Introducing a Model of Interpersonal Teacher Behaviour

Teacher-student relationships are an important aspect of communication in a classroom. Observations of successful teaching certainly hinge on a great deal of effective human communication. Currently, student teachers and beginning teachers are increasingly conscious of the importance of teacher competency in interacting with students. This is reflected in the types of questions often raised by them, for example: How can I relate better with my students? What must I do to make sure the students pay attention and learn? How can I gain their cooperation? How can I establish good rapport with my students? These questions reveal the significance of the X factor in an effective teacher. They also attest to the importance attached to the interpersonal relationship between teacher and students.

Teaching is, indeed, a form of serious communication, and past research, classroom observations, interview, surveys, etc., all indicate that for learning to take place, students must perceive their teachers, apart from being content experts, as possessing at least three characteristics known as the three F's: firmness, friendliness and fairness, in addition to being caring and understanding. It is such student feedback and a recognition of the likely impact of teacher-student relationships on student learning that makes it timely to introduce a model of interpersonal teacher behaviour.

Conceptually, this model of interpersonal teacher behaviour was inspired by, firstly, the systems communication theory of Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson (1967) and, secondly, the Leary model of interpersonal behaviour (1957). The systems communication theory and the Leary model were widely used in clinical and psychological settings but were adapted by a team of Dutch researchers for use in the educational setting since the early 1980s. In fact, the model of interpersonal teacher behaviour and the
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Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction, an instrument to measure teacher behaviour through student perceptions, were the results of a long-term Dutch research programme at the University of Utrecht entitled *Education for Teachers*. The conceptualisation and development of this model is discussed in the following sections.

**Systems Communication Theory**

The systems communication theory (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967) postulates that, among other important features, the occurrence of circular processes, stability and resistance to change are crucial for understanding human communication. The Dutch researchers (Creton, Hermans & Wubbels, 1990), believe that these very features are also present in classroom communication. Classes are described as characterised by circular processes, stability and resistance to change. Interaction between a teacher and his or her students is of pivotal importance in classroom communication. It is assumed that the behaviour of the teacher not only influences the behaviour of his or her students, but the behaviour of the teacher is also influenced by the behaviour of students. Teacher-student relationships are viewed as the result of a classroom eco-system in which both the teacher and students are the key participants. Indeed, this is the circular process of mutual influence whereby teacher and student behaviours are actions, reactions and interactions forming the chain of classroom communication. This circularity implies that all aspects of communication are interrelated; they not only consist of behaviour but determine behaviour as well. Teacher-student relationships in classrooms are thus seen as the outcomes of a classroom communication system and the behaviours of teachers and students continually change according to the situation and persons involved. It is, therefore, difficult to identify a beginning and an end in teacher-student interaction.

Despite the occurrence of circularity and change in interaction patterns in classrooms, such patterns are assumed also to be strongly stabilised over time. In order to manage student learning and behaviour, teachers tend to foster stability in the classroom by establishing routines, rules and procedures. This is reflected in descriptive words such as 'routines' and 'rituals' used in the literature...
to refer to such interaction patterns. In addition, teachers, as well as students, show resistance to changes in established communication patterns in the classroom (Doyle, 1983).

In addition to the occurrence of circular processes, stability and resistance to change, the systems communication theory also states that every form of communication has two inter-related aspects: a report and a command. Each can be understood as the 'what' (content, information or description), and the 'how' (the instructions) of a message, respectively. Whether a teacher is inspiring or interesting or scolds often will definitely affect teacher-student relationships. Furthermore, the same report message can influence differently depending on the command aspect. For instance, when a teacher points out a student's mistakes in class, this teacher behaviour can be conveying different underlying messages concerning the student's ability. One likely command message is 'I want to help you to learn' while another very different version could be 'You are too stupid to learn.' It is therefore important for teachers to be more conscious of the report and command aspects of their messages as these tend to have a tremendous influence on teacher-student classroom communication.

**Model of Interpersonal Teacher Behaviour**

The model of interpersonal teacher behaviour was an adaptation of the Leary model of interpersonal behaviour for use in education. The behaviours of teachers were mapped along two-dimensional axes: an Influence dimension (Dominance, D and Submission, S) and a Proximity dimension (Cooperation, C and Opposition, O), as shown in Figure 1. The Influence dimension portrays who is controlling or directing the communication process, and how often; and the Proximity dimension indicates the degree of cooperation or closeness among those who are involved in the process of communication. These two dimensions of Influence and Proximity were independent and reminiscent of effective teacher behaviours that could influence classroom processes. For instance, directivity and warmth were two descriptions of effective teacher behaviour (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974) which bore strong resemblance to Influence and Proximity. Each of these two axes (DS and CO)
represent opposite behaviours, the DS axis for dominance and submission and the CO axis for cooperation and opposition.

**FIGURE 1**

Two-Dimensional Axes of Influence and Proximity

![Diagram showing two-dimensional axes of influence and proximity.]

INFLUENCE (DS axis): Dominance-Submission
PROXIMITY (CO axis): Cooperation-Opposition
The Eight Teacher Behaviour Scales

The model of interpersonal teacher behaviour, as depicted in Figure 2, comprises eight teacher behaviour scales of Leadership, Helping/Friendly, Understanding, Student Responsibility/Freedom, Uncertain, Dissatisfied, Admonishing, and Strict behaviour (translated by Wubbels and colleagues from a Dutch version). The model takes the form of an octagon with eight sectors representing eight facets of teacher behaviour, starting with Leadership (DC) and ending with Strict (DO).

As an illustration of the mapping of teacher behaviour, the sectors DC and CD both include Dominance and Cooperation. In the DC sector, teacher dominance is a stronger trait than teacher cooperation (e.g., demonstrated through the teacher holding student attention by explaining a concept to the class, setting an assignment or establishing procedures); in the CD sector, it is the reverse, with more teacher cooperation and less teacher dominance (teacher might be seen moving among groups of students assisting and motivating them in their learning).

To clarify what the eight sectors involve, descriptions of typical teacher behaviour belonging to each of the sectors are provided in Figure 2. For example, in the Leadership (DC) sector, teachers 'notice what's happening, lead, organise and give orders' while, in the Strict (DO) sector, teachers 'keep reins tight, get class silent, maintain silence, exact norms and set rules.' As these two sectors (DC and DO) are adjacent to each other in the model, instances of teacher behaviour would tend to interrelate to each other more. To illustrate, teachers 'give orders, determine procedures and structure the classroom situation' in the DC scale, while teachers 'exact norms and set rules' in the DO scale. Every instance of interpersonal teacher behaviour could be placed within this coordinate system and, the closer the instances of teacher behaviour in this model, the more they would resemble each other. On the other hand, as scales' positions in the model are located further away from each other, they become increasingly more different until they are diametrically opposite to each other. For example, the Leadership scale measures teacher interaction patterns (such as 'lead' and 'give orders') which are the opposite to those measured by the Uncertain scale (for instance, 'apologise').
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FIGURE 2
Model of Interpersonal Teacher Behaviour

DOMINANCE

DO Strict Behaviour
Keep it tight, check, judge, set clear, maintain silence, be strict, good norms and set rules

DC Leadership Behaviour
Notice what's happening, lead, organise, give orders, set tasks, determine procedure, structure the classroom situation, get hold attention

OPPOSITION

OD Administrating Behaviour
Get things done, pupils to do, organise, structure, control, plan

OS Dissatisfying Behaviour
Wait for students to do, organise, control, plan, keep to plan

SUBMISSION

SO Uncertain Behaviour
Keep a low profile, apologise and admit how the wind blows, admit one is in the wrong

SC Student Responsibility/Freedom Behaviour
Give opportunity for independent work, wait for class to let off steam, give freedom and responsibility to students

COOPERATION

CD Helping/Friendly Behaviour
Always show interest, support, encourage in one's work, be kind, be helpful, be considerate and caring

CS Understanding Behaviour
Listen with understanding, be considerate and helpful, instruct, support, follow up, believe in students
Further examination of the model of interpersonal teacher behaviour reveals the following characteristics:

1. These eight scales of Leadership (DC), Helping/Friendly (CD), Understanding (CS), Student Responsibility/Freedom (SC), Uncertain (SO), Dissatisfied (OS), Admonishing (OD), and Strict (DO) circumrotate around the two-dimensional axes of Influence (DS: Dominance - Submission) and Proximity (CO: Cooperation - Opposition).

2. The first four teacher behaviour scales of Leadership, Helping/Friendly, Understanding and Student Responsibility/Freedom behaviour appear to be positive teacher behaviours while the remaining four scales of Uncertain, Dissatisfied, Admonishing and Strict behaviour appear to be negative (though, undoubtedly, a certain amount of Admonishing and Strict teacher behaviour could be necessary in certain classroom situations).

3. Adjacent scales in the model describe teacher behaviours that resemble each other to a certain extent (for example, Helping/Friendly and Understanding; Uncertain and Dissatisfied as shown in Figure 2).

4. Opposite scales in the model (such as Leadership versus Uncertain; Understanding versus Admonishing) portray diametrically different teacher behaviours.
Research Using the Model

Since the early 1980s, research on associations between interpersonal teacher behaviour and student learning have been undertaken in The Netherlands, the USA and Australia. These studies focused mainly on secondary science and mathematics classes. Recently, a study using the same model, was conducted for the first time in primary classes in Singapore.

In order to measure the eight scales of teacher behaviour in the model of interpersonal teacher behaviour, the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction was specially developed (originally in the Dutch language and later translated into English) for the purpose. The Questionnaire has been found to have satisfactory reliability and validity through several studies conducted in secondary schools in The Netherlands, the U.S.A. and Australia, and currently teachers in these countries use the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction to obtain feedback from students concerning their classroom interactional behaviour.

A description of each of the teacher behaviour scales is presented in Table 1. For instance, the Leadership (DC) scale measures the extent to which a teacher provides effective instructional leadership in class and is able to hold student attention. The DC sector in the Model of Interpersonal Teacher Behaviour (see Figure 2) illustrates what this Leadership behaviour encompasses by stating typical teacher behaviours which include 'notice what's happening, lead, organise, give orders, set tasks, determine procedure, structure the classroom situation, explain and hold attention.'
### TABLE 1

**Descriptive Information of Scales of the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership (DC)</td>
<td>Degree to which teacher provides leadership to class and holds student attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping/Friendly (CD)</td>
<td>Degree to which teacher is friendly and helpful towards students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding (CS)</td>
<td>Degree to which teacher shows understanding/concern/care to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Responsibility1</td>
<td>Degree to which students are given opportunities to assume responsibility for their own activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom (SC)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain (SO)</td>
<td>Degree to which teacher exhibits his/her uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfied (OS)</td>
<td>Degree to which teacher shows unhappiness/dissatisfaction with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admonishing (OD)</td>
<td>Degree to which teacher shows anger/temper/impatience in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strict (DO)</td>
<td>Degree to which teacher is strict with and demanding of students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Generally, findings suggest that interpersonal teacher behaviour is an important aspect of classroom learning environment as it is related to student cognitive and affective outcomes. Teachers who exhibited more positive behaviours (e.g., leadership and understanding behaviours) in their daily interactions with students facilitated the development of favourable attitudes and better achievement among students, while negative teacher behaviours (e.g., uncertain and dissatisfied behaviours) produced the reverse effect.

**Implications for Teachers**

As research findings indicate that the nature of teacher-student relationships influence student learning, interpersonal teacher behaviour has become a potentially powerful determinant of student learning. No teacher should ignore his or her development of classroom interactional skills, because teaching is immersed in a sea of human interactions. An interested teacher should strive to create and maintain a favourable classroom learning environment through positive interactional behaviours with students. What are these positive interactional teacher behaviours? Research findings suggest that teachers can motivate and improve their students' cognitive and affective outcomes through more positive and encouraging teacher behaviours which have been identified as those of leadership, understanding and helping/friendly teacher behaviours. Also, less uncertain, admonishing and dissatisfied teacher behaviours in class can lead to more favourable student outcomes. It is imperative for teachers to develop positive teacher-student relationships and establish close rapport with their students to facilitate the learning process.

In addition, the model of interpersonal teacher behaviour can also be used as a basis for identification and development of desirable teacher behaviours that contribute to the creation and maintenance of a conducive classroom environment. This means that teachers can systematically monitor their classroom interactional patterns and consciously attempt to modify their behaviours, if necessary, with the aim of favourably influencing student learning.
In conclusion, it is hoped that a careful examination of the eight scales of teacher behaviour presented in the model will act as a catalyst for teachers to reflect on their own interpersonal behaviour in class. In this way, perhaps, they may be able to find clues or answers to the questions stated in the opening paragraph of this article. Above all, this reflection can also assist teachers in taking positive steps towards improving teacher-student relationships with the major yet sometimes elusive goal of better student achievement. Ultimately they may find the X factor.

References


