

# Teacher-student Relationships: The Meaning of Teachers' Experience Working with Underachieving Students

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*Abstract:* This paper is based on phenomenological interviews with teachers who worked with underachieving students in South Africa, Russia, and the United States. It focuses on the analysis of meanings that teachers constructed while describing their relationship with underachieving students and how metaphors worked to construct such meanings. The researchers also used Buber's "I-Thou" concept as an interpretive lens to further understand the meanings of teacher-student relationships. The study concludes that the teacher-student relationship is one of the fundamental themes of the teaching experience and is common for teachers from different countries.

*Key words:* Qualitative research, phenomenology, metaphor analysis, teacher-student relationships.

*It can not be just me. It must be you and me, together...*  
Ellen, speech therapist, South Africa.

## Introduction

As former special education and regular teachers we, the researchers, strongly believed that teachers' beliefs in students' potential is essential for helping students to achieve. Phenomenological interviews with teachers about their experience of working with underachieving students in South Africa, Russia and the United States revealed that other teachers shared our belief. What was even more important for them, however, was the relationships that teachers built with their students. The discovery of this meaning coincided with the reading of Martin Buber's work. In fact, his distinction between "I-It" and "I-Thou" helped us see the relationships between teachers and students as the common meaning of teachers' experience in the three

countries, and teacher-student relationships became the focus of our further investigation. The present study explores what meanings teachers constructed while describing their relationship with underachieving students and how metaphors worked to construct such meanings. We also discuss how an understanding of teachers' work can be deepened when looked at through Buber's "I-Thou" lens.

## Related Literature

A substantial body of research demonstrates the importance of teacher-student relationships. The studies of teacher-student relationships from teachers' perspectives revealed that positive teacher-students relationships correlated with students' higher academic achievement, pro-social behavior, school adjustment, and mediated students' later school success [Midgley, Feldlaufer, Eccles 1989; Hamre, Pianta 2001; Stuhlman, Pianta 2001; Pianta, Stuhlman 2004]. The studies of teacher-student relationships from the students' perspectives demonstrated that students have an acute understanding of classroom relationships and how these relationships influence classroom participation and attitudes towards learning [Wentzel 1997; Roeser, Eccles, Sameroff 2000; Raider-Roth 2005]. The quality of the teacher-student relationships is especially important for children who experience social, emotional, and academic difficulties [Lynch, Cicchetti 1992; Murray 2002; Juvonen 2006]. For example, some studies demonstrated that students who were at risk for retention or special education were not retained or referred to special education if they had a positive relationship with teachers [Pianta, Steinberg, Rollins 1995].

The majority of the abovementioned studies used surveys, questionnaires and rating scales as their research method. While these methods helped us appreciate the role of teacher-student relationships in teaching and learning, they say little about what happens within these relationships and what teachers can do to build them. The major limitation of these methods is their inability to describe how the world of teaching appears to teachers and elucidate meanings that teachers construct regarding their work [van Manen 1990]. Qualitative research, and more specifically an existential phenomenological approach, addresses these limitations. It studies the teachers' perceptions of teaching and attends to teachers' first hand descriptions of their work. By doing this, existential phenomenology allows readers to see the classroom through the teachers' eyes. Special attention to metaphors in teachers' descriptions provides a deeper understanding of meaning of teachers' work.

## Theoretical framework and research method

The study of teachers' experience working with underachieving students used existential phenomenology as a theoretical framework and a research method. "Existential phenomenology blends the philosophy of existentialism with the methods of phenomenology to produce rigorous and richly nuanced descriptions of human life" [Thomas, Pollio 2002]. The purpose of existential philosophy is to "elucidate the fundamental themes with which human beings invariably struggle" [Valle, King, Halling, 1989: 6]. Phenomenology studies how reality is experienced; that is, how it appears to consciousness, "so that one might come to an essential understanding of human consciousness and experience" [Valle, King, Halling 1989: 6].

The existential phenomenological research method includes several steps that help researchers to understand how a phenomenon appears to those who experienced it and to describe this phenomenon thematically through the presentation of the patterns of meanings that repetitively reoccur in the participants' stories [Thomas, Pollio 2002]. It starts with a bracketing interview where a researcher shares his or her presuppositions regarding the phenomenon. Next, the researcher conducts a series of open-ended interviews in which participants share their stories regarding the phenomenon of interest. Participants' individual perspectives are important for understanding the "depth and richness of the experience" [Thomas, Pollio 2002: 25]. In a phenomenological interview, the researcher does not have a list of predetermined questions but follows "a flow of the dialogue [as] determined by the participant" and "helps the participant to focus on [relevant] themes and details" [Thomas, Pollio 2002: 26]. In the study of teachers' experience working with underachieving students, participants in the three countries responded to a request, "Tell me about some times when you were working with students who were not achieving as much as you thought they could." Subsequent questions were not determined in advance, but were asked in order to clarify and summarize experiences shared by the participants.

The number of participants in phenomenological studies varies from 6 to twelve. The researcher interviews new participants until repetitive themes in the participants' stories become evident. To participate in the study, potential participants should meet two criteria: 1) having experienced the phenomenon of interest, and 2) being willing to share this experience in an interview. The participants in the study of teachers' experience were nine educators from South Africa, seven educators from Russia, and nine educators from the United States. We use the term "educator" rather than "teacher" to reflect different educational responsibilities that the participants performed [Table 1].

Table 1. Participants of the study

Country	Areas of expertise and experience
South Africa	<p>2 speech therapists in a historically White, at the moment of interviews racially integrated school for children with learning disabilities;</p> <p>2 occupational therapists (provided one-on-one services for students with learning disabilities);</p> <p>1 art teacher – therapist in a school for the deaf (elementary through high school);</p> <p>1 special education high school teacher (age of 14-18 years) in a racially integrated school (45% Blacks, 35% Coloreds, 15% Whites, and 5 % Indians);</p> <p>1 regular education teacher in a school for Blacks and Coloreds;</p> <p>1 former special education teacher and an administrator at the time of the interview;</p> <p>1 regular teacher in a township.</p>
Russia	<p>2 speech therapists and classroom teachers in the boarding school for children with severe speech disorders, responsible for whole class and individual lessons;</p> <p>1 speech therapist in a private school, conducted one-on-one lessons in primary school or individual and small group lessons in kindergarten;</p> <p>1 psychologist in the boarding school, conducted psychological assessment, individual and group therapy, mainly worked with primary school children;</p> <p>1 primary school teacher in a private school;</p> <p>1 Russian language high school teacher in a private school;</p> <p>1 English language teacher in a private school.</p>

An understanding of the experience does not stop with the end of an interview. The focus of phenomenological analysis is on *interpretation*, “bringing out what was there,” not an inference, “bringing out what was not there to begin with” [Thomas, Pollio 2002: 22]. The interpretation of the interviews in this study was conducted in a research team. It started with reading interviews aloud and identifying themes, or repetitive patterns of meanings, of the experience. First, themes were identified within an individual interview. Then, these individual themes were compared with themes of other interviews. As a result, a thematic structure, common themes characteristic for the participants from one country, was developed. In addition to developing

common themes, a ground theme which represents a common meaning of the experience against which other themes emerged, was identified. The results of the phenomenological thematic analyses are presented in Table 2. The interviews from each country were analyzed separately.

Table 2. Thematic structure of teachers' experience working with underachieving students

Category 1: Teachers' Perception of Underachieving Students		
South Africa	Russia	United States
They have so much potential, but they don't know about it.	Everybody is a special story.	If you see their humanity.
Category 2: Teachers' Perception of Their Work in the Classroom		
South Africa	Russia	United States
Let's go and find out.	We go together to the heights.	The whole journey of working with them.
Category 3: Teachers' Perception of Their Lived Experience in the Classroom		
South Africa	Russia	United States
It was very challenging – but it is a joy and privilege.	Our backs are wet – the work can bring you joy.	Day to day battle – it makes you feel good ... finally pay off.
Category 4: Teachers' Perception of Transformations of Students		
South Africa	Russia	United States
The results were amazing.	They bring all these good surprises.	... really, really neat to see that.
Ground Themes		
South Africa	Russia	United States
I want to make a difference in their lives.	School is the meaning of our lives.	I DO care about them.

The comparison of the themes among the countries revealed a similarity in how teachers perceived and described their experience. The thematic description of the experience included four categories: (1) teachers' perception of underachieving students, (2) teachers' perception of their work in the classroom, (3) teachers' perception of their lived experience, and (4) teachers' perception of transformations of their students. The overarching meaning of the experience in the three countries was teachers' relationships with stu-

dents. In order to gain an insight in to what stood out for teachers in their relationships with students we analyzed the initial themes, looking for meanings that teachers constructed while describing relationships with students.

In this analysis we were particularly sensitive to metaphors that teachers used. We were guided by Lakoff and Johnson's [1980] work who suggested that "our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" [3]. Metaphors describe one concept in terms of another and, by doing this, extend the meaning of the former and help one get the handle of the experience. The study of how metaphors worked in teachers' descriptions of their experience and relationships with students helped us to gain deeper insights into the meaning of teachers' work. The results of this analysis are presented in this paper. Our findings are structured around four categories that were initially identified in the three countries. First, we present teachers' perception of their students at the moment of underachievement (category 1) and teachers' perception of transformations of their students (category 4). The presentation of these two categories together allowed us to bring to surface the differences in meanings that teachers constructed while talking about students before and after experiencing success. Then, we present teachers' perception of their work in the classroom (category 2) and teachers' perception of their lived experience in the classroom (category 3). These two categories shed light on what teachers do to establish relationships and help students succeed. Finally, the findings are discussed in connection with Buber's concept of "I-Thou," which provided further insights into the nature of teaching.

## **Teacher's perception of underachieving students and teachers' perception of transformations of their students**

The category of teacher's perception of students did not accidentally appear first. Students in the "their humanity" were the first that teachers talked about. We, the researchers, were surprised how affectionately teachers talked about their learners: "Tony is a bright kid. He is so smart" (Dawn, US); "He's very smart-looking little boy" (Harriet, SA); "But despite all of that he is an excellent student, he turned out to be a very smart student. He has an excellent memory. Very good boy" (Alina, RU). Teachers' emphasis on students' positive qualities and belief in their potential was particularly noticeable. "What I DO know ... they HAVE potential, but they do not KNOW about them" (Alice, SA); "So one of my slogans is, don't be afraid to tell children kind

words, don't be afraid to tell them that you believe in them, don't be afraid to tell them that they will succeed" (Olga, RU); "you KNOW they are capable of so much more" (Karen, US).

When teachers described their underachieving students, several metaphors were noticed. First, underachievement was described in terms of the downward or the lack of movement. For example, "they had so much the sense of failure," "fear of failure," "children that look down," "he has very little support," "no matter what they do, they still don't work up to their potential," "when you are beaten down long enough, it is just easier to give up," "slightly depressed," "no motivation," "passive." Students' emotions were described as negative, meaning not complete or below level: "insecure," "very negative," "his negative emotions inside of him." The metaphor of being closed from communication with others was prominent: "shut down," "reserved," "they were very reserved," "he has been locked in himself," "they wanted to hide behind their books." Students' loneliness was described as the lack of connection, as "wondering off on his own," "never associating with any students on play ground," "he would be on his own," "didn't speak a lot," "he had this lost feeling on his face," "he did not love anybody," "he did not have any attachment," "they cannot communicate," "they don't know how to ask for help." Students' inability to connect with others was also described as a "fight," "oppositional behavior," "lash[ing] out at children," being "prickly" and "angry at the world." Finally, underachievement was perceived as being broken inside – "traumatized," "shattered in small pieces."

The meanings that teachers constructed in the descriptions of their students provided understanding of underachievement as an emotional state, as moving down, as not being connected with others, and being broken inside. Some teachers perceived underachievement as "dying emotionally" or having "emotional baggage." Not surprisingly, teachers perceived themselves as "doctors" or "saviors" at an accident scene who took responsibility for stopping the downward fall and bringing students back to life. This is how Alice from South Africa and Karen from the United States described their work.

I think I can keep comparing to a doctor at an accident scene and actually struggling [for] a person that is already heart has stopped ... and the person, he actually stops bleeding and the heart starts and everything... after they see that the person is back normal and even better. This is actually to... somebody actually died emotionally and because of the lack of success and support and help for, direction in life ... (Alice, a special education teacher, SA).

... and there is just a lot of struggle of just being a teaching in general, but being a teacher of students who have emotional baggage that you really almost have to take on a ... I hesitate to use this phrase, but ... almost a savior role, you know, and that kind of pressure, I don't know, I think if you are a

good teacher, you feel that to some degree... (Karen, a special education teacher, US).

When we looked at teachers' descriptions of students who started making progress, the meanings that teachers constructed and the metaphors that they used were opposite to the meanings and metaphors that described underachievement. For example, success was described as an upward movement and flying: "blossoming," "the child gets wings," "he does not feel himself down to earth," "they opened up," "she has been allowed to take off", "and the child being on this wave [of desire], he starts developing." Positive emotions were described as producing light: "little face shining," "this child lightened up," "their eyes are shining." Establishing connections was described as getting "attached ... like a puppy" and "coming to fetch." While underachievement was described as a movement down and a break down in a relationship, the beginning of progress was described as movement up and connecting with the world. We looked more closely at the themes of the second and third categories to find out what teachers did to bring out these changes in students and help them become successful learners.

## **Teachers' perception of their work in the classroom and teachers' perception of their lived experience in the classroom**

First, teachers went down to the "lonely place" and connected with students by accepting them as they are and validating their experiences.

*But these kids have struggled with school and, you know, they have to know they can be successful and it doesn't just come from giving them academics...it comes from getting to know them and, you know, being a part of what they're going through (Joanne, a special education teacher, US).*

*...connecting with students, for them to know that you DO, you ARE sympathetic, empathetic and, you know, you've been where they are, for them to understand that you are in there, you care about them ... (Sandy, a science teacher, US).*

Teachers' presence gave strength to students. "I am here for you" was a common expression that teachers used to express their support. Spatial metaphors and metaphors of movement were prominent when teachers talked about the beginning of their work with underachievers. For example, they talked about getting "down" to students' "level" and "being on the same



level." Teachers said, "Get down to their level, get down to their mood," "So, you have to get down to his level and give him what he can take. When the child takes it, we can go further." Being "next" to students was another spatial metaphor teachers used: "I sit next to them," "She feels it, she feels better when I am next to her," "I sit in the middle of the class, next to them," "You are not going to throw them without a rope, you are going to be right there, with them." Teachers' support was expressed as "backing up" and "taking up" for them. Teachers used textural metaphors of "warmth" and "gentleness" to describe themselves in relationship to students. For example, they stated, "Friendliness, warmth that sometimes children don't get from their parents," "I am one of those warm fuzzy teachers," "But gradually, only by gentleness, you can take this children only by gentleness." Establishing connections was described as physical experience: "We had to get them to our hands," "you can *take* these children only by gentleness," "softness, going from your heart, eyes to eyes," and "she would hug me and she would try and be with me as much as possible."

Building relationships took place in a conversation, in the act of sharing between the teacher and students. The teachers described: "I very much try to communicate", "in the morning time we have just a short time of 'how are you'," "let's just talk," "it is very important to talk about something personal," "because all children have problems and they have something to share," "when I have an individual conversation with a child, in this conversation the child has to analyze himself what did not work and WHY it did not work, children like these trustful conversations," "I think it is a huge factor, that kind, friendly word and the child immediately, not that he grows up, but he feels more confident in the lesson." Rita's need for being connected with a student was evident in her frustration over her feeling that the connection did not happen:

*After that conversation, he was quiet for a long time and then...I said, OK, I am not going to do anything if you don't try to communicate ...Then he said, nobody talked to me before... Then, it changed to longer conversations and I know that other teachers were trying to talk to him, about school work and other things... and his attitude changed.*

What stands out in all of these descriptions is teachers' responsiveness to students. The teachers that we interviewed for the study were all experts in their field and used a variety of educational approaches in their work. However, when they talked about their experience, they focused not on an approach, but the need to be sensitive to the "buzz" of the classroom and be able "to change directions within a split second" during their teaching. Metaphors of movement and spatial metaphors of "moving up" and finding "direc-

tions" or "ways" were prominent in teachers' descriptions. Having started on the level of their students, the teachers "put the ceiling a little bit higher and higher, and higher" or "gradually raised the bar" or "pushed them further." Teaching was often described as finding a "way:" "You think, 'What is the best way to teach? How?' So that the child will learn the best," "If I try one way and it is not working, than I have to find another way." Some teachers talked about their work as a journey: "The whole journey of working with them!" In conventional communication, *journey* is thought of as a movement forward, towards a new destination. When we think of a journey, an array of metaphors comes to mind. Journey is exciting, but it is also challenging, and the way can be changed in achieving the destination. Teachers talked about destination as an achievement; "I can change direction during the lesson ten times, but I will achieve my main goal."

To summarize, teachers constructed several meanings to describe how they established relationship with their students. These meanings were: being on the same level with students emotionally and academically, supporting them, being available for them, having conversations, pushing them further, seeking and changing directions and finding a way. Several metaphors became evident as we analyzed these meanings- the metaphor of moving up and down, the metaphors of warmth, gentleness and physical connection, and finally the metaphor of direction, way, and journey. Thus, teaching was described as a dynamic, student-oriented, and emotionally charged activity. It was not an approach that made a difference in the life of a student, but a person who "took the responsibility" to respond. The comparison of metaphors describing students before and after experiencing success with metaphors describing teachers' work proved that teaching and learning is first of all a relational act. *He had so much the sense of failure - I am not going to throw him without a rope - The child gets wings. The children who are shut down - Teacher says: "Let's talk" - They opened up. Student: "I am no good" - Teacher: "I am here for you" - Student: "I can do them all."* Buber's concept of "I-Thou" is very similar to the idea of teaching grounded in a meaningful relationship. Using this concept as another interpretive lens gave us an opportunity to deepen our understanding of the relationship between teachers and students and highlight its existential meaning.

## Buber's "I - Thou"

The "I - Thou" relationship is characterized as "direct, mutual, present, and open;" in the "I - It" relationship "one relates to the other only indirectly and nonmutually, knowing and using the other" [Friedman 2005: 29]. In the

"I – Thou," one acknowledges existence of another person in her "wholeness, unity, and uniqueness" and allows her "to exist as a content of one's experience" [30]. The classroom is the place where the teacher and the student meet. At this moment of encounter, teachers did not perceive each student as "It," but as "Thou." "When I confront a human being as my You ... then he is not a thing among things, nor does he consist of things" [Buber 1970: 62]. Teachers repeatedly mentioned the need to see people, not objects, when working with students.

*And Mark is one of many children like that, in the system where I work, and I just realized you know, not any person in that school at the moment would... help Mark and kind of all passed the buck, and ah, I mean, it's not enough, and one teacher said you know I wish I could press a button just to get this child out of the school ...cause they don't know what to do about it (Evelyn, an occupational therapist, SA).*

*I don't have children biologically, but I was talking about my students. They weren't just objects in a classroom to me. I want um, having them everyday, I learned them as people. I could tell when they were having a good day...when they were having a bad day. I wanted to support them in the bad days, encourage them in the good days. So, what stands out to me in working with, in teaching is relationships (Angela, a science teacher, US).*

*So, that really taught me to not judge kids by what they look like or the things that they had done or even that sort of, a kind of tough veneer they put up when you first meet them because of that behavior problem and stuff, that, you know, inside the kids there is a very sensitive person that responds... (May, an English teacher, US).*

Encountering each student as "Thou," teachers approached learning as moving together, not as doing something *to* a student. Mutuality was evident in teachers' "I" changing as much as the student's "Thou." It is not only teachers that made a difference in students' lives, but also students who made differences in the lives of their teachers. Mutuality of "I – Thou" implies a free current of communication from "I" to "Thou" and from "Thou" to "I." The etymology of the word *relate* helps us understand the importance of mutuality in relationship. *Relatus* in Latin means *to carry back* [Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary 1979: 968]. Indeed, this was the case in the stories of our teachers whose students "carried back" their life stories after the formal teacher-student relationship was over.

*Every Friday she made an effort to come back to my room as she was leaving school for the weekend just to say, "Hey Mrs. Williams, just wanted to say hello", you know, "have a good weekend." She'd bring her buddies by and they'd all leave through my room, which wasn't the normal path (Angela, a science teacher, US).*

*So, Gerrard still to this day emails me and calls me and sends me letters because I think that's the important thing about working with kids that are underachieving is making sure that we're giving them enough support that they can succeed even if it's not at the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level, but at the level that they're at. And then there's Edward who calls me about three times a week (Dawn, an elementary/middle school teacher, US).*

Buber wrote about "I – You" relationships between the teacher and students that they "may never unfold into complete mutuality if they are to remain faithful to their nature" [178]. The reason for this impossibility is that a teacher-student interaction is about accomplishing a goal, not the relationship itself. While we agree with Buber's point, we believe that teachers' openness to students brought this relationship close to "I – Thou" and was essential for making changes in students' lives.

Our observation that a relationship is made up of time and space in some sense overlaps with Buber's idea that the "I – Thou" relationship does not know time and space. Teachers' relationships with their students overcame the formal boundaries of school and almost did not know time and space. Teachers talked about their students "all the time" and students' lives were entangled in the lives of their teachers. We believe that it is commitment and engrossment in another's "Thou" that made teachers expand the special and temporal boundaries of their relationships with students. Our reading of teachers' stories revealed that a relationship is made up of time and space. While immediacy of the classroom environment is a well-known aspect of teaching, the need to take time, to invest time was the aspect of teachers' experience that particularly stood out in the present study.

*I guess this bond and relationships are all made up of time. And I tried to communicate to them... I'm here, I have time, I'm willing to give it to you. I'm willing to find a time in your day to help you in whatever it is. So, um, those are the types of bonds I tried to create with my students (Angela, a science teacher, US).*

*I guess the biggest problem with not being able to help the child reach their potential is the time and the management issues in the classroom. Of not being able to spend enough time one on one with a stu-*

*dent, to be able to pull out potential out of them. If I am able to spend one on one with them, for the most part I feel like I can get what they are capable of (Linda, a special education teacher, US).*

The metaphor of classroom as a special place has been well discussed in the literature [Clandinin, Conelly 1995]. Teachers of the current study were vocal about the need to extend the space of the classroom and/or transcend it to establish the relationship with students. They did not close, but opened the doors of their classrooms or went beyond its physical borders.

*Your classes are always open, at break I do not go up to a staff room, I am here in my classroom during recess. And when they are walking around chewing a sandwich or an apple, they come in and say, do you know what happened? (Carol, an art therapist, SA).*

*So I would talk to them about um, you know this year you're going to be in Mrs. Williams' class. And I want you to know that wherever you are, you in a sense belong to me. Not that I am trying to get you wherever you are, but if you're ever in a place in the school and you don't know where to go, I want you to know where my room is. If anything ever happens to you in school, I'm going to care (Angela, a science teacher, US).*

Changes in students came from the relationships with their teachers which, similar to "I-Thou," were non-instrumental, mutual and overcame time and space. In such relationships, "man receives, and what he receives is not "content" but a presence, a presence as strength. This presence and strengths includes: abundance of actual reciprocity, of being admitted; ... nor does association make life any easier for us – it makes life heavier but heavy with meaning. It is guaranteed. Nothing, nothing can be meaningless" [Buber 1970: 158].

## Conclusion

In this study we approached teacher-student relationships from two perspectives. First, we looked at meanings that teachers constructed while describing these relationships and especially looked at metaphors that were used to construct those meanings. Then, we looked at teacher-student relationships through the lens of Buber's "I-Thou" and its qualities of non-instrumentality, mutuality, reciprocity, and time and space. Similarly to the work of others [Noddings 2005; van Manen 2000], these two analyses revealed that responsiveness and mutuality are central to the work of teachers. Regardless of their cultures, teachers focused on their students, their cur-

rent needs, emotional states, ways of being, and their future possibilities. "I – Thou" or "You and Me," we concluded, is one of the fundamental themes of the teaching experience. Moreover, the striking similarities in the way teachers described their work revealed that the patterns of relating and responding to students were invariant for expert teachers in the three cultural contexts. The differences in teaching methodologies among the countries did not influence the essence of teachers' experience. One of the participants responded in her feedback to this finding: "It is not the publisher or the program, it is the relationship that you create with the child [that makes a difference]." We, the researchers, could not agree more with these words, and are indebted to teachers from this invaluable lesson that we learned.

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