

A photograph of a male teacher with glasses and a beard, smiling and raising his hand. Behind him, several young students are also raising their hands. They are in a classroom with a green chalkboard in the background. The chalkboard has some faint white markings, including the letters 'p.p.p.' and a large bracket. A large, semi-transparent pink diagonal shape covers the left side of the image, and a dark blue shape covers the bottom right corner.

RELATIONAL SUASION

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OVERVIEW STATEMENT

The most important observation you can make is when you become a glimmer in the child's eyes and he becomes a glimmer in yours.

—Albert Trieschman, quoted in Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (2002)

Picture the face of a second grader, any second grader, when you ask the name of her teacher. A broad smile spreads over the gap in her front teeth, her chin tucks into her chest, and her eyes turn up to you with a twinkle as the second grader whispers the teacher's name with the same shy, blushing reserve of a 14-year-old when asked about a boyfriend or girlfriend. Think now of a 16-year-old at the dinner table, testing the family's patience with another in a string of worshipful recitations of the clever, memorable, humorous, or insightful sayings of Mr. Houlihan, his history teacher. Consider the anger that masks the hurt when a middle schooler vents frustration to a parent during the afterschool trip homeward about the teacher, coach, or band director who has expressed disappointment at the middle schooler's performance or behavior. All of these situations reveal the special relationship between a student and a teacher, cemented in the student's exalted view of the person of the teacher, simply because she is a teacher. This special relationship is one that gives the teacher extraordinary power of influence to impact each child's life for good.

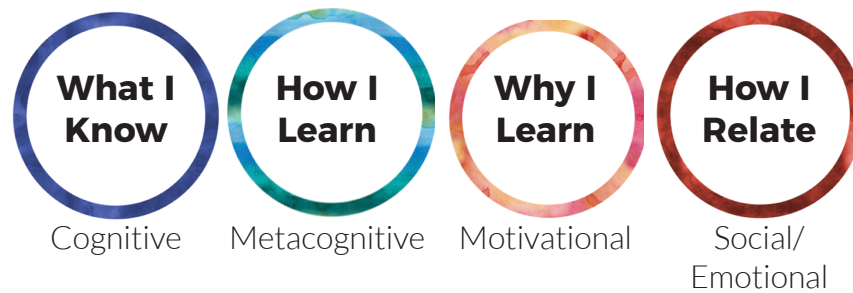
The teacher's extraordinary ability to influence students because of the nature of the teacher–student relationship is called “relational suasion” (Redding, 2013). Relational suasion is an asset to the student. It is a potent tool in the hands of the teacher. Relational suasion describes how the teacher–student relationship can and should be appreciated as a source of motivation to learn. For this reason, the teacher has a professional responsibility to build the capacity for relationship with students so as to initiate and support their learning.

The term relational suasion describes a common, human phenomenon: a person is open to guidance from someone he trusts. Any relationship of trust has this potential, and within formal education, it describes a student's openness to a teacher's influence, an openness that increases as the student grows in mastery and in successful learning habits. Highlighting relational suasion as a capacity to influence student learning allows us to prioritize the relational skill of a teacher. "Relational suasion, then, is a function of the role, the relationship, and the behaviors of the teacher . . . [in interaction with] . . . the students" (Redding, 2014a, p. 7). Relational suasion is amplified by the teacher's understanding of the individual student and the student's family. This understanding is acquired and demonstrated in ways that are personal (specific, unique) to each student. As a student is influenced by many teachers over the years of formal instruction and as a student's personal competencies for learning grow, the student also grows in capacity to enter into productive relationships with teachers, to more intentionally benefit from what the teacher has to offer. The teacher's skill in building a relationship with a student that most powerfully amplifies the opportunities for learning is fundamental to the profession.

Elmore (1996), among others, advocates the centrality of the instructional core in school learning. That core consists of three elements in relationship to one another: the teacher, the student, and the content. The content to be learned can be described broadly as standards or topical areas, or specifically, as a learning objective for a particular lesson. Thus identified, content

becomes a learning goal, and the teacher and student relationship has a clear purpose in its mastery. In this way, the teacher–student relationship is a particular kind of intellectual friendship, with mastery of the content as a common term or theme.





What explains inter-student differences in mastery of learning given similar opportunities for learning? In other words, what personal competencies propel learning and vary from student to student and from time to time for any student? Redding (2014b) proffers the concept of four personal competencies to describe variations in learning: cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and social/emotional. These factors describe the why and how behind student mastery. Personal competencies develop through direct instruction but also through the teacher's modeling, example, and attention to the student.

An important benefit of relational suasion is noted when the teacher is supporting a student in learning goals that are difficult to attain—when the student's persistence hinges on the teacher's support and confidence, building the student mindset as a learner capable of mastery and capable of growing in the skill of learning. That teacher's influence may, in fact, live long after the student is in the teacher's class.

If a topic is already interesting to a student, some of the motivation to learn is provided by the topic itself. But what if the learning goal arouses no immediate interest in the student? "Acquired relevance" describes the benefit to students when trusted teachers introduce new learning terrain, topics that are unfamiliar or even viewed with disinterest by the student. Teachers use relational suasion in introducing new avenues of interest to students, and the teacher's enthusiasm can provide comfort and encouragement when the learning topics are unknown or not immediately attractive. The new content is not as yet personally relevant to the student, and the student may not originally intend to expend effort toward the irrelevant novelty. Here the teacher's enthusiasm regarding the content and encouragement for the student's ability to learn may overcome the student's initial resistance. As a student successfully engages and masters this new content, the content acquires relevance.

In a sense, all relevance is acquired in some way; here we highlight the role of the teacher in introducing new material to broaden a student's horizon of interest. Consider a high school English teacher whose curriculum includes study of Shakespeare's *A Merchant of Venice*. The teacher is aware that the subject and the language of the play are neither immediately accessible nor relevant to the adolescent students, yet the teacher's craft in action meets the student's immediate disinterest and seeks to transform a lifeless unit into an adventure into language and meaning. At first the teacher may depend on the forbearance and trust of her students as she publicly commits the coming weeks of class to this single venerable play. As the unit progresses, her techniques of instruction and engagement reveal that this long dead but revered playwright has much to offer in this and other plays that a sincere and curious young person would want to sample.

Over the course of the unit, the teacher is able to show that, through this unfamiliar poetic prose, the characters offer access to deep human emotions, emotions the students are capable of feeling vicariously through them. Given the drama of the courtroom scene with Shylock and Portia, the students are able to see themselves and their humanity revealed in perceptive exchanges. Their appreciation of the virtues of friendship, the principle of justice, and the succor of mercy grow apace with their expertise in the action and expression of a drama written for the stage. As the unit concludes, theatrical drama, poetic expression, and the corpus of Shakespearean plays have acquired a relevance through the intercession of a teacher's art.

Although the student is the main agent in learning, relationships matter to this agency, and the teacher is in the key role with the student in learning. In a fictional vignette about Mrs. Taylor, a high school English teacher, David Brooks (2011) writes of the teacher as a personal, dynamic force in a classroom, seeking ways to engage students in a relationship that would awaken a desire to learn as well as acquire agency in learning. In the vignette, Mrs. Taylor, knowing a student's interests and idiosyncrasies, carefully chooses the right book to place in the hands of a student to ignite a new area of learning. The gifted book becomes the subject of continued conversation and personal interaction between teacher and student and the germ of an extended learning project. Brooks surmises that she used a skillful methodology and enthusiasm in relating to students, engaging them in learning as the "coin" of their relationship. Her role would inevitably disappear as she strove to "turn her students into autodidacts. She hoped to give her students a taste of the emotional and sensual pleasure that discovery brings – the jolt of pleasure you get when you work hard, suffer a bit, and then something clicks" (Brooks, 2011, pp. 82–83).



SUPPORTING RESEARCH



Albert Bandura (1986) acknowledges the influence of the teacher–student relationship by demonstrating that learning takes place both by direct reinforcement but also indirectly by observing others. Other persons serve as models of learning; outside the family, teachers are the most prominent models of learning. A student’s respect for a teacher provides a basis for imitating the teacher as a learner.

Bryk and Schneider (2002) show the connection between high levels of relational trust among principals, teachers, students, and parents and the school’s performance on standardized tests. In other words, the quality of the relationships served as a tonic for learning.

Within the literature on factors influencing student learning, the teacher has emerged as the prime contributor and is a powerful influence on the student’s personal development, development of learning habits, and motivation and persistence in learning (Redding, 2013). Hassel and Hassel (2009) write, “Teacher effectiveness has the largest impact of school effects on student learning, and research indicates that top-quintile teachers produce learning gains three times that of bottom-quintile teachers” (p. 2).

Success in building positive teacher–student relationships contributes to students' social skills, academic skills, and resiliency in academic performance

(Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Rudasill, Reio, Stipanovic, & Taylor, 2010).

On the other hand, negative student–teacher relationships early in formal schooling show a long lasting negative impact, including lower academic achievement and more frequent behavioral problems reaching into the later grades (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Decker et al., 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004).

Close relationships with students mean



better student attendance,



greater engagement in learning,



and more self-directed learning

(Birch & Ladd, 1997; Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004).

What is the Rationale for Including Relational Suasion in Your Efforts to Personalize?

The relational skills that complement a teacher's other instructional skills may seem to set a high bar of personal charisma or born ability. However, Hattie and Yates (2014) indicate that students do not require rare relational gifts from their teachers. For a student to respond to a teacher, ready for learning, rests on the student's belief that the teacher knows me, cares about me, and is competent to help me (Hattie & Yates, 2014). The keys to relational suasion are easily accessed within any teacher's relational repertoires. It's not about the teacher's personality but the teacher's behavior and how the student interprets the intentions. Students typically rate their teachers on approachability, fairness, and trust (Butler & Shibaz, 2008).

A research consensus is emerging about the influence of positive relationships and expectations for students shared by parents and teachers as a predictor of student success, indicating that each child needs one or more significant adults to regard them highly. A teacher can fulfill this role, even in the absence of other adults with this positive influence, overcoming an empathy gap that the child suffers (Hattie & Yates, 2014; Nordgren, Banas, McDonald, & Simpson, 2011).



HOW IS RELATIONAL SUASION USED TO PERSONALIZE LEARNING?

Relational suasion establishes trust and clarity that the teacher–student relationship is purposed to a student’s learning. The student feels that the teacher knows and cares about her and that the classroom is a safe and caring environment in which to learn and explore. The teacher establishes her expertise and guidance through her teaching—expressing enthusiasm, coloring instruction with appropriate personal vignettes, as well as allowing students to see her efforts and struggles in such a way as to demonstrate and encourage students to work through challenges. She also establishes her credibility through the personal attention she gives each student to bring out his or her best effort. The student believes that the teacher is competent to teach him. This connection or relational suasion allows the teacher to expand the student’s learning repertoire because the student explicitly trusts the teacher and wants to please the teacher. The student is inclined to commit effort to engage in learning and work to overcome obstacles that naturally appear in the course of learning. Relational suasion between teacher and student is also a mode of personal transparency and facilitates communication. When the teacher knows a student, she finds ways to link the student’s personal interests and passions to her learning through content, projects, or examples. The teacher also anticipates and recognizes where the student might encounter obstacles or barriers to his learning and plans ahead for strategies and support. When the student has experienced the attention and guidance of the teacher, he strives to do all that he can to meet the expectations placed on him and to strive to go beyond those expectations. He begins to find the value in the learning and to personalize his own learning beyond even what the teacher has so meticulously planned out for him.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

The teacher’s ability to positively influence a student because of the teacher’s relationship with the student and the student’s family is the cornerstone of personalization. This influence is a professional asset the teacher uses to develop the learning habit in her students which persists beyond the immediate teacher-student relationship.

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