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Student-Teacher Rapport and its Impacts on Students' Sense of Fulfillment

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Spring 2018
Senior Capstone
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Abstract

The topic of my capstone research paper is student-teacher rapport and its impacts on students' sense of fulfillment. The purpose of this research paper is to bring awareness and hopefully change to our current academic system in regards to how teachers interact with their students. All too often, teachers look solely at how the student is performing academically. They should also focus on *why* the lower achieving students are performing that way. This study includes literature review, a survey, as well as educator interviews to gather data on how students and teachers perceive each other in the classroom. The results indicated that all teachers feel that they have good rapport, but that students feel like they do not, generally speaking, have good rapport with their teachers.

Introduction and Background

Having positive teacher-student rapport is vital in today's society, now more than ever before. Teachers have a responsibility to cater to their students in every way, not only in the academic way. Paying attention to why they act the way they act and why they say the statements they say can be vital in how a student performs in the classroom. Many teachers and parents are concerned with how the child is performing in the classroom. Of course, this could come from a plethora of reasons- the child is not as good at math as others; the child is distracted by a student making silly faces; the child is sick and his or her parents still made the child go to school, etc. What if the child is not performing well in the classroom because he or she doesn't like the teacher? What if the teacher is ignorant to what is going on in the child's home life? Perhaps a relative of the child is sick and that is why he or she is having hard time in school. Teachers should make a conscious effort to understand students' lives beyond the classroom. Once a teacher understands, he or she can make every effort to make school more fun for the child. In addition, it will allow the teacher to be more sensitive with certain topics and can possibly take whatever is going on at home off of the student's mind.

Not all students are alike. A student who is acting out and receives poor grades has a much different backstory than a student who sits quietly and receives good grades. As Lee (2018) states in her article "4 timeless elements of strong student-teacher relationships", "While some [students] quickly grasp the concepts taught and take an active part in the learning process, others may be shy, uninterested or even downright disruptive" (p. 1). The responsibility of a teacher is now to make the child's learning environment more interesting and engaging. If a student is acting disruptive, it could be beneficial to take the child aside to ask if something is going on that has nothing to do with the school's learning environment. This is further backed by

Muntner (2008). In the classroom, both positive and negative climates exist. While positive climates focus more on “the enjoyment and emotional connection that teachers have with students, as well as the nature of peer interactions, negative climate focuses on “the level of expressed negativity such as anger, hostility or aggression exhibited by teachers and/or students in the classroom” (p. 1). Teaching is a two-way street. Of course, children will react in a positive way if the teacher is being positive. As such, a student will react negatively if the teacher is acting negative. Both emotions are highly contagious. On the flip side, teacher sensitivity, taken from Muntner (2008), plays a big role in how a teacher learns to deal with students who are acting out. Many teachers use the easy way out- discipline- instead of trying to understand *why* the student acted out.

Nosal (2015) says that in order for a classroom to have a positive climate, students must have self monitoring behavior. Educators learn from students, and students learn from educators. Teachers often times expect students to understand material as if they were adults, but we need to start treating them like the age they are- children. The classroom environment is vital to a student’s learning, according to the Guyana Ministry of Education (2017). Everything from the color of the walls to how the desks are placed has a huge impact on how students will learn and connect with the teacher. It is also stated that students will react more positively when a teacher has a sense of humor. Provenzano (2014, February 24) talks about the three most important aspects for a teacher to have so that students will feel comfortable and trusting when it comes to the teacher. He has three overarching philosophies which include the first five minutes, attending extra-curricular activities, and being available. In the first five minutes of class, a teacher can learn a lot about a student based on the answers. Attending extra-curricular activities shows the student that he or she is not just some robot throwing knowledge at you, but that they are a caring

person who takes an interest in the student's life. Being available is vital to any student. It can open doors for those who have a rough home life or students who need extra time to study. It also allows students to simply come early just to talk. This senior capstone will examine the following primary research question: How does student-teacher rapport impact a student's sense of fulfillment? Following my primary research questions, I will also seek the answer to the following secondary or related research questions. 1) What does research say about the impact of good rapport between students and teachers on their students' sense of fulfillment? 2) How does student-teacher rapport impact student's fulfillment inside and outside of the classroom? If not, what obstacles hinder the rapport to take place? 3) Do students feel comfortable confiding in their teachers? 4) Do teachers in general attempt to understand their students beyond the classroom setting? 5) Are there resources available for teachers and students to develop good rapport that fosters student's sense of fulfillment? I will begin with some current literature review.

Literature Review

You may be wondering if there is any research already conducted on student-teacher rapport or if anything stated could be credible at all. After intensive research, I have discovered that rapport is a widely discussed topic amongst educators, many of whom are attempting to improve their own rapport with their students. After all, developing good rapport with students, as teachers, professors, and future educators, is essential for the student's ability to learn. Studies actually show that good rapport is less often seen in the university setting. This is likely due to a child's growth; children are more likely to display disobedience and dissonance when they are in grades K-12. Once out of their parents' homes, they tend to display a more calm and respectful demeanor. Gillaspay et al (2017) state that "results showed a positive correlation between rapport

scores and final grades such that rapport at each of the time points during the semester predicted final course grade. Those students for whom rapport decreased across the semester showed significantly lower final grades than students for whom rapport remained stable or increased” (p. 5). The students whose rapport decreased likely because their grades declined, prompting an instructor to become a little more strict with them. Likewise, students who have improved rapport have had improved grades, building better rapport because they are showing that they are capable of more than a C. Those whose rapport remained stable were also consistent with their grades. Positive rapport has been proven to stimulate a student’s willingness to become more engaged in the classroom. If a teacher throws worksheets at the students to finish on his or her own, there is no good rapport.

Another study conducted by Sointu et al (2016) talks about how student strengths are often associated with how they connect with their teachers. It is also evident that how a student performs in the classroom is directly correlated with their perception of the teacher. This study was conducted with Finnish students in the age range of grades 5-7, as well as their parents. The parents noted that behavioral and emotional strengths did remain stable throughout one of two years of schooling; however, student perceptions of their teachers changed drastically. “Strengths were also indirectly associated with academic achievement via student-teacher relationships” (Sointu et al, 2016). How behavioral and emotional rapport is correlated to academic achievement remain unknown.

In another study conducted by Poulou (2015), a group of six to eleven years olds in central Greece were given a questionnaire about intelligence and how it is potentially linked to their learning. A group of 617 children were given this survey and ninety eight percent of teachers completed the survey. It talks about Emotional Intelligence (EI), social and emotional

learning skills (SEL), teaching efficacy, and how that could relate to how students are learning. According to the results, “It was demonstrated that teachers' perceptions of EI, SEL, and teaching efficacy were significantly related to teacher-student relationships, but they were not related to students' emotional and behavioral difficulties. Rather, teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationships were significantly related to these difficulties” (p. 1).

While conducting research, I did find one opposing view. There is a fine line between having good rapport with students and students abusing rapport. Linsin (2011) states that “making personal connections—through humor, kindness, likeability, and more—is a powerful way to influence behavior. It can also be astonishingly rewarding.” While he does see the benefits of having good rapport, he does believe many different aspects can fall through the cracks. A few downfalls include: a lack of respect and listening, abuse of rules, challenging students, accountability failing, students taking punishments personally, and classroom management not seeming to matter to the teacher anymore. There is a major difference between being friendly to a student and being his friend.

Rapport in History.

Bouncing off of Poulou's article (2015) about intelligence, we will now begin to investigate an article about slow learners. Another article was published back in 1967. Now we are shifting away from modern rapport and looking into how rapport used to be. Many slow learners were set up for failure and/or confusion by their teachers, who ignored their problems and consistently discouraged them, which hindered their personal growth. How rapport used to be fell almost entirely on the teacher! Of course, any kind of rapport is a two-way street, but if a student was failing a particular subject, the first aspect people wondered about was their rapport, not how difficult the testing was. Prindiville (1967) assessed that “learning begins in the person

and is fostered through the human element in the pupil-teacher relationship. When the student experiences a sense of security, he begins to grow” (p. 3). Security in the classroom can be experienced because of a number of aspects- trust, friendship, and appraisal. Other times, security is not felt due to aspects such as prejudice, discouragement, or degradation. It is very important for teachers to remain impartial with students that are proving to be more challenging so as not to come across negatively. If a teacher fails to do so, consequences for students can be dire. Students may even resent their teacher due to these negative impacts, even if unintentional (Prindiville, 1967).

Continuing on with the history of rapport and how it has developed, now we look to how sex plays a role when it comes to student-teacher rapport. Boys are called on more often than girls and girls receive far less attention, in turn. Boys tend to volunteer more than girls and this article talks about its investigation as to whether student volunteering rates could have an impact on good rapport in the classroom. This could be because of teacher bias. Higher achieving boys and girls have the great rapport with their teachers because they are more likely to actively participate in class and answer questions. On the other hand, the lower achieving students tend to have poor rapport with their teachers. This same study showed that the population that benefitted most from their learning were the higher achieving boys and were favored the most. Lower achieving boys tended to have the most poor rapport with their teachers. Altermatt et al (1998) indicated that “teacher bias, as it has typically been defined, is evident in classrooms in which teachers call on students of one sex more frequently than would be expected by chance given the relative proportion of boys and girls in the classroom of interest. For example, teacher bias in favor of boys for convergent and divergent questions would traditionally be concluded if, given a classroom in which 50% of the students were boys and 50% of the students were girls, boys were

called on to answer 50% of all memory questions but 75% of all convergent and divergent questions” (p. 521). The population that was likely the most negatively affected by teacher bias would be the lower-achieving boys, followed by the lower-achieving girls. This can lead to low self-esteem and low confidence, as well as feelings of frustration, apathy, and resentment. These students do not feel a sense of fulfillment because of teacher bias and do not gain the same benefits as those who are higher achieving.

Adults used to make what were called “interest rooms,” where young children were free to do as they wished and allow their imaginations to roam free. A child who is free to play is often less distracted and less likely to engage in destructive behavior. Children appreciated that adults would provide them with an environment where they could both learn and play. Bad rapport in these interest rooms were slim to none. They “enhance the permanent centers, bring the ‘outside world’ into the playroom, and help structure the play environment of the child” (Miles, 1988 p. 1). Not only do the children learn about life outside of the classroom, but they are encouraged to discover who they are by means of playing. No kid could ever resist a teacher telling them to play!

Method and Procedures

My method and procedures include literature review, interviews with five educators (see appendix 1 for interview questions to educators), and a survey with a 6th grade class (see appendix 2 for the survey questions to students). In regards to the teachers, two of them were middle school teachers that work in the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District. Two other subject participants are professors currently teaching at California State University Monterey Bay. The last participant is a professor who currently teaches at College of the Canyons (COC), a

community college in Southern California. Prior to his teaching at COC, he worked with high schoolers. For each participant, I asked them five questions (see appendix 1) and had them elaborate, since they are open ended questions. The reason those teachers were chosen was to gather statistical data in order to understand their points of view. It was also helpful in understanding why they teach the way they do.

I surveyed 59 6th grade students as well. Many of the students were students of color and many of them clearly came from a lower socioeconomic status. These students were all crammed into one classroom that was taught by only two teachers. There was a healthy mix of both sexes. I actually did not choose this class; the principal chose it for me. The reason I chose the students at this school is because I know they are understaffed and the students are not receiving as much one-on-one contact as I would like to see. This school was also where I did my service learning. The students loved me and wanted me to come back at the end of the semester and I told them, I would see what I can do (they're all in 8th grade now- wow!).

My secondary research questions are answered in both the interviews and survey. The questions asked to the teachers (see appendix 1) were based off of my secondary research questions, but I formulated them into question form. The survey was meant to answer my secondary research questions as well, although most of the questions answered question 3 (see appendix 3). This is beneficial, however, because the other questions are based on literature review and the teacher's point of view.

Materials I used for my interview include my cell phone and iPad. With these two tools, I conducted successful interviews that range from about ten minutes to twenty minutes. Materials I used for the survey include my imagination! My little cousin actually helped me think of questions to ask students her age when I started running out of ideas. Of course, I needed to print

out the surveys, so a printer was involved. Lastly, the students used a variety of writing utensils to help me conduct my research and gather statistics. This approach helped me answer my research questions because I noticed patterns after tallying up all the students' answers.

Results, Findings, and Discussion

Results and Findings

In this section, I will be discussing what I discovered after I interviewed teachers and surveyed students. After all the data was gathered, the statistics were astonishing. After tallying up all the students' answers for my survey, I saw a pattern of students who remain neutral with certain questions, or apathetic. Many of my secondary research questions were answered by this survey. Questions 1-6 and 8-9 answer secondary question 3, which asked students if they feel comfortable confiding in their teachers. Questions 7 and 10 answers secondary question 2, which aimed to answer if students feel are affected outside and inside of the classroom. Question 11 answers secondary research question 5, which asked if resources are available for teachers and students to develop good rapport. A majority of the students bubbled in "neutral", probably because they either didn't care that much or because they just wanted to get the survey over with (see appendix 2). Other questions, like question 7, caught almost all of their attention, hence the mixed answers. Some students finished quickly, while others took a while.

After synthesizing my audio interviews, many similarities and differences between my interviewees emerged. Every educator interviewed said that they have good rapport with their students and that their students confide in them. That was the biggest similarity. However, differences were much more noticeable. In Professor D's interview, he mentioned that good rapport is obtained, in his eyes, from politics- not just government politics, but all politics. He likes to know what his students are interested in so he can bond with them over that. Teacher

M's interview stood out because she is a young teacher; therefore, students naturally gravitate towards her and trust her. Her age is also advantageous because she knows student lingo and can understand their "slang". Professor L's interview stood out in the sense that he mentioned that good rapport is dependent on many factors, such as how he responds to students, how students respond to him, and the curriculum content. Overall, I learned quite a bit from my subject participants that I plan on taking with me when it is my turn to teach.

Discussion

I saw a pattern of students who remain neutral with certain questions, or apathetic. I looked over individual surveys and some students spoke very highly of their teacher, but when it came to question 7 (see appendix 2), those same students would bubble in either "disagree" or "strongly disagree." That was very interesting. It makes me wonder if those kids are more closed off to the world. This approach also helped me gain insight about each individual student and how they feel they are being treated in the classroom as an individual. This allows me to get in their minds about their view on teacher-student rapport. I chose this approach because not every child is the same. Surveys allow for anonymity while the researcher gains insight on a particular question. Some students goofed around with the survey and bubbled in all "strongly agree" or "strongly disagree". Unfortunately, I had multiple students do that, so they are included in my charts. Other students were thinking of both teachers and bubbled in "strongly agree", but made a note for me that it was only meant for one teacher. On the other hand, most students did take the survey seriously. Considering it was the equivalent of two full-sized classrooms, I can confidently say the statistics are accurate.

I think the results are super interesting. The students were generally apathetic with the questions because many of the answers' largest response was neutral. However, when it came to

specific questions about the teachers, the students seemed to bubble in agree. Many of the surveys taken were also a mix of disagree or strongly disagree. I have a hypothesis that those are mostly boys because it is difficult for a member of the opposite sex to truly understand the mindset of the other. In contrast, I think the girls mostly bubbled in agree. Questions that were very close to home were paid more attention to; I could tell. Those were the questions where the percentages are closer together. I also think the students didn't know which teacher to choose; I know for a fact that some were basing the survey off both of them because some students bubbled in agree or disagree for the younger teacher only and made a note to me about it. That made me a little sad to see because it seems like students prefer younger teachers over older teachers. In her interview, Teacher M even said she has an advantage because she is closer to her age. I definitely think it's a generational issue. Students today don't have the same problems that adults had. Looking at the surveys, it became clear to me that the older teacher was the one the students were thinking of the most. This leads me to believe she is the primary teacher of the classroom, as she has years of experience with classroom management.

In regards to the interviews, I think it was really interesting to hear all of the teachers take on rapport. We have Professor G, who goes above and beyond to make sure his students' well-being is healthy. We have Professor D, who takes interest in what his students are interested in and pushes them to succeed in whatever that may be. We have Teacher S, who understands that trust is the main component of good rapport and who greets her students individually every day. We have Teacher M, who is close with her students because she has an age advantage. We have Professor L, who understands students via email or office hours. I now know why they teach the way they teach. In a way, I was able to get into their minds psychologically and understand their intention of rapport and what it means to them. They all know not every student is alike and try

to cater to them in the best way possible. This tells me that they are all trying their hardest at their job and I commend them all very much.

Problems and Limitations

In my research, I did face a few obstacles to gain credible and qualitative answers to my research questions. When I began conducting research, I realized that blogs are not credible sources because they are biased and opinionated, so I needed to find other sources (mostly peer-reviewed) in order to accurately depict the notion I was trying to get across. I also came across a few readings that I didn't know were credible sources or not because they did lack vital information, such as an author, published date, and/or an actual title. I know that my collection of data is sufficient to answer my secondary and related questions because I based my survey off of them. Because they were given anonymously and with little context, the students did not know why I was having them fill out this survey- exactly what I wanted. Of course, if a student were to ask, I would tell them. Some students skipped some questions on the survey, and others did not know that the survey had two sides. In turn, that threw off the overall statistics, but not enough to make a monumental difference.

When I emailed the person in charge of students outside of the school I chose, he told me that the students were on their Spring break, so that threw off my original plan. In turn, I had to wait until after their break to get my survey completed.

I also had a few limitations with my interviewees. Most ran pretty smoothly; however, some did not. I forgot the consent forms when I went to interview the middle school teachers, so we had to do the interviews the next day. With Professor D's interview, I had to drive out to Porter Ranch (that's about twenty minutes away from my hometown) to meet him and my GPS refused to work properly, so I had to take one direction at a time, which is extremely dangerous

on the road. Professor L's interview was a headache in and of its own. We had originally planned to meet in his office the Friday before Spring break. Unfortunately, he did not tell me that he moved offices, so I ended up waiting for him for about half an hour. By then, he had to go to a meeting in Salinas and we had to reschedule for after break. When I finally did interview him, I had to leave class early, only to have to wait about another twenty minutes to half an hour. He told me, "I'm stretched for time, so let's try and make this quick." In turn, I felt anxiety kicking in and helpless because interviews cannot be rushed. During the interview, I continuously asked him to elaborate on his answers, as he was only giving me a little to go off of. He did elaborate, but not to my liking; he only elaborated about another sentence, and if I was lucky, maybe two.

Recommendations

The people that this research paper is aiming to affect are future educators, current educators, and parents. My is that they will take away some well-researched insight. Future educators should take note of what has been discovered and how this can affect students both inside and outside of the classroom. I want current educators to think twice when they are about to put a troublesome child in time out or give them detention. Instead, ask *why* the child is being disruptive. *Why* did the student misbehave? Dig a little deeper and you might be surprised! As for parents, I would like for them to note how the teachers are generally rated at the school where your child is at. Do students generally think highly of their teachers or do they generally think low of their teachers? Parents should take initiative to find out why on both ends of the spectrum. Often times, children will not say anything for fear of rejection. Every person reading this paper should be more involved in the student's life. Ask them how their day was. Ask them how their weekend was. Reach out and be approachable! A child is not going to learn from a person they do not have good rapport with.

Conclusion

This senior capstone is to examine how student-teacher rapport impact a student's sense of fulfillment. I have done intensive research, literature review, interviews with educators, and an anonymous survey given out to 59 6th graders. With these resources backing my research paper, I feel like I can accurately conclude that student-teacher rapport has improved from history, but is still flawed. Students do not generally feel a sense of fulfillment in the classroom, and this is likely due to how the teacher comes across.

My literature review supports my question through means of finding the same results, and even rapport in history plays an interesting role. My interviews helped with my research questions for all five research questions. I was able to understand the teachers' point of view in regards to rapport. The survey was the most interesting part of my findings because how students perceive their teachers is vastly different than how teachers perceive their students. It seems as though teachers do try, but students can't tell.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1 Teacher Interview Questions

1. Do you have good rapport with your students? Why or why not?
2. Do you feel like your rapport with your students, or lack thereof, affects them outside of the classroom or how they perform in school? Why or why not?
3. Do students confide in you? If they do, why do you think that is? If they don't, why do you think that is?
4. Do you attempt to be involved with your students beyond the classroom setting? Why or why not?
5. Are any resources available so that as a teacher, you can be more involved in your students' lives? For students, do you think they have any resources to have good or better rapport with teachers?

Appendix 2
Surveys to the Students

1. I feel like I am respected by my teacher.
 - Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree

2. I feel like my opinion is taken into consideration in the classroom.
 - Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree

3. My teacher listens to me objectively.
 - Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree

4. My teacher is compassionate.
 - Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree

5. My teacher is lenient.
 - Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree

6. My teacher is understanding.
 - Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral

- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

7. I feel comfortable talking to my teacher about my home life.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

8. I feel like I have a good relationship with my teacher.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

9. I feel like my teacher cares about my well-being.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

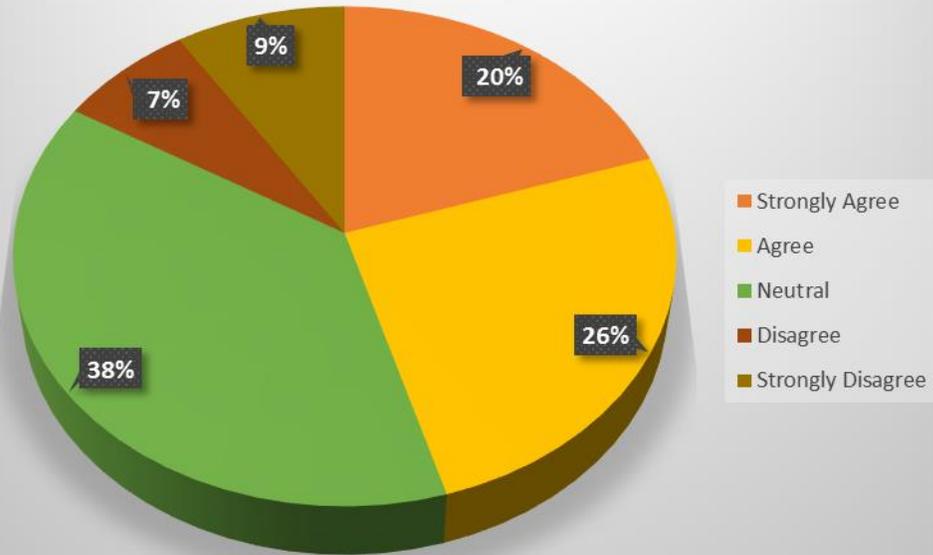
10. My teacher is willing to adapt to different learning styles because he or she knows we don't all learn the same.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

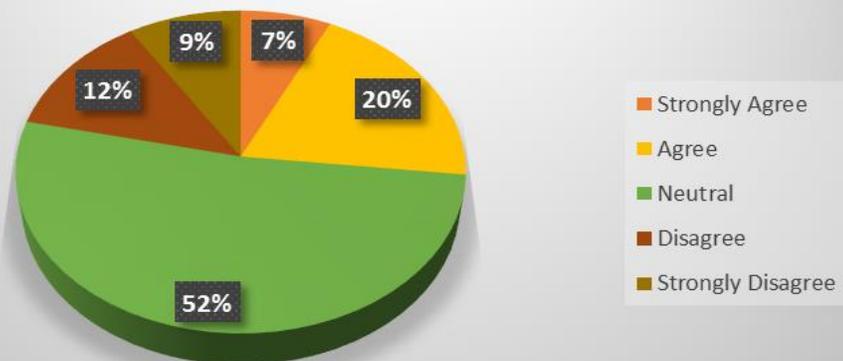
11. My teacher provides good resources to me to prosper in my learning, both in school and at home.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

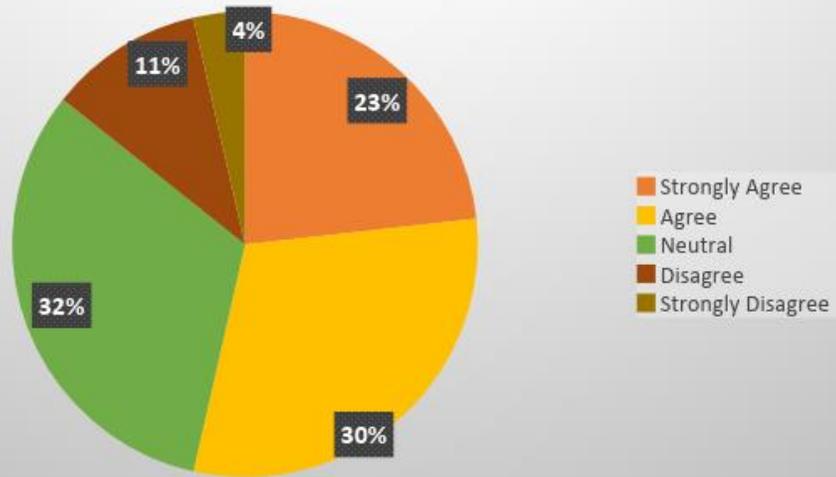
1. I feel like I am respected by my teacher.



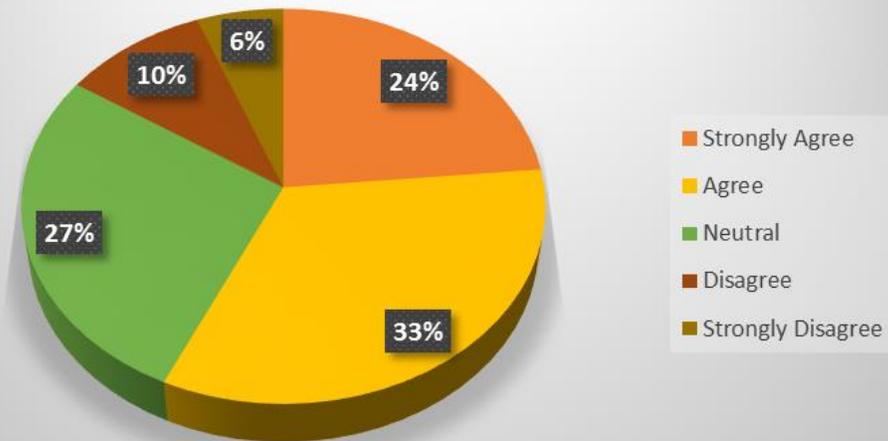
2. I feel like my opinion is taken into consideration in the classroom.



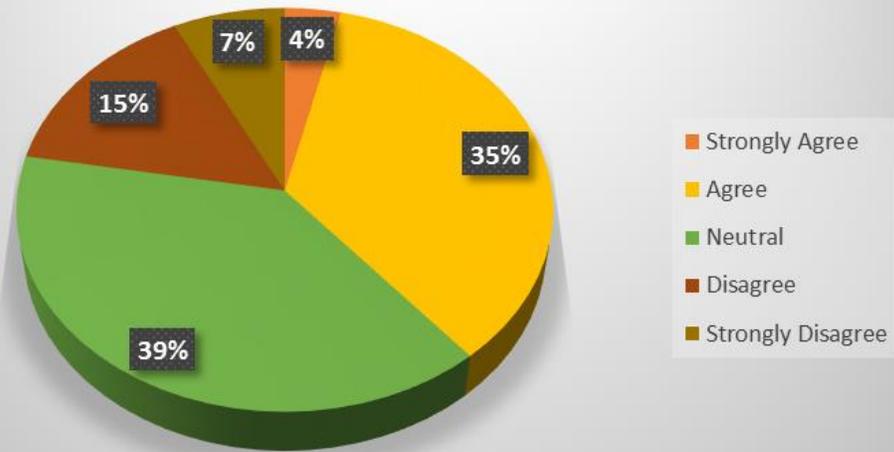
3. My teacher listens to me objectively.



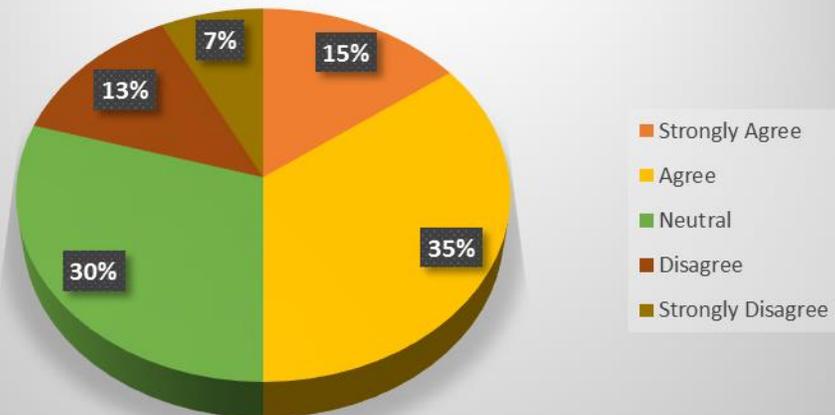
4. My teacher is compassionate.



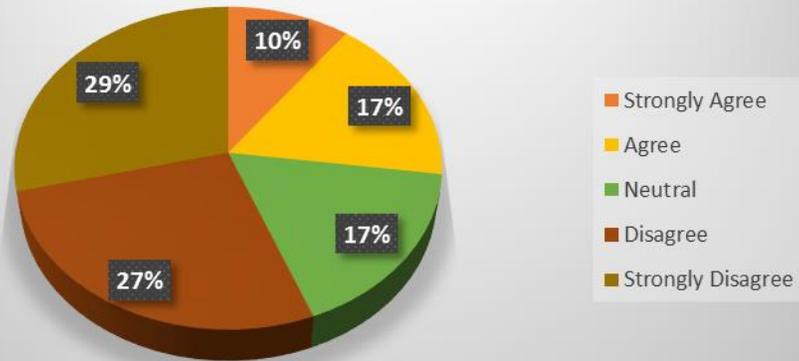
5. My teacher is lenient.



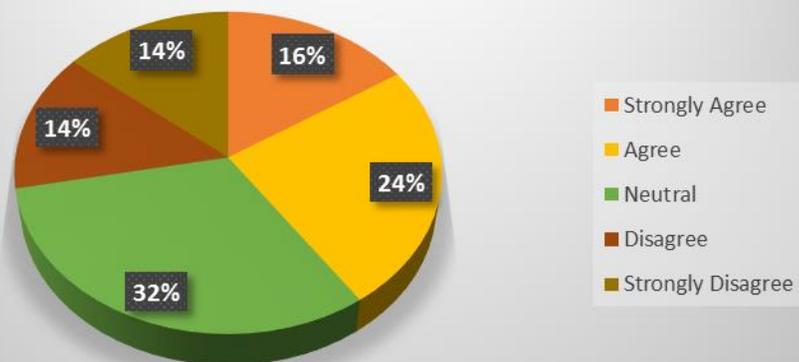
6. My teacher is understanding.



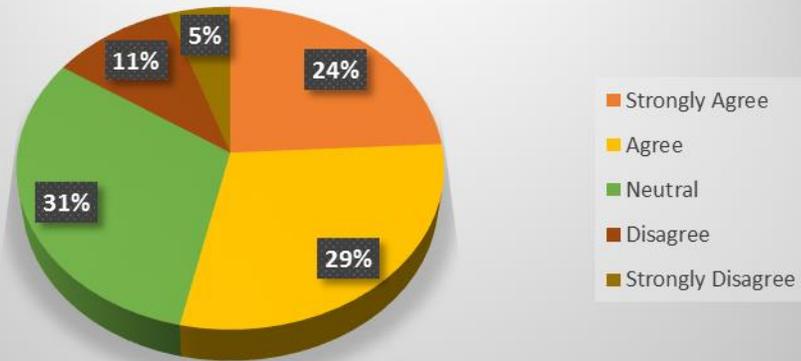
7. I feel comfortable talking to my teacher about my home life.



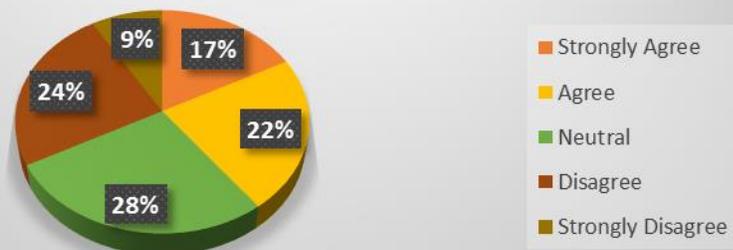
8. I feel like I have a good relationship with my teacher.



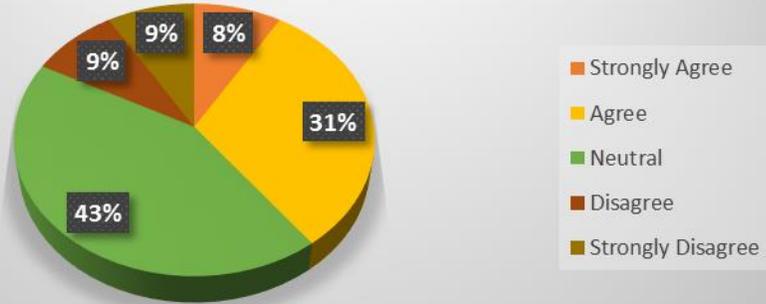
9. I feel like my teacher cares about my well-being.



10. My teacher is willing to adapt to different learning styles because he or she knows we don't all learn the same.



11. My teacher provides good resources to me to prosper in my learning, both in school and at home.



Appendix 3
Secondary Research Questions

1. What does research say about the impact of good rapport between students and teachers on their students' sense of fulfillment?
2. How does student-teacher rapport impact student's fulfillment inside and outside of the classroom? If not, what obstacles hinder the rapport to take place?
3. Why don't students feel comfortable confiding in their teachers?
4. Why don't teachers in general attempt to understand their students beyond the classroom setting?
5. Are there resources available for teachers and students to develop good rapport that fosters student's sense of fulfillment?