Perceptions of the Teacher-Student Relationship: A Study of Upper Elementary Teachers and Their Students

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PERCEPTIONS OF THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP: A STUDY OF UPPER ELEMENTARY TEACHERS AND THEIR STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perceptions of a group of fourth through sixth grade teachers and their students concerning their relationship; the participants included 39 teachers and 111 students at an elementary school in the People's Republic of China. Both groups responded to a survey with the same number of items and content but from two different perspectives. The second part of the survey included teacher-student responses to one open-ended question. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected for analysis and discussion. Statistically significant differences were found between the means of the teacher and student groups in classroom goal structures ($F=9.55$, $p=.000$) and teacher's role ($F=2.414$, $p=.018$). Findings indicate that the teachers and students expressed their views rather differently on the items that reveal or reflect teacher-student relationship. Pressure of norm-referenced testing or grades appears to be a major factor contributing to the differences. Participants perceived teacher attitude or affective education essential in establishing a positive relationship between the two. The role played by a teacher was depicted as being much more dynamic than linear, and both groups deemed it necessary for teachers to shift their role according to settings in order to better support learners.

INTRODUCTION

Learning takes place when teachers and students communicate in and out of the classroom. How teachers interact with students impacts directly on the quality of instruction. For example, teachers play a crucial role in providing guidance, directions and support to learners, and they must make adjustments as appropriate, based on needs and responses from the latter. Through this interaction and communication, teachers develop a relationship with students. The relationship not

only is instrumental to socio-emotional development when students use inter- and intra-personal strategies (Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005) but also serves to support students' development of important social and psychological skills (Baker, 2006). The affective facet of instruction has a strong influence on students' academic growth and general school experience (Cushman & Cowan, 2010).

To develop and establish a positive teacher-student relationship, teachers need to see themselves through their students' eyes (Brookfield, 1995). When teachers identify and understand how they and their students perceive and react to the impact of classroom interactions similarly or differently, they are prepared to create an environment that is conducive to development and improvement of self-worth (Nuthall, 2007). A positive relationship between teachers and students may contribute to the positive feelings of students about the educational process, which should lead to enhancing the quality of both teaching and learning.

In addition, interaction and communication in the classroom or on the school site are often a reflection of a particular cultural, social and historical background. The economic change in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the past two decades has facilitated the presentation of a new image to the world. At the turn of the 21st century, educational reform was launched (Department of Education, PRC, 2001) to prepare students for an ever-changing and increasingly-interconnected world. The primary goal of the educational reform is to address the following issues: overemphasis on children's development of basic skills to prepare them for testing, inadequate training on problem solving through application, the assessment process used for selecting and classifying purposes to identify students' needs in order to improve instruction, and excessive study load and assignments for students (Liu & Qi, 2005).

Evidently, this economic change has had an impact on the teacher-student relationship in the classroom. With a background in which the influence of the traditional view of education clashes with modern changes, provisions for adjustments in the teacher-student relationship cannot be ignored or overlooked in the educational reform (Han, 2008; Jiang, 2007; Wu & Shi, 2008). Instead of lecture and passive learning with a teacher as an authoritarian and students as obedient followers featured in traditional teaching, educational reform has introduced some key words to encompass the new teacher-student relationship: democratic/equal, interactive, and learning together (Bao, 2003). After reviewing 83 studies on the teacher-student relationship, Bao summarizes that scholars and educators have examined the topic from multiple perspectives and fields because the many variables related to the relationship make it complex. The relationship is social, interpersonal and psychological, and touches upon ethical and legal responsibilities and rights.

The characteristics of teachers may include interest, emotion, cognition, attitude and leadership. For instance, a democratic teacher is prepared to create a comfortable learning environment whereas a dictatorial teacher may generate ten-

sion when working with students. Therefore, teachers need to learn and then apply appropriate strategies to establish a positive relationship with their students--to get to know them; to take initiative in establishing open communication; to make a transition from that of a knowledge dispenser to that of a facilitator, guide and leader; and to aid them in pursuing self-development opportunities.

According to results from several surveys conducted in 2004-2006, over a third of students were not satisfied with their relationships to their teachers (Jiang, 2007). They characterized the relationships as "cat and mouse" and "authoritarian and followers" with students being placed in a passive position. Some other students were intimidated by their teachers and were reluctant to seek support, especially when they encountered problems in a non-academic context. Another concern raised by the students was that their teachers showed favoritism by paying more attention to those who did well academically or earned good grades. The author points out that a lack of communication and understanding between teachers and students prevents them from establishing a positive relationship. However, since teachers did not participate in these particular surveys, their views were unavailable for analysis.

Clearly, a need exists for research on the teacher-student relationship in the PRC with both elementary teachers and students as participants; their responses to detailed aspects in a classroom instructional context would produce new information about the topic. Findings from such a study would be useful for teachers in identifying areas of need in establishing a positive relationship with their students in order to enhance instruction and better nurture their overall growth.

Due to its importance, the nature of the teacher-student relationship has been studied by educators around the world including those in the PRC and the United States of America (USA). Most of these studies feature teachers as the key group of participants, while others include voices of students, though few at the elementary level. Below is a review of literature on the examination of the teacher-student relationship available in the PRC and USA.
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LITERATURE REVIEW

Social motivational theories (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Harter, 1986) highlight a basic psychological need for autonomy, competence and relatedness. In a learning context, when children view their relationship with teachers as being positive and close, their adjustment to the school environment, their perceived competence and their interpersonal ability may be promoted and established. As a result, the teacher-student relationship has a significant influence on interaction in the classroom in that it affects both children's learning and behaviors (Li & Meng, 1997; O'Connor, Dearing, & Collins, 2011; Song & Liu, 2007). Self-perception may be the source of motivation for children to make greater efforts to meet academic and behavioral expectations (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Pajares, 1996). Learners are more likely to seek assistance when they perceive teachers as

supportive and available (Marchand & Skinner, 2007).

Several studies have been published about the impact of the quality of the teacher-student relationship in regard to adjustments of elementary school children based on teachers' reports (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes, Luo, Kwok, & Loyd, 2008). Types of investigation extend from validity of teacher self reports of teacher-student relationship as related to peer rating of rapport between a teacher and students (Hughes, 2009) as well as direct and independent observations (Doumen, Verschueren, Koomen, & Buyse, 2008). However, a low to moderate correlation is shown between the reports by teachers and students on teacher-student relationship quality (Henricsson & Rydell, 2004; Murray, Murray, & Waas, 2008).

It is important that children's voices be heard in the examination of the teacher-student relationship. Elementary school children actually had a great deal to say about their school experiences (Barksdale & Triplett, 2010). They reported their worries at school, their feelings of being disconnected from the teachers, the lack of meaningful activities at school, and their eagerness to be heard. All of these aspects are valuable so that teachers are able to improve the quality of the teacher-student relationship. A need is also identified for more studies that gather the opinions of elementary school children (Wu, Hughes & Kwok, 2010) for the purpose of school improvement.

The establishment of any teacher-student relationship does not occur in a vacuum but has its foundation rooted in a specific social, cultural and historical context. In a civilization of several thousand years, certainly the Chinese education system, as well as the teacher-student relationship, has evolved (Ding, 2008). Traditionally, a Chinese teacher was regarded as the authority in the classroom and therefore should not be contradicted or challenged (Yuan, 2006). Consequently, the teacher-student relationship was hierarchical, and students were expected to follow teacher's directions or instructions unconditionally. In addition, teachers in an exclusively-male profession were expected to treat students as their own children (Huang & Yao, 2006).

Set in the above historical and cultural background, J. Liu (2013) reviews the discussion of the teacher-student relationship under the educational reform since late 1990s. The current teacher-student relationship is no longer limited to the individuals involved but can be affected by many variables within the communication context. For example, content of study is regarded as media through which a teacher and students interact to achieve learning goals. All who engage in the teaching and learning process develop a social relationship, which should be examined across different fields such as sociology, psychology and philosophy. The relationship also makes a transition from the old model that features an authority-pupil style to a new one that characterizes interaction between a teacher and students in a democratic, equal and dialogical climate.

In particular, Song and Liu (2007) examine the teacher-student relationship among 867 students in 18 classes selected from three elementary and three middle schools. The three main characteristics examined are collaboration, closeness and

initiation in the teacher-student relationship. Results show that the students rated collaboration the highest and initiation the lowest with closeness in between. This implies that the students followed their teacher's directions to complete academic tasks, an influence of the traditional model, but were less likely to take initiatives in asking questions or seeking additional assistance.

Another study (P. Liu, 2003) explores the motivation of Chinese elementary and middle school students in five categories: personal achievement goal orientations, classroom goal structures, academic efficacy, academic self-handicapping strategies and cultural dissonance between home and school. Based on the data collected from 138 elementary school students and 122 middle school students, no statistically significant difference was found in the perceptions of classroom goal structures between the elementary and middle school students. The application of a single subject instructional structure in both settings can be primarily responsible for the stability across the two levels. However, teachers' perceptions are excluded in the study.

In regard a to teacher's role, a comparative study of candidates in two programs of the PRC and USA examines the perceptions of elementary preservice teachers (Liu, 2010). The two groups perceived teacher's role similarly in some aspects--to be a friend to students and to teach essential knowledge--but not others. "Motivator" appeared only in the description of the USA teacher candidates, while "like a family member" was used only by the PRC participants to depict the role of a teacher.

Moreover, "a group of researchers using goal orientation theory to examine the relation between the learning environment and students' motivation, affect, and behavior" (Midgley, et. al., 2000, p. 2) have developed and revised the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales. One main component in the scales is perceptions of classroom goal structures. Classroom goal structures refer to "students' perceptions of the purposes for engaging in academic work that are emphasized in the classroom" (Midgley, et. al., 2000, p. 17). The scales have been used to examine students at elementary school and other levels with an ethnically diverse sampling population.

The purpose of this study--with its focus identified and selected based on the literature review above-- is to explore the relationship between Chinese upper elementary teachers and their students. In addition to the responses from the teachers, the conclusions drawn will be based on the perceptions of the students: First, on their purposes for engaging in academic work in the classroom and, second, on what they view as the role of a teacher. The focus of this study is identified and selected based on the literature review provided above. The intention is to achieve the following: (1) to enrich the existing literature regarding voices or perceptions of elementary school students and their teachers about academic and other aspects, and (2) to add new knowledge about how the PRC teachers and students perceive classroom goal structures and teacher's role similarly or differently while they make adjustments under the educational reform.

Data for this study were collected from 39 fourth-sixth grade teachers and 150 of their students in a Chinese elementary school. The surveys used to collect information were composed of exactly the same content and number of items adapted to be administered to the two groups respectively. Their responses were analyzed to identify similarities and differences in the level of communication and understanding between the two groups. The research question is stated as follows: How do the Chinese fourth-sixth grade elementary school teachers and their students perceive and describe their teacher-student relationship?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Participants

The participants of the study were 39 fourth-sixth grade teachers and 111 of their students in an elementary school. Almost all of the teachers of these grades participated in the study, while 120 students were randomly selected from a total of 1132 fourth-sixth graders although 111 out 120 of them were available to respond to the survey. Forty students were chosen from each grade by a random drawing of class numbers followed by a random selection of seating columns by number.

The elementary school is located in a mid-size city (population 912,000) in the mid-eastern section of China. Founded in 1980, it is one of the modern, educational-technological experimental schools in its home province and one of the model public schools of the city. The school (grades 1-6) has an enrollment of 2,322 students with 1,231 of them in fourth-sixth grades. The average class size is approximately 70 students. This school is representative of schools across the nation in its size, student population, teacher quality, school facility and community. At least two or three other similar schools are located in the city, and at least a dozen similar cities are located in the province; therefore, hundreds of elementary schools of the type can be found throughout the nation.

The school has a staff of 106 full-time teachers, and the teacher-student ratio is approximately 1:22. The majority of the teachers are female and their average age is 40. About 40% of the teachers serve as homeroom teachers or advisers to designated classes, in addition to assuming their regular teaching responsibilities. A homeroom teacher is responsible for taking care of non-instructional business that is often management-based. As needed, the teacher also serves as a liaison to other staff and parents in supporting students in the homeroom.

A school day starts at 8:00 am and ends at 5:00 pm with one hour for a lunch break. The eight hours of school time include one hour and thirty minutes devoted to after-school or extra-curricular activities. All students are required to participate in after-school activities that are led by their teachers. Moreover, the school, like most other schools in the nation, has adopted the new curriculum standards that reflect the goals of the recent educational reform (Ministry of Education, 2002) in the PRC.

Little ethnic diversity exists in the community where over 98% of its population is Han. Typically, the students come from homes from where parents have a good education, and their family income is at or above the national average. Like many other Chinese parents, these parents tend to make their children's education a top priority and are eager for their children to achieve academic excellence.

Instrument & Administration

A survey was developed to elicit responses from two groups of participants (teachers and their students) about their perceptions of classroom goal structures and the teacher's role. The survey includes 20 items with 19 of them on a Likert scale (ranging from 1 to 5; 1=least true and 5=most true) and one open-ended question to elicit additional written comments from participants. Part I of the survey, items 1-11, is on classroom goal structures and these items are adapted from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales (Midgley et al., 2000). Part II has eight items (12-19) on the role of a teacher; the format of these items is the same as that for Part I, but the content is generated from the results of the study on the perspectives of teacher's role by pre-service teachers including a group of PRC participants (Liu, 2010). The content of the survey for teachers and students is identical except for point of view. For instance, item 1 reads, "Our teacher really wants us to enjoy learning new things" on the student survey, and it reads, "I really want my students to enjoy learning new things" on the teacher version. Finally, Part III concludes the survey with an open-ended question so that participants can express their views about the teacher-student relationship. (For a sample teacher survey, see Appendix A.) Both the student and teacher survey versions were translated into Chinese for administration.

The survey was administered to all fourth-sixth grade teachers who attended a weekly staff meeting at the school. Out of the 40 teachers in attendance, 39 of them completed and returned the survey. Among the teachers, 17 of them served as homeroom teachers across all classes of these grades. The teachers received the survey to complete after they finished the weekly meeting.

After random selection of student participants was completed, a graduate assistant visited the selected students in their classes during after-school time to administer the survey. The graduate assistant went over the sample question with the students to make sure they understood the directions before they started to fill out the survey. Out of 120 students who were selected, 111 were available to complete the survey and return their responses to the graduate assistant.

Statistical or Data Processing Methods

Data were processed both quantitatively and qualitatively. First, the statistical technique, Multivariate test (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006), was applied to determine whether the means between the groups of teacher and student responses differed on the survey items. Among all items, eleven are related to classroom goal structures and eight are clustered on teacher's role. The calculation results will be used to answer each of the two research questions quantitatively. Also, a statistical summary of each survey item will be presented for more in-depth and detailed

analysis of the response between the two groups.

Also, written answers to the open-ended question were coded and themes were identified by two raters. Inter-rater reliability was obtained to ensure consistence and accuracy in coding and theme identification. The two raters independently obtained 87% agreement, with 12% agreement obtainable by chance alone. Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1960), an index of agreement, which corrects for chance, was .85, considered a notable level of agreement. Maximum Kappa for this data set was .93. The qualitative data will be used to enrich, further explain or clarify the statistical test results centered on the research questions.

RESULTS

Analysis of Quantitative Data

A multivariate test was computed on SPSS 18.0 Macintosh version to examine whether the mean differences of the vector scores are statistically different. Table 1 is a summary of the test results. Statistically significant differences of mean scores were yielded for the teachers and students on classroom goal structures ($F=9.55$, $p=.000$) and a teacher's role ($F=2.414$, $p=.018$). When the mean scores of all variables were compared, differences were also found statistically significant at $F=7.427$, $p=.001$.

TABLE 1
Summary of Multivariate Test Results

	Value	F	p
A. Classroom goal structures	.453	9.55	.000
B. Teacher's role	.127	2.414	.018
Both A & B	.092	7.427	.001

To further identify which items or variables of the two clusters are different, a statistical summary of means with standard deviation for all survey items is shown in Table 2. For all items under classroom goal structures, six of them show a mean difference of at least .60 between the two groups. Among them, the top three items present a difference ranging from 1.22 to 1.32. These three items are about the acceptance of mistakes made by students (item #1: T mean=4.23; S mean=2.95), students with good grades as examples for others (item #8: T mean=3.51; S mean=4.83), and only a few students really do well (item #10: T mean=1.79; S mean=3.01). Also, as a reflection of the results from the multivariate test, the mean differences of variables on teacher's role between these two groups are smaller than those on classroom goal structures. Specifically, none of the mean differences is greater than 1:00, and the variables that show the biggest differences are teacher's application of methods to make learning fun (item #13: T mean=4.79; S mean=3.86), teacher's application of appropriate methods to support learning (item #12: T mean=4.64; S mean=3.75) and teacher as a motivator (item #15: T mean=4.79; S mean=4.08).

TABLE 2
Statistical Summary of Mean and Standard Deviation of All Variables

Item	n	Mean	SD
1	T: 39	4.23	.931
	S: 111	2.95	1.436
2	T: 38	3.63	1.051
	S: 110	2.84	1.405
3	T: 37	4.78	.479
	S: 110	4.50	.993
4	T: 38	4.53	.868
	S: 110	4.61	.822
5	T: 39	4.92	.270
	S: 110	4.28	.978
6	T: 39	4.49	.823
	S: 110	4.14	1.104
7	T: 37	4.62	.721
	S: 111	4.16	1.092
8	T: 39	3.51	1.167
	S: 111	4.83	.895
9	T: 38	3.03	1.284
	S: 110	3.50	1.353
10	T: 38	1.79	.991
	S: 111	3.01	1.517
11	T: 39	1.91	1.109
	S: 111	2.47	1.554
12	T: 39	4.64	.743
	S: 110	3.75	1.391
13	T: 38	4.79	.474
	S: 111	3.86	1.334
14	T: 39	4.51	.721
	S: 110	3.95	1.367
15	T: 39	4.79	.522
	S: 110	4.08	1.190
16	T: 38	4.74	.601
	S: 111	4.38	.954
17	T: 39	4.82	.506
	S: 111	4.59	.898
18	T: 39	4.85	.366
	S: 111	4.37	1.061
19	T: 38	3.66	.938
	S: 108	3.44	1.518

* T=teacher; S=student

Analysis of Qualitative Data

In addition to responding to the Likert scale, the two groups of participants also answered in writing the open-ended question in the survey to reveal their perspectives about teacher-student relationships. Their written responses are reported below, with the teacher group followed by the student group.

Teachers' written responses. In the teacher group, 2/3 of the participants responded in writing (see Table 3). Except for a very small number of the teachers who claimed to play a linear role such as a family member or friend, the majority of the teachers perceived themselves as wearing multiple hats in order to work with students in and out of the classroom. A teacher commented, "To my students, I play the role of their friend, teacher and mother. When they share their problems with me, I listen to them, help them and give them guidance. I also care about their well being beyond the school and try to help them as much as I can. Usually, I am firm but considerate; I love them but don't spoil them. I have high academic expectations of my students." This teacher saw herself not only playing multiple roles to educate, nurture and facilitate but also making efforts for a balance between being approachable and reinforcing disciplines or principles. She set up academic standards for her students, but, like a mother, she also cared about her students' well being in a non-academic context.

Table 3
Summary of Teachers' Written Responses

Theme	Count
Multiple roles	18
-Teacher & friend	13
-Teacher, friend & family	3
-Other	2
Linear role	5
-Family	3
-Friend	2
Other	3
-Positive relationship	3

Number of teachers who provided written responses=26/39

The occurrence of the word <u>friend</u> presents the highest frequency in the teachers' responses, echoed in the answer of 18 teachers or over 69% of all who provided a written response. In this subgroup, 16 included <u>friend</u> as a component of a more complex role in their description. It is interesting to note that most teachers chose to befriend students outside of class or in a non-instructional setting but made it a top priority to offer academic support in the classroom. One teacher succinctly expressed how to adjust teacher-student relationship according to settings: "I think there are two types of relationship between my students and me. One is a relationship of teacher and student in the classroom and the other is a relationship of friends outside of classroom."

To summarize the teacher participants' responses, a teacher in the classroom should "respect/care about/listen to students," "treat everyone equally," "guide/ lead discussion," "respond to questions," "clear confusions," "help students enjoy learning and develop study skills," and "learn with students." Although a general consensus reached among the teachers is to have students' academic achievement as the ultimate goal, the word "grade" or "evaluation" is never visible or specified in their written responses.

Moreover, having a positive relationship with students is a predominant theme shared by all teachers. Words used to describe teacher-student relationship are: "close (my students like to be around me)," "harmonious (respect and treat all equally)," "comfortable (make them feel at home)" and "nurturing for all (learn and grow together)." One teacher, after assuring a harmonious relationship with her students, admitted that "sometimes we (teacher and students) have conflicts, disagreement and misunderstanding." Nevertheless, no comments were provided on how to resolve issues or conflicts to maintain the proclaimed "harmonious relationship." Additionally, while many teachers agreed on the importance of equity, none of them mentioned appropriately addressing individual students' needs as one aspect to support students. Also absent was any specific comment about supporting students' growth in critical thinking or problem solving.

Students' written responses. The students were highly active or enthusiastic in offering written comments, and 106 out of 111 students or about 96% actually responded in writing. A summary of their written responses is shown in Table 4. Their statements range from much detailed description to extremely short answers such as "very good" or "not good." One notable characteristic of the students' written answers is the use of metaphors to describe teacher-student relationship: "like plant/flower and gardener," "small tree and sunlight," "leaves and dewdrops," "loving mother" and "strict father." What is in common among the metaphors used is care and nurturing provided by a teacher to students.

TABLE 4
Summary of Students' Written Responses

Theme	Count
Positive relationship	23
Balanced /multiple	16
Friend	27
Family (mother, father or sister)	13
Regular relationship	16
Mixed (good and not good)	5
Not positive	3
Other	3

Number of students who provided written responses=106/111

The students collectively used the following words to depict an image of a teacher in a positive teacher-student relationship: "loving," "caring," "nice,"

"responsive," "good," "patient," "approachable," "open-minded," "not yelling" and "close." All these words can be classified under affective domain instead of subject matter or content based. Additionally, students responded positively when teachers "love teaching," "make students feel comfortable asking questions," "inspire students to work harder," and "have trust in students." Some students considered punishment for students' misbehaviors as the right thing for a teacher to do because "it is good for students' growth and development."

A number of students described how they received help and assistance from their teachers, which is illustrated in the comment of a student: "When I make mistakes, my teacher points them out to me; when I make progress, my teacher praises me." However, no clarifications were given whether the assistance was provided in an academic or non-academic context. Regarding academic performance, three students specified that their teachers helped them when they did not do well or failed a test but encouraged and praised them when they scored well.

Although students appreciated praise and encouragement from teachers, they valued equal relationship among all and expected teachers to treat every student equally. One example of being equal in their mind is that teachers and students can correct each other's mistakes. Some other students added "appropriate application of methodology to make learning fun" to the description of a positive relationship. However, the relationship was still perceived positive or harmonious despite teaching methods as reflected in another student's remark: "The relationship between the teacher and me is very harmonious. But sometimes I don't like some of the teaching methods applied."

Moreover, 16 of the students simply wrote "a regular relationship" in their responses. The short answer does not seem to suggest much excitement or enthusiasm, a condition which may indicate a rather limited affective connection or communication between the teachers and these students. It is unknown whether the participants had the same definition of "a regular relationship" in mind. Moreover, some students expressed mixed feelings regarding teacher-student relationship; they liked some part but disliked the other. As one student wrote: "Sometimes the teacher is nice and friendly. Some other times the teacher does not respect my opinion, provides no explanation and is biased, which really gets me annoyed and frustrated." Finally, three students were apparently not enthusiastic about their relationship with their teachers. Comments or any elaboration offered appears to be affective-related or about their perception of teacher attitude instead of quality of content instruction: "the teacher does not care or listen," "there is no communication between student and teacher," and "the teacher is biased."

DISCUSSION

Findings in this study indicate that the elementary school children had a great deal to share about their school experiences (Barksdale & Triplett, 2010). In fact, the ratio of students who provided written responses and comments is much high-

er compared to that of their teachers. Results suggest that both teachers and students did not agree in their perceptions of their relationship, a conclusion which is revealed through direct written description as well as in their views of classroom goal structures and the teacher's role. This confirms that correlation between the reports from teachers and students on their perceptions of teacher-student relationship is not high (Henricsson & Rydell, 2004; Jiang, 2007; Murray, Murray, & Waas, 2008). What contributes to the differences between the perceptions of teachers and students in this study can be related to or affected by each of the following: pressure of norm-referenced assessments or grades, teacher attitude to students, application of teaching methods and a dynamic role of a teacher.

Impact of Grades

The PRC has probably the longest history of employing examinations as the sole criterion to measure academic performance or abilities since the inception of the Imperial Civil Examination System over 1400 years ago (Wang, 2004). Even today, good grades remain critical to college admission, job competition and promotion among others. In a society where students who do well in taking examinations are qualified to enter higher education institutions, a critical step leading to a greater quality of life, parents tend to link their children's grades to teaching effectiveness. Consequently, teachers are pressured to pay special attention to their students' academic learning and could be grade- driven subconsciously. This becomes a cause for students to view teacher-student relationship less positively (Jiang, 2007). Yet teachers may not be aware of the affect on their students when they promote those students with good grades as examples to the rest of the class and consequently show favoritism to them (Jiang, 2007). The biggest mean difference among all variables between the two groups of participants is about the perceptions of grades. However, the teachers either were unaware of the impact that their attitude to grades had on students or preferred not to discuss it openly in their written responses. As a result, other than the mean difference presented in the quantitative data, none of the teachers used the words "grade," "assessment/ evaluation" or "competition among students" to describe their relationship with students. In comparison, some students commented on teachers' reactions when it came to their academic or testing performance and expectations for students to do well in taking tests.

One definite outcome from norm-referenced assessment is that students are ranked. This seems to affect how students perceived themselves in relation to their peers and teachers. It might not be the intention of teachers to use grades as the sole criterion to measure students' growth or excellence as their written responses imply. However, the actual message they sent during communication was interpreted rather differently by their students. After the implementation of educational reform for over a decade, it remains an issue that "good grades are acknowledged as the best or only indicator for successful students" (Liu & Qi, 2005, p. 36).

It is not difficult to understand why teachers, in the eyes of their students, have a low tolerance level for errors made by students, even if making mistakes is

part of the learning process. Obviously, the fewer errors students make, the higher the grade/score they earn. However, if students are expected to do it right the first time, many of them may feel frustrated and become less self confident when making errors is unavoidable. As a result of making mistakes, students may doubt their competence and ability under pressure, a condition which certainly does not meet the basic psychological need of social motivational theories (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Harter, 1986).

Furthermore, the application of norm-referenced assessments can be primarily responsible for the group difference on "only a few students do well in our class." The teachers' responses show that their rating of the item is heavily clustered toward the "not at all true" end. In contrast, the students showed a much higher level of acceptance to the statement, which could be based more on their perception of actual classroom practice than an admission that the majority of their peers did not do well. When only grades are used for classification or competition purposes, many students may miss an opportunity to see the highlights of their own growth over time and may feel inferior to the "few good students." Lack of self confidence is not conducive to student motivation or overall growth. The use of criteria-referenced assessment or more comprehensive evaluation should prove to be richer and more dynamic than the use of traditional grades in that all students may see their talents, strengths and personal growth across different subjects and beyond; in turn, students have an opportunity to develop and improve self worth (Nuthall, 2007).

In fact, the issue of highlighting the power of grades is identified in the educational reform that calls for assessment as a means to monitor student development and growth (Liu & Qi, 2005) so that teachers can make adjustments in planning lessons to better meet students' needs. When this is practiced, it lays a foundation for a teacher to reach students on an individual level to establish a positive relationship in a democratic, safe learning environment. Teacher-student relationship significantly influences classroom interaction, which has an impact on children's learning and development (Li & Meng, 1997; Song & Liu, 2007).

Teacher Attitude

The survey items that teachers and students agreed on the most are teachers' care for students, also supported by the comments made by a number of participants. The results indicate that students' assessment of a teacher can be highly affected by care from the latter. Students may feel more comfortable seeking assistance when they perceive teachers as supportive and available (Marchand & Skinner, 2007). In the meantime, the reason offered by those students who were not enthusiastic about a teacher was the absence or lack of care and communication from the latter. Active communication and outreach from a teacher to students, as a part of the affective domain of education, can significantly influence students' academic growth and general school experience (Cushman & Cowan, 2010).

However, possessing a caring heart and achieving open communication are only the beginning for teachers who want to develop an understanding of students;

teachers need to see themselves through children's eyes if they want to establish a positive relationship (Brookfield, 1995). As discussed previously, the weight of grades can very likely affect teacher attitude and the teacher-student relationship. When teachers and students use different criteria to evaluate success and achievements, misunderstandings and conflicts can occur to hinder their communication and relationship. Teachers can improve their relationship with their students when they understand the affect of their perception of grades on students before making plans to resolve differences and issues for school improvement. To achieve this goal, appropriate communication with parents about their children's development and well being can be essential. Therefore, corresponding adjustments in the social context are needed to implement the educational reform.

Students expect teachers to treat them equally regardless of grades or any other factors. Teachers who are eager to help but overlook equity may cause discomfort for students, a situation which is not conducive to a positive or harmonious teacher-student relationship. Discrimination as a result of ranking by grades and using grades as a sole or primary evaluation makes it practically impossible for all students to see that their efforts are equally acknowledged and valued. As a result, they may miss an opportunity to use their self-perception as a source of motivation to make more efforts and meet academic and behavioral expectations (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Pajares, 1996).

Teaching Methods

Teaching methods are a means that a teacher can apply to better support student learning and understanding. Application of appropriate teaching methods remains a focus of examination to improve teaching quality (Gibbs, 2001; Kyriacou & Goulding, 2006; Samuels, 1988). Clearly, one major aspect of examining teacher-student relationship is through an analysis of how a teacher and students interact in a learning context. So, how much did application of teaching strategies affect teacher-student relationship of the participants?

The quantitative results from this study show that the teachers believed they made great efforts to apply strategies to facilitate student learning and make learning enjoyable. However, their efforts did not seem to be recognized as much by their students as the mean differences suggest. The written responses from the teachers hardly reveal any details about how they supported students' learning other than to teach, guide, assist and facilitate. None of the teachers mentioned how to get to know each student and respond to individual needs in instruction or other context. Treating all students homogeneously is no doubt a different concept from treating everyone equally. The students' appreciation of application of teaching strategies may increase when the teachers discover the needs of students and take actions to address identified needs.

Moreover, some terms such as "clearing confusions" and "providing guidance" were used to define "teaching," but how to learn or what competence for students to develop was not exposed in the written responses. Were the students expected to memorize so that they would do well in examinations or were they

expected and guided to develop critical thinking, problem solving and independence? When both teachers and students are clear on learning goals, the teachers are in a better position to select appropriate teaching strategies and to be better prepared to improve instruction as well as the teacher-student relationship.

Comprehensive and Dynamic Role

Many participants in both groups agree that teachers assume different identities in meeting responsibilities: they can be teachers, friends and family members (male or female). In the participants' eyes, teachers are like a mother, father or sister to their students. Even for those teachers who simply claimed to be like a family member or friend to their students, it is almost impossible that they minimized or discounted their instructional responsibilities. In other words, all those teachers who defined a teacher's role as linear actually implied a complex meaning.

In being in a position of playing multiple roles, how do teachers know when to do what? Since each role is associated with certain responsibilities, conflicts may arise. For example, can a friend serve as an imposer of discipline for another? Based on the responses from the participants, it appears that they viewed a teacher as someone who takes some characteristics from different roles to form a brand new one that is comprehensive and dynamic. As such, a teacher should respect and treat each student as a friend, care and love them like a family member, and provide guidance, facilitation and support in learning as an instructor. The component of placing teachers in the role of family members appears to be an influence of Chinese culture and tradition (Liu, 2010).

Moreover, the participants maintained that teachers should act differently according to settings. A number of the participants in both groups stipulated that a teacher is an instructor in the classroom and a friend outside of the classroom but not vice versa. In the classroom, teachers are primarily responsible for providing guidance and support to better facilitate student learning while maintaining a safe and comfortable learning environment. Criticism and disciplines are considered necessary as long as a teacher is fair and unbiased, although the students welcomed and appreciated praises and encouragement more.

In addition, the mean difference on the teacher as a motivator indicates there is room for teachers to improve techniques to motivate students. It is worthy to note that the teachers never used the word motivation in their comments, despite their high level of agreement on the term. In addition, some participants considered it a sign of democracy or equity when a teacher accepted corrections from students and learned together with them. Their comments and responses imply that a teacher, as the leading figure in the classroom, should guide students to learn by treating them with respect and equity. Many participants imagined themselves to be more on an equal level when teachers and students interacted outside the classroom. A possible explanation of the phenomenon is that the traditional role of a teacher as an authority in the classroom should not be overlooked in establishing a new teacher-student relationship in the educational reform.

Limitations

In this study, all students from 4th-6th grades were treated as the same group. If the group were further divided by grade and gender, additional information about these variables could be obtained. If there were indeed major differences among the students across grade or by gender, possible causes can be explored to generate additional information about the perceptions of the participants. Also, the written responses from a number of teachers and students were rather sketchy with little explanation or elaboration provided. A follow up interview should be helpful for the teachers or students to share that they meant by saying, "a regular teacher-student relationship," "like a friend," or "not good." The new information would make it possible to enrich the existing qualitative data and consequently minimize ambiguity to improve accuracy in theme coding.

CONCLUSION

Perceptions of both teachers and students are included in this study to investigate the teacher-student relationship through their written depiction and rating of classroom goal structures and the teacher's role. The elementary school children were highly active in reporting and describing their perceptions or views, but they expressed rather different views than their teachers about teacher-student relationship. It can help the teachers better understand their students when they discover why differences exist in their perceptions and take action accordingly to nurture students' growth in an environment where everyone is treated equally and with respect.

Although teacher assessments of students' educational progress are necessary, the manner in which teachers conduct these assessments can significantly affect students' self worth and relationships with their teacher and peers. When grades are used exclusively for classification purposes and as a primary criterion to measure students' growth and excellence, it may become a factor that influences students' sense of belonging, motivation and psychological well being. As a result, differences between teachers and students in their perceptions of the importance of "grading" do not contribute favorably to the establishment of a positive teacher-student relationship. Moreover, when students with good grades are presented as good examples to the rest of the class, other youngsters' talents and strengths can be overlooked, a situation which has an impact on their self esteem and confidence. When education is limited to student academic performance, opportunities are lost in promoting students' overall growth, a condition which makes it difficult for students to feel treated equally.

The impact of a teacher tends to go beyond the walls of a classroom. How teachers and students relate to each other appears much more dynamic and complex than linear or simple. Settings, cultural/ historical background and other factors can all contribute to the complexity. Love and care from a teacher seem essential elements for students and teachers to communicate and establish a posi-

tive relationship. When certain emotional or affective conditions are met, teachers become better prepared to support students' learning. Moreover, application of teaching strategies should affect how a teacher works with students although the level of its power is unclear. One way for a teacher to show care and love is to explore different teaching strategies to get students more motivated about learning and have them more actively engaged. Consequently, many variables in a teaching and learning context do not appear to work on an independent or separate basis but very likely interplay within a given context.

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Appendix A

Teacher Survey

The first question is an example:

I like strawberry ice cream.

1	2	3	4	5
NOT AT ALL TRUE		SOMEWHAT TRUE		VERY TRUE

HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT YOURSELF AS A TEACHER. PLEASE CIRCLE THE NUMBER THAT BEST DESCRIBES WHAT YOU THINK.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. I think mistakes are okay as long as my students are learning.					
2. I tell my students how they compare to other students.					
3. I want my students to understand our work, not just memorize it.					
4. I make it obvious when students are not doing well on their work.					
5. I really want my students to enjoy learning new things.					
6. I give my students time to really explore and understand new ideas.					
7. I recognize my students for trying hard.					
8. I point out those students who get good grades as an example to all of them.					
9. I tell my students which students get the highest scores on tests.					
10. In my opinion, only a few students do really well.					
11. I call on smart students more than other students.					
12. I use a variety of strategies to help my students learn.					
13. I use a variety of strategies to make learning fun or enjoyable.					
14. I am like a friend to my students.					
15. I motivate my students in learning.					
16. I am passionate about teaching.					
17. I care about my students in their academic growth.					
18. I care about my students in their overall growth.					
19. My students want to become a teacher in the future because of my influence.					

20. How do you describe the relationship between you and your students?