

The quality and perception of the relationship between patient and therapist, student and teacher, mentee and mentor, and youth and youth worker is the most critical determinant of success in a myriad of fields.

1

Relationships across multiple settings: An overview

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WE ARE WITNESSING an underlying shift toward recognizing the effects of relationships on development for youth and adults alike in many contexts. Parenting, teaching, mentoring, youth work, out-of-school programming, and therapy have all had shifts in underlying theory, such as attachment models, resilience studies, and feminist psychology, toward a focus on the essential role of relationships in growth, learning, and healing.

After-school programs that are well attended, for example, exist because students feel bonded to one another and to one or more of the adults who work there.¹ The most academically successful schools are typically those where students feel attached to and respected by their teachers.² Patients who feel understood and cared for by their therapist have better therapeutic results.³ It is not the specific method of interaction that is the most critical determinant of success in these social fields, whether different styles of teaching or schools of therapy, but the quality and perception of the interaction between patient and therapist, student and teacher, mentee and mentor, youth and youth worker.

Such findings are reshaping the way researchers, program developers, and practitioners view and operate within these fields, yet there has still been very little cross-referencing and interdisciplinary work. The desire to spawn cross-pollination stems from the fact that youth typically navigate among these different worlds. In order to assist their development fully, it would help to understand the different relational roles in each sphere of their lives, how they complement one another, and how they can be used to enhance their overall experiences, successes, and life satisfaction. Our own studies⁴ suggest that adolescents are especially vulnerable to the fragmentation of interpersonal relationships, social institutions, and interpretative models of understanding reality at a time when the psychosocial task is to create a cohesive and overarching identity.⁵ In our words, adolescents benefit from efforts to help them bridge the many worlds they inhabit, institutionally and interpersonally. They have also shown that a sense of belonging plays a critical part in healthy youth-adult development.⁶ We believe that this assistance with bridging as well as this sense of belonging is best accomplished through an emphasis on positive, challenging, and supportive relationships.

Resiliency research attests to the overarching significance of adult mentors and role models, especially for young people who face socioeconomic, socioemotional, and educational disadvantage.⁷ Relationships formed between students and caring, nonparent adults are invaluable. These relationships allow the students to form attachments to programs, schools, and the community, thus providing a secure base for movement toward a more productive life. Attachment research has shown that positive attachment to more than one person signifies a very primary attachment to the primary caregiver.⁸

However, parent-teacher, parent-therapist, and parent-mentor relationships, among others, are notoriously fraught with misunderstandings. Parents often feel challenged or negated by actions of these other adults⁹ and therefore often do not give their children permission, whether conscious or unconscious, to be fully in relationships with teachers, mentors, or counselors. These other adults

also frequently ignore parents and thus make an overall investment of the youth in all relationships problematic. We believe that the reason for this is less about personal conflict and more based on institutional understandings of relationships. *Relationship* should not have one definition or be expected to contain the same components within every context.

Another reason to encourage cross-referencing is that the weaknesses of some domains are the strengths of others, and we stand to learn from all of them. Psychology and psychotherapy have the benefit of over fifty years of qualitative and quantitative research into the components of relationships between patients and therapists. These fields have devoted much time and money defining empathy, attunement, and the working alliance that occur during therapy and the resulting effect on the recovery and mental health of patients.¹⁰ Youth development fields such as out-of-school programming and mentoring find their strength in their newcomer status. The limited amount of established, bureaucratic rule allows for a great deal of flexibility and experimentation. Also, given that there is less of a main agenda (in contrast to academic achievement in teaching and recovery in therapy), youth development provides the chance to place relationships at the forefront of its programming and to promote the importance of supportive, encouraging nonparent adults in students' lives. It also provides a testing ground for forging relationships and programming that help students enjoy learning, which helps them build skills.

Attachment theory states that through the earliest interactions between mother (or primary caregiver) and child, the primary attachment model is established.¹¹ This internal working model of how to relate to another person becomes the foundation for the child's identity and well-being. It also determines the ability the child will have to relate to other people and therefore how secure the child will be about exploring new situations and new topics—in other words, how secure the child will feel about learning and relating—throughout his or her lifetime.¹² Relational psychology furthers this idea by presenting the notion that all learning and development happens as a result of attachments or relationships.

Human beings learn and grow not in isolation but through interactions with one another.¹³ Clinical developmental psychology and youth development theory argue that negative internal working models can be modified through the creation of positive internal working models through positive relationships with nonparent adults, such as teachers and mentors.¹⁴ They put forth the idea that teacher-student relationships, for example, may help alter children's negative views of themselves and of others, even if these views have been created through negative family relationships. This means that positive teacher-student relationships could not only boost academic performance but could raise students' overall sense of self and psychological well-being as well.¹⁵ As a result, there is a strong belief in the preventive, restorative, instructive, and developmental power of relationships.

Teachers who form relationships with their students are being presented in research as the most productive. Students respond best to teachers who make them feel "cared about."¹⁶ Awareness of this research and of the successes of some out-of-school programs to motivate learning in students has turned some schools' attention toward what is being done in these programs and how similar methods can be used to improve student participation during the school day. Many schools are realizing that school-age youth in the United States interact with no one else as frequently and consistently as with their teachers on a daily basis and that positive relationships between teachers and students are critical for both student success and the retention of teaching staff. Yet given all its pressures of testing and standards to perform academically, this field has benefited the least from these advances in relational theories.

The problem is societal and institutional as well as individual. There is a willing recognition of the need that younger students have for nurturing, relational environments. However, there is a widely held belief that as students mature, they should develop autonomy to later fully participate in adult society. This is reflected in the design of the school day and its change from a one-teacher classroom in elementary school, to a multiteacher schedule in middle and high school. In the United States, the transition to middle

school is a major milestone for the majority of adolescents. Unfortunately, the current school system impersonalizes the school experience in adolescence, right at the time that youth most need support and a sense of belonging. The pressures of pubertal changes and the search for identity are compacted by moving into unfamiliar and often stressful school settings where relationships with teachers are less embedded in the structure than they were in grade school. “Early adolescents’ desire for strong relationships with non-parental adults is a poor match with the impersonal halls of large junior high and middle schools where they have less opportunity for positive relationships with their teachers.”¹⁷

Although individual teachers have forged positive relationships with students, most U.S. public, middle, and high schools have not come around to accept a relational point of view. Research has shown that the lack of positive teacher-student relationships is contributing to large student dissatisfaction with schools and teachers and possibly also contributes to teacher burnout.¹⁸

When many teachers hear the phrase “relationship with students,” they imagine their classrooms becoming group therapy forums. This is not at all what we propose here. An attitudinal change toward students is all that is needed for students to pick up on the sense that they are being respected. Given this, most research shows that students will respond in kind. Students have been shown to perform better behaviorally and academically in classes that are taught by teachers who form strong relationships.¹⁹

Can we train teachers and other practitioners to be relational? In short, we do not think that anyone can be trained to have a different personality, and there are innate qualities that account for easy bonding with students, mentees, and patients. Nevertheless, there are tools that practitioners can use to help them better understand and manage their interactions with youth: “Although many of the emotional, relational and cognitive factors are innate to exceptional practitioners in each field, some of these can be trained and developed further through apprenticeships, work with supervisors, and learning environments that develop these desirable characteristics further in the trainees.”²⁰

Therapy and counseling have been trying to establish how best to train future therapists to employ not only their cognitive abilities but their emotional and relational ones as well. Multiple studies have shown that it is these emotional and relational factors that contribute to master therapists—those who motivate patients to work on getting well and who have more positive outcomes with their patients than those simply abiding by any one style of therapy and its techniques. With experience and continuous training and supervision, therapists have been found to be better able to bond with patients, intervene effectively, and support their progress. The last decades have seen a strong shift toward making the relationship the central focus of many therapies. The results have been impressive.

We recommend that teachers be trained to develop these relationships with students and, even more important, that schools institutionalize the development and promotion of a relational school climate. Schools need to allow and support teachers in creating supportive classroom environments. They should be aided by mentors and after-school youth workers. In the process, we should not be relying on exceptional personalities alone to carry forward amazing teaching work in adverse contexts. We should be training teachers to handle complicated relationship issues and to make relational growth possible, so they can create important learning relationships with youth. Although we believe that people can and should be trained toward these changes, if institutions do not support and promote such changes, all the training in the world will not help teachers, therapists, mentors, and youth workers. The foundations have been laid in theory, research, and promising practices. Now the institutional changes have to follow.

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