

# Good Teacher-Student Relationships: Perspectives of Teachers in Urban High Schools

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## Abstract

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*This study examined the behaviors that teachers in eight large urban high schools in a Northeastern state considered important for good teacher-student relationships. A factor analysis of teacher (N = 103) survey responses revealed three factors related to student behaviors: (a) demonstrating engagement and interest in schoolwork; (b) being respectful, rule-abiding, and cooperative; and (c) demonstrating positive social behaviors. Interviews with five teachers indicated teachers' preferences for students who tried hard in class, had a sense of humor, were respectful, and talked to teachers. Contrary to previous research findings, good teacher-student relationships were desired by teachers and easily established in these large urban high schools. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to conceal the identity of teachers, schools, and the school district.*

Teachers interact with students on a daily basis, and the types of relationships they have with them directly impact students' social, emotional, and academic experiences at school. Good relationships between teachers and students have been associated with students' increased motivation, academic achievement, high rates of attendance, and attitudes towards school. Although there has been consistency in research findings regarding teacher behaviors desired by students, there has been little research on desired student behaviors from the perspective of teachers.

Cole and Walker (1989) pointed out that schools provide few structural supports to help teachers meet the social demands of their jobs and teachers may therefore experience conflict, confusion, and stress over the boundar-

ies of their professional roles. In fact, teacher-student interactions have been identified as the primary sources of stress leading to teacher burnout (Friedman, 1995; Phillips, 1993). Although problematic relationships with students may exacerbate teacher stress, it has also been suggested that satisfying relationships may serve as buffers against teacher stress (Cohen & Willis, 1985; Gugliemi & Tatrow, 1998).

Poor relationships with students can also decrease teachers' organizational commitment. In a study of the impact of school climate and social-emotional learning on teacher commitment, Collie, Shapka, and Perry (2011) found that, of the school climate variables, student relations was the most consistent predictor of commitment. Specifically, better student relations predicted teachers' increased organizational commitment, as well as present and future commitment to the profession. Teacher commitment has important implications for professional performance and has been associated with teacher absenteeism and attrition (Day, 2008; Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005).

Teacher attrition is a serious problem for the nation's schools: Of the approximately 3.3 million public school teachers who were teaching during the 2007-08 school year, 8% transferred to a different school and 8% left the profession the following year. Of the teachers who left their jobs in the 2008-2009 school year, 45% felt a higher sense of personal accomplishment in their new positions (Keigher, 2010). It has been found that teachers' sense of personal accomplishment can be enhanced when teachers are involved in decision-making and when the school climate fosters their basic needs of relatedness and competence (Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, & Kaplan, 2007).

Not only are high rates of teacher turnover disruptive to students and the school, teachers with low organizational commitment often reduce their job performance before they quit (Horn & Kinicki, 2001). For example, teachers who have emotionally withdrawn from their jobs will be less tolerant of student behaviors and are more likely to respond punitively to misbehavior. Punitive responses to misbehavior are likely to trigger more noncompliant, acting-out behavior (Gable, Hester, Hester, Hendrickson, & Sze, 2005), which in turn will increase teachers' negative attitudes towards teaching. Hopkins and Stern (1996) explained that high levels of commitment push teachers to search for better teaching methods, even when students exhibit negative attitudes or difficult behavior. Teachers who have few discipline problems tend to have better relationships with students than teachers who have many discipline problems, and good relationships with students are associated with lower levels of stress and greater job satisfaction (Collie et al., 2011).

Despite the importance of good teacher-student relationships, very little is known about how teachers define or perceive good relationships with students. This absence of research lends itself to the need for further study. A problem related to this research area is that although teachers may be aware

of what they consider good relationships with students, they may feel unable to establish such relationships with students in large urban high schools, due to the structural and organizational constraints of the school. Nationwide, of public school teachers who left teaching in the 2007-2008 school year, a higher proportion were teaching in large schools with over 750 students rather than in schools with 749-500 students (9% vs. 5%, respectively (Keigher, 2010; see Table 1). The primary aim of this research was therefore to determine the student behaviors that teachers thought contributed to good relationships in large urban high schools.

### Teachers and Relationships With Students

Research on student-teacher relationships has been dominated by discussions of how teachers can meet students' emotional and interpersonal needs. Noticeably absent from the literature is the role that students' behavior might play in teachers' emotional well-being and job satisfaction. Studies indicate that teachers' motivation for entering the profession is related to their desire to work closely with students (Watt & Richardson, 2007), thus their need for connecting with students is likely to contribute not only to their job satisfaction but also their emotional well-being. However, relationships between teachers and students tend to be presented as situations in which teachers have the power to make a difference in students' lives, but are devoid of emotional needs of their own. As Hargreaves (1998) points out, it is as if teachers "think and act but never really feel." Contrary to this belief, he found from teacher interviews that the teaching strategies that teachers used were shaped by their own emotional needs, as well as those of their students.

Due to the increasing emphasis in high schools on standards, performance, accountability, and measurable results, the emotional aspects of teaching are virtually ignored in both research and practice. While some researchers point to the importance of caring or tactful teaching (Noddings, 1992; van Manen, 1995), these approaches still focus on the benefits of such behaviors to students. What has not been addressed is the way that teachers' experiences are shaped by their interpersonal relationships with students. Grayson and Alvarez (2008) report that one of the most predictive school climate components affecting educator cynicism is the teacher-student relationship.

Although in small schools attention is often specifically devoted to developing a sense of connection between students and teachers (Raywid, 1993), the structure of many large high schools often prevents teachers and students from developing close, personal relationships (Comer, 1988; Hoffman, 1996; Meier, 1995; Newmann, 1981; Sizer, 1996). The physical geography of most large high schools leads to an impersonal atmosphere and the specialized organizational pattern of high school life makes connections between teachers and large numbers of students difficult. This study there-

fore aimed to determine the student behaviors that teachers in large urban high schools considered important for good teacher-student relationships.

### Method

The study described here was part of a larger study on characteristics desired by both students and teachers for good student-teacher relationships. This article focuses specifically on the student behaviors desired by teachers for such relationships. Two methods of data collection were used: (a) teachers ( $N = 103$ ) in eight high schools with over 750 students were administered online surveys, and (b) five teachers from these high schools were interviewed.

### Procedures

Eleven large high schools with student populations over 750 in one North-eastern city were selected as sites from which to draw participants. Principals at eight schools provided consent for teachers in their schools to participate. A letter requesting teachers' participation in an online survey was placed in all teachers' mailboxes ( $N = 571$ ) at each of the eight schools. All teachers were sent follow-up e-mails with a hyperlink to the survey. A total of 103 teachers took the survey, providing an 18% response rate.

A separate survey was administered to students in which they were asked to name one or more teachers in their schools with whom they had a good relationship. The teacher who was named most in each school was selected as a potential interview participant. Due to low rates of teacher nominations in three of the schools, teachers in five of the participating schools were selected for interview. Teachers were contacted by telephone at their schools and asked if they would be willing to be interviewed for 50-60 minutes. They were told that they were named by students as a teacher with whom they had a good relationship. All five teachers agreed to participate and audiotaped interviews took place after school in teachers' classrooms.

### School District and Student Demographics

The Andover Public School District is a large school district with over 30,000 students in grades K-12. The majority of students in the district are racial and ethnic minorities and most students are from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, with 79% of students being eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The turnover rate of teachers in the district is one of the highest in the state. In 2009-2010, there was a 27% turnover rate for teachers with fewer than 5 years of experience.

### Survey Participants

The teachers who took the survey represented 11 different content areas. Twenty-five percent of the teachers were special education teachers who

taught in a variety of capacities. The next two largest proportions of respondents were made up of English Language Arts teachers (20%) and Social Studies teachers (11%). Ninety-percent of survey respondents were White and 72% were female. Eight-seven percent of respondents had a master's degree and approximately 50% had been teaching for more than 10 years.

### Interview Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select teachers for interviews with the intention of selecting participants who would provide "rich examples of the phenomenon of interest, but not unusual cases" (Patton, 1990, p. 138). Five teachers were selected from names students provided of teachers in each school with whom they had good relationships. Because teachers were those who had been named most in their schools as teachers with whom students had good relationships, questions focused on how they established good relationships with students and the meaning good relationships had for them. Using informants who could address the research questions with detailed personal experiences increased the study's validity. Characteristics of teachers who were interviewed are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Teacher Interview Participants by Background Characteristics*

Teacher	School	Highest level of education	Age range	Total years teaching experience	Years at current school	Content area and grades
Ms. Jenkins	North Hill	Master's	25-30	6	1	English 9
Mr. Scott	Southgate Vocational	Bachelor's	30-35	6	6	Social Studies & Mass Media, 9-12
Ms. Stewart	Jefferson	Master's	50-55	8	2	Social Studies, 10
Mrs. Georgiou	Woodburn Vocational	Master's	50-55	15	7	English, 11&12
Ms. Sabatino	Butler Tech	Master's	35-40	14	2	English, 9&10

### Instruments

There is currently no validated published instrument designed specifically to measure teachers' perceptions of relationships with students in high school settings. Items that address relationships between teachers and students are, however, included on several instruments designed to measure teacher stress and burnout. Survey items were therefore compiled from several different measures. A pilot survey consisting of 57 items was created using the Sur-

veymonkey program and was posted online. As a test of validity, ten high school teachers took the survey and provided feedback on additional student behaviors not addressed in the survey they thought were important for good relationships. Only one additional item was suggested. As a test of reliability, Cronbach's alpha was calculated. Items that were highly correlated ( $\pm .8$ ) were deleted. Scores were then collapsed to form dichotomous agree-disagree categories and items that received only disagree endorsements were deleted. The final survey consisted of 42 items.

### Survey Data Collection and Analysis

The teacher surveys were posted online and teachers took the surveys anonymously. The researcher was not present while any of the surveys were taken. The survey included 42 forced-response items about desirable student behaviors for good teacher-student relationships, rated on a 6-point scale (very strongly agree to very strongly disagree), and one open-ended question about additional student behaviors teachers considered important for good relationships. Data obtained from the forced-response items were analyzed through a factor analysis using the SPSS software package. A principal components extraction revealed a four factor solution, although the fourth factor was dropped due to its having only three items, as well as low reliability ( $\alpha = .47$ ). Scree plot results indicated a three factor solution. Factor labels were assigned by referring to the related literature and by conferring with colleagues.

Participants' responses to the open-ended survey question were listed and arranged by themes. Common behaviors formed categories which were given names to represent the constituent behaviors. Then, the number of behaviors listed in each category was counted to determine the most commonly named behaviors.

### Interview Procedures

Interviews were conducted to supplement survey data so that teachers' perceptions of good relationships could be illustrated through lived examples. Participants were told the overall purpose of the interviews and were given an approximate timeframe for each interview. Teachers were interviewed one time in their classrooms for periods of 50-60 minutes.

Questions focused on how teachers established good relationships with students and the meaning good relationships had for them. Through the use of probing questions, teachers were asked to describe the student behaviors they considered important for good relationships with students. Audio tapes were transcribed the same day of the interviews to enable fresh thoughts to shape interpretations. A coding system suggested by Bogdan and Biklin (1998) was used. Transcripts were read multiple times to identify descriptions of behaviors and to determine categories that encompassed examples

of behaviors. Coding of the interview transcripts was peer-reviewed by teachers in the field.

There are some issues of validity and reliability that need to be addressed when using the interview method. Purposeful sampling was used to select interview participants so as to use informants who could address the research questions with detailed personal experiences, thereby increasing the study's validity. The purpose of the interviews was to gather meaning from participants' own lives, so internal validity was also increased by ensuring that information made sense to the participants as well as to the interviewer (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993). By interviewing five different participants, comments of participants could be compared. While the interviewer's personal interpretation of participants' responses necessarily played into findings, reliability was increased through full transcription of interview tapes, and inclusion of verbatim quotes in the results to support the researcher's interpretations. The use of an objective measurement instrument also served to counterbalance any subjective influence.

### **Survey and Interview Data Analysis**

Findings obtained from the surveys and interviews were compared. Triangulation of data served to ensure its trustworthiness and dependability (Merriam, 1998). First, categories that emerged from the open-ended responses about behaviors teachers considered important for good relationships were compared with categories that resulted from the factor analysis. Similar behaviors were identified and these behaviors were then listed together and given new category names. Merging behaviors and developing categories from the factors and open-ended responses continued until all behaviors from both analyses were exhausted.

Interview themes were then reviewed and compared to the newly formed categories. Behaviors that were described in the interview themes were added to the newly formed lists. The interview transcripts were then reread to identify additional behaviors that could be classified within each category. Some modification to the lists took place to ensure that each category represented similar behaviors. This synthesis resulted in the categories of student behaviors and examples of those behaviors shown in Table 3.

### **Findings**

The aim of this study was to understand how teachers defined good relationships and to explore the nature of good relationships from their understandings. Findings from the factor analysis and the interviews are discussed in the following section.

## Factor Analysis

A factor analysis with varimax rotation was conducted on the data from the forced-response survey items. Four factors resulted from this analysis, although the fourth factor was dropped due to weak item loading and low reliability. The three retained factors were:

**a. Demonstrating engagement and interest in school work.**

Factor 1 consisted of 21 items, such as “concentrate and work quietly; be eager to learn; and be enthusiastic and interested in school work.” This factor had good reliability with a Cronbach’s alpha score of .97. This factor reflected teachers’ desire for students to arrive at class prepared, to be attentive and engaged during class, and to be academically motivated.

**b. Being respectful, rule-abiding, and cooperative.** Factor 2 consisted of 10 items, such as “be cooperative; be polite; and follow classroom rules.” This factor had good reliability with a Cronbach’s alpha score of .92. This factor reflected teachers’ desire for students to demonstrate respectful, disciplined behavior that extended beyond the classroom.

**c. Demonstrating positive social behaviors.** Factor 3 consisted of 8 items, such as “talk to me during nonclass times; greet me in the hallways; and thank me for doing things.” This factor had good reliability with a Cronbach’s alpha score of .89. This factor reflected teachers’ desire for students to demonstrate polite interpersonal behaviors and to relate to them as individuals.

## Teachers’ Open-Ended Survey Responses

After completing the forced-response survey items, teachers were asked to list up to six additional student behaviors they considered important for good relationships. Teachers’ responses to this open-ended question were arranged by themes. These themes were then named to form categories, and behaviors were listed under category headings. Then the number of times each behavior was named in each category was counted (shown here in parentheses). These behaviors included: (a) being respectful towards others (10) (b), having a sense of humor (6) (c), accepting teachers as individuals (5) (d), being respectful of the school environment (3), and (e) being respectful to themselves (3).

## Teacher Interviews

**Teacher profiles.** The demographic profiles of teachers who participated in the interviews were shown in Table 1. All teachers who were interviewed



were White. The demographic profiles of students at the schools at which interview participants taught are show in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

***Demographic Profile of Students at Interview Participants' Schools***

School	Total Number of Students	% Black	% Hispanic	% White	% Other	% Free/Reduced Price Lunch Eligibility	% Turnover rate of teachers with fewer than 5 years' experience
North Hill	817	25	16	55	4	73	44
Southgate Vocational	1098	61	15	19	5	79	14
Jefferson	1049	58	20	19	3	72	22
Woodburn Vocational	751	85	3	11	1	79	21
Butler Tech	1129	42	9	43	6	57	0

Adapted from 2010-2011 [Andover City School District] School Report Card

### Teacher Interview Themes

Teacher interview transcripts were read and coded. Then codes were used to identify themes. The four themes that emerged from this analysis were: (a) having a sense of humor (understanding the teacher's humor), (b) showing respect, (c) trying hard in class, and (d) talking to teachers. Each of these themes is discussed below.

**Having a sense of humor (understanding the teacher's humor).** Four of the five teachers interviewed discussed using humor in class. Mr. Scott explained how his use of humor broke down barriers and provided a way of connecting with students:

I joke around a lot. I don't have a lot of rules. I know that's counter to everything they teach you, but when you have good relationships, you don't need rules. Like the first day in class, I'm very honest with my kids, I say, 'you know, they tell us not to smile,' and, you know, you break the ice and you show them that you care.

Students clearly appreciated the nonthreatening environment Mr. Scott established, which resulted in his ability to maintain discipline without overtly stated rules. He also recognized that the same instructional method was not effective for all students, and explained that humor could make material more accessible to students than traditional methods. Mrs. Georgiou also used humor to engage students in instructional activities and the responses

she received from students were therefore important to her ability to build good relationships with them.

Ms. Sabatino also incorporated humor into her teaching and explained that one reason she preferred teaching at the high school level than lower grades was because older students:

...get a lot more of *my* humor that I use in classrooms--because with English there is a lot of drama that goes into it and I'm always flying my hands around and waving and acting out things and they enjoy seeing that and for them, humor is important because when they can laugh, then they can understand that there are things that we do to laugh at each other and I think it's easier for them to relate to me and they are a lot more communicative with me with their answers.

Humor was used by teachers as a way to relate to students, to engage them in learning, to maintain discipline, and to provide an outlet for teachers' own personalities. Because the use of humor served so many purposes, it was important to teachers that students had a sense of humor, or more specifically, that they understood their use of humor.

**Showing respect.** All teachers mentioned respect as being important in their relationships with students. In describing her understanding of a good relationship, Ms. Sabatino stated:

I believe it's one that's based on respect. I mean, when they come into my classroom, I tell them that the most important thing is that we respect each other...If they respect me as a teacher, I respect them as a student. I mean, no matter what, I still have more power than they do.

For Ms. Sabatino, respect was a two-way, but unequal feature of her interactions with students. She did not want to blur the boundaries between teacher and student and her understanding of student respect was therefore rooted in the way students related to her as a superior. Students who respected the professional boundaries she maintained were those with whom she was able to build good relationships.

Mrs. Georgiou explained that respect was: "Not using my first name ever, not using profanity in front of me, not disrespecting themselves or others or me....You don't have relationships with kids who swear, who sit on a cell phone, and don't do homework!" For Mrs. Georgiou, respect was intertwined with students' engagement and motivation in class. She associated students' academic motivation with their personal attitudes towards her and interpreted students' not doing their work as signs of disrespect towards her.

For Mr. Scott, respect was also demonstrated in the way that students regarded him, although he focused more on the way this manifested itself in

their respect of property in his classroom. In discussing the lack of graffiti on the desks in his classroom, he stated: "it's like a silent language. I will quietly say, 'You don't do that here'." When students acted upon such silent messages they showed that they respected Mr. Scott and his classroom. Like Mrs. Georgiou, Mr. Scott personalized students' behavior by interpreting their respect of property in his classroom with their attitudes towards him.

**Trying hard in class.** All teachers claimed to have good relationships with students who tried hard in class. The students with whom Ms. Sabatino had the best relationships were those who developed original ideas or novel ways to present work, as well as "a kid who's a complete idiot but really tries hard in my class, I will have a great relationship with them because, you know, they're trying." She also explained: "If I see a child who's not trying, then I'm not going to put myself out there either if I've been trying this whole time." For Ms. Sabatino the interactive nature of good teacher-student relationships was important. In situations where she felt that students were not contributing anything to the relationship, which to her meant not trying in class, she refused to put effort into the relationship, which meant not devoting any extra time to helping the student.

Mrs. Stewart shared a similar view. She felt that her "investment" was wasted on students who did not make any effort in class themselves. She claimed to give all students the opportunity to prove themselves at the beginning of the year, and if they did not show any improvement after a few weeks of receiving her help, she stated: "I don't even try, it's not worth it--you don't get the pay back." She explained: "...they're missing the opportunity to have one of the most amazing social studies teachers--I'm one of the most creative teachers I've encountered...I figure the ones who I don't really connect with, it's their loss because they're going to lose out on having an amazing teacher this year."

Mrs. Stewart felt she had a lot to offer students in terms of her background knowledge and appeared to be personally offended when students did not recognize her for being the exceptional teacher she considered herself to be. For Mrs. Stewart to have good relationships with students, it was clearly necessary for them to demonstrate that they appreciated the qualities she brought to the learning environment by putting forth effort in class.

In a similar fashion, Mrs. Georgiou interpreted students' efforts as being a reflection of her as a person. Her statement: "They are not going to work for you unless they feel safe, comfortable and happy" indicated that she felt that students were working for *her*, and that she was responsible for establishing the level of comfort among students that would motivate them to work for her.

Mr. Scott verbalized the direct relationship between students liking him and their completing work and explained that students worked hard because of the relationship he had established with them--a relationship in which he expressed high expectations for them. However, when they worked hard,

students were conveying the message to Mr. Scott that they had internalized his high expectations for them, which was a result of their liking him.

Ms. Jenkins was also aware of the fact that students worked harder when she had good relationships with them, and realized that students tried to do well because of the high expectations she had expressed for them. Ms. Jenkins stated:

In most of my classes I have 90% of my kids passing, which in the city of Andover is extraordinary. For the most part, the struggle to get the kids to succeed is reduced because the kids *want* to be there, they *want* to try to impress me, they want to prove that they can do it because I showed I believe in them.

Teachers interpreted the effort students made in class as reflecting students' attitudes towards them. Because of the personal way that students' efforts were interpreted, teachers found it hard to have good relationships with students who did not try in class. Teachers took credit for motivating students and perceived students' trying hard in class as important for good relationships because such behavior conveyed the message that students were living up to the expectations they had set for them.

**Talking to teachers.** All teachers stated that students talked to them in nonacademic contexts and that these informal teacher talks signified good relationships. When students talked to teachers, it conveyed the message that they trusted them, and this message seemed to play a role in teachers' opinions about the teacher-student relationship. As well as feeling trusted, knowing that students had selected them to talk to, led teachers to believe that students liked them, and this belief contributed to the building of good relationships.

Mrs. Stewart indicated that she felt she had been specially chosen by students as the teacher they felt comfortable talking to. She explained, "Students tell me everything. I keep it to myself...I figure that if a kid trusts me enough to tell me that sort of stuff, then I have to live up to that trust." Students' showing that they trusted Mrs. Stewart clearly served the purpose of self-validation for her. In a similar vein, although Mr. Scott claimed that students told him "too much," the role he played in students' lives as the teacher with whom they chose to share their most personal problems created a situation in which he felt trusted, and this feeling contributed to his establishing good relationships with students. In response to the question about how he knew that students liked him he stated:

...they're friendly to me. You can take a look in my yearbook and every year they all write in the yearbook because, you know, I'm not their 'friend,' but I'm playing the line a little bit you know....I'm always the teacher who ends up knowing about the rape or the as-

sault or the jail or whatever the hell these kids go through. So that probably shows that they trust me...you know kids, they go to who they know they can trust.

Clearly, being the teacher who students came to with personal problems contributed to Mr. Scott's feelings of importance in these students' lives. He was aware of the fact that students had chosen him to talk to above other teachers because they trusted him. Mrs. Stewart also seemed to derive a sense of satisfaction from knowing that students opened up to her. She believed that students felt comfortable talking to her because she had a quality that other people did not have, as she indicated in this quote:

Some students will come up to me and say, 'Miss, I've been working at a pizza delivery place and I've been paying my mom's bills'; I do have an uncanny ability to get people to tell me anything, even just strangers on the subway in New York will talk to me. I must have either a very trusting face, or a trusting persona or something, so I get people to talk to me. The kids do tend to open up to me on a one-to-one basis.

Mrs. Stewart prided herself on being the type of person that people opened up to. She clearly liked to think of herself as someone who people trusted, and when students talked to her about their personal issues, it confirmed her self-perceptions.

Ms. Jenkins commented that she had good relationships with students who liked English as a subject: "Because I teach English, I probably have closer relationships with kids who like reading and writing, because they can come up to me and talk about books." She described how she recommended books to students, and they in turn recommended books to her; this exchange played a role in validating Ms. Jenkins' sense of importance in students' lives. She explained that after recommending books to students: "The kids come back with, 'Wow! I loved that book!' And now they get to know a little bit about me. And then they'll recommend books to me." Ms. Jenkins felt that this book connection and the fact that students got to know a little bit more about her were foundations for her good relationships with students.

None of the teachers explicitly stated that they considered talking to students important for good student-teacher relationships. However, the feeling of being trusted clearly played an important role in the way teachers related to students and their likelihood of having good relationships with them.

### Synthesis of Data Sources

The results of the factor analysis conducted on the forced-response survey items were analyzed with the results of the open-ended survey item and the teacher interview themes. This process led to a synthesis of the student be-

aviors teachers considered important for good teacher-student relationships in a large urban high school. These behaviors, along with specific examples of behaviors, are shown in Table 3.

Findings indicate that teachers did not separate their relationships with students from other aspects of teaching. In addition to showing an interest in school work, teachers considered rule-abiding behaviors to be important, along with positive behavior traits, such as being trustworthy, honest, and cooperative. Overall, good relationships were established with students who demonstrated positive classroom behaviors as well as positive interpersonal skills when relating to teachers.

**Table 3.**

***Student Behaviors That Contribute to Good Teacher-Student Relationships***

Student Behaviors	Examples of Behavior
Demonstrating engagement and interest in school work	maintaining good attendance being on time for class coming to class prepared showing interest in the subject matter completing in-class assignments doing homework persevering with work showing initiative with work demonstrating academic improvement
Being respectful	following classroom rules following teachers' instructions talking at appropriate times in class being polite to students and teachers talking to teachers as adults (not as friends) being respectful of the physical setting
Demonstrating maturity and positive personality traits	assuming responsibility for their actions seeing teachers as individuals talking to teachers during nonclass times trusting teachers with personal information responding to teachers' efforts to help them being cooperative being trustworthy being honest having a sense of humor

## Discussion

This study attempted to identify the student behaviors that contributed to good teacher-student relationships in large urban high schools. To identify these behaviors, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used, a situation which served to boost the reliability and validity of the study's design.

Unlike studies that found that high school teachers avoided close relationships with students in order to maintain discipline and to encourage students to become more responsible and mature (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989), it was found in this study that teachers saw relationships with students as central to their jobs. Teachers did not separate their relationships with students from other aspects of teaching. They described the benefits of good relationships as relating to the academic environment, such as having high course passing rates and having few discipline problems.

Although previous researchers have found that in large high schools control is typically gained by formal policies and discipline procedures (Comfort, Giorgi, & Moody, 1997; Raywid, 1994), this situation was not supported in this study. Teachers who had good relationships with students claimed that they had few discipline problems. In fact, teachers developed good relationships with students primarily because they saw such relationships as serving instructionally beneficial purposes.

All teachers discussed establishing supportive classroom environments for students. Mrs. Georgiou stated: "If they feel comfortable in a non-threatening environment they *will* perform better--it's true!" Indeed, previous studies have confirmed that teachers' caring can have powerful consequences. Phelan, Davison, and Cao (1992) claimed: "It is not uncommon for low-achieving students to receive D's and F's in most classes while maintaining an A or B in an academic class that they describe as having a caring teacher" (p. 698). This study confirmed that students' academic behaviors were largely emotional responses to teachers' behaviors.

In terms of teachers' feelings about the student behaviors that led to good teacher-student relationships, only paying attention, trying hard, being honest, and respectful, were specifically cited by teachers when asked the question directly. Teachers claimed they could have good relationships with any student who demonstrated effort. In line with previous findings (e.g., Stenlund, 1995), teachers considered student responsiveness and enthusiasm as central to their own enthusiasm.

Teachers also indicated that they did not invest time in helping students who gave nothing back. Given that many students who drop out of school claim that teachers did not care about them, it is worth noting that teachers in this study expressed a strong need to feel cared for by students. Teachers prided themselves on being the teacher students came to with personal problems, or the teacher who did not have discipline problems because students liked them, or the teacher who had a high passing rate because students worked hard in their class. All of these situations helped to boost teachers' own emotional needs to feel liked and trusted by students. Students who did not respond to teachers in ways that demonstrated that they liked or respected them were those students that teachers refused to "help," "make an investment in" or "make an effort" for. Students would benefit from understanding that relationships with teachers involve the fulfillment of needs of

both parties involved and that teachers find it difficult to care about students who do not express positive behaviors towards them.

### Limitations

Despite the fact that 571 letters were distributed asking for teachers' participation in this study, only 103 teachers took the online survey. It is possible that teachers who do not have good relationships with students would be more reluctant to take a survey on good teacher-student relationships than teachers who have good relationships with students. By extension, the student behaviors desired for good relationships by teachers who do not have good relationships with students may also differ. Another limitation of this study is the fact that only teachers in large, urban high schools were selected to participate. It would be informative to find out if the student behaviors teachers desire for good teacher-student relationships are similar across different types of school settings and locations.

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