

**SAINT AUGUSTINE ON TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP:
RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATION**

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Abstract

In most schools, the teacher is understood as having the full responsibility of making decisions about what will be learned, how it will be learned, when it will be learned, and if the material has been learned. This is based on the assumption that learners need to know only what the teacher teaches them and that the teacher has nothing to learn from the student. The result is a scenario that actively promotes dependency on the instructor. This has also degenerated the educational system. In the face of these emerging problems, Saint Augustine's perspective of teacher-student relationship assumes huge importance. This work, therefore, would study different dimensions of Saint Augustine's perspectives on teacher-student relationship for the purpose of creating the appropriate atmosphere for learning. The hermeneutic method of inquiry would be employed.

Keywords: Augustine, Teacher, Student, Relations, Educational, Outcomes, Success

Introduction

The idea of teacher-student relationship concerns the climate in a school; that is, the way that the school is organized in such a way that it is teacher and student friendly for maximum educational outcomes. This is not only about advances in technology, or ecological or architectural issues; it is more about the relationship between the teacher and the student, feeling of trust, safeness, respect, etc., and how it affects learning. Thus, Augustine writes:

It is necessary to relax the tension and to eliminate the fear, creating a climate of kindness and understanding. It is sometimes necessary to break the ice with words and exhortations that cause their trust... But it is necessary to do this with fineness and tact, breathing trust and understanding... not hurting or embarrassing the student¹.

¹Augustine, St., *Catechesis of Beginners*, 13, 19

This atmosphere is created by the teacher through his looks and the kind of words that he or she uses. Augustine advises teachers to: "Teach with happiness. Sadness darkens the atmosphere and it withers our words"².

The level to which the teacher is able to communicate with joy also affects the level of assimilation of his students. And in fact, the love that students have for their teacher also affects their disposition towards learning from him or her. Augustine, therefore, teaches: "If teachers who speak wisely also wish to teach eloquently, they should so manage their approach that they are listened to with understanding, with pleasure and with assent"³. In this regard, it is not so much about preparing the lesson notes and being eloquent, it is also about the atmosphere created during the delivery: "It is relatively easy to list what needs to be taught. What requires the greatest consideration is the means by which it is taught, so that teachers enjoy their work when they teach. The better they succeed in this, the more attractive they will be"⁴. According to Gracias (2002), the more teachers are able to make the student feel a deep sense of self worth, the more they feel a basic confidence that translates into identification with the teacher and whatever they have to offer for learning⁵. If the teacher fails in this direction, he is not only rejected but what he has to offer for learning will also be rejected. Morahan (2006) asserts that the issue of the climate in a school is very necessary as people develop a sense of self worth not through an inward assessment of themselves but through their relationship with others⁶. This work would study different dimensions of Saint Augustine's perspectives on teacher-student relationship for the purpose of creating the appropriate atmosphere for learning.

1. Adapting to the Students

Augustine has some good years of experience, both in the classroom and outside the classroom. And one of the reasons for his success as a teacher was his ability to adapt to the circumstances of his students. He believed that teachers should adapt their teachings to their students, whom he distinguished into three kinds:

²Augustine, St., *Catechesis of Beginners*, 10, 14

³Augustine, St., *Christian Teaching*, 4, 26, 56

⁴ Augustine, St., *Catechesis of Beginners*, 2, 4

⁵ Gracias (2002)

⁶ Morahan, M. (2006). Climate in the Augustinian school. In Eusebio B. Berdon (Ed.). *Basic elements of Augustinian pedagogy* (pp. 170-182). Augustinian publications, Rome. Morahan (2006), p. 175

1. those well educated in the liberal arts,
2. those who had studied with inferior teachers of rhetoric and who thought they understood things they did not actually understand,
3. and those who were uneducated.

The teacher needs to begin with all students by questioning them about what they know. When teaching well-educated students, Augustine cautioned teachers not to repeat for them what they already know, but to move them along quickly to the materials they had not yet mastered. When teaching the superficially educated student, the teacher needs to insist upon the difference between having words and having understanding. These students need to learn docility and to develop the kind of humility that is not overly critical of minor errors in the speech of others. With regard to the uneducated student, Augustine encouraged the teacher to be simple, clear, direct, and patient. This kind of teaching requires much repetition, and could induce boredom in the teacher, but Augustine thought this boredom would be overcome by sympathy with the student⁷.

Morahan observes that Augustine's method of teaching was weaved around:

Lively discussion, searching together with his students, awareness of differing stages of preparedness of his students in different topics, sensitivity to this, and filling in that which they might not yet be familiar without embarrassing them in front of the rest of the group are all part of his teaching⁸.

He adapted himself to their level so that they can fetch conveniently from the bow of knowledge he carried. He teaches: "Nobody is able to lift someone else up to their level if they cannot in some sense descend and put themselves in the situation of the other"⁹. The teacher needs to reach out to the reality of the students and the diverse personalities of the different students and respond to them in the variety of their peculiarities. According to Augustine: "Different people must necessarily affect the teacher in different ways the teacher's talk

⁷ Leonard, T. (2016). St. Augustine (354–430) - Augustine and Teaching, Influence - Teacher, God, Students, and Student. Retrieved 12th June 2018 from <http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1778/Augustine-St-354-430>.

⁸ Morahan M. (2001). *Education: An Augustine Approach*. Villanova College: Australia. Morahan, M. (2006). Climate in the Augustinian school. In Eusebio B. Berdon (Ed.). *Basic elements of Augustinian pedagogy* (pp. 170-182). Augustinian publications, Rome. Morahan (2006), p. 175

⁹ Augustine, St., *Letter 11*, 4

should, as it were, ... it should affect the hearer in different ways according as his frame of mind varies"¹⁰.

This adaptation of the mode of relationship to each student by the teacher is a sacrifice that sometimes requires that the teacher lives within the student, managing not just the climate in the classroom but series of micro climates visible in the teacher's relationship with each student. This sacrifice requires love. Augustine teaches that: "Let us adapt ourselves to our students with a love which is at once the love of a brother, of a father and of a mother."¹¹

Adapting oneself to the students also involves the choice of language that the teacher uses. Language is meant for communication, and if the teacher uses a language that the student do not understand or is not familiar with then he fails in teaching. According to Augustine:

[For we who teach] Choice of language is made not on the basis of what sounds well, but rather on whether it indicates or suggests to those listening what the speaker wishes to communicate. For that reason, the distinctive mark of a good teacher is to love the truth above everything and words only in as far as they support the truth. As what does it serve to have a key made of gold if it cannot open the door we wish to unlock? Or what is wrong with a wooden key if it completes its task of opening up what was locked?¹²

Augustine further teaches that: "The one that teaches should avoid words that do not teach"¹³. The teacher would need to build on the language and interests of his students, in such a way that he takes advantage of the student's preexisting knowledge and experience.

As the teacher teaches, he must watch the disposition of his students. If the teacher doesn't watch this, he might end up speaking to himself rather than the students. He should know when they are tired and yawning so that he would know when to chip in a story to make them laugh or to catch their attention. In this way, he is able to spice up what he teaches. Augustine compares eating with learning: "Eating and learning have something in common, both are means of subsistence: one for the body, the other for the soul. Because many people are

¹⁰Augustine, St., *Catechesis for Beginners* 15:23

¹¹Augustine, St., *Catechesis for Beginners* 12:17

¹²Augustine, St., *Christian Teaching*, 4, 10-11, 24-26

¹³Augustine, St., *Christian Teaching*, 4, 10, 24

fussy and fastidious, even those foodstuffs without which life cannot be supported need their pickles and spices”¹⁴.

Augustine advocates for the restrained style of teaching, which requires that the teacher does not overload the student with too much material, but stays on one theme at a time, to reveal to the student what is hidden from him, to solve difficulties, and to anticipate other questions that might arise. Teachers also should, from time to time, speak in what he called the *mixed style*—using elaborate yet well-balanced phrases and rhythms—for the purpose of delighting their students and attracting them to the beauty of the material. Teachers should also speak in the *grand style*, which aims at moving students to action. What makes the grand style unique is not its verbal elaborations, but the fact that it comes from the heart—from emotion and passion—thus moving students to obey¹⁵.

The teacher should also know when to ask the students to stand up and when to sit down. Augustine, therefore, teaches that:

It also happens frequently that some who at the beginning of instruction listened with pleasure, then tire of listening or of so much time standing, and open their lips not to praise our words, but to yawn, or even to communicate a desire to leave. As soon as we realize this is happening, the right thing to do is to regain their attention by telling something cheerful and entertaining, related to the topic with which we are dealing. We may also take account of their physical concerns by getting them to sit down or stand up ... or we may focus on something which we know relates particularly to the person who is drowsy in order to re-arouse his attention.¹⁶

Beyond the disposition of the students, the teacher also needs to know what to teach at a particular time and what not to teach, judging the age and maturity of the students. Augustine writes that: “The good teacher knows what to pass on and what to hold in reserve”¹⁷. In another text, he teaches that: “Due to the lack of capacity or maturity of your students you may decide not to address certain issues or facts at a certain time”¹⁸.

¹⁴Augustine, St., *Christian Teaching*, 4, 26

¹⁵ Leonard, T. (2016). St. Augustine (354–430) - Augustine and Teaching, Influence - Teacher, God, Students, and Student. Retrieved 12th June 2018 from <http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1778/Augustine-St-354-430>.

¹⁶Augustine, St., *The Catechesis of Beginners*, 13, 19

¹⁷Augustine, St., *Commentary on the Psalms*, 36, 1, 1

¹⁸Augustine, St., *Against Lying*, 10, 17

2. Authority and Discipline

Creating the appropriate climate for learning in schools also depends on the management of the use of authority and punishment. There are times that teachers use disproportionate punishment that scares students away rather than dispose them for learning. According to Augustine:

Let us guard against any excess in the use of punishment, and against any shortcoming in our readiness to pardon. Let us not punish if it is not for the sake of improvement, and avoid all indulgence that may lead to worsening behaviour. Let us consider as our family all those who have been put in our charge. Let us be at their service as if we were embarrassed at having power over them, and use the power in such a way that we enjoy serving them¹⁹.

As the teacher exercises authority over the student, he must also create a place for reason, and not use authority in such a way that it suffocates the use of reason by the student. Thus, Augustine avers that:

Authority is like a door to education. Learning on the basis of authority may come first in time but ideally, reason should be placed first. Once the student has entered by authority, she or he best goes on to figure out, by means of reason, the principles accepted on the basis of authority... At the beginning, the student is a mere follower, guided and served by the authority, but, little by little, he becomes his own guide. The more mature the person becomes, the more that person will grow in knowledge and in wisdom²⁰.

Furthermore, Augustine teaches that the authority of the teacher must be grounded on good example: "Human authority completes a mission of service. But if it is not linked to the confirmation of good example, it can be deceiving. The good behaviour of those who exercise authority is the best and most effective confirmation of the truths they teach"²¹.

3. Good Example as the Best Lesson

Beyond the exercise of authority, the teacher is able to reach his students through the example of his life. Augustine teaches that: "Teachers offer themselves for

¹⁹Augustine, St., *Order*, 2, 8, 25

²⁰Augustine, St., *Order*, 2, 26

²¹Augustine, St., *Order*, 2, 9, 27

imitation. In many cases this is what we mean by teaching”²². In fact Augustine strongly believes that the life of the teacher communicates more knowledge than what he says:

Although the way of saying things has great importance, the teacher’s own life is the most decisive factor affecting the receptivity of the audience. There is never a shortage of those who, in order to justify their own shortcomings, find an excuse in the faults of their teachers, saying in their hearts if not even to the faces, “Why don’t you practice what you preach, if it is as good as you proclaim?” Distracted this way and rejecting the teacher, they end up rejecting the teachings²³.

When a teacher does not teach with good example, Augustine compares him to milestones that show the way but do not walk the way: “There are teachers that are like milestones: they show the way to others, but they themselves are at a standstill”²⁴. In fact, the teacher who lives a bad life, kills what he teaches by his way of life: “The one who teaches well and lives badly is really one who speaks words that do not belong to him. How can they be if he denies them with his deeds?”²⁵

Conclusion

Recent studies in the area of education have revealed a couple of issues in the relationship between teachers and students. Knowles (1984) observes that, in most schools, the teacher is understood as having the full responsibility of making decisions about what will be learned, how it will be learned, when it will be learned, and if the material has been learned. This is based on the assumption that learners need to know only what the teacher teaches them and that the teacher has nothing to learn from the student. Hiemstra and Sisco (1990) argue that the result, is a scenario that actively promotes dependency on the instructor. The teacher-student relationship is one of a narrating subject (the teacher) and patient, listening object (the student); the contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. The student is charged with the primary responsibility of memorizing mechanically the narrated content. Freire (1972) observes that this experience transforms the student into a mere container. Like a tunnel which is less affected by the fluid, the content passes through him and he does not pass through it.

²² Augustine, St., *Music*, 1, 6

²³ Augustine, St. *Christian Teaching*, 4, 27, 60

²⁴ Augustine, St. *Sermon* 119, 2

²⁵ Augustine, St. *Christian Teaching*, 4, 29, 62

Thus, the more completely the teacher fills the receptacle, the better a teacher he is. The more meekly the receptacles permit themselves to be filled, the better student they are. Words are transmitted without any reflection on them, and since creativity is born out of reflection, this kind of knowledge has no place for creativity. The consequence is a mentality that suffocates every aperture for innovative thinking. It is in the face of these emerging problems that Saint Augustine's perspective of teacher-student relationship assumes huge importance. Augustine sees the relationship as one between collaborators in the search for truth.

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