

Relationship and Belonging in the Classroom

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Strong relationships between teachers, students, and parents are at the heart of a student's sense of belonging in school. When students feel supported and connected through these key relationships, they are more likely to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Research shows that belonging is a major predictor of student engagement, motivation, and wellbeing, and that it develops through meaningful connections both inside and outside the classroom. This essay will focus on what can be called the "big three" relationships that shape belonging and learning in education: parent-teacher, student-teacher, and student-student relationships. Each plays a distinct yet interconnected role in shaping a student's experience. When parents and teachers collaborate effectively, students benefit from consistent support between home and school. When teachers build trust and care with students, engagement and learning increase. And when students develop positive relationships with their peers, they build confidence, empathy, and collaborative skills that enhance learning. Together, these relationships create a strong foundation for belonging, which directly supports both academic growth and personal wellbeing. This essay will explore the inquiry question: how do parent-teacher, student-student, and student-student relationships, as well as a student's sense of belonging, affect learning, and how can teachers implement this in their practice?

Parent-teacher relationships are often ones that come with lots of troubles and tensions because they can often come with different ideas on what the student will benefit from. When parents and teachers agree about what is happening in the classroom, both in terms of educational learning and social-emotional learning, the students benefit from the supportive team that a parent and teacher form together. In *Understanding Complex Relationships between Teachers and Parents* by Rollande Deslandes, Sylvie Barma, and Lucille Morin, it is highlighted that this relationship is often very complex and that parents

and teachers can often get into a hierarchy battle of who knows best when it comes to the student. It also states that when parents and teachers develop a good working relationship rooted in mutual trust and respect that it allows them to collaborate, and this benefits the students (Deslandes, Barma, & Morin, 2015). Parents and teachers are two of the people that a student will spend the most time with and have the ability to make the most impact on a student, so it is important that they are on the same page (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999). There was a case study done in 1999 by Cedric Cullingford and Mary Morrison, which looked at the positive effects of the parent-teacher relationship for both the student and the teacher. The study found that when parents were welcomed into the classroom to observe and engage with the teacher, they gained a clearer understanding of how learning was taking place, which helped them better support their child at home (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999). Students reported that their homework became easier to understand for both themselves and their parents, and many parents who had previously been uninvolved began actively helping with homework (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999, p. 257). Students notice the support from their parents and when they feel they have this extra support, it has a direct correlation with how they are behaving at school (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999). The case study states that it is not only a goal for the parents and teachers to have good communication, but for the parents to be coming into the classroom (Cullingford & Morrison, 1999). This strengthened students' sense of belonging in the classroom, as having a part of their home life present at school, through their parents' involvement and ongoing encouragement both in class and at home, helped them feel more supported and connected. This is only possible if the teacher and the parent have a good relationship, which is why, even though it can be a tough relationship to navigate, we need to make the effort so our students feel like they belong and that they are supported. Based on the findings of Cullingford and Morrison, teachers should adopt an open-door policy to make parents feel welcome in the classroom. Actively inviting

parents to visit not only strengthens the parent-teacher relationship but also helps students feel supported and more connected to their learning environment.

Student-teacher relationships are essential for helping students feel a sense of belonging, which directly affects their engagement, learning, and classroom behavior. Nix et al. (2022) explains that “positive teacher-student relationships encourage students' work habits, engagement, and wellbeing; and create an environment that encourages students to experience a sense of belonging at school” (p. 64). When students feel valued and supported, they are more likely to attend school, participate actively, and feel included. The study also found that having teachers who were trustworthy, available, and genuinely caring was “a key factor in developing and maintaining a strong SOBAS [Sense of belonging at school]” (p. 66), which is linked to “greater participation and motivation, academic achievement, and educational outcomes as well as more positive personal characteristics such as self-efficacy, conscientiousness, and happiness” (Nix et al., 2022, p. 65-66). There are many ways that teachers can actively support these relationships in the classroom. Marzano (2005) notes that “many people believe that the relationship between teacher and student is the starting place for good classroom management” (p. 56), and because “students cannot see inside a teacher's head... they look at the teacher's behaviors and interpret those behaviors as signs of the teacher's attitude” (p. 56), emphasizing that small actions carry meaning. Marzano (2005) also notes that making eye contact (p. 64), thanking students for participating (p. 66), and showing interest in their ideas (p. 59) all are ways that teachers can strengthen relationships with students in the classroom. Using an Assertive Connector communication style, which “unites the concepts of assertiveness, personal responsibility and emotional objectivity... The meta-message here is 'I value our relationship and what you have to say'” (Marzano, 2005, p. 67), teachers can listen actively, respond respectfully, and treat all students equitably. These

strategies help students feel included and supported, increasing engagement, reducing disruptions, and enhancing learning outcomes.

Student-student relationships used to be greatly underestimated for both the academic and social-emotional impact they have on students. It is found that student-student relationships can be the most impactful relationship and have the greatest impact on a student's academic and social well-being (Johnson, 1981, p. 5). In an article by David W. Johnson, he argues that schools often place too much emphasis on the teacher-student relationship and not enough on student-student interactions. He notes, “while the teacher-student relationship has traditionally been emphasized in American schools, there is considerable evidence that student-student relationships may be more important determinants of educational success” (Johnson, 1981, p. 9). Johnson also highlights that “teacher-student interaction is emphasized and the possibility of student-student interaction is eliminated in many classrooms, while it is student-student interaction that may be the more important determinant of educational success” (Johnson, 1981, p. 5). He also explains that when students develop strong relationships with peers that are rooted in support, acceptance, caring, and a sense of belonging, they experience positive effects on both their academic performance and social-emotional wellbeing (Johnson, 1989, p. 6). He also states that “simply placing students near each other and allowing them to interact does not mean that the above positive outcomes will appear. The nature and quality of the interaction is important.” (Johnson, 1981, p. 6). This means that we need to be intentional in how we aim to help cultivate positive relationships within our classroom community. Student-student relationships are very important for both learning and social growth. When students have strong connections with their peers, based on support, acceptance, and caring, they feel like they belong in the classroom, which helps them do better academically (Johnson, 1989, p. 6). A sense of belonging also encourages students to develop good learning habits and work well

together. Students who struggle can benefit from being around peers with strong work habits, learning from them and staying motivated (Johnson, 1981, p. 6). Teachers can support these relationships by planning group activities, pairing students for projects, and using routines like morning meetings to give everyone a chance to connect and work together.

In conclusion, strong relationships between parents, teachers, and students are key to helping students feel like they belong in school, which supports both learning and personal growth. When parents and teachers work together, students receive consistent support at home and at school. Positive teacher-student relationships build trust, engagement, and motivation, while strong student-student connections encourage collaboration, good learning habits, and peer support. Research shows that fostering these relationships intentionally, such as through open communication, classroom routines, and opportunities for students to connect, will help students succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. By prioritizing these connections, teachers can create a classroom where every student feels valued, supported, and able to reach their full potential.

References

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