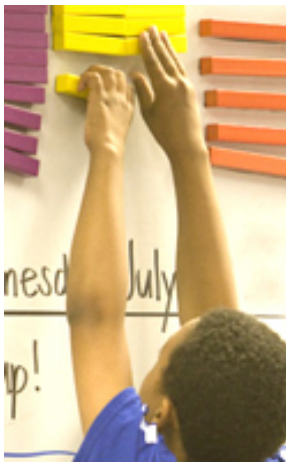




working papers



Relationships & Learning: Keys
to Academic Success

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Relationships & Learning: Keys to Academic Success

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Abstract:

A critical factor in the teaching and learning process is the incorporation of meaningful and sustained relationships between students and teachers. However, many practitioners struggle to build such bonds due to a myriad of factors. High leverage practices are manifested through the incorporation of trauma informed, caring relationships to inform pedagogy. The salience of trauma informed practice could be one of the reasons that practitioners are able to establish such bonds with students. This work addresses trauma, and the need to avoid the pathologizing of children experiencing adverse situations. Moreover, the importance of relationships as a way to disrupt trauma and improve learning will be discussed. Finally, recommendations for cultivating better student-teacher relationships are offered as a way to support students.

Amidst the growing debates about school reform there has also been much discourse about how to best enhance learning for all children, but in particular for those most marginalized populations. In particular, for students who come from a host of disadvantaged backgrounds this discourse has been most salient. This discourse has been most salient, in particular, for students who come from a host of disadvantaged backgrounds (Felitti, Anda, Nordenberg, Williamson, Spitz, Edwards & Marks, 1998). More pointedly, scholars have discussed the manner in which race and class create a burgeoning number of students who find themselves on the educational fringes (Darling Hammond, 2010; Howard, 2010; Milner, 2015). While issues tied to race, culture, language, and immigration status have all been documented, the scope of this work tied to the salience of relationships in learning. Moreover, this work unpacks how high leverage practices can be realized through the incorporation of better teacher-student relationships. The focus on relationships in teaching and learning is critical given the nature in which an emerging body of scholarship is dedicated to the importance of social emotional learning. Most germane to this work has been the idea that for many students learning occurs within a context of caring, sustained, and authentic relationships (Sparks, 2016).

Noted child psychiatrist James Comer (1980, 1983) stated many years ago “no significant learning can occur without a significant relationship” (p. 15). The focus on relationships has been critical for some time, but has become more central given the increasing awareness of how trauma continues to affect large numbers of students in schools (Craig, 2016). An issue tied to poverty, displacement, stress, and overall social emotional learning become a more focal part of what influences student learning, the need to examine trauma has become front in center in many ways. In short, social relationships and connectedness matter in meaningful ways that perhaps are not understood by many educators and can disrupt the potential for healthy teacher-student relationships (Birch & Ladd, 1997). To this end, this paper will have three foci; 1) address the importance of trauma in many of today’s students, 2) identify teacher-student relationships as a much needed intervention to aiding students’ social emotional development and academic success, and 3) identify strategies that can be used in developing relationships with students within a culturally supportive framework.

TRAUMA MATTERS

The increasing presence of poverty, displacement, and issues tied to trauma have become more commonplace in many schools across the U.S. The American Psychiatric Association defines trauma as heightened stress that students deal with from abnormal circumstances. Complex trauma, or layered types of disadvantages, which afflicts many young people, can have devastating emotional, behavioral and social and cognitive effects, and ultimately influence learning. The stressors of dealing with hunger, instability in living arrangements, general neglect, abuse or fear and overall anxiety can have debilitating effects on young people. And, we know that many children attempt to be whole in schools while dealing with some of the most challenging home, life and neighborhood circumstances. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network reports that children with complex trauma can have overactive alarm systems, wherein other people’s behaviors can easily trigger trauma. Some children may misinterpret social cues and may not be able to appraise danger or safety. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network defines complex trauma as “both children’s exposure to multiple traumatic events, often of an invasive, interpersonal nature, and the wide-ranging, long-term impact of this exposure.”

Many children with complex trauma histories suffer a variety of traumatic events, such as physical and sexual abuse, witnessing domestic and community violence, separation from family members, and re-victimization by others. Complex trauma can have devastating effects on a child’s physiology, emotions, ability to think, learn, and concentrate, impulse control, self-image, and relationships with others. Across the life span, complex trauma is linked to a wide range of problems, including addiction, chronic physical conditions, depression and anxiety, self-harming behaviors, and other psychiatric disorders.

The National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention (2012) reported that approximately 26% of children witness or experience a traumatic event by the age of four. A 2011/2012 National Survey of Children’s Health reported almost 50% of children in the

United States have experienced at least one or more types of trauma. And in an even more staggering report, last year the Los Angeles Times reported that 98% of sixth graders surveyed in the Los Angeles Unified School District experienced one or more traumatic events in the past year. Needless to say, the importance of understanding and responding to trauma is beyond important, as trauma in some schools and communities would almost seem to rise to the level of being an epidemic.

Understanding the depths of traumatic experiences requires educators to take a thoughtful and empathetic response to behaviors that are manifested in the classroom by students. Children with a complex or prolonged trauma history may be easily triggered or “set off” and are more likely to react very intensely and at time inexplicably. Some children may struggle with self-regulation (i.e., knowing how to calm down) and may lack impulse control or the ability to think through consequences before acting. As a result, complexly traumatized children may behave in ways that appear unpredictable, oppositional, volatile, and extreme. Upon seeing such behaviors, it is imperative for educators to understand the root causes of this behavior and not to demonize children based on these actions. Childhood trauma cuts across all socio-economic, racial, and gender classifications, and should not be viewed in deficit terms, but looked at as authentic social-emotional challenges (often beyond the control of the child) that children encounter which has a significant influence on learning and academic outcomes.

BEING CAUTIOUS IN SEEING TRAUMA

In discussing the traumatic experiences that many youth face, there needs to be extreme caution and sensitivity in seeing and understanding trauma and subsequent behaviors. It is vital for educators that when educators see the manifestations of trauma that they do not arrive at the conclusion that youth experiencing adversity should be seen, heard and treated in pathological, and deficit-laden ways. The same must be avoided in looking at students’ families and their communities. To be clear, many of the conditions and circumstances that contribute to trauma are a direct result of structural inequities, disinvestment in low-income communities, and a long history of exclusion that many community have faced, thus there must be a sense of compassion and empathy when assessing why trauma exists. To that end, one of the key recommendations that has been offered to educators to support students in trauma is to incorporate more relationship building in teacher-student interactions.

Frequently lost in the education reform debate is the importance of helping students feel a sense of connectedness to adults and peers in the learning process, as a response to trauma. Important to disrupting trauma is the salience of how human connection brings complex values to our lives: in short, relationships give us a sense of belonging in the group, a sense of identity in contrast to others in that group, an almost therapeutic-support system, and reason not to feel lonely, isolated or disconnected from social dynamics. In essence, students learn from others’ experiences and insight, and we learn together by pursuing new experiences alongside those we connect with, relate to, and in some cases, befriend. And on a basic level, therapy involves this principle as well. Across the lifespan, affiliative and attachment bonds have clear survival and reproductive advantages that may help explain why the motivation to form and maintain close social bonds is as potent as the drive to satisfy hunger or thirst (Lieberman, 2013). Just as hunger and thirst motivate the search for food and water, the pain of unmet social needs (i.e., felt social isolation) motivates a search for social reconnection. The desire for connection is so irrepressible that people imagine relationships with important social others, or indulge in “social snacks” (e.g., photos of loved ones) and surrogates (e.g., para-social attachments to television characters).

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHER–STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS TO LEARNING

Positive teacher-student relationships contribute to school adjustment and academic and social performance on a number of categories. Positive teacher-student relationships — evidenced by teachers’ reports of low conflict, a high degree of closeness and support, and little dependency — have been shown to support students’ adjustment to school, contribute to their social skills, promote academic performance and foster students’ resiliency in academic performance (Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Curby; Ewing & Taylor,

2009; Rudasill, & Reio 2006). High leverage teaching practices, which are germane to academic success and social/emotional well being, are rudimentary in advancing skill in teaching. Teachers who experience close relationships with students reported that their students were less likely to avoid school, appeared more self-directed, more cooperative and more engaged in learning (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004). Teachers who use more learner-centered practices (i.e., practices that show sensitivity to individual differences among students, include students in the decision-making, and acknowledge students' developmental, personal and relational needs) produced greater motivation in their students than those who used fewer of such practices (Daniels & Perry, 2003).

Within the context of teaching and learning, positive teacher-student relationships are associated with increasing student's feeling of safety at school (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Baker, 2006; Berry & Connor, 2009), increasing academic test scores (Curby, et al, 2009; Comer, 1980), increasing student understanding, reducing absenteeism (Basch, 2010), decreasing dropout rate and decreasing student-to-student conflict (Bernard, 2006; Brown et al, 2010). It is important to note that it is not only academic outcomes that improve as a result of healthy teacher-student relationships, but it is also students' overall social and emotional well being that can improve as a result of better teacher-student relationships. Positive family-school relationships have been shown to be associated with improving the development of student's social skills, improving the development of student's mathematics skills, and decreasing student behavior issues (Powell et al, 2010).

Tied to the importance of relationships has been the importance of care. Pena and Amrein (1999) explained that (a) adding an ethic of care to teaching invited all students to be involved as a group and share their product, (b) adding the ethic of care to teaching included cooperation and response, (c) the ethic of care enhanced relationships between teachers and students, and (d) "the characteristics of caring related to its adaptability and capacity to color institutional policies, practices, and structures with human attributes" (p. 176). Teven and McCroskey (1997) reported that teacher caring impacted students' affective and cognitive learning and students' evaluation of their teachers. In terms of behavior, teachers who demonstrated more caring behaviors had students who were better behaved. When examining the influence of teacher caring behaviors on high school students' behaviors and grades, Miller (2008) found that students who had lower perceptions of teacher caring behaviors earned lower academic grades. Part of what needs to be further examined in the schooling context is the salience of *culturally mediated care* that takes into account students' social-emotional learning and the links to academic outcomes. However, new areas require our attention, much needed exploration, and the investigation cultural context in conveying care to diverse student populations.

Freedom and enjoyment in learning and growing is what encourages and can lead to a place of excitement for many students. For many students, this excitement typically takes place within a context of a safe, nurturing, and caring community in which all members are socially connected in a manner that builds on students' ways of knowing, thinking, communicating, and sharing. This approach to relational learning builds upon one's interest in the subject, and the classroom environment in general. Education reformer Dewey (1916) wrote that "Interest is taken to mean merely the effect of an object upon personal advantage or disadvantage, success or failure. Educationally, it then follows that to attach importance to interest means to attach some feature of seductiveness to material" (p. 126). The classroom should never be a boring, culturally foreign and disconnected place for students, but a place where pedagogical practices can intervene and change classroom atmosphere. Dewey continued: "One who recognizes the importance of interest will not assume that all minds work in the same way because they have the same teacher and textbook. Attitudes and methods of approach and response vary with specific materials" (130).

Teaching through relationships is more than offering simply phrases and slogans about affective feelings about students. Ultimately, caring encompasses the complex social environment in which students and teachers converse, share experiences, build community, and participate in activities that, together make for engaged learning. Here, culture matters, context is important and language is crucial. Such an approach to learning embeds formal knowledge in the world in which it actually belongs and from which it is born: that of the complex, historical, and

social world of being human. When done well, culturally embedded caring recognizes the human stories, complexities, and challenges of the learners themselves (they are not blank slates), as well as that of the teacher. It is an approach that embraces complex and multiple identities, biographies, and the stories we bring that serve to humanize the subjects we teach. Teaching through relationships passes the student through that transcendent threshold when formal knowledge leads to hidden knowledge, while tapping into cultural knowledge.

What is hidden is the process of discovery itself and the connections between thought, everyday life, and other seemingly unrelated ideas and disciplines. When students are able to make this connection *via* "teaching through relationships," they begin to see themselves as co-learners along with their teachers, as well as with the greatest minds in history. Lev Vygotsky, (1934) the child psychologist, asserted that learning is relational, and that language/conversation is central to the relational aspects of learning. Another reason that Vygotsky's work is relevant when it comes to relationships and learning is his emphasis on the role of community and how that facilitates the learning process. A number of contemporary scholars have built on and expanded Vygotsky's idea that consciousness, connectedness, culture and learning itself arise through relationship. Recently, scholars and practitioners have understood that the social framework of teaching is fundamental to how we learn and to development and maintenance of human culture in general scholars have further advocated for scholars and practitioners understood that the social framework of teaching is fundamental to how we learn and to the development of human culture in general (Nasir, et al, 2009; Lee, 2007, Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff, 2003).

CULTURALLY AND PEDAGOGY AS RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

In the early 1990's, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) built on the work of multicultural scholars by suggesting that the complexity of culture was such that it required educational theorists and practitioners to think about an approach to education. Ladson-Billings' (1994) call suggested that the marriage of culture and pedagogy would be a more suitable means to provide students of color equitable opportunities for success in the classroom. She referred to culturally relevant pedagogy as: "a pedagogy of opposition not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment" (p.51). According to Ladson-Billings, culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (p.160).

Equally important to care and authentic relationships is the importance of culture. A number of scholars have called for building relationships within a context of care and culture (Emdin, 2010; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Geneva Gay (2010) states that culturally responsive teaching is important because "The validation, information, and pride it generates are both psychologically and intellectually liberating" (p. 35). She also describes culturally responsive teaching as having these characteristics:

- "It acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum.
- It builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities." (p.35)

Tapping into the sociocultural realities of students becomes an instructive approach to culture, care, and connection. To that end, Gay's work provides important approaches that can be used to cultivate relationships in diverse school settings. Understanding these aspects of culturally responsive teaching speak to the unique cultural attributes that are vital to rapport building.

Geneva Gay (2010), who was also instrumental in the development of the culture and pedagogy connection, stated that teaching is important because "the validation, information, and pride it generates are both psychologically and intellectually liberating" (p. 35). An examination of

the terms culturally and culturally relevant reveal little difference in scope, definition, aims, and purpose. Both recognize the salience of student culture, both contend that the affirmation of students' identities is important, and both advocate for student achievement to occur without compromising cultural integrity. Ladson Billings (1994) also stated that culturally relevant teaching is an approach that "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes" (pp. 16-17). She contended that there were additional elements of culturally relevant pedagogy that must be in place for the theory to be actualized:

- Student learning being able to be enhanced with pedagogical interaction with skilled teachers. This reference is not limited to standardized testing outcomes, but frames learning within a broader context
- Cultural competence, where "helping students to recognize and honor their own cultural beliefs and practices while acquiring access to the wider culture"
- Sociopolitical consciousness, where teachers help students to "recognize, understand and critique current social inequalities.

STRATEGIES FOR RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

"I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship" Brené Brown

An essential ingredient of relationship building is tied to fundamental links between teachers and students where there is authentic care for the social emotional and academic well-being conveyed to the student. These bonds are not forged immediately for some students, and in many cases they require persistent consistency, transparency, and honesty. Below are several steps that practitioners may consider in cultivating authentic teacher student-teacher relationships:

- **Getting to know students.** The foundation of relationship building is forged on knowing and understanding who students are holistically. Teachers can do this through conversations with students informally, though having students journal, or through listening to students as they discuss their likes, dislikes, home and family life, and goals and aspirations.
- **Sharing of self.** Many practitioners make the mistake of asking for students to provide insights into their lives, and to divulge key aspects of their realities, but fail to do the same in return. Authentic relationship building is based on reciprocity. Therefore, it is vital that educators share their personal stories. Talking about their childhood, their schooling experiences, tragedies, and triumphs, setbacks and successes can all be used to help humanize teachers. Many children are reluctant to form bonds with individuals that they do not know, nor trust, so sharing of one's personal life (within reason) matters.
- **Names, language and culture matters.** Critical to relationship building is the importance of acknowledging home life, culture, and circumstances. Hence, as mentioned in getting to know students, is the importance of how students are part of home and community contexts that have shaped their views of themselves and the world. Thus, practitioners can be helpful in doing small things such as knowing students by names. Kohli & Solórzano (2012) provide a powerful commentary on the importance of knowing and accurately pronouncing names. The same can be said for recognizing and respecting home language. Seeking to build on primary language is important; seeking to replace it is not.
- **Understanding Trauma.** As stated earlier, formulating healthy, authentic relationships with students often starts with knowing them. An important part of knowing students is understanding some of the day-to-day challenges students face and some of the adverse childhood effects that they may have, or may be currently experiencing. The effects of

trauma and adversity in children can have long lasting effects, and often the ability of adults to empathize with children can be invaluable in forming connections. The process of this bond forming comes through listening, suspending judgment, being straightforward and consistent with the students.

- **Racial Awareness.** Given the growing divide between the racial identities of today's teacher population and today's student population, an important aspect of relationship building for many students, particularly those from non-White backgrounds is having a healthy racial awareness. In essence, this means not taking a colorblind approach wherein students' racial identities are not acknowledged or seen. Racial awareness, which even some teachers of color may need to develop, means having a sociopolitical and historical awareness of the role that race and racism has played, and continues to play in our society. Racial awareness also mean being conscious of how racial discrimination can play out even in contemporary school structures, practices, and policies.

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