

DAVID ZANDVLIET, PERRY DEN BROK, TIM MAINHARD AND
JAN VAN TARTWIJK

1. THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN EDUCATION

In 2010 the first International Conference on Interpersonal Relationships (ICIRE) was held in Boulder, Colorado. The best contributions of this conference were afterwards brought together in the book *Contemporary research on interpersonal relationships in education*, edited by Theo Wubbels and colleagues and published by Sense as part of the *Advances in Learning Environments Research* book series. Since the 2010 conference was such a success, in 2012 a second ICIRE conference was organized in Vancouver, Canada. During the Vancouver conference, over 100 researchers, scholars, teacher educators and others gathered and shared knowledge and experiences during keynote lectures, paper sessions, posters and round table sessions. The current book is a collection of contributions and ideas presented at the 2012 ICIRE conference. After the conference, researchers and authors worked with these ideas and further developed the chapters presented in this book.

The theme of this book: *Interpersonal relationships in education* includes a wide variety of the relationships between actors such as peer relationships in class, teacher and students, school leaders and teachers, teachers and parents. The quality of these relationships is essential for the healthy developments of teachers and students alike (Wubbels, Brekelmans, den Brok, & van Tartwijk, 2006). We know for example that teacher learning thrives when principals facilitate accommodating and safe school cultures.

Clearly, positive teacher-student relationships also contribute to student learning (Wubbels et al., 2006; in press). Educators, parents and students together understand that problematic relationships can be detrimental to the attainment of student outcomes and development (see the contribution by Andrew Martin in this volume). Productive learning environments are characterized by supportive and warm interactions throughout the class (Fraser, 2007; Wubbels et al., 2006): *teacher – student* and *student – student*. Whereas positive teacher-student relationships are important for every child, these are more than a necessary condition for the development of students living and studying in contexts in which there is poverty, inequality or unequal access to the learning opportunities. Promoting social justice, also depends on the quality of teacher-student relationships.

A variety of research perspectives help explain how these constructive learning environment relationships can be developed and sustained. This focus speaks to the *from theory to practice* focus of our work. Contributions for this book have been influenced by educational and social psychology, teacher and school effectiveness research, communication and language studies, and a variety of other fields. What

all of these perspectives have in common is the practical goal of improving the lives of students and the quality of their educational experiences. What follows here is a summary of the research and perspectives that are shared in the following chapters of book.

In chapter two, Andrew Martin sets the context for other chapters by integrating theory and research in the area of interpersonal relationships. His work examines why interpersonal relationships are important; how relationships assist outcomes; how relationships can be a useful lens through which to understand educational phenomena; and the role of inter-personal relationships in achievement motivation theory. Martin also shares his recent findings from a multi-study research program. Martin relates that three major relationship sources are influential in students' academic and non-academic lives: parents/caregivers, teachers, and peers. Each is linked significantly to students' healthy functioning and development. Martin goes on to relate the numerous benefits attributed to the role of positive interpersonal relationships. Positive interpersonal relationships have been proposed as a buffer against stress and risk, instrumental help for tasks, emotional support in daily life, companionship in shared activities, and a basis for social and emotional development. Relatedness is also shown to positively impacts students' motivation, engagement, and achievement by way of its positive influences on other self-processes relevant to academic outcomes. For example, in the context of a student's life, positive interpersonal attachments to parents, teachers, and peers may foster healthy social, emotional and intellectual functioning, as well as positive feelings of self-esteem and self-worth.

In chapter three, Breeman and colleagues share research in the context of Special Education. Their research considers how vulnerable children can prosper from a positive teacher-child relationship. The aim of their study was to examine developmental links between teacher-child emotional closeness and behavioral problems in children with psychiatric disorders. The association between problem behavior and teacher-child emotional closeness development they examined at multiple intervals over an entire school year. Their results show that children's problem behaviors increased during the year, in contrast to teacher-child emotional closeness which remained relatively stable. Breeman et al. discuss how the higher initial levels of behavioral problems were associated with less teacher-child emotional closeness. Their results suggest that the teacher-child relationship is negatively affected by behavior problems in special education. The implications of these findings for children's development and prevention possibilities are also discussed.

Chapter four presents descriptive research on a model of reflective mentoring developed and implemented by Dyson and Plunkett as a way of enhancing interpersonal relationships between pre-service and mentor teachers involved in a school-based professional experience. Their process of reflective mentoring was developed as an alternative to the more traditional forms of supervision, which feature an intrinsic power relationship in which the student teacher is monitored and assessed by an experienced teacher or university lecturer. The process of reflective mentoring described by Dyson and Plunkett is seen as the underpinning

philosophical and procedural approach used within their primary teacher education program context. They relate how this process, within the school experience practicum, is part of an ongoing process involving the mentor teacher and the pre service teacher. It involves: support and guidance, a relationship built on trust, frequent conversations, the creation of a non judgemental environment and returning to issues and problems for further discussion. The case they describe demonstrates how the maintenance of positive interpersonal communications can impact learning outcomes within their program. The chapter further describes how pre-service teachers and their mentors are introduced to reflective mentoring through a range of approaches including modelling, continuous engagement with professional learning and a series of face to face discussion forums.

The benefits of positive teacher-student relationships are well established. For example, person-centered teacher variables are associated with positive student outcomes. In chapter five, Frelin and Grannäs use spatial theories to explore how teachers and students in secondary education view and navigate middle ground for achieving these positive and professional teacher-student relationships. Their research describes how teachers and students reason about the borderlands of teacher-student relationships and then navigate them. For example, Frelin and Grannäs describe how the teacher-student relationship is a professional one, and that while there is a need for teachers to have both professional closeness and professional distance there are limits to how close teachers and students can get without overstepping professional boundaries. These boundaries establish what is (in) appropriate in these relationships. In their work, Frelin et al. specifically use the term *middle ground* to denote the space in which it will be possible for individuals to emerge in ways that extend beyond given teacher and student roles.

Chapter six presents a longitudinal study exploring the factors affecting learning accessibility for children and adults. In this work, Higgins describes learning accessibility as ‘the individual’s personal circumstances and experiences located within and across contexts which impede or support that person in accessing learning’. Her study examines the impact on individuals and settings when a school moves beyond its traditional role and responds to the identified needs of the community. The chapter describes a case study of the Kileely Community Project (KCP) that evolved as a grass-roots response to the learning needs of children and adults in low socio-economic status (SES) areas. The chapter describes the context, evolution and impact of the initiative and firmly locates caring respectful interpersonal relationships as a key component in the development and sustainability of the project and the mechanism through which learning accessibility was addressed.

Because education is a fundamentally social enterprise, learning how to enhance the social interactions between teachers, administrators, students, and peers is essential to K-12 and higher education. Thus, improved interpersonal relationships should generate better educational outcomes. In chapter seven, King et al. explore theoretical pathways through which role-taking might improve interpersonal relationships. In their work, they articulate hypotheses connecting role-taking: an approach to taking the perspective of others in order to improve

relationships. They then provide an illustrative example of a virtual environment from the Social Aspects of Immersive Learning (SAIL) project. Through this example, they describe how these ideas about interpersonal relationships might be tested and how the resulting knowledge could lead to improved relationships in educational contexts. For example, King et.al. relate that by taking the perspective of others we might better understand them, and that understanding will pave the way for smoother interactions and relationships. With the development of virtual environments, people can now *walk a mile in the shoes of others* and take the perspectives of others more flexibly, efficiently, and authentically than ever before. Their work describes how virtual environments can allow for the systematic evaluation of these role-taking exercises.

Some educational contexts appear to give rise to more challenging behaviour than others. In particular, the tendency for challenging behaviour to be an issue in contexts of social and economic disadvantage has been noted, and in some cases attributed to a 'disconnect' between the middle class world of teachers and the working class world of students. Chapter 8 explores a classroom management intervention that took place within such a context. Lyons and Higgins describe their work with an intervention, called the Working Together Project, that took place in three schools in Ireland, each of which is located within an area of socio-economic disadvantage. Lyons and Higgins describe how their work was a research and intervention project that grew from an educational network of schools serving the learning needs of children living with urban disadvantage. The project was designed as a practical response to the network's request for research and intervention in the area of classroom management. The project also had a strong focus on interpersonal relationships and emotions. In their research, the data yielded by the project are explored in terms of what they reveal about the nature of emotions and relationships at school and their impact on classroom management.

The study presented in chapter nine investigated within-year changes in teacher-student relationships (TSR) and links with autonomous motivation among first-grade secondary school students in Indonesia. Maulana and Opdenakker use self-determination theory as a theoretical framework to study these relationships and autonomous motivation. In their study, teacher involvement, structure, and autonomy support were key factors and student surveys were conducted in five waves during the school year, for 504 students in the west of Indonesia. Multilevel growth curve modeling was also applied during their data analysis. Their findings, nconsistent with general findings in the western educational context, found that the quality of teacher-student relationships in Indonesian classrooms increased over time. Maulana and Opdenakker describe that relational factors are significant predictors of autonomous motivation. Differences between the Indonesian and western context in teacher student relationships are also discussed.

Research on social networks in schools is also increasing rapidly. Yet, knowledge on how demographic characteristics of teachers and schools affect the pattern of social relationships among educators is scarce. Chapter ten examines the extent to which teachers' work related social networks are affected by teacher and school demographic characteristics. In a study conducted by Moolenaar et al.

survey data were collected among 316 educators from 13 elementary schools in the Netherlands. Using social network analysis, they analyzed the effect of teacher and school demographics on individual teachers' probability of discussing work with their colleagues. The findings indicate that the probability of having work related relationships depends on gender, grade level, working hours, formal position, and experience. The study also discovered that educators tend to prefer relationships with educators of the same gender and from the same grade level. Moreover, years of shared experience as a school team appeared to affect the likelihood of teachers discussing their work together.

Supportive teacher-student interactions are a characteristic of a powerful learning environment and are thought to contribute to student learning. In Chapter eleven, Opendakker and Minnaert relate how self-determination theory, teacher support and teacher involvement/relatedness play an important role in the fulfillment of students' basic psychological needs and, therefore, to students' motivation and engagement for school. In addition, they emphasize the importance of students' perceptions of their learning environment. Their study is an investigation as to whether students' perceptions of their teacher in relation to the satisfaction of their psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness could explain differences in the (development of) students' academic engagement at the end of primary education. Using multilevel modeling, their study pays attention to the unique and joint effects of the learning environment as well as to student gender, ethnic-cultural background and prior academic engagement. Their results reveal important significant positive effects from all learning environment experiences on the development of students' academic engagement.

Chapter twelve reports on an alternative methodology to evaluate environmental education programs; one that acknowledges the importance of psychosocial and relational factors in educational settings (i.e. learning environment) that can influence students' learning. The study by Ormond and Zandvliet gives a description of place-based education, learning environment research, and environmental learning and discusses how learning environments research has important insights for the field of environmental education. The study illustrates that a positive learning environment as perceived by the student is a predictor of greater learning and that place-based environmental education settings tend to have more positive learning environments. The study by Ormond and Zandvliet also validates the administration of a distinctive questionnaire: the Place-based and Constructivist Environment Survey (or PLACES) for use in Post-secondary education environments. Supporting focus groups and interviews completed the description of these unique and place-based learning environments and the role of interpersonal relationships in supporting student learning.

The social network of an individual is shown to highly condition people's life outcomes: from education to earnings to health outcomes. Although sociologists differ on their ideas as to how social capital is developed, the educational outcomes from it are clear: the social relations that students have with their friends, peers, parents, and parents' network influence their educational aspirations, attainment, and achievement. Chapter thirteen presents a study by Price that focuses on how

the social identities of teenagers influence educational attainment and aspirations. She describes how these relations can be formed at the individual-friend level or at the group-friend level. The study by Price maintains a very tangible definition of peers as 1) those people that teens name as friends and 2) those other teens that teens associate within their activity groups. With these definitions, and the corresponding data about friends and activity groups (or crowds). Price asserts that this allows a more thorough analysis of the association of peers with social identity and that the mechanisms related to schooling outcomes can be better understood. In her study, the correlates of personal identity, namely the influence of personal attitudes and beliefs, and parent and school context are accounted for so that an estimate of the influence of social identity is more precisely estimated.

In the final chapter (fourteen), Wijsman et al relate that the social context for learning is conceptualized in terms of the interpersonal perceptions students have of their teachers: that is to what degree do students perceive their teacher as conveying agency (i.e., dominance, interpersonal influence) and communion (friendliness, interpersonal proximity) in class. The goal of their study is to show to what extent the perceived interpersonal teacher behaviour is related to the quality of a student's controlled and autonomous motivation. Recent literature in the area of interpersonal relationships has led to a consensus among researchers that (for students) autonomous motivation (as opposed to control) leads to more volitional persistence, better social relationships, more effective performance, and greater health and well-being (among other outcomes). The extent to which students' motivation is controlled or autonomous, describes a difference in the quality of motivation with autonomous motivation being associated with more positive learning outcomes. Wijsman et al. assert that the social context for this interaction should not be overlooked however other contextual factors, such as teacher structure require further investigation.

In summary, the chapters in this book paint a varied and eclectic selection of works which investigate both the theory and practice of Interpersonal Relationships in Education and their importance for educational processes. In this they draw on a range of methods including: analysis of communication processes; the study of interpersonal perceptions; research on class and school learning environments; research on school or teacher effectiveness; urban and multicultural issues; social justice, inequity and school reform; classroom management and attachment theory. We hope you find these perspectives useful in your work.

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INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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