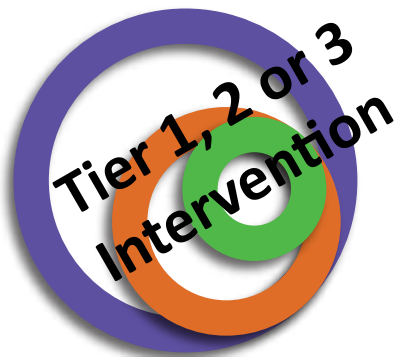


Staff-Student Relationships

Tiers 1, 2 & 3

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Student engagement in school is based on a multitude of factors, including relationships with school staff. Healthy staff-student relationships are a major goal for educators, particularly for at-risk youth. Building staff-student relationships is important for all students, and typically occur naturally. Much of the research on adult-student relationships has focused on methods to build healthy and beneficial relationships when they may not occur naturally for at-risk students in order to help to prevent academic and behavioral problems in school.

The school environment is second only to families in providing opportunities for social and emotional growth (Boorn, Dunn, & Page, 2010); however, much of the dropout prevention literature on relationships has focused on students and families, with less focus on school-related factors (Davis & Dupper, 2004). Existing research promotes efforts to develop secure attachments between students and teachers (or other school staff members such as custodians, para-educators, food workers, etc.) Secure, positive staff-student relationships are characterized by understanding, trust, respect and cooperation (Leitao & Waugh, 2007). Researchers assert that secure staff-student relationships are as important in predicting students' success (behavioral and academic) as parent-student relationships (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Secure attachment to one or more adults has also been shown to improve students' emotional and social development (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Students who develop healthier emotional and social competence are, in turn, more likely to succeed academically, while students who are struggling socially or emotionally may be at risk for decreased academic success and mental health well-being (Leitao & Waugh, 2007).

What are Staff-Student Relationships?

A staff-student relationship can be defined as a feeling of kinship or a caring connection between a youth and a school staff member that promotes healthy ongoing communication. These relationships should be considered a crucial prerequisite that can increase healthy social and emotional development, while building resilience to challenges or barriers that students may encounter. Esquivel, Doll & Oades-Sese (2011) claim that:

many schools are the sites of high-quality opportunities to interact with positive adult models and supportive peers, and school routines and practices can foster essential student abilities to maintain effective relationships, establish and work toward ambitious personal goals, self-regulate personal activities and behaviors, and manage emotions (p. 650).

In sum, positive relationships with staff at school may serve as a protective factor for students

at-risk for failure due to a variety of stressors (e.g. poverty, cultural adversity, poor parenting, emotional or behavior problems) by helping students build self-regulation skills.

On the other hand, students who have minimal to no attachments to school or staff, are often poor self-regulators in that they are less prepared for tests, less able to concentrate during tests, more fearful of failing, less likely to ask for help from teachers, and place less priority on school work than students who have strong, secure attachments (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). In order to create these healthy, secure attachments between students and school staff, Bergin and Bergin (2009) assert that school personnel should have a strong understanding of the role of attachment in the classroom.

What Do We Know About Staff-Student Relationships??

Attachment. Attachment refers to the bond between two individuals that is present through time and in different contexts. The type of attachment that is desired for a child's healthy development is a secure attachment. When a child is securely attached, he or she feels comfortable and confident exploring his or her environment. It is also important to note that children can be securely attached while still appearing outgoing or shy (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Unfortunately, children who have had negative and disadvantaged experiences in the past with caregivers upon entering school have difficulty forming secure attachments to teachers and other school personnel. Failure to develop positive social, emotional, and relational skills with early caregivers can transfer into the school environment leading to poor school attachment. Low levels of school attachment and low levels of student engagement (i.e. students have poor relationships with staff and are not involved in school activities) are likely to contribute to students' decisions to drop out of school (Davis & Dupper, 2004). According to a survey study conducted by Johnson (2008), at-risk students stated that teachers who pro-

moted resiliency and attachment engaged in the following behaviors:

made themselves available and accessible to students, engaged students by actively listening to their concerns and worries, took responsibility for teaching [build] their students basic reading, writing, and math skills, had empathy in helping students deal with adversity, advocated for their students, and they used their power to stop bullying and harassment in schools. (p. 395).

Furthermore, Johnson (2008) points out that good teachers have been engaged in these behaviors for decades. However, more structured programs and initiatives to support these behaviors are necessary.

Elements of Healthy Staff-Student Relationships.

Ellerbrock & Kiefer (2010) reported that trusting, caring, and respectful relationships between students and teachers, provide emotional and cognitive support, and are crucial for students' development. Building a caring relationship includes maintaining a connection and a reciprocated relationship. Teachers can also exist as a bridge between the students and the school. Teachers play a major role in helping the students learn positive, caring attitudes towards their school, including their sense of caring towards their school community (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). Teachers should also seek to create a supportive environment in which students feel they are important, respected, and cared for (Ellerbrock & Kiefer, 2010). This remains true for adolescents; as older students begin to establish autonomy, they benefit substantially from increased confidence and self-esteem, which can be fostered by healthy adult-student relationships. Ideally, it is important for



school staff to minimize safety risks for students, maximize protective factors (e.g. involvement in school, participation in the community, positive relationships with peers and staff), and provide early intervention when students display signs of emotional and behavior problems (Esquivel et al., 2011).

Specific ways that staff can improve relationships with students and build resiliency involve several components, including emotional safety

and trust, positive emotional involvement, a sense of closeness, teacher availability, and open communication. Leitao & Waugh (2007) have combined these elements into three larger constructs of connectedness, availability, and communication. In their model of teacher-student relationships (See Figure 1).

Leitao & Waugh (2007) have provided examples of specific teacher and/or staff behaviors that compose these three constructs.

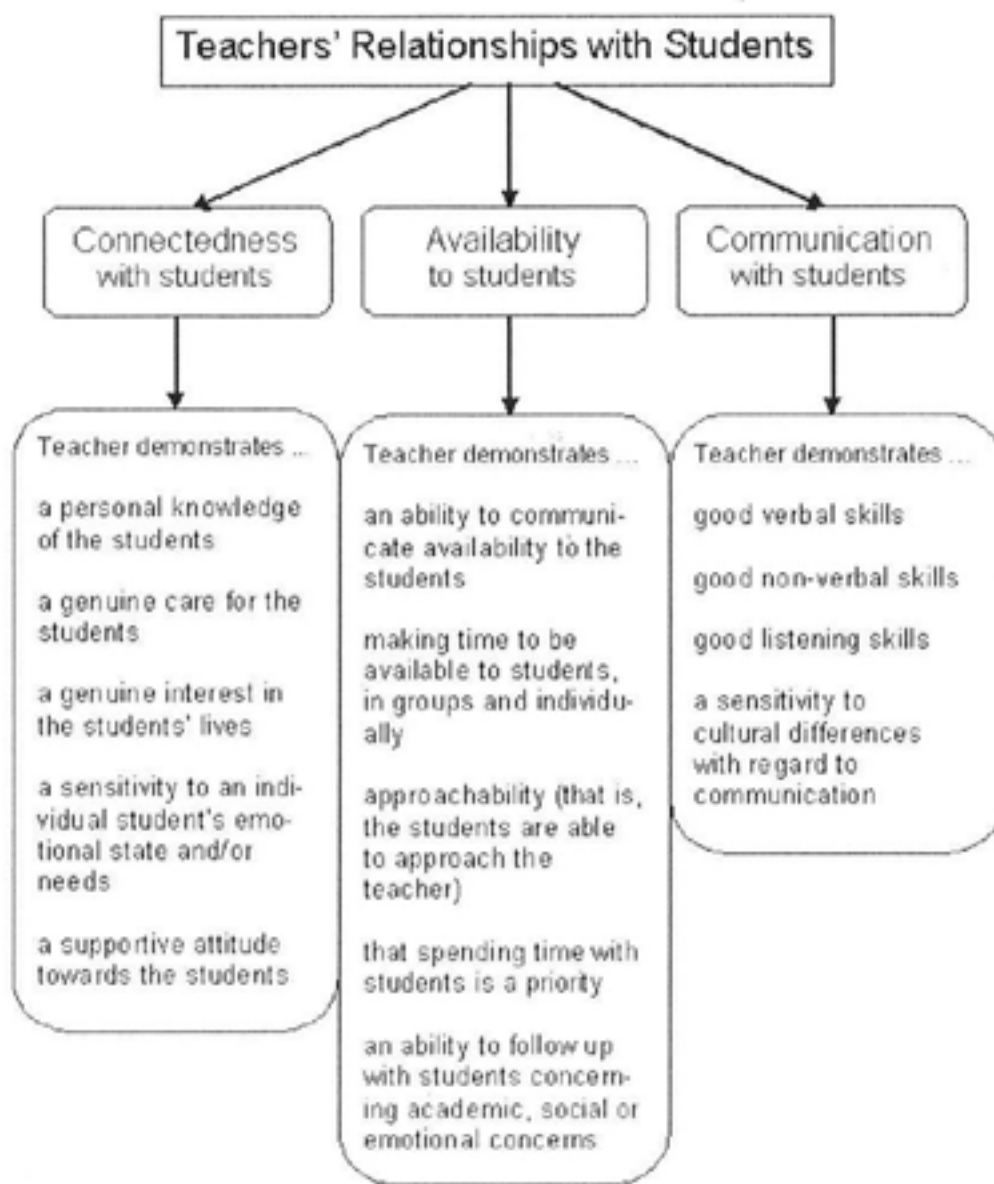


Figure 1. Theoretical Model: Teachers' Relationships with Students.

From Leitao & Waugh (2007); used with authors' permission.

For example, teachers can demonstrate connectedness to students by having a personal knowledge of the students, a genuine caring for students, a genuine interest in the students' lives, sensitivity to individual students' emotional states, and a supportive attitude towards the students. Availability to students may involve the teacher making time to be available to individual students or groups of students, being approachable, and following up with students if there are any academic, emotional, or behavioral concerns. Communication with students will likely require good verbal skills, good non-verbal skills, good listening skills, and sensitivity to diversity issues regarding communication. Leitao & Waugh (2007) also suggest that teachers and/or staff utilize data-based decision making and administer a survey to students and staff to gauge the extent of staff-student relationships and inform intervention development.

Benefits of Strong Staff-Student Relationships

Students who do not develop healthy attachment relationships are at risk for decreased academic success. It is important to build strong relationships to increase resiliency against potential downfalls. Securely attached children tend to be more persistent, enthusias-



tic, self-confident, and independent (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). They are also more likely to be socially competent and have quality friendships. Caring staff-student relationships benefit the social and academic language skills of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Esquivel et al., 2011). Overall, securely attached children are less likely to exhibit behavior problems and antisocial behavior. Students that exhibit more prosocial behaviors also tend to have higher grades. Securely attached children tend to be better at regulating their emotions and recover more quickly from distress. Not having proper emotional regulation can create excess anxiety and other negative emotional responses, thereby impeding academic performance (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

The factors that characterize a secure attachment between a child and his/her primary caregiver are the same factors that distinguish a secure relationship between a teacher and a student (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Developing healthy relationships with students creates an environment for them to feel safe in exploring new challenges. Moreover, healthy adult-student relationships allow these students to flourish academically because they are being provided with the necessary social and emotional support.

Programs to Encourage Staff-Student Relationships

There could be a variety of things administrators and teachers could do to improve the likelihood of developing stronger relationships between staff and students. Using the Leitao framework these would include efforts to develop connectedness, availability and communication.

- **Recognize & Reinforce Staff.** Teachers or other staff members who have been able establish strong relationships with students should be recognized formally in the appraisal process, as well as informally by administrators and others.

- **Staff Mentors.** Assign each at risk student to one or two staff mentors. These mentors would be available to assigned students for questions and would meet with students regularly.
- **Matching the Faculty Based on Interests.** Schedule students to include subject areas which are of high interest to the student's needs. A student who is at-risk might be more likely to develop a relationship with a teacher in an area of high interest. For example for a student who is interested in art, counselors might make sure that art is included in the student's schedule, with a receptive teacher assigned for art for that student.
- **Making More Counselors Available.** Increase availability and presence of counselors and others who are able to interact with students. Structuring good opportunities for counselors to strike up relationships with students, particularly at risk students. Many times current caseloads of counselors in schools do not permit this type of opportunity to develop relationships (Vitale, 2008).
- **Staff Time Before & After School.** Making Staff available before and after school, or during lunch for advising and informal conversation. This could be done for all students, but a special effort might be made to make this time available for high risk students.
- **Lunch groups.** Creating a system for staff to have lunch with at risk students.
- **Grade Specific Lunch Time.** Provide lunch time for only one grade at a time, and have teachers from that grade supervise the lunch time, permitting better opportunities for communication and interaction.
- **Posting grades & Progress Reports.** Posting grades or progress reports early for students (and parents) and then following up by discussing them with students;
- **Posting Daily Assignments.** Daily assignments listed on the website and/or hand-outs, could also provide a topic for teacher

student one-to-one conversation, as well as diminishing conflicts about homework and assignments.

- **Extra-curricular activities.** Providing a variety of extra-curricular activities supervised by staff that might engage the interests and discussion of students, particularly students who are at-risk in middle school and early high school.
- **Providing incremental time lines for long term assignments.** Making sure that teachers provide prompts and extra support for long term assignments to students who may be struggling, perhaps permitting feedback on steps in the process rather than only when the paper or report is completed.

Overall Programs

Some programs might address all of these components simultaneously and have been suggested in the literature. Three examples of more global types of programs which might support staff student relations are described here. In each case these programs may also have other goals as well beyond building relationships.

Advisory Periods. Having a home room or advisory group period once per day or at least twice a week, allows one teacher to connect with a small group of students on a more individual basis, thereby encouraging a supportive environment and increasing the students' sense of belonging and resilience. These groups should not be treated as a time consuming burden on teachers or students, but rather as a forum for community building, counseling, social skill development and informal problem solving. Advisory teachers may serve as student advocates or safe havens that "promote the school culture, teach students how to work in groups, and serve as the backbone of the community (Johnson, 2009, p. 3)." Although many schools already have guidance counselors in place, advisories are usually composed of approximately 30 students as opposed to a standard high school counselor load of approximately 500

(Vitale, 2008). The time devoted to advisories or homerooms likely will vary from building to building (e.g. once a week for 40 minutes to 35 minutes each day); however, all advisories require time. Many schools have adapted their schedules around advisories because they are viewed as essential to students' and teachers' success (Johnson, 2009).

Most advisories implement programs tailored to school or district goals, but may center on ideas, such as multiculturalism, leadership, or current events. Advisories are also most effective when students have input in choosing discussion topics and are active in providing feedback regarding classroom structure and instructional practices. Often homeroom or advisory groups remain together for four years (Vitale, 2008).

Team Based Instruction. Scheduling of academic teams of teachers to serve a subgroup of students within the school (sometimes called a "school within a school") increases the ability of the teachers to get to know and interact with their students. This provides both increased opportunities for communication with the same subject area teachers serving that group of students over an extended period of time. Clearly this would increase the familiarity and opportunities to establish relationships.

Social and emotional learning. Many social-emotional learning programs employ ways to increase personal interactions between students and teachers. Generally this entails teachers specifically teaching and supporting the development of social and emotional skills in the context of their classroom teaching of their subject matter. Additionally, The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has reviewed more than 300 research studies suggesting that social and emotional skills can be taught and achieved in students from a variety of ages, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, acquisition of these competencies improves behavior conduct and academic performance at school,

both for at-risk students as well as the overall student population (Mart, Dusenbury, & Weissberg, 2011; CASEL & National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2011). Students need to be given a chance to apply, practice, and receive feedback on positive behaviors and decision making consistently in both school and home settings in order to promote student engagement.

Looping. Some schools in elementary and middle grades have experimented with having teachers change grades with students so that students can be served by the same teacher or teachers for two school years. While difficult for teachers to learn the curriculum for both grades, it would afford the opportunity for educators to become more familiar with both students and parents, and thus offer increase opportunities for relationship building.

Conclusion

Students, including those at risk for poor academic achievement, dropout, and problematic behavior, benefit substantially from having healthy relationships with adults at school that emphasize connectedness, availability, and communication. Some of these students have healthy relationships with family members, while many do not. For either group, schools provide an opportunity to forge healthy adult-student relationships. Every additional healthy adult relationship further encourages positive academic, social, and behavioral outcomes. Schools can maximize their students' potential for success by seeking and promoting, as much as possible, healthy adult-student relationships.



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