The importance of teacher–student relationships, as explored through the lens of the NSW Quality Teaching Model

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This paper aims to address the importance of supportive teacher–student interactions within the learning environment. This will be explored through the three elements of the NSW Quality Teaching Model; Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment and Significance. The paper will further observe the influences of gender on the teacher–student relationship, as well as the impact that this relationship has on student academic outcomes and behaviour. Teacher–student relationships have been found to have immeasurable effects on students' learning and their schooling experience. This paper examines the ways in which educators should plan to improve their interactions with students, in order to allow for quality learning.

Keywords: teacher–student relationship; quality teaching; gender; academic outcomes; student behaviour

The Teacher–Student Relationship

The teacher–student relationship is one of the most powerful elements within the learning environment. A major factor affecting students' development, school engagement and academic motivation, teacher–student relationships form the basis of the social context in which learning takes place (Hughes & Chen, 2011; Roorda *et al.*, 2011; Spilt, Koomen & Thijs, 2011). Teacher–student interactions are not only influenced by a number of aspects including gender, but in turn also influence a student's academic outcomes and behaviour. Supportive and positive relationships between teachers and students ultimately promote a "sense of school belonging" and encourage students to "participate cooperatively in classroom activities" (Hughes & Chen, 2011, p.278).

NSW Quality Teaching Model

The NSW Quality Teaching model has been developed as a self-reflection tool to be used by teachers in order to understand, analyse and focus their own teaching practices for improved student learning. Comprised of three 'dimensions' of pedagogy, the NSW Quality Teaching model, provides a "consistent pedagogical framework within which all NSW teachers and schools can operate" (NSW DET, 2003, p.5). The three dimensions of Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment and Significance are observable in classrooms across all stages of schooling. These three dimensions are central factors, not only impacting on the

learning taking place in the classroom but also the quality of teacher–student interactions within the learning environment. There are a number of issues impacting each of the dimensions that have been chosen as exemplars for their role in the teacher–student relationship: gender, academic outcomes and student behaviour. Hammond identifies quality teaching as "the major factor in students' educational success" (2008, p.128).

Intellectual Quality

Intellectual quality can be identified as pedagogy that focuses on producing a deep and conceptual understanding of important skills, ideas and areas of study (NSW DET, 2003). Classrooms high in intellectual quality encourage all students to engage in challenging work that provides opportunities for the development of higher-order thinking and substantive communication, as students work to actively construct knowledge.

Gender

In terms of gender, Verenikina, Vialle and Lysaght have identified differences between the sexes in a number of areas, including "personality, physical, occupational and cognitive" (2011, p.234). There are significant variations in the learning styles of girls and boys, with more differences between a same-age girl and same-age boy than for example, the age differences between a seven-year-old girl and nine-year-old girl (NASSPE, 2011). Girls are more likely to cooperate and work well in small group settings in which they can discuss a problem or task ideas, compared to boys who prefer to work alone, and will often "argue over who will lead when working in a group" (EduGuide, 2010).

From an early age, girls are more compliant than boys, when interacting not just with peers but also their teachers (Berk, 2006). When students engage in interactions with their teachers, their learning is assisted, as students must demonstrate a meaningful and profound understanding of central ideas in order to communicate these understandings effectively (Hinde-McLeod & Reynolds, 2007). Girls and boys should both be encouraged to engage in substantive conversations focused on their learning experiences in order to "discover new ways of knowing rather than transmit traditional knowledge" (Hinde-McLeod & Reynolds, 2007, p.51).

Academic Outcomes

"High quality student outcomes result if learning is focused on intellectual work that is challenging, centred on significant concepts and ideas, and requires substantial cognitive and academic engagement with deep knowledge" (NSW DET, 2003, p.10). Students are likely to be more focused on their work and perform better when classroom tasks are both challenging and engaging (Churchill *et al.*, 2011). Willms, Friesen and Milton (2009) propose that effective teaching leading to greater academic outcomes amongst students is observable through learning tasks that require and instill deep thinking, immerse the student in disciplinary inquiry, are connected to the world outside the classroom, have intellectual rigour and involve substantive conversation.

Effective teachers, fostering academic achievement in students, are aware that knowledge is interrelated and, in turn, is best developed through experiences and the understandings of relationships between concepts, rather than through disconnected elements (Willms, Friesen & Milton, 2009). This idea stresses the crucial role played by substantive communication amongst students and their teachers in order to develop deep understandings of central concepts. Wells (1999) describes this dialogic process as one that not only contributes to meaning-making amongst others, but a process that extends own understanding. Teachers need to assist their students to "explore ideas both individually and collectively" (Churchill *et al*., 2011, p.264).

Student Behaviour

The behaviour that students exhibit within the learning environment is largely determined by their attitude towards the skills required of them, and their willingness and ability to engage in challenging tasks. Newmann, Marks and Gamoran propose that students need to be given opportunities to "use their minds well", which, in turn, "requires standards for intellectual quality" (1996, p.281). One of the major causes of students' misbehaviour in class is the result of boredom with routine activities (Prensky, 2005), such as those that involve worksheets where students are not given opportunities to develop deep knowledge or understanding of central concepts. In these situations, students will often distract other students, or roam the classroom in attempt to find a more interesting alternative. On the contrary, however, Daniels identifies that misbehaviour could result from the "student's inability to understand the concepts being taught" (1998, p.26).

It is crucial that teachers know their students, so that the planning of challenging activities is appropriate for the variety of different abilities within the learning environment (Churchill *et al*., 2011). When teachers pursue positive relationships with students and tailor class work that enables students to construct their own meaning, students are more likely to behave and participate effectively in learning tasks.

Quality Learning Environment

A quality learning environment is achieved when the classroom or other learning environment displays "high levels of support for learning" (NSW DET, 2003, p.12). Dempsey and Arthur-Kelly refer to the classroom environment as the "range of conditions in the learning setting that interact to influence the learning outcomes from that setting" (2007, p.110). In such environments, positive relationships are formed between teachers and students as they work cooperatively in an encouraging atmosphere.

Gender

Within the classroom context, gender plays a significant role, as teachers will often "respond differently to different students" (Schlechty & Atwood, 1977, p.286). Teachers often also act in ways that sustain the gender roles taught at home. Boys are often praised for their knowledge for example, and girls for their obedience. More of the teacher's time in the classroom is also spent interacting with boys than girls, with teachers likely to interrupt girls more than boys during conversations (Berk, 2006).

Verenikina, Vialle and Lysaght (2011) support that this can impact on girls' development in certain subject areas, as well as the development of their self-esteem.

Although girls seem to be more susceptible to teacher expectations compared to their male counterparts, girls perform better in classroom environments in which they have private and personal contact with the teacher (McCormick & Pressley, 1997). It is therefore important that teachers and students "form a community of learners" (Verenikina, Vialle & Lysaght, 2011, p.226), in which teachers understand individual student's needs and in turn, both boys and girls are given the support and assistance they require.

Academic Outcomes

Teacher's classroom practices and their interactions with their students are seen to have the greatest effect on student learning outcomes (Hayes *et al.*, 2006). Connor *et al.* (2005), examine research that indicates that teachers' regard for their students, their responsiveness to student questions and interests, the emotional climate of the classroom and their expectations, have all been related to student achievement. These expectations developed by teachers potentially influence their approach to particular students, which can ultimately affect the performance of those students (Verenikina, Vialle & Lysaght, 2011). Another important aspect affecting students' academic outcomes in the learning environment is the development of students' self-regulatory skills, such as autonomy and initiative (Ladwig, 2005). Self-regulation is important for students to develop, however, is not easily acquired by students on their own (Verenikina, Vialle & Lysaght, 2011).

The central role of the teacher involves modelling self-regulatory skills "as a means of promoting students' academic achievement and associated self-efficacy beliefs" (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997, p.195). The learning environment as a result needs to encourage social networks and teacher–student interactions where students are placed at the centre of learning and are encouraged and challenged to make sense of information for themselves (Churchill *et al.*, 2011).

Student Behaviour

McCormick and Pressley (1997) define an orderly classroom as one in which students know how they are expected to behave, going on to outline the importance of establishing classroom rules and procedures. However, without reminders or reprimands "not all students consistently show the kind of behaviour that enables a classroom to operate in an open, democratic manner" (McGee & Fraser, 2008, p.101). Behaviour and engagement however are directly related, and therefore the challenge for teachers is to engage their students in learning (Churchill *et al.*, 2011).

When teachers are able to form positive student relationships and engage their students, learning becomes an enjoyable experience – taking place in a balanced classroom atmosphere (Krause, Bochner & Duchesne, 2006). When students are given a chance to participate in their learning in learning-friendly environments, they are likely to be more motivated and to feel positive towards their schoolwork, also working more cooperatively in teams (UNESCO, 2004). If teachers make their classroom a "good place for students to be, then they will want to be there, and will generally be both on task and well behaved" (Churchill *et al.*, 2011, p.278).

Significance

Significance refers to pedagogy that helps students see connections between their learning and prior knowledge, assisting students in understanding that their learning matters. Learning is therefore made meaningful as students can see the importance of their work in contexts beyond the classroom, and the ways in which their learning and knowledge can be applied (NSW DET, 2003).

Gender

Gender stereotyping within the learning environment has a considerable impact on the significance students place on certain subjects as well as their motivation to complete tasks. "Sex differences in achievement motivation are linked to the type of task. Boys perceive themselves as more competent and have higher expectancies of success in 'masculine' achievement areas" (Berk, 2006, p.544), which is likely to result in boys placing more significance on sport, mathematics and science. Maths, for example is often viewed as a 'masculine' subject, with many parents thinking that boys are better at it (Verenikina, Vialle & Lysaght, 2011).

Teachers likewise may unintentionally place significance on boys' capabilities in certain subject areas such as mathematics. This attitude "encourages girls to view themselves as having to work harder at math to do well, to blame their errors on lack of ability, and to regard math as less useful for their future lives. These beliefs, in turn, reduce girls' interest in math and their willingness to consider math or science-related careers" later on (Berk, 2006, p.547). Teachers should ensure that all students are encouraged to participate in a range of subjects, and that gender stereotyping in relation to subject areas is reduced.

Academic Outcomes

In order to contextualise new learning and ensure that work is meaningful for students, teachers need to access students' background knowledge and understandings. "Teachers must use their understanding of students' backgrounds to plan learning experiences that build on existing knowledge … to ensure that new learning is significant to their lives" (Hinde-McLeod & Reynolds, 2007, p.63). The separate discipline areas or 'key learning areas' in the primary years, do not support a meaningful and real-world representation of knowledge. However in the upper-primary classroom, where the focus is learner-centred and employs an integrated curriculum, students tend to be engaged in higher-quality pedagogy (Churchill *et al*., 2011).

Teachers need to ensure that classroom tasks are significant to students as this has implications for the development of students' academic abilities. As students realise that their work is meaningful and relevant to their own lives, this provokes interest and greater engagement with the tasks at hand, and a willingness to perform to their fullest potential. The forming of relationships between teachers and students provides teachers with opportunities to understand and connect with students' interests, preferences, opinions, cultures and emotions, and plan for this in their teaching (Churchill *et al*., 2011).

Student Behaviour

The behaviour displayed by students within the learning environment is influenced by many variables including the 'perceived value' of their work. The perceived importance of learning or the way in which students will later make use of what they learn, ultimately has an effect on student behaviour. Learners tend to show little interest in activities they do not value, as the activities may not build on their background knowledge, or may fail to demonstrate links with other key learning areas (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). This may in turn contribute to the development of "non-disruptive off task behaviour" (Porter, 2007, p.39) or 'disruptive behaviour' within the classroom setting, in turn impacting on both the class teacher as well as other students.

When students however "hold positive outcome expectations, and value what they are learning, self-efficacy is assumed to exert an important effect on the instigation, direction, and persistence of achievement behaviour" (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997, p.198). Supportive relationships with their teachers, also encourage students to try harder and persevere when presented with challenges (Hughes & Chen, 2011). It is important that teachers assist students in developing these positive outcome expectations, encouraging learners to realise that their work is meaningful, valuable and relevant to their lives.

Summary

The NSW Quality Teaching Model provides a model of pedagogy available for use by teachers as a framework for enhanced student learning. Intellectual Quality, Quality Learning Environment and Significance are the three dimensions that "form the basis of the model" (NSW DET, 2003, p.5). When represented diagrammatically, Intellectual Quality is the central dimension, however, all three dimensions are critical in terms of improving student learning. It is essential to realise that each of the dimensions and their elements are interrelated, rather than being independent units. When considering what constitutes a Quality Learning Environment, for example, such an environment may be identified as high in Intellectual Quality, providing students with opportunities for higher-order thinking and substantive communication. These quality learning environments also encourage students to see the significance of their work in contexts beyond the classroom. It is difficult to isolate one dimension from the other in the learning experience (Hinde-McLeod & Reynolds, 2007).

The interrelationship between these three dimensions is reflective of the way in which the chosen exemplars are also related which, in turn, mirrors the relationships between the various elements. Within the learning setting, gender plays a significant role, impacting on both the students' behaviour and academic outcomes. For example, if students, are continuously engaging in conversation with their teachers and seek attention and support when required, it is likely that their behaviour will change. Students will feel more positive and confident toward classroom learning tasks, which will be reflected in their academic achievements. It is essential, therefore, that teachers actively plan to provide students with these opportunities in order to engage in quality interactions. Similarly, in terms of the Quality Teaching Model, the interconnectedness between the elements is evident in each of the dimensions. Intellectual Quality, for example, focuses on producing a deep understanding of

significant ideas. This ultimately requires students to engage in higher-order thinking, which may involve substantive communication with peers and the development of appropriate metalanguage.

Conclusion

Within the learning environment, importance needs to be placed on the development of positive teacher–student relationships, as these relationships have immeasurable effects on students' academic outcomes and behaviour. It is critical, however, that both boys and girls receive the support and assistance they need, and teachers endeavour to reduce the gender stereotyping that students may hold from the home environment. Teachers also need to ensure time is taken to understand their students' individual needs. In doing so, activities can be designed to provide opportunities for students to develop deep knowledge and understandings as well as self-regulatory skills. These tasks, however, need to be appropriate to individual students' capabilities, so that students are able to participate in tasks that are significant in their own lives. A positive relationship between teachers and students is the fundamental aspect of quality teaching and student learning.

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