Teacher-Student Relationships at a Kindergarten School as Viewed from Classroom Management Principles

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DOI: 10.31004/obsesi.v6i1.1366

Abstract
Quality classroom management contributes to creating learning environment that allows the realization of various teacher roles. One way to support this is by building good teacher-student relationship. This study aims at describing the relationship between teachers and students at a kindergarten school in Malang and discusses its aspects in relation to classroom management principles. After conducting qualitative research using one-week classroom observation and literature study, this study found that almost all aspects of teacher-student relationship were identified, namely conducting informal conversations with students, paying attention to students’ activities, using physical gestures and movements, implementing positive interaction strategies, providing affirmative reactions to incorrect responses, and exhibiting an assertive connection. The other aspect that was missed was acknowledging students’ different characteristics.

Keywords: early-childhood students; classroom management; teacher-student relationships.
INTRODUCTION

In every learning process, there must be certain goals that students need to achieve as the indicators of their success in learning. Related to the achievement of the goals, teachers play significant roles in managing classroom to ensure that any activity they design for classroom purposes can help their students reach what has been set as the learning goals (Safitri et al., 2020). As indicated by Temel (in Hussain et al., 2013), teachers’ presence nowadays is not only to deliver lectures and take examination but also to take the roles of organizing, managing, counseling, observing and evaluating the learning process. Since the learning process takes place in the classroom, teachers need to create the classroom environment in such a way that the very many roles they have to play can be realized. This implies the need to improve the way they manage their classroom.

According to Mulvahill (2018), classroom management can refer to different methods that teachers use in a classroom so that the activities can run smoothly without any disruption caused by students. Such an ability of managing the classroom and the behavior of their students is essential in achieving positive learning outcomes (Oliver & Reschly, 2007). It is also supported by Kelly (in Delceva-Dizdarevik, 2014), who states that a good management in a classroom makes students involved deeply in the process of learning because they know what the teachers expect from them.

In order to develop a good classroom management, teachers need to build good relationship with their students as the starting point. When teachers and students have a good relationship, other aspects of classroom management might run as expected (Marzano et al., 2005:56); teachers need to work together as a team with their students to achieve the learning objectives (Rampaola Mokhele, 2006). Related to this, Marzano et al. (2005:56) indicates that aspects of classroom management include agreed rules and procedures, general classroom behaviors, and learning activities. When teachers can build up a good relationship with their students, the students will be more willing to follow the rules and procedures in the class; the students feel more comfortable to be a part of the class. A good relationship between teachers and students can also make the behaviors in the class become more comfortable; the students might feel neither afraid nor anxious. Good relationship between teachers and the students, especially young students, is really important not only for the teachers who manage the class but also for the students themselves. As cited from Pianta and Walsh (in Koca, 2016), teacher-student relationship has an essential role in the development of competencies of the pre-school and early school students. The development of competencies that is significantly influenced by teacher-student relationship, according to Leitao and Waugh (2012), is emotional and social development. This kind of development, according to Yates et al. (in Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016), is about children’s abilities to build a close and secure relationship with their peers and adults, to express their emotions in appropriate ways according to social and cultural norms, and to explore and learn from the environment. Furthermore, healthy teacher-student relationship also contributes to students’ academic performance (Prino et al., 2016).

Literature has shown that teacher-student relationship might not guarantee an effective learning; however, it establishes a good situation in an environmental context that makes good learning process possible (Oliver & Reschly, 2007). Positive teacher-student relationship creates a warm classroom atmosphere for successful adaptations that can increase students’ motivation in learning process. An earlier-positively-built teacher-student relationship can serve as a quality of relationship between students and their teachers in the future. As reviewed by Hussain et al. (2013), much literature reveals that the positive teacher-student relationship is about high quality of mutual respect, caring, and warmth during interactions between teachers and students along activities in school. The closer the relationship between teachers and students, the more secure the students feel, which might then lead them to believe their teachers as source of exploring learning opportunities (Yoleri, 2016). In short, it can be concluded that teacher-student relationship has an essential contribution to the quality of early childhood education.
A number of previous research studies have dealt with communication patterns between teachers and early-childhood students (Nugrohoningsih et al., 2015; Bagus & Dewi, 2018; Prasanti & Fitriani, 2018). Nugrohoningsih et al. (2015) focused on describing the communication between teachers and students, including the students’ responses in the learning process. Bagus and Dewi (2018) described not only the communication between teachers and students but also the communication of students with peers and their parents. Another study conducted by Prasanti and Fitriani (2018) found out that teachers’ efforts in developing effective communication with the students might cover three aspects of communication: paying attention to characteristics that teachers should have, realizing the importance of using media in communication, and understanding students’ different characteristics. However, those several studies seem to be lack of explanation on teacher-student relationship related to its importance for effective classroom management.

Considering the importance of teacher-student relationship in classroom management and young students’ development, this present study has been focused on exploring the relationship between teachers and young-aged students. More specifically, this study aims to describe the aspects of teacher-student relationship in the improvement of effective classroom management in an early-childhood educational institution, that is, in a kindergarten. The results of this research will provide practical contribution to the development of procedural knowledge about the importance of the relationship between teachers and students in developing good classroom management. Furthermore, this research can be a reference for teachers in early-childhood education to build a better relationship with their students.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a descriptive qualitative research design was employed, where observation technique and literature study were used in collecting the data. Observation helped the researchers to reveal the features of the context or interpersonal dynamics that may be unseen by participants, and the literature study, also mentioned as textual analysis, is critical in understanding the history, policy, or implementation of particular actions (Hamilton & Finley, 2020). The study took place at TK Muslimat NU 16 Malang, East Java Province, Indonesia from October 19 to 26, 2019. The subjects of this study were one female teacher and her 12 students comprising seven female and five male students whose age range was from 5 to 6 years old. Observations were carried out during classes, from 07.00 to 09.30 AM, until the data were saturated. The observations focused on the activities before the class, during the learning activities, and after the class.

The data collected were related to the teacher’s strategies in communicating with the students, problems that were faced by the teacher, and the teacher’s responses to the students’ behaviors in order to overcome the problems. From the three aspects, it is obvious that this study put the focus on the teacher’s roles in building good relationships with the students. However, instead of collecting the data under those elements that seemed to be quite general, we elaborated them into a number of related aspects. Those aspects were linked to the teacher-student relationship and the connection with classroom management so that the data could be more focused and discussed specifically. In deciding all aspects that were related the teacher-student relationships, we referred to the four modules as the main reference source, that is, A Handbook for Classroom Management that Works by Marzano et al. (2005). In this case, the teacher’s communication strategies were divided into having informal conversations with children, paying attention to the kinds of students’ activities, employing physical gestures and movements, and establishing positive interaction strategies. The teacher’s responses consisted of showing affirmative reactions to incorrect responses, exhibiting an assertive connection, and being aware of the needs of the students. The data on these seven aspects had to be collected and discussed in this study since other previous studies had not been conducted with more narrow analysis on related themes.
The instrument used to assess the teacher-student relationships was the observation table containing seven aspects related to teacher-student relationships developed by Marzano et al. (2005). At first, we began collecting the related information by taking notes and making a list of main points that were found from the beginning of the school session to the end of the classroom activities. Parts of the conversations between the teacher and the students that indicated some aspects to be analyzed were included in this step. The observation points based on the aspects they belonged to were done afterwards. The analysis was facilitated by the available indicators of each aspect as can be seen in Table 1, synthesized from Marzano et al. (2005) to check whether or not each aspect of teacher-student relationships occurred in the school sessions. For the purpose of data analysis, scores were assigned to each aspect, with the score of 4 reflecting occurrences of all of the time, 3 of most of the time, 2 of some of the time, and 1 of none of the time.

Table 1. Indicators of Aspects of Teacher-Student Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Having informal conversation with students</td>
<td>Teacher demonstrates personal interest by interacting as individuals, for example, by greeting the students by name and talking in break times about students' life and interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Paying attention to the kinds of students' activities</td>
<td>Teacher notices students’ participation in a variety of activities inside and outside the school, such as sports, drama, and other extracurricular activities, and gives appropriate comments on students’ involvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Employing physical gestures and movements</td>
<td>Teachers scan the classroom and maintaining eye contact while speaking with students, moving around the class to ensure that children feel their teachers are close, and looking at students who are speaking as well as listening to what they are saying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Establishing positive interaction strategies</td>
<td>Teachers give credit to students who offer ideas or comments during the learning process, encourage students to participate, and provide appropriate “wait time” for students while they are thinking about responses to questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Showing affirmative reactions to incorrect responses</td>
<td>Teachers provide corrections by acknowledging correct answers and explaining how they can change the incorrect answers, restating the question or stating the real question that was answered incorrectly, giving hints and cues, letting the students think again, or providing answers but asking for elaboration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Exhibiting an assertive connection</td>
<td>While talking to students, teachers are not engaged in other things, maintaining eye contact, expressing emotions appropriately, asking questions respectfully, spending equal time of speaking and listening, or expressing agreements, disagreements, or neutrality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Being aware of the needs of the students</td>
<td>Teachers can make distinctions of how to act when facing behavioral problems based on students’ different types.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the observations and literature review show that most of the aspects of teacher-student relationships have been fulfilled by the teacher in the classroom process. The data are presented briefly in Table 2 and discussed in more details by referring to the seven aspects as the focus of the observation.
Table 2. Teacher-student Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>ASPECTS</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Teacher’s communication strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having informal conversations with students</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paying attention to the kinds of students’ activities</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employing physical gestures and movements</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establishing positive interaction strategies</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Teacher’s responses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Showing affirmative reactions to incorrect responses</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exhibiting an assertive connection</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being aware of the needs of the students</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean score</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in Table 2 clearly show that the teacher has done all the aspects under study, with the highest score of having informal conversations with students and the lowest score of being aware of the needs of the students. Overall, the mean score of three reflects most-of-the-time occurrences of the aspects being researched. The results of the observation and literature study are explained in more detail in the following sections based on each aspect of teacher-student relationships.

Having Informal Conversations with Students

According to Kumar (n.d.), when students come to school, the first thing that they face is the school hierarchy, which is the system of the school to maintain students’ discipline. This hierarchy is mostly maintained by teachers by keeping the distance from students in order to make the students keep the respect to the teachers. Making conversations with the students can loosen the authority to make space for the students so that they can share a comfortable rapport and build relations which can create opportunities for further dialogues between teachers and students. Moreover, being close with the students can lead to the warm atmosphere and open communication between teachers and students. Such closeness can help students improve their school performance (Bosman et al., 2018) since they will feel more motivated and secure in their school environment.

Based on the result of the observation, the teacher made informal conversations with the students all of the time as indicated by the score of four in Table 2. As stated by Ostrosky & Jung (n.d.), in the early childhood context, each moment that is used by teachers to interact with the students is an opportunity to develop a positive teacher-student relationship. Those informal conversations happened during the break time when the students were eating their meals or playing together in the class. The teacher sat together with all of the female students and started the conversations. She talked casually to the students and asked some questions related to the students’ life, like activities that they did the day before, how good their meals were, and activities that they would do after the school. We noticed that the students looked comfortable during the conversations. Moreover, some students started the conversations with the teacher without waiting for the teacher’s intention to ask something, which was a good sign that the students were used to having talks with both their peers and the teacher. In addition to the aforementioned benefits, making conversations between teachers and students is to enhance students’ engagement, learning, and achievement in the context of social and educational disadvantage (Alexander, 2018). Thus, it is obvious that the role of teachers in the realization of this component is essential to help the students grow more, especially in the way they possibly interact with others around them.

Paying Attention to the Kinds of the Students’ Activities

Knowing the students’ participation or activities in and outside school has been said to be beneficial to the students’ mental development. The results of our observation suggest that
the teacher paid attention to the kinds of the students’ activities most of the time, as reflected in the score of three in Table 2. According to Marzano et al. (2005:61), noticing the students' participation in sports, drama, and other extracurricular activities can make the students feel known and appreciated for what they are. Those feelings can increase the motivation of the students to improve their skills and make them more confident in showing their best in front of others. Besides improving their skills, the behavior from the teachers can improve the relationship between teachers and students even more by giving compliments or feedback to the students. Based on the result of the observation, the teacher in our study took notice of other activities the students participated in and outside school. However, only two or some students were asked in one meeting. For example, the teacher told us that she became informed one day that some of her students joined a Samroh activity, a traditional Islamic musical instrument, outside the school, and were very good at playing it. At the time of observation, the students were directed to the Samroh class and asked to prepare themselves to start playing Samroh based on their roles in playing different instruments. Then in the middle of the activity, one student did not play it well because he was distracted by his friends. The teacher was aware about it and tried to motivate the student by saying “Ayo coba lagi, nak. Kamu pasti bisa lebih bagus lagi. Kemarin waktu tampil Samroh kamu udah bagus banget – Come on, have a try again, dear. You can play it well. Once you performed Samrah quite well.” From that point, the teacher meant that the student could perform better, for she had watched him while performing very well previously. After hearing that encouragement, that student started to play it in a correct way, and he became more focused. It proves that noticing the students’ participation outside school can improve their motivation to develop their skill. Therefore, it is important for teachers to show the students their appreciation, especially to praise them for their achievement, as it can be a successful way to influence how the students abide by classroom rules and pay attention to the teachers (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).

**Employing Physical Gestures and Movements**

Gestures and movements are two things that teachers have to be aware of, for communication is not only about words but also messages that are expressed through body language. Different gestures are used as signs to express personal feelings and thoughts that vary from displeasure to affection, and it can also help the students to construct the meaning (Bourne & Jewitt, 2003). During the classroom activities, we found that most of the time, the teacher gave her attention to each student by using eye contact but used only few physical gestures and movements, as can be seen from the data in Table 2. Roviello (2004) argues that individual eye contact with every student throughout the learning process can indicate attentiveness from the teacher. The eye contact maintained by the teacher most of the time in our study shows that she tried to make sure that all the students also gave their attention and became more focused during the teaching and learning process. Moreover, by maintaining the eye contact, the teacher could notice whether the students could follow the lesson easily or not.

In terms of movements, however, we often observed that the teacher tended to look at the whole class from one spot where she was sitting or standing up. She spent time mostly in one place without trying to move around the room to approach all the students. According to Marzano et al. (2005:84), a teacher should occupy the entire classroom not only visually by maintaining eye contact but also physically by systematically walking to all areas of the classroom. The movement occupying the room is important to make sure that all students feel that the teacher is there, accompanying them all in classroom activities. The reason for this statement is also supported by Mag (2019) suggesting that students are sensitive not only to what the teacher says but also to the nonverbal communication. It means that students can catch either positive or negative messages, depending on how the teacher sends them using his or her body language. The appropriate signs used by the teacher in the classroom may also
help prevent unexpected behaviors of the students and keep the students’ interest on the teacher that make the lesson memorable (Sieberer-Nagler, 2015).

**Establishing Positive Interaction Strategies**

In this aspect, we found that the teacher appreciated all ideas and answers that were given by the students. She thanked all students who participated without forgetting to mention their names one by one. The behavior showed that the teacher tried to always build better relationship individually, and she behaved equitably to all of the students. This practice is beneficial since it could send the students a message that their teacher respected their ideas and it can build positive classroom atmosphere (Sieberer-Nagler, 2015). According to Marzano et al. (2005:64), this habit done by a teacher can encourage students to convey more their ideas in the future. However, not every time all students could participate in answering questions or offering some opinions, especially those who were not confident to speak up. Even some of the students who were active needed some time to think about the answers. In this situation, the teacher gave appropriate “wait time”, which that is said by Marzano et al. (2005:57) can help the teacher encourage students’ participation. The teacher said to the particular students that she would ask questions to other students while waiting for their responses. She would come back to the students and asked the same questions until the students can gave the answers.

**Showing Affirmative Reactions to Incorrect Responses**

When one student could not answer questions given to him correctly, although he had been given time to think again in “wait time” period, the teacher did not directly move to other students. She kept encouraging the student to answer the question correctly by giving some clues. By giving the student clues related to the answer, the teacher had helped him to be more encouraged though his answer was wrong. Previous researcher (Li, 2020) called it instructional support, that is, one of dimensions of mistake-related interaction. Moreover, Li also provided indicators that this way of supporting the children with some hints is categorized as mid-quality instructional support. Then situation related to incorrect responses also happened when the teacher asked the students about the previous material related to a story, but most of the students could not recall anything. When the students gave their responses and turned out that they were the incorrect ones, the teacher provided the correctives as the feedback on what the students have said as the responses. As it is stated by Panisoara (in Mag, 2019), the feedback is one of the best motivators of the teacher-student relationship since it allows teachers to show that they are cared. Moreover, the reactions to students’ answers indicated how the teacher respected her students’ ideas by acknowledging not only correct answers but also the incorrect ones. In the classroom, the teacher still tried to encourage them to answer the same questions by providing some related cues, and it showed that the teacher tried to focus on providing positive reactions, which was needed by the students as the negative ones may significantly impact their self-esteem and motivation towards learning (Mag, 2019). Therefore, the way the teachers response to incorrect answers determine to the effectiveness of teacher-student relationship that is built in the learning process.

**Exhibiting an Assertive Connection**

The group found that most of the time, the teacher used assertive connection in communication, which is defined as social behavior or social ability which shows an act of respecting oneself and those with whom the person interacts (Cabelo et al. in María Dolores et al., 2016). The teacher was not engaged in other activities but the ones that must be done by her students. She focused on each student in the class when it was the time to teach and lead the students in other activities such as playing games and singing. In the learning process, the teacher also listened attentively to the students who were answering questions and giving
their opinions. Later on, she used the behavior as the example to encourage the students to listen when others were speaking. One thing that was important was that the teacher knew when she could practice the habit to the students. At the break time, conversations only happened to some students because other students preferred to play or talk to their friends. Although some students ignored the teacher’s questions or did not want to join the conversations, the teacher did not get angry or forced the students to answer her question or joined the conversations. In this kind of situation, the teacher succeeded in keeping the boundaries, for she did not force the students to make interaction that might make them uncomfortable and loosen their relationship with the students (Hargreaves, 2001).

As cited from Marzano et al. (2005:67), Assertive Connector is the most appropriate style for good communication that will lead to positive results. The required skills for someone to be an assertive connector, according to Romek (in Peneva & Mavrodiev, 2013), are including the habit of maintaining communication, being an active listener, dealing with conflict situations as well as openly expressing both negative and positive feelings. It will be even better if the person can replace the negative thoughts or situations with the positive ones (Bishop in Peneva & Mavrodiev, 2013). Therefore, based on the results of the observation, the teacher has done her roles to build the connection with the students by applying these skills of being an assertive communicator.

Being Aware of Needs of Different Types of Students

Types of students refer to personal quality of each student that becomes their characteristics as different individuals in a classroom. In this research, the types discussed belong to the types of high-needs students that may lead to some behavioral problems during the classroom sessions. Marzano et al. (2005:72) grouped these students’ characteristics into five categories, namely passive, aggressive, attention problems, perfectionists, and socially inept students. The information about these characteristics, according to Dwiwarna and Rahadian (2018), is needed by other learning components such as instructional media, goals, evaluation, and learning strategies used. Hence, understanding students’ characteristics and ways to deal with different types of the characteristics is the key to ensure the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes. Based on such information, teachers can arrange appropriate learning activities to match students’ learning styles.

As stated by Felder et al. (2002), teachers in every field must function in all type modalities to be fully effective, and the goal of education should therefore be to provide balanced instruction. However, what was observed in the classroom was that the teacher was not quite aware of the students’ different characteristics. It was shown by the way she taught in the learning sessions. When she was explaining the lesson, she stood in front of the class all the time, which made some students sitting at the back row did not pay attention to what their classmates were learning since they tended to seek for attention from the class. According to Griggs et. al. (in Rudasill et al., 2020), such children with higher reactivity and lower regulation mostly have difficulty at school and classroom setting since their behaviors put more demand on their teachers and peers. In addition, one student even lay on the floor during the class, which made him not fully follow the activities taking place. At first, the teacher asked the students who were still playing and having their own things to pay attention to her explanation, but it did not last long. The students sat down with their friends and tried to get involved in just very short time of the learning process. After several times asking the students to sit down and focus on learning, the teacher seemed to give up and continued the learning activity with the students sitting in the front row and some others who were sitting at the back row but still paying attention to the activities. The actions indicated that hyperactive students need more attention and thus require different strategies. Therefore, addressing the needs of different types of students is an important thing that teachers should know in order to make the learning activities run smoothly despite behavioral problems that may happen during the class.
CONCLUSION

This study has shown that almost all components of teacher-student relationships covering informal conversation with students, taking notice of students’ activities, physical gestures and movement, positive interaction strategies, affirmative reactions to incorrect responses, and exhibiting assertive connection have been implemented by the classroom teacher. However, improvement in implementing all the aspects is needed from time to time for the betterment of teacher-student relationship quality, particularly for early childhood education. One aspect was missed by the teacher, namely being aware of students’ characteristics, should be highlighted and taken into more consideration. Future researchers might explore further aspects related to teachers’ needs for addressing students’ individual differences as parts of managing students’ behaviors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the two anonymous reviewers and the editors for their insightful comments on this manuscript. We also thank Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Negeri Malang, for the publication grant.

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