Interpersonal Teacher – Student Relationships: The Foundation of Intercultural Competence

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Introduction

Intercultural competence, as defined by Bennett and Bennett 2004 is one’s ability to communicate effectively across cultures and relate to those of different cultural backgrounds appropriately. (149) In order to successfully develop intercultural competence a teacher must develop what Bennett and Bennett termed Heartset, followed by Mindset and Skillset. Heartset is the development of a passionate feeling, a desire to discover and a willingness to seek out resources educating oneself concerning diverse cultures experienced when teaching in international schools. Mindset then is the, “conscious knowledge”(149) of one’s own and ‘another’s’ cultures. This requires teachers to explore, reflect, and learn about his or her, as well as their students’, cultures. This knowledge leads to the development and application of Skillset. Skillset is the behavior that causes and permits for the adaptation of one’s culture to another’s and to subsequently communicate, or apply, this knew knowledge gained, enhancing intercultural communication. This intercultural competence must occur though a process as one step necessitates the other, reflected in Figure 1; furthermore, this process is a conscious one. The consciousness of the process is necessary as teachers transfer unknowingly their cultural biases to students subconsciously though normal everyday exchanges (curriculum, lessons, and exchanges between teacher and student), often unknowingly causing cultural conflicts between teacher and student. (Casey, 366)

Figure 1

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1 Other referring to all student’s whose cultures differ from those of the teacher.
2 For example the study done for this essay surveys students from 10 different cultural backgrounds
Students encounter the hidden curriculum while experiencing conflict between their and another’s culture. Allan (2002) discussed this cultural dissonance that both students and teachers face while navigating the various cultures that coexist within international schools. (83) Within an international school students and teachers are obliged to navigate these “cultural borderlands”, (78) that include: school culture, host country culture, majority student cultures, faculty cultures (international school faculties have both majority and minority cultures), and other student cultures (these cultures could be numerous). (78) In order to successfully navigate these cultural borderlands, teachers must develop and model intercultural competence.

When a group of 32 students was asked the importance of their teacher having knowledge of their cultures, 20 responded that they felt it is somewhat important for their teacher to have knowledge of their culture, while 8 said it was of high importance with only 4 responding that their teacher’s cultural knowledge is of little importance. This intercultural transference necessitates a, ”penetration at the interpersonal level,” (Cushner, 12) further necessitating ”collaboration or reciprocity” (12) between student and teacher. Cushner considered this interpersonal teacher – student relationship necessary in order to build intercultural competence that is characterized by, ”respect, equality and acceptance.” (12) The purpose of this paper is to discuss the characteristics and importance of interpersonal teacher – student relationships as they relate to the development of intercultural competence. The first section will detail the characteristics of positive teacher – student relationships and their relationship to teachers’ and students’ enhancement of intercultural competence. The second section will outline how these teacher – student relationships contribute to the pillars of intercultural competence, open – mindedness and curiosity. Finally, the paper will conclude with an action research study related to the application of teaching strategies used to build positive interpersonal teacher – student relationships.

**Interpersonal Teacher – Student Relationships**

Teachers interact with some students more than their own families; specifically within the setting of an international school, students most often see teachers more than their parents, brothers or sisters. In these schools, teachers spend both compulsory and exceedingly more, non – compulsory hours with students. OECD estimates that Canadian students spend more than 8000 hours a year receiving compulsory education in public day schools. (OECD) Of these hours, at minimum, it can be assumed that a given teacher would make up about 1/4th of a student’s time, though it is common for a student to attend more than one class with a given teacher. However, within an international school, specifically one in which students are boarded, teachers spend more non – compulsory hours with students.

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2 For example the study done for this essay surveys students from 10 different cultural backgrounds (Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Kazak, Russian, Ukrainian, Thai, Mongolian, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong).
as mentors, coaches and role models; these students lack the familial support that many in publicly funded schools receive, based solely upon their proximity to family. That, in combination with increased mandatory non-compulsory education, ensures that teachers in international schools are prone to increased contact hours with students.

These increased contact hours place an emphasis on the need for teachers to develop positive teacher–student relationships. As pointed out by Claessens et al. (2016), these positive relationships extend beyond classroom instruction, with the majority occurring outside regular classroom instruction. As such, the need for teachers working in international schools whereby students are either boarded or have limited familial influence to develop these positive relationships is increasingly necessary.

Wubbeles (2015) differentiated between six different approaches to classroom management: behavioral, internal control, classroom ecology, discourse, curriculum and interpersonal relationships. Wubbeles found that increasingly teachers have been moving from the behavioral model towards the interpersonal model. The behavioral model is characterized by stimulus (rewards for a desired behavior), negative reinforcement (taking away of a positive stimulus), extinction (ignoring a behavior or student), and punishment (where the teacher presents as an advisory – examples include detention and public scoldings). Wubbeles goes on to conclude that interpersonal teaching, more specifically one characterized by a democratic style (providing students with responsibility, choice and collecting student feedback), increased student success when compared to the behavioral model.

Figure 2

![Figure 2](image)

Figure 2 illustrates Wubbles and Brekelmans’ categorization of interpersonal teacher–student relationships. They found that teachers who had high degrees of Influence and Proximity developed stronger relationships with students, which lead
to increasing academic success. High degrees of Influence is characterized by leadership, while Proximity was characterized by helping/friendly and understanding. (9) Wubbels and Brekelmans concluded that high levels of proximity (leading and helpful/friendly) produced positive motivation, leading to improved academic outcomes. Negative student outcomes were associated with admonishing and dissatisfied behaviors. (14) Abel and Wojciszke (2007) outlined characteristics common to positive student outcomes, “communion [proximity] is the most important dimension because close and secure relationships that include friendliness, trust, empathy, and helpfulness are indispensible.” (Claessens et. al., 12) As students’ success is closely tied to motivation and given that within international school settings teachers spend an increased amount of contact hours with students, it is essential that teachers incorporate an interpersonal teaching style in order to develop positive teacher – student relationships.

These teacher – student relationships extend beyond the classroom, specifically within the context of international schools. Having positive relationships with students is presented as the number one reason teachers remain in the profession (Claessens et. al., 1). As teachers interact with students, these moment-to-moment encounters increase and morph into long – term teacher – student bonds. Claessens et. al. found that 53% of positive relationships occurred outside of the classroom. (6) Teachers interact with students in hallways, during school clubs and activities, in the cafeteria, and on sporting teams ext. The positivity of these encounters often determines the type of relationship built with the student. During these encounters students share personal details about family and friends, the school and sometimes other teachers. Specifically within international schools where students are far away from culture, family and friends, students will discuss problems they face at home, school, and their future prospects (post secondary education/career). (6) How teachers receive these encounters often determines the type of relationship that is built with the student. These informal conversations help to build positive interpersonal teacher – student relationships. Moreover, when conflict arises within the classroom setting, relationships are often repaired easily outside the class. When surveyed both teachers and students said that when conflict arose they both desired to, “pull the relationship back to more friendly interactions” (9) and in doing so moving the relationship back to a more “positive stance.” (9) Given that a multitude of teacher – student interactions occur outside of the class, building interpersonal teacher – student relationships that extend beyond the classroom will help to bring comfort, motivation and success to both teachers and students.

Given that students come from diverse cultural backgrounds, developing interpersonal relationships with students allows a teacher to gain valuable knowledge of that student and their diverse cultural background. Interpersonal teacher – student relationships allow teachers to look beyond cultural stereotypes to see students as individuals within given cultural contexts and not only as members of socio-constructed cultural norms. Keeping in mind that students come from diverse cultures and have experienced varying types of education, students
come to schools with preconceived notions of what education and thus teaching is and as a result, arriving with differing educational expectations that all stakeholders involved must taken into consideration. Taking the time to build positive teacher – student interpersonal relationships is the best way to improve student learning.

**Interpersonal Teacher – Student Relationships and Intercultural Competence**

Within an international school there can be upwards of 40 different nationalities occupying one often mono-cultural space. These diverse nationalities have varying levels of intercultural communication that, like other cultural constructs, exist on a spectrum. For example, a student of Chinese origin is traditionally of a higher - context culture, while students from German or other Scandinavian countries are often of lower - context cultures. (Neese, Southeastern University Online). Facilitating a classroom that consists of students existing on this cultural context spectrum is challenging, specifically for teachers who lack formal training necessary to successfully work with these diverse groups of learners.

Building positive interpersonal teacher – student relationships is the foundation that improved intercultural communication is built. Specifically, as teachers build positive relationships with students, they position themselves better to become and subsequently model, open – mindedness and curiosity, the two pillars of the first level of intercultural competence, Heartset. Intercultural competence as characterized by Cushner (2015), involves teachers and students, “possessing a genuine interest in other people and cultures; being observant and knowledgeable about cultural differences as well as similarities.” (12) Being observant and having a genuine interest in another’s culture requires a high degree of open-mindedness, as open-mindedness necessitates that one examine perspectives that differ from ones’ own. An individual’s ability to listen sincerely and to be potentially swayed by another’s argument, are important characteristics of open – mindedness. (Hare, 3)

Teachers, in order to be open-minded, must be willing to build interpersonal teacher – student relationships with their students, as it is through the building of trust, friendship, and respect that students are willing to share their cultural experiences. Sure it is true that teachers can and should research the differing cultural contexts to which their students derive, but this can only take a teacher so far. In order to truly gain an understanding of their students’ diverse cultures and subsequently increase their intercultural competence, teachers must engage with students and their cultures at an interpersonal level, looking beyond cultural constructs to see the individual student’s experience within said cultural construct. It is through the building of positive interpersonal teacher – student relationships that teachers increase and subsequently model open-mindedness for their students, encouraging students to navigate cultural borderlands with open-mindedness and when faced with dissonance, overcome obstacles through shared and learned experiences of another’s culture. By teachers modeling and encouraging open-mindedness in students through building positive teacher – student relationships,
teachers are able to reinforce these behaviors in students, and in doing so encouraging positive interpersonal student – student relationships. This results in an increase of overall intercultural competence within the international school setting.

Teachers can improve both their own as well as their students’ intercultural competence by modeling and providing students the opportunity to implement curiosity. Like open-mindedness, curiosity necessitates the building of interpersonal teacher – student relationships, as in order for teachers and students to increase their intercultural competence, thus being able to communicate better across cultures, they must consciously provide opportunities and support for students’ curiosity. (Engel, 36) These opportunities can only come about if teachers have built strong interpersonal student – teacher relationships. Interpersonal classroom management inherently provides these opportunities through the democratization of the classroom, whereby students are given the freedom to direct their learning. (Wubbels, 270) This freedom manifests itself in curiosity resulting in the increased motivation of students. (Wubbels and Brekelmans, 14) This motivation creates an environment whereby curiosity can flourish, as it promotes the motivation and desire necessary to investigate and experience new cultures. (Kashdan and Steger, 159)

**Interpersonal Teaching: Action Research**

Daniels (2002) described action research as teacher driven in that the teacher is both the practitioner and researcher. The teacher poses a specific question of practice then collects data from a variety of sources, analyzes said data, shares that data with trusted colleagues and develops an action plan to address highlighted obstacles in practice. (55) The concluding section of this paper is designed to demonstrate the effectiveness of action research and formalized reflection when critically reflecting on one’s practice through both critical self – reflection and authentic student feedback developed through the building of interpersonal teacher – student relationships.

**Action Research Question:** "As a teacher, am I building positive interpersonal teacher – student relationships that encourage intercultural competence?"

**Method:** During a two - week Summer School session, a teacher of two classes of English Language Learners (Intermediate Level and Advanced Level) implemented instructional strategies designed to both build effective interpersonal teacher – student relationships and to encourage the building of intercultural competence. Students were all newcomers to Canada and most, 22 of 32 students, had been in Canada less than one month, while of the remainder, less than one year. (Laffin, SurveyMonkey) Students represented 10 different nationalities3 and were surveyed twice during the two week course, with the first taking place two days into the course asking the following question: “I would like a teacher who...” Students

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3 Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, Kazak, Russian, Ukrainian Thai, Mongolian and Mexican
had 25 choices derived from Wubbels and Brekelmans’ (2005) Model for interpersonal teacher behavior (Figure 2). Top responses included: is friendly, explains things, is understanding, jokes, shows interest in me and gives me a choice. (Laffin, SurveyMonkey) These sentiments, as hypothesized, reflected conclusions made by Wubbels and Brekelmans that student’s motivation increased with positive teacher – student relationships characterized by high levels of proximity and influence. (14)

Students then were exposed to two different teaching strategies designed to develop interpersonal teacher – student relationships, while fostering intercultural competence. The first was the development of classroom laws as opposed to setting classroom rules. In doing so, the desired result is the building of, “trusting relationships” (Chamberlain, 207) between the students and teacher. In groups of four, students were tasked with creating 5 class laws to be implemented for both teacher and student. These groups of four co-created five classroom laws. The five groups of four then each wrote their five laws on the whiteboard; after all laws were written, students were instructed to vote for as many laws as they desired (by putting a checkmark beside said laws) so long as they were not their own. After the voting was complete students reflected on their chosen laws. They highlighted important similarities and differences between laws chosen; for example, “Respect Others” was common among all groups, while, “Do not use your cell phone in class” had a variety of variations and perspectives. The teacher then included any law that received even one vote (giving all cultural perspectives value) in a signed classroom document that was posted in the classroom.

The second teaching strategy implemented involved students creating individual blogs using Google’s Blogger application. Students were instructed to write two blogs about any topic they desired. Topics varied, but of the 32 different blogs written, 50% involved an aspect of student culture, while the remaining 50% reflected student’s diverse interests or their experiences as newcomers to Canada. This “gathering of student information” (Chamberlain, 206), not only helps teachers and students navigate cultural conflicts though the building of intercultural competence, but helps to build positive teacher – student relationships though the development of cultural knowledge and understanding. The culmination of the blogging assignment was a blogging presentation whereby students chose one of their two blogs to present to the class. The enthusiasm of the students was clearly heightened during the presentation portion of the assignment with 75% of students exceeding the 2-minute maximum time limit.

**Results:** After implementing the aforementioned two teaching strategies, as well as: learning students names within a week, participating in sporting activities outside of class and engaging students in one to one conversations surrounding both feedback on assessments and ‘casual conversation’, the teacher surveyed the students once more performing a Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction or QTI. The 48 questions were derived from Fisher et. al. (1995) and the Australian School’s Council of the National Board of Employment, Education, and Training. (16) The
study compared the variance of the teacher’s reflection on and students’ perception of, the teacher’s ability to build positive interpersonal teacher – student relationships over the course of the two-week class.

The results of the QTI as illustrated in Figure 3 were as follows: By in large both the students and teacher found that the teacher built positive interpersonal relationships with students as both the teacher and students scored the teacher high in Leadership, Understanding, Helping/Friendly and moderately high in Student Responsibility/Freedom. The teacher’s reflection also mirrored that of the students’ scoring low in Uncertainty, Admonishing, Dissatisfied, and Strict. (Laffin, FreeOnlineSurveys.com)

Figure 3
The results of the study highlighted not only that the teacher accurately views themselves as building positive interpersonal teacher – student relationships, but also points out an important obstacle to practice that both the teacher and students identified, the teacher’s ability to give appropriate amounts of responsibility and freedom to students. This obstacle was reflected in den Brok et. al. (2017) as teacher’s “wanting to care for students versus being expected to be tough” (153). den Brok et. al. remarked that when implementing positive interpersonal teacher – student relationships, teachers may develop tension between their ability to take control and to build a close relationship with students. (153) This tension can manifest itself in either too much or too little teacher direction resulting in more of what Wubbels (2015) termed as a laissez – faire interpersonal management as opposed to democratic. (270)

**Discussion:** A teacher’s ability to build positive relationships with their students is the foundation to which effective classroom management is built. Specifically, in terms of an international school setting, a teacher’s ability to build positive relationships with students in order to gather knowledge and develop understanding of both student culture and the individual existing within that culture is essential. Teachers can accomplish this through implementing teaching strategies that engage the student and their diverse cultures. Furthermore, teachers ought avoid behavioral teaching strategies characterized by admonishing/strict punishments such as detentions or scoldings, as well as behaviors characterized by dissatisfaction such as waiting for silence (the classic putting your hand up or turning off the lights). Instead teachers should take the time to learn about individual students, participate in after school clubs and activities, engage students
in authentic conversation, give appropriate and timely feedback and remove their teacher persona, because the best way to develop positive interpersonal teacher–student relationships, is for a teacher to just be themself.

**Works Cited**


