lead to attainment of the same achievement goal (Ford, 1992; Ford & Smith, 2007), Fox and Dinsmore note that teachers might cultivate interest through many pathways: by presenting an intriguing topic, providing motivating classroom activities, or engaging in captivating pedagogy. Teachers will find that some students may be predisposed to connect with the subject matter first and foremost; a connection with the teacher may be a secondary priority. For others, indifference toward the subject matter may be best overcome by a teacher who demonstrates a strong personal interest in the student. In sum, teachers not only need to view it as central to their role to cultivate teacher–student relationships, but they will also need a repertoire of several approaches to connect with their students. By allowing students multiple ways to foster interpersonal bonds, teachers will likely be more successful in connecting with a larger proportion of their students.

Armed with the knowledge from these handbook chapters and similarly valuable resources, teachers may bolster their appreciation of how crucial teacher–student relationships can be for supporting a host of student and teacher outcomes. They may also begin to better appreciate how central these relationships are within a vast network of other factors affecting students' (and teachers') well-being. Hopefully, the magnitude of the importance and the breadth of the effects of these relationships will help convince teachers that their interpersonal connections with students need to become an central force in their daily routines. Finally, particularly because the scholarly work on interventions to improve teacher–student relationships is still developing, teachers should experiment informally with their own attempts to improve these relationships. This knowledge base can provide guidance for teachers to begin developing and assessing strategies to improve the nature of their social interactions and relationships with their students.

Cultivating Teacher–Student Relationships: What Do Teachers Need to Do?

Typically, when teachers and students undergo the annual ritual through which they are assigned to work with one another, neither party has much choice in the matter. Therefore, cultivating productive relationships between each teacher and each

of several dozen students is no small feat. Furthermore, teachers and students must develop a working relationship that generates not just learning but also caring, support, and liking. As highlighted in the previous section, researchers have made significant progress in understanding teacher–student relationships through a solid base of correlational and longitudinal studies. The next logical phase of work is to conduct experiments to improve these relationships and gauge what the downstream benefits might be. Strategic collaborations with practitioners may help scholars determine the pathways and approaches that can help foster positive, productive relationships under these unusual conditions.

Recent studies to improve teacher–student relationships have established different pathways through which interventions might be delivered. In other words, teachers might learn how to improve their relationships with students through pathways such as teacher professional development (Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Mikami, & Lun, 2011; Driscoll, Wang, Mashburn, & Pianta, 2011; Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, & Pianta, 2014; Lyon et al., 2009; Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, & Justice, 2008; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014) and guided reflection (Spilt, Koomen, Thijs, & van der Leij, 2012). For example, a study that examined the effects of a professional development coaching program that focused on improving the quality of teacher–student interactions found that teacher–student relationships appeared to mediate the effects of the coaching intervention on student achievement (Allen et al., 2011). The program targeted teachers' daily interactions with students to enhance student motivation and achievement. Notably, the intervention improved student achievement regardless of the content area of instruction.

Another intervention used guided reflection as a route to improve teacher–student relationships. A relationship-focused, reflection-based intervention for teachers was designed to change teachers' beliefs and orientations about their teacher–student relationships (Spilt et al., 2012). The intervention aimed to help teachers build better relationships with disruptive children by targeting teachers' mental representations of relationships with specific children through narration and reflection, with a focus on the emotions teachers feel while working with a particular child. The program increased the closeness of the teacher–student relationships for a subset of the dyads that experienced the intervention.

Given these promising illustrations of how to deliver teacher–student relationship interventions, it seems that if the right interventions can be developed, they can be placed in teachers' hands. Thus, the field needs to identify which psychological levers to press—that is, which mechanisms to focus on—to improve teacher–student relationships. A host of new studies—particularly field experiments—are testing potential levers such as perceived similarities between teachers and students, social perspective taking, and self-regulation as ways to improve teachers' interpersonal connections with students. For example, Gehlbach et al. (in press) developed an intervention that capitalized on the extensive social-psychological literature showing that similarity between people fosters more positive relationships. They administered a "get-to-know-you" survey to both teachers and students and provided those in the treatment groups with feedback on what they had in common. Learning about similarities and common interests improved relationships between teachers and students (particularly from the teachers' perspectives) and academic performance for students. Congruent with Wubbels et al.'s (this volume) idea of relationships being disproportionately important for some students, exploratory analyses suggested that these effects were largest for African American and Latino students.

Another promising approach to designing interventions utilizes social perspective taking—the capacity for students and teachers to discern each other's thoughts, feelings, and motivations, as well as how they perceive the situation (Gehlbach, Brinkworth, & Wang, 2012). Theoretically, teachers who more frequently and more accurately gauge how students are feeling, when students are struggling with content, when their motivation is flagging, etc., are likely to be more responsive to students' needs (Ickes, 1997). Improved teacher–student relationships and student learning seem to be likely consequences. Parallel benefits should accrue for students who are more responsive to their teachers' moods and motivations. Congruent with this theory, Gehlbach, Brinkworth, and Harris (2012) found that improvements in social perspective taking accuracy over the course of a school year predicted improvements in teacher–student relationships.

Other research highlights self-regulation as an additional, promising lever that may improve teacher–student relationships (Eisenhower, Baker, & Blacher, 2007; Martin, Marsh, McInerney, Green, & Dowson, 2007). In general, teachers likely find it easier to cultivate good relationships with students who are better able to regulate their behavior (Meyer, this volume). An intervention study found that teachers who are trained to take a proactive approach to classroom management and help their students develop self-regulatory skills may be more likely to develop positive teacher–student relationships (see Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007). Presumably the reverse may hold true as well—interventions that target teacher self-regulatory skills, such as mindfulness, might similarly improve teacher–student relationships (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

The field seems well positioned to benefit from these types of experimental studies that evaluate which levers might improve teacher–student relationships. However, for any of these interventions to work, teachers must view their relationships with students as central to their practice. The best, most potent theoretically supported interventions can be thwarted if teachers do not buy in to the importance of these relationships. Furthermore, successful interventions will require balanced researcher-practitioner collaborations. Researchers can lend expertise on the nuances of levers, such as similarity, social perspective taking, and self-regulation. Meanwhile teachers can contribute a richer understanding of the constraints and affordances of their classroom settings, as well as realistic appraisals of what is possible in practice. Teachers with a better understanding of teacher–student relationships, as proposed in the previous section, will make for exceptionally strong partners. Naturally, teachers regularly design and implement their own interventions. In these cases, researchers who can provide teachers with user-friendly measurement approaches that allow for efficient, accurate assessment of teacher-developed strategies will be similarly valuable collaborators.

Assessing Teacher–Student Relationships: How Can Teachers Measure Their Progress?

Once teachers understand the theory and supporting evidence behind teacher–student relationships and have tangible strategies for improving their relationships with their students, they need tools to assess their progress. To grasp the measurement complexities in this domain, imagine that a group of teachers uses a self-regulation intervention with their students and seeks to assess how the strategy affects their teacher–student relationships. The literature suggests that improved student self-regulation should affect teacher expectations and support of students (Pianta, 1999), but not necessarily other facets such as teacher care and students' sense of belonging. These teachers could gauge the efficacy of their intervention by measuring

those discrete subcomponents that are hypothesized to matter (e.g., expectations and support). However, this approach might miss important indirect effects of improved self-regulation on aspects of the relationship such as feelings of care and belonging. Therefore, one approach to assessing the intervention's impact is to measure a comprehensive array of subcomponents. On the other hand, assessing so many constructs may be impractical. In this case, a holistic measure that efficiently documents the changes in overall teacher–student relationships may be more appropriate.

In sum, measuring teacher–student relationships is not a straightforward task. Researchers must address three main challenges. First, scholars conceptualize teacher–student relationships in a wide variety of ways. Should we think of relationships fundamentally as care (Wentzel, 1997), expectations (Wentzel, 2002), or support (Goodenow, 1993)? Are they grounded in interactions (Pianta, 1999) or rooted in teachers' and students' perceptions of those interactions? Or are they a holistic combination of all these things? To ascertain whether interventions work, evaluators need to know whether specific facets of teacher–student relationships or the overall relationship is likely to improve. To date, most researchers have focused more on subcomponents of teacher–student relationships as the unit of analysis. But presumably, a balance between discrete and holistic approaches will be most effective.

A second challenge is that teacher–student relationships are two-way streets; teachers and students construct these relationships together, yet their perceptions of these relationships are largely independent of one another. Simply because a student reports liking a teacher, this does not necessitate that those feelings are reciprocated. Thus, measuring only one perception of the relationship omits crucial information. Most past scholarship acknowledges that these relationships are two-way streets theoretically (e.g., Roorda et al., 2011). However, when it comes time to measure teacher–student relationships few studies account for both perspectives. Incorporating both teachers' and students' perceptions into measurement strategies will provide a more complete picture of teacher–student relationships and may sharpen our understanding of how each party's views are associated with student outcomes.

A third challenge is that researchers and teachers want to know how effective an intervention is at improving teacher–student relationships, but there are inherent tensions between academic pursuits and practical constraints. Researchers' interests in finding out *how* the intervention works (by administering a long battery of scales to students and teachers) may conflict with teachers' pressing need to know *whether* the intervention works (which might necessitate only a brief holistic measure that takes little instructional time). Both sides will likely need to compromise frequently around these challenging assessment issues.

As teachers come to prioritize teacher–student relationships as a fundamental component of their practice, assessing the efficacy of pedagogical approaches to improve these relationships should also increase in importance. To evaluate whether these interventions work, researcher–teacher partnerships will need to thoughtfully consider whether to measure these relationships as discrete versus holistic; if they need to include one or both perspectives; and how to balance researchers' needs for comprehensiveness, depth, and detail with teachers' time constraints.

CONCLUSION

Scholars researching teacher–student relationships have contributed a wealth of knowledge about how critical these relationships are to student outcomes. The chapters in

this handbook section resoundingly answer the question of *why* teachers should cultivate teacher–student relationships: teachers can have a powerful socializing influence, downstream student outcomes will improve, teacher outcomes may improve, at-risk students may be more resilient, and so on. As this research moves forward, we need to learn *how* teachers can improve teacher–student relationships in their classrooms.

To advance research on how to cultivate teacher–student relationships, teachers must view these relationships as an integral part of their role as educators. Little is known about how teachers construct and prioritize their roles in the classroom. Thus, studies identifying how teachers conceptualize and weigh the importance of teacher–student relationships within their broader roles as educators will be especially illuminating. Innovative researcher–teacher collaborations can move the field forward by providing teachers with practical information, identifying promising levers to improve teacher–student relationships, and developing precise, efficient assessments to capture teacher and student perceptions of these relationships.

By embracing research focused on improving teacher–student relationships, researchers have the potential to change teachers' conceptions of their primary roles in the classroom: Teachers may ultimately perceive the role of building relationships with students as comparably important to delivering content knowledge. This vision will be realized when the development of strong teacher–student relationships is perceived not only as an additional way to promote student learning, but as a cornerstone of what it means to be a teacher.

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