IMPROVING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS FOR ESSENTIAL SUPPORT FOR LEARNING IN NIGERIA'S SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This literature-based paper x-rays the importance of positive teacher-student relationship for essential support needed by Social Studies students for their academic achievement. The paper explored the concepts of teacher-student relationship and positive teacher-student relationships. We went further to the theoretical perspective by exploring three theories; the attachment theory, the social cognitive theory and the self-system theory that explained to us why students behave in certain ways. Strategies that could help Social Studies teachers to improve on their teacher- student relationship skills and practices were explored. The authors concluded by emphasizing the importance of healthy and positive teacher-student relationship and recommended that teachers should endeavour to update their skills through conferences, seminars and workshops. It should be noted that student-teacher and teacher-student relationships are used interchangeably in this article.

Keywords: Social Studies, Teacher-Student Relationship, Academic Achievement.

INTRODUCTION

Education is the bedrock of development of any nation that wishes to live above her limitations. The Nigeria school curriculum is designed in a way that it prepares an individual learner to fit into the society after passing through the school system. Social Studies being one of the subjects taught in junior secondary schools in Nigeria refer to the education of man and his immediate location. The National council for Social Studies (1994) defined Social Studies as a cohesive study of social sciences and humanities aim at improving public proficiency.

Social Studies in Nigeria is meant to develop a responsible citizen in a democratic society that is diverse culturally and equips them so that they can make sound judgements and take adequate actions that will lead to the development of the physical environment and the sustainable development of the human society.

Social Studies encompasses the study of relationships between people and people and between people and the environment. It recognizes the challenges and benefits of living in a diverse cultural and ideological society. Students develop unique skills and an analytical awareness of the human circumstances and develop dimensional arrangements and the processes and events that informs them based on dedicated investigations and studies within Social Studies.

Social Studies prepares the students for career, higher education and civic life. It emphasizes skills and practices as preparation for democratic decision making among other things. It is

obvious then that when Social Studies is not thought well, you get people not well informed and history is redirected.

Lemchi (2001) noted that students are losing interest in Social Studies subject and one of the reasons among other reasons is as a result of lack of teacher-student relationship. Carlivati (2001) is also of the opinion that adolescent attachment, peer relationships and school success are a predictor, mediator, and moderator to student-teacher relationship in social studies academic success in schools.

Painta, (2003) defined student-teacher relationship as the bond that links the interaction between teachers and students within and outside the academic environment. These relationships according to him involve closeness, conflict and dependency. He went further to define Closeness as warm interactions and open communication between students and teachers and Conflict to be negativity and discord in the process of learning between students and teachers, while Dependency in his words has to do with student's clinginess and tendency to over-rely on the teacher to learn.

Harter (2012) said that student-teacher relationship can influence students' self-concept positively especially in the aspect of self-evaluation. Wentzel, (2009) defined student-teacher relationship as the nature and quality of students' level of affection with their teachers to play important and central role in inspiring and engaging them to learn. Student-teacher relationship can also be the emotional support from the teachers to the students.

Social Studies teachers are just as likely to experience student motivational problems as are teachers in other content areas. Wetling and Maccalin (2015) suggested a few reasons he believes teachers in the United States of America may face more challenges now than before in motivating students. These are also applicable to Nigeria's teachers. According to him, one source of motivational problems stem from the problems in American society that are found in too many American families. Poverty, divorce, one-parent families, and dysfunctional families sometimes create situations that cause young people to focus their time and attention on dealing with personal problems rather than classroom subjects.

Another source of motivational problems he mentioned is the effort to keep as many students as possible in school that has been partially successful. This according to him has resulted in students remaining in school who at one time would have either dropped out or have been removed. He is of the opinion that although the goal of keeping as many students as possible in school is worthy but it can lead to having more students in the classroom who lack a sense of direction and purpose, and hence a low level of motivation for learning. This is also the case in Nigeria's school system where we have a lot of students who are not interested in anything that is being done in the school. They come to school very late, they do not do their Assignments or HomeWorks and always absent minded when classes are going on.

With the understanding that the challenge of motivating students may be more difficult than it once was, the literature from research and classroom practice related to motivation always mentions the quality of teacher-student relationships as an important factor. Good quality relationships can motivate students to be active participants in the teaching and learning process which will lead to them not being so much involved in disruptive behaviors (Rimm-Kaufman and Sandolis 2011).

POSITIVE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

Many characteristics define a positive relationship and create ways on how to establish good student-teacher relationships. Any teacher who has these good qualities are always seen as the student's favourite teachers. Some of these qualities or characteristics are good communication skills, respect for students and colleagues, student equality, patient and positive attitude, and frequent praise.

According to Rimm-Kaufman and Sandolis (2011), one of the coolest and best inspirational relationships is that of a devoted and motivated teacher and a willing student. Most of us as students has a favourite teacher, and those we dislike. How teacher-student relationships were developed and nurtured makes us to still admire the relationships and have strong feelings of respect and affection or a displeasure for those people who were responsible for educating us. The ability to maintain a positive strong relationship between students and teachers may be difficult and challenging but with good and strong learning environment it can be easily accomplished. The learning and learning process is not a one-way process. An effective and efficient learning environment is one where students and teachers learn from each other. While students learn a subject from a teacher, the teacher through insights from the students learns how to improve on her teaching skills to make the lessons more interesting.

We know that not all students are the same. Some grasp the concepts taught quickly and participate actively in the learning process, others may be slow in grasping the concepts because they may be unconcerned, apprehensive or even outright unruly. This puts increased responsibility on a teacher to create an atmosphere which is conducive to create an interesting learning process. The teacher is seen as a sculptor and the student the raw clay, and it is the duty of the sculptor to mould the clay into a masterpiece.

Negative teacher-student relationships are stressful and irritating for both teachers and students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Lisonbee, Mize, Payne, & Granger, 2008) and can be detrimental to students' academic and social-emotional development (McCormick & O'Connor, 2014; O'Connor, Collins, & Supplee, 2012).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Below is a look at three theories that explains why students behave differently in our classrooms and how we can through our relationships with them enhance their learning. These theories are; attachment theory, social cognitive theory and self-system theory

ATTACHMENT THEORY

This theory describes how students make use of their positive relationships with adults to coordinate their experiences. O'Connor & McCartney (2007) believed that central to this theory is that students with close relationships with their teachers view them as what they described as a "secure base" from which to explore the classroom environment. They went further to say that in practice, students with this "secure base" feel safe when making mistakes and feel more comfortable accepting the academic challenges necessary for learning. Strong teacher-student relationships can even act as a cushion against the likely negative effects that insecure parent-child attachment can have on students' academic achievement (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007).

SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY

Social cognitive theory postulates that students evolve a wide range of skills simply by observing other people execute those skills. In other words, modeling behavior can be a

positive and effective method of teaching. If we apply this to the classroom environment, teachers play a crucial role as figures that model good social behavior and communication skills from which students can learn. This theory also tells us the importance of feedback, assistance and incentive from teachers in relation to student performance. Teachers as role models help control student's behavior.

SELF-SYSTEM THEORY

Self-System theory stresses the importance of students' motivation and the importance of teacher-student relationships (Harter, 2012; McCombs, 1986). According to Deci and Ryan (2002) Students come to the classroom with three basic psychological needs — *competence*, *autonomy* and *relatedness* — all of which can be met in a classroom through students' interactions with teachers and with the learning environment (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Classroom environment that cultivate the feelings of competence, autonomy and relatedness will be able to build the commitment and motivation vital for academic learning and achievement.

a. *Competence* refers to a student's need to feel suited of academic work.
b. *Autonomy* suggests a feeling of having a preference and capability of decision making
c. *Relatedness* implies that a student feels socially linked to teachers and peers.

If teacher-student relationship is strong and positive, students will be able to meet these needs. Teachers offer feedback to students to support their feelings of competence. Teachers who know their students' interests and preferences, and show regard and respect for these individual differences, bolster students' feelings of autonomy. Teachers who establish a personal and caring relationship and foster positive social interactions within their classrooms meet their students' needs for relatedness (or social connection to school). Taken together, effective teacher-student relationships confirm to students that teachers care for them and support their academic efforts. (Deci and Ryan 2002).

STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING POSITIVE TEACHER STUDENT RELATIONSHIP IN A SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

Here are some ways based on available literature on classroom practices and research that can help to improve teacher-student relationships in a typical Nigeria's Social Studies Classroom.

Know your students by name. At the beginning of the term, may be the first or the second day of your class you can distribute an information sheet. The sheet can request student's name, the name they prefer to be called by, where they live, interests or hobbies, etc. You can also have them come before the whole class and introduce themselves. As they do this, you will have the opportunity to focus on one student at a time and ask some follow-up questions. This will help you to know more about each student and help you communicate your interest in them. Make effort to call them by their names and strive to figure out what they need to succeed in school.

Positive classroom climate. Help your students to link the concepts and skills they are learning to their own experiences. Make your class interactive and full of fun and create activities that inculcates a sense of community so that the students have an opportunity to see the connections between what they already know and the new things they are learning, and also have the time to enjoy being with the teacher and the other students. Social and emotional support for learning should be provided by the teacher.

According to Donahue, Perry & Weinstein, (2003) Wentzel, (2010) The teacher should create a positive climate in his or classroom by focusing on not only improving the relationship with the students but also on enhancing the relationships among the students.

Behavior Modeling. Students notice all that we do both inside and outside the classroom. Be aware that you are modeling behavior for your students, whether intentional or not. Students notice our interaction style, how we show warmth and respect to them and to other people in the school. They usually will model their own behavior after your behavior.

Students notice positive strategies, such as taking a deep breath or talking about your frustrations, they notice also negative strategies such as yelling at students or making mean or disrespectful jokes about colleagues (Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013). Be conscious of the fact that students will usually embrace the strategies that you use.

Give Students Relevant Feedback. Pay attention to the way you give feedback to your students. I will suggest you make a video of your teaching and watch the video of your own teaching. This will help you know if you are doing the following;

- Giving students meaningful feedback that shows you care about them and their learning.
- Focusing in your conversations on what your students have accomplished,
- If your body language, expression of your face and tone of voice show your students that you are interested in them as people too.
- Whether you are modeling a different thing from what you are telling your students
- If you are paying more attention to some students more than others
- And also, to know if the feedback you give to your students conveys the message that you are supporting their learning and that you care about them.

Make extra endeavor to establish and maintain relationships with difficult students

Don't lose interest too quickly on your efforts to develop positive relationships with difficult students. These students will benefit from a good teacher-student relationship as much or more than their easier-to-get-along-with peers (Baker, 2006; Birch & Ladd, 1998).

Problematic students need more energy on the teachers ʼpart. This is so because, you may need to spend time with them individually to get to know them better and understand their interests and what motivates them. This will help them develop trust in you and help you construct your instruction in a way that it will motivate as well as arouse their interest. Research on high school students who have repeated, and excessive discipline problems shows that when adolescents perceive their teachers are trustworthy people, they show less disobedient behavior (Gregory & Ripski, 2008). Constant teacher-student conflict throughout the elementary years increases the possibility that children will display negative manifesting behaviors (O'Connor et al., 2012).

If you have a particularly problematic student, you can try the activity suggested by Wlodkowski (1999). Every day for two weeks, spend two minutes talking with the student. During your conversation, say something positive about the student. Over the course of the two weeks, try to change the equilibrium of the conversation so that the student does more of the talking. It is important for teachers to form close relationships at an early age with children at-risk for behavioral problems.

Organize values analysis discussion of some event or topic. In this activity, lay down some rules that must be followed, like when anyone is speaking, everyone listens and pays attention to the speaker. Allow them to ask questions to help clarify what a student is saying, but they cannot challenge or disagree with the speaker. Other students can react by expressing their opinions but should not be allowed to directly disagree with each other.

For example, in a Social Studies class we could ask students to read about and discuss the Nigeria's civil war. Have students take a position on whether they favor or disapprove of the war. Then have them explore the reasons for and against their decisions. In making students to listen to each other and the teacher, you can explain why it is important to listen carefully to others. Review with them about respect and how they perceive it when others listen carefully to what they have to say. As Social Studies teachers we know that teaching and understanding good interpersonal communication are important goals in Social Studies

Do not have favorite Students*. It is true that* some students are more likeable than others but as a Social Studies teacher you should make sure that some students do not get special privileges because of your feelings toward them. Try to give all students an equal opportunity to participate in tasks and responsibilities. This will help you with the opportunity to strengthen your relationship with the students by showing trust in them, as well as giving you the opportunity to appreciate them for what they have done.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Student-teacher relationship is a very important factor when it comes to student's academic success. Research has shown that one of the major responsibilities of the 21st century teacher is to build positive and healthy relationship with the students as it has a significant effect on the academic success of students especially in Social Studies. Social Studies teachers can build a positive student-teacher relationship and sustain a high academic success of their students by updating their skills through conferences, workshop and seminars on classroom management, motivation skills, teacher-student relationship skills and practices.

We have discussed only a few of the many activities that teachers can use to improve teacher-student relationships in a typical Nigeria's Social Studies classroom for essential support. Research and practice indicate that students will become more motivated and the teacher will have fewer disciplinary problems if strong and positive teacher-student relationship exists. The most important part of it is that, both the teacher and the students will most likely experience an increased sense of pleasure from the time spent in the classroom.

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