Reflection that informs teacher judgment:
Determining the appropriateness of differential classroom behaviors

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To teach effectively, one must attend to the emotional well being of students (Ryan, Connell, & Deci, 1985). Forming positive, supportive relationships can be a challenge for teachers, given the wide-ranging needs, backgrounds, abilities, and personalities of students in a typical classroom that constantly change from year to year. The only constant in the classroom is the teacher. Yet the teacher may not be a constant after all—her differing reactions to the variety of students also factor into the overall outcome (Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006). Positive relationships that support and enhance the learning environment are therefore influenced by how a teacher and student interact with each other (Deiro, 2005; Author et al, 2008; Noddings, 1995; Reeve, 2006). The way the teacher interprets and responds to the student and vice versa will determine much about the success of that shared experience. The practice of reflection in teaching can be helpful in improving teacher practice (E. Davis, 2006) and it may also be a valuable tool in improving relationships that form in the classroom.

This study is part of a larger yearlong case study conducted to understand the workings of classroom relationships between one teacher and her class of second grade students. The dual purposes of this study are 1) to examine a teacher's differing classroom behaviors; and 2) to re-examine a previous model on motivations for teacher interaction. To do this, two relationships dyads involving the teacher were selected for further inspection. The paper begins with a review of the kinds of student-teacher relationships and teacher preference, with a focus on the model for teacher choice in interaction proposed Newberry & Davis (2008). Next the method for data collection is described and analysis explained. The third section presents the findings highlighted through a comparison of the relationship the teacher had with two different students, including a discussion suggesting an adaption to the model. Finally, the paper concludes with implications for teachers.

Kinds of classroom relationships

Emotional closeness creates a mutual tendency for teacher and child to form relationships, as caring interchange is established and continually acted upon (Noddings, 1995). It has been suggested that teaching relationships most closely reflect a parent-child relationship (H. Davis, 2006, Wentzel, 2002). Other kinds of relationships present in the classroom have been conceptualized as such as expressive-emotional relationships (desiring emotional fulfillment), confirmatory (seeking reassurance), instrumental (using the relationship to gain an end) and influential (in which both parties impact the other for good) (Deiro, 2005). There are also special relationships that form between teachers and specific students as in the teacher’s pet phenomenon (Babad, 1993). Reasons for these different relationships within the classroom can be credited to teacher perception and preference.

Studies show that teachers tend to have preferences for students who are like them in personality, background and experience (Morganett, 2001; Author et al, 2008) and who are likely to facilitate ease in classroom management by demonstrating desired behaviors (Babad, 1993; H. Davis, 2006; Wentzel, 1993). Teachers are also inclined to prefer students who show a high probability for success and motivation (Babad, 1990; Davis, 2003; Urdan & Maehr, 1995; Wentzel, 1993) and who offer no conflict with the teacher (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Additionally, teachers prefer to spend time with
students who reflect and support the role they have conceived for themselves (Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006). These judgments of how and with whom to spend their time are likely not made consciously, but are rather subconsciously invoked as the teacher protects her own need to belong (Leary, 2003) and in doing so teachers may not be aware of the influence that their choice or reaction may have on the relationships with students (Babad, 1992; Brophy, 1974; Goodlad, 2004). Dealing with negative affect from students is not a comfortable thing for many teachers (Reeve, 2006), and therefore teachers may spend more time with the students from whom they feel the least rejection (Davis, 2003).

Newberry & Davis (2008) devised a model (Figure 1), determined from teacher interviews using an instrument called the Adapted IOS (Newberry, 2006) in which each teacher-student relationship dyad in the classroom was described in terms of the emotional closeness felt. The results of their study produced a model proposing how teachers are influenced by aspects of student personality and need. According to the model, these factors then influence the stance teachers take when approaching that student. The authors report three main factors that influence how teachers interact with students.

![Figure 1. Model of teachers’ concepts of factors that influence the interaction-approach orientation enacted toward students (Author et al, 2008).](image)

The first two, that of negotiating personality (student attributes), and dealing with challenge (management of special circumstances), are intensified by the third of relational press from the child (attention required/demanded and how the student attempts to avoid/obtain it); some students press inappropriately, others barely engage at all. For example, the teacher will consider the student’s personality and specific challenges. If the student’s personality is fairly easy to negotiate, and the challenges are
mild then the teacher leans toward more positive interactions, ones that show feelings of affinity or where she is being attentive. However, if the press is excessive, inappropriate, or non-existent, it can lead to less positive interactions. The way a student presses for a relationship can intensify or alleviate the feelings connected to the other factors. How the teacher perceives the combination of the three factors subsequently determines the interaction or approach taken up by a teacher.

The model then connects the perception of student factors to five different interaction-approach orientations that were indicative of how teachers receive students and how they tend to interact with them. These are (1) feeling affinity (a natural inclination to associate with another), (2) being reflective (considering needs and being attentive to another), (3) implementing strategies (relying on previously used teaching techniques to work with a student), (4) treating causally (a somewhat indifferent or hands off approach), and (5) acting professional (an emotionally detached performance of duties as part of the role of teacher) (See Newberry & Davis, 2008). In this study, attempts to further explore the heuristic model for these judgments were made through a closer examination of a teacher and two of her students.

Methods

The larger context of this study included all 27 students who belonged to the class taught by the participating teacher during the 2007-2008 academic year. The school is located outside a large Mid-Western city in the United States where 60% of the students received free or reduced lunch. The second grade class in question had between 23-25 students at any one time, in which 56% were white, 24% Hispanic/Latino, 12% Black, one Asian and one Pacific Islander. The specific context of this study is the relationships that were formed between the teacher and two of her students.

Participants

The participating teacher, Sandy is a White, middle-class, married, female from the Mid-western United States who was in her fifth year of teaching. The first student, Desiree is a Black, high-achieving, eight-year-old student from a single-parent home. She is the oldest child in the family since the death of her older brother due to gang related violence. The second student, Keisha, is a Black, average achieving eight-year-old student who moved to the school district at the beginning of the school year from the southern United States with her parents and older siblings. The two girls shared a friendship group, but had vastly different relationships with the teacher, despite their similarities in ethnicity, SES and social group.

Data were gathered through various means, the same as used in the study that produced the previous model, including classroom observations, interviews, and written reflections. Eighteen in-class observations were made throughout the school year, each lasting approximately an hour and were recorded in written field notes. There were two kinds of interviews, each occurring 4 times: after the first two weeks of class, at the winter break, and spring break and at the end of the school year. The first was a structured interview in which the teacher created a diagram for each student in the class, including Keisha and Desiree, to represent the closeness felt in the relationship. This interview protocol is known as the Adapted IOS (see Newberry, 2006). The diagrams consisted of two circles placed on a straight line. The circles represent the teacher and the student. The closer the circles, the more emotional closeness felt in the relationship. Once all diagrams were created, diagrams were grouped according to proximity of the

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1 The names of the participating teacher and those of her students have been changed for anonymity.
circles and displayed as a whole for the teacher to see. Throughout the process, the teacher was encouraged to talk through her rationale for placement choice as she described the student in question and the relationship they shared.

Open-ended interviews were conducted two weeks after the structured interviews. They were designed to give the teacher an opportunity to openly discuss any issues that may have occurred throughout the week in regards to relationships as well as the results of the structured interview after having had time to reflect. Between the time of the structured interviews and the open-ended interviews, the teacher was asked to write a reflection based on her experience using the Adapted IOS. Each method of data gathering was subject to constant comparative method (Glaser, 1978) of analysis throughout the process as the transcripts of the interviews and reflections were reviewed and used to guide the next step in data gathering.

Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed within 24 hours. Field notes were typed up the day they were recorded. This study takes a phenomenological approach (Van Manen, 1990), guided by the interest in differential behaviors that occur in the classroom. All written or transcribed data were coded according to the commentary and classification Sandy assigned to each student regarding personality and perception of the relationship. The level of closeness represented in the diagrams and both her point of view and that which she ascribed to the student were also noted. Interactions between the students and the teacher were counted, noting who initiated the contact, and placed in a reference table. Coded materials went through a peer-review process and were entered into data chart. Interview data were also broken down into a table listing teacher-identified student characteristics. This turned into student profiles, which then were cross-referenced with the teacher-created diagrams from each time point. The results of the diagram groupings from the first time point fell in line with the Newberry & Davis (2008) model in that the students had been categorized into five distinct groups, which corresponded to the five different approach orientations that teachers take when interacting with students. This model then served as a heuristic in examining further time points.

As a result of the fit between the diagram groupings and the former model, students from different groupings were selected to further analyze the relationship. Desiree was selected because she was initially in the closest group, moved to one of the most distant groups, and then back to the closest group by midyear. Keisha was selected because she began the year in the most distant group, but progressed to the middle group and remained there all year. These girls were friends and were more similar to each other than to the teacher, which added to the rationale for their selection. Additional passes through the data were made to identify all references to Keisha and Desiree. A data matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1984) for both students was then created that detailed the relationship across the four time points by including the closeness indicated by the diagram, characteristics ascribed to the student by Sandy, and summative quotes highlighting critical incidents (Corsini, 1964). The information in these charts gives some insight to the movement of the relationship by not only identifying the kind of relationship the students had with Sandy, but also indicating the contextual factors that influenced the relationship throughout the year.

Findings

An analysis of the changes in relationships between Sandy and her students indicated that there are qualitative differences in the choices she made to move a relationship forward. Although at the original interview the relationships and interactions followed the model previously discussed, in consequent interviews the model began to
break down. Aside from the factors identified in the Newberry & Davis model, perceived motivations appeared to be considered by the teacher before judging how to respond. Although mastery of content and skill in teaching are important, teachers are often hired for their judgment (Goodlad, 1990) of how they navigate situations. The process of making judgments is added to the previous model here to suggest an alternate model to teacher judgment. To demonstrate the process by which these judgments are made and what it looks like with different students, the findings are presented in terms of the two relationships. The comparison of these relationships highlights the process that Sandy went through in considering interactions with both students and the resultant change in the relationship.

**Motivations**

In analyzing the change in relationships across the year, perceived motivations for interactions appeared to influence the direction and quality of the relationships between Sandy and the students. Sandy did act in response to the student’s personality, her press for a relationship, and her specific challenges, as indicated in the Newberry & Davis model (2008) and correlated with her action toward them. For example, the first rating of relationships took place at the second week of school therefore they were based on very little time in the classroom together. Sandy had met both Desiree and her mother at the school social prior to the beginning of the year and reported that Desiree’s mother was overly preoccupied with the death of the older brother, leaving Desiree overlooked. Sandy initially outlined plans to “build up [Desiree’s] self-esteem and [help her to know that] when she’s here, she’s important.” Sandy’s perception of Desiree’s need and the judgment that she could fill that need led to a positive evaluation of the relationship as being close (Woolfolk Hoy et al, 2006) and therefore Sandy felt affinity for Desiree and sought ways to interact with her positively.

Keisha, on the other hand, joined the class in the very day of the first interview so the assessment of the relationship was based on only one day’s interaction. Sandy reported that Keisha spent the morning in tears and was pretty nervous and inconsolable. The lack of familiarity with Keisha and the unrepressed tears led to Keisha being the most distant of relationships (Winograd, 2003) and therefore Sandy responded to the academic, but not emotional, needs of Keisha. In fact, Sandy assigned other students to befriend and console Keisha.

Upon closer scrutiny of the data relating to Sandy’s reaction to the factors of personality, press, and challenge, there seemed to be more processing that took place between the identifications of those factors and the resultant approach. This is demonstrated through an incident in the end of the third month of school in which Sandy is not pleased with the girls’ behavior yet the shift in the relationship is different for each girl. The following scene took place at the end of the school day as the children were being dismissed.

[A girl] comes to Sandy, crying. Desiree and Keisha follow her. [She] tells Sandy that Keisha and Desiree told her that she has peed her pants. The two protest emphasizing that they only said that it looked like she peed her pants. Sandy tells the girls that they hurt her feelings and then turns from them and attends to crying girl. Desiree and Keisha stand quietly for a few seconds, then look at each other and walk away. (Field note 11/26/07)

It appeared that once Sandy identified the original factors of a student’s personality traits, relationship needs, and personal challenges, she then had to make decisions regarding how it related to her, reflect on what her actions meant for the student, and the result’s impact on the classroom in general. In the above example, first Sandy had to relate to the student. What is known and understood about the people involved? Second, she had to reflect and weigh the needs present in the moment. Which is more
important, attending to the girl in tears or reprimanding the two who caused the tears?
Third she had to try to foresee the result of her choice. What are the options and how
would they benefit any party? Her judgment led her to attend to the girl with the greatest
need and ignore the two who caused the tears. Often Sandy’s evaluation of her
perception of students’ motivation and of students’ needs was a much larger influence
for how Sandy engaged. These judgments are not evident in the current model and are
explained below.

Alternate model

An alternative model incorporates a separate dimension including judgments of
relation, reflection and reward, in which the initial factors are weighed (Figure 2). The
realm of relation includes determining shared interests or other commonalities that
naturally incline people to associate. In addition to or in absence of commonalities, it
also includes an element of reciprocity in the acceptance, enjoyment, and effort to get to
know the other. Reflection as a process refers to judgments made regarding needs,
requirements to meet those needs, responsibility and role, ability to meet the needs, and
effort necessary. The third element of reward refers to attempting to predict outcomes for
the parties involving success academically, socially or personally. The outcomes can be
focused on the self, other, or both and can be positively or negatively weighted. This
dimension incorporates sorting information and processing feelings that collectively
guide teachers’ decisions.

With Desiree and Keisha, the process was evident in the shift in the
relationships. Originally, Desiree had many of the traits that research indicates are
preferred by teachers; she participated in class and worked hard (H. Davis, 2006;
Wentzel, 1993). At the second interview Desiree went from being judged as one of the
closest relationships to one of the most distant relationships. Following the
aforementioned incident, Sandy now described Desiree differently. She stated, "I would
say she’s a pleaser. . . . when she’s with her girlfriends, they’re all that matter. Like you
could be throwing things in the classroom and wouldn’t care. She’s gotten very “cliquey”
as of late (Interview, 12/21/10).

The change in the relationship from the first time point to the second could be
interpreted as change in the perceived reward from the relationship previously enjoyed
in the reciprocal exchanges. As Desiree sought less attention from Sandy and more from
her friends, disappointment over personality issues of being a “pleaser” and going along
with the crowd was also a frustration that Sandy had. Regardless of Desiree’s continued
academic efforts, the negative evaluations of reward and relation changed the
relationship between Sandy and Desiree.
The relationship with Keisha didn’t change from the first to the second time point although she too was involved in the clique. At the first interview Sandy did not have much to judge the relationship on so it was one of the most distant. At the next interview Sandy stated in regards to Keisha, “I almost feel like that sometimes she’s the instigator, she’s the girl that has the bad idea and they… do it, which worries me some” (Interview, 12/21/10). Perhaps because she was described as an “instigator” who initiated some of the ideas that got the girls in trouble there was less expectation based on the Sandy’s assessment of their personalities. The challenges that each girl brought to the relationship were also different and the perception of what Sandy could do about them and the reward for the effort was evaluated differently. Sandy initially perceived Desiree as needing adult attention and help in building her self-esteem and so she made plans to help, but Desiree responded more to the clique instead. With Keisha, the challenge was behavioral, and keeping her on task. These challenges are not favorite tasks among teachers and generally result in less positive relationships (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

This process of filtering the factors through the perspectives of relation, reward and reflection is not usually conscious, nor is it exactly an unconscious or subconscious one. But rather it is “nonconscious” (Stern, 2004). Stern distinguishes between unconscious and nonconscious, as unconscious has an aspect of repression to it. On the other hand, things that are nonconscious are not repressed, but are merely not made explicit. They are things that are perceived which are yet to be brought to
consciousness: a kind of “implicit knowing” (Stern, 2004, p. 116). Sandy’s evaluation and appraisal of the explicit factors she saw was an implicit and unrecognized decision-making process about what she perceived.

By the third interview, Desiree had returned to her place at the top of the rankings, and Keisha also moved up to the middle of the rankings. At this time point, Desiree was described as a “very sweet, hard-working student” and Keisha as a student who “doesn’t apply herself” and as having a “bit of a ‘so what’ attitude.” The girls did not change rankings again for remainder of the year, yet the relationship had changed qualitatively. By the year’s end, the relationship between Sandy and Desiree had come to include physical affection, with Desiree initiating hugs and shedding tears at the last day of school. Sandy described her as a “good kid [who] just really wants to know someone cares about her the way she cares about them.” The relationship with Keisha also changed. Sandy referred to Keisha at year’s end as a “good kid [who] wants attention and wants to be a part of things...but needs that extra guidance” (Interview, 6/07/08).

Differential behaviors and judgment

Observation of classroom interactions identified differential behaviors toward the two students, and although research indicates it is typical for teachers not to be aware of the difference (Babad, 1992; Brophy, 1974), the revelation surprised Sandy. At face value it may appear that Sandy and Desiree enjoyed a higher quality relationship, but that is not to say that the relationship between Sandy and Keisha was not positive and ultimately successful. Taking time to reflect on relationships often has a positive affect on those relationships, but it does not necessarily mean that there will no longer be differential behaviors in the classroom. To better understand the relationships and the qualitative differences between the two it is necessary to look at each one individually.

Desiree

Sandy’s judgment that Desiree was easy to work with and that she was overlooked led to the decision to create opportunities to get to know Desiree and build her self-confidence. Sandy planned to do this by working with her after school:

She’s pretty quiet but she’s going to start working with me after school... help put papers away and stuff like that, so it will be interesting to come and be able to talk on a one-on-one basis; she doesn’t get much of that. (Interview, 10/11/07)

In terms of relation, Sandy could relate to Desiree as a student and found her pleasant to work with in the classroom, which promoted Sandy’s willingness to nurture the relationship (Winograd, 2005). Reflection involved Sandy’s plans to help Desiree see her own potential and the belief that she would have an influence on Desiree’s self-esteem (Woolfolk Hoy et al, 2006). Reward revolved around Sandy’s prediction that both would benefit from working together as they got to know each other and ultimately Desiree would gain confidence.

Sandy was surprised when at the second interview, Desiree ended up in the most distant rankings of all of her relationships. She stated:

I guess I was just surprised...because she’s helping me after school at least once a week, so you know we talk ...And so it surprised me I guess ... only because I expected her to be closer but that may have just been my need to [believe] ‘she stays after school and helps me, I’ve got to know more about her than I do other students.’ In reality, I didn’t... so I guess that’s what surprised me overall (Interview 1/18/08).

Sandy spoke extensively about the problem of the development of a clique and Desiree’s participation in it. It may not be that she knew less about Desiree, but that nonconsciously she evaluated the relationship—the disappointment over the difference between who she perceived Desiree to be and the behaviors she enacted as part of the
clique—and began to distance herself from Desiree as happens when otherwise well meaning teachers detach themselves from the lives of their students (Goodlad, 2004).

The change in the relationship was gradual and unnoticed but when brought to the conscious level it affected Sandy and she made efforts to deal more appropriately with Desiree, including addressing the issue of the clique. An example of her efforts is demonstrated in the following, which took place after school when only a few students were left in the room.

Some boys and Sandy discuss the ignorance of women over “men things.” Desiree chimes in and Sandy turns her attention to Desiree as they expound upon their knowledge until Desiree leaves the area. Sandy continues to talk to the boys who are now glorifying video games. Desiree returns to the table just as Sandy tells the boys that video games are a waste of time. One of the boys states that they improve hand-eye coordination, to which Sandy insists that sports will do the same. Desiree tells Sandy that she is going to start playing soccer this year. Just then the bell rings and the students all turn to leave. Desiree comes back and hugs Sandy, then heads out the door (Field note 2/04/08).

This is just one example of the effort Sandy made after the last interview to include Desiree more in her conversations. Sandy had stated “with some [of the girls] I don’t know what to talk to the about,” but here she made an effort to involve Desiree. In return, Desiree offered up personal information that gave them something else to talk about and through physical affection Desiree returned the effort that Sandy put into the relationship.

At the third interview Desiree had once again joined the group of students to whom Sandy felt the closest. Sandy explained that Desiree had improved her work ethic in the class. Observations confirmed that Desiree was a very willing participant academically; she often raised her hand to answer questions and volunteered to do work at the board. In addition to Desiree’s academic efforts, Sandy reinterpreted Desiree’s needs. She said,

As I learn more about her, the more I guess I’d say [she’s] sad… Last conference her mom said, “I’m not a caring mother. I tell the kids what they need to do, I keep a roof over their head and I feed them… I usually don’t comfort the kids. I let them deal with it.” Hearing her mom say that really told me a lot about... why [Desiree] has such emotional breakdowns… Mom says she doesn’t comfort the kids; it’s not her style. So I’m seeing some of this sadness from Desiree… you realize she just feels like she’s not getting enough, just loving, I guess. (Interview, 3/13/08)

This conversation between Sandy and Desiree’s mother, along with Sandy’s own unexpected distant relationship between she and Desiree, seemed to cause Sandy to reinterpret Desiree’s motives and influences as well her needs and the role that Sandy should take in their relationship (Woolfolk Hoy et al, 2006).

This process of reflecting on Desiree’s situation and needs, and finding ways to relate and communicate with Desiree changed the relationship qualitatively. Although Sandy always expressed fondness for Desiree, by the end of the year there was much more of a meaningful, reciprocal relationship between the two. The many ways that Sandy showed Desiree that she cared about her, from including her in conversations to taking the time to deal with her problems, endeared Sandy to Desiree beyond what Sandy had anticipated. The depth of Desiree’s connection to Sandy is made apparent through their interaction on the last day of school. Sandy reported,

Desiree was another one that cried on the last day. She was fine all the way through dismissal [but then later]… she was just full of tears. She’s like, “I don’t
want you to leave; I don’t want to go… I don’t want it to be summer time, I want to stay here with you.” [I] gave her a few hugs… it was hard for me to see her be so upset, you know. She’s a good kid. I think she just really wants to know someone cares about her the way she cares about them and I think—I’m hoping—me, like spending extra time with her, you know, after school giving her that [helped her know that I care] as much as she cares. (Interview, 6/07/08)

By the end of the year Desiree had solidified her place as one of the students to whom Sandy felt the closest. Initially Sandy felt drawn to Desiree’s personality, as she was a bright, polite, helpful little girl who did what she was told and worked hard (Urdan & Maehr, 1995; Wentzel, 1993). Desiree’s personality had not changed, but Sandy’s perception of it, as well as that of her relationship needs and challenges, had. The judgments of these factors referenced in terms of relation, reflection and reward changed the relationship between the two.

Keisha

Keisha’s family life was perhaps even more difficult than Desiree’s situation. At the beginning of the study, less was known about Keisha as she had recently moved into the district and Sandy had not met the parents so her placement as a distant relationship was based on the lack on familiarity. By the second interview Keisha had become one of the members of the clique with Desiree. She was still found as a distant relationship as compared to the majority of the class, although as with Desiree, this was somewhat surprising to Sandy because both girls had extra time with Sandy after school. Sandy’s impressions of Keisha at this time point were that of concern but also hesitancy. Sandy stated,

She gets picked on a lot at home by her older sister and so though she doesn’t show how sensitive she is, I think there’s more going on than meets the eye… Her sister wrote “kick me now” on her forehead in permanent marker…I asked her why she didn’t try [to remove it] at home and she said, “Oh, Mom said we’d try later tonight.” A lot of the kids said something so I wanted to make sure to at least get it off of her…I couldn’t imagine going to school with that, having my parents allow that kind of thing to unfold. She plays it off like she didn’t care, but when I put her in the hallway [alone] she, like, deflated completely when she had to tell me about it. So, I can’t imagine; I don’t know. She won’t tell me what’s going on. I think eventually I might be able to find out, but it’s going to be a long process of pulling it out of her because I don’t think she’ll want to talk about anything that’s going on at home. (Interview, 12/21/07)

The hesitancy shown by Sandy can be interpreted as filtering her impressions of the situation. Sandy did not relate to the situation that Keisha found herself in, but she did try to temper her impressions of Keisha’s actions in the classroom with the little that she observed of her family life. This was a process of reflecting on what she pieced together and what could be done about it. Sandy evidently needed to gather more information before she knew what role to take up, but being sensitive to Keisha’s privacy, Sandy interacted with her as any dutiful teacher would—by taking care of the situation at hand and addressing the behavior that affected the classroom.

At the third interview Sandy still had mixed emotions about Keisha. The relationship between the two was judged to be in the middle of the class, closer than previously judged, but still ambivalent. She stated that the relationship depended on Keisha’s mood. Sandy also described her as bright but never putting effort into her work. Sandy shared an incident that shows both her concern for Keisha’s home life yet still uncertainty about Keisha’s personality. She explained,

I find that a lot of things I hear from her about home life is kind of what leads into that “so what?” attitude. Perfect example, we had spring pictures and Mom wrote
on her thing “Can you please make sure that she doesn’t look ugly for her picture. Usually she looks ugly when she smiles, will you make sure she looks pretty?” [Keisha] points this out to me, “look what my mom wrote about me.” And I’m like, “how did that make you feel?” [She says.] “Whatever, I don’t care.” …She got to see the picture beforehand, and I’m like… “You look really beautiful.” … and she really good about herself and so she was fine. On the days she feels bad about herself are the more of her “so what” days. (Interview, 3/13/08)

Sandy continued to say that Keisha was reluctant to disclose personal information, which kept the relationship more focused on academic topics. Little by little Sandy would share personal stories with the class and Keisha would slowly take part in the conversations. This was Sandy’s attempt to find ways to relate to Keisha as she stated, “I think that more she learns about me, the better we are off. You know, when she feels like I’m completely not related to her whatsoever, that’s when she really [ignores] me, I guess” (Interview, 3/13/08). As Sandy found ways to relate to Keisha, she was reflecting on the situation and planning on how to move the relationship forward. The reward for such effort is Keisha having a better day and therefore being much more pleasant in the classroom.

At the last interview, Keisha remained ranked in the middle of the class as far as the closeness felt in the relationship. However, this is not to say that the relationship did not improve qualitatively. Sandy reported the ambivalence when she stated, [Keisha’s] lost a lot of her edge that she had at the very beginning of the year, but yet she’ll still see what buttons she can push and what she can get away with. I mean, that’s still there but she’s a good kid; she just wants attention and wants to be, you know, part of things and taken care of and…into whatever we’re doing when it comes to social aspects… I feel like she’s a little more laid back with me than she was before. A little more trusting of ‘you’re not going to do anything bad,’ kind of thing, if that makes sense. (Interview, 6/07/08)

Examining both relationships through the lens of relation, reflection, and reward, helps us to make sense of Sandy’s responses. The assessments for Desiree were initially positively evaluated as far as the resources, requirements needed, and reciprocation. It was not so with Keisha; they appeared to have few commonalities, Sandy was unsure of what resources were needed and Keisha did not put as much effort into a personal relationship with Sandy, leaving their relationship much more casual.

Conclusion

Differential behaviors do occur in the classroom because relationships with students vary as their needs vary. Teachers cannot be expected to treat all students equally, but they are to treat them fairly. To treat students fairly, the teacher must determine what the needs of the students are and how to meet them, however, this will look different depending on how the teacher interprets the needs, motivations and actions of the student against her own resources, abilities and accepted role (Woolfolk Hoy, et al, 2006). It is important to remember that just because relationships look different, it does not always mean that they are not just as appropriate. That being said, it is just as important that teachers are judicious in their interpretations and honest with their efforts.

The extended model of teachers’ concepts of factors influencing choice for interaction-approach orientations broadens our understanding of how relationships are formed. It appears that in addition to recognizing the personality, press for a relationship and the specific challenges of the student, there is also this process of making
judgments of how it relates to us, what is needed of us, and what the outcome may be, that are all part of the phenomenon of relationship building. The change comes through making the nonconscious, conscious. It is interesting to note that the overall trajectory of both relationships was an upward trend toward more close relationships. In the case of Sandy’s relationships with these two students, the definition of what it meant to be close shifted along with the diagrams. What it meant to be close at the beginning was quite different from what it meant to be close at the end. As Sandy reflected on perceived motivations it lead to positive changes in relationships. Teacher reflection of the relationship between teacher and student can increase the likelihood of incorporating different perspectives, which leads to change in perception and approach. The information and understanding achieved through this study will be important for pre-service teachers as they prepare to take on their first class full of students and consider the ways that they could prepared to be reflective in their own practice.

REFERENCES


