

Educators' Notebook

Teacher-Student Relationships and Person-Centred Learning

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This paper outlines the results of a meta-analysis on teacher-student relationships in person-centred environments conducted by Jeffrey Cornelius-White from Missouri State University. Cornelius-White (2007) suggests that person-centred education originated from a counseling, educational psychology model that includes classical, humanist education and constructivist learner-centred theories of education. The review of 1000 articles to synthesize 119 studies from 1948-2004 suggests that person-centred teacher student relationships are effective for enhancing students' cognitive, affective and behavioral success.

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Person-centred Learning

The person-centred approach to learning common in the educational rhetoric of the day stems from both classical and learner-centered models of education, though Cornelius-White (2007) suggests that these models originate from different traditions (the humanist and the constructivist) and decades (1950's-1970's and the 1990's-2000's, respectively). Carl Rogers (1951) is charged as the founder of person-centred learning theory through his work related to nondirective and client-centred therapy, which eventually influenced ideas related to interpersonal relations, nursing, organizational functioning, and education (Cornelius-White & Cornelius-White, 2004; Rogers, Cornelius-White, & Cornelius-White, 2005). Ultimately, this theory of education aims to create citizen-leaders for a democratic society who can "take self-initiated action, . . . are capable of intelligent choice and self-direction, . . . are critical learners, . . . have acquired knowledge, . . . adapt flexibly, . . . utilize all pertinent experience freely and creatively, . . . cooperate effectively, . . . [and] work . . . in terms of their own socialized purposes" (Rogers, 1951, pp. 387–388).

Key to this theory is the importance of teacher-student relationships. The classical model "emphasizes teacher empathy (understanding), unconditional positive regard (warmth), genuineness (self-awareness), nondirectivity (student-initiated and student-regulated activities) and the encouragement of critical thinking (as opposed to traditional memory emphasis)" (Cornelius-White, 2007, p. 113). This model also includes

flexible teaching methods; transparency in process and an emphasis on compromise; collaborative and student-self evaluation; and the provision of human and learning resources. Activities include but are not limited to solving relevant and real problems, providing resources, using contracts for planning

and evaluation, forming learning groups, programmed instruction adapted to individual needs, encounter groups, community involvement, and peer tutoring. The aim is to create an atmosphere of acceptance and reliance on student responsibility.

The learning centred model focuses on four domains of individual learners to increase individual learning: metacognitive and cognitive, affective and motivational, developmental and social, and individual difference factors (Cornelius-White, 2007). Teacher-student relationships that are emphasized include "teachers' honoring of students' voices, adapting to individual and cultural differences, encouraging learning, thinking, and having learner-centered beliefs" (Cornelius-White, 2007, p. 115). Learning is facilitated in supportive, safe and trusting environments where learners have some control over their own learning and can learn with and from each other (McCombs, 2004).

In fact, most learning models emphasize the importance of teacher-student relationships. Attachment models, feminist models, developmental models, cooperative learning models and multicultural models all emphasize the importance of relationships, and, as in person-centered theory, make the claim that "persons only exist in, and in fact are, relationships" (Cornelius-White,

2007, p. 115). As Poplin and Weeres (1994) suggested “where positive things about schools are noted, they usually involve reports of individuals who care, listen, understand, respect others and are honest, open, and sensitive” (p. 12).

Meta-Analysis of Research

Cornelius-White (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 119 studies from 1948-2004 that synthesized the correlational and causal associations between teacher-student relationships and affective or behavioral and cognitive student outcomes. He found that learner-centered teacher variables have above-average associations with positive student outcomes. The classical and contemporary models as wholes are more supported than looking at variables in isolation. Positive relationships, nondirectivity, empathy, warmth, and encouraging thinking and learning are the specific teacher variables that are above average compared with other educational innovations. Correlations for participation, critical thinking, satisfaction, math achievement, drop-out prevention, self-esteem, verbal achievement, positive motivation, social connection, IQ, grades, reduction in

disruptive behavior, attendance, and perceived achievement are all above average and are presented in decreasing order.

Implications

It is likely that much of the correlation between learner-centered teaching and student success is bidirectional: “Students’ cooperation and success likely lead to better teacher behavior, just as better teacher behavior leads to student success” (Cornelius-White, 2007, p. 134). However, the robust associations found in this meta-analysis suggest that positive teacher-student relationships go hand in hand with student success, whether success is defined cognitively, or in terms of affective or behavioral outcomes. The evidence suggests, therefore, that researchers, policy makers, teachers, administrators, students, parents, and others involved in schooling must advocate for increasing the awareness and practice of positive learner-centered relationships between teachers and students as they work together to create caring, responsible, democratic citizen-leaders.

Selected References

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This is a brief review of a complex body of educational research. Since no brief review can capture a full body of research, readers are urged to consult the references which have been cited. The views expressed in this notebook are those of the author. The sponsors welcome your comments on this issue and your suggestions for future issues of Educators' Notebook.