Student-Teacher Relationship and Student Academic Motivation

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**Abstract**

This qualitative study investigates the link between student-teacher relationship and student’s academic motivation. Two 16-year old male students from a public boarding school in the Peninsular of Malaysia were chosen as participants. Data were gathered from two unstructured interviews. Five themes within the student-teacher relationship were identified throughout the interviews: care, support, trust, approachable and expectation. The findings suggest that academic motivation is fostered when teachers show genuine care towards the students, provide continuous support to the students, build trust in the relationship, be approachable to the students, and have a reasonably high expectation towards students’ achievement.

**Key words:** Student-teacher relationship, academic achievement, motivation

**INTRODUCTION**

Academic achievements are always of interest to many parties including teachers, parents, school administrators and governments alike. Malaysia is no exception, having spared no effort in attempting to enhance student learning and academic performances in its public schools. These efforts are mostly centred on curriculum development, teaching approach and most recently, assessment. Student-teacher relationship, however, has received scant notice from its policymakers. Similarly, when it comes to investigating the link between student-teacher relationship and student’s academic motivation, especially in boarding schools, local researchers pay little notice to it. This is despite the fact that in such schools, students stay in hostels for a number of years—interacting with their teachers more than their family, and meeting the schools’ demands that they maintain high academic achievements. This study was an attempt to fill in some of this gap in knowledge.
LITERATURE REVIEW
Many studies have examined the effect of student-teacher relationship in enhancing students’ motivation towards learning (Hanrahan, 1998; Paulson, Marchant & Rothlisberg, 1998; Tuan, Chin & Shieh, 2005). For instance, Hanrahan (1998) studied the effect of learning environment on students’ motivation, and concluded that, “I believe that teachers had to give more importance to the nature of the teacher-learner relationship, particularly as it affected students’ learning related motivational beliefs” (p.750).

Other aspects in the student-teacher relationship that had been studied include types of feedback given by teachers, students’ age, social observation, teacher’s level of patience, sense of belonging, teacher support, emotional connection between student and teacher, students’ perception of their teachers’ care for them, teacher expectations of students, and teacher motivation.

Support
Wentzel (1998) defined teacher support as providing emotional support to students, while Griffing (2006) defined teacher support as providing extra academic help and assisting students’ personal concerns. Based on their studies, both of them concluded that teacher support has positive influence on enhancing students’ academic motivation. Their findings were supported by Daniel and Arapostathis (2005) who made the point that reluctant learners became more motivated when they received teacher support.

Emotional Connection
In her study, Griffing (2006) noted that when participants feel emotionally connected to their teachers, their motivation to learn increased. In addition, participants mentioned that when they do not feel emotionally connected to their teachers, their motivation to learn decreased.

Caring
In their study, Murdock and Miller (2003) asserted that teacher care had a significant positive impact on student motivation. This assertion was supported by a study conducted by Wentzel (1997) who contended that students who thought their teachers were caring paid more attention during class and were more motivated. Griffing (2006) also noted that lack of caring teachers seemed to reduce student motivation.

Teacher Expectation
The findings by Griffing (2006) suggested that when the participants perceived their teacher to have high expectations of them, their academic motivation increased. Conversely, low teacher expectation resulted in low academic motivation. The findings are similar to that of Murdock’s (1999) and Wentzel’s (2002) who found that teacher’s high expectation corresponded with the student’s end of year grades. Griffing (2006) further argued that teacher expectation may only act as superficial cover to the notion of how well the teacher knows the students and how much confidence the teacher has in the students.
METHODOLOGY
The study used a qualitative approach. Data were gathered through two unstructured interviews, one individual and one group interview. Purposive sampling was used to select two 16-year old male participants from SEMESA (pseudonym), a public boarding school in southern Peninsular Malaysia. Both interviews, conducted in the Malay language in line with the participants’ preference, were recorded with the participants’ consent and the procedures to maintain confidentiality and anonymity were explained to them. The relevant parts of the interviews were then translated into English. The transcribed data were then reduced into meaningful categories under themes that emerged from them.

FINDINGS
The results suggested five interconnected themes in the student-teacher relationship that had a certain degree of influence on the participants’ level of academic motivation.

The five identified themes were care, support, trust, approachable and expectation.

Theme 1: Care
This theme looked at how much teachers’ care for the students affect participants’ academic motivation. Teachers who appear to care about their students increased the students’ academic motivation.

For instance, Arif, one of the students in the study, mentioned that when a teacher personally asked him about his studies, he felt that the teacher cared about him. This increased his motivation to achieve good results.

“Teacher Z was concerned; she sometimes dropped by and asked if I’m doing okay with my studies. For a student, when a teacher comes and asks us personally, we feel that it's a huge thing for us already—for us, the teacher is concerned about us. It made me work harder to get straight As and make the teacher happy.”

Naim, the other student, mentioned that when the teacher cared about students, students actually could feel it. Arif agreed that a caring teacher was more like a parent to him. He mentioned that in a boarding school, students rarely saw their parents and spent more time with teachers. So, to have a good relationship with teachers was a great source of motivation.

Theme 2: Support
Participants shared that they were motivated to learn and to complete academic tasks when the teacher supported them. As Arif explained:
“Like in my class, 4F, teacher D was present during night preparation class and during weekends, just to be there so we can consult her and ask her things we don’t understand in the tasks she assigned.”

Lack of support from the teacher leads to a decrease in participants’ motivation, especially when they feel that they cannot complete the task given. Continuous support from their teachers made the participants believe that they could succeed in their studies. Naim pointed this out clearly:

“…because teacher A always supports me. She always guides me, and is willing to spend extra time to teach me outside class. The way she taught me, I knew that I can succeed if I worked hard.”

**Theme 3: Trust**

Both Arif and Naim mentioned trust as an important factor underlying the student-teacher relationship throughout the interviews. When participants believed that the teacher trusted them, their academic motivation increased. It led them to work hard to live up to the trust. Naim narrated how he worked hard and transformed into an A student in the second semester:

“For example, teacher A during the August test, she had a target for each of us. She targeted me to get A for Biology. At that time, in my heart, I felt the teacher’s trust. Teacher trusted me, so I had to prove it.”

Both participants shared that trust was built through the teachers’ caring and supportive attitude on a daily basis. When asked about how he knew the teacher trusted him, Naim explained,

“Because teacher A always supports me. She always guides me, and the way she taught me, I knew that she trusted me.”

Not only was the teachers’ trust important, participants also discussed that it was essential for students to trust their teachers. Both Arif and Naim mentioned that when they trusted their teacher, they were willing to support the teacher through active engagement in class, and this simultaneously increased their academic motivation.

Arif, when asked why it was important for him to maintain the teacher’s trust in him, said:

“In this school, we spend more time with our teachers. If we have a good relationship, it’s great. Class will be fun, especially when there is trust and we trust each other. That is important. It makes me feel safe to be present in class, or to voice out my opinion.”
Theme 4: Approachable

Friendly and approachable teachers increased the participants’ academic motivation. Participants appeared to translate teachers’ friendliness and being approachable into teacher care. As Arif explained:

“A friendly teacher like teacher D is more approachable. She always talks to students; asks them what they feel is difficult. Students will feel more comfortable to talk to her about studies. She makes us know that she cares. And that motivates us to keep going.”

Unfriendly teachers, on the other hand, were less approachable to students. So, students tended to keep queries and problems to themselves. This affected students’ motivation negatively. Arif, for instance, commented, said:

“If the teacher is not friendly, always has a serious-looking face, students will feel scared to ask questions, and just let the unclear concept remain.”

Arif also shared that teachers who made themselves accessible during class allowed students to ask questions in a more comfortable way:

“Or like teacher S, she often walked around the class, so it’s easier for students to ask questions. Students will be more motivated to complete their work.”

Theme 5: Expectations

Participants agreed that teacher expectation affected their academic motivation. Naim explained that teacher’s expectation played an important role in his academic motivation especially when the relationship with the teacher was good.

Arif however emphasised that too high an expectation could be counterproductive. He feels burdened by it, he said, and that decreased his academic motivation:

“Sometimes the teacher expects too much, but the student doesn’t feel like he can achieve it. I am like that. When teacher expectation is too high, I feel burdened, I feel anxious and it demotivates me.”

Arif also mentioned that high expectation should be complemented with support:

“When a student is good at one subject, don’t expect him to always get good marks; sometimes he fails too. And he needs full support like other students too”.

Low expectation, however, had the opposite effect. It usually made the students take it easy and lead them to put in less effort to succeed. As Arif further added, “But the teacher shouldn’t expect too little, it makes students lazy.”
DISCUSSION
The result of this study highlights five themes within the student-teacher relationship which affect students’ academic motivation. These components are trust, care, support, approachability and expectation. All five components are interconnected, and should not be seen in isolation from one another.

Care
In this study, teacher care seems to have a huge influence on participants’ academic motivation. This finding is consistent with other findings by Wentzel (1997), Murdock and Miller (2003), and Griffing (2006). All these findings support the positive correlation between caring and academic motivation. For instance, Murdock and Miller (2003) suggested that the more students felt that their teachers cared about them, the more motivated they became.

In this study, both participants mentioned that they felt it was important for them collectively as a class to make sure they kept good relationships with the teachers. This was especially true with the teachers that they perceived as caring. The participants strongly believed that when the teacher was not happy or uneasy with the class, he or she would not teach the class wholeheartedly. Surprisingly, both participants shared that students could differentiate whether the teacher was teaching their class wholeheartedly or not, and they found it more rewarding to have teachers who teach wholeheartedly. Hence, they make an effort to keep a good rapport with the caring teachers so that the teachers would teach and care for them wholeheartedly.

Another interesting finding is while Griffing (2006) made the point that only female students mentioned about teacher care in her findings, both male participants in this study mentioned teacher care extensively. One of the possible reasons underlying this finding, as suggested by both participants, was the fact that they came from a full boarding school where they spent more time with their teachers compared to their immediate family. Thus, these students treasured the good relationship with teachers.

Support
The findings of this study also suggest that teacher support increased students’ academic motivation. The participants stressed that the teachers’ support, especially in academic tasks, kept them interested in completing the task, while the lack of support often had the reverse effect. This finding is supported by Griffing (2006), Wentzel (1998), and Daniel and Araphostasis (2005).

Daniel and Araphostasis’ (2005) findings suggest that reluctant learners are more motivated to learn from teachers who supported them and sincerely wanted them to succeed. As shared by the two participants in this study, there is a strong relationship between the teacher’s sincere desire for students to succeed and the support provided
by the teacher. Sincere desire, however, is rooted in how much the teacher cares about the students. When the students recognise that the teacher really cares about them, they translate the teacher’s effort to help them as support. When the teacher cares less about them, students translate the teacher’s hard work as merely an effort to maintain the subject’s grade. Thus, it did not increase students’ academic motivation.

**Trust**

This study seems to suggest that trust is the ultimate pillar that holds the student-teacher relationship. However, trust is not built in one day. It has to start with how much the teacher cares about the students, and how much support the teacher provides to them. Through daily encounters with the teachers inside and outside the classroom, students develop trust in their teachers. Trust makes the students feel safe to try and to learn. Trust is translated into motivation to engage in classroom activities to complete the tasks assigned by the teacher.

**Expectations**

Teacher expectation seems to affect students’ academic motivation in three ways. High teacher expectation increases students’ academic motivation. The findings of this study confirm that of other studies which suggest that high teacher expectations have a positive impact on students’ academic motivation (Murdock, 1999; Wentzel, 2002; Griffing, 2006). However, this study’s findings also suggest that high teacher expectation is only translated into how much the teacher trusts the student when the student perceives that the teachers care for them and support them.

Another interesting finding from this study is that when teacher expectation was too high, participants felt that the teacher did not know their capability. They felt burdened by the expectation which lowered their academic motivation. This is supported by Griffing’s (2006) study. Griffing (2006) explained that when the teacher has high expectations but the students are not able to achieve the goal, students seem to become discouraged which then lowered their motivation.

**CONCLUSION**

This research offers an insight into how the student-teacher relationship affects the academic motivation of two 16-year old male students from SEMESA, a public boarding school in Malaysia. This study may prove useful to teachers who are interested in utilising the relationship they have with their students to increase students’ academic motivation. Several suggestions can be made for teachers to enhance their student-teacher relationship so that it will be more meaningful for the students. Suggestions include having teachers show genuine care for the students through continuous support and trust in the students. It is also suggested that teachers cultivate a friendly personality to be more approachable, and to have high expectations of students but complement it with support.
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REFERENCES


