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Caring Professor-Student Relationships: Making our Students Feel Known

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Abstract

This session will discuss a qualitative research study design to determine the perspectives of college students when their professor attempted to make their students feel known by creating personal relationships with them. Participants included two education professors teaching three sections of the same course and their fifty students. Findings indicated that the students recognized and appreciated each professor’s efforts to make them feel known by creating caring professor–student relationships. The objectives of the presentation are twofold: First, to discuss the students’ reactions and the professors’ implementation of specific strategies to create caring professor-student relationships, and second, to offer attendees recommendations for implementing a relational approach to teaching in the college classroom. The objectives of the presentation will be accomplished by including a PowerPoint presentation to discuss the study and engaging activities such as think-pair share to discuss how an attendee could incorporate relationship-building activities into his/her classroom.

Introduction

As Pianta (2006) suggests, the view of classroom management in terms of relationships can lead to new designs that are “mutually satisfying, supportive, and productive relationships” (p. 704). The notion of organizing classrooms around caring teacher-student relationships is
becoming widely promoted in pre-K through secondary classrooms (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Noddings, 1984; Noddings, 2005; Pianta, 1999, 2006; Watson & Battistich, 2006; Watson & Ecken, 2003). However, the role of caring faculty-student relationships is slowly being promoted in postsecondary classrooms (Anderson & Carta-Falsa, 2002; Straits, 2007). For example, Anderson and Carta-Falsa (2002) suggest that college students indeed desire that their classrooms have “an open, supportive, comfortable, respectful, safe or nonthreatening, and enjoyable interpersonal climate” (p.136). In addition, incorporating teacher-students relationships into pre-K through post-secondary classrooms have been shown to positivity impact motivation and learning (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988, Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow, 1993b; Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps & Lewis, 2000). Recently, Straits (2007) suggested that creating caring professor-student relationships results in increased motivation and learning in postsecondary classrooms.

Literature suggests that community and relationships in the classroom are important because doing so, among other things, creates a sense of belonging for students (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Saphier & Gower, 1997; Watson & Battistich, 2006; Watson & Ecken, 2003). However, the research reported here offers a new concept, making students feel known and respected in the classroom. We see this direction as a way to create a deeper level of relationship than those that create a sense of belonging. The notion of creating relationships with students is not new (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Noddings, 1984; Noddings, 2005; Pianta, 1999; Pianta, 2006; Straits, 2007; Watson & Battistich, 2006; Watson & Ecken, 2003). There is also support for the notion that teachers/professors should learn information about their students to create classroom relationships and/or a sense of belonging for students (Battistich, 2001; Battistich, Watson, Solomon, Lewis, Schaps, 1999; Charney, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Denton & Kriete, 2000; DeVries &
Zan, 1994; DePorter, Readon, & Singer-Nourie 1999; Marzano, Marzano & Pickering, 2003; Nieto, 2000; Pianta, 2006; Provitera-McGlynn, 2001; Rogoff, Turkanis, & Bartlett 2001; Solomon, Watson, Delucchi, Schaps, Battistich, 1988; Watson & Battistich, 2006; Weinstein & Mignano, 1993; Waton & Ecken, 2003; Wlodkowski, 2008; Wolk, 2002). Such relationships typically include getting to know a few facts about students and/or learning names at the beginning of the year (Anderson & Falsa, 2002; Denton & Kriete, 2000; Evertson & Emmer, 2009; Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003; Provitera-McGlynn, 2001). The depth of relationships that are promoted in classrooms are, often times, nothing more than a surface level relationship. Even in instances when the notion of caring professor-student relationships is supported, the relationships promoted can be seen as surface level. Such is the case with Wlodkowski (2008), although he promotes caring professor-student relationships, he also suggests that the disclosure of personal information should be used to help learners understand a topic from class. We are not sure if a mutual relationship (Noddings, 1988) that is caring can be fostered unless both parties are active participants. Our relationship construct does much more than simply learn a few facts about students and does more than attempt to make student feel a sense of belonging. In this vein, we developed a qualitative research study design to determine the perspectives of college students when their professors attempt to make their students feel known by creating personal relationships with them.

Methods

The setting for this study consisted of three sections of an education course at an upper level institution (a university that serves undergraduate juniors and seniors, as well as graduate students). The course, titled Creating Positive Learning Environments EC-6, was taught by two professors (who are also the researchers). The first professor is a white male who is in his first
full year at the institution and is at the rank of instructor. The second professor is an experienced professor who has been at the university for a number of years and has achieved tenure status. The first professor, Kent, taught two section of the course; whereas, the second professor, Denise, taught one section. The fifty students who participated in the study were undergraduate education students (juniors and seniors) enrolled in the aforementioned sections of the course.

Data Collection

Data collection methods included: interviews with a cross-section of students, a student survey, end-of-the-semester evaluations, field notes, and e-mail transcripts. For the purpose of this paper, only the student survey data will be discussed. The student survey was administered the last week of the course. On the survey, students anonymously rated their professors using a Likert scale (rating of one being strongly disagree and rating of five being strongly agree) based on fifteen statements that were given. The survey was adapted from a survey used for evaluating the classroom community for online courses at the university level (Rovai, Lucking, & Cristol, 2001). The questions that did not relate to a face-to-face class were eliminated and questions that related to students feeling known were added. In addition to asking students to rate their professors, students were given space on the survey to comment about the topic. The survey statements focused on obtaining information about the students’ view of the relationships that the professors attempted to create with their students and the classroom environment. In addition to the survey questions, three open-ended questions were included.

Data Analysis

Data analysis methods included open, axial and selective coding to create categories and subcategories using qualitative methodology. Open coding was used on the survey data to create
categories and patterns, then a constant comparative methodology was used to compare emerging categories and patterns in an effort to saturate the categories (Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

The data from the survey indicated that the students, regardless of section or professor, rated their professors at a high level. The mode score on each question was a five and the lowest ranking that was given by a student was a two (which only one student indicated on one question). Rather than discuss the average scores on each questions, we elected to provide rich descriptive data and suggest that the scores on each question are very high (on average fours and above). The survey results yielded the following themes: (a) our construct allowed students to feel known, respected and appreciated in our courses, (b) we took time to get to know students/ we were interested in them and their well being, (c) we cared about our students, and (d) student advice was freely provided for professors through suggestions to highlight activities.

Feeling Known and Respected

The students in all three sections and with both professors indicated that they believed that their professors respected them as individuals and respected and appreciated students for who they are. In terms of respecting students as individuals, one of the students related respecting them as an individual to caring: “The professor is respectful because he has shown the class that he cares” (student 2-8). One student shared “She took an interest in my life outside of school…some teachers could care less” (student 1-8). Another student suggested that: “I feel he really took an interest in each student and wants to help us be as prepared as possible when we enter our classroom” (student 2-1). And another shared “When she knew I felt bad, she let me
leave early” (student 1-13). Yet another student related being respected to having someone get to know them: “Yes, I feel that it is important that people get to know me” (student 2-17). Finally, one student suggested that his/her professor respected him/her because the professor was able to “alter my assignments to better reflect my degree plan and my personality” (student 3-4).

When asked to comment on the professors in terms of making students feel known and respected for whom they are, students suggested that they indeed did feel respected and appreciated for who they are. Students responses included: “We matter!” (student 2-10); “Yes he did” (student 2 – 9); “I never felt out of place” (student 3-3); “You always let everyone know that they are valued and respected” (student 3 -7); “She let people talk a lot” (student 1-3); “Showed interest in me, gave us respect” (student 1-4); “Feel special in class like not being here matters” (student 3-20); “She accepted us unconditionally”; and “We are who we are and he accepts that we are different” (student 3-8). In addition, students’ responses suggested the following conceptualizations for faculty that want to show that they respect students individually and want to make them feel respected and appreciated for who they are: (a) put in effort; (b) welcome questions in class; (c) invite communication outside of class; (d) take time to get to know students; (e) show that you want students to learn/be successful; (f) care about students; (g) respect diversity; (h) accessibility by timely responding to emails and phone calls; (i) give good feedback on assignments; (j) learn names; (k) give equal attention; (l) never embarrass students or put them on the spot; (m) be considerate; (n) don’t judge; (o) grade fairly; (p) be available to students; and (q) include students in discussions and activities.

*Interest in Students*
The second theme that emerged was that the professor took time to get to know the students and showed interest in the students’ well-being. Data suggested that both professors were interested in getting to the students and cared about their well-being. The following statements by students are a snapshot of the students’ responses to whether or not the professors showed an interest in the students well being: “Yes, genuine thank you!” (student 3-22); “Very much so thanks!” (student 3-6); “Very caring and concerned” (student 3-23); “She knows us probably more than we know ourselves!” (student 1-12); and “She could tell and asked me when I was not myself” (student 1-10). During the semester, caring took on an entire different meaning for the professors and their students when hurricane Ike devastated the area. Although neither professor had any significant damage to their homes, many of their students experienced some form of loss from the hurricane. Both professors made an effort to contact the students via e-mail and/or phone to make sure that they were all safe within a few days after the hurricane. In addition, they gave gift cards to students that were either displaced or had significant damage to their homes to help them in their time of need. Students recognized the professors caring during this tragedy: “He expressed concern about how I felt during difficulty” (student 3-4); “She made sure we were all OK after the hurricane” (student 1-2); “When the hurricane hit, e-mailed to check if we were ok” (student 2-2); and “Showed a personal concern when I lost my apartment” (student 3-3). One of the most telling responses on all of the surveys, related to this tragedy: “I have never had a teacher give advice this great, or give me something from their own pocket (a gift card when I lost my apartment in Hurricane Ike). I felt very supported” (student 3-3).

The students also suggested that the professors did the following to get to know them (a) sent e-mails- “A lot of his e-mails were to check to see how I was doing in school this semester” (student 2-18); (b) learned about their students- “took time to know something unique about
each student” (student 3-24); “congratulated me on running a half marathon” (student 1-9); (c) showed that they an interest in their students’ well being- “Very much so! I have been struggling with some depression and he took time to notice and encouraged me to speak to counselors” (student 2-7); (d) talked to students about students’ personal lives- “Knew all about my son, and asked how the pregnancy was going” (student 2-3); and “always asked questions about and tried to know what was going on in our lives” (student 1-14). The students were also asked an open-ended question about the ways (if any) that the professor tried to get to know them. Many of the students were able to provide examples about the ways that their professors attempted to get to know them. The students suggested that the professors (a) “asked about my personal goals, interest, and hobbies.” (student 3-25) (b) used classroom assignments and activities to learn about them; (c) had students “sharing pictures” in class (student 3-5); (d) “Getting to know where I was from” (student 2-5); (e) “called me by name” (student 2-11); and (f) asked questions about their life (student 3-7).

Care

As a result of the professors’ attempts to create caring relationships, the students had some strong opinions about the professors and their efforts to make them feel known. Students’ views of the professors included: (a) “five gold stars for caring” (student 2-4); (b) “Fantastic teacher/ person” (student 2-7); (c) “never has a professor been so warm and caring about his students” (student 2-5); (d) “An amazing professor!” (student 2-14); (e) “The best class I’ve ever had in college,” (student 2-14); (f) “made more of an effect than any other professor I had, and it wasn’t creepy” (student 3-3); (g) “needed a hug before we exited our last class” (student 1-5); (h) “I called twice on a Friday after 4 pm and she answered both times”; and (i) “My class,
peers, & teacher became a safe community to grow and learn together. This class should be a requirement for all school of education students!”.

Student Recommendations

When the students were asked what aspects of the professors teaching style they wish that other professors incorporated into their teaching the students had a number of suggests. These suggestions can be organized into a number of different categories: (a) feeling important and getting to know them, (b) positive and caring attitude, (c) feedback on assignments, and (d) teaching style. The students were very interested in having other professors take time to get to know them and suggested that such actions would make them feel important. For example, one student posits that other professors should be interested in “Making you feel welcome and important in class” (student 2-11). Another student mentioned that having other professors get to know them is very rare: “getting to know us- that never happens” (student 3-26). While another students recommended that “All professors need to know all his or her students and be considerate of everyone’s feelings” (Student 3-8). And lastly, “Always gave great feedback” (student 1-16).

Students believed that other professors should have a positive attitude in class, for example one student suggested that other professors should have: “the positive attitude that he [Kent] has” (student 2-2). The students inferred that other professors should provide feedback on assignments that is helpful. In fact, one student’s response captured this theme, “Feedback on assignments-excellent, didn’t realize how important and valuable it was until I had it-experienced it” (student 3-1); another shared “She always gave positive reinforcement” (student 1-3). Finally, students also wanted other professors to include an interactive teaching style to
maintain student interest. Two examples from students who clearly expressed this view when asked about the aspects they wanted other professors to use: (a) “having us up and moving all the time. In other classes I easily lose interest because they just read a PowerPoint and I know how to read so it is boring” (student 2-7) and “group activities and class discussion” (student 2-4).

Discussion

Although these results are generally what we expected and relate to most of the literature on creating positive relationships and creating classroom communities, the results add to the literature because data suggest that students recognize and appreciate our new conception of classroom relationships (i.e., making students feel known). In addition, there were a number of concepts that either contradicted previous research or were surprises. We are both vested in creating caring personal relationships that make our students feel known. As teacher educators, we feel that it is our job to “practice what we preach” in our classrooms. Therefore, we were surprised that students were not having the same experiences in other classes as those we attempted to create for them. Responses such as “first time ever” (student 3-1); “I have never felt more comfortable in a class” (student 3-27); and “This is the first class that I know each and every student” (student 2-1) we view as compliments to our instructional style and relational goals, but as concerns for our higher education system if this is the exception to what they normally experience. We were most shocked when one student suggested that in other classes they felt like a number: “Didn’t make me feel like a student #, made me feel like a person” (student 2-1). Scott (2003), in her study, suggested that students that were interview concluded that many college professors “viewed student-teacher relationships as superfluous, which made students feel insignificant and unimportant” (p. 31). Such practices concern us on two levels: (a) as education professors how can we suggest that our students create caring relationships that
make their future EC-12 students feel known for who they are if there are so few professors modeling the practice, and (b) regardless of discipline we are concerned that so few professors take an interest in their students and consequently “make students feel insignificant and unimportant” (Scott, 2003, p.31).

Anderson and Carta-Falsa (2002) suggest that although college students want to interact with each other, they are not interested in creating relationships with their professors. The data reported here challenge those findings. Our data show that the students not only could recognized the professors attempts to create caring relationships with their students, but they also appreciated such relationships and wanted their other professors to include aspects of caring relationships that make students feel known in their teaching. Straits (2007) suggests that caring professor-student relationships results in increased motivation and learning in postsecondary classrooms. In this study, our focus was not as much on learning, but determining whether or not the students even want to feel known in the classroom by their professors. Despite this, some students indicated that they learned more as a result of the professors’ attempts: “The way that he takes time to get to know all of this students, I hope he teaches other education classes in the future because I feel I learned a lot from him this semester” (student 2-1).

Anderson and Carta-Falsa (2002) also posit that the professors that they studied were not interested in creating personal relationships with their students. We are not surprised that many faculty members do not attempt to create personal relationships with their students based on our students’ comments. Based on the data reported here, we believe students do indeed want their professor to attempt to get to know them and make them feel known. Also, our findings support Anderson and Carta-Falsa’s (2002) theory that students in their survey students were not interested in creating relationships with their professors because the students were not accustom
to such relationships. This is very apparent in our data because students were pleased that the professors in this study actually did something as simple as used the students’ names in class. In our view, using a name in class is a very basic form of showing that a faculty member knows a students. In her book, Successful Beginnings for College Teaching: Engaging your students from the first day, Provitera-McGlynn (2001) suggests that the use of student names and quoting student ideas in class increases student motivation. The fact that some students do not feel known by their professors (Anderson & Carta-Falsa, 2002; Scott, 2003) and/or feel like numbers suggests that a simple concept such as a professor learning students’ names is not taking in many college classrooms. Thus, we suggest that the students in their study would not want to have a relationship with a faculty member because (a) the students have had little experience with such relationships and (b) many students do not see that such relationships are possible. Caring relationships are mutual (Noddings,1988) and if professors do not express their interest in students, student will not see such relationships as a possibility.

Straits (2007) suggests that professors who care “encourage out-of-class discussions” and “welcome questions in class, respect the students as individuals, and challenge students with higher-level thinking” (p. 174). In addition, Straits (2007) posits that care includes professor: being available to students, giving extra effort, getting to know students, wanting students to learn and/or succeed. All of these aspects were evident in our practices based on students’ responses. Woldkowski (2008) posits that empathy is an essential component of instruction that is motivating for students. Our data show that we considered our learners’ perspectives and feelings and adapted our instruction to meet the needs of our learners, which are consequently two of Woldkowski’s (2008) tenets of empathy. We also found it interesting that the students in this study suggested they wanted other professors to include interactive teaching methods. As we
mentioned earlier, we attempt to “practice what we preach” and consequently our teaching style is very interactive. We are troubled that our data suggests that other professors do not include interactivity since “Without engagement, learning does not have a chance to have meaning” (Woldkowski, 2008, p. 228). The lack of including interactive teaching styles shows that some in higher education have not come to understand that adult learning is more than cognitive processing (Merriam, 2008).

Conclusion

We strongly suggest that professors think about their teaching styles, the activities they use in class, their attempts to get to know other students, and the benefits of creating caring relationships with their students. We understand that not all professors are willing to share information with students or feel comfortable making classroom relationships the center of their teaching philosophy (Watson & Battistich, 2006). Yet, student data indicated that very few professors even knew their names and students recommended that professors get to know them. Thus, we suggest that professors consider at minimal using names in the classroom. Although a lecture style of teaching is very effective for relaying information, it is ineffective in getting to know your students and more importantly making them feel known. Students suggested that they would like their professors to include more interactivity into their courses. Thus, we propose a shift from the concept that students be silent participants in the classroom to a more engaging teaching style.

Students appreciated our attempts to make them feel known and encouraged other professors to include such relational practice in their teaching. Since students indicated that they enjoyed feeling known by their professors, we suggest that professor-student relationships move
beyond creating a sense of belonging in the classroom to what we see as a higher level on a relationship continuum (i.e., making students feel known). In order to the following are a list of a few ways that we attempt to make our students feel known: (a) including activities wherein students get to know each other and the professor during learning activities, (b) creating times for students to partner for group, (c) taking notes and incorporating what you learn about your students, (d) having personal conversations, (e) using learning activities that motivate and include students, and (f) checking on our students academic and social well-being.

References


