



# The Effects of Teacher-Student Relationships: Social and Academic Outcomes of Low-Income Secondary School Students

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## 1. Introduction

Teachers play an important role in the trajectory of students throughout the formal schooling experience. Although most research regarding teacher-student relationships investigate the elementary years of schooling, teachers have the unique opportunity to support students' academic and social development at all levels of schooling. Aligned with attachment theory, positive teacher-student relationships enable students to feel safe and secure in their learning environments and provide scaffolding for important social and academic skills. Teachers who support students in the learning environment can positively impact their social and academic outcomes, which is important for the long-term trajectory of school and eventually employment.

When teachers form positive bonds with students, classrooms become supportive spaces in which students can engage in academically and socially productive ways. Positive teacher-student relationships are classified as having the presence of closeness, warmth, and positivity. Students who have positive relationships with their teachers use them as a secure base from which they can explore the classroom and school setting both academically and socially, to take on academic challenges and work on social-emotional development (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). This includes relationships with peers, and developing self-esteem and self-concept. Through this secure relationship, students learn about socially appropriate behaviors as well as academic expectations and how to achieve these expectations. Students in low-income schools can especially benefit from positive relationships with teachers.

Students in high-poverty urban schools may benefit from positive teacher-student relationships even more than students in high-income schools, because of the risks associated with poverty. Risk outcomes associated with poverty include high rates of high school dropout, lower rates of college applications, low self-efficacy, and low self-confidence. There are several factors that can protect against the negative outcomes often associated with low-income schooling, one of which is a positive and supportive relationship with an adult, most often a teacher. Low-income students who have strong teacher-student relationships have higher academic achievement and have more positive social-emotional adjustment than their peers who do not have a positive relationship with a teacher. There is substantial research on the importance of teacher-student relationships in the early elementary years. However, little is known about the effects of teacher-student relationships on secondary school students. Studies show that early teacher-student relationships affect early academic and social outcomes as well as future academic outcomes, but few researchers have looked at the effects of teacher-student relationships in later years of schooling. Researchers who have investigated teacher-student relationships for older students have found that positive teacher-student relationships are associated with positive academic and social outcomes for Secondary school students.

## 2. Academic Outcomes

Although many studies focus on the importance of early teacher-student relationships, some studies have found that teacher-student relationships are important in transition years; the years when students transition from elementary to middle school or middle to high school. Studies of math competence in students transitioning from elementary to middle school have found that students who move from

having positive relationships with teachers at the end of elementary school to less positive relationships with teachers in middle school significantly decreased in math skills. For students who are considered at high risk for dropping out of secondary school, math achievement is significantly impacted by the perception of having a caring teacher. Furthermore, students who went from low teacher closeness to high teacher closeness significantly increased in math skills over the transition year, from elementary to middle school. These studies show that relationships with teachers in the later years of schooling can still significantly impact the academic achievement trajectories of students. Another example of the importance of teacher-student relationships in secondary school students stems from intervention studies aimed at improving academic outcomes for low-income students. Research shows that positive teacher-student relationships can improve academic skills in students as early as middle school and as late as secondary school. In addition to positive teacher-student relationships, student's motivation to learn is another factor that influences social and academic outcomes.

A possible reason for the association between academic improvement and positive teacher-student relationships is students' motivation and desire to learn. Motivation may play a key role in the relationship between teacher-student relationships and academic outcomes. Motivational theorists suggest that student's perception of their relationship with their teacher is essential in motivating students to perform well. Students who perceive their relationship with their teacher as positive, warm and close are motivated to be more engaged in school and to improve their academic achievement. Students' motivation to learn is impacted positively by having a caring and supportive relationship with a teacher. Motivation is closely linked to student's perceptions of teacher expectations. Studies of middle and high school students have shown that students shape their own educational expectations from their perceptions of their teachers' expectations. Students who perceive that their teachers have high expectations of their academic achievement are more motivated to try to meet those expectations and perform better academically than their peers who perceive low expectations from their teachers. Due to the influence of expectations on motivation, expectations can be an important factor on a student's academic achievement.

Furthermore, teacher-student relationships have an impact on the academic self-esteem of students. High-poverty students often have low academic self-esteem and low confidence in their academic and vocational futures. Thus, positive relationships with teachers are important in supporting higher levels of self-esteem, higher academic self-efficacy, and more confidence in future employment outcomes. Self-confidence and future aspirations have a significant impact on students' interest in school, their academic self-efficacy and in turn, their academic achievement. In addition to academic achievement, positive teacher-student relationships provide important social outcomes for students.

### 3. Conclusion and Limitations

Although there is extensive research on the positive effects of teacher-student relationships on elementary school students, there is little research on middle and high school students. Middle and high school is when students begin to think about their academic futures, which are informed by academic achievement and social capital in elementary years. Early high school is usually when students dedicate themselves to graduating or decide to drop out. Currently, high school dropout rates are high, and improving teacher-student relationships for students at this stage may decrease dropout rates. Similarly, high school is when students decide if they plan to attend college or stop their education. Therefore, it is important to develop positive teacher-student relationships during this time.

### References

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