Exploring the Perceived Positive Relationship Interactions of the Sri Lankan Adolescents and Their Teachers in the Context of Adolescent Psychosocial Well-being

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a time of change and transition, specifically in the context of interpersonal relationships with significant adults in their lives. Adolescence is also a period in which vastly reflects growing psychological and emotional independence from adults and proximity and dependence to peers. Therefore, adolescents often must negotiate and establish relationships with adults under less than optimal conditions. Thus, nature and quality of relationship interactions between teachers and adolescents are fundamental to understanding adolescent psychosocial wellbeing. A particular concern lies with the adolescents who do not enjoy positive, supportive relationships with their teachers. Such adolescents are often at risk for academic and psychosocial problems. The present study explores Sri Lankan adolescents' perceived relationship interactions with their teachers and its impact on their psychosocial wellbeing, using in depth interviews. The findings provide specific components pertaining to strong positive relationships such as empathy, warmth, sense of comfort, guidance, provision of financial assistance when in need and confidentiality. However, adolescents also mentioned teachers as figures detrimental to their wellbeing.

Keywords: Adolescents, Teachers, Relationships, Psychosocial wellbeing, Sri Lanka

The goals for education held by teachers for students reflect desires for them to develop social and moral competencies as well as intellectual skills (Wentzel, 1991). Therefore, it could be assumed that teachers and other socialization agents hold the potential to create optimal contexts within which learning goals and values is likely to take place. It can also be hypothesized that if these socialization processes are robust and generalizable, they also might describe ways in which teachers influence their students' school-related adjustment in a positive manner.

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Thus, adolescent-teacher relationships and interactions have been described as complex, multicomponent systems (Pianta, Hamre & Allen, 2012; Gablinske, 2014). Further, the nature and quality of relationship interactions between teachers and adolescent school going students have also been reported as fundamental factor in understanding their psychosocial wellbeing. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that teacher modeling and use of specific caregiving strategies might partly explain students' motivation to achieve positive social and academic outcomes at school, which in turn may contribute to their wellbeing. Recent studies have documented significant associations between teacher–adolescent/student relationships and adolescent's social and academic adjustment at school (Birch & Ladd, 1996; Pianta, 1992).

An overview of Education in Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan education system has and is being commended for its quality access to free primary and secondary education, empowering Sri Lankan children to attain a high level of human development for a low income economy (The World Bank, 2005). These achievements are reflected in it is a higher than average literacy rates for a developing country, primary health outcomes and social development indicators.

According the school census statistics in 2016 (MoE, 2016), there are 232,555 teachers employed in government schools in Sri Lanka. Out of them large percentage of teachers were graduates (n = 99,724, 43%) and trained teachers (n = 127,857, 55%). Comparatively few are untrained, and trainees (n = 4974, 2.1%). There were 4,143,330 students in Sri Lankan schools recording that the number girls (n = 2,091,142) are higher than the number of boys (n = 2,052,188). The teacher student ratio is recorded as 1: 18.

Secondary education in Sri Lanka is generally divided into formal and non-formal education having three segments. They are 1. Junior Secondary (6-9 years of education), 2. Senior Secondary (10-11 years of education) leading to O/L national examination, and 3. Collegiate level (12-13 years of education) leading to A/L. Due to increased educational opportunities students enrolled in Sri Lankan secondary schools, has recorded a dramatic rise. For example, the number on roll in 1970 was 360000 and it reached over a million in 1980 (MoE, 2008). According to the school census report it records over two million (MoE, 2016).

Student, teacher relationships

Historically, student-teacher relationship was viewed to be sacred with teachers being perceived as deities imparting valued treasures of education in the Sri Lankan milieu. As a result, they were endowed with unimaginable power of control over the student education as well as discipline. Even though teachers are expected to be knowledgeable, competent and dedicated; absence of studies on this topic prevents acquiring more recent information pertaining to student, teacher relationship in Sri Lanka; especially in the context of student psychosocial wellbeing. Moreover,

even though education in Sri Lanka is regulated by the government with availability of free education, large number of Sri Lankan students rely on private teachers after school to support their studies due to many and varied reasons. Further, due to demand on English medium education significant numbers of parents send their children to private fee levying schools providing education in English medium., popularly known as 'international schools'.

Globally, few studies of teachers and students have examined specific dimensions of teaching that might create optimal developmental contexts for young adolescent students. For instance, research has documented that teachers communicate valued goals and expectations to their students (Hargreaves, Hester, & Mellor, 1975; Trenholm & Rose, 1981), and create contexts conducive to the learning and adoption of these goals (Ames & Ames, 1984). In studies of elementary school-age children, teacher provisions of structure, guidance, and autonomy have been related to a range of positive motivational outcomes (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Birch and Ladd (1997) reported that young children's adjustment to school was related to teacher–student relationships characterized by warmth, the absence of conflict, and open communication (Pianta, 1992). Existing, studies involving modeling of teacher motivation are infrequent. However, studies convey that children adopt standards for performance and display academic skills moulded by their classmates (Schunk, 1987) and that it is likely students learn by observing their teachers' behaviour as well. Literature also conveys that teacher-student relationships significantly impact educational and emotional outcomes for children (Murray-Harvey, 2010).

However, other studies convey that teachers are rarely mentioned by adolescents as having a significant or important influence in their lives (Galbo, 1984; Reid, Landesman, Treder, & Jaccard, 1989). Adolescents often rate teachers as providing aid and advice (Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1992), but only as secondary sources relative to parents and peers (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Studies (Feldlaufer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1988; Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989), however, have found that young adolescents report declines in the nurturing qualities of teacher–student relationships after the transition to middle school; these declines correspond to declines in academic motivation and achievement.

Similarly, young adolescents' perceptions that teachers care about them have been related positively to their pursuit of social and academic goals, mastery orientations toward learning, and academic interest (Wentzel, 1991). Further, students who are in their middle and pre-adolescence have characterized caring and supportive teachers as those who promote democratic and respectful interactions, set expectations for performance based on individual differences, and provide constructive, nurturing feedback characterized by the reflect Baumrind's (1971, 1991) parenting dimensions (Wentzel, 1996, 1998).

METHODOLOGY

Present study reports the findings on perceived positive relationship interactions of Sri Lankan adolescents, a section from a broader study pertaining to psychosocial wellbeing of the Sri Lankan adolescents.

Participants

The participants were 10 adolescents (Girls = 06; Boys = 04) coming from different socio-economic backgrounds and demographic contexts in Sri Lanka. They were between the age group of 15 to 18 years. Before conducting the interview the researcher and her assistant contacted the potential participants via telephone or visits. These visits consisted of a brief introduction including the purpose of the study, an explanation of how they gained access to the person's name, and decision on when to meet. If they agreed to be interviewed, during the initial contact, time and place for the interviews were arranged with the adolescents. None of the participants approached refused to participate in the study.

Procedure

The participants were provided the freedom to choose the time and place of the interviews. When selecting a venue for the interview, a location familiar to the participants was selected. The duration of the interviews varied from 90 to 60 minutes and was tape recorded while noting down the salient points of each interview. At all points of the study confidentiality of the participants were ensured.

Instrument

The primary data source of the study was an open ended questionnaire which provided the participants to express their feelings freely. The participants were asked to recall an instance of positive relationship interactions which they have/had with their teachers (school and tuition teachers). Sample prompts included 'Tell me about an instance in which your teachers/ teacher positively influenced your life? These open ended prompts were based on expert feedback and piloted with two adolescents who represented adolescent population in Sri Lanka. Experts were specialists in the field of psychology and sociology. s feedback and in the field of psychology and sociology.

RESULTS

The present study explored the positive relationship interactions between adolescents and their teachers in the context of psychosocial wellbeing. The study also explored the Sri Lankan adolescents' positive relationship interactions with their teachers, in the context of their school as well as in extra support classes, popularly known as tuition classes. The results of the study conveyed the significant associations between teacher–student relationships and contributed to

the adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing especially in the context of social and academic contexts.

The results also conveyed that the teachers including tuition teachers hold the potential to create optimal contexts within which learning of goals and values is likely to take place. Following narrative elaborates how teachers create optimal contexts to achieve learning goals for adolescents,

My teachers are good...English madam come near me and explain things that I do not understand...Maths teachers is the same...they try very hard to help me...all the teachers are good (Participant 4, Male 16 Yrs; whose first language is Tamil but attending a Sinhala medium school of his choice).

Tuition teachers were also mentioned as a source of great support by the adolescent who participated in the study,

If I have a problem I tell B sir, That sir helps children (meaning students) a lot, I have told many things to that sir, he loves children...is always with them, I have even talked to him about my boyfriend, he told me to work hard...study and one day when I achieve something (meaning professional/ academic achievement) he will go and talk to my boyfriends' parents. (Particpant 6, Female 17 Yrs; living with her grandmother due to parental emotional/financial neglect).

Her only social and emotional support was the boyfriend and the teacher mentioned.

The study also conveyed that the teachers provide financial assistance to the adolescents if and when required.

When I told my tuition sirs of my financial difficulties they gave me free cards...they like me a lot... (Particpant 6, Female 17 Yrs).

When my mother does not have money to give me for a field trip my class teacher gives me money and take me...that is one of the reason that I do not want to go to N school (a school he would very much like to go to...) I feel sad leaving this school...thinking how can I leave this school and this teacher...last time she said she will not be our class teacher... then I felt very sad...thinking why such a good teacher is not going to be our class teacher and then she came as our class teacher...I felt very happy about it (16 year old adolescent boy from the plantation sector, whose parents are tea pluckers (Participant 4, Male 16 Yrs).

The study also conveyed instances in which teacher motivation and positive interventions impacted outstanding academic outcomes for the participants.

When I was preparing for my Ordinary level exam, I was extremely weak in Maths... I used to score around thirties in exams, then I had this tuition sir who would explain a sum to me repeatedly ...however, when for the tenth time if I did not understand the sum he would go out, wipe his face with the wash cloth of his car and come and teach that sum again...one day he told my mother..."elder sister...just see the result that he would get"...I received a B for Maths in the O/L exam...I like it when my teachers explain things to me patiently without scolding (Participant 3, Male 17 Yrs).

DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to explore the perceived relationship interactions of the Sri Lankan adolescence with their teachers in the context of adolescent psychosocial wellbeing. The results conveyed that contrary to the previous literature which reports teachers are rarely mentioned by adolescents as having a significant or important influence in their lives (Galbo, 1984; Reid, Landesman, Treder, & Jaccard, 1989); adolescents in the present study rated teachers as providing aid, comfort and advice leading to psychosocial wellbeing. The study also finds that teacher-adolescent/student relationship interactions serve as an importance factor in their academic motivation. Further, in line with the previous research, positive relationship interactions that a teacher have on an adolescent through the provision of affect and attention appears to have been perceived as having a significant positive influence by the participants.

However, teachers were also listed as figures which decrease their wellbeing or factors detrimental to their wellbeing.

As evidenced in this study positive relationship between teacher-student contributes to psychosocial as well as academic wellbeing within the adolescents. These findings are also supported by previous research. Findings of Skinner and Belmont (1993) convey that teacher-student interactions influence student engagement directly through the feedback that teachers provide to students during the interactions, and indirectly via students' perceptions of the interactions. Further, students who report positive relationships with their teachers also tend to report higher levels of motivation and emotional engagement. Studies also report that high quality teacher-student relationships are associated with increases in student feelings of motivation and responsibility toward academic work, development of self-regulation skills, and psychological wellbeing (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994; Wentzel, 1994).

The most stressed upon preferred quality of the teachers was the confidentiality. All most all the adolescents seemed to like teachers who did not breach the confidentiality by 'gossiping about

their problems to other teachers'. Hence, it is suggested that concerned authorities need to further into this aspect when developing training programs for secondary school teachers in the context of their students' psychosocial wellbeing. The findings of the present study also suggest that apart from the content and program delivery, psychosocial wellbeing programs in schools need to focus on factors outside the program realm such as student preference for the teacher who conducts it.

For instance, findings of the present study convey that factors such as students' liking a specific teacher and their perceived relationship to him/her also seem to determine how they perceive school, their academic performance, their motivation towards studies as well as their broader perceptions towards school and life. Thus, the findings of the present study suggest there is a need to focus on improving teacher-their adolescent student relationships as well as improving the ethos of the schools. In this light, the present study recommends evaluating the existing rules, regulations; policies in order to develop specific interventions for psychosocial wellbeing of school going adolescents in Sri Lanka. For instance, corporal punishment still prevails in Sri Lankan schools. This as well as the large student numbers (in spite of the healthy student-teacher ratio) and discriminations experienced by Sri Lankan students may impact in creating distress within Sri Lankan students'.

Results of the study also conveys that teachers, school administrators as well as policy makers need to be acutely aware of the diversity within the Sri Lankan student populations, their varied psychosocial issues and possible ways in which they varies. These factors may in turn impact adolescents' academic achievement. Hence, the present study recommends teacher programs on positive discipline, and psychological first aid on promoting psychosocial wellbeing to promote a positive culture within the Sri Lankan schools.

The role of teachers in addressing adolescent wellbeing
Moreover, the study also point out the need for a well-structured support system for Sri Lankan students (Pathirana, 2016). This vacuum seems to be filled by one or few well-meaning teachers in their schools by providing academics, psychological and at times financial support. However, this guidance and assistance seems to be hardly sufficient. Moreover, the research also recognizes that Sri Lankan adolescents' students' psychosocial wellbeing should not simply be the responsibility of their class and subject teachers. Further, it seems impossible for Sri Lankan teachers or schools to shoulder this burden alone, as a comprehensive and a broad task as such requires greater involvement from policy makers and child welfare agencies. Thus, the findings of the present study suggests that a more comprehensive national plan of action is required to promote wellbeing of the Sri Lankan adolescents students in particular and Sri Lankan students in general.

Literature point out that in order promotes student wellbeing, partnerships among; schools, education, health and human services (Wyn, 2007) require to be formed. Hence, the findings of the present study also reports that teachers need to be considered not only as focal points or primary source of knowledge acquisition/learning but also as focal points for health (and particularly mental health) and wellbeing promotion agents within their students.

Unfortunately, the significance of the teacher provision of student wellbeing remains an unaddressed domain within the Sri Lankan education milieu (Pathirana, 2017). Furthermore, current teacher evaluation system in Sri Lanka does not appear to endow student wellbeing the credence it deserves in determining effectiveness teachers and teaching practices. Especially in comparison to student learning outcomes measured by test scores. The findings of the present study also question this and the detrimental effects created by the overemphasis the present Sri Lankan education system has given to test scores and examinations. It posits that such endeavors have already cost the adolescents students love of learning and their desire to acquire knowledge, while negatively contributing to their psychosocial wellbeing.

Literature also conveys that a comprehensive framework for mental health intervention must address risk factors, protective buffers, and the promotion of full development related to adolescents, families, schools, and communities (Adelman & Taylor, 2012).However, there seemed to be a significant gap between the mental health needs of Sri Lankan adolescents and the services available to meet those needs. Even though Sri Lankan schools have become increasingly recognized as important locations for addressing the wellbeing needs of their students; this gap between the need to the services and the provision seemed to be unaddressed. With advantages including the reach and familiarity of schools to students and family members, and the increased opportunities they provide for mental health promotion and prevention efforts the study identifies; Sri Lankan teachers can be recognized as ideal source of support for mental health provisions. This urges the policy makers to develop and implement suitable teacher target interventions.

Thus, based on its findings, the present study also recognizes the importance of teacher targeted interventions. The advantages of teacher targeted interventions are that they address specific risk factors and are individualized. However, their potential disadvantages include the need to screen students for participation and the associated potential for stigmatization (Anderson & Doyle 2005).The proposed target interventions include providing increased psychosocial awareness within Sri Lankan teachers in order to promote the wellbeing of the students through specific interventions. Further, these specific, targeted interventions can serve as additional mental health support and wellbeing for Sri Lankan adolescents in the absence of a structured psychosocial support system and their reluctance to reach out for counseling teachers (Pathriana, 2016) in times of need.

Furthermore, findings convey that social, financial and psychological support provided by the teachers, can influence their level of risk and health. For instance, literature convey that adolescents who feel a strong attachment, level of support, and connection with their teachers are significantly less likely to engage in risky behaviors (e.g., tobacco and alcohol use, violence) and more likely to have better academic achievement (Walsh, Harel-Fisch, & Fogel-Grinvald, 2010). The role of teacher supportive factors (e.g., social capital and cohesion, accessibility of services) in adolescent development is beginning to emerge and suggests a similar pattern. Literature also conveys (Downey, 2008) that teacher's personal interaction with his/her students made a significant difference for all students, but in particular, for students at risk for academic failure.

In line with the previous literature (Downey, 2008), the outcomes of the present study also find that Sri Lankan adolescents need teachers to build strong interpersonal relationships, focusing on their strengths while maintaining high and realistic expectations for success. These interactive relationships should be based on respect, trust, caring, sense of belongingness and cohesiveness. Furthermore, the present study also confirms the previous literature findings which posit the importance of 'the teacher conveyed personal interest in their students' to their learning (McCombs & Whisler, 1997) and wellbeing (Gablinske, 2014).

This study relied exclusively on self-reported and interview data from a small sample of adolescents. While this method allowed them to share information and perspectives that may not have been observable otherwise, the present study can only viewed as an exploratory one due to this limitation. However, in its absence of data pertaining to this research topic, the present study promotes greater awareness pertaining to specific components of teacher-adolescent/students relationship interactions on adolescent psychosocial wellbeing in Sri Lanka.

Moreover, the present study did not explore the teacher perceptions of the quality of the relationship interactions, impacting the Sri Lankan adolescent wellbeing. Even though studies have found similarities between student and teacher ratings of relationship quality and engagement (Pianta, 1999; Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009), it is imperative to gather information from multiple sources. Hence, it is believed that procuring teacher perceptions would have come up with crucial information. Further, future studies could also explore the quality of the adolescent-teacher relationship impacting the adolescent wellbeing, utilizing observational data, or teacher interviews to collect their teacher perspectives on it.

Existing studies examining patterns of student engagement across grade levels finds that differences in students' levels of engagement may be impacted by their gender and ethnicity. In general, girls tend to report higher levels of student engagement than boys, regardless of grade level (Marks, 2000; Skinner et al., 2009). Hence, it is also suggested that future studies carried out in the Sri Lankan milieu need to explore the impact of gender and ethnicity on the quality of

teacher adolescent relationship and how these variable also impact the adolescents' psychosocial wellbeing.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study provide several interesting contributions to the existing literature on relationship quality of adolescents and their teachers. Contrary to previous research, primarily relying on teachers' ratings of relationship quality with students, the present study finds adolescent/student perceptions of teacher-student positive relationship interaction quality is detrimental to the wellbeing of the adolescent/students.

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