


1985

## Interpersonal Interactions in Student-Teacher Relationships: Types and Effect on Student Achievement

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INTERPERSONAL INTERACTIONS IN STUDENT-  
TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS: TYPES  
AND EFFECT ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT


by


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A thesis submitted to the Division of Curriculum  
and Instruction in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA  
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES

August, 1985

  
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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the types of interpersonal interactions, in student-teacher relationships, that have an effect on student achievement. These essential conditions of communication have been labeled: warmth, empathy, respect, genuineness, concreteness, self-disclosure, immediacy, and confrontation. Communication of these conditions, by teachers to students, shows a significant effect on student achievement when observed by classroom researchers. This investigation has also addressed the efficiency of training procedures used with groups of teachers who participated in the research studies, the results of which support the increasing awareness of human-relations development.

Dedication

To Mom and Milt, for without either, this would not have become a reality.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

#### Problem Statement

What types of interpersonal interactions, between student and teacher, have an effect on student achievement?

#### Rationale

The role of the teacher within the classroom appears to be the single most important factor in our educational setting. Although the majority of studies in the field of interaction analysis have focused upon the relationship of teaching techniques to academic achievement, there is an increasing interest in the interpersonal relationships between teacher and students (Robinson, Wilson, & Robinson, 1981). Consequently, teachers often have rather detailed knowledge of various teaching techniques, but limited awareness of the importance of the interpersonal process in teaching.

This limited awareness is unfortunate, because according to Thomas, Karmos, and Altekruise (1981) "Effective relationships between teachers and students are essential if students are to have more time to learn and teachers are to have more time to teach"

(p.67). Furthermore, Wagner (1983) states that, "A classroom climate is established through the working relations which exist between a teacher and pupils" (p.392).

Interpersonal interaction skills revolve around the ability of the teacher to provide certain core conditions which are essential in creating a positive educational setting. These conditions consist of warmth, empathy, respect, genuineness, concreteness, self-disclosure, immediacy, and confrontation.

In summary, Smith (1980) states that, "Focus upon the nature of teacher-pupil interaction and its relationship to pupil progress could give insight into the variables involved in correcting deficiencies in communication skills and other academic deficits" (p.53).

#### Purpose

The purpose of this research is to identify those essential ingredients in interpersonal interaction, between teacher and student, that have an effect on student achievement.

## Chapter Two

### Review of Related Literature

In recent years the importance of social influences on a child's total educational experience has been recognized. Educators have long since acknowledged that children in school are not empty bodies to be filled with an endless number of facts. If their educational experience is to be a valuable one, they must be regarded as individuals in their own right with their own opinions, interests, and feelings. These young people are capable of making choices and sharing in the process of decision making.

This interpersonal sharing of opinions, interests, and feelings between two or more persons, in which participants are actively involved as both senders and receivers, has been termed interpersonal communication. Mutual interpersonal interaction, between student and teacher, is essential in developing a working relationship within the classroom. Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify certain core conditions in the student-teacher relationship that have an effect on student achievement.

Research in the field of interaction analysis and its relationship to pupil progress has only been

under investigation since 1950. These studies have been termed process-product research. The process being student and teacher behaviors, while the product is the outcome of instruction. This argues Brophy (1979), is the starting point for improvement in the educational processes.

Having established the importance of human-relations development revolving around both student and teacher, it is important to examine the research concerning student-teacher relationships, continuing to interpersonal interaction skills, and concluding with a summary of pertinent findings of both.

#### Student-Teacher Relationships

The importance of the relationship between the teacher and the students they teach can be significant. Few individuals would argue that teachers do not have the potential to affect a student's academic, social, and emotional growth more than any other person outside the family unit (Robinson & Schumacher, 1978). These relationships can be improved or hampered, depending on the communication between the two. Poor interpersonal communication often results in poor relationships, thereby, creating problems that are difficult to solve (Thomas, Karmos, & Altekruise, 1981).



Gone are the days of absolutism, where the teacher acted as a machine dishing out the facts while the student silently absorbed them. Today's classroom is student-centered. The student is an active participant who shares in the responsibility of planning and implementing learning activities. The teacher's role is that of a facilitator of learning experiences. The teacher motivates and guides student activities rather than dictating them (Kolczynski, 1980).

The student-centered language arts classroom, as described by Hemphill (1981), focuses on the individual student. The teacher uses the student's own experiences and innate ability to communicate experiences to build skills of oracy and literacy. The skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking are taught in interrelated patterns. The effective teacher in this kind of classroom knows how to use the student's ability to express personal experiences as a basis for moving to more abstract skills, such as reading and writing. With this type of approach, the interaction between student and teacher helps to guide the learning to encompass student needs and interests (Clinkscale, 1979).

Teacher-student interaction must be based on firm foundations of mutual trust and understanding in order to be an effective mechanism for helping students. As defined by Teeter (1975), "Teacher trust involves confidence in students' ability, positive expectations for their progress, and a willingness to let students participate not only in setting goals important to their education, but also in determining approaches to those objectives" (p.29).

The importance of mutual trust, between student and teacher, is further supported by Clinkscale (1979). This mutual trust is a very important ingredient in developing a rapport with students, which is the end result of a good teacher-student relationship.

Smith (1980) observed that teacher-pupil interaction that includes the specific factors of teacher praise, task orientation, teacher questions, pupil initiation and response, appeared to be significant predictors of pupil progress in reading. A teaching situation that relied heavily on teacher-task orientation and teacher lecturing did not relate adequately to student achievement.

In the Day and Sheehan day-care study (1974), it was found that more growth-productive behavior

occurred in classrooms where adults spent most of their time in activities either directly or indirectly related to those of the children, and more growth-inhibiting behavior appeared in programs where adults were apt to be engaged in tasks apart from the immediate activity of the children. Where there was more growth-productive behavior, teachers maintained a rather consistent and personal contact with the children, engaged them in conversation about their activities, assisted in tasks, and instructed them when it seemed important and necessary. There was and apparent affection between the children and the teachers which was characterized by natural and unaffected interaction focused on the activities of the children.

Mussen, Conger, and Kagan (1974) further support the idea of active teacher guidance and participation being more beneficial than detachment. They found that when a teacher participated in student activities, suggesting that his/her interest was to be with the children, the children stayed at activities for long periods of time and were friendly and outgoing. When the staff was consistently moving from one project to the next and seemed, at times, to be

avoiding children, the children had a short attention span and avoided contact with adults.

Teaching is more than a focus on methodological skills dealing with subject matter, it is also an interpersonal operation. As stated by Robinson and Robinson (1981), "Interpersonal relationships between teacher and student should be one of utmost concern" (p.106). The teacher must deal with a child's psychological needs first, only then will the academic concept of  $2 + 2 = 4$  take on meaning (Gazda, Asbury, Balzer, Childers, & Walters, 1977).

Clinkscale (1979) also stated, "As one examines the years of changing styles and modes of instruction, one single factor seems to stand out: it is the quality of the relationship between teacher and learner that makes or breaks the learning achievement of the student" (p.323).

#### Interpersonal Interaction Skills

Competent teachers have realized for years that teaching skills are the basis for learning. Educators agree that teachers must have the teaching skills they need to relate students to their learning experiences. In order to better communicate with

students, teachers need interpersonal skills at their command. Interpersonal skills enable the teacher to enter the learner's frame of reference and prepare him/her for learning (Carkhuff, Berenson, & Pierce, 1977).

The interpersonal skills are dependent upon the teacher providing certain core conditions. The conditions that have an effect on the interpersonal relationships of students and teachers are: warmth, empathy, respect, genuineness, concreteness, self-disclosure, immediacy, and confrontation (Robinson, Wilson, & Robinson, 1981). The presence of these conditions has been noted among successful teachers, and the absence of these conditions has been noted among unsuccessful teachers (Aspy & Roebuck, 1977).

Before focusing on these conditions and their effects on students, one must define these essential conditions.

1. Warmth: the teacher's ability to demonstrate that he/she cares for the student as a person.
2. Empathy: the teacher's ability to communicate an understanding of the student's interpersonal communications.
3. Respect: the teacher's ability to

- demonstrate a belief in the student's ability to solve his/her own problems.
4. Genuineness: the teacher's ability to be real or honest with the student.
5. Concreteness: the teacher's ability to pinpoint or accurately label feelings and experiences of the student.
6. Self-Disclosure: the teacher's ability to reveal experiences of his/her own that were similar to what the student is experiencing.
7. Immediacy: the ability of the teacher to communicate to the student about his/her relationship as it exists at that moment in time.
8. Confrontation: the teacher's ability to inform the student of a discrepancy between things that he/she has been saying and things that he/she has been doing.

(Gazda et al., 1977; Robinson, Wilson, & Robinson, 1981).

The National Consortium for Humanizing Education (NCHE), set out to determine whether or not interpersonal skills make an important difference in the classroom. They began by establishing two different groups of teachers. One group would receive intense training in interpersonal skills development. The second

group would receive no training. The findings of the NCHE strongly supported the relationship between the core conditions and student achievement. Students taught by teachers with interpersonal skills training scored significant gains on achievement tests. The relationship was stronger at the elementary level than at the secondary level. This finding is consistent with previous studies, thus lending further validity to the NCHE's findings (Aspy & Roebuck, 1977).

The NCHE was also concerned with the efficacy of their training procedures used with the teachers who participated in the study. Would the training programs result in higher levels of facilitative interpersonal conditions in the classroom? They found that the training groups made more significant advancement toward facilitative conditions than did the control group who received no training. The major effect of the training was a change in the quality of the interactions between student and teacher.

As a consequence of the research done by the NCHE, the data collected suggested that there is a significant relationship between a teacher's level

of interpersonal ability and a student's self-concept. Students were given the "How I See Myself" self-concept test (Aspy & Roebuck, 1977) and in general seemed to be enhanced by the core conditions used by their teachers.

More recent studies lend support to the findings of the NCHE. Robinson and Schumacher, (1978) collected data in their investigation that show that the core condition of concreteness can be an important factor in student achievement. Students who were exposed to this condition scored significant gains in language arts, as compared to their peers who were not exposed to this condition of concreteness. It was also found that the more ability the teacher had in offering concreteness, the greater the rate of student achievement.

Studies on the conditions of warmth and empathy also support the relationship of interpersonal skills to student achievement. When a group of sixth grade students were exposed to these conditions by their teachers, they, too, scored greater gains in language arts. These gains were significant when compared to their counterparts who were instructed by teachers



who did not provide these conditions (Robinson, Wilson, & Robinson, 1981).

Robinson, Wilson, and Robinson (1981) also reported in their study that students of teachers perceived as having the greater ability to show warmth and empathy achieved on the average over a year above the students of teachers perceived as having the lowest ability of communicating these conditions. This finding seems to suggest that the more noticeable the differences in teacher's interpersonal skills ability, the greater the effect on students.

Many studies lend support to the idea that interpersonal skills can have a positive effect on students and teachers in the regular classroom setting, but what of the special education classrooms? What general findings of education, that are applicable to the regular classroom, are also applicable to the needs of exceptional children? In order to answer these questions, one must look to the study conducted by Robinson and Brosh (1980).

For the purpose of this study, teachers were trained in a 20-hour in-service program titled the Heart of Teaching. The program was designed to assist

the teacher in dealing with the interpersonal communications of students through human relations development skills that emphasize the eight core conditions.

The results indicate that interpersonal communication skills for teachers of exceptional children may be an important aspect of the teacher's overall effectiveness. These findings are in accord with findings of the regular classroom setting. Teachers who were trained in providing effective levels of the core conditions were more successful in promoting student achievement in exceptional children than teachers who were not trained.

The effects of certain core conditions are not limited to student achievement, according to Harbach and Asbury (1976). They found that empathic understanding had some effect on negative student behavior as well. Teachers who can communicate understanding and caring will most often be able to establish good working relationships with students. As a consequence, students feel that their teachers care about them, and they in turn, care about what the teachers think about their behavior. In general, one could say that the student's behavior appeared to reflect the behavior of the adults.

The teachers participating in the Harbach and Asbury study (1976) followed the model for human relations training presented by Gazda et al., (1977). Communication of empathic understanding by the teacher showed a significant decrease of negative student behaviors.

This study showed how teacher ability to communicate understanding to the student helps build a positive relationship for both. Although this study addressed the effects of empathic understanding on negative student behavior, these same skills can be used to the further development of all students.

#### Summary

Analysis of this research indicates the importance of a positive student-teacher relationship. Both the student and teacher have vital roles to play, but it is the interaction of the two that develops a good working relationship. Student-teacher interaction that encourages the child to assume the lead and make decisions regarding his/her own progress is an effective approach for helping students. Equally important to this relationship is mutual trust. This mutual trust is the respect the teacher has for

students, and the students, for the teacher.

Active teacher guidance and participation is more beneficial than detachment. Adults should not be separated from children for any long periods of time. Just the presence of the teacher seems to encourage interaction and to invite participation on the part of the student.

Interpersonal interaction skills play a major part in the communications between student and teacher. These skills are dependent upon the teacher's ability to provide the core conditions of warmth, empathy, respect, genuineness, concreteness, self-disclosure, immediacy, and confrontation. When a teacher is able to provide effective levels of these conditions, a positive impact is made on student achievement. This impact seems to hold true for various school settings, i.e., regular classrooms, special education classrooms, and pre-school settings.

It was also found that systematic training of teachers can effectively increase their level of functioning regarding interpersonal skills attainment. In addition to this, the greater the student's perception of their teacher's ability, the greater

the effect on student achievement.

Also noted in chapter two was the enhancement of a student's self-concept through the use of interpersonal skills and the decrease of negative student behavior when a teacher utilizes empathic understanding. These findings help prepare teachers for the student-centered classroom where learning begins with the child's interpersonal world.

## Chapter Three

### Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has been concerned with the types of interpersonal interactions, between student and teacher, that have an effect on student achievement. An intricate part of this study has dealt with the student-teacher relationship. Close examination of this relationship has resulted in an appreciation for the interpersonal skills which are necessary ingredients in today's interpersonal classroom.

#### Conclusions

Increasing evidence in research suggests the importance of interpersonal relationships of students and teachers, and its effect on the outcome of the educational process. This interaction refers to the teacher's ability to provide the core conditions of warmth, empathy, respect, concreteness, self-disclosure, genuineness, immediacy, and confrontation when dealing with the student's interpersonal communications.

Teachers are not independent factors in the educational process. They are dynamic and interdependent elements whose behavior with students will influence the reactions of the students. The responsibility of an effective student-teacher relationship lies with

the teacher. His/her ability to communicate trust, respect, and confidence in the student will lay the ground work for a good working relationship between the two.

The interpersonal interactions skills are an essential ingredient to a better student-teacher relationship. Research strongly supports the positive impact of these skills on student achievement. Students, who are taught by teachers who effectively communicate the core conditions, score significant gains on achievement tests. These findings do not seem to be restricted to students of regular classrooms only, but seem to hold true for exceptional education students and pre-school children alike.

Furthermore, the positive effects of interpersonal skills do not seem to be limited to student achievement alone. Enhancement of a student's self-concept and a reduction of negative student behaviors are a few of the additional benefits gained from the utilization of these skills.

Of significant interest to educators is the benefit of interpersonal skills training for teachers. Teachers who are trained in providing effective

levels of the core conditions are more successful, at promoting cognitive growth in students than teachers who are not trained. This conclusion leads one to make important recommendations to educators.

#### Recommendations

The need for teachers to acquire interpersonal communication skills can not be overlooked. The present research base supports the idea of both pre-service and in-service training in these skills. The training programs most highly regarded at this time are; The Skills of Teaching: Interpersonal Skills (Carkhuff, Berenson, & Pierce, 1977) and Human Relations Development: A Manual for Educators (Gazda et al., 1977). These programs offer the classroom teacher practical suggestions to aid in the total development of the child.

In order to develop a good relationship with students, teachers need to remember that successful interaction takes place when both senders and receivers share opinions, feelings, and interests. This sharing of personal experiences helps build mutual trust and respect, two key elements to any relationship. These interpersonal interactions help make teachers



much more effective in the classroom. The result of such efforts may lead to many positive gains for students and teachers alike.

#### Summary

Data specifically collected for this study indicate the importance of interpersonal interaction skills in communications between student and teacher. The significance of this interpersonal process revolves around the teacher's ability to provide effective levels of the core conditions of: warmth, empathy, respect, genuineness, concreteness, self-disclosure, immediacy, and confrontation. Several studies have indicated that students of teachers who communicate these conditions show a meaningful increase in achievement scores. This finding would support a greater emphasis on teacher training in the area of interpersonal skills development.

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