2. TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS AND ADOLESCENT COMPETENCE AT SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION

There is growing consensus that the nature and quality of children’s relationships with their teachers play a critical and central role in motivating and engaging students to learn (Wentzel, 2009). Effective teachers are typically described as those who develop relationships with students that are emotionally close, safe, and trusting, who provide access to instrumental help, and who foster a more general ethos of community and caring in classrooms. These relationship qualities are believed to support the development of students’ motivational orientations for social and academic outcomes, aspects of motivation related to emotional well-being and a positive sense of self, and levels of engagement in positive social and academic activities. They also provide a context for communicating positive and high expectations for performance and for teaching students what they need to know to become knowledgeable and productive citizens.

Despite this consensus, there is much yet to learn about the nature of teacher-student relationships and their significance for motivating students to excel academically and behave appropriately. At the most general level, the conceptual underpinnings of work in this area tend to suffer from lack of clarity and specificity. For example, it is not always clear what scholars mean when they talk about ‘relationships’ between teachers and students. Similarly, motivational constructs are often vague and ill-defined (see Murphy & Alexander, 2000). In addition, explanatory models that provide insights into the mechanisms whereby teacher-student relationships have a meaningful impact on student outcomes are rare.

In light of these issues, this chapter highlights various perspectives on teacher-student relationships and motivation, including definitions of constructs and theoretical perspectives that guide current work in this area. A specific model of teacher-student relationships that focuses on relationship provisions in the form of emotional warmth and expectations for goal pursuit is presented, and suggestions for future directions for theory and research are offered.
DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTUAL MODELS

Defining Teacher-Student Relationships

In the developmental literature, relationships are typically defined as enduring connections between two individuals, uniquely characterized by degrees of continuity, shared history, and interdependent interactions across settings and activities (Collins & Repinski, 1994; Hinde, 1997). In addition, definitions are frequently extended to include the qualities of a relationship, as evidenced by levels of trust, intimacy, and sharing; the presence of positive affect, closeness, and affective tone; and the content and quality of communication (Collins & Repinski, 1994; Laible & Thompson, 2007). Along each of these dimensions, relationships can evoke positive as well as negative experiences. Finally, relationships are often thought of in terms of their influence and what they provide the individual. In this regard, researchers have focused on the benefits of various relationship provisions such as emotional well-being, a sense of cohesion and connectedness, instrumental help, a secure base, and a sense of identity for promoting positive developmental outcomes (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989).

From a developmental perspective, relationships are believed to be experienced through the lens of mental representations developed over time and with respect to specific experiences (Bowlby, 1969; Laible & Thompson, 2007). Mental representations that associate relationships with a personal sense of power and agency, predictability and safety, useful resources, and reciprocity are believed to be optimal for the internalization of social influence (see Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007). These representations also provide stability and continuity to relationships over time. In this regard, early representations of relationships with caregivers are believed to provide the foundation for developing relationships outside the family context, with the quality of parent-child relationships (i.e., levels of warmth and security) often predicting the quality of peer and teacher relationships in early and middle childhood (see Wentzel & Looney, 2007).

Although stability and continuity are viewed as hallmarks of relationships, they also are viewed as dynamic; relationships undergo predictable changes as a function of development and the changing needs of the individual. For example, over the course of adolescence, children’s relationships with parents improve with respect to overall positive regard and reciprocity; in early and middle adolescence, relationships with parents are marked by heightened negative affect and conflict; and adolescents experience discontinuities in the frequency and meaning of interactions with parents and the availability of resources from them (Collins & Repinski, 1994). Similarly, relationships with peers change with age. Whereas younger adolescents tend to form relationships within peer crowds and cliques, older adolescents tend to focus on relationships with a more limited number of friends (Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994). As children move through adolescence, they also view relationships with peers as the most important sources of intimacy, nurturance, companionship, and admiration (Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1992).