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Reprioritizing Relationships:

Using Teacher Professional Learning to Strengthen Classroom Connections

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Executive Summary

Teacher–student relationships (TSRs) are a foundational driver of effective teaching and learning—yet they remain underemphasized in most teacher professional learning (PL) agendas.

Drawing on a robust body of evidence, we show that strong TSRs improve student academic outcomes, engagement, motivation, and mental health/emotional well-being. At the same time, they support teacher satisfaction, emotional resilience, instructional quality, and retention. We suggest that TSRs not be treated as ancillary to instructional priorities but as core to them.

Fostering better TSRs in schools is challenging – teachers must simultaneously cultivate healthy relationships with individual students and create a warm, yet demanding, relational climate for the whole classroom. But, strong evidence suggests that these challenges are surmountable. We review promising strategies from this literature that can both improve teachers' abilities to connect with individual students and create positive relationship climates in classrooms.

The time is ripe to prioritize interpersonal relationships in schools. When integrated intentionally, strong relationships can create the relational conditions students need to take academic risks and engage meaningfully with rigorous content. They are central to effective instruction for all students. Districts, policymakers, and teacher preparation programs can collaborate to realign educational priorities with what science, experience, and common sense confirm: Relationships matter.

Introduction

As a thought experiment, consider your local school district's investments in teacher professional development. What key priorities do they emphasize? Training for curriculum adoption? Coaching on better alignment with standards? Understanding compliance with new policies? Implementation of new attendance systems?

Helping teachers foster better relationships with students is rarely on a district's list of top priorities. Yet, relationships remain the fundamental currency in schools today. Conversations, questions, and interactions between teachers and students drive learning. Learning accelerates when students feel emotionally connected to their teachers, look forward to school, and feel respect from their teachers. Conversely, learning often grinds to a halt when these conditions are absent.

Through their daily actions, teachers create social spaces that communicate warmth, belonging, and connection – or lack thereof. Successful teachers cultivate strong individual relationships with students and warm relational climates in their classrooms; teachers who struggle to foster these social connections are often left with classrooms of disengaged students. The repercussions of these positive or negative social connections ripple far beyond the classroom.

We argue that professional learning experiences which emphasize strong relationships tend to be undervalued and need to be elevated to the status of core priorities for teachers.

Recent science shows that social connections – in school and otherwise – are essential for human thriving (Yang et al., 2016), but people's abilities to relate to each other are more difficult than ever, thanks to politics, social media, and loneliness epidemics (Murthy, 2023; Epley & Schroeder, 2014). Of all the venues for improving our societal challenges with relationships, classrooms represent a unique space to address this paradox. Social connections between students and teachers can be especially valuable, offering opportunities for relationship skills to be modeled, nurtured, and practiced across important developmental stages. In addition to their intrinsic importance, they are pivotal for a myriad of student outcomes that are often the focus of broader policy interventions.

In this brief, we review evidence on how and why these relationships matter so much and what we know about attempts to strengthen classroom connections through teacher professional learning. We note approaches to improving individual TSRs as well as interventions that foster positive relational climates more broadly.

Understanding Teacher–Student Relationships

Why TSRs Matter

Interpersonal relationships matter inherently. People are intrinsically motivated toward three developmental goals, one of which is to connect with others (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Neuroscientists corroborate this theory, noting that a major portion of the human brain, the prefrontal cortex, likely evolved to facilitate social connections and cooperation with others. Relatedly, studies show how various "social" areas of the brain activate when people are not actively thinking about other things. In short, the brain's natural state is to think about others (Lieberman, 2013).

Although science has consistently demonstrated the importance of relationships, recent findings underscore their overwhelmingly crucial role in almost every facet of human well-being. Scholars see relationships as the key ingredient to happiness (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023) and well-being (Clark & Lemay, 2010). On the other hand, poor social connections portend poor health outcomes, about on par with smoking (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

Within schools, a mountain of correlational evidence, including longitudinal studies, shows that better TSRs go hand in hand with better student outcomes. Academically, more positive TSRs predict better grades, homework completion rates, classroom participation, and test scores across student grade levels (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Gehlbach et al., 2012; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). More positive TSRs also correspond to more positive student behaviors—higher attendance and prosocial behavior, as well as less disruption, aggression, disciplinary referrals, and dropping out of school (Anderson et al., 2004; Baker et al., 2008; Birch & Ladd, 1998; Hughes et al., 1999; Hughes et al., 2001; Murdock, 1999). Students who perceive stronger relationships with their teacher tend to be more motivated and engaged with school (Roorda et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 2005; Wentzel et al., 2010).

Students who perceive their teachers as caring also report elevated levels of respect for others (Sandilos et al., 2025). Finally, students with more positive TSRs experience fewer mental health challenges and greater psychological well-being (Reddy et al., 2023). All told, better TSRs support not only students' emotional well-being and development, but also their academic learning. TSRs are critical for the types of learning that all students will need to thrive personally and professionally.

These relationships are also critical for teachers. Connecting with students is a core reason why teachers choose to enter the profession (Butler, 2012). Qualitative and correlational research suggests that positive TSRs are associated with teachers' emotional well-being (Spilt et al., 2011). Teachers who perceive more positive TSRs experience greater job satisfaction (Admiraal et al., 2019; Klassen & Chiu, 2010) as well as less burnout and emotional exhaustion (Aldrup et al., 2017; Milatz et al., 2015). Moreover, positive TSRs bring teachers enjoyment, motivation, and enthusiasm (Aldrup et al., 2017; Hargreaves, 2000). Finally, high-quality TSRs appear to be associated with high-quality teaching practices (Li et al., 2022). For instance, teachers who show high emotional support early in the year are more likely to engender high-quality math discourse, provide coherent math instruction, and deliver high-quality instructional support (such as individualized feedback, promotion of higher order thinking) later in the year (Banse et al., 2018; Curby et al., 2013).

These studies represent only a subset of the research establishing positive associations of TSRs with desired teacher and student outcomes. Consequently, it is easy to speculate that, if even a fraction of these correlational findings were explained by TSRs causing improved outcomes, schools would want to invest in TSR-focused professional learning opportunities for their faculty.

The TSR Landscape

An influential conception of TSRs—particularly oriented towards younger students—was developed by Robert Pianta and colleagues. Drawing on developmental psychology's "attachment theory" (Ainsworth, 1989), they characterized interaction patterns—such as conflict, closeness, and dependency—between teachers and students as primary aspects of the relationship (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Pianta et al., 2003). These ongoing, dynamic relationships change over time in parallel to shifts in these interaction patterns.

TSRs also extend beyond interactions (Wentzel, 2022). Teachers' and students' perceptions of their interactions are at least as important (Brinkworth et al., 2018). And, perceptions of a TSR can diverge—just because a teacher feels positively towards a student does not mean that those feelings are reciprocated (and vice-versa).

In addition, these interactions and perceptions unfold along individual and collective pathways simultaneously. As dyadic (one-on-one) relationships are developed between individual students and their teachers, a classroom relational climate is cultivated by the class as a whole (Wentzel, 2022; Burns & Van Bergen, 2025). These individual and group relationships influence each other. Both one-on-one TSRs and supportive overall classroom environments are essential Rucinski et al., 2018).

According to one view, the fundamental building blocks of TSRs consist of the moment-to-moment inferences that teachers and students make about one another (Gehlbach & Mu, 2023). Teachers (or students) can be accurate or inaccurate as they attempt to infer others' thoughts, feelings, and motivations. They also vary in the amount of effort they invest in trying to understand the others' perspective. Biases that lead to misperceptions are a third important factor in how this social perspective taking process leads to inferences (Montoya et al., 2018).

Though most types of relationships have complexities, TSRs have a unique confluence of characteristics. First, teachers and students are matched in ways that make these relationships intrinsically challenging. They lack the benefits of screening interviews, courtship, or choice as would happen for work relationships, romantic partners, or friendships, respectively. As teachers simultaneously nurture their dyadic relationships with each student while fostering a positive relational climate, they face a daunting asymmetry in their numbers. Teachers must manage multiple, simultaneous relationships within each class and (for most secondary teachers) across classes. Meanwhile, students navigate relationships across a modest number of teachers. Further, these challenges occur within a larger school context with structures, cultures, practices, or policies that may affect teachers' and students' abilities to build strong relationships.

Relationships Across Lines of Difference

People tend to develop close relationships more easily with individuals who are similar (Montoya et al., 2018). Correspondingly, teachers may find it more challenging to connect with some students than others. TSRs vary by a myriad of student demographics, including race, gender, income level, disability, and so on. For instance, numerous studies find lower-quality TSRs for boys (e.g., Baker, 2006; Roorda & Jak, 2024) and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Garner & Mahatmya, 2015; Ladd & Burgess, 1999).

Race provides an interesting example for understanding TSRs across lines of difference. A challenging complexity arises with respect to teacher demographics. The teacher workforce remains predominantly White (80 percent according to the National Center for Educational Statistics in 2023)—demographics that do not match the student population attending U.S. public schools (Schaeffer, 2021).

While some studies find weaker TSRs for students of color (Bottiani et al., 2014; Konold et al., 2017; Nguyen & Le, 2023; Rudasill et al., 2023; Yiu, 2013), others find no differences (e.g., Burrell-Craft et al., 2022; Garner et al., 2021). One complexity is that patterns likely vary for students of different races. For example, Black students reported less supportive relationships with their teachers than their White counterparts across several different studies (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Bottiani et al., 2014; Konold et al., 2017; Spilt et al., 2012). Further complicating the picture, certain aspects of the relationship may implicate outcomes differently for students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. For instance, greater teacher closeness was associated with greater increases in vocabulary scores for young children of color than for White students (Burchinal et al., 2002). In a sample of second and third graders with elevated levels of aggression, positive TSRs buffered against persistence of aggressive behaviors to a greater degree for Black and Hispanic students than for White students (Meehan et al., 2003).

In sum, teacher-student mismatches along demographic lines may augment teachers' challenges in their efforts to foster strong TSRs. Notably, neither teachers' nor students' demographic characteristics are particularly malleable. By contrast, teachers' *perceptions* of their students are malleable, and, correspondingly, can be improved. We turn now to promising interventions that can strengthen TSRs.

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Moving the Needle on TSRs

What would it look like to meaningfully alter patterns of TSRs in schools? Schools are already under considerable pressure to expand teacher learning opportunities focused on key needs such as the use of high-quality instructional materials and the uses and challenges of AI – even as the amount of time for this professional learning is relatively fixed.

Incorporating TSRs does not necessarily mean forgoing other training; instead it means building evidence-based interventions to improve TSRs into ongoing work. Importantly, many of the existing frameworks on high-quality professional learning and curriculum-based professional learning already emphasize the importance of supporting teachers to meet individual student needs. Professional learning on TSRs offers a means to this end.

We focus first on what evidence demonstrates about professional learning opportunities that help teachers form strong TSRs with *individual students* and second on ways teachers can shape positive *classroom relational climates* that give rise to positive TSRs.

How TSRs Can Strengthen Instruction: A Spotlight on Math

Why It Matters

- Strong TSRs don't just support classroom culture – they also enhance instructional quality. Research shows that positive TSRs are linked to more coherent math instruction, richer discourse, and stronger academic outcomes.

What We Know

- Teachers who offered high emotional support early in the school year were more likely to engage students in rigorous mathematical thinking and discourse later on (Banse et al., 2018; Curby et al., 2013).
- Framing students' mathematical contributions as valuable can enhance mathematical identity and achievement (Empson, 2003).
- When students feel seen and respected, they are more willing to take academic risks, persist through challenging problems, and engage in mathematical reasoning.

What This Looks Like

- In coaching and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), teachers reflect on individual students who are struggling with math content. They may think about those students and consider whether it is anxiety, perfectionism, or lack of interest that may be preventing engagement. The process of taking students' point of view deepens teachers' understanding of students and then helps figure out which strategies are likely to reengage students in the work.
- Teachers develop and practice classroom discussion norms that promote participation and allow teachers to uncover misconceptions and acknowledge mathematical competence.
- Teachers create or modify problems to reflect students' real-world contexts and lived experiences.
- PL can help teachers use routines found in their high-quality instructional materials (HQIM)—like Turn and Talk, error analysis, or small-group tasks—not just for academic purposes but to foster connection and validate student thinking.

Building Relationships with Individual Students

Several approaches show promise for teachers' efforts to cultivate strong connections with individual students. Teachers can be trained directly on key aspects of relationships and practices. Building teachers' self-efficacy for relationships can also bolster their effectiveness in this area. Alternatively, focusing on teachers' own well-being can pay dividends for their TSRs. Finally, teachers can be supported to reframe their perceptions of their students and their students' behaviors.

Direct Professional Learning on Facets of Strong Relationships

> **Teachers can improve their ability to build strong relationships through explicit, direct skill-building about facets of positive relationships and associated concrete practices. Reflection on relationships with individual students, paired with change in practices, also improves dyadic relationships.**

We know that teachers can improve their ability to build strong relationships through explicit, direct skill-building about facets of positive relationships and concrete practices. Interventions typically introduce and train teachers to use specific, concrete routines that then lead to stronger practices. For example, experimental studies in small samples of K-8 teachers found that the Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR) intervention improved TSRs (Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019). In this intervention, teachers engaged in a three-hour training plus an individualized 30-minute follow-up video call, where they learned about three interrelated phases of a relationship and concrete practices associated with each phase. They also reflected on their relationships with each of their students, identifying those who would particularly benefit from relationship practices. Similar programs, such as the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management program (Webster-Stratton, 2011) and the BRIDGE program (Cappella et al., 2012), also showed positive impacts. In short, strategic routines can help teachers build stronger dyadic TSRs.

Several pedagogical approaches highlight the centrality of TSRs as tools to engage students in learning. One example comes from the Responsive Classroom® Approach, which encompasses a set of practices for building "safe, joyful, and engaging classrooms." Evaluations of this approach show that teachers employing Responsive Classroom practices more frequently reported increases in their closeness with students (Baroody et al., 2014; Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007).

Relatedly, teachers can essentially become their own relationship coaches by reflecting on what aspects are going well and what might be improved. In a metacognitive training, the Relationship-Focused Reflection Program helped teachers to reframe their mental representations of relationships with individual students. Across multiple versions of the program, treatment teachers reported increased closeness with their students compared to their control counterparts (Bosman et al., 2021; Hoogendijk et al., 2020; Spilt et al., 2012).

Building Teachers' Self-Efficacy and Mindset Around TSRs

> **Bolstering teachers' confidence that they can successfully connect with students and improve relationship quality over time leads to better TSRs.**

Forming positive TSRs can be daunting. Bolstering teachers' sense that they can successfully cultivate strong social connections with their students offers another promising angle for TSR interventions.

From a motivational perspective, expectations for success predict actual success across many domains (Usher & Pajares, 2008). In a study of relationship trajectories across grades 2–6, teachers with greater self-efficacy reported greater closeness and less conflict with students (Hajovsky et al., 2008). Studies of kindergarten teachers from Hong Kong (Yin et al., 2022) and Greek elementary school teachers produced similar findings (Poulou, 2017).

Knowing the nature of teachers' mindsets around building TSRs also predicts the positivity of their relationships (Okonofua et al., 2016). In a study of K-12 teachers, those who reported a positive orientation toward setting goals about TSRs also reported higher quality relationships with students (Chang & Hall, 2022). Other work (Poulou, 2017) shows that teachers' perceptions of their emotional intelligence, commitment to improving social and emotional skills, comfort in implementing social and emotional learning and self-efficacy contribute to higher closeness and lower conflict with students aged 6 to 11 in their classrooms. Recently, Carly Robinson introduced the concept of teachers' relational self-efficacy and a corresponding measure (2022), suggesting that this important idea may get increased scholarly investigation in the future.

Improving Teachers' Emotional Well-Being

> **Teachers are better positioned to cultivate positive relationships with their students if they themselves are thriving. Mindfulness training and mental health support can create a better context for teachers to foster positive TSRs.**

A teacher's personal well-being influences their relationships with students. Teachers with higher levels of depression reported more conflict with their students, even after accounting for students' problem behaviors (Hamre et al., 2008). Another study of kindergarten teachers found that their well-being was positively associated with their TSRs (Yin et al., 2022). After having teachers participate in a mindfulness training, researchers found that the educators were more mindful, showed improved emotion regulation, and experienced less distress. In turn, this intervention showed evidence of improved emotional support for students (Jennings et al., 2017). Finally, some research suggests that teachers who are trained to deliver social-emotional curricula to their students might reap personal benefits in terms of experiencing less burnout and more positive interactions with their students.

(Re)shaping Teachers' Perceptions

> **Perceptions matter. Helping teachers more accurately understand, and empathize with, the experiences that students are having in their classrooms can improve the strength of interpersonal connections and reduce adverse disciplinary events.**

Because teachers' perceptions shape their relationships, researchers have explored different approaches to having teachers "see" their students in a different light. One approach leveraged the psychological principle of similarity (Montoya et al., 2008). A core ingredient of interpersonal liking is the extent to which people find commonalities. Thus, although teachers and students generally perceive themselves as having little in common, their focus can be re-oriented toward what they do have in common (Gehlbach et al., 2016). In one study, researchers provided selective feedback from a get-to-know-you survey that focused teachers' and students' attention on shared commonalities rather than their differences. This intervention improved TSRs and students' academic achievement, particularly for students from historically marginalized groups. Although several attempts to replicate the findings were disappointing (e.g., Robinson et al., 2019), a team of researchers found that using the intervention in a tutoring program in the United Kingdom improved students' attendance—a proxy for tutor-pupil relationships (Tagliaferri et al., 2022). Though this approach warrants more investigation, one emergent hypothesis from these mixed findings is that focusing on similarities (such as through selective feedback on a survey) may improve relationships when teachers have a manageable number of students and commonalities to focus on.

Another approach has been to focus less on the psychological sense of similarity and more on the process of how perceptions are formed and revised. For example, Hunter Gehlbach and colleagues (2023) designed and tested a professional learning intervention to enhance this process for teachers as a means to improving TSRs, specifically through making teachers' efforts to understand their students more accurate and frequent. They found that TSRs improved from both the teachers' and the students' perspectives; students' academic achievement improved as well. In a conceptually related approach, Jason Okonofua and collaborators (2016) designed an intervention to shift teachers to a more empathic mindset about their students. Across three school districts, this intervention reduced suspension rates and produced more positive relationships.

Other efforts that focused on teachers' perceptions include the INSIGHTS program, which seeks to improve engagement and behaviors of children with "high-maintenance temperaments" by reframing teachers' perceptions of students' misbehaviors as expressions of temperament. The program encouraged teachers to find strengths in those temperaments. In one evaluation, students in the intervention condition experienced improved relationship quality (McCormick et al., 2015). A final example focuses on helping teachers better connect with their students by sharpening their perceptions of what content will engage their students. LessonLoop's AI-powered platform creates real-time feedback loops that reveal how students interact with different high-quality instructional materials, then offers educators evidence-based strategies to boost engagement.

Key Evidence-Based Strategies

Building relationships with individual students

Intervention Strategy

Direct PL on Facets of Strong Relationships

Teachers can improve their ability to build strong relationships through explicit, direct skill-building about facets of positive relationships and associated concrete practices. Reflection on relationships with individual students, paired with change in practices, also improves dyadic relationships.

Example Practices

During class conversations, paraphrase students' comments to check for understanding and demonstrate active listening;

Affirm positive choices students make;

Reflect on which students would benefit most from efforts to improve TSRs;

Note students' strengths, especially those who might be marginalized by peers (e.g., because of ADHD);

Hold 1-on-1 student-led meetings to learn about students' goals and interests

Example Interventions/Programs

Establish-Maintain-Restore, Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management, BRIDGE

Intervention Strategy

Building Teachers' Self-Efficacy and Mindset Around TSRs

Bolstering teachers' confidence that they can successfully connect with students and improve relationship quality over time leads to better TSRs.

Example Practices

With colleagues, discuss successful past TSRs with challenging students to identify what enabled past successes

Note: *Example Interventions/Programs represent example practices that correspond to the focal feature designed to improve TSRs that teachers might experiment with; these practices are not necessarily empirically verified.*

Building relationships with individual students (continued)

Intervention Strategy

Improving Teachers' Emotional Well-Being

Teachers are better positioned to cultivate positive relationships with their students if they themselves are thriving. Mindfulness training and mental health support can create a better context for teachers to foster positive TSRs.

Example Practices

Develop mindful listening skills, practicing "noticing" emotions without reacting or judging

When facing classroom stressors, try asking mindfulness-inspired questions such as, "Is there a different way to look at this situation?"

Example Interventions/Programs

Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) for Teachers

Intervention Strategy

(Re)shaping Teachers' Perceptions

Perceptions matter. Helping teachers more accurately understand, and empathize with, the experiences that students are having in their classrooms can improve the strength of interpersonal connections and reduce adverse disciplinary events.

Example Practices

Find common interests/values with each student and reference them during informal and curriculum-related conversations;

When frustrated by a student's action, come up with multiple explanations, at least one of which is charitable, and with which the student might agree

Example Interventions/Programs

INSIGHTS

Changing the Classroom Relational Climate

As a complementary approach to improving individual relationships, educational researchers and practitioners have explored ways to help teachers foster a positive relational climate. These classroom-level interventions aim to create local cultures and social norms that benefit all students. Some have focused specifically on high-stakes points of potential friction in relationships, such as disciplinary events; others have focused on the emotional tenor of the classroom; still others have helped teachers embrace the diversity of students in their classes.

Improving the Disciplinary Culture

When teachers use restorative practices (as opposed to exclusionary discipline) to resolve conflicts, they strengthen relationships and build social connection in their classrooms. Restorative practices can promote multiple beneficial outcomes, including reducing disciplinary disparities and shrinking opportunity and achievement gaps.

One way to engender a positive classroom relational climate is to focus on reducing relational stressors. In this regard, approaches to disciplinary episodes have particularly important implications for TSRs (Legette et al., 2023). In one approach—restorative practices—teachers and students attempt to resolve conflicts, create dialogue, bridge gaps among divided groups, and build cooperative environments, all with the goals of strengthening relationships among individuals and improving social connections within communities (International Institute for Restorative Practices). Restorative practices center relationships as a "fundamental value," promoting empathy and communication and reducing exclusionary discipline practices (Huguley et al., 2022). Rather than a curriculum or program, these practices have been implemented in schools across the country over the past decade and a half with many positive outcomes. They have been shown to narrow discipline disparities and achievement gaps, improve student behavior and school safety (Darling-Hammond, 2023), and improve relationships between teachers and minoritized students (e.g., Adukia et al., 2025; Gregory et al., 2016).

Building Emotionally Supportive Classrooms

Teachers can enhance their capacity to cultivate warm yet demanding classroom contexts through participation in social and emotional learning programs and reflection-based coaching. These programs give teachers the opportunity to learn about and reflect on their use of practices that support effective classroom interactions.

By definition, emotionally supportive classrooms are those characterized by warm, supportive relationships between teachers and students, few negative interactions between teachers and students (e.g., lack of sarcasm, threats, and yelling), sensitivity to individual students (e.g., awareness of individual needs), and regard for students' perspectives (e.g., teacher flexibility, student expression; Hamre et al., 2010). The warmth of the overall classroom climate is a particularly important complement to rigorous

instruction and high standards. Research provides several instances of how teachers can be taught how to foster supportive environments that enhance the social, motivational, and emotional dimensions of the classroom (Gehlbach & Chuter, 2020) while demanding academic excellence from their students.

One important example comes from My Teaching Partner, which offers teachers a video-mediated coaching program that uses the CLASS observation tool as a framework for teachers to reflect on their teaching practices. Participation in My Teaching Partner has improved observed emotional support among pre-K teachers (Early et al., 2017; Pianta et al., 2008). It has also been successfully adapted for secondary settings, where positive effects have been found for observed teacher practices (Allen et al., 2011), student engagement (Gregory et al., 2014), student achievement (Allen et al., 2014), and peer relationships (Mikami et al., 2011). Making the Most of Classroom Interactions is a similar intervention, in which teachers are trained to identify practices for effective classroom interactions. Teachers who engaged in small group discussions about video observations demonstrated higher observed emotional support than their control counterparts (Hamre et al., 2008; Early et al., 2017).

Many studies of social and emotional learning programs show links between these programs and increased emotional support. For instance, a randomized controlled trial of the 4R program (Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution Program) showed higher emotional support in intervention than control classrooms after controlling for teachers' social and emotional functioning (Brown et al., 2010). Training and implementation of the Responsive Classroom approach was associated with greater emotional support in third and fourth grade classrooms (Abry et al., 2013). In particular, use of Morning Meeting and Academic Choice linked to higher levels of emotional support (Abry et al., 2017). A randomized controlled trial examining a program called the Good Behavior Game delivered via coaching using MyTeachingPartner to new teachers improved emotional support for teachers who showed high distress at baseline and had many disruptive students in their classes (Downer et al., 2024).

Efforts to ensure that students feel that they belong have also proven effective. For example, the MOSAIC program was designed to support social and academic functioning by teaching teachers to communicate that children with ADHD are valuable members of the classroom community to create a more positive social climate. Results from a randomized controlled trial showed that for children with ADHD, students in the intervention group perceived greater support from their teachers (Mikami et al., 2022).

Building Culturally Responsive Classrooms

> **When teachers learn about and embrace students' individual identities, they are more likely to form strong social bonds.**

Culturally responsive pedagogy (and related approaches such as culturally relevant/culturally sustaining pedagogy) describes a set of practices designed to support all learners by attending to their racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Among other foci, culturally responsive pedagogy centers TSRs, emphasizing that such bonds are critical and may take more effort when teachers and students do not share a common background. Although these approaches often focus on students from historically marginalized ethnic-racial backgrounds, the practices teachers learn can

meaningfully impact students from all backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Teachers learn to build understanding and respect for students' individual identities—including their cultures, ways of being, and learning needs—laying the foundation for strong relationships and positive academic outcomes (Gay, 2018; Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Carter & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Hammond, 2014). Across content areas, numerous culturally responsive strategies have been identified, all of which can improve TSRs across diverse teachers and students. These include creating and modifying curriculum to represent and reflect diverse cultural identities and connecting content to students' lived experiences (e.g., Ciampa & Reisboard, 2021). Scholars have also highlighted how teachers can engage in "humanizing" teacher-student relationships to address historical and contemporary inequities that marginalize Black students in schools (Legette et al., 2022).

One way of understanding and honoring students' cultures was exemplified in a study of Maori learners in New Zealand. There, researchers discovered the interchangeability of the roles of teachers and learners described by the term "ako" which means "to both teach and learn" (Denston et al., 2022). For instance, at one point, a Maori teacher expressed his anxiety related to failure on a task. In response, students then checked in with the teacher to see how those tasks were going as a way of reassuring him. This level of reciprocity represents a high-quality TSR in Maori culture but could be seen as undermining teachers' authority in other cultures. As such, what is considered a high-quality TSR in one culture may be different in another culture, and this knowledge supports teachers' ability to identity and build positive TSRs across cultural differences.

Key Evidence-Based Strategies

Changing the Classroom Relational Climate

Intervention Strategy

Improving the Disciplinary Culture

When teachers use restorative practices (as opposed to exclusionary discipline) to resolve conflicts, they strengthen relationships and build social connection in their classrooms. Restorative practices can promote multiple beneficial outcomes, including reducing disciplinary disparities and shrinking opportunity and achievement gaps.

Example Practices

Proactively identify students in need of extra behavioral support;

Engage in community-building circles to honor all voices and challenge traditional hierarchy;

Use responsive circles to address low-level behavioral incidents

Example Interventions/Programs

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility; International Institute for Restorative Practices; Restorative Practices Fact Sheet

Intervention Strategy

Building Emotionally Supportive Classrooms

Teachers can enhance their capacity to cultivate warm yet demanding classroom contexts through participation in social and emotional learning programs and reflection-based coaching. These programs give teachers the opportunity to learn about and reflect on their use of practices that support effective classroom interactions.

Example Practices

Greet students by name;

Set aside regular times for community-building activities;

As class ends, ask students for "exit tickets" to better understand how students felt about a lesson, then reflect key themes back to students the following day;

Provide regular opportunities for students to exercise autonomy by making choices in academic and non-academic domains

Example Interventions/Programs

Responsive Classroom, My Teaching Partner, Making the Most of Classroom Interactions, 4R's (Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution), MOSAIC, CASEL

Intervention Strategy

Building Culturally Responsive Classrooms

When teachers learn about and embrace students' individual identities, they are more likely to form strong social bonds.

Example Practices

For each student, try to learn one aspect of the student's cultural background that is particularly important to them and one that is less important (as a means to building a nuanced understanding of how students identify with their culture);

Pair feedback with actionable next steps and affirmation that students can reach their goals;

Help students interrupt negative self-talk and disrupt stereotypes about themselves and others;

Build and explicitly share your belief that all students will succeed in your classroom

Example Interventions/Programs

National Equity Project; Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain; Unearthing Joy

Implications for Practice and Policy

TSRs are critical. They are intrinsically valuable—the human brain is hard-wired to connect with others. Better relationships also predict a vast constellation of outcomes that engender academic thriving, motivation, prosocial behaviors, and emotional health. These relationships confer parallel benefits for teachers' professional well-being. Yet, most educational organizations emphasize TSRs in ways that suggest they are only a modest priority.

Recent experimental studies show that many interventions designed to enhance TSRs have effectively improved these critical social connections. The collateral benefits of professional learning that supports teachers becoming positive role models in this regard could ripple far beyond students' schooling years (and the same goes for the collateral damage if teachers negatively model how to cultivate relationships). Given the society-wide challenges with relationships and the opportunity for teachers to build positive relationships with students, the argument for more teacher professional learning focused on TSRs has never been more compelling.

Although scholarly knowledge about successful professional learning approaches is still growing, we already know a lot about what it will take to make progress. Compelling evidence shows that professional learning efforts to improve students' and teachers' social connections with each other have found success through two pathways—a focus on improving one-on-one TSRs and fostering a supportive classroom relational climate as part of their broader instructional practice.

Alongside the approaches outlined here, we encourage teachers to experiment with their own approaches to improving TSRs. While researchers might focus on evaluating programs or interventions designed to improve TSRs, it may be more realistic for teachers to infuse positive practices that support TSRs in small, subtle ways through routine practices (such as an extra personal note included in assignment feedback or connecting a student's personal interests to curricular materials). Researchers can complement teachers' efforts by evaluating those emerging practices which, anecdotally, appear more effective. Furthermore, if researchers

> The collateral benefits of professional learning that supports teachers becoming positive role models in this regard could ripple far beyond students' schooling years.

can measure multiple outcomes of TSR-focused professional learning opportunities, educators will gain a clearer understanding of how valuable these social connections truly are. Ultimately, new knowledge on how to improve TSRs can develop more quickly if teachers and researchers simultaneously and collaboratively experiment with approaches to improving TSRs.

To be successful, initiatives to strengthen TSRs will take more than training and motivated faculty. Teachers are already asked to do so much. All school improvement efforts occur within a broader context—school leaders who create a culture that values social connections, promote teacher well-being, offer supportive coaching, and maintain adequate staffing levels will inevitably be more successful in improving TSRs. Furthermore, how new initiatives to improve TSRs are implemented will matter. Are initiatives framed as enhancing a district goal of leveraging high-quality instructional materials? Are coaches, administrators, and support staff included in trainings to create a more ubiquitous culture of strong social relationships? To what extent are the full array of TSR outcomes measured in schools' evaluation plans?

At the policy level, states and districts face extraordinary challenges with teacher attrition, particularly post-pandemic. Given that many teachers are motivated to enter the profession because of the rewarding relationships that they anticipate (Butler, 2012), it seems valuable for policymakers to put serious thought into what levers might improve TSRs.

At a time when society faces deep relationship challenges in the form of loneliness, political tensions impacting interpersonal relationships, and the specter of artificial friends generated from AI, science has shown more convincingly than ever how essential social connections are for human survival and thriving. Although numerous settings show promise for addressing this increasing societal problem, focusing on TSRs within educational settings seems especially promising given the opportunities for teachers to serve as models for students. The potential scale for this approach to improving relationships is commensurate with the scale of the problem. We hope that policymakers, philanthropic foundations, researchers, and fellow educators will collectively help align society's behavioral prioritizing of relationships with their actual value.

> Science has shown more convincingly than ever how essential social connections are for human survival and thriving.

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