

# Building Empathic Relationships Between Teachers and Students: A Psychodynamic Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

*This study aims to explore and analyze the importance of building empathic relationships between teachers and students in basic education, focusing on psychodynamic elements that influence these interactions. This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method. Participants consisted of teachers and students from several elementary schools, selected through purposive sampling. The instruments used include semi-structured interview guidelines and direct observation in class, the research was analyzed using content analysis methods. Thematic analysis shows some psychodynamic elements that play a key role in building empathic relationships between teachers and students. Teacher self-awareness of student feelings and responses, clear identification of roles in class, and conflict management with a psychodynamic approach are important factors in creating healthy empathic relationships. The results show that understanding psychodynamic elements can increase the effectiveness of teachers in building empathic relationships with students. Practical implications include the development of teacher training that incorporates psychodynamic aspects to improve the quality of interactions in class. In the context of basic education, an in-depth understanding of the psychodynamic elements in teacher-student relationships makes a positive contribution to building empathic relationships that support students' learning experiences. Recommendations for further research include further exploration of educational interventions that can strengthen these psychodynamic elements.*

*Keywords: Relationships, Empathy, Teachers, Students, Psychodynamics*

## INTRODUCTION

Basic education plays an important role not only in transferring knowledge, but also in building empathic relationships between teachers and students. This relationship forms the foundation for the development of identity, emotional well-being, and students' academic motivation (Rogers, 1951). It is important to understand the psychodynamics underlying this interaction in order to design more supportive educational approaches.

Psychodynamics highlights the role of unconscious dynamics and psychological processes in human interaction (Sandler et al., 1992). This perspective can provide deep insight into the teacher-student relationship. This article aims to explore the contribution of psychodynamic elements, such as transference, countertransference, and defense mechanisms (Freud, 1912), in shaping empathic relationships in elementary school environments.

Understanding the psychodynamics of teacher-student relationships is not just a sentimental matter, but fundamental to the success of learning itself (McAllister & Irvine, 2002). Unfortunately, the existing literature is still limited in exploring this topic in the context of basic education. In fact, a solid understanding of psychodynamics can inform the development of more responsive and affirmative educational approaches.

Therefore, this study seeks to bridge the gap in the literature by thoroughly investigating the role of psychodynamic elements in shaping the quality of primary school teacher-student relationships. It is hoped that the findings of the study can inspire basic education practices that are more oriented towards students' psychological developmental needs. Furthermore, this study encourages critical and innovative discourse regarding the dynamics of human interaction in educational contexts.

## METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to gain an in-depth understanding of empathic relationships between teachers and students in the context of basic education (Yin, 2018). A qualitative approach was chosen because it provides the freedom to explore the complexity of interpersonal relationships without being limited by rigid theoretical frameworks.

Participants were selected purposively from various primary schools to ensure variation in characteristics such as background, age, and education (Etikan et al., 2016). This aims to gain richer and more representative insights into teacher-student relationships in various contexts. The research instruments consist of semi-structured interview guidelines and observation sheets. Interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences related to psychodynamic aspects such as transference, countertransference, and defense mechanisms (Rogers, 1980). Observations were made to monitor teacher-student interactions in the classroom, including verbal/non-verbal expressions, emotional responses, and levels of self-awareness (Schmidt, 2016).

The research procedure consists of interviews and observations. Interviews with Teachers and Students: Interviews were conducted with teachers and students to gain an in-depth understanding of positive experiences and challenges in teacher-student interactions (Yüksel, 2017). The interview questions were designed to open up discussions about various aspects of their relationships. Classroom Observations: Observations were made to observe the behavior and responses of teachers and students during interactions in the classroom (Watts, 2016). Observations are carried out systematically to record the verbal and non-verbal expressions, emotional responses, and levels of self-awareness demonstrated by teachers and students.

Data analysis is performed using content analysis methods (Harwood & Garry, 2003). Data from interviews and observations are coded and analyzed to identify analysis units related to psychodynamic elements such as self-awareness, role identification, conflict, and students' self-concept (Cramer, 2015). The findings are analyzed thematically and compiled into narratives to explain the role of psychodynamic elements in shaping empathic teacher-student relationships in basic education (Nowell et al., 2017).

To ensure data validity, this study uses source triangulation and auditing. Source triangulation involves the use of various data sources to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under study. Auditing involves an independent check of the research process and results by other competent people in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in this case auditing was done by consulting the research process and results with two senior researchers experienced in qualitative research. They provide input regarding the suitability of the data analysis methods used and the validity of the data and interpretation of the research findings.

In addition, we also pay great attention to ethical issues in this study. Prior to involving the participants in the study, we obtained written informed consent from them after providing sufficient explanation of the purpose, procedures, risks and benefits of their involvement in this study. We also ensure the confidentiality of the participants' identities by using certain codes and not including their real names in any publication of the research results. All data and interview recordings can only be accessed by researchers and stored securely. The results of the study will be used responsibly while still considering the safety, confidentiality and rights of the participants regarding their privacy and personal information. We are committed not to misuse the data that has been provided by the participants in full confidence. Overall, the ethical principles we uphold are respecting the dignity and worth of the human participants, conducting research responsibly and trustworthily, and prioritizing the interests and well-being of the participants above all else.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic findings that emerge from the data analysis are closely related to psychodynamic elements, deepening our understanding of the complexity of empathic relationships between teachers and students in basic education environments, as described as follows:

### 1. Self Awareness

This thematic finding highlights the importance of self-awareness in teacher-student interactions. Teachers who have a high level of self-awareness tend to be more sensitive to students' needs and feelings. For example, a teacher stated, "I always try to understand how students respond to my teaching. Self-awareness

helps me measure the effectiveness of my teaching methods." Meanwhile, students also recognize the role of self-awareness in forming empathic relationships. A student revealed, "Teachers who understand themselves know how to touch students' hearts. That makes learning more meaningful."

## **2. Role Identification**

This thematic finding emphasizes the importance of clear role identification in student-teacher relationships. Teachers who are able to identify their roles properly can create a supportive environment and facilitate empathic interactions. A teacher noted, "When we know our role and the students also know theirs, the interaction becomes more open. They feel comfortable talking and sharing." On the student side, understanding the role of teachers is also considered crucial. A student conveyed, "Teachers who have clear roles make me feel supported. I know they exist to help, not just teach."

## **3. Conflict**

This thematic finding highlights that conflict can be an unavoidable part of an empathic relationship, but how the conflict is resolved plays an important role in strengthening the relationship. Teachers noted experiences managing conflict with students. A teacher said, "There are moments of misunderstanding, but overcoming conflict strengthens the bond between us." Students also recognize that through conflict, they can better understand the teacher. A student shared, "I think that through conflict, we can learn how teachers deal with challenges. That deepens our relationship."

## **4. Student Self Concept**

This thematic finding underlines that students' self-concept influences empathic interactions. Teachers who understand and support the development of students' self-concept can create more positive relationships. A teacher revealed, "I try to help students build their confidence. When they believe in themselves, the relationship becomes more harmonious." From the student's perspective, a positive self-concept creates a strong foundation for empathic relationships. A student stated, "Teachers who help me understand who I am make me feel valued. That makes me want to learn more."

## **5. Teacher and Student Experience Narratives and Quotes**

The narratives and quotes that emerged from interviews and observations depict the experiences of teachers and students in building profound empathic relationships. Teachers reflect their efforts to identify and respond to the individual needs of students, as expressed by a teacher, "I always try to listen to what they need, even if it goes unspoken."

From the students' perspective, this is reflected in their positive impressions of teachers who demonstrate empathy. A student recounted, "Teachers who listen make me feel cared for. They don't just teach, but also care about us." These quotes and narratives illustrate the complexity of empathic relationships, highlighting the joint efforts of teachers and students to create a learning environment that supports each other and respects individual differences.

The results of this study identified the central role of several psychodynamic elements in building empathic relationships between teachers and students in basic education environments. Specifically, self-awareness, role identification, conflict management, and support for students' self-concept contribute significantly to strengthening humanistic interactions in the classroom.

Findings related to self-awareness and role identification (Gu and Day, 2007; Srofe, 2009) indicate the importance of developing self-capacity for teachers. Training programs that enhance self-awareness and understanding of roles can strengthen teachers' ability to read students' emotional responses and create clear boundaries of interaction. This in turn will support the establishment of a more responsive learning environment.

Meanwhile, findings related to conflict management and support for students' self-concept (Collie et al., 2012; Hamre and Pianta, 2006) highlight the need for a more holistic and adaptive educational approach. Conflicts that are managed wisely can be used to deepen understanding and strengthen emotional connections between teachers and students. Likewise, efforts to understand and support students' self-concept will help increase their motivation and participation in learning activities.

The implication is that the integration of psychodynamic perspectives needs to be considered, both in curriculum development and education institution policy. Recognizing that each individual brings their own history, experiences, and psychological dynamics can open the door for more empathic and meaningful interactions between teachers and students. At the systemic level, policies that encourage teacher self-care

for psychological well-being and trauma-informed interventions for vulnerable students also need to be considered.

Further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing psychodynamic approaches and explore other factors that play a role in optimizing teacher-student relationships in basic education environments. Hopefully, the findings of this study can inspire innovative efforts to improve the quality of educational experiences for both teachers and students.

## CONCLUSION

This study identified the central role of several psychodynamic elements in shaping the quality of empathic relationships between teachers and students in elementary school environments. Specifically, self-awareness, role understanding, conflict management, and support for students' self-concept formation become key components that contribute to the establishment of affirmative and mutual understanding interactions.

The study findings indicate that integrating psychodynamic perspectives, whether in curriculum development, teacher training, or education institution policies, can open the door to the establishment of a learning environment that is more responsive and oriented towards students' developmental needs. At a broader level, a profound understanding of psychological dynamics in teacher-student interactions can inspire innovative efforts to improve the quality of educational experiences holistically.

Although this study has expanded our understanding of this topic, further research is still needed to evaluate the effectiveness of actual psychodynamic approach implementation in the field. Thus, it is hoped that academic discourse and educational practices that take into account students' psychological diversity and teachers' needs can continue to develop in the future.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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