Positive teacher-student relationships are seen through a variety of psychological models.

The role of teacher relationships in the lives of students

Katia Fredriksen, Jean Rhodes

As all parents know, children’s relationships with their teachers can be a crucially important influence, affecting students’ connection to school, motivation, academic performance, and psychosocial well-being. Students spend a great deal of time at school, and the classroom is the source of many of their interpersonal relationships and activities. Although children’s social adjustment to school was initially examined primarily through relationships with classroom peers, research increasingly has highlighted the significance of student-teacher relationships.¹

Academic achievement

Relationships with teachers may have an impact on students’ learning and academic achievement. Children with better social skills may be more adept at interacting in positive ways with teachers and peers, and teachers may interpret positive interactions as reflecting not only social competence but also intellectual competence. In addition, children who are motivated to seek approval from their teachers may employ achievement-related behaviors to meet this
goal. Finally, supportive relationships with teachers may augment students’ motivation to learn and actively participate in subject domains that have traditionally held little interest for them. Increased participation may result in changes in attitude regarding the subject domain as students experience increased efficacy, interest, and perceived utility.²

**Psychological adjustment**

While most work to date has focused on academic outcomes, there is growing evidence that perceptions of support from teachers also affect psychological adjustment. In a preschool population, researchers found that secure attachment with a teacher partially compensated for insecure child-mother attachment relationships, predicting teacher-rated social competence and prosocial behavior. In an elementary school population, students who reported more positive bonds with their teachers obtained higher scores on self- and teacher-reported social and emotional adjustment outcomes. In addition, elementary school children appear to make judgments about their classmates based on perceptions of how the target child interacts with and is perceived by the teacher, which has implications for peer acceptance and rejection.³

Teacher support also appears to have an impact on psychological adjustment in older students. Students who attended middle schools that deliberately sought to enhance teacher-student relationships tended to have fewer adjustment difficulties during the transition. Indeed, changes in perceptions of teacher support predicted changes in both self-esteem and depression among middle school students, such that students who perceived increasing teacher support showed corresponding decreases in depressive symptoms and increases in self-esteem, while students who perceived decreasing teacher support showed increased depressive symptoms and decreased self-esteem. Other researchers have emphasized the impact of positive teacher relationships on students’
social development, with this support serving a regulatory function in children’s and adolescents’ development of not only academic and behavioral skills but also emotional skills. These findings suggest that teacher support can help to buffer some of the stress associated with middle school, offsetting the risk for adjustment difficulties.4

Factors contributing to the quality of student-teacher relationships

Researchers have identified a number of factors that contribute to the quality of student-teacher relationships. The development of these relationships is a dynamic process that is built on the beliefs, values, and skills of both participants. Elementary school students who believe that they are good at interacting with their teachers are more likely to report a warm student-teacher relationship and to report turning to their teacher when they need emotional or academic support, as well as modeling themselves after their teacher. Students who exhibit problem behaviors, including inattention, internalizing, and disruptive and aggressive behaviors, are likely to have negative relationships with their teachers that may be critical and punishing, and characterized by conflict and a lack of warmth. In addition, students who experience greater dissatisfaction with the school environment, or who are reluctant to use adults as a source of support or to invest in relationships with adults, are likely to experience less supportive relationships with their teachers.5

Teacher characteristics also play an important role in the formation of close ties with students. Researchers have linked teachers’ attachment histories with their primary caregiver with the quality of student-teacher relationships. Elementary teachers’ levels of stress and negative affect predicted the number of students with whom teachers had negative relationships. Teachers who are stressed may be more likely to display inappropriate negative affect,
such as anger and hostility, thereby creating an adversarial stance with students. Teachers’ images of themselves as educators, as well as their beliefs about their efficacy in the classroom and their expectations for students, also appear to influence the ways in which they interact with students, as do their gender, experience, socioeconomic status, education, and ethnicity.6

Theoretical models
Researchers have presented a number of models that have somewhat different ways of framing positive student-teacher relationships and the role students and teachers play in forming these. Researchers who view student-teacher relationships through an attachment lens conceptualize them as extensions of the parent-child relationship. From an attachment perspective, warm, supportive, caring relationships characterized by open communication, trust, involvement, and responsiveness are necessary to help children develop behavioral, social, cognitive, and emotional skills.7 Good student-teacher relationships are characterized by low levels of conflict and high levels of closeness, supporting children’s motivation to explore as well as their growing ability to regulate social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Children use their relational models concerning the nature of social relationships and their social world, including conceptions of emotional closeness, conflict, and dependency, to shape interpretations of classroom interactions. Children who have experienced insecurity with primary attachment figures are likely to be ambivalent toward exploration and intimacy experiences, while children who have formed secure attachments with primary caretakers are likely to have the skills to engage more adaptively in these sorts of experiences.

Teachers also play a role in shaping relationships through the emotional quality of their interactions with children, as well as their responsiveness in terms of frequency and consistency to children’s needs. They can be particularly important to early adolescents, who are often undergoing profound shifts in their sense of self and are struggling to negotiate changing relationships with their parents.
and peers. Since teachers have the advantage of standing outside these struggles, they can provide a safe context for support and guidance, while transmitting adult values, advice, and perspectives.动机研究者倾向于集中研究教师作为有效讲师所起的作用，指出学生不仅依赖于教师能够提供的结构和支持，而且依赖于教师能够帮助他们感到在学术上成功的能力。教师的期望、信念和行为被认为影响了他们与学生的关系质量。例如，教师能够在课堂中平衡结构需求和学生自主需求的程度预测学生对学习的内部化和努力的感觉，以及他们对能力的感知。研究表明，通过创造一个鼓励归属感和支持的环境，教师可以同时满足学生的学术和社会需求。

社会文化视角下的学生-教师关系引入了另一种评估其质量和影响的方法，关注这些关系的嵌套结构，这些结构被嵌入课堂，这些课堂又嵌入学校，这些学校又嵌入学术文化。生态研究显示了学生-教师关系的相互作用，以及课堂、学校、社区和其他系统相互作用影响这些关系质量的方式。例如，当学生感知学校有爱心时，他们倾向于更积极地看待与教师的关系。研究显示，学生与同班同学和学校的联系可能影响他们与教师的关系；例如，同班同学的规范与教师和学术规范的对应程度可能会影响学生-教师关系的质量。在 addition, 学生对教师与其他学生在课堂中的关系的感知可能影响他们自己与教师的关系。
Developmental systems theory also views student-teacher relationships in the context of a number of systems. The developing child, a system in and of himself or herself, functions in the context of proximal (for example, temperament) and more distal (for example, student-teacher relationships) systems. Within the school setting, interactions take place within and across levels, as teachers are influenced by their beliefs about a particular child as well as by their training and the school in which they work, and these interactions are reciprocal and bidirectional. The child’s competence springs from both the child’s characteristics, such as attention and cognition, and the child’s relations and interactions in the context of the classroom. Relationships between children and adults are largely responsible for developmental change, and relationships with teachers form developmental stepping-stones on which students’ later school experiences build.

The role of schools

Student-teacher relationships deeply influence students’ academic and psychosocial functioning. Although different models vary in their explanation of these effects, none denies their existence. As demonstrated, evidence suggests that student-teacher relationships remain important throughout students’ academic careers, with research spanning from preschool to high school. However, close and confiding student-teacher relationships appear to be more the exception than the rule. Students may develop one or two important ties with certain teachers over the course of their schooling, but they do not perceive their typical teacher relationships as particularly close or meaningful.

Given the way schools are structured, this is not surprising. The same teachers who are being asked to provide more personalized support are simultaneously being saddled with additional obligations. A growing emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing has given rise to dense curricular demands that have constrained teachers and left little room for the sorts of conversations and activities
that typically draw them closer to their students. Larger student-teacher ratios have left each young person with a smaller piece of the teacher’s attention. Sadly, many adults who were initially drawn to the teaching profession out of a desire to establish meaningful connections with their students have become increasingly disillusioned by the structural impediments to relationships in schools. Supportive bonds become even less practical as students move into middle and high school and no longer have a primary teacher with whom they spend most of the day. Rather than presenting impediments, schools should increase the likelihood of teacher-student bonds.

The supportive potential of teachers has not gone entirely unnoticed among school reformers, however, and they recommend a broad array of efforts to capitalize on it. A major challenge for schools will be to create settings that can increase and facilitate teachers’ and other staff members’ caring potential, while maintaining academic rigor and teacher autonomy. In addition to making teacher salaries more competitive (the starting salaries of New York City teachers hover around $30,000 per year) and establishing a corps of highly qualified and high-quality teachers, we should evaluate school policies in terms of their effects on student-teacher relationships.

There is unequivocal evidence that lowered student-teacher ratios are associated with improved student achievement and competence, and this is a straightforward means of improving teacher-student interactions. Similarly, policies that ensure more contact and continuity with teachers, such as homerooms, advising, and multiyear teacher assignments, might provide students with support for learning and development through relationships. Resources should be deployed that enhance student-teacher fit such that the student feels supported and the teacher feels effective.

Interventions at the school climate level can affect student-teacher contact and quality through restructuring of time and scheduling, allocation of space and teaching resources, placement policies, and work related to school values, cultural issues, and staff support and involvement in decision making. Such programs,
involving changes at the classroom level, such as the Child Development Project, or within specific student-teacher interactions, such as the Students, Teachers, and Relationship Support (STARS) system, should be more widely implemented, so that children and adolescents can reap the many benefits associated with positive student-teacher relationships.13

Notes


13. According to Pianta, Stuhlman, and Hamre (2002), the Child Development Project is designed to promote social and moral development, a sense of
community, and caring for students. This program has primarily been implemented in elementary schools, with interventions at both the classroom and school levels. In contrast, the Students, Teachers, and Relationship Support (STARS) system is designed to help the teacher improve his or her relationship with a particular student. The program uses a supportive relationship with a consultant to target the teacher’s representation of his or her relationship with the student as well as the teacher’s behavior toward the student.

Katia Fredriksen is a doctoral candidate in the clinical psychology program at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Jean Rhodes is professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts Boston, a clinical and community psychologist, and a fellow of the American Psychological Association.
Teachers play vital roles in the lives of the students in their classrooms. Teachers are best known for the role of educating the students that are placed in their care. Beyond that, teachers serve many other roles in the classroom. Teachers set the tone of their classrooms, build a warm environment, mentor and nurture students, become role models, and listen and look for signs of trouble. Teaching Knowledge. The most common role a teacher plays in the classroom is to teach knowledge to children. The phrase "The relationship between a teacher and student should be like a fish and water but not like a fish and fisherman." is to be considered once by every teacher. 1.6k views · View 1 Upvoter. Unison Kinder World School.