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RAPPORT BUILDING AND MAINTENANCE

Teacher Strategies to Maintain Rapport in Elementary Classrooms

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
Elementary Education

By
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Under the mentorship of Abraham Flanigan Ph. D.

Abstract

This study examines the initiation and maintenance of rapport between teachers and students in kindergarten through second grade classrooms. Three teachers participated in phenomenological interviews to identify what strategies they employ when initiating and maintaining rapport with their students as well as the perceived benefits of student-teacher rapport. Research has shown that there are several effective strategies for initiating rapport with students, but if this effort is not maintained throughout the school year, the quality of student-teacher rapport can weaken. Through thematic analysis, this study identified the strategies these three elementary grades teachers use to initiate and maintain rapport with their students. Findings from this research could be used as a framework for elementary school teachers to guide how they cultivate rapport with their students.

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Introduction

There are many factors other than course content and instructional techniques that can influence learning. Factors such as classroom environment, interpersonal relationships, and student motivation have been linked to positive classroom outcomes in the form of grades (Lammers, Gillaspay, & Hancock, 2017; Frisby & Martin, 2010). When students have a positive affect before engaging in academic tasks, they are more likely to exert a higher level of effort and, in turn, learn more and get better grades (Kiuru et al., 2020). Students' sense of positive affect can be partially attributed to positive student-teacher relationships and the classroom environment. And, a big portion of a positive student teacher relationship is rapport. More specifically, rapport can be defined as a positive relationship between two or more people that demonstrates trust, warmth, sensitivity, responsiveness and perspective taking (e.g. Ansari, Hofkens, & Pianta, 2020; Frisby & Myers, 2008).

Several studies have focused on the lasting benefits of good student-teacher relationships (e.g. Ansari, Hofkens, & Pianta, 2020). These positive relationships are formed through good rapport. Some studies have simplified the formation of rapport into two dimensions: enjoyable interactions and personal connections, both of which had a positive correlation to student participation, motivation and engagement in courses (Frisby & Myers, 2008). Student-teacher relationships displaying these qualities can influence a student's ability to succeed in their educational activities through the development of skills such as cognitive, social, and self regulatory skills (Ansari, Hofkens, & Pianta, 2020), which highlights the importance of good rapport in the classroom and a need for more research into the topic.

There are certain actions that teachers can use to create or facilitate rapport with their students; some examples of rapport-building actions would be the use of humor, calling students by their names, and positive body language (Frisby & Martin, 2010). However, these same actions one would use to build a student-teacher relationship are not the same actions one would use to keep up or maintain that relationship. This is where rapport maintenance comes in. Teachers must use a variety of strategies throughout the school year to ensure that the rapport they created at the beginning of the year continues to grow and influence the classroom environment. If teachers do not continue to engage in rapport-eliciting behaviors across time, then student perceptions of rapport towards their instructors can start to fade (Lammers et al., 2017). Just eliciting a sense of rapport from students at the beginning of the school year is not enough to ensure that student perceptions of rapport will remain strong across time; which is where rapport maintenance comes into play. Rapport maintenance is increasingly important as relationships with one's teachers often plays a key role in success in a classroom setting. Students who feel a sense of rapport with their teachers tend to be more motivated, comfortable and participate more in class than those students who do not have good rapport with their teachers (Estep & Roberts, 2015; Frisby & Martin, 2010). The present study aims to identify those strategies and contextual factors teachers rely on to develop and maintain strong rapport with students in early elementary classrooms. Identifying these strategies and contextual factors can provide insight into how teachers cultivate an environment where students can become more successful in the classroom.

Review of current literature indicates that there are certain immediacy behaviors which are more effective at building rapport with students, as well as several benefits that

may arise from strong student-teacher relationships. Research also indicates that if an effort is not made to maintain these relationships, the benefits and rapport itself may be lost as quickly as it was formed (Lammers, Gillaspay Jr., & Hancock, 2017; Webb & Barrett, 2014). These studies, however, do not address what behaviors are used to further or keep up a relationship with a student once a baseline connection is made (Dwyer et al., 2004; Frymier & Houser, 2009; Webb & Barrett, 2014). Additionally, while there is an abundance of research regarding the formation of rapport with college-aged students (e.g., Dwyer et al., 2004; Estep & Roberts, 2015; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frisby & Myers, 2008), there is very little on the development of rapport with elementary-aged students. The present study aims to fill that gap in research by interviewing elementary school teachers about how they develop and maintain rapport with their students.

Literature Review

In the following review of literature, several aspects of rapport are discussed. The first subset of literature includes studies aimed at defining rapport, examining its benefits, and depicting rapport in the context of elementary schools. The next set of studies are primarily focused on rapport-building strategies and how those impact the classroom environment. Each of these sub-topics of rapport examine a crucial piece of the entire topic of rapport and together provide context for the need to maintain strong interpersonal relationships with students.

Benefits of Rapport

There are numerous studies on the benefits of rapport in the classroom. One study (Estep & Roberts, 2015) focused on the use of immediacy behaviors as a building block of rapport in college classrooms. Immediacy behaviors are behaviors used to encourage

involvement or participation from students; they can be verbal or nonverbal. Some common immediacy behaviors include smiling, nodding, or calling a student by name. In Estep and Roberts' (2015) study, an immediacy behavior scale, professor-student rapport scale, and students' final grade outcomes in the class were utilized to establish a positive correlation between rapport and student engagement. This study also found that verbal immediacy, such as affirming statements, humor, and specific feedback, were more beneficial for forming rapport than nonverbal cues such as eye contact, gestures, and smiling—but more difficult to implement. Other research studies found a similar relationship between verbal immediacy and rapport (e.g., Sozer, 2019). Additionally, Estep and Roberts found that rapport—not non-verbal immediacy—was a key factor in students' motivation, which aligns with previous findings (Dwyer et al., 2004; Sozer, 2019).

A similar study by Frisby and Martin (2010) focused on how student-student rapport can impact the learning environment. For this study, participants were recruited from a mid-sized university and were given several surveys to measure their perceptions of the quality of their individual student-teacher rapport, participation, and learning. Findings indicated that not only did rapport impact motivation, it also predicted participation, affective learning, and cognitive learning. Frisby and Martin found that when the environment created by an instructor is more welcoming, students feel more comfortable, which in turn enhances their learning. Part of this welcoming environment includes a relationship with both the instructor and with peers. A suggestion from these findings is to foster student-student rapport in the classroom through “integration of collaborative opportunities for students into the classroom, engaging in casual and

personal conversation, balancing intellectual excitement with interpersonal relationships, and utilizing techniques to foster positive relationships with students and between students” (Frisby & Martin, 2010, p. 159)

A key demographic to focus on when discussing rapport is those students considered at-risk for academic problems, as the formation of good rapport with these students can reduce the risk of behavioral problems and academic struggles (Ettekal & Shi, 2020). Ettekal and Shi’s study followed a group of students for 12 years to establish a link between the impact of student-teacher relationships on their performance and disciplinary record across all grade levels. This study found that the more conflicts a student had with a teacher, the more disciplinary issues were presented throughout that same year and the years following. This implies that a tense, conflict-filled relationship with a teacher can create lasting negative effects for that student for years to come. Inversely, warm student-teacher relationships can contribute to a decline in student disciplinary issues even after years of conflict and acting out.

In addition to the benefits a student receives from good rapport, the development of rapport actually benefits the teacher as well. Teachers who feel a sense of rapport with their students tend to experience less job-related emotional fatigue than teachers who feel a weaker sense of rapport with their students (Corbin et al., 2019) Teachers also reported better professional development and meeting more professional goals due to the decreased emotional fatigue (Corbin et al., 2019). These findings highlight the benefits teachers gain from cultivating positive relationships with students.

Rapport in Elementary and Middle Schools

While most literature regarding rapport focuses on higher education, there were some studies found that highlighted rapport in elementary and middle school classrooms. The majority of these studies refer to rapport with students as a student-teacher relationship and highlight benefits of rapport lasting long after a relationship is formed (Ettikal & Shi, 2020). One of these studies (Sozer, 2019), similar to Estep and Robert's study, found that student-teacher relationships in middle schools were better formed with verbal communication or immediacy, such as affirming statements, humor, and specific feedback, rather than with nonverbal types of immediacy, such as eye contact, gestures, and smiling. This particular study shows that different rapport-building strategies are viewed as more effective than others to students, and thus contribute to teacher efficiency.

Another aforementioned study (Corbin et al., 2019) focusing on the impact of student-teacher relationships on the teacher found that student-teacher closeness impacts not only the students' participation and success in a class, but also the professional satisfaction or burnout of the teacher. This study identified strong relationships with students as being characterized by open communication, student participation, and perceived effort in class. These findings indicate that student-teacher relationships in K-5 classrooms are specifically important to not only students, but also the teacher—most likely due to the sheer amount of time a K-5 teacher spends with their students.

Rapport-Building Strategies

Several studies set out to identify which strategies were effective in building rapport with students. Most often, these studies found that verbal communication impacted the teacher-student relationship the most out of all rapport-building strategies (Estep & Roberts, 2015; Sozer, 2019). Most of this literature, however, is either based

on populations of older students or does not fully--if at all--examine rapport maintenance and how that affects students' relationships with teachers and their performance in class. Studies have shown that if the rapport in a student-teacher relationship is not properly maintained then there is a drop off of those benefits developed from said rapport (Lammers, Gillaspay Jr., & Hancock, 2017).

One study focused on one class specifically and how the professor aimed to build rapport with his students across a semester (Sybing, 2019). College students completed a survey that included a portion for them to identify the kinds of rapport-building techniques used by their instructor and to assess how frequently they had participated in class. Findings from this study identified instructor strategies such as decentering yourself as the sole proprietor of knowledge, acknowledging inputs of students, and creating a classroom philosophy of learning as being particularly consequential for student-teacher rapport. However, because this study was more focused on the pedagogy of the college classroom--and how rapport forms in that setting--it is not clear whether these same strategies are equally effective at building relationships in elementary settings.

Another key factor in student-instructor rapport is student-student rapport. When students are able to form their own rapport with one another it opens the class up to more participation and makes students more receptive to their instructors' rapport-related overtures (Dwyer et al., 2004). The key finding of Dwyer et al.'s (2004) survey-based study was that fostering student-student rapport would in turn help create a sense of rapport between an instructor and a student through classroom interactions. These authors went on to suggest ways that professors could help push for student-student rapport through practices such as collaboration in creating the syllabus, cooperative groups,

service learning, and more. These inputs into building a classroom community are thought to in turn foster a sense of connectedness not only from student-student but also student-instructor (Dwyer et al., 2004).

Because a student's relationship to a teacher is both relational and content-driven, an important key to forming good rapport with a student is the use of content-based conversations that allow for student input (Frymier & Houser, 2009). Frymier and Houser's study found that baseline rapport is built from the conveying of content and simultaneous immediacy behaviors. More specifically, the relationships formed with students must include explaining content clearly and concisely as well as meeting students' emotional needs and motivating them.

One study sought out to find a link between teacher self-efficacy and the building of student-teacher rapport within elementary and middle school classrooms (Hajovsky et al., 2020). Second through sixth grade classroom teachers completed surveys designed to measure how confident they felt interacting with their students, as well as which techniques they used to build relationships with their students. There was an identified positive trend between a teacher's self-efficacy and how effective they were at building rapport with their students. This is most likely due to the fact that when less of a teacher's concern is being directed to their ability to manage their classroom, they are able to direct more of their attention to fostering those relationships with their students. Findings from this research identified providing emotional support to students, being open to students and aware of their situations, using humor in the classroom, and giving positive reinforcements as positive contributors to building student-teacher rapport.

Five Categories of Rapport Building

Another widely-cited study identified five categories of rapport-building behaviors that classroom instructors can engage in: uncommonly attentive, common grounding, courteous, connecting, and information sharing (Webb & Barrett, 2014). In this survey-based study, undergraduate students identified the instructor behaviors that elicit a sense of rapport from them in the classroom. The five categories of rapport-building behaviors identified by Webb and Barrett (2004) are discussed in turn.

Uncommonly Attentive Behaviors. In their study, Webb and Barrett loosely defined an uncommonly attentive behavior as an action that could be viewed as above expectation. Some examples of uncommonly attentive behaviors instructors displayed in the classroom include “calling students by name, demonstrating excitement for their job, prompt email responses, willing to meet students outside of class, getting all students involved in class, commitment to students’ success in the class, and displaying a positive, enthusiastic attitude” (Webb & Barrett, 2014, p. 19). This type of behavior was the most reported builder of rapport in the classroom by students at 25.9% of the data set (Webb & Barrett, 2014, p. 19). This displays the importance of taking the extra time to treat students as individuals rather than as part of a whole class.

Common Grounding Behaviors. Common grounding behaviors are defined as an attempt on the part of the instructor to find a shared interest with students. Webb and Barrett give a few examples of instructors who used common grounding behaviors in their classrooms; students viewed these instructors as “personable, [relatable], ... down to earth, and not condescending” (Webb & Barrett, 2014, p. 21). This type of rapport builder was the least mentioned as it was only mentioned 10.9% of the time. This indicates that

while some students might find commonalities with their instructors to be helpful, most prioritize other forms of rapport building (Webb & Barrett, 2014, p. 23).

Courteous Behaviors. These behaviors are ones that keep students in mind when making decisions regarding the class. They tend to show qualities like empathy and respect for students. Webb and Barrett describe instructors who use these behaviors as “being open to questions, trusting students, understanding, and creating an environment where students feel they can speak openly” (Webb & Barrett, 2014, p. 21). These types of behaviors made up 18.9% of the data set, meaning a significant number of students value an empathetic and compassionate learning environment and teacher (Webb & Barrett, 2014, p. 23).

Connecting Behavior. A connecting behavior is one a teacher uses to try to form a relationship with a specific student. Some examples of connecting behaviors would be the use of humor, small talk, and friendly interactions (Webb & Barrett, 2014). Student’s described instructors who use connecting behaviors as “funny, easy going, approachable, informal, calm and collected” (Webb & Barrett, 2014, p. 20). One student even commented that an instructor who used these behaviors made lessons “... more enjoyable and more interesting to listen to” (Webb & Barrett, 2014, p. 20). These types of behavior were the second most common response, making up 23.7% of all responses. This finding shows the need for instructors to form relationships with students to better foster their learning and is consistent with other findings in this field (i.e. Frymier & Houser, 2000).

Information Sharing Behavior. The final identified rapport building strategy was defined as the good communication of information that might be helpful to the student. This would include the instructor giving advice, sharing knowledge, clear and

concise feedback or communicating expectations clearly. Additionally, this category includes nonverbal forms of communication such as eye contact, smiling and physical immediacy. This type of behavior made up 20.6% of responses and led Webb and Barrett to suggest that instructors should place emphasis on a clear syllabus, assignment feedback, and nonverbal communications (2014, 23).

Summary of Webb and Barrett's Findings. Findings from Webb and Barrett's (2014) research showed that uncommonly attentive behaviors and connecting behaviors were the most common behaviors cited by students as boosting their perceptions of rapport with their instructors. Such findings imply that students prefer to be treated as individuals instead of as an entire class, and that they also desire a personal connection to their instructor in order to better trust and learn from them. Additionally, this study claimed that rapport is more effective the more it is developed and briefly mentioned students identifying actions that could hinder rapport. The study did not list these rapport-hindering behaviors, but highlighted that students mentioned them without being prompted. The authors claimed that students mentioning rapport-hindering behaviors without being asked indicates that rapport can be lost if it is not maintained properly and that educators should be aware of potential actions that could hinder rapport (Webb & Barrett, 2014).

Gaps Identified in the Existing Literature

The existing literature on rapport in elementary schools is limited. Specific rapport-building strategies have been analyzed and the benefits of these relationships have been proven (Corbin et al., 2019; Estepp & Roberts, 2015; Frisby & Martin, 2010). Collectively, these findings suggest that teachers understand the importance of forming

relationships with their students, as well as what inputs they can use to form those relationships. Additionally, the findings of this literature are very consistent. Despite the differences in grade level, socioeconomic background, race or other differences, there are clear relationships between rapport, student performance, and classroom environment (Corbin et al., 2019; Ettekal & Shi, 2020; Frisby & Martin, 2010). There is also a common trend of which immediacy behaviors and rapport-building strategies students prefer (Estepp & Roberts, 2015; Sozer 2019).

The biggest weakness of the literature found on rapport research, is the lack of it. Most studies focus on higher education or focus more on student-student relationships as opposed to the relationship between a student and a teacher. Additionally, apart from two studies (Flanigan et al., 2021; Flanigan et al., 2022) there has not been a focus on differentiating between rapport-initiating and rapport-maintenance behaviors. The gap in research here is the lack of studies on which behaviors are used to initiate and maintain rapport in elementary school classrooms. The present study aims to fill this gap by examining the strategies used by elementary school teachers to cultivate rapport with their students and what behaviors teachers use to maintain that rapport throughout the school year. It also aims to identify the benefits that elementary school teachers believe arise when rapport develops. The primary research question guiding the present study was: “What strategies and contextual factors do elementary school teachers use to build and maintain rapport with students in elementary classrooms?”

Methodology

Participants and Design

For this study, elementary school teachers of kindergarten through second grade (K-2) general education classrooms were recruited. The sample of participants were recruited through a medium sized, rural, public-school district in the southern United States. Following approval from both the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the superintendent of the school district from which participants were to be recruited, each school within the district advertised participation in the study via email. Three teachers agreed to participate. Jennifer is a first grade teacher at a rural public school with twenty one years of teaching experience. Sam is a first grade teacher at a rural public school with nine years of teaching experience. Brandi is a second grade teacher at a rural public school with four years of teaching experience. One-on-one phenomenological interviews were held with these three participants in Fall 2021. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix A. Participants also completed the brief demographic survey located in Appendix B prior to their interviews. Due to the confidentiality, no data was gathered regarding teachers race, sex, or ethnicity.

Data Analysis

The present study used the phenomenological approach to qualitative research. The analyzed data were non-numerical in nature and acquired through the sharing of peoples' life experiences of a specific phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). As such, data was collected through participants' responses in one-on-one interviews with the primary investigator. Participants were informed that their interview would be audio-recorded to be transcribed and analyzed. Specifically, the primary investigator used thematic analysis, a process where data is analyzed to find commonalities among participant responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). First, the primary investigator

extracted “significant statements” from the interview transcripts. Significant statements are defined as any statement that was relevant to the research question. This process identified a total of 79 significant statements.

Then, the primary investigator assigned codes to each significant statement. This initial coding process resulted in 24 unique codes being identified; these codes were then categorized by topic and condensed into 13 focused codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focused coding process was used to refine codes by reducing overlap. For example, “I just have little conversations with kids to let them know I care” was assigned the initial code “showing care” and “I always ask them how their day has been,” were collapsed together into the “express interest in their lives” code. Upon consolidation, those codes were combined to form the “informal conversations” code. Codes were condensed until there was no more overlap between categories.

This thematic analysis process resulted in the identification of the strategies these elementary school teachers use when initiating and maintaining rapport with their students. Participants were sent these categories of rapport building and maintenance to check the validity of the findings through the process of member checking (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Responses confirmed the findings and did not result in any new codes or the removal of any codes.

Procedures

Participants were interviewed one-on-one with the primary investigator using Zoom video conferencing. Prior to their interview, participants were provided with a copy of the informed consent form and asked to provide their consent to participate in the interview and for the interview to be audio-recorded. Also prior to their interview, each

participant was assigned a pseudonym which is used throughout the interview and for the continuation of the study. From this point forward, their legal name will not be associated with any data gleaned from their interview. This is done to ensure all participants remain anonymous and their information be kept confidential.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner. The primary investigator followed an interview protocol (Appendix A) and asked additional follow up questions to further probe participants for a clearer response or for additional details to avoid ambiguity. Once the one-on-one interview was complete, participants were given a chance to ask any questions they may have had regarding the study and were asked for permission to be contacted once data collection was finished. When contacted, participants went through member checking in order to validate the findings. The member checking process is a validation procedure which requires participants to give feedback on the findings of the study and whether or not the findings accurately reflect their lived experience (Maxwell, 2013). In the present study, member checking provided evidence that the findings accurately captured the participants' experiences building and maintaining rapport with students in their elementary classrooms.

Results

The following sub-sections summarize findings of the present research related to the behaviors and contextual factors that elementary grades teachers rely on to initiate and maintain rapport in their classroom. While Webb and Barrett (2014) identified five categories of behaviors related to rapport, this study found that elementary school teachers did not employ all of these behavior categories. Rather, elementary school teachers used two of these behavior categories to initiate rapport with their students (i.e.,

connecting and common grounding) and three of these behavior categories to maintain that rapport (i.e., connecting, attentive, and courteous). Additional behavioral and contextual categories were also identified by these participants as consequential for rapport initiation and maintenance that did not fall within those identified by Webb and Barrett (2014).

Initiators of Rapport

Participants identified the following behaviors and contextual factors as important in the initiation of rapport in their classrooms.

Connecting Behaviors

Participants all indicated that they begin their rapport building before or on the first day of school. They expressed the importance of starting the school year off with an effort to get to know their students and for their students to get to know them. The first thing these teachers do to humanize themselves to their students is give small self disclosures in the form of a “Get to Know You” activity. All participants discussed their use of the first few days to form relationships with the students through the sharing of personal experiences, likes and dislikes, interests, and personal background. One teacher, Jennifer, said “We do ‘Meet the Teacher’ activities, where I will tell them about me and my family, things I'm interested in, and things that I like to do away from school.” Every participant indicated that after they self disclose something about themselves, they give students the opportunity to do the same. Teachers discussed the use of games, presentations, and worksheets to better acquaint themselves with their students. Another teacher, Brandi, indicated that her students complete a ‘Math about Me’ where they can put all these math facts and tell me about them, I also have them introduce themselves to

me that way.” Following these activities they allow their students to share out with the class.

Another way that these teachers make connections with their students is by using their names. Similar to the findings of Flanigan et al. (2021), these elementary school teachers went out of their way to clarify students' names and use them during instruction. Sam indicated that in her second grade class, “Before just calling their name on [her] roster, [she] always asks what they want to be called. Some students are really particular about that.” This was also brought up in another interview, wherein Jennifer discussed that students seem more involved when they are called on by name and acknowledged in front of their peers.

Common Grounding Behaviors

Another key component elementary school teachers use to initiate rapport with their students is finding things they share in common. Once students shared about themselves, participants explained that they like to relate their students' experiences with their own. Brandi said, “I always like to connect to at least one thing a student says to something about me.” All teachers supported the concept that first grade teacher Jennifer conveyed: “Once students feel like they share something in common with you, they want to work harder for you.” These commonalities allow students to feel more comfortable talking to their teachers and thus makes establishing rapport easier.

Baked-in Rapport

All three participants mentioned the benefits and hindrances of baked-in rapport teaching in a small town. Jennifer summarized this concept excellently saying:

“Most of my students know me before they are in my class. I am from this town and they see me at ball games, the grocery store, or I taught their siblings. It is a double-edged sword, sometimes that means they want to work harder for you and sometimes that means they think they can get away with everything.”

Sam supported this point by discussing that students who already know her or know about her are excited to be in her class, but they also try to push the boundaries.

Participants believed that students having prior knowledge of them or a baked-in perception of them made it easier to both initiate and maintain rapport with students.

They indicated that these previous assumptions could be a good jumping-off point for the formation of relationships whether that be for the good or the bad.

Maintainers

Participants identified the following behaviors as important in the maintenance of rapport in their classrooms across the school year.

Attentive Behaviors

Two of the three participants expressed the importance of showing their students that they care about their success. Brandi, a second grade teacher said, “If your students think that you don't care about their success, then they don't care either” when asked about how important rapport is. Teachers discussed a variety of ways they are attentive to students including talking to struggling students, responding when students reached out, and offering outside services to help students who were behind the curve. Another key attentive behavior all participants mentioned was the importance of keeping a positive attitude and excitement in the classroom. Sam discussed looking “for the good in students, instead of looking at the negative points” being an important factor in student

teacher relationships. This sentiment was repeated throughout the interviews; participants believed that staying positive with students would keep them engaged in their rapport and in the content being conveyed.

Courteous Behaviors

Two participants discussed the importance of students picking up on the concept of fairness in everything they do in the classroom. First grade teacher, Sam, said, “If you aren’t consistent with your behavior consequences, they will notice that and it can cause problems in your classroom.” Brandi also gave an example of the issue of fairness in the classroom; she said, “It’s hard to re-earn their respect again once you’ve lost it. As soon as someone notices another student getting away with something that they got in trouble for doing, you’re going to have a problem.” Participants believed that showing students fairness in behavior management and in your responses to them was influential in the relationship not only between a teacher and student but also between students.

Related behaviors participants mentioned using to maintain rapport was the display of empathy and sympathy. All three teachers discussed checking in with their students and paying special attention to students who might have extenuating circumstances. Jennifer, a first grade teacher, discussed that giving students support they might not receive at home is extremely important to the continuation of their relationship. She said, “You just have to be aware of where they are coming from. If they had a rough night or week or just home life in general you have to be aware of what you’re asking them to do everyday.” Second grade teacher Brandi reinforced this concept with an example of a student. Brandi said, “Her house burned down and she came to school the

next day. Normally, I would get on to students for sleeping in class or for not paying attention, but knowing what she was going through, I just let her do what she needed to.”

Connecting Behaviors

By far, the most discussed aspect of rapport maintenance for these elementary school teachers was informal conversations. All participants went into detail about how they attempt to talk to students as much as possible. Brandi said, “I try to talk to them as much as I can. Whenever they're coming into the room I say good morning, ask them how their day has been, how was your weekend, just making that personal relationship so they feel like they are meant to be here.” These teachers felt that informal conversations with students help humanize them to their students and creates a further sense of trust and comfort. A first grade teacher, Sam, discussed that her informal conversations with students “show how much I care about them and their success.”

Participants also discussed tailoring instruction to their students' needs and interests. They mentioned that the use of students' names in activities, examples, and content immediately increases participation, engagement, and thus, rapport. However this is not all they do to personalize content. Sam discussed how she chooses books for students based on their interests and what they like to talk to her about. She said, “If you give them a book about dragons and you know they love dragons they're going to be interested in reading that book, but if you give them something they aren't interested in they won't read it.” This sentiment was echoed by other participants who said that even just changing math problems from random scenarios to something of interest created a sense of more engagement. Making lessons more engaging for students allows for them to not only grasp more content but also feel closer to the teacher.

Similarly, these teachers believed that using positive reinforcement and praise are key factors in student engagement and rapport. All participants explained that the use of verbal praise in their classrooms makes them appear more approachable and creates a sense of pride in their students. Jennifer explained, “When they know you're their biggest cheerleader they want to work hard for you. They want to hear that you are proud of them.”

Attending Outside Events

One unique behavior these elementary teachers indicated using to maintain relationships with their students was their attendance of special after-school events. Two out of three teachers talked about attending sporting events, shows, and other community events to support their students. Jennifer, a first grade teacher, said, “I like to go to their football games and choir concerts and just be there whenever I can. They just get so excited to see you supporting them.” This idea was supported by Sam, who indicated that she loved going to her students' baseball games. This allows students to see their teachers outside of a school setting and may help humanize them.

Discussion

The present study investigated the strategies and other factors that elementary school teachers rely upon to positively influence the initiation and maintenance of rapport in their Kindergarten, first grade, and second grade general education classrooms. Previous research has linked student perceptions of rapport to numerous benefits including student engagement (Estep & Roberts, 2015), motivation (Frisby & Martin, 2010), and learning (Frisby & Martin, 2010). Previous research has also highlighted the importance of rapport maintenance as relationships can decline throughout the course of a

school year if teachers do not continue to engage in rapport-related behaviors (Lammers, Gillaspay, and Hancock 2017). Additionally, prior research has shown that the teachers rely on different behaviors and environmental factors for rapport maintenance than for rapport initiation (Flanigan, et al, 2021). Given the current research's breadth of knowledge on the rapport in middle and high school as well as college classrooms, this study fills a necessary gap in the literature by discussing the rapport techniques used in elementary school classrooms.

Present findings show that elementary school teachers do not rely on all five of the categories of rapport-related behaviors identified by Webb and Barrett's (2014) taxonomy. Furthermore, the present study found that not only do elementary school teachers employ different techniques to ensure that rapport benefits do not fade out, but that they also use strategies that differ from college instructors. Both college instructors (Flanigan et al., 2021) and these elementary school teachers use connecting and common grounding behaviors to initiate rapport with their students. However, these elementary school teachers do not use information sharing behaviors as a method of forming a relationship with their students, perhaps because information sharing in the elementary school classroom is not as prevalent as in the college classroom where students need to understand the structure of a class and have a clear road map to succeed. Although tentative, this may explain why these participants did not indicate using information sharing behaviors to build rapport.

Similarly, these elementary school teachers and college instructors alike used attentive, courteous, and connecting behaviors to maintain rapport throughout the year (Flanigan, et al., 2021). College instructors indicated that connecting behaviors were

quintessential to both rapport initiation and maintenance, however elementary teachers, while using connecting behaviors to initiate rapport, mostly relied on these behaviors as a means to further or maintain already established rapport. As students grow closer to their teachers the informal conversations become more common; as the year progresses, teachers look for more opportunities to converse with their students in an effort to show that they care and create a sense of belonging.

Similar to college instructors, these elementary school teachers acknowledged the pros and cons of baked-in rapport (Flanigan, et al., 2021). Both elementary teachers and college instructors indicated that baked-in rapport affects the quality of the relationships with their students (Flanigan, et al., 2021). Whether good or bad, a student's perceptions of a teacher before a class or school year impacted the relationship that teacher was able to have with the student. College instructors and elementary school teachers were wary of this, and therefore monitored how students might perceive them inside and outside of the classroom (Flanigan, et al., 2021).

These findings inform elementary school teachers of what strategies their peers see as valuable in the classroom for forming relationships with their students. Present findings suggest that elementary teachers first focus on making connections with students and finding commonalities to draw upon for the duration of the year. Then, once a connection has been established, these instructors switch to the use of informal conversations, showing that they care, and showing empathy for students. Elementary education teachers and researchers can use the present findings as a starting point for making rapport-related decisions in their classroom. Although the benefits of student-teacher rapport have been widely documented, many teachers might struggle to

identify the strategies that are most helpful for improving student perceptions of rapport. Present findings can be used as a resource to help elementary teachers begin to make such rapport-related decisions in their own classrooms.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study provided helpful insight into the development and maintenance of rapport in elementary school classrooms, but the scope is limited. First, this study only included three participants. While the participants were thorough in their responses, the results likely are not representative of the whole of educators. Future research should involve more participants from a broader range of schools to generate a broader spectrum of responses. Second, this study focused solely on the strategies used by Kindergarten through second grade classroom teachers. Thus, it is possible that the strategies presented in these findings may not be as applicable to upper elementary or even special education spaces. Future research could be used to determine if the same strategies are employed in other educational spaces in the elementary school. Finally, this study gathered data from teachers only through the use of a one-on-one interview. More insight could be gleaned from further discussions and classroom observations with teachers, support staff, and from students themselves. Further research could not only interview students, but also observe in the classroom to observe what strategies are being employed and the effectiveness of those strategies.

Conclusion

Student-teacher rapport is an important aspect for engagement and motivation in the classroom (Frisby and Martin, 2010). If teachers only engage in rapport-eliciting behaviors at the beginning of the school year, then the benefits of that rapport can start to

fade (Lammers et al., 2017). Teachers must continue to engage in rapport-eliciting behaviors for the duration of the school year to ensure that the engagement and motivation does not wane. In comparison to prior research on the behaviors and contextual factors college instructors rely on to initiate rapport and maintain rapport in college classrooms (Flanigan et al., 2021) findings from this study indicate that elementary school teachers rely on many of the same behaviors and contextual factors as college instructors when initiating and maintaining rapport, with a few exceptions. Furthermore, this study is the first study to focus on this distinction for elementary school teachers. The present findings serve as a starting point for helping elementary school teachers identify the strategies they can use in their classrooms to better initiate and maintain rapport with their students.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. How important do you believe rapport or the student- teacher relationship is in your classroom and why?
2. What are some factors that positively influence the building of rapport between you and your students?
3. What are some factors that negatively influence the building of rapport between you and your students?
4. What specific strategies or actions do you use to create or initiate a sense of rapport or relationship with your students?
5. What specific strategies or actions do you use to maintain your rapport or relationships with your students?
6. Describe how good rapport has contributed to specific positive or negative outcomes within the classroom.
7. Is there anything else about how you cultivate rapport with your students that you think would be useful for me to know?

Appendix B

Teacher Demographic Survey

Please answer the following questions.

1) What grade level do you teach?

2) How long have you taught at this grade level?

3) Have you taught any other grade levels?

4) If so, which grade levels did you teach and how long did you teach them?