

Beyond the Curriculum: How Teacher–Student Relationships Lift Academic Performance; An Insightful Interpretation from the ELA Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In today's performance-driven educational environment, academic accomplishments are often measured by data and outcomes, leaving the emotional and relational dimensions of teaching unnoticed. However, the relationship between teachers and students play a significant role in shaping students' engagement, motivation, and their overall performance. This reflective study discusses the powerful impact of teacher-student relationship (TSR) on academic success through the experience of the researcher's lens as English language arts instructor in an international school context. Highlighting the personal classroom stories, this paper illustrates how emotional safety, trust, and personalized feedback developed not only the academic results, but also student growth confident and the level of resilience. While this study is embedded in the context of ELA, the insights presented are applicable across all subjects and disciplines, informing all educators that connection is not a soft skill but it is a core part of effective teaching. The paper concludes by supporting for school cultures that prioritize relational pedagogy as a groundwork for meaningful and sustainable academic achievement.

Introduction

"People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel." This well-known quote by Maya Angelou captures a thoughtful truth about human connection. One that is mainly applicable to the educational field. Modified to a classroom setting, her words might read: "Students may forget what they were taught. They may forget what they were assessed or assigned. But they will never forget how a teacher made them feel." This feeling highlights the "often-overlooked" emotional measure of the learning experience, where the quality of the teacher–student relationship has a permanent impact on students' academic motivation, engagement, and performance.

While modern educational discourse often highlights curriculum design, performance metrics, and data-driven instruction, the relational dynamics between teacher and student remain a critical, if less reckonable, factor in student achievement [1]. Research progressively points to the idea that students achieve best when they feel respected, supported, and emotionally safe in the classroom environment [2]. In this sense, the emotional

environment conveyed by the teacher is not simply a background condition for learning; it is a central driver of it.

This paper discusses the relationship between positive teacher–student interactions and student performance, with precise attention to the English Language Arts classroom. Based in practical classroom experience within an international school context, the discussion inspects how empathy, trust, and consistent emotional support can generate the conditions necessary for academic success. While the focus is rooted in the ELA discipline, the outcomes extend across subject areas and support the argument that relational aspect is indispensable to effective teaching in any educational setting.

By drawing from classroom-based reflections and supporting them with broader pedagogical understandings, this paper aims to strengthen the value of emotional connection in education, not as a marginal aspect of instruction, but as a foundational element in the recreation of meaningful, lasting student achievement.

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Theoretical Framework

The importance of teacher–student relationships (TSR) in determining academic outcomes is extensively supported in educational theory and research. Beyond curriculum design and instructional delivery, it is often the emotional climate of the classroom that determines how deeply students engage with learning [3]. This understanding is known in several intersecting theoretical perspectives, including “relational pedagogy”, “the ethics of care”, “attachment theory”, “social-emotional learning (SEL)”, and “meta-analytical research” on teaching effectiveness.

Nel Noddings’ ethics of care remains one of the most powerful frameworks in understanding the affective dimension of teaching. Noddings claims that care is not a secondary element in education but the central structure through which meaningful teaching occurs [4]. A caring teacher, in her view, actively responds, listens, and adjusts in ways that affirm the dignity of the learner. Within this framework, academic content becomes truly reachable only when the student feels emotionally safe and personally valued [4]. This is especially relevant in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms, where students are often required to discover themes of identity, emotion, and conflict, all of which require a trusting and supportive environment.

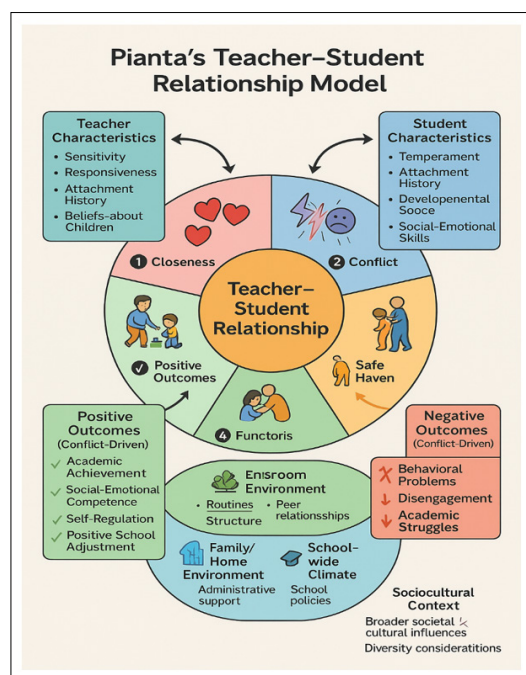


Figure 1: Visual representation of Pianta’s Attachment-Based Model of Teacher–Student Relationships

Building on this, Robert Pianta’s attachment-based model of teacher–student relationships (1999) emphasizes that secure and emotionally familiar relationships with teacher’s function much like early childhood attachments: they provide the stability and reassurance students need to take academic risks and engage fully in learning [5]. Pianta’s work is particularly convincing in secondary education contexts, where academic burden increases and adolescent students face complex social and emotional changes. His research indicates that positive teacher–student interactions can significantly reduce behavioral problems and increase academic achievement, particularly for students at risk [5].

The field of social-emotional learning (SEL) has advanced the case for relationship-centered teaching. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework identifies five core competencies essential for student success, one of which is “relationship skills”, the ability to establish and maintain healthy, supportive connections [6]. Classrooms where students feel connected to their teachers have a tendency to report higher levels of persistence, engagement, and academic motivation [6]. SEL-based approaches discuss that relationships are not detached from academic development but are a vital foundation for it.

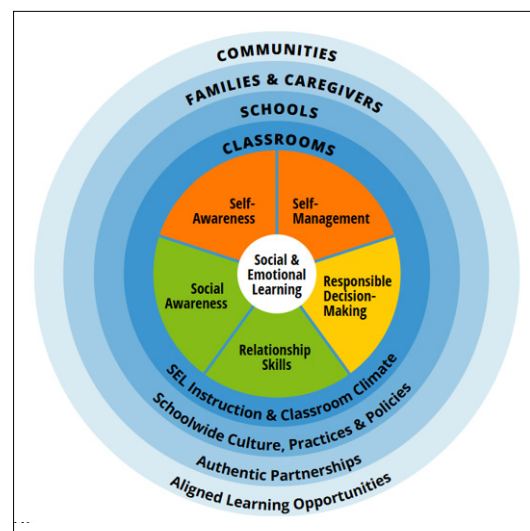


Figure 2: The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Framework. This model presents five core social-emotional competencies situated within a broader system of support, including classrooms, schools, families, and communities.

The sociocultural theory of Lev Vygotsky also adds to this understanding. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights the significance of interaction in learning, particularly the role of the “more knowledgeable other” in controlling the learner forward [7]. In this context, the teacher–student relationship (TSR) is not only emotional but cognitive; it runs the “scaffold” upon which students can move beyond what they can achieve alone [7]. When that scaffold is constructed on mutual respect and trust, the learning process becomes far more effective and efficient.

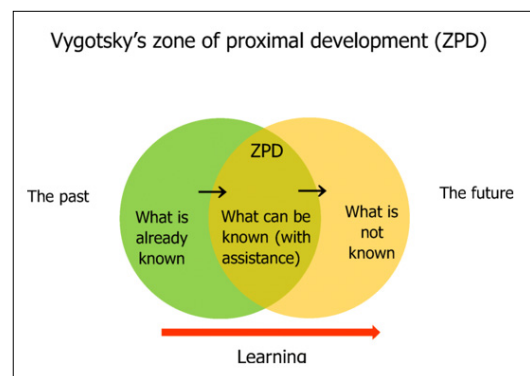


Figure 3: Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This model illustrates the learning process as a continuum between what a student already knows and what they can know

with the support of a more knowledgeable other, ultimately moving toward independent mastery.

Together, these theoretical perspectives emphasize a central claim which is, teacher–student relationships play an essential role in supporting academic success, particularly during the middle and secondary educational years. When students experience consistency, emotional safety, and care within the classroom, they are more likely to participate actively, continue through difficulty, and involve in higher-order thinking. The following section of this paper demonstrates how these concepts take shape in everyday classroom practice, presenting real-life examples of the ways relational pedagogy supports student performance in the ELA classroom and beyond.

Personal Context: Teaching English in an International School

Unique challenges and powerful opportunities for connection are both presented when teaching English Language Arts in an international school. The classroom frequently brings together students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds, each carrying their own learning needs, perspectives, and personal experiences. Within such a setting, the importance of raising strong teacher–student relationships become not only useful but indispensable for student growth and success.

In international school environments, students are often in a steering wheel mode, moving between countries, forming their identities within a global context, and adjusting to new educational systems. These transitions can be emotionally difficult, particularly during adolescence. As a result, the classroom becomes more than a place for academic instruction; it becomes a place of familiarity, stability, and emotional attachment. The teacher, in this context, plays a dominant role in providing reassurance, consistency, and a sense of belonging.

The English Language Arts classroom, in particular, invites students into emotionally deep and intellectually demanding tasks. Whether creating personal narratives, analyzing literature, or engaging in class discussions, students are required to think critically, express vulnerability, and draw connections between texts and their own lives [8]. Such tasks are naturally relational; they need a foundation of trust between teacher and student in order to be successful. Students are keener to take academic risks, share their thoughts, and involve deeply when they feel that their teacher sees and values them as individuals.

Furthermore, teaching in an international context calls for sharp cultural sensitivity and a responsive pedagogical approach. Relationship-building includes understanding not only each student's academic strengths and challenges, but also their cultural frameworks, home languages, and emotional needs [9]. Creating a connection, hence, contains consistent communication, empathy, and an ability to adjust teaching strategies to meet students where they are, intellectually and, most importantly, emotionally.

Core Reflections: How Relationships Improved Performance Building Trust and Emotional Safety

Trust is the base upon which all important learning is built. In the secondary English Language Arts classroom, where students participate with personal, emotional, and abstract themes, they must first feel psychologically safe in order to fully participate. Academic risk-taking, whether it contains writing creatively, expressing an opinion, or discussing a controversial topic, requires the guarantee that their voice will be respected and their presence valued.

One particular student stands out in this regard. He was withdrawn, quiet, and often unengaged during class discussions. His academic work was unreliable, and he often avoided tasks that required personal reflection or open-ended thinking. Rather than responding with pressure or disciplinary action, the relationship was built gradually through careful listening, brief personal conversations, and moments of genuine encouragement. Over time, his behaviour changed. He began to take initiative in group work, raise his hand in class, and submit complete assignments.

But the change extended beyond academics. Once trust was established, students began to speak openly about challenges they were facing, not just within school, but in their personal lives. Another student shared feelings of confusion admitting that he is the one who always listens to others and no one listens to him. Though not always able to suggest concrete solutions, simply being available and present as a listener became a meaningful source of support for him. Conversations were framed with empathy, grounded in an understanding of adolescent development, and always respectful of his dignity.

In another conversation, he reflected, “Now, whenever I think of doing something, even outside of school, I ask myself how you would react. If I think you’d be disappointed, I don’t do it.” This statement exposed the deep emotional influence the teacher–student relationship had come to hold, not as a form of control, but as a moral scope rooted in respect and care.

Such moments demonstrate that the teacher’s role in a student’s life often exceeds instruction. Consistent Attentiveness and emotional presence can create a relational space where students feel supported, heard and understood, even when their challenges cannot be fully resolved. This supports closely with Pianta’s attachment-based theory, which suggests that emotionally safe classroom relationships increase students’ capability to self-regulate and engage.

Personalized Feedback and Academic Growth

Feedback is often viewed as a mechanism for correction, guidance, and improvement, which basically a technical component of instruction. However, when put in a strong teacher–student relationship, feedback becomes much more than an academic tool; it becomes a form of care [10]. When students notice that feedback is delivered with patience, sincerity, and belief in their potential, they are more likely to receive it not as criticism, but as encouragement.

This was obvious in the case of a student who exhibited sharp verbal intelligence but struggled expressively with written expression. His spoken offerings were insightful and mature, but when asked to translate those thoughts into writing, he became disengaged, frustrated, and kind of defensive. Early drafts of his essays were often disorganized, incomplete, or overly simplistic which actually don't not showcase his true capabilities. Rather than focusing only on rubric scores or marking errors, feedback was delivered through handwritten nice notes on his drafts, informal check-ins, and revision one-to-one meetings. Each interaction was framed with empathy: presenting open-ended questions to guide his thinking, pointing out strengths, and highlighting growth rather than gaps.

He was also given the opportunity to revise his work multiple times, not as a consequence of underperformance, but as a process of development. Over time, his writing began to reflect depth, greater structure, and voice. More notably, his confidence grew. He started seeking out feedback proactively. This shift was not just academic; it was relational. He was able to see that the feedback was not there to judge him, but to support him.

This experience allies with both Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, where a more knowledgeable other scaffolds the learner toward independence, and Noddings' belief that caring is expressed through consistent, personalized attention to a student's needs [4,7]. When a student feels that a teacher sincerely sees their potential and is invested in their growth, the emotional battle to challenge begins to dissolve. Feedback, in this context, is no longer about correction, it becomes a conversation.

Motivation Through Connection

Motivation in education is usually discussed in terms of grades, rewards, and goal-setting, but one of the most powerful drivers of student motivation is the teacher-student relationship, even if it is frequently underestimated. When students feel a real connection to their teacher, they are more likely to try harder, try harder, and continue through challenges — not just for the sake of achievement, but because they care about the relationship and want to keep a sense of mutual respect.

This was particularly true for a student who was known across multiple classes for his disruptive behavior and lack of academic interest. During the first few weeks of the semester, he showed little engagement, frequently avoided assignments, and seemed generally disinterested in learning. Rather than viewing him through a disciplinary lens, efforts were made to connect with him personally, asking about his interests, listening without judgment, and creating non-academic moments of conversation that indicated trust and respect.

Gradually, a shift began to occur. He started showing up to class, bringing his materials, and, most notably, participating in discussions. He later confessed that while he struggled with motivation and attention, he began to make an effort because, in his words, "I know you care, and I don't want to disappoint you." What initially presented as behavioural issues were, in part, expressions of disconnection, and once the relational bridge was built, the motivation to participate followed.

This example supports Martin and Dowson's (2009) findings that teacher-student relationships significantly impact academic motivation, particularly through the development of student self-efficacy and belonging [11]. In this case, motivation did not come from external rewards or consequences, but from the internal desire to keep a meaningful relationship, a powerful force that sustained his effort even when academic tasks were difficult.

Relevance Beyond ELA

While the accounts in this paper are drawn from experiences within the English Language Arts classroom, the relational strategies described are not discipline-specific; which means this can be applied to any other subject. The elements of trust, emotional safety, personalized feedback, and motivational support are universally relevant and applicable to any subject, including mathematics, science, and technical fields.

All classrooms, regardless of content, work as social environments where students bring not only their cognitive abilities but also their emotional needs, personal histories, and relational expectations [12]. In subjects often perceived as abstract or content-heavy, such as mathematics or science, students may scuffle not because of theoretical difficulty alone, but because of anxiety, low self-efficacy, or the feeling of disconnection from the teacher. In these cases, emotional support and relationship-building can play an essential role in increasing the students' confidence, re-engaging them, and improving outcomes.

Besides, effective relational teaching does not need significant rearrangement of instructional time or academic content. Small, intentional acts, such as using students' names, listening actively, offering supportive feedback, and showing consistency, can raise an environment where students feel respected and seen. When students believe their teacher honestly cares about their success, they are more likely to take academic risks, invest effort, and continue through challenges.

Educators across disciplines are therefore encouraged to view relational work not as an addition to their teaching practice, but as an essential dimension of it. As research consistently affirms, academic achievement is most sustainable when it is grounded in emotional connection and relational trust, principles that transcend subject boundaries and define truly impactful education [13].

Conclusion

Teacher-student relationships (TSR) are among the most powerful factors in shaping a student's academic expedition. As this paper has illustrated through both theoretical framing and lived classroom experience, emotional connection, trust, and responsiveness are not marginal to learning; instead, they are foundational. In the context of secondary education, where students often face sharp academic expectations and emotional difficulty, the presence of an attentive, supportive teacher can make a long-lasting difference in both performance and personal growth.

Based in the English Language Arts classroom but applicable across disciplines, the very few examples shared in this paper validate that when students feel heard, seen, and understood,

they are more willing to engage, take risks, and continue to take more challenges. Whether through informal conversations, personalized feedback, or simply showing up with consistency and care, the teacher's relational occurrence becomes a powerful catalyst for academic and emotional development.

As education continues to grow, there remains a continuing truth: the most actual instruction begins with connection, not with content. It is within the context of a meaningful relationship that students find the courage to learn and the confidence to succeed.

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