

How Teachers Shape Students: A Qualitative Study on Motivation, Emotion, and Growth at Dawson

College

Introduction

In every person's life, parents serve as the first teachers, guiding us through essential life skills such as walking, eating, and dressing. As we grow older, however, the role of teaching expands beyond that of our parents', to later include school teachers who guide us academically toward a brighter future. Knowledge is the key to success; it helps us open doors in every field and aspect of human endeavor. Therefore, teachers not only impart knowledge but also inspire, shape, and mold our character. The role of teachers in shaping students' educational experiences is not limited to classroom instruction but it also affects students' emotional health, motivation, and overall development. This study aims to explore how teachers influence students' emotional responses, academic progress and personal development, drawing on insights from six college students from various academic disciplines. Through semi-structured interviews, participants shared their personal experiences with teachers who have impacted them both positively and negatively. These accounts reveal that while supportive and engaging teachers inspire students to succeed and grow, unsupportive or indifferent teachers can hinder their progress and emotional health. By understanding these dynamics, we can gain valuable insights into the qualities of effective educators and the practices that contribute to positive student outcomes.

Literature Review

Previous studies have consistently shown that teachers play a significant role in shaping students' experiences in the classroom. Kahveci (2023) stated that teachers' attitudes and behaviors are the second most important factor influencing students' academic performance. In support of this view, Broeckelman Post et al. (2015) emphasized that teachers who lack adequate knowledge or exhibit hostile and dismissive behavior can seriously undermine students' academic progress and achievement. In a related study, Sürücü and Ünal (2018) found that teachers who demonstrate professional dedication, thorough preparation, and a deep understanding of their content contribute positively to student outcomes. In addition, the educational philosophies that shape

teachers' approaches can also influence various aspects of students' lives. For example, idealism suggests that teachers act as authority figures who impart moral values and knowledge, while progressive education indicates that teachers should guide students through experiential learning based on their interests and needs (Cevizci, 2017; Dewey, 1986). These different philosophies highlight the complexity of teaching approaches and the need for adaptation in different classroom contexts. Overall, previous research suggests that effective teaching is not simply about delivering content but also involves creating an environment that promotes learning through well-structured, supportive interactions.

Methods

This study will use a qualitative approach, focusing on semi-structured interviews with a sample of 6 college students from diverse academic disciplines. The semi-structured format allows for in-depth exploration of students' personal experiences with teachers and how those experiences shape their academic and emotional outcomes. Participants will be recruited through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in background and academic levels. Specifically, all participants will be current students enrolled at a Cégep in Montreal to maintain consistency in institutional context. The sample will include students from a variety of academic programs, such as social sciences, natural sciences, humanities, and arts, to explore whether discontent with attending class is influenced by differences in subject matter or teaching styles across disciplines. Participants will also represent a range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds to examine how different life experiences shape perceptions of teacher behavior and engagement. Additionally, students from different academic years will be selected to understand whether perceptions shift as they progress through their studies.

Data collection involved individual interviews, which were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Four main themes emerged from the coding process: the influence of teacher behavior on student motivation, the role of emotional support in academic confidence, the impact of teaching styles on personal development, and the relationship between teacher engagement and students' long-term aspirations.

Analysis

One of the key themes that emerged from the interviews was the underlying links between student motivation and academic success, which were supported by the pedagogy and the teacher's willingness to support students when needed. Participants across a range of disciplines described how extra support and encouragement from teachers had a significant impact on their learning journeys. For example, Participant 1, a civil engineering student, praised teachers who were willing to provide extra support, whether through office hours or online meetings. This is consistent with the findings of Sürücü and Ünal (2018), who highlighted that dedicated teacher who thoroughly explained complex material contributed positively to student learning outcomes. Similarly, Participant 5, an environmental science student, attributed their success in biology to a teacher who provided clear instructions, well-structured assignments, and tests that fostered a better learning environment for them. When Participant 5 mentioned “tests that fostered a better learning environment,” they referred to assessments that were clear, fair, and aligned with the material taught in class, which reduced anxiety and improved comprehension. Such approaches from teachers not only foster academic success but also help students build confidence in their abilities (Kahveci, 2023). Together, these examples demonstrate that when teachers are approachable and committed to student understanding, they not only improve student achievement but also build student confidence in their abilities. However, participants noted that students often had to initiate extra help themselves. None of the participants explicitly mentioned whether teachers took the initiative to offer additional support, suggesting that proactive communication might still largely depend on the students.

Another important insight from the data was how teachers' communication styles affected student engagement. One participant explained, “Some teachers have a reputation for being difficult to communicate with. It's like they say, ‘I'm the teacher, I'm right,’ and that makes communication difficult.” This authoritarian attitude is often associated with traditional educational philosophies such as idealism, and it unintentionally positions the teacher as an infallible authority figure, which can potentially alienate students (Cevizci, 2017). In contrast, progressive education emphasizes experiential learning and promotes a more open teacher-student

relationship that encourages active student participation (Dewey, 1986). Dewey (1986) also mentioned that teachers who use rigid, authoritarian methods may inadvertently stifle student voices and reduce their desire to participate in classroom discussions. This in turn contrast between traditional and modern approaches highlights the need for adaptability in teaching, as traditional methods may not be appropriate for all students. Such experiences highlight the detrimental effects of unsupportive teaching, illustrating that teacher attitudes and behaviors significantly influence students' motivation and desire to engage in academic challenges.

Moreover, participants also shared experiences of negative teacher behavior that undermined their motivation and confidence. Participant 2, a first-year law student, recounted their struggles with a chemistry teacher who was “unclear and unhelpful in helping us improve,” and this situation led to long-term frustration and dislike of the subject. These finding echoes Broeckelman Post et al.'s (2015) observation that teachers who exhibit hostile or dismissive behavior can seriously impact students' academic progress and mental health. Another example is when Participant 5 also described how discouraging comments from a chemistry teacher caused performance anxiety and how it negatively impacted their mental health and almost caused them to abandon the program altogether. Such negative behaviors highlight the potential for teachers to create barriers to learning when they are unsupportive or communicate low expectations, emphasizing Kahveci's (2023) finding that teacher attitudes are one of the most important factors influencing student achievement.

The emotional impact of teacher behavior on student well-being also emerged as an important theme. One participant shared her experience with a chemistry teacher who discouraged students by telling them they were likely to fail, and this behavior led the participant to have severe performance anxiety and adverse effects on their mental health. This situation reflects the inimical effects of unsupportive teaching practices, which can contribute to student stress and anxiety. According to Broeckelman Post et al. (2015), teacher snobbishness can undermine student academic achievement. In this case, the student's adverse experience was likely to cause them to consider dropping out of school. Another example is Participant 4, a health science student, who shared how their chemistry teacher's humorous and understanding demeanor helped create a supportive classroom atmosphere. In contrast, the same student recounted feeling inadequate due to a calculus teacher's dismissive

attitude, discouraging them from asking questions or attending the class. Such contrasting experiences reflect the dual role teachers can play, either nurturing or stifling students' emotional resilience. These examples once again illustrate that teachers' influence is not limited to academic outcomes but also impacts students' emotional health and resilience.

Beyond academic achievement, participants highlighted the role of teachers in fostering life skills and personal growth. Many participants noted that teachers imparted essential values beyond the classroom, such as punctuality and responsibility. For example, participant 1 indicated that teachers who emphasized the importance of punctuality helped prepare students for career expectations. This is consistent with ideal educational philosophies that suggest that teachers should act as role models, imparting values that contribute to students' moral and social development (Cevizci, 2017). Similarly, participant 3, an interior design student, compared the experience of working on projects under teacher supervision to managing clients in preparing them for future professional relationships. These insights demonstrate that teachers contribute not only to students' academic development but also to fostering life skills necessary for their future success.

Lastly, the influence of teachers extends to students' long-term academic ambitions and personal aspirations. Participant 6, a law student, credited a philosophy teacher for encouraging deep reflection on personal identity and ambitions, fostering an environment where students felt comfortable exploring complex ideas and values. This approach aligns with Dewey's (1986) philosophy of progressive education, which promotes self-discovery and learning based on individual interests. Similarly, one participant described a good teacher as someone who "makes sure you understand the material but also connects personally," highlighting that effective teachers guide students according to their unique needs rather than rigid educational standards. This perspective reinforces the idea that a "good" teacher is someone who acts as a mentor, nurturing both academic and emotional growth, as reflected in Sürücü and Ünal's (2018) findings on the importance of supportive teaching environments. Conversely, some students experienced the opposite effect when teachers were unsupportive. Participant 5, for example, shared how discouraging teachers in the science program led to a temporary loss of confidence in pursuing a science career, illustrating the potentially detrimental effects of

judgmental or dismissive teaching styles. These contrasting experiences underscore that while supportive teachers empower students to pursue their goals, unsupportive teachers can cause self-doubt and hinder personal growth. The idea of a “good” teacher, as described by one participant, reflects this balance: a good teacher not only ensures students understand the material but also connects personally, fostering both academic and emotional growth (Sürücü & Ünal, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, students’ reflections reveal that teachers’ behaviors, attitudes, and teaching methods have profound impacts on students’ academic and personal development. Supportive teachers who offer guidance, empathy, and effective teaching practices foster motivation, resilience, and life skills for students to succeed both academically and personally. Conversely, negative teacher behaviors—such as judgmental attitudes or lack of support—can discourage students, impacting their confidence, emotional well-being, and future aspirations. These findings confirm existing literature on the critical role of teacher influence in shaping a supportive and enriching learning environment.

However, the study has limitations that should be addressed. With a small sample size of six participants from a single Cegep in Montreal, the findings are not generalizable and represent the experiences of a specific time and place. The diversity of the participants, while intentional, cannot fully capture the range of student perspectives across different institutions or cultural contexts. Reflecting on this project, there are several aspects I would approach differently if I were to redo it. For instance, incorporating focus groups in addition to interviews might allow for richer discussions and a deeper understanding of shared experiences among students. I think that in the future, this study could be expanded by recruiting a larger and more diverse group of participants. I could also compare students from multiple Cegeps or post-secondary institutions, and explore experiences across different age groups or educational systems. Additionally, examining the perspectives of teachers themselves could provide valuable insights into the challenges they face and the strategies they use to support students. My positionality as a student researcher inevitably influenced this project. As a young adult with personal experiences navigating education, I was drawn to this topic because of my own encounters with

both supportive and unsupportive teachers. My identity—shaped by factors like age, academic background, and cultural context—may have affected how participants perceived me and how I interpreted their responses. While I aimed to remain objective, I recognize that my perspectives and biases could have influenced my analysis, particularly in identifying themes that resonated with my own experiences.

Finally, this research process has been a profound learning experience, not only about qualitative methods but also about me. It has deepened my understanding of the complexity of teacher-student dynamics and the importance of empathetic communication in fostering positive educational outcomes. Through this project, I have gained greater appreciation for the ways in which education shapes individual growth, and I hope future research continues to build on these insights to create more equitable and supportive learning environments for all students. Ultimately, it is essential for educators to adopt a compassionate, student-centered approach that encourages both academic achievement and personal growth, ensuring students are well-equipped for their future endeavors. To ensure that students are well-equipped for their future endeavors, teachers act as beacons of hope for the new generations. By guiding students through their learning journey, teachers instill curiosity, resilience, and critical thinking – qualities essential for success beyond the classroom.

References

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