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Teacher–student contact: Exploring a basic but complicated concept

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The study combines a theoretical and empirical approach to teacher–student contact.
- Contact is a combination of awareness of inner processes and external contact.
- In moments of good contact, the process is reciprocal and self-reinforcing.

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ABSTRACT

Contact is fundamental to teacher–student relationships, but empirical studies or theoretical frameworks on teacher–student contact are rare. This article describes a theoretical and empirical exploration aimed at building such a framework. In two studies using classroom observations and interviews with teachers and students, we found interesting features of teacher–student contact. We conclude that contact is a very personal experience, in which teachers' ideals and core values play a central role. Using frameworks from other fields, we were able to define teacher–student contact as a two-way interactive process, in which both participants influence each other's cognitive, emotional, motivational and behavioral responses.

> "What I must do is to be totally and non-selectively present to the student – to each student – as he addresses me."
>
> Noddings, 1984, p. 180.

1. Introduction

An issue both student teachers and experienced teachers often talk about, is the contact with their students. Although these conversations sometimes deal with negative experiences in the contact, for many teachers positive contact experiences in the interaction with young people are the driving force behind their choice to become a teacher (Newman, 2000; Palmer, 1998). Moreover, the nature of teacher–student contact seems relevant to the learning process and thus to educational outcomes. Studies on maintaining discipline in classrooms also point towards the central role of contact (Doyle, 2006). Contact thus seems a fundamental issue in teaching (Noddings, 2003; Van Manen, 1994). At the same time, although much has been published about maintaining classroom discipline or promoting a positive learning climate, the underlying and fundamental notion of 'contact' has seldom been the direct object of studies on teaching. However, researchers do publish studies on related concepts such as teacher–student relationships and presence (Meijer, Korthagen, & Vasalos, 2009; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006).

In other helping professions, too, contact seems a basic concept. For example, in the field of psychotherapy many researchers studied the effectiveness of specific approaches. In their overview of the research in this area, Lambert and Bergin (1994) concluded that it is hard to maintain that one therapeutic approach is more effective than others, but that most of the effectiveness of therapy appears to be influenced by factors not related to a specific approach but by the quality of the contact between the therapist and the client. Hence, it is not the specific approach that therapists use that makes the difference but more how they are creating a type of contact that is supportive of personal growth. Would this not be the same in the field of teaching?

In several studies a significant relation has been found between the quality of teacher–student relationships and outcome variables

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such as engagement in learning activities (Skinner, Wellborn, & Cornell, 1990), positive feelings about school (Gest, Welsh, & Domitrovich, 2005), and higher levels of academic and behavioral competence and achievement (Gest et al., 2005; Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, Swanson, & Reiser, 2008; Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998). However, it is not clear what such publications on teacher–student *relationships* mean for teacher–student *contact*. What exactly is contact? What is the theoretical meaning of this concept? Does this theoretical meaning concur with how in practice teachers experience and talk about the contact with their students? These were questions guiding our research into the contact between teachers and students. They seem highly relevant for the daily practice of teaching and thus also for teacher education.

First, we wish to emphasize that we distinguish 'contact' from 'relationship'. The latter term refers to a more enduring phenomenon: relationships develop over time and may last for months or years. Contact is a *momentary experience related to an encounter in the here-and-now*, although in some cases it may last for several minutes. Hence, we can speak about 'contact moments'. Buzzelli and Johnston (2002, p. 120) referred to such a contact moment as "a point" [in time]. Fredrickson (2013) speaks about micro-moments of connection. Relationships grow on the basis of many contact moments. For example, when a teacher wishes to build a trusting relationship with a student, in general this may take quite some time and a large number of contact moments in which trust is gradually being built.

Second, it may be clear that the term 'contact' may refer to rather different experiences. Saying hello to a student in the school corridor is quite a different experience from having an intense contact with a student about a serious personal problem. Thus, there is a continuum from superficial to more intense contact. Although we soon discovered that in the literature on teaching and teachers not much is written about such a distinction, we did find related notions in the theory on Gestalt therapy. The founders of Gestalt therapy, Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) defined contact as "the sense of the unitary interfunctioning of you and your environment" (p. 73). This is exactly what we were interested in, assuming that teachers know and value such specific experiences of unitary interfunctioning. Perls (1969) related such contact moments to the *I–Thou relationship* as described by Buber (1958). Buber also distinguishes contact from relationship and states that real contact in an I–Thou relationship is in contrast to casual contact between people, which he describes as an I–It association. In such cases the other person is perceived more as an object and the quality of the contact is businesslike, habitual (Korb, Gorrell, & Van de Riet, 1989). We were especially interested in the questions of how teachers experience moments of "unitary interfunctioning" with students and what are the characteristics of such contact moments.

In more everyday terms we briefly refer to this unitary interfunctioning as *good contact*, in order to demarcate the difference from more superficial contact. We have also chosen this term as it concurs with what is common in conversations between teachers, who often talk in terms of good or bad contact with students. Our assumption was that a thorough scholarly exploration of good contact might reveal that the concept is not self-evident and deserves close analysis.

A more elaborated discussion of the available theoretical notions that we found will be presented in the next section. We will conclude that as an area of academic research, the topic of teacher–student contact seems to be in its infancy and thus our research can be seen as an exploration of an unknown territory. It seems much too early to think of large-scale studies in this area. Hence, we carried out a first small-scale study among teachers in one small primary school in the Netherlands. In order to make an in-depth analysis possible, we decided to study the topic in a relatively small number of cases. We soon found discrepancies between our theoretical exploration and our study of contact as it emerged from practice: existing theories did not always concur with the teachers' way of thinking and talking about contact. In addition, giving justice to their perceptions of contact seemed to be in contrast with a focus on observable elements (e.g. making eye contact). This led to a second study, in which we built our analysis more on teachers' perceptions and meaning-making. How these teacher thought about contact contributed considerably to our understanding of how the concept of contact is being used – implicitly and explicitly – in practice. We believe that this may help future researchers in building a theoretical framework regarding teacher–student contact that is ecologically valid. By definition this means that the methods, materials, and setting of the research approximate the real-world that is being examined (Brewer, 2000).

2. Theoretical framework

In this section we will discuss the theoretical background to our research, in particular the concepts of teacher–student relationships, contact, presence, and engagement.

2.1. Teacher–student relationships

As noted above, there is an extensive literature on *teacher–student relationships*, in which we can perceive various theoretical orientations.

A first theoretical perspective on teacher–student relationships is the traditional *extended attachment perspective*, based on research about the relationship between mother and child (Riley, 2011; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011; Watson, 2003). According to this theory, feelings of security in the student are promoted by a positive relationship with the teacher, which is seen as a necessary precondition for learning (e.g. Thijs & Koomen, 2008).

A second theoretical perspective is *Self-Determination Theory* (SDT), which describes three basic psychological needs: the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Fulfilment of these three needs is essential to psychological health and growth, intrinsic motivation, well-being, optimal functioning, and self-actualization (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

A third theoretical perspective is *Relational-Cultural Theory* (RCT) (Jordan, 1986; Miller, 1976; Spencer, 2000). It rests on the assumption that healthy, growth-enhancing relationships are crucial to human development (Gilligan, 2011; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Central concepts in this theory are *connection* (and connectedness), *disconnection*, and *reconnection* (Spencer, 2000).

Systems theory is another theoretical approach that has been used to understand teacher–student relationships. For example, Pianta (1999) used systems theory with the aim of helping teachers understand the many factors involved in their classroom relationships. Stieha's theory of a *relational web* (Stieha & Raider-Roth, 2012) built on Pianta's work and views the teacher's professional life as an interconnected system embedded within the relationships with others (e.g. students, colleagues, administration).

A number of other researchers have contributed additional notions and insights, in particular about *pedagogical* relationships. Drawing on interviews with children, Raider-Roth (2005) claimed that building *trust* in teacher–student relationships is pivotal to students' capacity to learn (cf. Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Watson, 2003). This concurs with Chu (2004), who emphasized that teacher–student relationships influence the thinking, feeling, and desires of students. Way and Chu (2004), who studied adolescent boys, stated that adults who are able to establish *caring relationships* with them, contribute to positive outcomes in all aspects of