Building Strong and Positive Teacher-Student Relationships in the Classroom: A Systematic Literature Review and Strategy Guide

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Abstract

This systematic literature review, originating as an action research study, synthesizes scholarly literature to explore how strong, positive teacher-student relationships, particularly those built on an authoritative teaching style, profoundly impact the classroom environment and student learning. The review identifies evidence-based strategies for building foundational interpersonal connections, implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-sensitive practices, and cultivating genuinely positive classroom environments. An accompanying webpage, https://selteachertostudentrelationships.com/, serves as a practical resource where teachers can self-reflect on their practices, evaluate the quality of their relationships with students, and discover actionable techniques to foster more supportive and positive learning environments. This research offers practical strategies for educators to enhance their relationship-building skills. The study draws upon four key theoretical components from Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as set forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020), John Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) to provide an integrated framework for understanding these dynamics.

Keywords:

Teacher-student relationship, relationship-building strategies, social and emotional learning (SEL): social awareness and relationship skills, attachment theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, positive learning environment

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The quality of teacher-student relationships is paramount in education, as these connections create vibrant communities where safety, trust, and mutual respect flourish. Research shows that strong relationships foster positive classroom climates, enhance student engagement, and improve academic outcomes, highlighting a critical need for evidence-based strategies. Without such relationships, student disengagement and disruption frequently result. This systematic literature review focuses on teachers and their relationships with students, offering insights relevant to educators across all grade levels and diverse student populations. Drawing upon scholarly literature and frameworks such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020), John Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), this study synthesizes current understandings of how teachers' relationship-building strategies meet students' social-emotional needs, impact the classroom environment, and improve student learning outcomes. The project provides an accessible webpage designed to empower educators with actionable steps to foster more enriching educational experiences.

Problem Statement

Students today navigate complex stressors, including high-stakes assessments, diverse classroom expectations, socioeconomic disparities, and the profound impact of trauma, particularly Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (California Department of Health Care Services et al., 2024). These challenges create significant emotional burdens; for instance, 34% of California youth have experienced at least one ACE (California Department of Health Care Services et al., 2024). Such experiences often lead to difficulties with social awareness, relationship skills, emotional regulation, and interpersonal conflict, often manifesting as challenging classroom behaviors (Strader, 2018; Pianta et al., 2012). Students from Title I

schools and English Language Learners face compounded stressors, heightening their vulnerability and sometimes resulting in punitive responses rather than supportive interventions.

These pervasive student challenges, coupled with high academic standards, inclusive learning environments, and diverse student needs, place immense demands on educators. While most teachers recognize the vital importance of positive teacher-student relationships, consistently cultivating strong bonds, especially with students exhibiting challenging behaviors, remains a persistent struggle. This gap leads to student disengagement, suboptimal academic outcomes, and increased teacher burnout, hindering the creation of safe, stable learning environments. Addressing this requires equipping educators with effective, evidence-based strategies to foster robust relationships with every student.

Theory of Action

Imagine stepping into two different classroom environments: one marked by disengagement and struggle, the other by productive energy and deep connection. This contrast highlights the critical need for understanding the principles and strategies that cultivate positive learning environments through strong teacher-student relationships.

This project's theory of action suggests that providing educators with evidence-based strategies for strong teacher-student relationships will transform classroom environments into more positive, respectful, and collaborative spaces. This transformation is expected to reduce disruptive behaviors, increase student engagement, enhance student social-emotional competence (e.g., self-regulation, empathy, relationship skills, as conceptualized by CASEL, 2020, Attachment Theory, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs), and improve learning outcomes (e.g., increased motivation, academic achievement, measurable through tools like CLASS) (Henry & Thorsen, 2018).

The primary actions involve teachers intentionally implementing literature-identified relationship-building techniques, practicing empathetic communication, and fostering emotional

literacy. Educators will consciously integrate these strategies, with the accompanying webpage serving as a practical resource for self-reflection and actionable steps.

Performance targets project a positive transformation: students will exhibit improved self-regulation, greater engagement, and more harmonious peer interactions, and will reflect a heightened sense of safety and belonging. Teachers will experience increased efficacy in classroom management, deeper student connections, enhanced job satisfaction, and reduced stress. This collective impact results in the cultivation of a more supportive, predictable, and positive classroom climate conducive to learning and social-emotional growth, characterized by reduced disruption and increased engagement, consistent with empirical findings (e.g., those using CLASS).

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates four theoretical frameworks: the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) framework, John Bowlby's Theory of Attachment, Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954), and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). These frameworks collectively provide a comprehensive lens for understanding student social-emotional development, the psychological underpinnings of relationships, student foundational needs, and the observable quality of teacher-student interactions, informing effective measurement and improvement of teacher-student relationships to affect classroom environments and student outcomes.

CASEL Framework

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) framework promotes the social-emotional well-being of the whole child by cultivating skills and environments that enhance student learning and development (2020). Its core competencies, particularly Social Awareness and Relationship Skills, foster self-regulation, empathy, and healthy relationships, which are foundational for a positive classroom environment and

improved learning outcomes (Cefai et al., 2016). For this study, the CASEL framework provides a clear standard for cultivating positive relationships, aiding teachers and students in understanding diverse perspectives and fostering a safe, respectful, and connected classroom environment (see Appendix A for full definitions of all five CASEL competencies).

Theory of Attachment

John Bowlby's Attachment Theory provides a crucial framework for understanding how early childhood relationships profoundly influence an individual's capacity to form healthy bonds and regulate emotions throughout life (Bowlby, 1969). In the educational context, this theory illuminates how students' foundational relational experiences shape their behavior and interactions within the classroom. When early caregiving relationships are disrupted, they can compromise emerging attachment styles, often manifesting in challenging classroom behaviors (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

Attachment in the classroom serves two vital functions: offering a sense of security that empowers children to explore their learning environment freely and laying fundamental groundwork for their socialization (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). The quality of these attachments, developed through repeated interactions with primary attachment figures (AFs), leads to distinct attachment styles: secure, insecure/avoidant, insecure/resistant, and insecure/disorganized-disoriented (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Ang et al., 2020). Each style influences a student's *internal working models* of self and others, shaping their expectations for relationships and their responses to school demands. These variations present unique characteristics within the school environment that affect a student's ability to fulfill their basic needs, particularly those related to safety, belonging, and esteem (Deshmukh et al., 2021), with each style showing distinct behavioral and relational patterns.

Securely attached students exhibit positive school outcomes, confident in exploration and seeking comfort when needed. Insecure/avoidant students often appear highly independent

and emotionally distant, suppressing vulnerability. Insecure/resistant students may struggle with separation, display exaggerated emotions, and appear demanding. Finally, insecure/disorganized-disoriented students exhibit contradictory and apprehensive behaviors, often struggling with safety and emotional regulation.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

As outlined in the theoretical framework, Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a foundational psychological theory of human motivation that offers a valuable lens for understanding student drives and their application within educational settings (Maslow, 1954; Deshmukh et al., 2021). While traditionally depicted as a rigid pyramid, contemporary scholarship acknowledges that the hierarchy is more fluid and dynamic, recognizing that individuals may pursue multiple needs simultaneously or oscillate between levels (Kenrick et al., 2010; McLeod, 2023). The core principle remains that human needs exist in a general hierarchical structure, where individuals tend to satisfy fundamental, lower-level needs before genuinely attending to higher-level needs, including those related to learning and personal growth (Maslow, 1965; Noad, 1979). In the classroom, understanding where students operate within this hierarchy is paramount, as a student's readiness to learn directly correlates with the satisfaction of their current needs (Deshmukh et al., 2021; Milheim, 2012).

The hierarchy includes Physiological Needs (e.g., food, water, sleep), Safety Needs (physical and emotional security), Love and Belonging Needs (affection, acceptance, community), Esteem Needs (recognition, respect, achievement), and culminates in Self-Actualization (personal potential and intrinsic learning). This framework highlights that a student's motivation and learning capacity link directly to the satisfaction of these needs, making positive teacher-student relationships crucial for supporting students through the hierarchy towards higher levels of learning and personal growth (Bodeliwala & Piliyesi, 2020; Deshmukh et al., 2021).

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)

Within the comprehensive theoretical lens of CASEL, Attachment Theory, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs used in this study, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) serves as an established observational and assessment tool for evaluating the quality of teacher-child interactions, considered "the single most important influence on children's learning and development" (Teachstone, n.d.). CLASS shifts focus from merely "structural quality" (e.g., curriculum, facilities) to "process quality," emphasizing the dynamic daily interactions between teachers and students that truly mediate and enhance learning and development (Teachstone, n.d.).

The framework comprises three broad domains: Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support (Hamre et al., 2009). Each domain captures various aspects of effective interactions, providing a common language and metric for discussing and improving teaching practices. For this study, the Emotional Support domain is particularly central to understanding teacher-student relationships. This domain measures the crucial aspects of a child's social and emotional experience in the classroom, focusing on how teachers build warm, supportive relationships through dimensions such as positive climate, absence of negative climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspectives (Hamre et al., 2009). CLASS provides a concrete framework for assessing and improving teacher-student interactions within the classroom environment, making it a valuable resource for teacher self-assessment and professional development.

Research Question(s)

How do teachers use relationship-building strategies, meet students' social-emotional needs, impact classroom environment, student learning outcomes, and what strategies can be recommended to improve educational practice?

Review of Literature

Introduction to Review of Literature

Today's students face significant stressors, from high-stakes assessments and diverse classroom expectations to the profound impact of trauma like Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). These challenges affect a significant portion of students and can manifest as challenging behaviors that impede learning. As a result, there is an urgent need for positive and supportive teacher-student relationships, which serve as a vital buffer against adverse effects and transform classroom dynamics from disengagement to active learning. Educators, who must simultaneously manage student challenges alongside the demands of academic standards and diverse learning needs, recognize the critical importance of cultivating strong bonds with all students. To address this need, this systematic literature review examines how teachers can foster robust, positive connections in the classroom. This paper investigates key factors influencing teacher-student relationships, such as culture, socioeconomic status, attachment levels, ACEs, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and individual locus of control. The review also examines evidence-based frameworks such as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and effective relationship-building strategies.

Teacher-Student Relationships: Foundations and Strategies

The Importance of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

Positive teacher-student relationships are pivotal for academic success, classroom management, and student engagement, as they directly address students' foundational needs for safety, belonging, and esteem (Maslow, 1954; Deshmukh et al., 2021). Research consistently demonstrates that such relationships also predict improved engagement, academic achievement, and social–emotional well-being (Roorda et al., 2011; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen,

2012; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Nurturing teacher–student relationships create classroom environments that lay the foundation for lifelong learning.

Beyond academic achievement, these relationships significantly improve classroom management and directly influence student engagement. The Australian Education Research Organisation (2023) emphasizes that respectful relationships reduce disruptive behavior and promote collaboration. Valued students adhere to expectations and engage positively with peers. Teachers prioritizing relationship-building establish clear boundaries while maintaining support and fostering community, meeting students' love, and belonging needs (Desautels, 2014). Personalized support and shared experiences create a sense of belonging (Strader, 2018), and students feel more engaged when teachers show care, especially for diverse learners (Pendlebury, 2020). This prioritization of relationship-building proves fundamental for student success, cultivating supportive environments that enhance academic achievement, classroom management, and engagement.

Key Principles and Contexts for Effective Teacher-Student Relationships

Contextual Factors in Relationship-Building. Effective relationship-building in the classroom, while often promoted as a universal solution, suffers significant limitations when critical contextual factors go overlooked. Generic strategies failing to account for diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and trauma-informed considerations can be inadequate or even counterproductive (Pendlebury, 2020; Strader, 2018). Students enter classrooms with unique backgrounds, needs, and experiences that profoundly influence their interactions and responses to relationship-building efforts, particularly affecting their ability to meet Maslow's foundational needs.

For instance, socioeconomic disparities directly impact access to basic physiological needs like food and shelter and a student's sense of security, influencing overall needs and perceptions of teachers (Pendlebury, 2020; Deshmukh et al., 2021). Similarly, cultural

backgrounds profoundly influence communication styles, behavioral expectations, and perceptions of authority, requiring cultural awareness from educators to prevent misunderstandings or biases. The high prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) further demands a trauma-informed approach, as generic techniques can inadvertently trigger trauma responses, directly compromising safety and belonging needs (Strader, 2018; Deshmukh et al., 2021). Teachers who understand the effects of trauma can more effectively create supportive environments (Strader, 2018).

Beyond external factors, understanding a student's locus of control, their belief about the extent to which outcomes are within their own control (Rotter, 1966), is crucial. Recognizing that students with an internal locus tend to take initiative, whereas those with an external locus may feel disengaged, enables teachers to tailor strategies and strengthen relationships.

The authenticity and efficacy of positive relationships depend on understanding students' diverse contexts and how these contexts influence their progression through Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Effective relationship-building requires training that incorporates culturally responsive practices, trauma-informed strategies, and awareness of socioeconomic disparities to foster genuine connections that support student development.

Foundations of Effective Teacher-Student Relationships: The Authoritative Approach as an Integrated Model

Building upon the foundational importance of positive connections and acknowledging the diverse contextual factors students bring to the classroom, effective teacher-student relationships embody the authoritative discipline style. This approach, combining clear and challenging expectations with genuine warmth and responsiveness, serves as an integrated model that organically weaves together principles from Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), Attachment Theory, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to foster holistic student well-being and academic success.

The authoritative teacher establishes an ideal teacher-student relationship by creating an environment of mutual respect, clear structure, and genuine support (Marzano, 2003; Emmer & Evertson, 2016). This direct approach to discipline and interaction provides a predictable yet caring classroom, essential for meeting students' fundamental needs as outlined in Maslow's Hierarchy. Specifically, the consistent structure and emotional predictability of an authoritative classroom directly satisfy a student's Safety Needs, ensuring they feel free from physical and emotional threat. The authentic warmth, individualized support, and open communication inherent in this style concurrently address Love and Belonging Needs, fostering a sense of acceptance and community. Furthermore, by providing meaningful feedback, acknowledging effort, and offering opportunities for student voice and choice, authoritative teachers cultivate a student's Esteem Needs, promoting a sense of competence and value (Desautels, 2014; Deshmukh et al., 2021). With these foundational needs satisfied, students can free cognitive resources previously consumed by insecurity or a search for belonging, becoming more receptive to learning and social engagement. This consistent, responsive, and supportive environment created by an authoritative teacher also serves to establish a secure base for students, a core tenet of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969; Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Teachers, as secondary attachment figures, model healthy relational patterns, which are critical given how students' early relational experiences shape their *internal working models* and classroom behavior. An authoritative teacher's predictability and emotional availability directly address the varying needs of different attachment styles. For instance, they provide consistent reassurance and clear boundaries often needed by students with insecure/resistant patterns, helping them regulate exaggerated emotions. For insecure/avoidant students, the teacher's persistent but non-intrusive warmth can gradually build trust, encouraging engagement rather than withdrawal. For disorganized-disoriented students, the authoritative teacher offers crucial predictability and a coherent response to contradictory behaviors, helping to establish a sense of safety that was

previously lacking (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Ang et al., 2020). This cultivation of a secure attachment through authoritative practices directly improves academic outcomes (Barshay, 2018) and reduces disruptive behaviors, enhancing comfort and engagement for all students (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2023; Pendlebury, 2020).

Crucially, the secure, needs-met environment fostered by the authoritative style provides the fertile ground for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies to flourish, particularly Social Awareness and Relationship Skills (CASEL, 2020 framework). When students feel safe and connected (Maslow/Attachment), they develop self-regulation, empathy, and effective interpersonal navigation (Sherman, 2024). Authoritative teachers, through their balanced approach, naturally provide opportunities for students to practice these SEL skills: engaging them in collaborative problem-solving, encouraging respectful communication, and modeling emotional literacy through their own interactions. This is especially vital for students who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Studies indicate that many children face trauma or ACEs, leading to behavioral and academic difficulties due to impacts on decision-making and social interaction (Strader, 2018). Positive adult relationships within an authoritative, SEL-focused environment function as powerful buffers, providing crucial security and meeting unmet belonging needs for these vulnerable students (Sherman, 2024; Desautels, 2014; Strader, 2018). Successfully integrating SEL and trauma-informed practices within this authoritative framework, however, requires educators to manage significant emotional demands, highlighting a crucial need for enhanced teacher education in these areas to prevent inadvertent reinforcement of biases (Sherman, 2024).

In conclusion, the authoritative discipline style is more than just a classroom management technique; it is a comprehensive approach to teacher-student relationships that organically integrates the core principles of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Attachment Theory, and Social and Emotional Learning. By consistently applying elevated expectations with

genuine warmth and support, authoritative teachers cultivate environments that meet students' fundamental psychological needs, foster secure attachments, and enable the robust development of social-emotional competencies, leading to enhanced student well-being and academic success.

Assessing Relationship Quality: The CLASS Framework

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) serves as a prominent, research-backed tool for understanding and measuring the quality of teacher-student relationships within the classroom (Teachstone, n.d.). Recognizing that dynamic daily interactions are pivotal to learning and development and crucial for meeting students' foundational and psychological needs, CLASS provides a systematic framework to assess these critical exchanges.

Specifically, its Emotional Support domain directly quantifies key aspects central to relationship-building and aligns closely with the characteristics of an authoritative approach. Through structured observation, CLASS evaluates dimensions such as Positive Climate, assessing the warmth, respect, and joy evident in interactions, indicative of meeting Maslow's Love/Belonging needs and a secure attachment environment. It also measures the Absence of Negative Climate, observing the lack of anger, hostility, or sarcasm, which are counterproductive to establishing psychological safety. By measuring the educator's awareness and responsiveness to children's academic and emotional needs, which reflects the adaptive support vital for diverse attachment styles, the project assesses teacher sensitivity. Finally, Regard for Student Perspectives evaluates how teachers incorporate students' ideas, interests, and preferences, fostering the autonomy and value essential for both Maslow's Esteem needs and the development of SEL competencies (Hamre et al., 2009).

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate CLASS's utility in identifying effective relationship strategies: research shows that higher CLASS Emotional Support scores are significantly associated with improved student outcomes, including enhanced social skills and

academic achievement (Hamre et al., 2009; La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004). Meta-analyses affirm the robustness, validity, and reliability of the CLASS framework for assessing teacher-student interactions across diverse age groups and contexts (Li, Liu, & Hunter, 2019; Bichay-Awadalla & Bulotsky-Shearer, 2022). By providing a structured means of observation and feedback, CLASS serves as an invaluable tool for researchers and practitioners seeking to understand, measure, and enhance the quality of teacher-student relationships, thereby informing effective, authoritative relationship-building strategies.

Impact of Teacher-Student Relationships

Impact on Social-Emotional Needs.

The authoritative teacher, through the intentional application of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies and an understanding of attachment, is pivotal in fulfilling students' diverse social-emotional needs. An authoritative approach creates the safety and security fundamental for Maslow's Safety Needs, closely mirroring supportive parent-child dynamics that enable students to explore their environment and navigate school demands (Kremer, 2010 as cited in Yang et al., 2018). When students perceive their teachers as caring and responsive, they develop a stronger sense of connection to school (Yang et al., 2018), directly fulfilling their Love and Belonging Needs (Deshmukh et al., 2021).

Teachers effectively address Attachment Needs by serving as vital secondary attachment figures and providing a "secure base," particularly for those with insecure attachment patterns (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Pianta et al., 2012). This role directly supports Maslowian needs for safety and belonging. Understanding how various attachment styles influence emotional regulation is crucial, especially for students impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Trauma can lead to difficulties in emotional management and social interaction (Strader, 2018; Sherman, 2024), impeding foundational need satisfaction. However, positive authoritative relationships, nurtured through SEL and trauma-informed practices, buffer

these negative effects, re-establishing a sense of security and contributing to students' Esteem needs by helping them thrive despite adversities (Strader, 2018; Deshmukh et al., 2021; Desautels, 2014; Sherman, 2024). Practical strategies like "Calm Down Corners" further demonstrate the authoritative teacher's active role in meeting these critical needs (Sherman, 2024).

These early experiences and attachment styles also influence the development of Emotional Intelligence (EI)—the capacity to understand and manage one's own emotions and those of others. ACEs and insecure attachment can contribute to moderate to low EI (Dewi, 2022), leading to challenges in managing stress, expressing empathy, and controlling impulsivity (Goleman, 2001). Such EI deficits often contribute to chaotic classroom environments. Authoritative educators actively foster emotional development through consistent, empathetic connections, directly addressing students' needs for security, belonging, emotional regulation, and interpersonal competence, thereby facilitating their progression through Maslow's Hierarchy towards self-actualization. This initiative-taking approach supports individual student well-being and lays the groundwork for a healthier, more engaged learning community.

Impact on Classroom Environment.

A positive learning environment is foundational to student success, encompassing a dynamic atmosphere cultivated through intentional practices that foster belonging, mutual respect, and collaboration (Dellosa, 2024). This supportive atmosphere is a direct outcome of an authoritative classroom approach, which cultivates conditions meeting the students' fundamental needs, thereby reducing behavioral problems, improving mental health, and leading to better overall academic and social-emotional development (Dellosa, 2024; Wang et al., 2019).

In an authoritative classroom, the teacher masterfully balances elevated expectations with genuine warmth and responsiveness, directly addressing students' Maslow's Hierarchy of

Needs within the physical and emotional space. Establishing clear classroom rules and expectations, often collaboratively developed, promotes a shared understanding of behavior and fosters order, respect, and student ownership (Dellosa, 2024; Freiberg & Stein, 1999). This predictability creates a profound sense of stability, essential for students' Safety Needs, especially benefiting those from less structured home environments (Strader, 2018; Desautels, 2014). Beyond structure, the authoritative teacher actively encourages student collaboration through interdependence in cooperative learning groups, promoting teamwork and social skills by ensuring mutual reliance and shared goals (Dellosa, 2024; Johnson et al., 2013). By supporting student autonomy and allowing choices, the teacher deepens investment and community, contributing significantly to students' Esteem and Self-Actualization Needs (Dellosa, 2024; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Deshmukh et al., 2021). These intentional practices create a classroom where students inherently feel their Love and Belonging Needs and foster a powerful sense of connection and community (Deshmukh et al., 2021).

This environment, characterized by consistent support and emotional responsiveness, also creates a secure base for students, directly applying principles from Attachment Theory. Teachers function as significant adult role models whose predictable interactions provide crucial stability and a sense of safety and trust (Strader, 2018). The authoritative teacher's awareness of students' diverse backgrounds and needs, coupled with consistent and empathetic responses, helps create an environment where students feel profoundly understood and supported, irrespective of their early attachment patterns. This initiative-taking approach cultivates strong Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies within the classroom. Students in such an environment are more inclined to participate actively, ask questions, and seek feedback, as they feel psychologically safe and valued (Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Roorda et al., 2011). The teacher's provision of positive reinforcement recognizes student efforts and

achievements, boosting motivation, self-esteem, and further reinforcing a sense of belonging, all critical for holistic development (Dellosa, 2024; Pekrun et al., 2009).

As a result, an authoritative classroom environment is not merely an outcome but an ongoing process shaped by teachers' deliberate efforts to implement structured routines, foster collaboration and autonomy, and build authentic, empathetic relationships that are responsive to the diverse needs and backgrounds of every student, thereby supporting their progression through Maslow's Hierarchy and nurturing their social-emotional growth.

Impact on Student Learning Outcomes.

In an authoritative classroom, students experience a learning environment meticulously cultivated for their intellectual, social, and emotional growth. Here, the authoritative teacher, through consistent elevated expectations coupled with genuine warmth and responsiveness, creates conditions that profoundly influence academic performance, engagement, and overall learning success. These factors are not mere supplements to instruction; they are foundational elements enabling students to thrive intellectually and progress towards Esteem and Self-Actualization needs within Maslow's Hierarchy (Deshmukh et al., 2021).

For the student, this secure and supportive foundation translates into tangible academic gains. The consistent predictability and emotional safety provided by the authoritative teacher directly support secure attachments, which research shows lead to higher grades and standardized test scores (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). The student feels safe to take academic risks, ask questions, and persevere through challenges. For instance, the deeper relationships fostered by practices like "looping," where teachers stay with students for multiple years, correlate with improved academic performance, particularly for minority students (Barshay, 2018). In settings like Title I schools, the robust teacher-student relationships built by authoritative educators are crucial for enhancing academic achievement and motivation, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Pendlebury, 2020). Students in such

environments exhibit higher levels of self-efficacy and resilience in challenging academic tasks when they experience strong teacher connections (Wang, 2023).

Moreover, the authoritative teacher cultivates a deep wellspring of student engagement and intrinsic motivation. Students who feel a strong sense of connection and support from their teacher, experiencing their Love and Belonging Needs met, are significantly more likely to participate actively in class discussions, seek feedback, and apply greater effort and investment in their academic tasks (Dellosa, 2024; Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Strader, 2018; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Longitudinal studies underscore how this social support from teacher's links to higher levels of school compliance, participation in extracurricular activities, and a stronger subjective valuing of learning (Wang & Eccles, 2012). The emotional support provided by the authoritative teacher helps students feel valued and appreciated, directly fueling their intrinsic motivation to learn and satisfying their Esteem Needs (Stern, 2019; Deshmukh et al., 2021).

Crucially, for the student, this environment minimizes behavioral barriers and enhances emotional regulation, mediated through strengthened Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies. When teachers meet students' social-emotional needs, students feel safe and valued (thereby satisfying their foundational Maslowian needs), and behavioral disruptions decrease. This leads to more focused instructional time and a more conducive learning environment for all (Sherman, 2024; Australian Education Research Organisation, 2023). SEL interventions, integrated into the authoritative classroom, improve students' emotional engagement and attitudes toward school, resulting in better attendance, higher motivation, and improved morale, all of which indirectly support substantial academic gains (Yang et al., 2018). By fostering these positive, authoritative relationships and actively addressing social-emotional needs, teachers empower students to overcome challenges, engage more deeply with their learning, and achieve greater academic success, moving them closer to Self-Actualization.

Recommended Strategies to Improve Educational Practice

To bridge the gap between disengaged and thriving classrooms, transforming learning environments requires a multi-pronged approach embodied by the authoritative teacher. The following strategies, drawn from contemporary research and informed by frameworks such as CASEL, Attachment Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and CLASS, enhance teacher-student relationships and boost educational outcomes. Authoritative teachers prioritize cultivating foundational interpersonal connections. This involves consistently demonstrating genuine interest in students, remembering their names, and practicing active listening, building critical trust and rapport (Carnegie, 1936; Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Specific practices include making daily "deposits" into students' "emotional bank accounts" (Covey, 1989) through consistent positive interactions and keeping promises. Strategies such as the "2x10" approach, where teachers engage in two-minute personal conversations with students for ten consecutive days, can significantly deepen connections, fostering trust and nurturing students' sense of belonging and esteem (Beachboard, 2024; Desautels, 2014).

Simultaneously, the authoritative teacher expertly integrates Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and trauma-informed practices to establish a secure and emotionally safe classroom. This means providing consistent routines, emotional support, and open communication to function as a vital "secure base" for students, particularly those impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Sherman, 2024; Strader, 2018). Practical SEL strategies, such as using morning meetings to build community, implementing calm down corners, and offering structured opportunities for emotional regulation to help students manage their feelings and build resilience (Sherman, 2024).

This balanced approach also defines how authoritative teachers foster a positive classroom environment and community. They establish clear rules and expectations, often developed collaboratively with students, and implement consistent routines that create stability

and address students' Safety Needs (Dellosa, 2024; Strader, 2018). Furthermore, they actively encourage student collaboration through interdependence in cooperative learning groups, promoting teamwork and social skills by ensuring mutual reliance and shared goals (Dellosa, 2024; Johnson et al., 2013). By supporting student autonomy and allowing choices over learning, the authoritative teacher deepens investment and community, significantly contributing to students' Esteem and Self-Actualization Needs (Dellosa, 2024; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Deshmukh et al., 2021). The effective implementation of these integrated strategies is also supported by tools like the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which can systematically assess and improve the quality of interactions, focusing on dimensions like positive climate and teacher sensitivity that are vital for fostering such a supportive atmosphere (Teachstone, n.d.).

Broader Professional Development and Systemic Support

For these classroom-level strategies to be truly effective and sustainable, educators require robust professional development and systemic support. Training must encompass culturally responsive practices, trauma-informed approaches, and the cultivation of teachers' own emotional intelligence and mindfulness (Pendlebury, 2020; Wang, 2023; Kohl, 2021). Schools should actively invest in programs that build collective teacher efficacy, fostering a shared belief among staff that they can collectively make a significant educational difference (Strader, 2018). Additionally, structural approaches like "looping," where teachers remain with the same students for multiple years, can naturally facilitate deeper relationship-building and positively influence academic outcomes (Barshay, 2018), as these stable connections inherently support students' belonging and safety needs. Ultimately, creating an educational ecosystem that values and invests in relationship-building at all levels is paramount for student success.

Summary of Review of Literature.

This review systematically explored the critical role of positive teacher-student relationships in shaping educational outcomes. It established that foundational theoretical frameworks, including Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Attachment Theory, and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, synergistically inform the authoritative teaching approach, which serves as an integrated model for fostering these vital connections. Highlighting the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) as an invaluable tool for assessing and enhancing such relationships. Literature consistently demonstrates that when authoritative teachers intentionally cultivate strong relationships, remaining mindful of diverse contextual factors like cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic disparities, and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), there is a profound and positive impact. Specifically, these relationships effectively meet students' social-emotional needs, cultivate a supportive classroom environment, and significantly improve academic learning outcomes. Despite this unmistakable evidence for the "what" and "why" of these relationships, the literature also reveals a persistent challenge in providing educators with consistent, actionable, and accessible evidence-based strategies to implement these complex relationship-building techniques amidst daily demands.

Methods and Procedures

This project, which originated as an action research study and employs a systematic review of existing literature, addresses the identified gap in readily accessible and actionable resources for educators seeking to enhance teacher-student relationships. The overarching goal of this methodology was to translate comprehensive scholarly findings into a practical tool, specifically a webpage, designed to empower teachers in cultivating positive classroom dynamics and improving student outcomes.

The project, which began as an action research initiative, evolved into a systematic literature review to address a lack of accessible resources for educators. Its overarching goal

was to translate comprehensive scholarly findings into a practical tool, specifically, a webpage, which empowers teachers in cultivating positive classroom dynamics and improving student outcomes.

The "data" for this systematic literature review comprised scholarly literature on teacher-student relationships, social-emotional learning (SEL), attachment theory, classroom environment, and student learning outcomes. I conducted a systematic review using academic databases like Google Scholar and university library resources. Keywords such as "teacher-student relationships," "social-emotional learning strategies," "attachment in classroom," "positive classroom environment," "student engagement," "academic achievement," and "trauma-informed practices in schools" identified relevant peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, and reputable organizational reports. Selection criteria prioritized studies offering empirical evidence, theoretical frameworks, or practical strategies directly applicable to elementary education and positive teacher-student interactions, focusing on peer-reviewed articles from the last 10-15 years for currency, alongside foundational texts. This comprehensive process synthesized strong, evidence-based practices to form the foundation for the practical resource.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this systematic literature review involved an iterative process of synthesizing findings, primarily informed by the principle of triangulation. This methodological strategy enhanced credibility by examining phenomena from multiple perspectives, specifically through the convergence of diverse data sources and theoretical frameworks.

Data Source Triangulation

Analysis commenced with a meticulous review of each selected article, identifying key findings, methodologies, and conclusions related to teacher-student relationships, social-emotional development, classroom environment, and student learning outcomes. This involved extracting relevant insights and categorizing them thematically. Data source triangulation

compared findings across multiple independent studies. Consistent reporting on the effects of positive teacher-student relationships, such as improved student engagement and academic achievement (e.g., Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Barshay, 2018; Wang & Eccles, 2012), significantly strengthened conclusions. For instance, the recurring link between strong teacher-student bonds and increased student motivation and participation, highlighted by Pendlebury (2020), Dellosa (2024), and Strader (2018), underscored the robust impact of relational quality on student drive. The analysis revealed discrepancies, providing a nuanced understanding. This comparative analysis across empirical studies yielded robust evidence.

Theory Triangulation

Beyond individual studies, theoretical triangulation examined findings through different conceptual lenses, including Social Emotional Learning (SEL) (CASEL, 2020 framework), Attachment Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). Interpreting the impact of teacher-student relationships through these varied perspectives yielded a richer, more comprehensive understanding. For example, practical strategies from the CLASS framework for enhancing emotional support (Teachstone, n.d.) aligned with theoretical underpinnings of secure attachment (Bergin & Bergin, 2009), Maslow's foundational needs fulfillment (Deshmukh et al., 2021), and core SEL competencies (Yang et al., 2018). This convergence across theoretical explanations reinforced the multifaceted nature of positive relationships and their mechanisms of influence on student well-being and academic success.

This dual application of triangulation moved the analysis beyond mere summarization to a deeper synthesis of the literature, identifying consistent patterns, confirming findings across diverse sources, and integrating insights from multiple theoretical perspectives. This systematic process provided a solid foundation for the conclusions in the Review of Literature's "Impact"

sections and directly informed the development of "Recommended Strategies to Improve Educational Practice" for the accompanying webpage.

Findings

This section presents the synthesized findings derived from the comprehensive literature review, directly addressing how building strong, positive teacher-student relationships, particularly through an authoritative approach, profoundly influences the classroom environment and student learning for all. The analysis consistently revealed overarching themes regarding the tangible effects of relational quality on various facets of the educational experience, alongside effective strategies that facilitate these crucial connections.

Impacts of the Authoritative Approach

The review consistently demonstrates that the authoritative teaching approach profoundly benefits students' social-emotional well-being, the classroom environment, and academic outcomes. Authoritative teachers effectively meet students' diverse social-emotional needs by creating a sense of safety and security, directly aligning with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (especially physiological, safety, and love/belonging). This approach builds emotional security, fostering belonging and connectedness vital for learning (Deshmukh et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018). Furthermore, these relationships serve as a crucial buffer against the negative effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), helping students develop emotional regulation and resilience (Sherman, 2024; Strader, 2018).

This intentional cultivation leads to a significantly improved classroom environment, characterized by psychological safety, trust, and mutual respect (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2023; Dellosa, 2024). In an authoritative classroom, consistent warmth, clear expectations, and opportunities for interdependence in cooperative learning groups reduce behavioral issues, increase cooperation, and promote active participation, transforming the

classroom into a harmonious and productive space for growth (Strader, 2018; Teachstone, n.d.).

Consequently, these robust relationships directly translate into enhanced student learning outcomes. Authoritative teacher-student relationships lead to improved academic achievement, including higher grades and standardized test scores, supported by the secure attachments fostered (Barshay, 2018; Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Beyond direct metrics, students exhibit increased engagement and intrinsic motivation, showing greater willingness to participate, ask questions, and invest more effort in academic tasks (Dellosa, 2024; Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Wang & Eccles, 2012). The emotional support and enhanced regulation stemming from these relationships reduce behavioral disruptions, optimizing instructional time and supporting substantial academic gains for all students (Sherman, 2024; Yang et al., 2018).

Effective Strategies for Practice

The literature identifies several key, actionable strategies for authoritative teachers to cultivate these powerful relationships and environments. Building foundational interpersonal connections involves consistently demonstrating genuine interest, active listening, remembering names, and making students feel valued (Carnegie, 1936; Dellosa, 2024). This includes regular "deposits" into students' emotional bank accounts through positive interactions and keeping promises, exemplified by strategies like the "2x10" approach to deepen trust (Beachboard, 2024; Covey, 1989; Henry & Thorsen, 2018).

Simultaneously, effective practice integrates Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and trauma-informed approaches. These mandates prioritizing emotionally safe environments, providing consistent routines, emotional support, and open communication to function as a vital "secure base" (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Sherman, 2024). Practical SEL techniques, such as morning meetings and calm down corners, are essential for emotional regulation (Sherman, 2024). Furthermore, fostering a positive classroom community relies on establishing clear,

collaboratively developed rules and encouraging student collaboration through interdependence (Dellosa, 2024; Johnson et al., 2013). The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) serves as a valuable tool to systematically assess and refine these interactions (Teachstone, n.d.).

Teacher-Student Web Resource

Intervention/Action: Webpage Development

The primary intervention of this systematic literature review, originating as an action research study, is the creation of a dedicated webpage designed as a practical resource for educators. The development process involves several key steps:

- Content Synthesis and Selection: Based on a comprehensive literature review, the study identified and synthesized key findings, theoretical insights (including those from CASEL, Attachment Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and CLASS), and empirically supported strategies. This process involved drawing actionable recommendations related to fostering interpersonal connections (e.g., active listening, showing genuine interest), implementing SEL and trauma-informed practices (e.g., emotional regulation techniques, creating safe spaces), and cultivating positive classroom environments (e.g., establishing routines, promoting collaboration).
- Translation for Accessibility: The project translated complex academic concepts and research findings into clear, concise, and user-friendly language suitable for busy educators. The goal was to make the information digestible and immediately applicable, avoiding overly technical jargon while maintaining academic rigor.
- Pedagogical Design and Usability Considerations: With the end-user (teachers and administrators) in mind, the webpage prioritizes intuitive navigation and clear organization. Sections mirror the themes identified in the literature review, enabling users to quickly locate specific strategies or information. The design incorporates

elements that promote self-reflection and practical application, including clear descriptions of strategies, their potential benefits, and illustrative classroom scenarios. Practical guides, downloadable resources, and links to relevant research are also included for deeper exploration. The ultimate goal is for the webpage to serve as a dynamic tool that supports teachers in assessing current practices and adopting evidence-based approaches to relationship-building.

Limitations

This project, a systematic review of existing literature originating from an action research study, is subject to inherent limitations in its design and scope. Recognizing these constraints is important for a balanced interpretation of the findings and the utility of the developed resource.

A primary limitation stems from reliance on secondary data. This study did not involve direct observation, data collection from human participants, or intervention in a live classroom setting. This study draws conclusions exclusively from the synthesis and interpretation of existing scholarly literature. While rigorous triangulation enhanced credibility, the researcher lacked control over original data collection methodologies, contexts, or potential biases of primary studies. Thus, insights are based on reported findings, not firsthand empirical evidence generated by this specific project.

Secondly, the findings may not be generalizable to all educational contexts. Though the reviewed literature encompasses a range of settings and student populations, applying these findings to highly specific or unique classroom environments might require further localized investigation. Recommendations serve as a guide, but their precise effectiveness can vary with individual teacher styles, school culture, and student demographics.

Thirdly, the scope of this project was limited to resource creation. The developed webpage is designed to facilitate teacher self-reflection and the application of evidence-based strategies; however, this study did not include an empirical evaluation of the webpage’s impact

on teacher practice or student outcomes. Its effectiveness will require future implementation and rigorous assessment in real-world settings. Given substantial evidence linking teacher–student relationships with engagement and achievement (Roorda et al., 2011; Pianta et al., 2012), future research should examine how tools like this resource directly influence classroom interactions and student outcomes.

Finally, despite efforts toward a systematic and objective review, potential for research interpretation and selection bias exists. Identifying, selecting, and synthesizing literature, while guided by criteria, involves subjective judgments. The project translated complex academic concepts and research findings into clear, concise, and user-friendly language suitable for busy educators.

These limitations do not diminish the study's value but frame its boundaries and suggest avenues for future research and practical application.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review, grounded in an action research approach, explored the pivotal role of positive teacher–student relationships in shaping the educational experience. The synthesis of scholarly literature highlighted that such relationships—when grounded in an authoritative teaching style—are foundational to meeting students' social-emotional needs (as described by Maslow's hierarchy), cultivating supportive classroom environments (as measured by CLASS), and enhancing engagement and learning outcomes (as supported by Attachment Theory and CASEL).

The methodological design, which employed triangulation across multiple sources, strengthened the credibility of the findings. This process culminated in the development of a practical webpage intended to translate complex research into actionable strategies for busy educators.

The implications for educational practice are significant. These findings affirm the need for sustained professional development focused on relationship-building, social-emotional learning, and trauma-informed approaches. While acknowledging the limitations inherent to a literature-based study, this project offers a foundation for future empirical research. Ultimately, fostering strong teacher–student relationships remains a powerful lever for educational transformation, enabling teachers to create learning environments where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered to thrive.

Future Research

This systematic literature review, while comprehensively synthesizing existing literature and proposing a practical resource, also highlights several avenues for future inquiry. These areas for further research will contribute to a deeper understanding of teacher-student relationships and the efficacy of interventions designed to enhance them.

A critical next step involves the empirical evaluation of the developed webpage within authentic classroom settings. Future studies could implement the webpage as an intervention tool for a cohort of teachers, collecting qualitative and quantitative data on its actual impact. This would assess changes in teacher practice, observed classroom environments (e.g., using CLASS observations), and measurable student outcomes such as engagement levels, social-emotional competence, and academic performance. Such research would provide direct evidence of the resource's effectiveness.

Secondly, exploring the long-term effects of sustained teacher-student relationship interventions warrants further investigation. Longitudinal studies could track students and teachers over multiple academic years to understand how consistent efforts to foster positive relationships influence student well-being, academic trajectories, and resilience over time, offering valuable insights into lasting benefits.

Thirdly, future research could delve more deeply into specific contextual factors that mediate the effectiveness of relationship-building strategies. While this study acknowledged the influence of cultural background, socioeconomic status, and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), more granular research could explore how particular strategies need adaptation for distinct student populations or school environments. This could include examining interactions with Maslow's foundational needs and attachment styles in highly diverse classrooms or those with a high prevalence of trauma.

Finally, research could also focus on teacher professional development models that effectively integrate findings on positive relationships. This would involve evaluating different training approaches, mentorship programs, or collaborative learning communities designed to enhance teachers' skills, emotional intelligence, and capacity for trauma-informed care, providing invaluable insights into effective, sustained changes in teacher practice.

By pursuing these lines of inquiry, future research can build upon the foundational knowledge established in this study, further solidifying the evidence base for cultivating positive teacher-student relationships and optimizing educational outcomes for all students.

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Appendix A: CASEL's Social and Emotional Learning Five Competencies

Figure A1
CASEL SEL Framework Wheel

The following are the definitions of two of the core social and emotional learning competencies, directly quoted from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework.

Social Awareness:

The ability to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts. This includes the capacities to feel compassion for others, understand broader historical and social norms for behavior in different settings, and recognize family, school, and community resources and support.

- Taking others' perspectives
- Recognizing strengths in others
- Demonstrating empathy and compassion

- Showing concern for the feelings of others
- Understanding and expressing gratitude
- Identifying diverse social norms, including unjust ones
- Recognizing situational demands and opportunities
- Understanding the influences of organizations and systems on behavior.

(CASEL, 2020, p.2).

Relationship skills:

The abilities [sic] to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups. This includes the capacities to communicate clearly, listen actively, cooperate, work collaboratively to problem solve and negotiate conflict constructively, navigate settings with differing social and cultural demands and opportunities, provide leadership, and seek or offer help when needed.

- Communicating effectively
- Developing positive relationships
- Demonstrating cultural competency
- Practicing teamwork and collaborative problem-solving
- Resolving conflicts constructively
- Resisting negative social pressure
- Showing leadership in groups
- Seeking or offering support and help when needed
- Standing up for the rights of others.

(CASEL, 2020, p.2)

Appendix B: Overview of Classroom Discipline Styles

This appendix provides a detailed examination of the four widely recognized classroom discipline styles. These styles are conceptual frameworks that illustrate how a teacher's approach to managing student behavior, defined by their level of demandingness (expectations/control) and responsiveness (warmth/support), fundamentally shapes the classroom environment and teacher-student relationships. The visual representation in Figure 1 provides a concise overview of these styles, followed by a detailed description of each in Table 1. Discussions of these styles frequently appear in broader classroom management frameworks and are evident in various models described in educational literature (e.g., Čechová, 2025).Figure 1: A Two-Dimensional Model of Classroom Discipline Styles

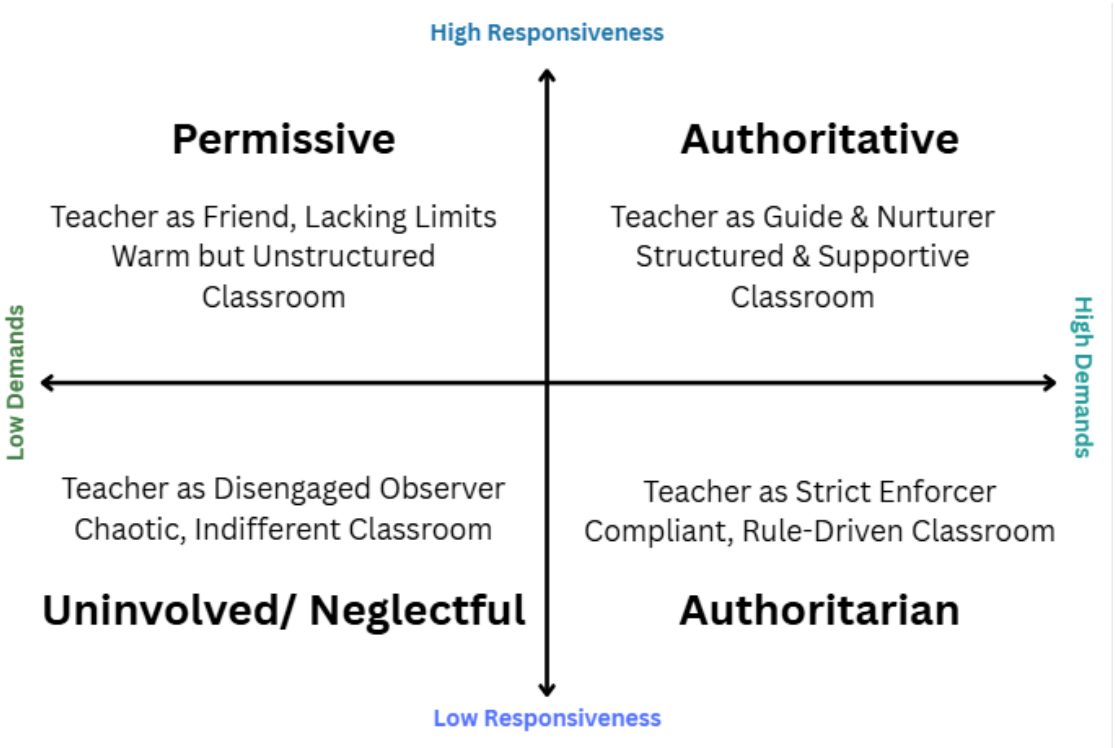

Figure 2

Appendix C

Project Website:

The full set of curated strategies, resources, and teacher-facing materials developed for this project are available at: https://selteachertostudentrelationships.com/

Fostering Classroom Connections

Social & Emotional Learning

Home | Relationships Frameworks | Cultivating Teacher-Student Relationships | Resources | About

Foundations & Benefits to Powerful TSRs

Putting Theory into Practice
Build Stronger Connections Today

Foundational Frameworks

Leading to Strong TSRs

To truly understand why Positive Teacher-Student Relationships are the most important tool a teacher can provide, we rely on established educational frameworks. These frameworks provide the backbone for our reasoning, offering key principles and components that explain *how* these powerful relationships are built and sustained.

Each framework offers unique insights into the dynamics of teacher-student interactions and their profound impact:

- **CASEL's Framework:** Focuses on five core social-emotional competencies essential for healthy development.

- **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:** Explains that basic human needs, including safety and belonging, must be met before a child can truly learn.
- **Attachment Theory:** Highlights how secure emotional bonds provide the foundation for a child's confidence and exploration.
- **CLASS Framework:** Uses observable metrics to evaluate and improve the quality of classroom interactions.

For a deeper dive into each of these frameworks and to learn more about the specific evidence backing their importance, please visit our Powerful Frameworks for Success page.

Core Benefits of Strong TSRs

in the Classroom

In every classroom, beyond textbooks and daily lessons, you'll find the most powerful tool for learning and growth: a positive teacher-student relationship (TSR). It's more than just a friendly bond; it's a deep and active connection built on mutual respect, trust, genuine empathy, and open communication. This is a special place where students truly feel seen, heard, and valued, and teachers act as supportive guides, not just people giving instructions. This fundamental connection isn't merely a "nice-to-have" extra; it's the absolute foundation for all meaningful education. It profoundly shapes a child's academic journey and helps them grow into a confident, well-adjusted individual. In fact, the positive impact of these relationships often goes far beyond the classroom, sparking a lasting love of learning and creating memories that endure for a lifetime.

These powerful relationships bring incredible advantages to everyone in the learning environment. They are not just beneficial; they are foundational for success:

- **Student Learning:** TSRs significantly boost student motivation, aid cognitive development, and lead to better overall academic performance and achievement.
- **Classroom Environment:** Strong bonds foster a positive classroom culture, reducing behavioral challenges and cultivating a deep sense of safety, belonging, and community among students.
- **Social-Emotional Growth:** They are crucial for developing essential life skills, such as empathy, self-regulation, resilience, and effective problem-solving in social situations.
- **Teacher Benefits:** Educators also thrive, experiencing greater job satisfaction, reduced stress, and ongoing opportunities for professional growth and impact.

Frameworks

Explore key frameworks and theories, including the CASEL Framework, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Attachment Theory, and the CLASS. These models underscore the importance of positive relationships, providing a scientific and practical roadmap for success in education.

Let's Go

Core Benefits of Positive TSR

Student Learning

Positive relationships boost academic achievement, motivation, and cognitive development, leading to better overall student performance.

Classroom Environment

Strong connections foster a positive classroom culture, significantly reduce behavioral issues, and cultivate a vital sense of safety and belonging among students.

Social-Emotional Growth

These bonds are crucial for developing emotional regulation, empathy, social skills, and self-efficacy, preparing students for lifelong success.

Teacher Benefits

Cultivating positive relationships leads to greater job satisfaction, reduced stress, and ongoing professional growth, making teaching more fulfilling.

Let's Go

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Fostering Classroom Connections

Social & Emotional Learning

Home | Relationships Frameworks | Cultivating Teacher-Student Relationships | Resources | About

Cultivating Teacher-Student Relationships

Welcome to the heart of our mission to transform your classroom through connection. This section of our site is your dedicated guide to unlocking greater teaching efficacy and renewed joy in your profession, while fostering environments where every student feels valued, engaged, and empowered to thrive. Here, you'll discover why strong Teacher-Student Relationships (TSR) are indispensable, gain tools for insightful self-assessment to pinpoint your unique strengths, and explore actionable strategies to become an expert at cultivating these vital connections for both your well-being and your students' success.

Foundaion for Success | Power of Connections | Modeling Strong TSRs

Foundation for Success

Strong teacher-student relationships (TSRs) are the absolute bedrock of a thriving classroom. They do more than just make the classroom a pleasant place; they actively create a safe, trusting, and respectful environment where every student feels secure enough to take risks and learn. When students feel a genuine connection with their teacher, their engagement increases significantly, leading directly to improved academic outcomes across all subjects. This foundation builds confidence and a sense of belonging, which are vital for sustained learning.

Conversely, without strong TSRs, the classroom environment can struggle. Students often disengage, becoming less interested in lessons and less motivated to participate. This can lead to learning struggles, as children may be hesitant to ask questions or seek help when they don't feel connected to their teacher. Furthermore, a lack of strong relationships often results in more disruptive behavior, as students may act out to get attention or because they don't feel valued. This cycle makes teaching incredibly harder and less effective, turning the classroom into a challenging space rather than a place of growth.

This project strongly confirms that focusing on strong TSRs truly transforms classrooms from the ground up. These relationships lead to more positive, respectful, and collaborative spaces where students and teachers work together harmoniously. This approach dramatically reduces misbehavior, boosts student engagement in lessons, and significantly improves essential social-emotional skills like empathy, self-regulation, and problem-solving. It also consistently leads to higher academic achievement, increased motivation, and overall positive classroom climates. Ultimately, strong TSRs improve job satisfaction for teachers by creating a more joyful and manageable teaching experience, and they foster a happier, safer learning environment where everyone feels they truly belong and can succeed.

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Social & Emotional Learning
fostering connections, empowering classrooms.

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Fostering Classroom Connections

Social & Emotional Learning

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Educator's Resource Library

Welcome to your Educator's Resource Library! We know that professional learning never truly stops, so we've carefully gathered a collection of valuable articles, insightful videos, and informative books just for you. This comprehensive library is designed to help you grow your skills in building strong and meaningful teacher-student relationships. Our goal is to offer easy-to-use resources that give you fresh ideas and practical strategies. These insights will help you create more engaging classrooms and positive learning environments where every student can truly thrive and reach their full potential.

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Foundational Paper

Building Strong and Positive Teacher-Student Relationships in the Classroom: A Systematic Literature Review and Strategy Guide

This systematic literature review, originating as an action research study, synthesizes scholarly literature to explore how strong, positive teacher-student relationships, particularly when characterized by an authoritative approach, profoundly affect the classroom environment and student learning for all students.

Foundational Frameworks: A Deeper Dive

Collaborative for Academic, Social & Emotional Learning

CASEL provides the definitive framework for **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)**, outlining core competencies that foster crucial life skills. It emphasizes developing self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making to enhance student well-being and academic success.

Maslow's Hierarchy in the Classroom

Maslow's Hierarchy explains human motivation by prioritizing basic needs before higher-level ones, from physiological to self-actualization. In education, it highlights that meeting students' fundamental needs for safety, belonging, and self-esteem is crucial before they can genuinely engage in learning.

Attachment Theory in the Classroom

Attachment Theory describes how early relational experiences shape an individual's capacity to form bonds and regulate emotions. In the classroom, it underscores the teacher's role as a "secure base," influencing student behavior and their sense of safety and exploration.

CLASS: Assessing Teacher-Student Interactions

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is an observational tool that evaluates the quality of teacher-child interactions. It focuses on how teachers provide emotional support, organize the classroom, and deliver instructional support, directly impacting student learning and development.

Authoritative Discipline Styles

Principles of Authoritative Teaching

This article from Continental Press provides a clear overview of the four primary classroom management styles, highlighting the key principles and benefits of the authoritative approach in fostering positive student behavior and a productive learning environment.

Positive Discipline: Teaching Life Skills with Respect

Explore the official Positive Discipline website for comprehensive resources, articles, and tools that teach adults how to be both kind and firm, fostering cooperation, problem-solving skills, and mutual respect in children and students.

Video: How Authoritative Style Fits With Relationships

This practical video from Tolentino Teaching offers clear, actionable tips on how educators can effectively embody an authoritative classroom management style. Learn to balance warmth with firm expectations to create a respectful and productive learning environment.

Parenting Styles & Student Educational Growth

This Knovva Academy article explores how different parenting styles, particularly the authoritative approach, profoundly influence a student's educational growth and development. Gain insights into creating a supportive learning environment in your classroom.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Practice

What is Social & Emotional Learning

This informative video from The Global Family Playroom offers a clear and concise introduction to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). Understand the core concepts and the profound impact SEL has on student development and classroom environments.

SEL 3 Signature Practices

Explore this practical playbook from CASEL, offering concrete, evidence-based strategies for integrating social-emotional learning into daily classroom routines. Discover actionable practices to foster students' social-emotional competencies.

The CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL

Explore this comprehensive guide from CASEL that provides a roadmap for schools and districts to implement social-emotional learning systematically. Discover strategies for creating a supportive school-wide culture that fosters SEL for all students.

Systemic Implementation

Explore CASEL's official page on systemic implementation to understand the foundational principles and overarching framework for integrating social-emotional learning across entire school systems, fostering a cohesive and supportive environment.

Recommended Educational Websites & Articles

Explore SEL With Harvard University

Dive into Harvard Graduate School of Education's Explore SEL website, offering comprehensive research, insights, and tools for integrating social-emotional learning effectively into educational practice. A highly authoritative resource for deepening SEL understanding.

CASEL Program Guide

Utilize CASEL's comprehensive program guide, an essential resource for educators and schools, to effectively evaluate and select evidence-based social-emotional learning programs for implementation.

Mr. Rogers & The Importance of SEL

This engaging opinion piece from The Hill thoughtfully explores how the timeless wisdom of Mr. Rogers perfectly embodies the core principles of social-emotional learning, underscoring its vital role in child development and education.

Doing Right by Kids at the Intersection of Equity, Trauma-Informed Practice & SEL

This insightful article from Education Northwest explores the crucial intersection of equity, trauma-informed practices, and social and emotional learning, providing educators with a holistic framework for supporting all students effectively.

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Sanford College of Education, National University
Master of Arts in Social and Emotional Learning. | Sep. 2025

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Fostering Classroom Connections

Social & Emotional Learning

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE KIDS

My dad, Larry Rathbun, once shared a simple, yet profoundly resonant truth with me: "It's all about the kids." These five words, unadorned by academic jargon or complex theory, cut straight to the heart of what teaching truly means. Why become a teacher? Why strive to be a better teacher? My unwavering conviction, and perhaps yours too, is that our deepest motivation lies squarely with the children, making it all about the kids.

Children are the vibrant, evolving future of our society, embodying boundless potential and innate curiosity. Every child deserves the best chance to learn, thrive, and realize their unique potential, regardless of background. This holistic development—nurturing their emotional intelligence, fostering critical thinking, and cultivating a sense of belonging—hinges on strong, positive relationships. Classrooms aren't just spaces for instruction; they are dynamic ecosystems where young minds are shaped, and futures begin to crystallize. The bonds between a teacher and student form the bedrock of effective education, creating trust that encourages growth and ignites a lifelong love of learning.

As you reflect on your own practice, ask yourself: How is what I'm doing now truly helping my students thrive? If your current approach isn't yielding the results you envision, what different steps might you need to take? This question is at the heart of growth, and it's the very foundation of the resources you'll find here.

ABOUT MY REPORT

This child-focused conviction sparked the journey behind my Master's Action Research Report. I wanted to deeply impact student lives and empower fellow educators, especially those who often lack time for essential relationship-building. This website, "Fostering Classroom Connections," is my first step in addressing that challenge.

My research explored specific findings and actionable strategies, all driven by the desire to serve children better and make positive education a reality. When we refine our teaching, adopt new strategies, and intentionally build positive relationships, the ripple effect is immense. We see:

- More engaged and supportive learning environments.
- Students with stronger Social & Emotional Learning (SEL) skills.
- Increased academic success.
- Kids who are better adjusted and more empathetic.

Investing in strong relationships means investing in every child's potential.

ABOUT THE WRITER

As a Multiple Subject Credentialed Teacher with a decade of experience working with children, my passion for impactful learning environments is deeply personal. My journey culminated in a Master's degree in Social and Emotional Learning from National University.

My teaching philosophy is built on the belief that every student can thrive. I see education as a collaborative journey where students deserve a safe, engaging, and equitable learning experience. I focus on fostering a growth mindset and empowering students to become lifelong learners.

I actively put this philosophy into practice by:

- Creating supportive learning environments.
- Empowering student growth.
- Ensuring comprehensive support.

This deep-seated philosophy and knowledge drive my Master's Action Research Project: "Building Teacher-Student Relationships in the TK-8th Grade Classroom." This website, "Fostering Classroom Connections," is a practical extension of that research, a dedicated space to share actionable strategies for vital teacher-student relationships and supportive classroom environments.

YOU'RE INVITED

I invite you to delve into the practical strategies and valuable insights offered throughout "Fostering Classroom Connections." Your commitment to fostering engaging, inclusive, and supportive learning environments is a direct investment in the self-worth, academic success, and future well-being of every child.

Explore the resources, implement the strategies, and join me in making an immeasurable difference in the lives of young learners.

For any questions, collaboration inquiries, or simply to share your experiences, please don't hesitate to reach out. Click here to email me.

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Appendix D

Comparison of Discipline Styles

Discipline Style	Key Characteristics	Teacher Behaviors	Student Outcomes / Impact on Relationships	Primary Source(s)
Authoritative	High demands paired with high responsiveness. Clear rules and boundaries are provided, but with flexibility, consistent enforcement, and open communication.	Balances high expectations with warmth and individualized support; fosters open communication; engages students in setting rules and solving problems; provides rationale for decisions; offers choices.	Students tend to be highly engaged, self-regulated, academically successful, and have strong social-emotional skills. Relationships are built on trust and mutual respect. This style best supports Maslow's Safety, Love/Belonging, and Esteem Needs.	Grinder (2025); Mamadaliyeva & Akbaraliyeva (2023); Čechová (2025, referencing Dreikurs, Ginott)
Authoritarian	High demands/expectations but low responsiveness/warmth. Strict adherence to rules is emphasized, often with punitive consequences and little room for student input or explanation.	Establishes rules without discussion; uses strict, often punitive enforcement; prioritizes obedience and control; may lack warmth or emotional connection; relies on power dynamics.	Students may achieve compliance but often lack intrinsic motivation, self-advocacy, and strong emotional bonds with the teacher. Can lead to resentment, anxiety, or passive resistance.	Čechová (2025, referencing Canter's Assertive Discipline)
Permissive	High warmth and responsiveness but low expectations or demands for behavior. May result in a lack of clear structure, consistent boundaries, or follow-through on consequences.	Acts more as a friend than an authority figure; avoids confrontation or setting firm limits; may be inconsistent with rules; seeks to avoid student upset.	Students may feel liked but often lack self-regulation, may struggle with boundaries, and can have lower academic achievement due to lack of structure. Relationships may be warm but lack respect for authority or clear boundaries.	Baumrind (1991)
Uninvolved / Neglectful	Low warmth/responsiveness and low expectations/demands. Minimal involvement from the teacher in either instruction or behavior management. Lacks interest in student well-being or academic progress.	Provides minimal guidance or support; rarely enforces rules; shows little emotional engagement; may appear disengaged from students' academic or behavioral needs.	Students can feel ignored, exhibit poor social-emotional development, and show low motivation and achievement. May act out behaviorally (externalizing) or non-externally (internalizing), leading to disengagement and behavioral issues.	Baumrind (1991)

Appendix E

AI Editing Disclosure

In preparing this report, I used AI-based tools, including ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Gemini (Google), to assist with grammar, formatting, and clarity. These tools were used solely to improve readability and professionalism. All ideas, literature synthesis, analysis, and conclusions presented in this report are my own.