DO YOU THINK LIKE A FIFTH-GRADER? EXPLORING THE TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS OF IMPORTANCE TO STUDENTS FROM TWO DIVERSE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN A RURAL MIDWESTERN COMMUNITY

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Abstract. *Background*. Since 2002, No Child Left Behind has caused administrators to place great emphasis on academic learning. This has practitioners seeking strategies that will produce student academic growth, yet few are looking to bolster student-teacher relationships (S-T relationships), a strategy that has shown promise in the area of student achievement for students of differing abilities and in different types of schools and situations. *Purpose*. The purpose of this study was to explore S-T relationships and answer the central question: "What teacher behaviors influence fifth-grade students' perceptions of desirable teacher characteristics?"
Method. Research was conducted with the primary qualitative data collected from 24 semi-structured student interviews. *Results and discussion*. Results revealed teacher behaviors that were valued by students. The behaviors included consistent help (with high expectations); a sense of humor; active listening, providing for a sense of community, and several others. The identification of these behaviors could provide goals for personal development by teachers, as well as assist administrators and other hiring officials searching for potentially successful hires. These themes could also provide a foundation around which a perceiver survey could be developed. *Conclusions.* Regardless of circumstances and developments, educators and districts must never overlook the importance of cultivating student-teacher relationships in their classrooms.
Keywords: student-teacher relationships, poverty and affluent schools, teacher behaviors.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2002, No Child Left Behind has placed greater emphasis on academic learning. This development has practitioners seeking effective strategies that will produce substantial and sustainable student academic growth. With so many voices in education touting the latest and the greatest, researchers advocate for what many studies have reported (Brophy & Evertson, 1976; Hughes, 1999; Lee, 2007; Liu, 1997; Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1995; Soar & Soar, 1979) and many teachers have long known: strong and positive student-teacher relationships (S-T relationships) influence students and their success.

One area of study, which holds hope for improving student success, is furthering the understanding of S-T relationships for students in differing schools and situations. The purpose of this study was to explore S-T relationships and answer the central question: "What teacher behaviors influence fifth-grade students' perceptions of desirable teacher characteristics?"

Literature Review

Whether positive or negative, relationships have profound effects on one's quality of life. Vanzetti and Duck (1996) found that relationships provide physical support, a sense of belonging, a sounding board for emotional reactions and opinions, a reassurance of worth, and validation for the way we do things and interpret experiences. Conversely, Landsford, Antonucci, Akiyama, and Takahashi (2005) reported many negative effects resulting from a lack of positive relationships including anxiety, depression, and overall poor health.

Student-teacher Relationships

Beyond benefits from relationships in general, S-T relationships provide others more specific to learning and the school environment. The APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs (1997), the Presidential Task Force that produced *Learner-centered Psychological Principles: A Framework for School Reform and Redesign*, stated in Principle 11 – The Social Influence on Learning: "Learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with others." Additionally,

McCombs and Whisler (1997) proposed, "learning occurs best in an environment that contains positive interpersonal relationships and interactions and in which the learner feels appreciated, acknowledged, respected, and admired" (p. 10). Relatedly, Marzano, Marzano, and Pickering (2003) reported four general factors of importance on teacher effectiveness, one of which was teacher-student relationships. Though not the highest in terms of effect size (−.869), teacher-student relationships are suggested to be the keystone for the other three. Relatedly, Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener (2005), and Pianta (1999) found that S-T relationships also have a great influence on students' success in school. Crow (2009) as well reported positive anchor relationships, including those with educators, were a common factor in the lives of fifth-grade students who were identified as intrinsically motivated to seek information, supporting other studies that point to the influence of adult relationships on students' inner drive to learn (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). Lee (2007) echoed this and added that S-T relationships contribute to students' academic performance. Students make learning a higher priority and work harder for teachers whom they care about and perceive as valuing their learning (Noddings, 1992). More to the point, Ziljlstra (2015) reported that in addition to the teacher's ability to provide clear expectations, manage the classroom, and optimize student attention, children's perceptions of their teachers' friendliness and cooperative spirit had a positive impact on their learning of mathematics in the early elementary grades. S-T relationships can also influence students' future paths toward academic success (Birch & Ladd, 1998). Miller (2000) noted that S-T relationships played an important role in helping reduce the chances of future bad outcomes (i.e., dropping out of school). It should then be of no surprise that caring, supportive teachers are often found in schools with high-ranking achievement regardless of the socioeconomic status of the students attending the schools (Hughes, 1999; Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1995).

Positive outcomes from strong S-T relationships go well beyond achievement. Hamre and Pianta (2001) assert "the quality of teacher–child relationships is a stronger predictor of behavior than of academic outcomes" (p. 634). Doll, Zucker, and Brehm (2004), developers of the ClassMaps Survey (CMS) used in the current study, attest that the quality and consistency of the teacher's rapport is the most essential

ingredient of a safe, supportive classroom environment. Moreover, Howes, Hamilton and Matheson (1994) reported that S-T relationships influence students' relationships with peers in their classrooms.

Student Voices

The importance of S-T relationships is generally voiced best by students themselves. Unfortunately, few studies to date make use of student voices to convey these important messages. According to Doda and Knowles (2008), when asked to respond to the question "What should middle school teachers know about middle school students?" approximately 2,700 middle school students from diverse communities across North America responded emphatically that they deeply desired positive and rewarding relationships with their teachers and with their peers, "characterized by compassion, respect, personalization, fellowship, and friendship" (Doda & Knowles, 2008, p. 27). One student surveyed captured it best by stating:

The key to being a good teacher is to know the kids. You have to know every single one and have a relationship with every single one. I think that one thing that really allows me to work hard is knowing that my teacher knows where I am in life at that moment. If they don't know me, I will tend not to work as hard for them (p. 28).

Characteristics of Student-Teacher Relationships

Studies conducted to better understand S-T relationships have focused directly on the characteristics of the S-T relationship. Decades ago, Barr (1958) and later Good and Brophy (1995) identified teacher characteristics that students found to be most likable, including: (a) consideration, (b) buoyancy, and (c) patience. Additionally, Boals, Tyree, and Marker (1990) noted the importance of establishing high expectations when working with students of poverty. Most recently, Bakx, Koopman, de Kruijff, and den Brok (2015) reported that primary students most often mentioned factors related to personality, didactic skills, guidance, and authority with regard to their perceptions of "good" teachers.

Though these studies provide important insight, their limitations most notably include their inability to explain *how* students perceive these characteristics which ultimately impact the S-T relationship. The

intent of this study is to answer the central question: "What teacher be-
haviors influence fifth-grade students' perceptions of desirable teacher
characteristics?"

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study included sixty-two 10 to 11 year-old
fifth-grade students from two elementary schools in the same rural, Mid-
western community of roughly 30,000 people. Over 92% of the popula-
tion is Caucasian with the rest being mainly of a Hispanic background,
and some of African-American and Asian descent. The median income
in 2010 was just over $47,000, with 15.5% of the population living below
the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

To ensure more generalizable results, the two schools, though al-
most identical in number of students (approximately 260 students each),
had unique and differing populations in terms of the socioeconomic
level of students who attended, mobility rates, and ELL populations. For
this study, *poverty schools* are defined as having more than 75% of stu-
dents receiving free or reduced priced lunch (U.S. Department of Edu-
cation, 1998) and *affluent schools* are defined as having 10% or fewer
of the students receiving free or reduced price lunch (U.S. Department of
Education, 1994). Additionally, the two schools each had two fifth-grade
classrooms from which students were chosen to participate with teach-
ers possessing differing degrees of experience (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of School Sites and Classroom
Experience of Teachers*

Poverty Elementary (n = 257)	Affluent Elementary (n = 258)	
Percentage	Characteristic	Percentage
81.71	Free or Reduced Lunch	10.80
20.75	English Language Learner	0.78
15.77	Mobility	3.10
Poverty Elementary Teacher's Classroom Experience	Affluent Elementary Teacher's Classroom Experience	
13 years	Female Teacher	> 25 years
> 25 years	Male Teacher	8 years

Additionally, the twelve fifth-grade students purposefully sampled from each school for the semi-structured interviews were selected according to differing levels of achievement on the *Measure of Academic Progress* (MAP) in reading and mathematics to provide a broad sampling across both affluent and low SES schools (See Figure 1).

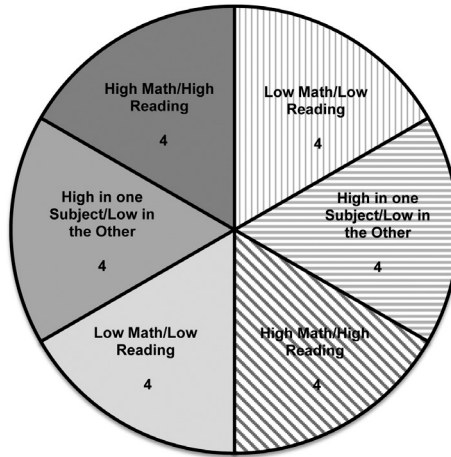**Purposeful Sampling: Number of Students by Achievement Levels**

Figure 1. *Purposeful Sampling: Number of Students by Achievement Levels*

The diversity of the populations between the two buildings, the wide array of teachers' classroom experience, and the differing levels of achievement of the students provided unique and diverse lenses through which to explore S-T relationships.

Procedure

In an attempt to reveal a more holistic understanding of the S-T relationship and to answer the central question "What teacher behaviors influence fifth-grade students' perceptions of desirable teacher characteristics?" students from two different schools and of differing achievement levels were purposefully sampled. To qualify for the study, fifth-graders must have attended their designated school for their entire scholastic career to ensure each was truly a participant in and of the culture of the school. Those considered must have also completed the Teacher-Student section of the *ClassMaps Survey* (CMS).

The CMS, as developed, tested, and published by Beth Doll and associates, is an anonymous survey where students report their degree of agreement for each item using the following descriptors and corresponding four point scale (Never = 0; Sometimes = 1; Often = 2; Almost Always = 3) (Doll et al., 2009). Only the Teacher-Student section of the CMS was used for the current study. Estimates of the CMS sections' internal consistency reliability were reported to be in the mid .80 range with none below .78, which allows sufficient flexibility to use any of the eight subscales independently (Doll et al., 2010). The final step of purposeful sampling relied upon student's achievement scores on nationally normed *Measure of Academic Progress* (MAP) in reading and mathematics. Students were categorized as those who had high growth on both subtests (H-H), high growth on one subtest and low growth in another (H-L), or low growth on both subtests (L-L). Four students from each designation (H-H; H-L; LL) were randomly chosen for a total of 12 from each school, or 24 students overall were chosen to complete the semi-structured interviews. Within the semi-structured interviews, students were asked to expand upon their initial Likert Scale responses on the Teacher-Student section of the CMS. An example of an interview prompt is as follows, "On 'My teacher listens carefully to me when I talk.' You marked, 'Almost Always.' Please tell me why you marked answer this way?" The seven initial prompts from the Teacher-Student section of CMS survey include:

a. My teacher listens carefully to me when I talk.
b. My teacher helps me when I need help.
c. My teacher respects me.
d. My teacher likes having me in this class.
e. My teacher makes it fun to be in this class.
f. My teacher thinks I do a good job in this class.
g. My teacher is fair to me.

After transcription of the 24 interviews, analysis began with reading each of the transcripts several times to get a bird's eye view of the database. Notes were recorded in the form of short phrases and key concepts in the margins of each transcript. Next, to promote better within-case analysis, all student responses for each question were organized on one spreadsheet, which enabled analysis of all student responses by question, thus revealing the common themes reported.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the qualitative data from the diversely sampled 24 student interviews revealed six explicitly stated themes. Additionally, the investigator inferred one theme due to its omission from all the student interview transcripts (See Table 2).

Table 2. *Teacher Behaviors as Themes*

Explicitly Stated by Students	Inferred by Researcher from Student Responses
Consistent help (with high expectations)	Focus on character rather than appearance
Sense of humor	
Making learning fun	
Active listening	
Providing for a sense of community	
Encouragement	

Consistent Help (with High Expectations)

Two-thirds of the students indicated on the CMS that their teachers *Almost Always* helped them. Yet, within the interviews, the fifth-graders expressed that they still expected to be held accountable for their own learning. One shared, "Most of the time I don't need help but when I do, she always does." Others stated that, "If we need help, she'll always call on us and say, 'What can I help you with?'" Students in each of the four classrooms shared different ways in which help was delivered. Some assistance was given while class was in session, other times help was provided in a small group or individually after school or at recess, and still another teacher offered her help via a sign-up list on the board. *How* and when the help was provided didn't appear to be important to the students as long as assistance was consistent and available to all.

Students also valued expectations of orderliness and opportunities to try on their own. Several mentioned that the assistance was always available, but that there were procedures to be followed, most importantly

the raising of hands while patiently waiting in one's seat. Others spoke of the teacher not doing for students what they are able to do on their own, "Because sometimes she thinks we should do it by 'oursef'." This student concluded with, "She helps us the right amount."

Students need to trust that their teachers are going to be there to help them when needed, but are going to do so while retaining high expectations for their students (Boals et al., 1990). This sense of trust with regard to a teacher's willingness to help was shown to be developed differently in each of the classrooms, but ultimately teachers need to not only be available to assist but must also recognize and respond to students in need of help. When this occurs in the classroom, a resulting trust between teacher and student develops that can potentially contribute to students' academic success (Lee, 2007; Hughes, 1999).

Sense of Humor

Another attribute that was valued by the students was a strong sense of humor. Students from three of the four classrooms explicitly mentioned their teachers' strong senses of humor and that this resulted in them especially enjoying time spent in their classroom.

Two of the teachers showed their sense of humor mainly through sharing of funny stories, most specifically about their families. An example of this was when one of the teachers shared of her daughter's sleepwalking, "She walked all the way down the stairs, opened the fridge, got the milk out and then went back to bed. *That* was funny." Another shared a similar example stating, "She's always making us laugh and she tells us stories about her grandchildren." One teacher was described by several of his students as hilarious because he tells lots of jokes.

Whether expressed through humorous stories, or through appropriate, well-intentioned jokes, this caring sense of humor conveys to students that their teachers are "'human' in the fullest sense of the word" (McEwan, 2002, p. 30; APA Work Group, 1997; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Saul, 2005), and that school is more than just about achievement and test scores.

Making Learning Fun

Students also valued when their teachers made learning fun. Fourteen students of the 24 interviewed from all of the four teachers' classrooms specifically mentioned the implementation of games that reinforced or included learning as a reason they felt their teacher made learning fun. Some of the games mentioned were used as impromptu review sessions. Such examples included, "... in grammar and math, she makes up games on the topic review, which is a lot of fun." Another student shared, "He lets us play these little games, and if we get an answer correct, he'll let us go to this miniature basketball hoop and shoot from a certain line." When asked by the interviewer, "Do you feel like the games help you learn?" one student answered, "Yeah … 'cause … the games help [us] remember."

According to the fifth-graders, teachers need to keep learning fun and upbeat in their classrooms, but in such a way so that learning is indeed still taking place. Spontaneous, relatively simple games for reviewing concepts, such as a class "Quiz Bowl," were most appreciated by students. The implementation of such a game or activity at a particularly tedious time can breathe life into the most stagnant of environments; and according to Frey and Wilhite (2005) who built upon the work of William Glasser, this "combination of laughing and learning can maximize the relationship that educators have with students" (p. 157).

Active Listening

Another characteristic that emerged was the importance of teachers exhibiting active listening. Nearly two-thirds of the students indicated on the CMS that their teachers *Almost Always* listened to them. When asked how the students knew this, the vast majority (nearly 71%) stressed the importance of being looked at (i.e., eye contact) as they spoke. One shared, "She's looking me in the eyes and she's not looking anywhere else." Another stated, "He doesn't turn his head and say something else while I'm [speaking to him]." Students also shared that teachers needed to give them nonverbal feedback, such as nodding one's head, and verbal confirmation that they were being understood.

Though the school day can be extremely hectic and busy, students need to know that they are being heard. Active listening, such as getting down to the student's level and maintaining eye contact, giving non-verbal feedback, such as nodding and responding appropriately, does not take much effort on the teacher's part, yet goes a long way to help students feel appreciated, acknowledged, and respected (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

Providing for a Sense of Community

An attribute that was more implicit in nature but found throughout the student responses was the communal or group-oriented thinking by most of the 24 students interviewed. With the exception of a question inquiring about the teacher making class fun (My teacher makes it fun to be in this class), the other seven questions were geared more to individual responses such as "I" and "me." Thirteen of the 24 students made use of the pronouns "we" and "us" rather than "I" and "me" on at least two of their prompt follow-ups. For example, on the ClassMaps prompt dealing with fairness (My teacher is fair to me), 16 of the 24 students who were interviewed had marked *Almost Always* in the survey. When asked in the follow-up interview, "Does he/she treat everyone fairly?" and, "Is that important to you?" the students emphatically responded "yes" to both. Some comments that displayed this thinking include, "Because he shows fairness to everybody in the class. He shows the same amount," and, "She really takes time for each and every one of us."

With over half of the fifth-graders expressing group-oriented or communal thinking, it is important for teachers help students experience a feeling of belonging in their classrooms. According to Osterman (2000), when students feel that they belong, they are "more helping, more considerate of others, and more accepting of others, including those not in the friendship group" (p. 334). Jensen (2009), author of *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, stated, "What you want to emphasize at school is moderate social status and group acceptance" (p. 90). He went on to emphasize this point stating, "Students who know, trust, and cooperate with one another typically do better academically" (p. 92).

Encouragement

Two-thirds of the students interviewed expressed that their teachers *Almost Always* felt they (the students) did a good job in class. And two-thirds spoke of specific ways that the teachers conveyed to them that they were doing a good job in the classroom. Though there were a couple examples shared by students that included the earning of stickers or candy, the manner most frequently mentioned by the fifth-graders was verbal encouragement and/or compliments that were expressed either by spoken or written language. The majority of the examples shared by the students were spoken in nature and most generally expressed as, "Good job!" or other variances of this compliment. Some of the students included their own name in their examples and others included some specificity in terms of what the student did that was worthy of praise. However, based upon the infrequency of these details, in spoken encouragements, it seems the salient aspect was not specificity or name usage but the fact that the compliment was expressed. Conversely, written forms of this encouragement or compliments were more valued when they were specific. The students shared examples of teachers not only writing "Good job!" on their papers, but also including smiley faces and notes, which included specific compliments and encouragement.

As early as 1925, Dr. Elizabeth Hurlock studied fourth and sixth graders and how different types of feedback affected their math performance. The findings indicated that all feedback can improve performance, however, students who were identified by name and praised in front of their peers showed a 71% improvement in their performance, while those receiving criticism showed only a 19% gain. Jensen (2009) shares some of the strategies purported by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) that can instill much needed hope in schools of poverty. Hope, along with learned optimism, is a crucial factor in supporting low-SES students to be high achievers. The strategies include "offering help, encouragement, and caring as often as needed" and "building academic, emotional, and social assets in students" (p. 113). Encouragement should be both spoken and written. With regard to the written forms of encouragement, Rath and Clifton (2005) propose it is "most appreciated and effective when it is individualized, specific, and deserved" (p. 80).

Focus on Character Instead of Appearance

The final theme was exposed due to its complete and total omission by all of the students interviewed. There were no references to the physical appearance and dress or style of any of the four teachers. The four teachers in the study ranged in age from roughly their early thirties to their mid-fifties, and in terms of style of clothing or dress, from extremely casual (i.e., khaki's and casual shoes) to a much more professional look (i.e., a dress shirt, slacks and a tie). Regardless of these details, students focused their descriptions and comments solely on the behaviors and character traits their teachers exhibited. Interestingly enough, the first question of each semi-structured interview, "Tell me about Mr(s). ___." could have been interpreted as a request for a physical description, but again, there was not one mention of the physical appearance of the teachers by any of the students interviewed. One student responded, "Well, Mr. __ is fun and hilarious." Another shared, "He's a really nice guy, and he can be strict, but that's a good thing, because sometimes teachers can be too nice, and so that will lead kids to be a little more disrespectful."

The implications of this theme are perhaps most beneficial for administrators and human resource hiring officials. According to a recent *Newsweek* poll, 63% of those polled felt that good looks were an advantage for getting a job for women and 72% indicated that physical attractiveness of men was advantageous in being hired (Princeton Survey Research Associates International, 2010, June 30). The responses of the fifth-graders in this study suggest this focus on appearance or "lookism" needs to not be a consideration, at least not when hiring their teachers.

Implications and Recommendations

The analysis of the qualitative data revealed several teacher behaviors for characteristics which were valued by students. The identification of these behaviors can provide a roadmap for teachers for *how* to better develop S-T relationships in classrooms. Additionally, these themes could provide a specific list of personal attributes for which administrators and other hiring officials could look for in potential teacher candidates. Lastly, the seven themes could provide the foundation for

a study through which a survey could be developed to help hiring officials initially sort candidates who possess these important personal characteristics.

Limitations of the Study

There were two major limitations with this study. The first limitation was that according to the results of the Teacher-Student section of the CMS, all four teachers in the study had already developed strong S-T relationships in their classrooms. Though not revealed until after the administration of the CMS, this could be viewed as limiting the analysis from the perspective of students from classrooms who do not rate their S-T relationship favorably.

Another similar limitation of this study is that the teachers voluntarily agreed to take part in the study. The results from the study may have differed greatly had the teachers from the two different types of schools been randomly assigned to the study. Random assignment may have produced survey results that were not as favorable.

Conclusion

The data from the current study point to the importance of teachers providing consistent help (with high expectations), displaying a sense of humor, making learning fun, practicing active listening, and providing for a sense of community to their students. These characteristics were shown to be important to students of diverse SES levels and achievement levels, and in situations where their teachers were of differing genders, ages, and experience levels. Additionally, the students in the study reflected little to no awareness of their teachers' physical appearance, but instead focused on their behaviors and personalities. All of these characteristics point to the value of the S-T relationship to students.

While student test scores and school rankings are all critical elements in today's educational system, and on-going professional development on progressive methods of instruction is of obvious importance, educators and districts must never overlook the value of cultivating S-T relationships in their classrooms. S-T relationships are built through purposeful and continual effort, primarily on the part of the teacher. It is in

this relationship between the teacher and the student where learning begins to flourish. The degree to which a teacher invests in each interaction affects students not only in their current learning outcomes and behaviors in the classroom but also beyond the school's walls and into each student's future.

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AR MĄSTAI KAIP PENKTOKAS? MOKYTOJŲ CHARAKTERISTIKŲ, SVARBIŲ DVIEJŲ SKIRTINGŲ PRADINIŲ MOKYKLŲ MOKINIAMS VIDURIO VAKARŲ KAIMIŠKOJE BENDRUOMENĖJE, TYRIMAS

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Santrauka. *Darbo problema*. Nuo 2002 metų įsigalėjusi nuostata neturėti nei vieno nepažangaus mokinio privertė mokyklos administratorius susitelkti į akademinius mokinių pasiekimus. Tai paskatino mokytojus ieškoti būdų, kurie pagerintų akademinius pasiekimus, tačiau mažai iš jų kreipė dėmesį į santykio tarp mokytojo ir mokinio gerinimą. Tokio ryšio puoselėjimas skatina įvairų gebėjimų lygį turinčius ir skirtingo tipo mokyklose besimokančius mokinius siekti akademinių žinių. *Tikslas*. Šio tyrimo tikslas – išanalizuoti mokinio ir mokytojo tarpusavio santykius ir atsakyti į klausimą, kokias mokytojų savybes penktokai suvokia kaip pageidautinas. *Metodas*. Tyrimas atliktas naudojant kokybinį metodą ir išanalizavus 24 pusiau struktūruotų mokinių interviu duomenis. *Rezultatai*. Atskleistos mokinių vertinamos mokytojų charakteristikos, tokios kaip nuolatinės pagalbos teikimas, humoro jausmas, aktyvus klausymasis ir keletas kitų. Šių charakteristikų išskyrimas padėtų mokytojams užsibrėžti asmeninio tobulėjimo tikslus, o mokyklų administratoriams praverstų atrenkant pedagoginį personalą. Tyrimo rezultatai naudingi ir siekiant toliau plėtoti šios srities tyrimus (atliekant suvokimo analizę). *Išvados.* Kokia situacija ir išsivystymo lygmuo regionuose bebūtų, ugdymo personalas turėtų atkreipti dėmesį į mokytojo ir mokinio tarpusavio santykių plėtojimo svarbą.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: mokytojų ir mokinių santykiai, mokytojų elgesys, skurdžios ir turtingos mokyklos.