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Respect in the Classroom: A Developmental Approach

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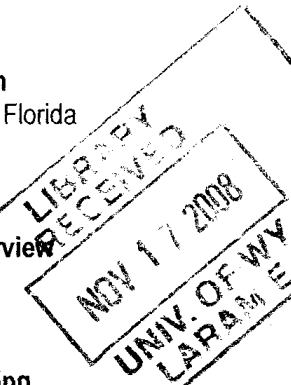
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Respect in the Classroom: A Developmental Approach

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Abstract

This article examines respect through Piaget's theory, recent empirical research, and exemplary practice in order to highlight a developmental approach to understanding and fostering respect in the classroom.

Introduction

Educators may agree that respect is a crucial component of successful classrooms, but only recently has respect been formally included in descriptions of teacher responsibilities. A recent description from a Midwestern school asked the candidate to "model respect for others in every aspect of the job" while assuming typical teacher responsibilities of designing curriculum, planning instruction, and teaching students. Another job description highlighted a teacher's ability to "maintain classroom responsibility and respect." The consideration of teachers promoting respect seems to be a burgeoning trend, and although it is neither new nor unreasonable to ask teachers to foster respect, the expectations of respect can be behavioral, moral, or ideological in nature. The explicit expectation of teachers to model and maintain respect presents an intriguing challenge to teachers and students alike: What do we mean by respect? Teachers, administrators, and parents may agree that respect is associated with school success, but it is almost certain that there is a great variation in their definitions of respect.

The job descriptions above seem to assume that respect in school is best defined as a behavioral construct (i.e., to act respectfully), which is often a common assumption about respect in the field of education. However, such an explanation limits respect to the observable, excluding the inner quality of human thoughts and feelings. Recently, researchers have begun to consider the affective, cognitive, and cultural nature of respect. For example, researchers have examined respect as a social emotion through cultural mediation (Li & Fischer, 2007); as a key construct in romantic relationships (Frei & Shaver, 2002; Hendrick & Hendrick, 2006); and as a significant factor for children's peer relations (Cohen, Hsueh, Hancock, Zhou, & Floyd, 2006; Hsueh, Zhou, Cohen, Hundley, & Deptula, 2005; Mann, Mitsui, Beswick, & Harmoni, 1994).

As noted above, respect can mean many things. The different conceptions of respect can create problems for teachers and students to understand and maintain respect in the classroom. The focus of this article is to examine respect in light of Piaget's theory, recent empirical research, and exemplary practice to highlight a developmental approach to understanding and fostering respect in the classroom. First, we present Jean Piaget's explanation of the development of respect for others, emphasizing the development of unilateral to mutual respect. Then, we review recent empirical evidence from our research group supporting Piaget's theory. Finally, we illustrate an exemplary practice for fostering mutual respect in the classroom.

Piaget's Theory of Respect

Piaget's theory of respect is central for both educators and researchers. Although, before Piaget, many thinkers such as Bovet (1928), Durkheim (1961), and Kant (1981) had pondered various issues relevant to the development of respect, Piaget (1952, 1995) was the first to place philosophical (Kant, 1981) and psychological (Bovet, 1928) notions of respect in a

developmental perspective through empirical research. For Piaget, young children's respect evolves from a type of unilateral respect for parents at home to a more cognitively sophisticated and continually socialized type of mutual respect for one another in the community.

The development of children's conception of respect results from advances of their cognitive structures and their interactions with adults and peers. These two types of respect do not exclude each other in childhood; the child can hold unilateral respect for parents and teachers while having developed mutual respect for peers. Piaget's unilateral respect is taken from the work of Pierre Bovet (1928), who defined unilateral respect as a biologically based sentiment that is "directed toward a person" (p.136). Unilateral respect occurs between two individuals who recognize the unequal status of their relationship. It is first given from the child to the parent or the teacher as a sign of acceptance of the latter's value system. The child with unilateral respect is developmentally unable to consciously define his own values, especially in relation to the parent's and the teacher's (Piaget, 1952). For example, a teacher tells a student to be quiet. The student recognizes and obeys the teacher's authority, resulting in acceptance of the teacher's value of the classroom hierarchical structure. In other words, the child has and shows respect for the teacher by accepting the value of the teacher's power and rule without evaluating his own against the teacher's.

Unlike unilateral respect, mutual respect is not fostered between individuals who hold identical values. Piaget (1952, 1995) pointed out that the later emerging mutual respect is based on a reciprocal relationship — two individuals who recognize each other's values and evaluate these values by shared norms. As long as one can take the perspective of the other and see how that value might be important from the other's perspective, then mutual respect can occur. For example, a teacher tells her class that she values student's "listening" to her when she lectures. The teacher also acknowledges students' value in "sharing ideas" which is important to their learning as well as her teaching. Both the students and the teacher agree that the exchange of ideas is more important than just listening to the lecture, and so the students suggest that they will raise their hands when they want to share ideas during the lecture. This sharing of ideas through listening to, and exchanging with, each other embodies the shared normative value at work, conducive to building mutual respect.

Piaget (1952) does not specify an age range for the onset of mutual respect, but he carefully notes that the child must have acquired perspective-taking and equal status in social relationships before mutual respect can occur. Thus, in early childhood, respect is primarily unilateral. As children enter middle childhood and become more socialized in their thoughts and feelings, they also develop perspective-taking and frequently interact with peers. As a result, mutual respect may develop between peers. The transition from middle childhood to adolescence brings about additional changes to the rapid social and emotional changes in the adolescent's understanding of others. Adolescents become less likely to see themselves as inferior to others, such as other adolescents, parents, and teachers, rather, more or less as an equal (Lightfoot, 2000). Therefore, adolescents come to expect mutual respect in their relationships with others, including the teacher.

Children's View of Respect

Recent evidence from two empirical studies supports the view that the two types of respect can co-exist and evolve—from early childhood unilateral respect to the middle childhood mutual respect. The first study was based on pilot interviews in the U.S. and in China, to construct a questionnaire assessing Grade 3-6 children's understanding of the definition of respect, the function of respect, and the behavioral expression of respect for a teacher (Hsueh et al., 2005). For the definition of respect, most U.S. children chose reciprocity ("To be good to others and treat them as you want to be treated."). In contrast, the Chinese children favored admiration as the definition of respect ("To look up to or admire."). These different definitions of respect were in turn associated with different reasons to respect others. U.S. children's reasons emphasized the importance of both reciprocity ("If you respect them, they will respect you.") and deservingness

("Because people deserve respect no matter who they are."). Chinese children's reasons emphasized deservingness most strongly. Finally, U.S. children emphasized treating the teacher as an authority figure by being compliant and obedient ("Do what your teacher tells you to do."). Although the Chinese children also viewed the teacher as an authority figure, they emphasized doing one's duty ("Work hard on your schoolwork.") rather than obeying directives as a way to show respect to a teacher.

These data suggest that 9- to 12-year-old children should understand respect in terms of mutuality. However it is evident that unilateral and mutual respect can coexist and coevolve, as Piaget (1952) depicts. The U.S. children defined respect and considered the function of respect as being based on mutuality; however, to act on respect for a teacher meant to act obediently. Also evident were different cultural meanings as Hsueh et al. (2005) pointed out:

In the United States, children's understanding of respect develops in a culture of separation of church and state, which creates a division of home and school life. In China, children's understanding of respect is shaped by Confucianism, which informs both family and school life. Therefore, U.S. and Chinese children know and show respect based on different culturally derived meaning systems (p. 253).

In another study examining respect and peer relations, also with third through sixth graders in the U.S. and China, Cohen et al. (2006) found that respect by peers was associated with peer relations. Specifically, using structural equation modeling, a variety of measures of peer social competence were positively related to respect by peers which, in turn, was positively related to being liked by peers. Again, cultural influences emerged. Data showed that, for children in both cultures, respect was a driving force for getting along with peers, but respect was more of a core construct within the Chinese culture.

These two studies (Cohen et al., 2006; Hsueh et al., 2005) are consistent with the aforementioned theoretical delineation about respect. Between teacher and student, respect is based primarily on obedience (unilateral); among students, respect is based on reciprocity (mutual). The evidence from the two studies suggests that the two types of respect, unilateral and mutual, are distinctive depending on the grade level and the relationship, and are coexistent depending mostly on the relationship in the upper elementary grades and over. Such distinction and connection can impact the student's social functioning in the classroom. The classroom can be viewed as a community, composed of shared and exchanged values, whose focus includes nurturing the cognitive and social abilities of the child. It is precisely in this type of social environment where mutual respect can be fostered. However, how mutual respect extends beyond peers to other relationships has not yet been discussed. The role of the teacher as a facilitator of mutual respect in the classroom will be examined next.

Respect in the Classroom

In the classroom, the teacher is the authority that desires and deserves, if not demands, respect. It goes without saying that in an ideal classroom, respect is observable between the teacher and students, and among students. However, the empirical evidence suggests that this is not likely to occur spontaneously in a classroom, as children have different views of what is respect and who receives respect. Anecdotal evidence supports this notion — as students progress in school, they treat their teachers differently. Developmentally, a first grader's response to a teacher's "Please be quiet" is certainly different than a seventh grader's response. An implication of the theoretical discussion above, however, allows us to reexamine why the response changes. It is not that children lose respect for the teacher as they get older. Rather, it is that students do not hold the same conception of respect over time.

The preschool child, perhaps along with many first and second graders, will have no difficulty understanding obedience to authority; however, he or she may not engage in types of peer social interactions that require mutual understanding. Middle school aged children will certainly begin to comprehend mutuality among peers as a basis for respect, but this understanding also begins to undermine the authority that used to go unquestioned. They may try to take, in part, their new understanding of peer mutual respect to their relationship with the teacher. Furthermore, they begin to expect respect from the teacher, from time to time, as equals. If mutuality becomes increasingly essential in children's respect at this age, what does it mean for a child to be respected by the teacher? How can a teacher offer her students the type of respect that they want without giving up her authority status as a teacher? If we accept Piaget's (1952) reasoning, then the children's quest for reciprocal respect can be satisfied by fostering shared and exchanged values in the classroom. In doing so, the teacher can create a learning community that fosters mutual respect without undermining the teacher's authority—the focus of equality is not on the actual teacher-student relationship per se, but on the values that constitute the relationship.

The practice and importance of using shared values to foster mutual respect in real classrooms has been noted by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000) in her book *Respect: An explanation, as well as from classroom teachers and educators* (Luck, 2006; Richardson, 2006). As little empirical research exists on the promotion of mutual respect through shared values, we will examine a teacher's personal experience of successfully using shared values to promote mutual respect in the classroom. Daniel Richardson (2006), a fourth grade award-winning teacher, promotes active learning as the classroom value that allows him to mutually respect his students without losing his authority as a teacher. He notes:

I have found that active learning is not a particular method, but rather a shared attitude between students and teachers that allows them to perform as a team — a team in which teachers orchestrate the processes and procedures for learning to occur and students become engaged in these processes in ways that learning will occur (Richardson, 2006, p. 244).

Richardson (2006) refers to the shared attitude of active learning as establishing an “atmosphere of mutual respect” (p. 244) in which the teacher and student act as equals in the learning process. Although the students and the teacher are not equals in all aspects of the classroom life, they share the value of active learning. The teacher still plays the role as a classroom leader, but the students are more willing to take on their role as learners in order to participate as part of the team in which the teacher is a member. The “shared attitude” toward active learning is essentially a normative value and it can integrate cultural differences about respect that are fostered outside the classroom. By agreeing and acting on the normative value, students and the teacher can respect one another within the classroom. In this example, mutual respect between the teacher and students is a hallmark of active learning. As Richardson (2006) noted, “no matter what, your students will learn if mutual respect is an integral part of your classroom culture” (p. 244).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to provide a theoretical underpinning, with empirical evidence, and an exemplary teacher's work, to illustrate how mutual respect between a teacher and students can be fostered. During children's cognitive and social

development, their understanding of respect evolves from unilateral to mutual. Piaget emphasized this transition which has been empirically supported. In addition to development, theory and research indicate that peer group, teacher–student relationship, and culture are also important factors in children’s understanding of respect. Considering all these factors, we suggest that teachers should focus on shared values to foster mutual respect and that doing so will not sacrifice the teacher’s authority. A professionally sensitive and thoughtful teacher like David Richardson (2006) can strive to integrate these aspects of respect in his curricular and pedagogical efforts and achieve mutual respect in the classroom.

Our reasoning in this article leads to an implication that school administrators can incorporate this approach into teacher professional development. Teachers, when equipped with an understanding of how children’s concept of respect evolves with development and context, can foster mutual respect in the classroom. This is important because the way teachers understand and foster respect in the classroom will have a great impact on how their students understand respect and act respectfully in the future.

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