Can improving teachers’ relational competence enhance student motivation and concentration?

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1. Research Problem
Danish secondary schools are experiencing growing problems between students and teachers:
• Students seem to lack engagement, motivation and concentration
• Teachers feel burdened by the need to coax and motivate students to work
• Teachers are challenged by the wide range of pedagogical and emotional resources necessary to respond to the heterogeneous student body
• The drop-out rate is too high, and teachers react with frustration and stress

2. Research Question
Can the development of teachers’ relational competence ease the problems related to the lack of motivation and concentration that can be observed in Danish secondary school classrooms?

3. Relational competence
International research (in Hattie 2009, Cornelius-White 2007) has indicated the importance of relational competence for students’ motivation and learning outcome. In Denmark, relations and relational competence have traditionally been considered issues for pre-school or primary school, and theories have concentrated on smaller children (Jensen & Juul 2003, Lynge 2007). In my project I seek to develop concepts that are applicable to the Danish context of secondary school teaching.

A preliminary definition:
Relational competence in teaching is the teacher’s willingness and ability to
1. Observe and adjust his/her own behavior in the classroom
2. See the individual student’s learning potentials and needs
3. Act accordingly with empathy, positive expectations and support
4. Demonstrate clear class leadership and take responsibility for facilitating the learning of the class

Analytical concepts: model of relations in the classroom

4. Theoretical background
• Theories of relations and relational competence – see above
• Humanistic, constructivist pedagogical theories (Carl Rogers, Dewey, Vygotsky, Cornelius-White & Harbaugh)
• Classroom management theory (Kounin 1970), theories of youth culture (Ziehe 2004)
• Research on cognitive consequences of media consumption (Jacobson 2010)

5. Method
• Cases: two classes in secondary schools + 2x3 teachers, followed over 2 years
• Observation and video taping of teaching
• 16 interviews with teachers and students using video-stimulated recall: Interviewing while watching just completed teaching (Rowe 2009)
• Approach inspired by Grounded Theory, NVivo as an analytical tool
• Project will be completed summer 2013

6. Preliminary findings
Teachers need to capture students’ attention with positive contact and with activating teaching and learning methods in order to facilitate the necessary motivation and concentration.

1. The teachers’ eye contact, personal communication and appreciation are important to the students
2. Students are greatly motivated by teachers who show a willingness to help them
3. Many students are demotivated by the traditional teacher-talk method because the teacher seems not to care about them
4. Many students have ADHD-like concentration problems caused by pervasive media consumption and lack of sleep
5. Many students need a more structured learning environment than what they experience