Social Relations within the School and Home Environment: The Impact on Student Health and Achievement

David Farrugia

Abstract

The scope of this article is to draw on some of the research studies that demonstrate to what extent the type and level of social relations affect student achievement and well-being. Social relations may vary in nature from interpersonal to intrapersonal, among peers or with educators in the school social setting, as well as in the immediate circle of internal family relationships. Teachers have a significant impact on the academic achievement and well-being of students, so much so that the nature of a teacher-student relationship may be critical in determining whether a student perceives early school leaving intentions (Bergeron, Chouinard & Janosz, 2011). The level of parental involvement may also play a role in affecting academic achievement. Distressful relationships trigger a physiological response that might have a long-term negative impact on the condition of one's health during adulthood (Kim, 2021). Similarly, going through traumatic experiences during childhood and adolescence tends to lower and impoverish the social capital and experiences in the future, as in healthy marriages, friendships and perceived meaning of life (Kim, 2021). In addition, a number of students with special educational needs (SEN) find it harder to go beyond mere physical inclusion in the classroom. For this reason, this article will put forward some recommendations based on research studies that will help to guide future direction in this area, effectively aiming to improve the social-relational safety at school and at home.

1. INTRODUCTION

Attempts to answer questions about student performance, academic achievement and well-being cannot be done without just attention to the nature of students' social relations. Two facets emerge within this aspect: on one side of the coin is the increased effort for social-emotional learning and safety to take place at school, on the other side lies the challenging social context experienced in schools, particularly by at-risk students.

Literature in this field points to how social relations exert an influence on student learning and development. The effect manifests itself clearly in student academic achievement. Stewart (2008) demonstrates how social relations among students as well as the level of parental involvement play a significant role in the academic achievement of students. The nature of students' interpersonal relationships with other peers, teachers and staff, as well as their relationships at home, not only have an impact on their academic outcomes but also on their well-being and development. It can be argued that while the physical environment may influence the physical safety of students, likewise, social relations within the home-school environment affect the emotional safety of students. Then as well, the study by Lee et. al (2000) about schools' enrolment size shows how large schools were related to worrying feelings of anonymity among school members, while smaller schools were linked to social relations of a more personal nature.

Albeit the fact that social relations are ordinally present at school and home, it is the degree and kind of these experiences that may influence students' level of social and emotional safety in both environments.

2. SOCIAL RELATIONS AT SCHOOL: TEACHER-STUDENT and STUDENT-STUDENT RELATIONS

At school, students are exposed to different types of relationships that are continuously being re-established, while their needs are meanwhile being negotiated. Relationships may be with other peers, teachers, the senior leadership team, and perhaps, with other professionals servicing in school. Thus, the school can be understood as a significant social setting whereby children and adolescents relate with others for a substantial part of their day (Crosnoe, 2011).

2.1 Teacher-Student Relations

As Backman *et al.* (2012) say, an effective learning environment is a classroom as a place for learning and a learning environment that goes beyond the classroom. In fact, as Roorda et al. (2011) claim, a significant association exists between this type of relationship and academic outcomes. This association is affirmed as positive in other studies such as that by Maldonado-Carreño and Votruba-Drzal (2011) and that by Gregory and Weinstein (2004), whereby the latter claimed that the teacher-student relation is the most influential factor in academic achievement.

Just as with any other relationship, the teacher-student relationship has to be based on love and care. As the adults in the classroom environment are the teachers, it should be the teacher who should take the first initiative. Students then learn how to model this behaviour in order to enrich this mutual relationship of trust. In fact, "*strong and supportive relationships between teachers and students are fundamental to the healthy development of all students in school* (Hamre & Pianta, 2006, pg. 49). This relationship needs to be based on positive terms as it is helps to uncover at an early stage whether students have academic or behavioural issues. It also helps the learners to enjoy schooling more and get along better with their peers. In fact, this relationship influences the way they relate and socialise with other same-age peers. This relationship is a secure base for young children because they know that if things get difficult or they are upset, they can count on their teacher. Hamre and Pianta (2006) also show that a positive teacher-student relationship decreases student dropout percentages, and in turn, results in a higher job satisfaction for teachers themselves.

On the other hand, students may feel there is a negative relationship with feelings of humiliation, being ignored and being used by the teacher during lessons as an example for the rest of the class. When teachers foster positive teacher-student relationships that encompasses mutual respect, caring and closeness, students feel worthier in class and in life (Hajdukova, Hornby, & Cushman, 2014).

2.1.1 Impact on Student Academic Achievement

Research in this area has proved that the way students experience their social processes at school has a strong impact on their academic achievement (Konishi, Hymel, Zumbo & Li, 2010). For instance, various international studies, such as that by PISA (OECD, 2017) demonstrate how students who tend to be disengaged from the school community and who might have unsupportive teachers, tend to score lower in tests and assessments.

Other studies show to what extent teachers are influential in the future of students and their education. As social agents, teachers have a significant determining role in the way students presume dropout intentions. In fact, a strong predictor of student disengagement and early school leaving has been attributed to teachers' negative relationship with students (Bergeron, Chouinard & Janosz, 2011).

2.1.2 Impact on Student Mental Health and Well-Being

In turn, various studies report a correlation between the achievement and well-being of students. The study by Kirkcaldy, Furnham and Siefen (2004) is an example where a positive correlation with life satisfaction is demonstrated after analysing the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). At school, students have to establish relationships with their teachers and the management team, and it is here that adult figures are key in creating a positive learning environment. Positive and healthy teacher-student relationships not only support a learning environment where students can grow socially and emotionally but may also act as key resource at times when students face a crisis in life (Konishi & Wong, 2018).

2.2 Student-Student Relations

At school, students also have to form relationships with their peers. They start to seek new relationships as soon as they become independent from their parents (Konishi & Wong, 2018). In this socialisation process, bullying and harassment are often the common phenomena that negatively influence the academic achievement and well-being of students.

The social relations at school among peers have a strong impact on student academic performance, as found in the study by Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich and Gullotta

(2015). Students who belong with their school and feel supported by other social agents have increased levels of motivation to succeed academically (Kiuru et al., 2015). Therefore, schools that inculcate and lay the grounds for social conditions that enable healthy relationships among students are characterized by authentic inclusive education (Pijl, Frostad, & Flem, 2008).

2.3 Relations with Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Social interactions constitute an important feature for social participation to take place between children with SEN and other students in the class. The presence of social interactions implies that children with SEN are socially acceptable by other children in an effort to build genuine friendships and enhance the social participation process (Garrote, Sermier Dessemontet & Moser Opitz, 2017). The latter study highlights a growing body of literature which demonstrates how children with SEN are socially rejected by other primary school children, and this doesn't happen only throughout the school year but also during the recess (Frederickson et al., 2007). Additionally, Pijl, Frostad, & Flem (2008) show how physical inclusion alone does not necessarily imply social inclusion, and thus, students with SEN need further help in integrating and being part of a social group.

Social interaction and acceptance also seems to be reliant on academic achievement, to such a degree that students with SEN and students with low achievement are more apt to be socially excluded (Garrote, Sermier Dessemontet & Moser Opitz, 2017). In like manner, children with behavioural difficulties are more likely to be rejected by their friends than children with learning or sensory difficulties. Therefore, social acceptance of students with SEN is a contingent phenomenon on one's social behaviour (Garrote, Sermier Dessemontet & Moser Opitz, 2017; Avramidis, 2013).

2.4 Impact on Student Health During Adulthood

Physiological processes are known to be responsible for determining one's physical health according to the type of social experiences with other children and teachers (Kim, 2021). Various studies are listed by Kim (2021) to show how positive and negative relationships are factors which determine whether body systems function in a healthy way (see Uchino, Bowen, Kent de Grey, Mikel, & Fisher, 2018 in Kim, 2021). Distressful social relationships at school lead to stress, which in turn initiate a physiological response to counteract such force (Condon,

2018). The struggle to maintain healthy relationships at school is usually realized in deprived social processes such as healthy marriages (Thoits, 2011). On the contrary, when students establish supportive relationships at school, they are more inclined to comprehend the meaning of their life and additionally, a healthy physiological outcome (Kim, 2021).

When children develop healthy relationships with their parents and cultivate other social relations during their developmental stages of childhood and adolescence, children are more likely to have favourable health outcomes when they grow up (Umberson, Crosnoe, & Reczek, 2010). Negative social experiences, such as parental divorce, has a significant impact on children's physical and psychological health later on in life (Danese et al., 2007). Relations with students and with teachers have a strong effect on adult health (Kim, 2020). Effectively, the identification of students who are at risk of early school dropout can be carried out as early as the beginning of their elementary schooling (Davis & Dupper, 2004).

3. SOCIAL RELATIONS AT HOME

The learning process and development do not cease to continue at the school environment but keep on progressing at home (Konishi & Wong, 2018). According to the Social Learning Theory by Bandura back in 1977, the way the family interacts together has an impact on the development of the child and academic achievement as well as social learning and the cognitive framework. The children are engaged in the process of observational learning whereby they learn behaviour through observation of their environment. In this physical and social environment, children critically observe the influential parent models and then imitate this behaviour. Therefore, the home environment and the relationships within it have an influence on the psychology and emotion of the child.

Achievement is also influenced by family characteristics such as the parental achievement and their socio-economic status (Eivers, 2020). Family involvement also acts as a reciprocal relationship between the home and school environment with the purpose of having the same responsibilities and intentions towards the healthy development and learning of the child (Raftery, Grolnick & Flamm, 2012). For this reason, educational research has confirmed the impact of the family particularly that of parents, on student academic achievement, even though other variables may play a role, such as the parenting style, their attitudes and

expectations for their children. Different family contexts and parents' academic and social background may also have an effect on student achievement.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

The results and findings from the study carried out by Farrugia (2019) about the impact of conditions for learning on student academic achievement reveal how various conditions should be improved in the school and home environment. In this study, 205 primary and secondary school students in Malta were asked to describe how physical and social conditions influence their learning. The study shows how students' social relations are also involved in the learning process and thus confirms that there is a significant impact of conditions for learning on student learning. When asked to suggest what could be done to improve conditions, secondary school students not only mentioned the introduction of air conditions in their classrooms but also referred to more individual attention to improve their relations. This finding confirms the literature about adolescents who long for supportive and healthy relationships with adults at school.

For this reason, schools should be vigilant to self-assess their own philosophical and mission statement and to what extent it is actualized in their policies and day-to-day approaches (Davis & Dupper, 2004). Rather than attributing a successful school to high annual test results and above-the-mean scores, schools should attempt to monitor the nature of teacher-student relationships and provide teachers with substantial professional development on how to maintain interpersonal relationships with students (Kim, 2021).

Additionally, schools should aim to enhance the social participation and acceptance of students with SEN through appropriate and evidence-based interventions, as recommended by scientific literature (Garrote, Sermier Dessemontet & Moser Opitz, 2017). Finally, there should be increased efforts to develop a more robust framework that calls for schools to be further linked with the home environment. Schools should initiate the first step toward modelling of building supportive relationships with children. Thus, it would also be worth enquiring whether schools are supporting differences in parental social positions and the different parent-student relations which exist within the home environment.

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