

The importance of the teacher/student relationship for Maori and Pasifika students

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Abstract

This article is the result of three separate research projects. Each project focused, in some way, on the teaching/learning processes involving Maori and Pasifika lower SES students in the Auckland region. The projects, respectively, cover the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors. The dominant theme that emerged independently from all three projects is the critical importance of the relationship between the teacher and the learner. The research clearly demonstrated that when a positive relationship exists, students are more motivated to learn, more actively participate in their learning and the learning is likely to be more effective. Furthermore, that if a teacher is unable to form this relationship the students are less able to open themselves to learning from that teacher. The paper explores the components of the relationship common to these students from primary through to tertiary study.

Introduction

Over the period of 1999 - 2000, three research studies took place independently of each other and in different educational sectors; primary, secondary and tertiary. The students involved in two of the three studies were Maori and Pasifika and were from schools in low socio-economic areas. The tertiary study involved Pasifika students only.

Each study was written up, and it was not until the researchers discovered and read each other's reports that they realised the correspondence of some common themes. This article will discuss the primary theme, that of the critical importance, for these students, of the relationship between the teacher and the student. The secondary study¹ noted:

“An important new insight we gained through this research was how critical this relationship is for these students in low decile schools. It is our conclusion that the forming of the right kind of relationship is, for these students, a prerequisite for learning to take place” (Hill and Hawk, 2000).

The data in the other two studies also demonstrated a very high value placed on the right kind of relationship. The tertiary study described it as being *“crucial to their success”*. We discuss the characteristics of a highly effective teacher/student relationship and use the words of students to illustrate the impact they believe it has on their learning.

Study objectives and methodologies

The three studies are very different in terms of size, sample, coverage and methodology. They had each come about as a result of an identified need and were designed for a particular purpose. The serendipity of coverage from primary through to tertiary provides us with wonderful insights into the evolving nature of the teacher/student relationship as students journey through their education. The research studies are fully referenced for teachers who wish more methodological detail.

¹ Indented quotations in speech marks and italics are from the original research project reports. The particular report will be identified in the text or in brackets following the quote. Indented quotes in ordinary print are the words of the research participants that are quoted in the research reports.

The primary school study, the Kaiako-toa project, was conducted in 1999 and 2000 by a team of three researchers from the Auckland College of Education (ACE) who worked with three highly successful² primary school teachers working in schools where the majority of students are of Maori and Pasifika origin. Lengthy face-to-face interviews were conducted with each of the teachers and with people who had knowledge of each teacher's practice and were able to discuss their attitudes and beliefs. Student interviews were not part of this design. The 'voices' are those of the teachers and other adults.

The secondary school study was conducted in 1999, as part of a longitudinal study³. Two researchers worked in eight secondary schools with teachers and students. The research objective for this phase of the research was to gain an understanding of what constitutes effective teaching practice in decile one schools⁴. These were the secondary SES equivalents of the schools in the primary study. The research design included 100 full-lesson classroom observations of 89 highly effective⁵ teachers, individual face-to-face interviews with each of the teachers after the lessons and 100 group discussions with students (N=600) who had participated in the lessons. The students were Maori and Pasifika and the teachers came from a wide range of backgrounds, learning areas and ethnic groups. The opinions, feelings and experiences described by the students play a significant part in the understandings gained from this study.

² The teachers were identified by their peers as being 'highly effective'.

³ The longitudinal study is the AIMHI, (Achievement in Multicultural High Schools) project. This particular report is "Making a Difference in the Classroom". Hill, J., and Hawk, K. (2000). Ministry of Education: Wellington.

⁴ All New Zealand schools are ranked on a decile scale of one to ten. It is a measure of socio-economic position with decile ten schools having the highest status. Some school funding (about 4%) is allocated on the basis of decile ranking in an attempt to provide for equity.

⁵ Each school used its own process to identify its most effective teachers.

The tertiary study was a three-phase study⁶ conducted in 1999 and 2000, by researchers at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) to seek explanations as to why Pasifika student achievement has been lower than for Palagi and Asian students. The first phase involved past and current Pasifika students in the Faculty of Business and course lecturers participated in group discussions and interviews. Themes that emerged were incorporated into a structured questionnaire that provided a quantitative analysis of the influence of various practices and approaches to student achievement. Again, the student 'voices' provide important insights into their learning experiences. These students are young adults and have a lifetime of learning experience to call on in their reflections. An important additional dimension to this study is the quantified correlation between some of the teachers' attributes, identified in all three studies, and student achievement at the tertiary level.

Characteristics of an effective relationship

There is a remarkable similarity, across the three studies, regarding the behaviours and attitudes that teachers and students described as characterizing an effective relationship. These will be discussed using student and teacher 'voices' to illustrate the attributes they perceived as important. They are not presented in any particular order of importance or frequency of occurrence. Each attribute is part of the whole picture.

⁶ "The Academic Experience of Pasifika Students in the New Zealand Diploma of Business Economic Environment 120", (2000), Cowley, E.T., Dabb, H. and Jones, B. Auckland University of Technology.

Empathy

All three studies noted that the teachers did not have to be any particular ethnicity to relate effectively to Maori and Pasifika students. The secondary study, which observed and interviewed 89 teachers, including Maori and Pasifika teachers, found that there was no correlation between ethnicity and being effective. There was also no correlation between age, gender, type of teacher training, subject area or years of experience, and effective teaching.

The evidence from the studies suggests that it was the type of person; their attitudes, values, behaviours, effort and skills, that contributed to their being able to form the type of relationship that would assist these students to learn. Teachers did, however, need to demonstrate an understanding of, and empathy to, Maori and Pasifika cultures.

The level of acceptance of a teacher by her primary class is illuminated by her reflection on her Pakeha husband's visit to the school where children commented – 'He's Palagi'. The teacher commented 'So they don't see me as Palagi. He's the Palagi. I thought it was nice, I'm one of them, they don't look at me and say you're Palagi. You're our teacher, you're one of us. (Palagi primary teacher)

The teachers with effective relationships took care with their pronunciation of names and wanted to learn about the students' worlds (Hawk and Hill, 1996:136) and experiences. They incorporated relevant experiences into educational activities, encouraged students to talk in their first language and enjoyed learning from their students about their culture.

"There was a sense that the lecturers with whom they had built good relationships were not just interested in them as students but as people who had lives and worlds that were different from their own and wanted to get to know them better". (Tertiary study)

It is significant that all three studies concur on this issue because many teachers are teaching 'across habitus'. In multicultural schools and tertiary organisations, students are statistically more likely to be taught by a teacher from another culture and social class from their own. While having a teacher of your own culture might be a valued bonus, this is not necessarily the case. Students were clear that what was most important for them was that the teacher could relate to them and was also an effective teacher. Not all Maori, Pasifika or Pakeha/Palagi teachers are able to deliver on either or both these needs.

If an effective teacher had experienced the same, or similar, cultural and family experiences they have an advantage, providing they can establish the appropriate relationship.

I had a Samoan teacher at our school and he didn't take any crap from us...He was strict but you knew he was good too...he knew us really well...where we came from...our families. (Tertiary student)

Caring

Students knew these teachers really cared about each one of them. There were many ways in which the teachers demonstrated this caring.

Some teachers 'loved' their students and told them so. Some loved them as they would a family member. The primary study identified teachers who act as a caring family member. Several teachers in the primary and secondary schools thought of themselves as being in a "mother" type relationship.

...someone who will give them a cuddle and listen to them, sort out their lunch if they haven't got one and turn their clothes round the right way in the morning. (Primary teacher)

I treat them as if they were my own daughter or son. I tell them that is how I feel. I love them but I am strict as well. (Secondary teacher)

She told us that her son is sitting exams soon and she wants us to pass just as much as she wants him to pass. (Secondary student)

At the tertiary level the 'caring' is more likely to be described as *friendliness* rather than love but it is a continuation of the same warmth and connectedness described earlier.

He was really good cos he could relate to students you know...he was friendly and helpful and he'll come around and see what everyone is doing...so it was just like having a buddy. (Tertiary student)

Good teachers ...really care about the students, really care. (Tertiary student)

My teacher was extremely helpful. Right from the word go she said 'let me know in advance if you are going to find it hard'. So that was quite good. I mean she cared. (Tertiary student)

Respect

An effective relationship is one of mutual respect. This is not necessarily the same as liking. There were teachers that the secondary students could identify as nice people but whom they did not fully respect as teachers because these teachers did not help them to learn. The reverse was also true. Some teachers did not set out to be 'liked' but they did build a special relationship that commanded respect, as a tertiary student explained:

He really pushed us. I kinda hated and liked him...but I respected him too. He really made us work and he expected us to pass...plus he related well to us. (Tertiary student)

Nor is gaining respect linked to any particular style of interacting. The respect that students give to their teachers comes as a result of the way teachers treat and speak to students. This manifests in the way the teachers model attitudes and behaviour, from the energy and effort they put into their work, from their enthusiasm for learning, their loyalty to the school/university and, finally, from their genuine love and caring for each student as a person and a learner.

Secondary students wanted to be treated as *people* and *adults* rather than as *students* or *children*. They described some teachers who put themselves 'above' the students. The respectful teachers were described as accepting the students at the same level as themselves.

Knowing their names is critical and something about their history and their interests. It is important to be in their space and talk at their level. (Secondary teacher)

He communicates well. He talks to us and makes it easy for us to know he respects us. He laughs with us and teases us like we tease him. (Secondary student)

The primary project researchers wrote that:

"many comments in the interviews related to the theme of connectedness and described class climates of mutual respect between the teacher and the students. Such climates allowed for children to develop an internal locus of control". (Primary study)

The teacher behaviours were those of normal respectful behaviours between adults. They include giving helpful explanations and reasons for actions, being sincere and professional, thanking and apologizing when appropriate, valuing student ideas and contributions, being polite and friendly and inviting feedback.

Listening to criticism and not being defensive when challenged by a student were also behaviours valued by students.

Going the extra mile

Students were really appreciative of extra efforts made by teachers to reward and encourage them. Sometimes this meant giving tangible rewards, even at the tertiary level.

Our tutor went out of her way all the time...she was always trying to get us going...to motivate us. She'd even bring chocolates to class and we'd have quizzes and stuff like that. (Tertiary student)

There were many secondary examples of teachers buying rewards from their own money and students were very aware and appreciative of this. Many teachers shared or loaned their own resources and equipment.

Another way of providing extra support involved giving extra or personal time.

He got us through the course...On our days off he would tell us to come over during the morning if we needed more help. (Tertiary student)

Some teachers were creative in finding ways to provide extra help. A tertiary teacher told some students they were welcome to come to any of his 'other' classes and sit in if that would help them get a fuller understanding of the concepts they did not understand. Some students found this very helpful and were grateful for the suggestion.

Like if you were stuck...like he would say...oh yeah I'm available through these times and he would give us the times he would be available and he would give us his extension so if we had questions on our assignment we could contact him. (Tertiary student)

Another dimension of 'going the extra mile' is when the teacher gives something personal of himself or herself. Secondary students gave several examples of teachers who shared aspects of their lives, their feelings, their failings and their vulnerabilities with students. Telling personal stories with a positive message is appreciated and remembered by students.

At the beginning of the year, she told us about her life and her family. We ask her about herself and she tells us about her holidays and weekends. (Secondary student)

I tell them about me first, before I expect them to open up to me. They are impressed at my frankness. Otherwise why should I expect them to be? (Secondary teacher)

The following example from the secondary research study report demonstrates how a teacher linked a personal experience to the lesson in a way that had a very positive outcome for students.

"Sometimes there were opportunities during lessons to share aspects of themselves either formally or informally. One teacher read parts from her personal diary that she wrote as a teenager. It was about a relationship she was involved in and it described her feelings at the time. The learning outcomes were related to writing style and the students were greatly motivated to participate in the lesson and could relate to the messages".
(Secondary study)

At the primary level, parents as well as the children appreciate the extra efforts.

...just little things like her maths, like Marama's got a little funny home made badges which I know (the teacher made) at home in her own time, in her own space. All those little things...they add up to a parent as well...little personal things. Then a letter towards the end of the year to Marama, and I know that Marama is not the only student who got one of those. (Primary community member)

Passion to enthuse/motivate

There are many dimensions of this attribute. Effective teachers are enthusiastic people who love their work with students and this shows in their interactions. Knowledge of the subject and skilled pedagogical practice is important, but not enough. The classroom climate can be motivating or it can be a barrier to learning taking place.

A primary teacher described what she observed in a colleague:

I think you have to have a dedication. It's basically the old fashioned dedication. You have to really love teaching. You have to want to, it has to be something, so she has that. (She) fights tooth and nail for the best for her class. She will utilise every little ounce of extra help that will come her way. (Primary teacher's colleague)

General positivity and energy are common characteristics. The secondary study noted that most of the exceptional teachers smile easily and spontaneously.

His face smiles and his whole body smiles. He is just a positive person and we look forward to his classes because the study is positive as well. (Secondary student)

She exerts love, she exerts caring, she exudes enthusiasm. (Primary parent)

There were many examples of teachers planning carefully to make the learning fun and interesting.

Good teachers are not just those that know all about economics but they know about teaching and make it fun, not boring. (Tertiary student)

Students found it helpful if the atmosphere in the classroom was relaxed and encouraged humour. This did not necessarily mean that the teacher made all the jokes. Sometimes it meant that they encouraged and enjoyed student

humour. A relaxed atmosphere enabled students to be free of tension and engage more actively in their learning.

He was heaps of fun which helped me in the sense that I looked forward to going to economics...He made the class environment very relaxing and comfortable to learn in.
(Tertiary student)

She encourages us and makes jokes. It breaks the ice. Breaks the tension. Loosens everyone up. Gets us active and ready to make an effort. (Secondary student)

She makes us laugh so that we will talk and join in the lesson and it works. We don't usually find her jokes funny but we laugh. We laugh at her but not because she is stupid. We laugh in a nice way because she treats us as equals and that's why it's fun.
(Secondary student)

A strategy demonstrated by some of the secondary teachers was to personally participate in the class activities. This ranged from helping students to keep the classroom tidy through to doing the class work or homework themselves to model a good work ethic.

I find that if I do the work with them, it shows them how much they can do and need to do in a period. They watch me and increase their pace. Its better than telling them to hurry up. (Secondary art teacher)

Patience and perseverance

Teachers need to be patient with students particularly in relation to managing behaviour and in giving explanations.

Secondary and tertiary students explained how critical it is for them to know a teacher will not give up on them and will repeat information, give several differing explanations, and provide a range of examples until they feel they understand.

I've got a good tutor who can really explain well and she uses good examples we can relate to. I mean I feel sorry for the others who haven't got a tutor like my tutor. (Tertiary student)

It was good that he reiterated things every time...yeah he was a good teacher. (Tertiary student)

The similarity of the messages in the following comments from a secondary student and a tertiary student demonstrate the importance of patience and perseverance.

Some teachers make you feel stink when you say you don't know how to do it. They say 'you should have listened' or 'you wouldn't have to ask if you had been concentrating'. Then we don't ask again and we don't know what to do. Sir will go over it again slow enough for me to get it. He doesn't growl us. (Secondary student)

If we were stuck or something he wouldn't move on until we could really understand what he was talking about...and he checked our understanding. Like he'd say 'who doesn't get it?...then raise your hands. If there was say three people he would get everyone to do exercises...and with those three he would come around and make them understand. (Tertiary students)

Belief in their ability

Students knew which teachers really believed in their ability. These teachers tended to articulate that belief often so students would gain confidence from it.

"Pasikale's (1996) research with adult learners showed that Pasifika peoples put great importance on their teachers accepting and believing in them and being committed to their learning". (Tertiary study)

In the same year, Hawk and Hill's research with Pasifika and Maori secondary students found that "The feedback from both teachers and students suggests

that a teacher's ability to believe in the students and to make them feel special and important has an important impact on the way they feel about the teacher, the subject and their performance in that subject". (1996:214)

These three studies again endorse those findings.

She really wants us to pass. She puts in the extra effort and goes over and over things. She says she will not give up on us, she will not go away. She makes you work. We give her a hard time about it sometimes but we need to know she thinks we can do it.
(Secondary student)

She loves being in the classroom. She enjoys children and that's very obvious. I think the children relate to her for that reason... She's very good at drawing the best out of the children. She has high expectations. (Primary Principal)

She wants the best for children, she's motivated and she won't accept failure. She'll find a way of enhancing it. Even to her detriment she is very hard working, she's driven.
(Primary teacher colleague)

How students assess the relationship

Teachers need to model the behaviour they want from their students.

Students are very observant of even the most minor examples of a teacher saying one thing but doing another. This does not mean that students expect their teachers to be perfect all the time. They make allowances for normal ups and downs. It does help, however, when a teacher can apologise for a mistake or a slip in mutually expected behaviour.

Some teacher behaviours impact negatively on the relationship and, therefore, on the learning situation.

The most often mentioned ones were *put-downs, unfair treatment, not getting to know you, ignoring you, having favourites, comparing you to others, growling*

over trivial things, not listening to us, not believing you can do it, not having fun, not explaining carefully, having boring lessons, thinking they are always right and picking on you (Secondary study).

Students are very observant and aware of the body language of their teachers as well as of what they say.

Students described the “facials” of their teachers as well as their body movements and tone of voice. This total picture of teacher behaviour was used by students to assess the genuineness of their actions and attitudes. Appropriate body language also assists the learning process by making it more interesting and by motivating students.

She talks slow and clear. We look at her talk. We watch her expression. She feels what she's reading. She smiles a lot. She loves us and she is excited about what she's doing.

(Secondary student)

Body language plays a very important role in classroom management in classes where the teacher has built a successful relationship with students.

Students ‘read’ teacher body language that is intended and also that which is unplanned. Many teachers develop signs that direct student behaviour. These are effective because they are quiet, unfrontational and often directed at individual students without others being aware.

Good strict is when they are not too strict over small things and they talk afterwards just to us. You can tell by their facials and their voice tone and how they act around you. You can just tell. (Student)

When his face has gone pink we notice and it's time to stop (the ‘bad’ behaviour).

(Secondary student)

Outcomes of the relationship

Confidence/ self efficacy

The effective teachers were confident practitioners with high self-efficacy. Their confidence as teachers and their confidence in the ability of their students transfers to the students themselves.

BJ is a very good lecturer. She definitely knows her stuff...and it shows in her confidence (Tertiary student).

Reciprocity

What the three studies tell us about reciprocity is complex and important. Each aspect of the relationship can engender a reciprocal response. If a teacher is seen to work hard for students, they are more likely to work hard in response. If a teacher really cares, students will really care for him/her. An enthusiastic teacher is more likely to engender enthusiasm in the class. A teacher who models respectful communication is more likely to receive the same.

I just think by knowing them better they feel cared for and if they like you and feel you care about them, then they try and work hard for you. (Primary teacher)

When I know she has done all that work for us, I want to work hard for her. (Secondary student)

Loyalty

When there is a highly effective relationship between student and teacher, there is a sense of mutual loyalty, but the responsive behaviour is not just enacted by the student to please the teacher. Students can see the effects of the modeled behaviour and respond because they have learned that such behaviour is positive, appreciated and helps their learning.

She has a very good rapport with the kids, she can respond to the teachable moment, she has a lovely tone, the children learn, they feel enthusiastic about their learning. They produce their work not so much for her but for their own success. It is a real partnership.
(Primary teacher's colleague)

I would say that my positive experience in the economics class was the interaction between the teacher and us...as well as our interaction...me and all the students. It's like back in the islands...we talk and we share information...and I like that...sharing and helping each other. (Tertiary student)

Expect a good work ethic

Teachers who set clear and high expectations for students tend to achieve them. This applies to work habits and getting assignments and homework done as well as achievement in assessments and exams. It is clear that some teachers can get students to do homework and assignments and some can't (Hawk and Hill, 1996:275). Students want and need a teacher to insist and to pressure them, at the same time as helping them.

Maybe if the teachers could be like...you know...really Really expect us to be ace students more, instead of like...you know...just thinking well if we pass we pass. I think some lecturers don't expect us to do well...not all of them...but some. Like I said I was really lucky I had a cool lecturer but that wasn't the case all the time. Sometimes I think we need more pushing to get our assignments in on time. That's where it all goes wrong
(Tertiary student)

Secondary students called this being "good strict" and they needed the teacher to **not** let them get away with things.

He (the teacher) says I can do it and he will keep waiting until I do. I know I have to keep trying even when I don't feel like it. (Secondary student)

I tell them I am not going to give up on them and I am counting on them to come up with the goods. I say if it's good enough for me, its good enough for them. (Secondary teacher)

Model a good work ethic

These teachers set high standards for themselves and work hard in order to deliver that standard. Students are aware of the effort they put into lesson preparation, marking, providing feedback, room displays, extra support and co-curricular activities. At the primary level, there was evidence that parents were also very aware and appreciative of their hard working teachers.

She always puts a lot of effort in. She expects us to work 80% as hard as she works. That is quite a lot to ask of us because she is such a hard worker. (Secondary student)

The perfect teacher ???

It is not possible for a teacher to display all of these characteristics all of the time. Nor do students expect that of their teachers. Some teachers do demonstrate these characteristics most of the time in their interactions with students. Students treasure such teachers and want to do their best for them. The tertiary study provides some evidence that this does result in enhanced achievement for Pasifika students.

As previously mentioned, students are aware of the normal ups and downs that all people experience and are very understanding and forgiving of the temporary 'downs'.

I have learned that not every day is a great day and that's OK. (Secondary teacher)

They do not expect their teachers to be perfect and will generally be supportive if a teacher explains why they are tired or having a bad day. Students are also

very aware of their own inappropriate and bad behaviour and they do not expect teachers to let them get away with it.

New teachers, relievers, and teachers new to the school, are often given a very hard time by students. In many instances this will last for as long as the first year. They are testing the relationship. If a teacher can demonstrate their commitment to a good relationship, that reputation then precedes them in the following year. They have earned the reciprocity and the loyalty and will receive it from most, if not all, students. Forming an effective relationship is not a matter of applying a formula of strategies. The characteristics discussed above come from holding particular attitudes. This has implications in some educational settings for informing recruitment policy and practice as well as for professional development and performance management. These are sensitive issues that must not be avoided if we are to improve the achievement of our Pasifika and Maori students.

Issues and implications for teachers, principals and trustees

There is widespread concern within New Zealand about the achievement of Maori and Pasifika students at all levels of education. The three research studies each arose from such identified concern. At the same time, schools/universities in Aotearoa/New Zealand are becoming increasingly multicultural. A trend that is likely to continue is the decline of the proportion of Pakeha, as Maori and Pasifika people make up an increasingly greater proportion of our population. By 2051 it is estimated that a third of all children will be Pakeha and a third Maori. Pasifika children will make up 21.1% (ERO, 2000:5).

The three research studies provide a great deal of information about what makes a good teacher for Maori and Pasifika students. There are data on pedagogy, attitudes, philosophy, behaviour management, classroom environment, pastoral care and holistic care. Some of these issues were identified as being important at all teaching levels.

This paper, however, concentrates on the relationship between teacher and student. None of the studies were set up to investigate this attribute. They were each investigating the links between what teachers do, student achievement and effective practice. The importance of the relationship emerged from each of the research findings as the data were analysed and the reports written. The decision to further investigate the student/teacher relationship came from the overall importance of it for student learning to be optimised. There is a high degree of consensus in the three studies about what the nature of the relationship needs to be like and the degree to which it is important.

It is probable that an effective teacher/student relationship will be conducive to learning for most students from all socio-economic groups. We have had feedback from many teachers to this effect. The researchers in the secondary study felt, from their experience in a wide range of school types, that “students in higher decile schools will generally learn from teachers they don’t like and are likely to achieve regardless of the relationships they have with their teachers” (Hill and Hawk, 1990:18).

Since the quality of the relationship is so important for Maori and Pasifika students, and since the education community is actively seeking ways to improve

educational achievement for these students, we are left with a number of questions that still need to be answered:

- Can teachers learn to develop an effective relationship?
- What can pre-service educators do to prepare teachers?
- How can schools/universities ensure their teachers have such a relationship?
- How can we give students safe ways to give feedback on their teachers' performance?
- What can/should schools/universities do if a teacher cannot develop such a relationship?
- What type of professional development will assist teachers most?
- What sorts of teaching qualifications and skills do tertiary teachers need?

These are difficult questions with implications for political and educational leaders. They were beyond the scope of the current studies but will make important topics for future research. The answers will enable decision makers to respond strategically and plan more effectively for Maori and Pasifika student achievement.

Researchers and authors

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