

An Integrative Psychotherapy approach to Education: Relational Needs in the Classroom

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Abstract:

Educators help meet the relational needs of students in ways that promote students' growth and development. Powerful opportunities exist to increase effectiveness in the classroom by recognizing and responding to the relational needs of students. In this article, eight relational needs are described which, when satisfied, enhance human functioning. Best practice in education focuses, in part, on the dynamics of the student/teacher relationship.

Key Words: integrative psychotherapy, relational needs, education, student needs, relational pedagogy

In Integrative Psychotherapy, we understand and cherish the primacy of interpersonal relationships. We see harmful interpersonal relationships as one source of many personal and social problems. We also know the power of interpersonal relationships as curative agents for many of life's ills.

Valuing the client for his or her uniqueness and accepting the client regardless of life circumstances are key values in Integrative Psychotherapy (Erskine, 2013). Ever since the ground-breaking work of Carl Rogers (1951), the client-centered approach to psychotherapy has provided a solid foundation upon which all effective psychotherapies have been built. Likewise, effective teachers adopt a student-centered perspective. Educators recognize that teaching and learning is personal. Students come to school with various academic goals and professional desires. They also bring a multitude of personal, cultural, emotional, and social needs. Teachers interface with students on more than academic issues. Educators who are prepared to engage students head-on and help them recognize their many personal needs make huge strides in educating the whole person.

Students' emotional, psychological, and relational needs frequently become apparent in the classroom. Observant teachers are quick to recognize students who demonstrate strong needs for attention and those who withdraw from attention, students with poor self-esteem, those experiencing fears of failure, and those showing the effects of bullying by classmates. Much of the

workload of teachers is directed toward the non-academic dimensions in students' lives that affect their academic performance, such as issues of family, health, and poverty.

A cornerstone of Integrative Psychotherapy is the emphasis placed on the dynamics of the client-counselor relationship. Surely, issues of transference and counter-transference are recognized and commonly addressed when appropriate. Similarly, from the student-centered perspective, one key element is the teacher-student relationship. Who doubts the impact that teachers and classmates have on a student in the classroom? Who does not have a story of a favorite teacher; a teacher who went out of his or her way to make a difference?

Student/Teacher Relationships

In the book *The Ones We Remember* (Pajares & Urdan, 2008), educators reminisce about the teachers who changed their lives. Story after story is told of teachers who influenced students' career choices and life-long pursuit of hobbies, and whom students continued to visit many years after leaving school. The powerful interactions between teachers and students have made for some of the world's most inspiring and dramatic cinema. Recall Sidney Poitier in *To Sir, with Love*, Anne Bancroft in *The Miracle Worker*, Paolo Villaggio in *Ciao, Professore*, Isabelle Adjani in *La journée de la jupe*, Francois Bégaudeau in *The Class*, Jon Voight in *Conrack*, Gérard Jugnot in *Les Choristes*, and even Whoopi Goldberg in *Sister Act 2*. Keen sensitivity and focus on the non-academic needs of students certainly embodies best practices in education. The teacher who recognizes something special about a student, communicates this to the student, and then offers encouragement and support is one who will make a difference.

The work of Fouts & Poulsen (2001) in *Attunement in the Classroom* and Bergin & Bergin (2009) in *Attachment in the Classroom* found that the quality of student-teacher relationships had a direct positive impact on the student's level of knowledge, test scores, and motivation, with positive relationships leading to fewer classroom and academic problems. These researchers also found that students who developed healthy attachments to teachers were better able to control their emotions, were more socially competent, and were more willing to explore new ideas in the classroom. They concluded that effective teachers connect with their students and care for them by providing necessary warmth, respect, and trust.

Young children whose teacher-child relationships are characterized by closeness show greater levels of overall school adjustment. Children at risk for academic and behavioral difficulties are particularly well served by positive teacher-child relationships (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Supportive, reciprocal relationships with teachers influence child development in multiple fashions and serve to promote positive emotional and academic outcomes, while protecting

children from a variety of potential educational, social, and emotional risks (Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995).

Salzberger-Wittenberg, Williams, & Osborne (1999) in *The Emotional Experience of Learning and Teaching* concluded that a teacher's personality and interpersonal style are of supreme importance to the student's ability to perform inside and outside of the classroom. In other words, the personhood of the teacher was more critical in effecting lasting change than the subject matter or teaching method.

A fast growing area in the field of education is called Relational Pedagogy. Nel Noddings, in her *Foreword* to the book *No Education Without Relation* (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004/2010) discussed the reactions of students who developed close emotional connections with caring teachers. These students showed increased interest for the subject matter, enhanced self-esteem, and demonstrated respect and concern for others.

In a published *Manifesto of Relational Pedagogy*, pioneers in this field of education outlined the following principles:

1. The self is a knot in the web of multiple intersecting relationships.
2. A relationship is more real than the things it brings together.
3. Knowledge and authority are not something one has, but relationships, which require others to enact.
4. Human relationships exist in and through shared practices.
5. Relationships are primary; actions are secondary.
6. Human words and actions have no authentic meaning; they acquire meaning only in a context of specific relationships.
7. Teaching is building educational relationships. Learning outcomes are defined as specific forms of relationship: to oneself, people around the students, and the larger world.
8. Educational relationships exist to include the student in a wider web of relationships beyond the limits of the classroom (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004/2010, pp. 6-7).

Classroom Dynamics

Best practice in teaching may include raising students' awareness of the dynamics of the student-teacher relationship while also inviting students to recognize and examine their interactions with fellow students. Certainly, transference phenomena occur in the classroom between students and teachers and among students themselves all the time. Failure to recognize and respond effectively to the many personal needs that students bring to the classroom is to miss the student as a whole person and to produce graduates who may be intellectually prepared and technically proficient but who lack the essential characteristics of insight and empathy. Students develop insight and empathy for others by recognizing and meeting their own needs (Murphy & Dillon, 2008). It is vital for teaching faculty to recognize students' emerging needs, whether subtle or obvious, and to respond in ethical and effective ways that foster student growth and development.

Relational Needs

A review of the psychotherapy literature reveals one constant and that is the paramount importance of the helping relationship. Clinical theories and sophisticated intervention models abound, but one unifying factor is that of relationship. From Buber (1958) to Bowlby (1969), Rogers (1951) to Winnicott (1965), and Sullivan (1968) to Stern (1994), theorists, writers, and clinicians have emphasized that relationships, both early in life as well as throughout the lifespan, are the source of meaning and validation of the self (Erskine, 1998). Numerous theories of human motivation conclude that people will do just about anything for attention, affection, appreciation, and admiration from others (Berne, 1964).

People have all kinds of needs and Maslow (1970) did an excellent job of naming and categorizing these various needs. Relational needs, however, described by Maslow as the need for love and belonging, are different than the needs for survival, physical comfort, and safety. Relational needs are the needs for human contact and human interaction. Relational needs are present at every age and stage of human development and we do not outgrow our need for relationship.

When basic relational needs are met, the normal emotional and psychological growth process continues. When basic relational needs are not met regularly or sufficiently over time, especially during early development, the process of human growth and development is thwarted and psychological, emotional, and behavioral symptoms begin to appear (Spitz, 1945). When relational needs are not met there is a tendency for the unmet needs to become stronger. As expected, a person whose relational needs are not being met will seek alternate ways of obtaining needed attention and contact. The absence of

need satisfaction may initially be manifested as a range of disruptive emotions and behaviors, such as irritability and frustration. When relational needs are not met over time, the lack of need satisfaction is experienced as a loss of energy, apathy, a lost sense of hope, and the development of a cynical attitude, as in “Who cares?” or “What’s the use?” (Erskine & Trautmann, 1996; Moursund & Erskine, 2004).

Erskine, Moursund, and Trautmann (1999) indicated that relational needs are met in interpersonal relationships characterized by the sustained “contactful presence of another person who is sensitive and attuned to our relational needs and who can respond to them in such a way that the need is satisfied” (p. 123). A lifetime of unmet relational needs leads to distorted relationships and skewed expectations later in life. Sometimes, a person comes to realize that a relational need exists only as a result of the need not being met and the ensuing emotional distress that occurs. One example is the hurt one might experience when not receiving recognition in some desired way.

There is no telling how many personal needs human beings have that are met in interpersonal relationships. Erskine and Trautmann (1996), however, identified eight universal relational needs that clients bring to the clinical situation and that, by extension, students bring to the classroom. These include the following:

1. **Emotional Safety and Security:** Personal safety and security are rooted in the belief and experience of having our physical and emotional vulnerabilities protected. It is living without fear of actual or anticipated danger. Freedom from shaming, criticism, and ridicule and knowing that someone will block harmful judgments provides a basic sense of trust.
2. **Validation and Affirmation as Significant:** When our thoughts, feelings, and experiences are validated as important to another person we learn to believe in ourselves. For healthy growth and development to occur it is necessary to believe that someone cares about us and considers our point of view to be important in some way. When others ask for our point of view and take our opinions and experiences seriously we come to believe in our basic worth. Validation and affirmation from others, especially those whom we consider important to us, provides some of the essential building blocks of self-esteem and self-confidence. The classic example is the adult who praises a child’s scribbled drawing.
3. **Acceptance by a Stable and Dependable Other:** Throughout the lifespan, we need role models upon whom we can rely. The process of developing an accurate and stable personal identity is enhanced when we interact with others who are emotionally stable. A lack of permanence in the environment creates a shaky foundation for interpersonal relationships. Rejection from others fosters hurt, fear, shame, and self-

rejection. We are free to grow and experiment with new behaviors when we know that we can return to the protection provided by steady and dependable others.

4. Confirmation of Personal Experience: If we never meet anyone who is “just like me” in some way, it is easy to believe that we are the only ones to have a particular type of problem or a particular life circumstance. Being in the presence of others who have or have had similar thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences provides a needed sense of normality and mutuality. Yalom (1975) called this *universality*. The need to be believed and to have our experiences confirmed as real and genuine is a powerful dynamic. It means, “I’m not the only one.” How valuable it is to our growth and development to be with others who have experienced what we are currently experiencing.

5. Self-Definition: The relational need of self-definition is described as knowing and expressing our own personal uniqueness and individuality and being acknowledged and accepted by others. When we communicate our self-chosen identity through the expression of our needs, interests, preferences, and points of view and we are accepted for who we are, the need for self-definition is met. Self-definition means not being defined or labeled by others. Rather than being told what we should think or feel, being asked to tell others about ourselves is one way the need for self-definition is met. When someone blocks labeling and name-calling we receive recognition and acceptance for our unique personhood.

6. To Make an Impact: There are many reasons why people help others. One motive is the need to make an impact on another person in some desired way. It is the desire to make a difference in the lives of others. Sometimes this impact has a positive tone, as in giving someone a compliment. It can also be negative, as in imposing oneself on another in some way. We receive information about ourselves when we say or do something and then gauge others’ reactions. When others react to our comments, humor, and gestures we know we have been heard and received; a relationship has developed. Not much of a relationship exists when we are ignored by others.

7. To Have Other People Initiate: In infancy, we could not meet our own needs for food or comfort. We relied on the actions of others to receive nourishment and holding. We learned language because others spoke first. Throughout the lifespan, we need others to initiate actions and activities so that learning can take place. We need people to reach out to us and to call us into relationship. How comforting is it to be sitting in a crowd of strangers when, finally, someone we know comes to sit next to us? At times, we may have an important point to add to a discussion and we need to be invited to participate because we are unlikely to participate

actively on our own. We need others to introduce new information and ideas all the time. Clearly, there are times when we need to make the first move rather than wait for others. However, there are also numerous occasions when we require initiation into a new opportunity or way of being.

8. To Express Love and Appreciation: The relational need to express appreciation, gratitude, and affection is seen when we do things for other people. It is heard when we tell others what we think about them and how we feel about them. Our words of gratitude and acts of kindness must also be received by the other person. Recall the hurt or frustration when someone rejects our compliment, refuses our gift, or does not acknowledge our love and affection.

Some may ask if *the need to be loved by others* might be a ninth relational need. In actuality, the vital relational need for receiving love from others is met when the eight relational needs described above are met on a sufficient basis. To have our relational needs met is to be loved by others (Erskine, Moursund, & Trautmann, 1999).

Relational Needs in the Classroom

How, then, are students' relational needs expressed in the classroom? What situations and activities occur in academic settings that provide opportunities for relational needs to be addressed? In the classroom we see students of all age and grade levels exhibiting needs for excessive attention, social withdrawal, fears of conflict, rebellion and defiance, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, perfectionism, fears of making mistakes, and, of course, all manner of transference phenomena. Some students distort the teacher-student relationship and attempt to get their archaic childhood relational needs met by the teacher and other students in the classroom in duplicitous ways (Kaiser, 1965; Miljkovic, 2010). Consider the following conditions and scenarios regarding students' relational needs in the classroom.

Security

Students whose physical and emotional vulnerabilities are protected are free to learn and grow normally. Living without fear of actual or anticipated danger fosters basic trust and allows a necessary level of bonding to begin. Being sensitive to and responsive to the insecurities of students by blocking harmful judgments by others in the classroom provides essential safety and security for students allowing them to open themselves to learning opportunities. A place where one's vulnerabilities are understood and honored rather than criticized or exploited makes for a powerful positive learning environment. A

nonjudgmental attitude and corresponding actions of faculty, staff, and administrators is an integral part of the educational process.

Valuing

When students' thoughts, feelings, and experiences are validated as important to others students learn to trust and believe in themselves. For positive learning to take hold it is necessary to believe that someone cares about us and considers our point of view to be important in some way. Attributed to Theodore Roosevelt, the old saying, — *No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care* — is very much at the heart of informed teaching. Skilled teachers help students find meaning in their experiences by taking students' questions seriously. Best practice in education includes the affective component, and skilled teachers are attuned to the emotions of their students and respond reciprocally. That is, students are taken seriously when angry, consoled in some way when they are sad, encouraged when afraid, and celebrated when they are happy. Students may not be accustomed to having others show an interest in their ideas or experiences and they may be wary of and uncomfortable receiving such attention and positive feedback. Students who have had little positive validation in life may display a lack of confidence, make poor eye contact, exhibit decreased participation in the classroom, and may question a teacher's motives for caring so much. At these times, it is incumbent on teachers to proceed slowly and to titrate the dosage of their attention and care so as to not overwhelm an insecure and fearful student (McElfresh, 2007). This attunement to the student's unique pace, rhythm, and cadence is one way of conveying validation of the student's unique experience.

Acceptance

Students need role models to whom they can look as they discover and develop their identities. Students cultivate a personal and social style by interacting with their teachers and other adults. The acceptance shown by teachers and mentors provides a solid rock of consistency and reliability that some students may have never experienced. As a result, students are free to experiment with new behavior when they know they can return to the protection provided by steady and dependable teachers.

What about the student who idealizes the teacher? Perhaps the student is conveying a true appreciation for what the teacher is providing or, maybe, the student is expressing, albeit indirectly, the relational need for acceptance by someone stable and secure. Some students have had little acceptance in their lives and as a result may display dependency needs and clinging behaviors such as asking unnecessary questions, requesting out-of-class time, and seeking special assistance. At these moments, educators have an opportunity to demonstrate firm professional boundaries and caring confrontations. Clarifying a student's need for acceptance and his or her maladaptive behavior is a way to

support the student in finding appropriate relationships to meet their relational needs.

Mutuality

Students may come to school believing that they are the only ones to have a particular type of problem or some unique life circumstance. By interacting with teachers and peers, students come to realize that many of life's challenges are, in fact, quite common.

The relational need of mutuality, to be in the presence of someone "like me", is tremendously important. For example, a shy gay male might have few peers in his own community but find support and encouragement in meeting a faculty member or fellow student who understands because he or she has "been there". The opportunity for students to express themselves and learn about each other is enhanced when teachers utilize learning communities, team projects, service-learning activities, sharing exercises, and collaborative learning strategies. At times, teacher self-disclosure may help meet a student's relational need of having their thoughts, feelings, or experiences confirmed as real and important. Naturally, appropriate professional boundaries apply. Normalizing a student's experience goes a long way toward helping the student become less self-critical and more self-accepting.

Self-Definition

Supporting students to identify and communicate their unique personal identities, through the expression of needs, interests, preferences, and points of view without rejection, helps meet the need for self-definition. In traditional educational settings there is a temptation for faculty to categorize students and for students to label and diagnose themselves and each other. Effective teachers block this kind of labeling and name-calling in the classroom and demonstrate recognition and acceptance for individual differences. Classroom activities and assignments that identify issues of cultural diversity help students meet the need for self-definition. Course assignments that require self-reflection invite students to ask themselves the hard questions that may lead to greater self-awareness.

Making an Impact

Some students may attempt to influence faculty by working extra hard, complimenting a professor, engaging the teacher in conversations about non-academic topics like fashion, music, or sports, or by creating disturbances in the classroom. Faculty who are intimidated or too easily distracted may actually reinforce a student's maladaptive style inadvertently by engaging in these tangential conversations. Clearly, there is nothing wrong with talking to students about fashion, music, or sports. However, the mindful educator considers which relational needs the student may be expressing at the moment and then decides

whether or not to participate in the conversation or whether to bring the student's behavior to his or her attention. Certainly, it may be necessary to caringly confront students who make a habit of following the teacher from the classroom to the office, request excessive out-of-class time, offer unnecessary gifts, or make inappropriate comments. Some students help each other by organizing study groups, sharing resources and materials, and by mentoring or tutoring other students. Inviting students to take leadership roles in the classroom helps them to maximize the positive impact they can make.

Having Others Initiate

Perhaps a student's quietness in the classroom is an expression of the need for someone to initiate contact. Some students may have important points to add to class discussions and may need to be invited to participate because they are unlikely to participate actively on their own. There is a difference between students who do not participate because they are apathetic, unprepared, or tired and those who come to class prepared but need a push to become active and involved.

Teachers introduce new ideas and information that students have never considered. Teachers initiate lines of thinking that lead to important learning for students. Students come looking for education and training, and the program curriculum and course instructors prompt them to consider unknown aspects of themselves. Effective education helps students do things they never imagined doing and things they have always imagined doing.

Expressing Love and Gratitude

At times, students will express their appreciation and admiration to faculty and peers for their support. The giving of token end-of-the-year gifts, thank you notes, tearful hugs, and nominations for faculty teaching awards are all expressions of love and gratitude, and teachers must be mindful, while exercising good and ethical judgment, that this relational need is important to students. Accepting students' compliments may be difficult for some faculty due to their humility or diminished self-esteem, yet it is important for faculty to accept that students are deeply grateful for all that they have learned and received in the training process.

Evaluation

A process of formative assessment can help faculty and program administrators identify strategies that work well for managing issues affecting student success and those areas requiring change. By asking the following questions, teachers and educational administrators can assure that program

policies and classroom practices afford students the best opportunity to reach their personal and academic goals.

Individual teachers may ask:

- What is the student really saying, at this moment, about their current relational needs?
- What are my responsibilities, if any, for bringing the student's needs and behavior to his or her attention?
- What are the likely consequences if I address these issues with the student?
- What might happen if I do not address these issues with the student?
- What issues of diversity need to be considered in this situation?
- What ethical and professional standards come into play?
- What supports are available to help me make effective choices?

Curriculum developers and program leadership might inquire:

- What innovations can be made to provide students with opportunities to meet their relational needs? For example, service-learning activities or collaborative learning strategies might help.
- What portions of the program curriculum have a potentially disturbing effect on students? A classroom assignment designed to unpack family of origin issues or a course in, say, domestic violence may stir long forgotten needs, memories, and emotions.
- What supports are in place to help students maintain and enhance their personal growth and development, such as student counseling services, mentoring programs, and support groups?
- Does the demographic composition of the school empower students to address their relational needs? For example, is the school and classroom sufficiently diverse so that students feel safe and supported in their academic endeavors, free to form healthy attachments to faculty and peers, and able to discover positive role models? Is a milieu of inclusion and respect apparent?

Resources

The potential is high for every classroom to be a place of safety and support so that the natural process of personal and academic growth is facilitated. Currently, schools offering such engaged relational education include the worldwide systems of the Reggio Emilia Approach based in Italy [www.reggiochildren.it], Germany's Waldorf Education [www.freunde-waldorf.de], and the Eton House Schools in Singapore [www.etonhouse.com.sg] to name a few.

Conclusion

It is not the job of teachers to be psychotherapists to their students or to meet all of their students' relational needs. The contract is one of teaching and learning, not treatment. Yet when educators are aware that students bring specific relational needs to the classroom, teachers can make prompt determinations about how to engage the student.

Teachers, too, have relational needs and these are frequently manifested in the classroom. Educators dedicate themselves to making an impact on their students and in making the world a better place. Some educators seek attention, admiration, and validation in the classroom. They feel proud when their students succeed and may define themselves, in some ways, in terms of the achievements and failures of their students.

Much of the influence that teachers and students have on each other is, of course, unconscious. That is, while teachers and students are about the daily work of teaching and learning they relate in ways that meet and frustrate deeper needs. Academic and behavioral problems in the classroom can be traced, in part, to unmet relational needs and distorted expectations on the parts of teachers *and* students (Zygouris-Coe, 1999). Therefore, best practice in education must include an awareness of and thoughtful response to students' relational needs.

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