PACE

COMMENTARY

How Learning About Commonalities Can Improve Student-Teacher Relationships and Boost Achievement at School

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PUBLISHED: May 17, 2016

Relationships to teachers are fundamental to the educational success of middle and high school students. Compared to those with more strained social connections, adolescents who have positive relationships with their instructors feel better about school, behave better in class, and achieve more in their studies. But improving teacher-student relationships poses a substantial challenge. Teens often lack the motivation to develop close personal ties with their teachers—and teachers often find themselves preoccupied with conveying the Common Core curriculum, prepping their charges for standardized tests, and administrative duties at school.

In this study, my colleagues and I investigated a way to improve teacher-student relationships based on the social-psychological tenet that people are more motivated to connect with others whom they perceive as similar. In an experiment conducted in dozens of 9th grade classrooms in a large high school, we randomly assigned students and teachers to different groups, where some would be told that they had important beliefs, attitudes, and values in common, while others would not hear this message. Our results show that when people learned that they shared beliefs and values, their relationships improved—and so did student achievement.

AN EXPERIMENT TO INVESTIGATE IF RELATIONSHIPS CAN BE IMPROVED

Many previous research studies have demonstrated that people who share beliefs or characteristics enjoy better relationships. However, most schools allocate students to classroom teachers more or less at random, such that commonalities may or may not occur. As researchers, we could not change this reality. Instead, we focused on influencing teachers' and students' *perceptions* of what they had in common.

In our study, teachers and students responded to about 30 survey questions asking about personal characteristics, learning preferences, and values. By asking about a large number of items we were able to find five things in common for each teacher-student pair, and we could then direct students' and teachers' attention to those beliefs or values that they shared. To test whether learning about commonalities mattered, we varied the feedback we presented to four different groups:

- In group one, our "control group," neither students nor teachers received feedback.
- In group two, only the students were told about five things they had in common with their teacher.
- In group three, only teachers were told about five things they had in common with their students.
- In group four, both students and teachers learned about the five things they had in common.

A follow-up survey was later conducted to see if relationships between teachers and students had changed. We also had access to the grades students earned in the relevant class period.

THOUGHT-PROVOKING RESULTS

By the end of the grading period, we recorded a number of suggestive findings:

- Teachers and students who had been told that they shared five commonalities perceived themselves as being more similar.
- Teachers who had learned that they shared commonalities with their students rated their relationships with those students more positively. In contrast, students who learned they shared commonalities did not significantly alter their perceptions of their relationships with their teacher.
- When teachers learned about commonalities, students earned higher grades in the relevant class.

Additional analyses led us to an interesting, albeit speculative, conclusion. We examined results for the white and Asian students, who are often well-served in schools, separately from the results for black and Latino students, who have been historically underserved. In doing so, we discovered that providing feedback about commonalities was most effective in improving teachers' relationships with the black and Latino students. Furthermore, the grades of the historically underserved students improved when their teachers learned about these commonalities. Indeed, telling teachers what they shared with their students reduced the usual gap in grades between well-served versus underserved groups of students by more than 60%. Specifically, the grades assigned to black and Latino students in these treatment groups improved from less than a B- to a B.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Our findings are preliminary, but they underscore how important teacher-student relationships can be for relationships and achievement—and they raise a host of important possibilities.

- Given how little it costs in time and money to influence the motivations and social ties of students to their teachers, shouldn't school leaders undertake more such efforts?
- Can improved social ties and motivations help to reduce persistent racial and class gaps in U.S. school systems?
- Beyond schools, what other major societal challenges might be addressed by making people aware of the values, ideas, and characteristics they share? In any setting where collaboration matters—in short, in all communities and workplaces—much progress can surely be made by helping people learn more about and pay closer attention to what they share, not just how they differ or disagree.

The full study is in Gehlbach, H., Brinkworth, M. E., Hsu, L., King, A., McIntyre, J., & Rogers, T. (2016). Creating birds of similar feathers: Leveraging similarity to improve teacher-student relationships and academic achievement. Journal of Educational Psychology Vol 108(3), Apr 2016, 342-352. An ungated version is available here.

Suggested citation

Gehlbach, H. (2016, May). *How learning about commonalities can improve student-teacher relationships and boost achievement at school* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/how-learning-about-commonalities-can-improve-student-teacher-relationships-and-boost

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