

**The Effect of Teacher-Student Relationships**  
**on the**  
**Academic Achievement of Fifth Grade Students**

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**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the**  
**Degree of Master of Education**

**May 2013**

**Goucher College**  
**Graduate Programs in Education**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a correlation between fifth grade students' perceptions of the relationship with their teacher and their academic achievement. This was a correlation research design. The academic achievement measurement tool was the Anne Arundel County public school report card, specifically the students' first and second marking period reading and math grades. This study also involved use of a questionnaire survey where students were asked to rate their relationship with their teacher. These results were then compared to their grades to look for a correlation between student achievement and the perception of their relationship with their teacher.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Overview**

This study was designed to explore the connection between teacher-student relationships and student academic achievement among fifth grade students in a suburban public school.

The researcher has found in her six years of teaching elementary-level students that her students seem to respond academically to the effort she puts forth in developing positive relationships with them. The researcher also found that some students in her school who were performing poorly had teachers that were not interested in developing a positive relationship with their students. This caused the researcher to question the possibility of a correlation between the way a student perceives their relationship with their teacher and the quality of their academic performance and achievement.

As human beings, we are biologically wired to seek connections with other people. Young children spend a good amount of time at school, where they try to make connection with peers and adults alike (Brown, 2010). Teachers can respond to this need by developing positive relationships with their students. Although the teacher-student relationship is a matter of perception from the student, a teacher can affect this perception by certain teacher behaviors, such as treating their students with respect, listening to students and their ideas, and recognizing students for good work and effort.

Previous research has found three main factors to be associated with positive teacher-student relationships- teacher characteristics, student characteristics, and external factors such as

school organization (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Jerome & Pianta, 2008; Rimm-Kaufman, 2012).

According to Hamre and Pianta (2006), "the need for connection between students and adults in the school setting remains strong from preschool to 12th grade" (p. 49). Positive teacher-student relationships at the elementary school level can lay the foundation for student success in future school years.

Positive teacher-student relationships have impacts on a child's education, both behaviorally and academically. Roorda, Koomen, Split, and Oort (2011) conducted a study to determine the association between teacher-student relationships and engagement and achievement. The results of the study found positive teacher-student relationships were positively associated with both engagement and achievement, and negative teacher-student relationships were negatively associated with both engagement and achievement. Their study found a higher correlation with engagement, which likely is positively associated with academic achievement.

There are many ways a teacher can develop positive relationships with their students. These techniques include having high expectations for all students, using positive communication, being friendly and caring, showing an interest in students' personal lives, and allowing students to get to know them personally. The researcher uses these techniques daily in her classroom, and has had positive feedback from her students in the way they perceive their relationship with their teacher.

### **Statement of Problem**

The purpose of this study is to determine if there a relationship between fifth grade students' perception of their relationship with their teacher and their first semester academic reading and math grades.

### **Hypothesis**

There will be no relationship between fifth grade students' perceptions of their relationship with their teacher and their school performance.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Perception of relationship:* For the purpose of this study, a student's perception of their relationship with their teacher was defined by their answers to a questionnaire. The questionnaire was created specifically for this research. Students responded to ten statements such as "My teacher treats me with respect, my teacher listens to my ideas, and I have a good relationship with my teacher" with a "yes, no, or sometimes" response.

*Academic reading and math grades:* For the purpose of this study, the academic reading and math grades were an average of the student's first and second marking period report card letter grades in reading and math. These grades are determined by averaging numeric (percentage) scores on classroom assessments and assignments throughout each marking period.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This literature review examines how teacher-student relationships can impact a student's education. The first section is an overview of teacher-student relationships including theories associated with building relationships, factors influencing relationships, and development of relationships throughout a child's school years. The second section examines the effects teacher-student relationships can have on education, including effects on behavior and academic achievement. The third section analyzes ways teachers can develop positive relationships with their students, including teacher behaviors and specific intervention programs.

#### **Overview of Teacher-Student Relationships**

As human beings, we are biologically wired to seek connections with other people. We are social beings. This need to connect begins at birth and develops as we grow older (Brown, 2010). Young children spend a good amount of time at school, where they try to make connections with peers and adults alike. Unfortunately, the importance of building positive relationships in school is often overlooked.

According to Hamre and Pianta (2006), "A sizeable literature provides evidence that strong and supportive relationships between teachers and students are fundamental to healthy development of all students in schools" (p. 49). These relationships can serve as strong foundations for learning for students of all ages. Researchers have only recently begun to look into teacher-student relationships and how important they are to the development in children and for success in school. Marzano (2011) reports that relationships are matter of student perception. Relationships between students and their teachers have very little to do with how a teacher feels



about a student. Teacher behavior is the biggest impact on how a student perceives the relationship. A student's perception of teacher behavior is what ultimately impacts the quality of relationship they have with that teacher. "Feeling a connection and sense of relatedness to a teacher represents an essential need of all children and teens" (Rimm-Kaufman, 2012, p.14).

There are numerous theories that support the development of positive teacher-student relationships. Three of these theories are attachment theory, self-systems theory, and Glasser's choice theory (Erwin, 2003). According to attachment theory, students use their positive relationships with adults to organize their life experiences (Rimm-Kaufman, 2012). Students who have close relationships with their teachers have a secure base to explore the classroom environment. These students often feel safe making mistakes and feel more comfortable approaching the academic challenges necessary for learning. A child's emotional security with their teacher can support their engagement in learning tasks (Roorda, Koomen, Split, & Oort, 2011).

Self-systems theory emphasizes the importance of a student's motivation in the classroom. Teacher-student relationships can improve this motivation, especially intrinsic motivation. According to self-systems theory, students come to the classroom with three basic psychological needs- competence, autonomy, and relatedness, all of which can be met through the relationships with their teachers (Rimm-Kaufman, 2012). To increase competence, teachers provide beneficial feedback to their students. Teachers can foster autonomy by knowing a student's interests and preferences, and by showing respect for these differences. Teachers can meet a student's need for relatedness by establishing a caring relationship and fostering positive social interactions within their classroom. These relationships positively impact students' social connection to school.

Erwin (2003) presents that Glasser's choice theory can help teachers increase students' intrinsic motivation by developing a positive relationship. When intrinsic motivation is improved, academic achievement is also increased. According to choice theory, students have five basic needs that constitute the source of intrinsic motivation- survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Teachers can meet these needs in their classrooms by ensuring that students feel a sense of belonging, feel physically and emotionally safe, feel that they have power over their personal growth, have freedom to make choices, and are able to have fun when learning. All of these needs can be met with a positive teacher-student relationship.

Several studies have found three main factors to be associated with positive teacher-student relationships- teacher characteristics, student characteristics, and external factors such as school organization (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Jerome & Pianta, 2008, Rimm-Kaufman, 2012). Some teacher characteristics make it easier to form positive relationships with their students. These characteristics include personality traits (such as being outgoing and friendly), positive feelings towards students, and their own relationship histories with teachers as well as other adults. These researchers have also found that teachers are more likely to develop positive relationships with students who share the same ethnic background. Teachers' years of experience and amount of education have been found to have no or little impact on the quality of their relationships with students. There is very little research on the importance of teacher gender in the formation of student-teacher relationships (Jerome & Pianta, 2008).

Jerome and Pianta (2008) and Rimm-Kaufman (2001) also looked at the impact of child characteristics on teacher-student relationships. They found that children's relationships with their teachers are impacted by a child's gender, race, socio-economic status, academic ability, and past relationship history. Research indicates that girls tend to have better relationships than

boys, children coming from less economically advantaged families are at risk for having poorer teacher relationship quality, and children who have greater academic ability have better relationships with their teachers. Students that have had problematic relationships with family members or past teachers tend to have poorer quality relationships with their current teachers. External characteristics, such as state and federal policies regarding education, school-wide behavior management plans, and classroom organization, can also impact the quality of relationships teachers can have with their students (Jerome & Pianta, 2008).

According to Hamre and Pianta (2006), "the need for connection between students and adults in the school setting remains strong from preschool to 12th grade" (p. 49). Teacher-student relationships in the primary grades provide a foundation for successful adaptation to the social and academic aspects of school. These relationships continue to be important in the middle grades. Support from teachers in transition times may be particularly salient. The relationships can help to maintain students' interest in academics and social situations, which can lead to better grades and positive peer relationships. Although time spent with individual teachers is at its lowest in high school, research supports that these relationships may be the most important predictors of student success. Positive teacher-student relationships lead to lower rates of emotional distress, suicidal ideation, violence, substance abuse, and early sexual activity in students. Hamre & Pianta also report that student-perceived teacher connection is the factor most closely associated with growth in achievement from 8th to 12th grade.

### **Effects of Teacher-Student Relationships on Education**

Positive teacher-student relationships have great impacts on education, specifically behavior and academic achievement. Behaviorally, students who report having a positive

relationship with their teacher are less likely to develop problematic behaviors outside of school such as substance abuse, violence, sexual activity, and suicide (Sulkowski, Demaray & Lazarus, 2012).

Positive teacher-student relationships can also impact how students behave in school. According to Rimm-Kaufman (2012), "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" (p. 3). Boynton and Boynton (2005) postulate that developing positive relationships with students is one of the most effective steps teachers can take to establish a positive discipline climate in the classroom. "Students will resist rules and procedures along with the consequent disciplinary actions if the foundation of a good relationship is lacking" (p.1). Positive teacher-student relationships can also decrease absenteeism, drop-out rates, and discipline issues (Brown, 2010). All of these behaviors can help lead to increased academic achievement.

Roorda, et al. (2011), conducted a study to determine the association between teacher-student relationships and engagement and achievement. The results of the study found positive teacher-student relationships were positively associated with both engagement and achievement, and negative teacher-student relationships were negatively associated with both engagement and achievement. However, they found stronger associations with engagement than achievement. This suggests the effects of teacher-student relationships on achievement is complex and both of those variables (relationships and achievement) are impacted by and impact engagement, which likely is positively associated with achievement. "Engaged students are attentive and participate in class discussions, exert effort in class activities, and exhibit interest and motivation to learn" (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012, p. 700).

Rimm-Kaufman (2012), cites research that shows poor teacher-student relationships correlating with an achievement gap between students. "First grade children who had poorer relationships with their teachers were less engaged in school and had lower academic achievement in second grade. African American children had poorer relationships with their teachers than children of other backgrounds" (p. 14). It is widely known that there is an achievement gap in our country between African American students and students of other ethnic backgrounds. Developing positive relationships with these students may help reduce this achievement gap.

### **Developing Positive Relationships with Students**

This review of the literature uncovered several tested strategies for teachers to improve their relationships with students. Numerous authors report similar techniques teachers can use to develop positive teacher-student relationships (Boynton & Boynton, 2005; Brown, 2010; Hamre & Pianta, 2006, Marzano, 2011; Rimm-Kaufman, 2012; Sterrett, 2012). These techniques include teachers having high expectations for all students, using positive communication, being friendly and caring, showing an interest in students' personal lives, and teachers letting students get to know them personally.

Across the board, researchers emphasize the importance of having high expectations for all students. In order to promote positive teacher-student relationships, teachers also need to communicate those high expectations to their students. Boynton and Boynton (2005) stress communicating high behavioral and academic expectations to all students, not just to high achievers. According to the researchers, "When you fail to recognize particular students, you can communicate a low level of confidence in their abilities" (p. 2). This can lead to a drop in

perception of the teacher-student relationship. Students need to feel that teachers expect them to achieve, regardless of their current abilities.

Appropriate communication is also key to developing positive relationships with students. This includes verbal and non-verbal communication. Teachers must converse positively and respectfully with students. Brown (2010) reports that teachers should never yell at or demean a student. She suggests, "[w]hen we incorporate good manners in our classrooms and maintain a consistent demeanor, we show respect and help our students understand and learn the power of a positive, healthy interaction" (p. 10). This high level of respect will help contribute to positive relationships in the classroom. Brown, Boynton and Boynton (2005) suggest that teacher frustration and stress can often lead to yelling and a decline of respect in the classroom. The researchers report, "frustration can have a devastating effect on teacher-student relationships, as it tends to cause educators to make irrational decisions" (p. 7). They suggest that teachers must be able to recognize signs of frustration and have a plan to reduce or prevent it.

Non-verbal communication is also important when building relationships with students. Students can perceive a teacher's non-verbal communication just as well as verbal communication. It can have an enormous impact on relationships. Brown (2010) emphasizes the power of a smile from a teacher since, "students (and even more so, students from poverty) rely heavily on non-verbal communication and are always watching those around them for their non-verbal cues" (p.9). A smile can help students perceive a teacher as friendly and caring.

Boynton and Boynton (2005), Marzano (2011), and Sterrett (2012), all advocate that being friendly and caring is one of the best techniques a teacher can use to create positive relationships with students. They emphasize being welcoming to students, listening to students,

empathizing with students, or even joking with students when appropriate. Marzano reports, "[m]any teacher behaviors promote this perception of friendliness" (Marzano, 2011, p. 83). Sterrett (2012) presented a case study where students were paired up with caring teachers to facilitate relationship building. He reports, "Teacher leadership was the catalyst, and students benefitted from knowing a specific adult at the school cared about them" (p. 74).

Another strategy presented to promote positive teacher-student relationships is showing an interest in students' personal lives. Teachers can know students by name (secondary teachers), ask them what they thought about recent events, ask them about their interests or inquire how school is going for them. This can help students know that the teacher is interested in them and their well being, which can promote a positive relationship (Marzano, 2011). It is also important for teachers to show genuine interest in students' responses by spending time listening, asking follow-up questions, and remembering key information, such as the name of a sports team they like or the class they are having a hard time in. Students can easily pick up on whether or not a teacher is genuinely interested in them, and this can impact their perceptions of the relationship (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

Brown (2010) also presents the idea of letting the students get to know you as a teacher. She suggests letting students ask questions about the teacher's life and setting aside class time to answer some of these questions. This can help students see their teacher as a real person and perceive a positive relationship with that teacher. Some teachers fear this strategy because they feel it may lead to a decrease in discipline in the classroom. Brown (2010) counters that with, "the fact is, the more comfortable your students are with you, the more relaxed and receptive they will be" (p. 9).

Jerome and Pianta (2008) and Rimm-Kaufman (2012) present a number of interventions designed to target teacher-student relationships and create more caring schools and classroom communities. These intervention programs include the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum, Banking Time, My Teaching Partner intervention, the Child Development Project (CDP), and the Responsive Classroom (RC) approach. The PATHS curriculum, created by the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, focuses on increasing student awareness of their emotions (Rimm-Kaufman, 2012). Banking Time trains teachers to conduct one-on-one play sessions with students designed to enhance teacher-child relationship quality. My Teaching Partner pairs teachers with a consultant who trains the teacher to improve classroom quality in a number of areas including teacher-student relationships (Jerome & Pianta, 2008). The CDP focuses on fostering caring relationships, including students in decision-making and teaching students to better understand the feelings, needs, and perspectives of others (Rimm-Kaufman, 2012). The RC approach is a classroom-based intervention designed to integrate social and academic learning. Research has shown that teachers using RC practices had closer relationships with students in their classrooms (Rimm-Kaufman, 2012).

### **Summary**

This review of literature has discussed an overview of teacher-student relationships, their impact on education, and techniques for developing positive teacher-student relationships. Teachers can use a variety of strategies and techniques to develop and promote positive relationships with students in their classrooms. The research shows a positive correlation between positive teacher-student relationships, student behavior and academic achievement. If students perceive a positive relationship with their teacher, they are more likely to be successful in school, and in turn, successful in life.



## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

#### **Design**

The design used to conduct this research was a correlational study. This study examined the relationship between fifth grade student responses to ten statements on a teacher-student relationship questionnaire and their first semester reading and math grades on their report cards. This study included 115 fifth grade students at a suburban elementary school in Annapolis, MD. In this study, the dependant variable was students' reading and math grades for the first semester. The independent variable was their perception of their relationship with their teacher.

#### **Participants**

This study included one hundred fifteen fifth grade students at a suburban elementary school in Annapolis, MD. The specific school in this study houses seven hundred five students, kindergarten through fifth grade. The school is made up of 52% male students and 48% female students. Enrollment is 79% White, 4% African American, 8% Hispanic, 2% Asian and 7% two or more races. On the 2012 Maryland State Assessment, 95% or more of students in grades three through five achieved proficient or advanced in both math and reading.

There are five different fifth grade classes at the school. Each class participated in the questionnaire. The fifth grade is made up of 115 students.

Fifty-five percent of these students are male and 45% female. Fifth grade enrollment is 80% white, 2% African American, 6% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 9% two or more races. On the

2012, 4<sup>th</sup> grade Maryland State Assessment, greater than 95% of these students achieved proficient or advanced in both math and reading.

### **Instrument**

The questionnaire used in this research study was specifically created for the study by the researcher (Appendix A). It consisted of ten statements where students responded, “yes, no, or sometimes.” Each question asked students to think about an aspect of their relationship with their teacher. The statements included: I like coming to this class. My teacher treats me with respect. I respect my teacher. My teacher cares about me. My teacher believes I can learn. My teacher thinks I will be successful in school and in life. My teacher listens to my ideas. I am recognized when I do good work. My teacher cares about my interests. I have a good relationship with my teacher.

### **Procedure**

The questionnaire was administered to each fifth grade class at the end of the second marking period, which is also the end of the first semester. The researcher visited each class individually and explained the directions of the survey. The students were told that this was an anonymous survey and their responses would not be held against them in the classroom. The questionnaires were numbered so student responses could be matched up with their reading and math grades.

Once all questionnaires were collected, the researcher collected first semester report cards for each student. The results from the questionnaire and the students’ first semester reading and math grades were collected on an Excel spreadsheet. All ten responses were recorded for all 115

students. First semester reading and math grades were an average of their first and second marking period grades.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between fifth grade student responses to ten statements on a teacher-student relationship questionnaire and their first semester reading and math grades on their report cards.

The relationships between the students' perceptions of the student-teacher relationship as measured by the Elementary Teacher Student Relationship Survey and their reading and math grades was analyzed using a correlation research design. The Pearson Correlations are reported in Table I.

Table I

Pearson Correlation of Student-Teacher Relationship and Reading and Math Grades

	Reading		Math	
	Correlation	Significance	Correlation	Significance
Survey	0.295	.001*	0.251	.007*

\* $p \leq 0.007$

The null hypothesis that student-teacher relationships will not be related to reading and math grades is rejected.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The researcher set out to determine if there was a relationship between the student-teacher relationship, as measured by student perception of the relationship, and student achievement, as measured by reading and math report card grades. The null hypothesis stated the absence of a relationship between fifth grade students' perceptions of their relationship with their teacher and their school performance. The results of this study rejected the null hypothesis and showed a small positive correlation between student-teacher relationships and student achievement (0.295 in reading and 0.251 in mathematics.) Although it was a small positive correlation, the results were statistically significant.

#### **Implications of Results**

This study provides evidence of the fundamental responsibility and importance of teachers to form positive relationships with their students. Although small, the positive correlation between students' perception of the relationship with their teacher and their reading and math achievement grades indicates that students who perceive their relationships with their teachers as positive have higher achievement scores. Students who feel that their teacher cares about them and their success in school are more likely to have higher grades in both reading and math. Teachers should employ techniques that create these positive relationships daily in their classrooms on top of their curriculum and teaching techniques to ensure positive academic achievement.

### **Threats to Validity**

There were threats to validity present in this study. Since this was a correlational study looking for relationships between teacher-student relationships and achievement grades, one cannot be sure whether success determines a student's perception of their relationship with their teacher or vice versa. Students may achieve higher because of a positive student-teacher relationship, or students who have high achievement may view their student-teacher relationship in a more positive way. This study does not prove either way, it just found a relationship between the two.

This study also examined a fifth grade class with a limited range of academic achievement. Most students in the study achieved grades in the A or B range; there were not many under-achieving students to study. Although there were a few students who were earning D's and E's in reading and math, there were more high-achieving students participating in the study. This may have a significant impact on the results of the research study.

Finally, students' perceptions of their relationship with their teachers can be situational. Students having a bad day at the time of the survey may have reported a lower relationship with their teachers, and students having a good day may have reported a higher relationship. There was one student in particular who had just been reprimanded for poor behavior in class who rated their teacher-student relationship very poorly, perhaps because of this situation. Had the survey been given on a different day, the results from the student may have been significantly different.

### **Comparison to Other Research**

Many other studies have been conducted that analyze the relationship between the student-teacher relationship and academic achievement. Roorda and Koomen (2011) also

conducted a research study examining at the relationship between teacher-student relationships and academic achievement. They also found positive correlations between the teacher-student relationship and academic achievement. Roorda and Koomen examined this relationship through the lens of student grades representing student achievement and student test scores representing student achievement. They found that grades versus test scores had a significant effect on the associating between positive relationships and achievement.

Results from this study also support the research found by Hamre and Pianta (2006). They report, “there is strong evidence that relationships with adults in these settings [schools] are among the most important predictors of student success” (p. 50). Hamre and Pianta attribute these results to positive relationships maintaining student’s interests in academic pursuits which in turn lead to better grades in school. They also look at how student-teacher relationships progress throughout a child’s schooling, and found that although student-teacher relationships seemed to be more important in the younger, primary years of schooling, they also had impacts during transitional years (elementary to middle school and middle school to high school) and during secondary schooling.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

One suggestion for future research in this area is to examine the relationship between academic achievement and teacher-student relationships more closely to determine the causation. One may look at the question, “Do student-teacher relationships cause higher academic achievement or does higher academic achievement cause better student-teacher relationships?” This was a question unanswered by this study. Researchers may choose to create an experimental study to determine the causation of the two. This could change the way teachers try to create

positive relationships with their students. It may also provide answers to the question, “Do positive relationships with students cause higher academic achievement?” This could prove or disprove many of the theories suggested by current literature.

Researchers may also be interested in examining actual techniques used to create positive student-teacher relationships and their effects on academic achievement. For example, Sterrett (2012), presents the idea of maintaining high expectations of all students to promote teacher-student relationships. A researcher may choose to conduct an experimental study to determine the effectiveness of this technique on creating positive student-teacher relationships and its effect on student achievement.



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## APPENDIX A

### Elementary Teacher-Student Relationship Survey

**Directions:** Think about the following questions about your relationship with your teacher. Place a check in the column that best fits your response. Please remember to be honest!

	Yes	Sometimes	No
1. I like coming to this class.			
2. My teacher treats me with respect.			
3. I respect my teacher.			
4. My teacher cares about me.			
5. My teacher believes I can learn.			
6. My teacher thinks I will be successful in school and in life.			
7. My teacher listens to my ideas.			
8. I am recognized when I do good work.			
9. My teacher cares about my interests.			
10. I have a good relationship with my teacher.			