Appendix F A Case Study—“Relational Underpinnings and Professionality—A Case Study of a Teacher’s Practices Involving Students With Experiences of School Failure”

Abstract

Relational features of the educational environment, such as positive teacher-student relationships, are important for students’ academic success. This case study explores the relational practices of a teacher who negotiates educational relationships with students who have a history of school failure. ‘Gunilla,’ a secondary school teacher working in the Swedish ‘Introduction Programme’ (for students who have not been accepted in national upper secondary school programmes) and identified as a successful instructor for students who have failed at school, was selected for the study. The data consists of two semi-structured interviews eliciting the informant’s stories of practice and the researcher’s contextual observation. Results show how relational practices create an emotionally safe school climate. In the initial phase of the teacher-student relationship the main purpose of the activities is to establish trust and repair the students’ self-image so that they can view themselves as successful learners. This requires professional closeness and the teacher distancing herself from a stereotypical teaching role, in order to display humaneness and empathy. The findings contribute to understanding how relational features in the everyday school context help students to learn and how school psychologists can be part of this endeavour.

Keywords

at-risk students, professionalism, school failure, teacher-student relationships, teaching

Teachers encountering students with a history of school failure often face difficult challenges. Some teachers are better equipped to deal with them than others. Because positive teacher-student relationships are particularly important for students who risk school failure (e.g.Pianta, 2006), both teachers and students beneﬁt from support in developing such relationships. The purpose of this article is to trace and exemplify relational and professional practices that can help teachers and other school staff to assist students to overcome obstacles and be more successful at school. A qualitative case study approach is used to illustrate the complexities of building and sustaining educational relationships with upper secondary students who have experienced school failure. A case study can illuminate the speciﬁc aspects that emerge in the teacher-student interaction and that contribute to successful academic and social outcomes. It can also take into account how everyday interactions contribute to the speciﬁc temporal character of teacher-student relationships that are established and maintained in the school environment over the school year.

Although this article draws on an educational perspective, it has the potential to contribute to and complement a psychological perspective in valuable ways for teachers, school psychologists, and others working in an educational setting. It provides insights into teachers’ work, the kind of challenges that they face and the professionality that supports them. Such insights are valuable for school psychologists who provide consultation to teachers who struggle with challenges in relationships with their students who have experienced school failure. The literature review will cover teacher professionality and teacher-student relationships with special attention to students with experiences of school failure, and the consulting role of school psychologists.

Relational Professionality

Although there are competing deﬁnitions of what constitutes a profession, in order to be viewed as a profession the practice has to fulﬁl certain criteria. It also includes things such as extensive training and autonomous judgements (Bridges, 2001; Freidson, 1994; Hoyle, 1995). Professionalism can be viewed as the result of the collective achievement of a corps of professionals striving together towards the same end, and professionality as the instantiation of this collective effort by a single individual (Evans, 2008). In this article, teachers’ relational professionality refers to the dimension of professionality that teachers use to build and sustain educational relationships with students in order to help them learn and grow (Frelin, 2010, 2013).

Teacher-Student Relationships

Quality instruction characterized by positive teacher-student relationships constitutes an important part of student learning along with contextual factors both inside and outside the school (Darling-Hammond, 2014). The quality of teacher-student relationships and the closeness of cooperation has proven especially beneﬁcial for students’ well-being, self-conﬁdence, motivation, and academic outcomes (Backman et al., 2011; den Brok, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2004; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Roorda et al., 2011; Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010; Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2010; Wubbels et al., 2015; Zimmer-Gembeck& Locke, 2007). Informal environments and situations can be of great value for the negotiation of teacher-student relationships (Frelin&Grannäs, 2010, 2014; Hansen, 1998; van Tartwijk, den Brok, Veldman, & Wubbels, 2009). One prominent factor seems to be the closeness of the relationship; the ability to create a personal relationship that goes beyond the roles of teacher and student, as has been shown in various studies (Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008; Cornelius-White, 2007; Hattie, 2009; Pianta, 2006; Rudasill, Reio Jr, Stipanovic, & Taylor, 2010). Thus, besides a need to keep a professional distance, there is also a need to create professional closeness (Frelin, 2008). Warm and supportive teacher-student relationships are also part of the wider school climate that connects students to their schools (Raufelder, Sahabandu, Martínez, & Escobar, 2013; Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, &Delucchi, 1996; Watson &Battistich, 2006; Woolfolk Hoy & Weinstein, 2006).

Relationships and School Failure

Dealing with challenging situations in teacher-student relationships is a struggle that many teachers face. For students with a negative experience of school, positive and close teacher-student relationships are even more important than for their peers (Baker et al., 2008; Hamre &Pianta, 2001; Johnson, 2008; Pianta, 2006; Pomeroy, 1999; Rudasill et al., 2010). In his study on how ‘at risk’ students’ view their teachers, Johnson (2008) argues that by focusing actively on small and repeated actions in order to relate to and connect with students at the micro level, teachers can make a diffierence in the lives of their students. In his study of minority students, Erickson (1987) highlights the importance of a student’s trust in the teacher for the creation of a positive relationship (see also Bliding, Holm, &Hägglund, 2002; Raider-Roth, 2005). Studsrød and Bru (2012) connect teachers’ socialization practices, such as academic support, with upper secondary students’ school adjustment, whereas Davidson (1999) argues that teachers’ expressions of conﬁdence in students’ capacities despite their poor performance could elicit their students’ acceptance for a broader range of teacher behaviour. In her interviews with abused or neglected youths, Benjaminson (2008) points to the signiﬁcance of schools as places of emotional support.

The Consulting Role of School Psychologists

In the same manner that teachers build educational relationships with their students, psychologists build therapeutic alliances with their clients (Grossman & McDonald, 2008). However, school psychologists also have consulting roles in schools, in relation to teachers who teach students with experiences of school failure. Consultation has been identiﬁed as an efficient approach to school psychology (Guiney, Harris, Zusho, & Cancelli, 2014), and its importance has been highlighted by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). In their work, teachers are caught within tensions between internal, relational, and external demands that can lead to moral stress (Colnerud, 2015). For school psychologists, the consultant role may bring challenges and resistance from teachers (Knoff, 2013), even if they have a different set of tools to help students (cf. Thuen& Bru, 2000).

Summary

Teachers draw upon their relational professionality to build educational relation- ships with their students, relationships that are particularly important for students experiencing difficulties. This case study explores the relational practices of a teacher who negotiates educational relationships with students who have a history of school failure. For school psychologists in consulting roles, a deepened insight into the teachers’ everyday practice building relationships with students who struggle, and the arguments that they draw upon, may help them overcome resistance from teachers.

Method

Case studies have a naturalistic approach and are sensitive to the complexities and interactions in a particular context (Stake, 1995). They often focus in-depth on relationships and processes and how to disentangle the complexity of a given situation (Denscombe, 1998). The case study presented in this article is derived from a qualitative study (Frelin, 2010) of the relational professionality of teachers.

Procedure

Eleven teachers in different school contexts were identiﬁed by experienced teacher educators as having positive relationships with their students. They were each interviewed twice, usually in small meeting rooms in their schools. Interviews were relatively unstructured, but guided by four themes that were deliberately open-ended. Charmaz (2006) argues that a few broad, open-ended, and nonjudgmental questions can encourage narratives to emerge. The themes were to be regarded as starting points for capturing the various features and stories of everyday practices: 1) the informants’ backgrounds, education, families, and important inﬂuences as a person; 2) their career histories; 3) important professional inﬂuences; and 4) practices fostering democratic citizens. The reason for the last theme is that it is an overarching purpose of education in Sweden that is not speciﬁcally connected to one subject.

Through a multitude of follow-up questions the interviews allowed for issues that the informants viewed as important and pressing in their work at the time of the interviews. A common follow-up would be: ‘Give me an everyday example of this in your teaching’. After the example I would ask: ‘Why do you think this is important?’, or ‘Why do you do this?’. The interviews lasted approximately one hour. One contextual observation was conducted during a lesson that took place after the ﬁrst interview. The observations were unstructured and aimed at facilitating conversations of description rather than justiﬁcation during interviews (Eraut, 2007). The second interview followed up the issues raised during the ﬁrst interview and the observation. The informants were repeatedly asked to describe their practices and reasons for the various actions taken in their everyday situations.

Analysis

The notion of story is central within research on teaching. Narrative forms of representation have often been used to report on teachers’ knowledge and practice (Rosiek& Atkinson, 2007) The interviews focused on eliciting stories of practice (Goodson & Sikes, 2001) and practical arguments (Fenstermacher& Richardson, 1993), whereas the observation served to highlight the context in which the teacher worked and to elicit new questions (Kvale, 1997). In the main study (Frelin, 2010), three aspects or themes of relational practices intended to achieve trusting teacher-student relationships were identiﬁed by means of cross-case analysis and constant comparisons (Charmaz, 2006).The software AtlasTi aided the analysis. The themes were constructed from qualitative analyses of informants’ stories of actions aimed at achieving positive teacher-student relationships. They involved negotiating: 1) trusting relationships; 2) humane relationships; and 3) the students’ own self images (the informants’ combined use of self-conﬁdence and self-esteem).

In this article, the case study of one informant, here named Gunilla, was selected for presentation using purposeful selection (Stake, 1995) having been identiﬁed by teacher educators as both being able to form positive relationships with students as well as having extensive experience of teaching students with previous school failures. The interviews also provided rich descriptions of relational practices with such students. The study is ideographic and the purpose is not to make generalizations but rather to illustrate a case where the reader can judge its use. The study is valuable to the extent that others may gain further insights into the issue at hand. In this article, the illustrations provided in the results are intended to facilitate professional judgement-based analogies rather than evidence-based method applications (cf. Biesta, 2007).

The Case Context

Gunilla, an upper secondary teacher of Swedish and social studies, is in her early 40s and has about ten years of teaching experience. Together with her colleague, here named Lasse, she manages a small municipal school. The school runs an ‘Introduction Programme’, which is a one-year upper secondary school programme offering individual solutions for students who after nine years of compulsory schooling, at the age of 16, are not eligible for national upper secondary school programmes, the higher education preparatory programme, or vocational preparatory programmes.1 The reasons for this vary. For example, the students may have special needs, difficult social circumstances, or have recently migrated to the country and as a result have not obtained the necessary pass grades. Regardless of their individual circumstances they all risk some kind of stigmatization, which requires the teachers to have a ﬂexible yet professional approach (cf. Nilholm&Alm, 2010).

Gunilla’s school consists of one group of up to 20 students and is located in a house in a residential area. The curriculum is aimed at obtaining pass grades with a special focus on the core subjects of Swedish, English, and mathematics. The students do regular school work for three days and spend the remaining two days at a work-place selected by the student with the aid of a guidance counsellor. Typically, the students attend the programme for one year. If they obtain pass grades they are then eligible to apply for one of the national upper secondary programmes. The upper secondary school is not part of the compulsory school system, which means that students can either choose to participate or drop out of school. This affects the teacher-student relationship, in that the student’s participation becomes negotiable.

Results

In her work, Gunilla is in daily contact with students with a history of school failure, or being failed by school, and regards it as her task to turn their negative experiences into more positive ones. Teacher professionality includes negotiating positive teacher-student relationships that help students to learn (Frelin, 2013). Such negotiations can be very subtle, but in Gunilla’s work they often take up substantial time and energy, especially so at the beginning. Gunilla’s story illustrates the different negotiations that are involved and provides a basis for reﬂections and analogies that aid judgement in other situations and professions. The ﬁrst part involves the establishing phase of the relationship, where the negotiations start, and the following parts each represent one of the three themes identiﬁed in the main study: negotiating 1) trusting relationships; 2) humane relationships; and 3) the students’ own self images.

Establishing Educational Relationships

When students arrive in the autumn term all Gunilla and Lasse know about them is which school subjects they have not yet passed. This enables them to say to the students:

Welcome! From now on we’ll be looking to the future, we don’t look back. This is your second chance, take it if you wish. If you want to go forward, and if you want help, we’ll do our very best to provide all the help we can.

Such statements communicate the importance of giving the students another chance and discarding the label of truant, argumentative, or silent.

The students ﬁrst meet a guidance counsellor to talk about career choices and then have in-depth interviews with the teachers. Gunilla asks whether they are motivated. Surprisingly many are honest and answer no to that question. Their motivation is often tied to an extrinsic goal, such as getting pass grades and being accepted into a particular national programme, although in some cases the goal is limited to turning up at school each day. Based on what emerges during the inter- view all the students are helped to set short- and long-term goals. In order to ﬁnd out whether there are any latent conﬂicts, Gunilla asks whether they have problems with any other student. Finally she asks whether there is anything else the teachers need to know. The responses to all these questions remain conﬁdential.

In this way the teachers learn about sensitive issues. This kind of knowledge is important in order to approach the student in a positive and caring way:

If parents are in the process of divorce or quarrel a lot at home you can see whether a student has not slept well or if something happened. You can simply ask: ‘Was it tough at home last night?’ ‘Yes’ they say. Okay, then we can be a bit more careful with that student on that day.

The physical school environment facilitates relation building practices. At Gunilla’s school this consists of one classroom, one smaller breakout room, an office for the teachers, and a kitchen where the students and teachers have their coffee breaks. The door to the teachers’ office is always open and the teachers make a point of always being available for the students as a way of building trusting relationships. The practices of negotiating aspects of educational relationships are illustrated in the following sections.

Negotiating Trusting Relationships

Trust is an important feature of teacher-student relationships (Brookﬁeld, 1991; Jones, 1996). This section illustrates relational practices of building trust, which is one aspect of relational professionality. Gunilla’s view is that caring teacher-student relationships are important for students and make them want to come to school. She says that her trust in a student makes a difference too. If students feel trusted by the teachers they are more likely to feel that they have let them down if they miss school and are more likely to come to school if they are trusted. The only thing that the teachers ask of the students is to let them know if they are ill. If they are absent without reason the teachers contact them to ﬁnd out what is wrong. This sometimes results in the student coming to school.

Gunilla often encounters students who have little trust in adults, especially teachers. Her ﬁrst task is to try to change this, and she argues that the size and home-like atmosphere of the school helps to facilitate the building of trusting teacher-student relationships, where teachers and students are physically close and meet informally over tea or coffee. Gunilla argues that meeting over coffee during the break makes the transition to the classroom less traumatic. The students and the teachers can thus meet outside the classroom and display other sides of their personalities.

According to Gunilla, having easy access to teachers and the creation of a relaxed atmosphere among students is both deliberate and extremely important. The teachers make use of the days when students are involved in workplace training to plan their lessons and catch up with administrative and other tasks, so that when the students are at school they are constantly on hand.

Sometimes the teachers need to be very straightforward about how they get a message communicated to the students. However, Gunilla says that such straight- forwardness has to wait until the teacher-student relationship is ﬁrmly established and they know each other well. At the beginning of the autumn term Gunilla spends a lot of time reading books with the students and encouraging class discussions, which may run relatively free. The purpose of these discussions is to establish a warm and accepting atmosphere that facilitates direct instruction. Gunilla explains that:

For some students it may take until January to get going, because these are students who, the only thing they’re really good at . . . the only thing they know that they can do is fail. They are terribly good at that. And they’re so disappointed in the adult world and in school. So it’s about showing them that adults are actually also human, and especially so teachers.

One of the purposes is to negotiate and re-establish the students’ faith in the adult world. According to Gunilla, one of the signs that students know that she cares about them is that they try very hard to do what she asks and that they view her as fair. She makes a habit of explaining her actions and giving arguments for the school rules at the beginning, so that students can make sense of their environment.

Negotiating Humane Relationships

Caring educational relationships have been highlighted by several scholars in edu- cation (Noddings, 1988; O’Connor, 2008) as being particularly important for students in difficulty (Davidson, 1999; Pianta, 2006). In this context, Gunilla is conscious of trying to really listen to her students and remember what they say. Some examples are:

Good morning. Hi Adam. New cap today? Wow, you must have slept a long time, you look very alert. Good job today, bye, have a nice [day]. All those things are important. And remembering to ask whether the cat is okay and whether their sister had a good time.

This practice is a way of recognizing her students as people and not as the (failed) students they are used to identifying themselves with. It also shows them that someone is listening to them and regards what they say as important. Gunilla experiences that students will see through feigned interest and view it as a betrayal of the relationship if she is not authentic. Negotiating humane relationships means accepting fallibility, in that failing is human. Gunilla says that it also means showing our own humanity and imperfections. Moreover, she has to be prepared to negotiate the demands in situations in order to help a student learn. Stretching the rules a little, such as giving a student permission to sit in the breakout room, can mean a lot in the long run, because it makes her appear human and displays her concern for the student. Gunilla says that she jokes a lot and laughs at herself, which in turn helps the students to lighten up. For her, lifting one’s spirits with humour is an important piece of the puzzle in her students’ conditions for learning. However, humour can also hurt and she makes a clear distinction between laughing with and laughing at someone.

Negotiating the Student’s Self-Image

Meta-analyses, such as Hattie’s (2009), emphasize the role of the student’s self- conﬁdence for learning. This ﬁnal section illustrates relational practices in which Gunilla attends to her students’ self-image. According to Gunilla the students attending her school have very little self-conﬁdence and self-esteem (here combined in the concept of self-image, see the methods section), which is why she ﬁnds it important to do what she can to improve these negative images. Gunilla says that as the students’ self-images have been damaged in the past by teachers at school she tries to use her practices in school to repair this damage.

One of the ways in which Gunilla does this is to create a totally different setting and atmosphere, both in terms of the physical environment and her approach. For example, as she wants students to read literature, and students are expected to read novels every day in school, she starts the year by saying: ‘You will read a lot here, but you will never be asked to write a book report’. This is because students tend to connect reading to the practice of having to write about it. Instead, they talk informally about the books they have read. She also tries to make the students’ learning joyful and immediate, so that the knowledge learned can be put to practical use, also outside school. Another prerequisite is that her students feel that the school is a safe and fair place. Gunilla views these two aspects as essential, because without them:

To put it bluntly, they wouldn’t come here, they wouldn’t give a damn. Yes. I don’t think they’d actually say that, because they are so used to not being listened to. It doesn’t matter, they’ve been to student welfare conference after student welfare conference after student welfare conference throughout compulsory school. And everyone is against them.

As Gunilla’s and Lasse’s school has a long history of turnaround students, they have been able to defend their ideas and economic resources in the municipality, which according to Gunilla has been important for the running of the school, especially as their students have been more successful in attaining pass grades compared with similar schools in the municipality. She argues that their time cannot just be spent in the classroom, and that they also need to spend time with their students outside the classroom. This is why time in the in-between spaces is essential for her, so that she is accessible to the students and can give them quality time when necessary:

That you always have the time to spend with a student, and can sit down and talk if you see that something is wrong. You can always have a proper conversation with a student. Always. It is fantastic, but you can’t do that at compulsory school when you have a group of 30 and need to rush off to the next lesson.

It is important for Gunilla to develop closeness in the teacher-student relationship. This also helps her to see why students do not want to work and enables her to resolve the situation and thereby improve the educational experience of the student.

Summary

The results have provided illustrations of relational practices aimed at negotiating educational relationships with students who have been labelled as failures. Providing detailed examples of how Gunilla worked to negotiate relationships and the qualities of trust, humaneness and students’ self-images, the complex and temporal nature of teachers’ work with making relationships educational is highlighted.

Discussion

The results illustrate a teacher’s everyday relational practices and intentions to build and maintain educational relationships with students. It is important to keep in mind that although Gunilla has a reputation and record as being successful in her practice, the results do not aim to provide evidence of, ‘what works’, but rather to inform professionals’ judgement in unique situations and deepen our understanding of complex educational practices (cf. Biesta, 2007).

Positive relationships are particularly important for students with a negative experience of school (Baker et al., 2008; Hamre &Pianta, 2001; Johnson, 2008; Pianta, 2006; Pomeroy, 1999; Rudasill et al., 2010). These are brieﬂy discussed from a relational perspective, after which implications for school psychologists are suggested.

Connecting to Students With Experiences of School Failure

Relationships at school are not educational by default. Sometimes, teacher-student relationships may be the opposite, such as when a student views a teacher as inhumane and unfair and refuses to be taught by him or her. In order to connect to their learning, students may need a relational context, or educational community (Frelin, 2013; Solomon et al., 1996), as an important feature of the wider school climate (e.g.Raufelder et al., 2013).

Negative experiences of school also contribute to the creation of a negative student self-image that impedes further learning. Raider-Roth (2005) highlights the connection between students’ self-conﬁdence in their work and trust in someone they respect. What Gunilla views as repair work on students’ self-images is also a delicate balancing act that requires relational professionality, especially as students tend to guard themselves against vulnerability (Raider-Roth, 2005).

In her dealings with students who have learned to mistrust adults, Gunilla employs a number of strategies in order to negotiate trust, especially at the beginning of the school year, such as appearing humane by displaying care for the student. The establishing phase of an educational relationship may require practices that are different from those in the maintaining phase. For Gunilla, gaining her students’ trust is a prerequisite for being able to teach, which highlights the relational underpinnings of education.

Trusting relationships with adults are important in other senses too, e.g. for students’ well-being and health (Backman et al., 2011). Raider Roth (2005) argues that students share and suppress knowledge based on their understanding of school relationships and take the consequences of their own vulnerability into account. That is, conﬁding sensitive information to an adult requires trust in this person and in what the act might result in (Bliding et al., 2002).

Implications for School Psychologists

The establishment of a professional relationship between psychologist and client or teacher and student is critical for its success. In the teaching context, the professional object of a teacher is student learning. Here, Gunilla’s story helps to illustrate the relationship building practices that make it possible for education to happen (cf. Frelin, 2013). What she does can be compared with psychologists’ practices of building a therapeutic alliance (cf. Grossman & McDonald, 2008), i.e. a relationship that helps to achieve the professional object of mental health. With students who have experienced failure at school and who tend to distrust adults this practice is particularly demanding and may require a high level of relational professionality (see Frelin, 2013). Given their expertise and experience of negotiating therapeutic alliances, school psychologists have much to offer when it comes to the creation of alliances and relationships. They can also provide tools for the creation of a supporting environment (cf. Thuen& Bru, 2000). However, being mindful of the teacher’s work situation and sometimes conﬂicting demands can help them in their consulting role (cf. Knoff, 2013).

As teachers like Gunilla, by means of an educational relationship, are in some instances the only adult with whom a student has a trusting relationship, they may receive information from students that requires some kind of intervention from other professions, such as school psychologists. The trusting teacher-student relationship may then constitute a bridge that enables the student to be helped. Moreover, teachers may need to consult trained professionals, such as psychologists, for such conversations with students.

A teacher’s work thus involves coping with the tensions between internal, relational, and external demands. In other words, they need to work towards improving students’ self-images and at the same time work within an institutional frame that may result in the opposite. Living in and with this tension can lead to moral stress (Colnerud, 2015). Teachers may therefore need to turn to school psychologists, who are more able to provide tools for coping with such stress.

This article has illustrated the relational practices of one teacher with experience of helping students who have failed at school. It has also suggested points of connection between teachers and school psychologists that could contribute to an improved and more inclusive education for all students, and in particular for those students who have experienced school failure.

Note

Please see http://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/andra-sprak-och-lattlast/in-english/the-swedish-education-system [Available 2015-06-11] for a more comprehensive description of the Swedish school system.

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