

# Student–Teacher Relationships

**Bridget K. Hamre**  
**Robert C. Pianta**

*University of Virginia*

## BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT

### **The Importance of Student–Teacher Relationships**

A sizable literature provides evidence that strong and supportive relationships between teachers and students are fundamental to the healthy development of all students in schools (e.g., see Birch & Ladd, 1998; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, 1999). Positive student–teacher relationships serve as a resource for students at risk of school failure, whereas conflict or disconnection between students and adults may compound that risk (Ladd & Burgess, 2001). Although the nature of these relationships changes as students mature, the need for connection between students and adults in the school setting remains strong from preschool to 12th grade (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004). Furthermore, even as schools place increasing attention on accountability and standardized testing, the social quality of student–teacher relationships contributes to both academic and social–emotional development (e.g., Gregory & Weinstein, 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). As such, student–teacher relationships provide a unique entry point for educators and others working to improve the social and learning environments of schools and classrooms. These relationships may be a direct focus of intervention or may be viewed as one important feature of successful implementation of many of the other interventions described in this volume.

As children enter formal school settings, either in preschool or kindergarten, relationships with teachers provide the foundation for successful adaptation to the social and academic environment. From the first day of school, young children must rely on teachers to provide them with the understanding and support that will allow them to get the most out of their daily interactions in the classroom. Children who form close relationships with teachers enjoy school more and get along better with peers. Positive relationships with teachers can also serve as a secure base for young children; they are better able to play and work on their own because they know that if things get difficult or if they are upset, they can

count on their teacher to recognize and respond to these problems.

Relationships with teachers may be particularly important for children who display early academic or behavior problems. In one study examining children at academic risk, a group of children were designated as at risk for referral for special education or retention on the basis of low kindergarten screening scores. Those who ultimately did get retained or referred between kindergarten and second grade were compared with those who, despite being high risk, were promoted or not referred (Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). The children who, despite predictions of retention or referral, were ultimately promoted or not referred had far more positive relationships with their teachers than their high-risk peers who were retained or referred. Similarly, highly aggressive third- and fourth-graders who are able to form supportive relationships with teachers are more likely than other aggressive students to be well liked by peers (Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001). Positive relationships with teachers may even help those behaviorally at-risk students learn more adaptive behavior, as evidenced in one recent study among a group of aggressive African American and Hispanic students in which supportive student–teacher relationships were associated with declines in aggressive behavior between second and third grade (Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003).

The need for positive relationships with teachers does not diminish as children mature. Support in teacher–student relationships may be particularly salient at transition points, such as the transition from elementary to middle school (Wentzel, 1998). Middle school teachers who convey emotional warmth and acceptance as well as make themselves available regularly for personal communication with students foster the positive relational processes characteristic of support. These supportive relationships help maintain students' interests in academic and social pursuits, which in turn lead to better grades and more positive peer relationships. Although teachers are not the only source of support for middle school students, the support students receive from their parents, peers, and teachers seemed to have additive, thus fairly independent, effects. Thus, teacher

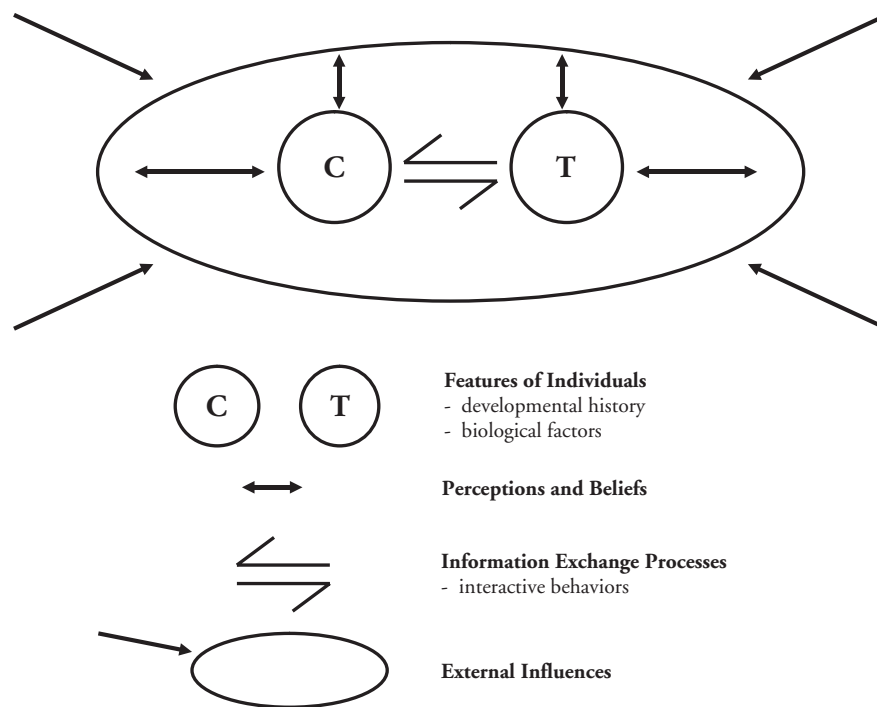


Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of Teacher-Child Relationships

support among this age group may be particularly salient for students who have low levels of parent support (Harter, 1996).

Although students have less time with teachers during high school, there is strong evidence that relationships with adults in these settings are among the most important predictors of success. Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health indicate that high school students reporting greater connectedness to teachers display lower rates of emotional distress, suicidal ideation, suicidal behavior, violence, substance abuse, and early sexual activity (Resnick et al., 1997). Connection with teachers was a better predictor of many outcomes than was students' sense of family connectedness. As with young students, the benefits of positive relationships with adults are not limited to social and emotional outcomes. Although both parental and teacher support are important in predicting students' achievement, a recent study indicated that student-perceived teacher connection was the factor most closely associated with growth in achievement from 8th to 12th grade (Gregory & Weinstein, 2004).

### A Conceptual Model of Student-Teacher Relationships

Developmental systems theory (e.g., Lerner, 1998) informs the core conceptual model for student-teacher relationships. Using this theory, the development of the person-in-context is depicted as a function of dynamic processes embedded in

multilevel interactions between a person and his or her contexts over time. Consistent with developmental systems theory, the conceptual model of teacher-child relationships presented by Pianta (1999) is reproduced as Figure 1. As discussed below, the primary components of relationships between teachers and students include (a) features of the individuals and their representation of the relationship, (b) processes by which information is exchanged between the relational partners, and (c) external influences of the systems in which the relationship is embedded.

**Individuals: Demographic, Psychological, and Developmental Factors.** At the most basic level, relationships incorporate features of individuals. They include biological facts such as gender; biological processes such as temperament, genetics, and responsiveness to stressors; developed features such as personality, self-esteem, or social skills; as well as the perceptions each individual holds of their relational partner and the relationship itself. Below teacher and student characteristics that contribute to the development of their relationships with one another are discussed.

Teacher demographic factors show a fairly inconsistent association with quality of the teacher-student relationship. Teacher experience and education have shown little relation to teachers' or students' reports about the qualities of their relationships (Stuhlman & Pianta, 2001; Wentzel, 2003). In contrast, teachers' beliefs and perceptions about students and

about their own roles are much more salient to the formation of supportive relationships in the classroom. Brophy (1985) suggested that teachers view themselves primarily as instructors or socializers and that their perceptions in relation to these two roles affect the way they interact with students. Instructors tend to respond more negatively to students who are under-achievers, unmotivated, or disruptive during learning tasks, whereas teachers who are socializers tend to act more negatively toward students they view as hostile, aggressive, or interpersonally disconnected. Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs may also affect the nature of the relationship they develop with students. Teachers who believe that they have an influence on students tend to interact in ways that enhance student investment and achievement (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989). Furthermore, when teachers hold high generalized expectations for student achievement, students tend to achieve more, experience a greater sense of self-esteem and competence as learners, and resist involvement in problem behaviors during both childhood and adolescence (e.g., Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998); thus, these expectations are quite salient to student–teacher relationships.

Teachers' mental health may also play a role in relational experiences, as evidenced by two recent studies. Among a group of child care providers and preschool teachers, caregivers reporting more depressive symptoms were less sensitive and more likely to engage in negative interactions with young students (Hamre & Pianta, 2004), likely resulting in less positive relationships. Teachers experiencing a recent loss or depression in their personal lives were also more likely to respond in a dependent fashion to students' needs and have difficulty establishing emotional or behavioral boundaries for students (Zeller & Pianta, 2004). These teachers report their relationships with students as being a source of emotional support and comfort. Little is known about the consequences of this type of emotional investment on the part of teachers, but an extensive body of research on parenting suggests that a lack of boundaries can be harmful to children's social development.

Just as teachers bring features of themselves into the classroom, students begin to make impressions on a teacher from the moment they enter a classroom, impressions that are important in the formation of the relationships that develop over the course of the school year. Some characteristics, such as gender, are both static and readily apparent to teachers, whereas others are more psychological or behavioral in nature.

Students' relationships with teachers change from elementary to junior high school. Relationships between teachers and students become less personal, more formal, more evaluative, and more competitive (Harter, 1996; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). These changes can lead to more negative self-evaluations and attitudes toward learning because the impersonal and evaluative nature of the relational context in junior high does not match well with the students' relational needs (Roeser & Galloway, 2002). This disparity applies particularly to students who have lower levels of intrinsic motivation, in that teacher–student relationships (typically viewed as potential resources)

can actually exacerbate risk if they either are not positive or do not match the developmental needs of the student (Harter, 1996).

Across grade levels, girls tend to form closer and less conflictual relationships with their teachers than do boys (e.g., Bracken & Craine, 1994; Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994). Unfortunately the disproportionately female teaching workforce in elementary and middle schools makes it difficult to determine whether this consistent finding is a reflection of gender bias. Findings from the adolescent literature suggest that relational closeness may be higher for gender-matched dyads (Drevets, Benton, & Bradley, 1996) but absent a major shift in staffing of elementary and middle schools, the consequence remains the same: Boys are at greater risk of relational difficulties in schools.

Other student characteristics that may be linked to the relationships students develop with teachers include their own social and academic competencies and problems. In particular, disruptive behavior (observed, self-reported, and teacher-reported) is consistently associated with formation of less supportive and more conflictual relationships (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Ladd Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Murray & Greenberg, 2000). According to Ladd et al., this connection between behavior and relationships may be the result, in part, of the relational style of the student (moving toward, away, or against), as discussed later in this chapter.

***Information exchange processes: Feedback loops between student and teacher.*** As with any system, the components of the student–teacher relationship interact in reciprocal exchanges, or loops, in which feedback is provided across components, allowing information to be calibrated and integrated in the feedback loops. In one way, dyadic relationships can be characterized by these feedback processes. This view of interaction as *carrying information* is somewhat broader than that of interaction as *reinforcing* or not. This perspective makes explicit the link between interaction and the participants' interpretation of the information embedded in the interaction, which is consistent with the focus on relational units of analysis. Furthermore, the qualities of information or how it is exchanged (tone of voice, posture and proximity, timing of behavior, or contingency or reciprocity of behavior) may be even more important than what is actually said or done.

Research on student–teacher interactions as they relate to student motivation provides some insight into associations between these interactions and the quality of student–teacher relationships. For example, a study of upper elementary teachers found that students had positive perceptions of the teacher when teachers were more involved with students within the social environment (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). A reciprocal association was found between teacher and student behavior: Teacher involvement fostered students' classroom engagement, and that engagement, in turn, led teachers to become more involved. This study and others suggest that students who are

able to form strong relationships with teachers are at an advantage that may grow exponentially as the year progresses.

**External influences.** Teachers and students do not interact in isolation; they are a part of a larger school community that may support or constrain the development of positive relationships. It is difficult to disentangle the extent to which student–teacher relationships and school climate influence one another, and the extent to which the balance of influence shifts as students grow older and their experiences become more widely distributed within a school. Nonetheless, there is ample evidence that school climate and the quality of student–teacher relationships share a reciprocal association (e.g., Crosnoe et al., 2004).

One interesting line of research in this area has highlighted the increasing mismatch between students' continuing need for emotional support and schools' increasing departmentalization and impersonal climate as students move from elementary to middle school (e.g., Roeser et al., 1998). Teacher–student interactions that lead students to feel supported by their teachers, and smaller communities of teachers and students, are important in enhancing young adolescents' motivation and emotional well-being. Unfortunately, in most middle schools, students spend very little time each day with any one teacher, thus limiting their ability to form close connections. Furthermore, many middle schools approach students' social and instructional needs from a perspective in which management is the goal. The ensuing control-oriented organization and techniques often backfire, creating less motivation and increasing student disengagement and hostility. These school-level effects on student–teacher relations have important implications for school-wide intervention, as discussed in the next section.

In sum, in student–teacher relationships, both parties bring an assortment of goals, feelings, needs, and behavioral styles that will ultimately affect the quality of the relationship they form and, in turn, influence the value of their experiences with one another in the classroom. These relationships may be further enhanced or constrained by external factors such as the climate and physical features of schools and classrooms.

## PROBLEMS AND IMPLICATIONS

Over the past 10 years, research on student–teacher relationships has focused on the ways in which these relationships may affect students' peer relations, parent–child relationships, academic competence, and social and emotional adjustment (for review see Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003). In the previous section some of the ways in which relationships between students and teachers can promote more positive outcomes were considered. In contrast, students who have difficulty forming supportive relationships with teachers are at greater risk of school failure. Poor relationships may be conceptualized as

producing concurrent risk, with conflict between a student and teacher that leads to problems in the classroom during that school year, or chronic risk, with students developing a pattern of negative relationships with teachers over time. Unfortunately, most of the research on poor student–teacher relationships as a source of risk has focused on elementary school students. Research on student–teacher relationships with older students has generally focused on the supportive context of relationships (e.g., Harter, 1996; Wentzel, 1998).

At least for younger children, relational stressors, such as student–teacher conflict, may be more powerful predictors of school adjustment than relational supports (Ladd et al., 1999). For example, in a study of kindergartners (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Ladd et al., 1999), children with greater conflict with teachers displayed lower levels of classroom participation and achievement. For some children, these early relational problems develop into more long-standing, chronic risks. Children develop a generalized interpersonal style (moving toward, moving against, or moving away) that characterizes their interactions with peers and with teachers. That relational style, which crosses socioeconomic levels, is related in predictable ways to the quality of relationships children form with teachers and peers in the classroom during early elementary school (Birch & Ladd, 1998). Those children who display *moving against* behaviors in kindergarten, such as verbal and physical aggression toward teachers and peers, are more likely to form negative relationships with teachers in first and second grade (Ladd & Burgess, 1999). Also, chronic student–teacher conflict is associated with increased problems of attention and behavior and decreased cooperation, participation, and positive attitude toward school from kindergarten to first grade (Ladd & Burgess, 2001). Chronic student–teacher conflict is a particularly strong predictor of poor outcomes for aggressive children.

These findings suggest that early relational difficulties are important indicators of problems throughout students' school careers. Indeed, a study by Hamre and Pianta (2001) demonstrated that conflict in the student–teacher relationship reported by kindergarten teachers predicted achievement test scores, disciplinary infractions, and school suspensions through eighth grade. Conflict was a better predictor of sustained academic and disciplinary problems than were teacher ratings of students' behavior problems. That suggests that students' relational capacities may be more salient than behavior problems to students' ability to adjust to the classroom environment and thus a better indicator of future school difficulties.

Although we know something about how the nature of student–teacher relationships may change as students mature (Harter, 1996), we know almost nothing about the implications of the developmental changes on the function of student–teacher relationships within the school environment. For example, young children rely extensively on teachers to structure their daily experiences, regulate their emotions and behavior, and facilitate connections with peers. Consequently,

student–teacher relationships are likely to have a somewhat diffuse influence on many aspects of young children’s classroom experiences. As children get older and their ability to form relationships with teachers becomes more circumscribed, however, the function of these relationships may move toward providing links to resources outside of classroom.

To better understand these potential developmental shifts, researchers need to perform longitudinal studies that specifically examine changes in the nature and function of student–teacher relationships and to perform more studies on the consequences of negative relationships among older students and teachers.

## ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS FOR PREVENTION

In considering applications of knowledge about student–teacher relationships across the many levels of organization and processes in schools, researchers approach the task with a bias toward deploying resources (or techniques) before problems emerge, with the distinct goal of enhancing wellness and strengthening developmental competencies (Cowen, 2000). It is in that context that improved relationships between teachers and students are either (a) a focus of intervention efforts or (b) a by-product of other efforts directed at students, teachers, classrooms, or schools. Using Eccles’s and Roeser’s (1999) model of school processes and structure, researchers can discuss an assortment of educational and psychological applications that improve student–teacher relationships, either directly or indirectly, as a consequence of other improvements in the network of systems in which the relationship is embedded. Eccles’s and Roeser’s model of the context of schooling (Eccles & Roeser, 1999) is a helpful organizing framework because of its focus on understanding the multiple layers of school organization and processes. Below, applications are discussed related to (a) organizational ethos of the school, its structure, and its resources; (b) classroom ethos and structure and the characteristics of the teacher; and (c) social interactions between teachers and students.

### Influence of School-Level Approaches on Student–Teacher Relationships

In a comprehensive review of whole-school restructuring projects and their consequences for student mental health, Felner, Favazza, Shim, & Brand (2001) concluded that often there is a “mismatch between the conditions and practices students encounter in grades K–12 and the developmental needs, readiness, and capacities of students” (p. 3). One of these needs is to form functional, effective, supportive relationships with peers and with adults in the school setting. The structure or organization of a school community greatly affects the way students and teachers feel about the time they spend at school. An emotionally and socially positive school climate contributes

to the development of students’ self-confidence, teachers’ belief that they can be effective in their jobs, and an atmosphere of cordiality in student–teacher relationships. Results from several large studies that examined mechanisms for creating such “caring communities” suggest that schools would benefit from emphasizing the importance of building and maintaining supportive, caring relationships between teachers and students (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997).

The ability of middle and high school students to form supportive relationships with teachers is often constrained by the structure of the school day. They have short periods of time with up to six or seven different teachers over the course of the day. Changes to that structure can foster relationships by increasing the amount of time that teachers and students spend together. In Felner et al.’s (2001) approach to that challenge (which is widely used in large schools), teams of 60 to 100 students have classes together and have consistent homeroom advisers and counselors. Time is allotted for all teachers to meet and discuss students, to integrate curriculum, and increase coherence and the support available to students. Such school restructuring efforts reduce complexity for students and build a sense of continuity and community, critically, increase and stabilize contact between students and a teacher or teachers. Schools report 40–50% declines in school dropout, maintenance of achievement levels, and fewer student- and teacher-reported behavioral or emotional problems. Not surprisingly, teachers also reported higher job satisfaction and less burnout. Table 1 presents some other practical steps that schools can take to create a more caring community.

One underlying goal of many of these strategies is to encourage staff members to learn more about students’ lives outside the classroom so that they can connect with students on a more personal level. These efforts communicate to students that adults are genuinely interested in them as individuals and that they care about what is going on in their students’ lives.

### Classroom Practices and Student–Teacher Relationships

Although the school-level preventions described above often contain classroom-level efforts, other prevention programs have focused exclusively on improving the classroom climate and the quality of interaction between students and teachers.

**Teaching teachers and students about social and emotional development.** Explicit teaching of social and emotional skills and behavioral regulation fosters relational development by providing students with opportunities to talk about difficult feelings and situations in a safe and supportive environment. Social–emotional curriculums, such as PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies), as described in Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma (1995), are designed to help students identify and label feelings and social interactions, reflect on these feelings and interactions, and generate

**Table 1** *School-Wide Steps to Supporting Positive Student–Teacher Relationships*

Goal	Steps
Increase the amount of time that students and teachers spend together.	<p>Organize nonacademic extracurricular activities for students and teachers to participate in together.</p> <p>Have students and teachers eat lunch together in small, consistent groups at least a few times a week.</p> <p>Have homeroom teachers act as advisers for students. Decrease the number of transitions and “pullouts” (e.g., art, P.E., library) during the school day</p> <p>Have parents and paraprofessionals in classrooms to facilitate more small-group and individual time between teachers and students.</p>
Expand the network of adults who are available to students.	<p>Create opportunities for nonclassroom staff, such as specialists, office staff, janitors, and others, to engage with students in fun, after-school activities</p>
Model caring relationships from the top down.	<p>Involve administrators in teachers’ planning and activities.</p> <p>Teachers who feel that administrators are genuinely interested and supportive of their work are likely to impart this same interest and support to their students.</p> <p>Have teams of teachers and administrators meet regularly to discuss problems and successes with individual students.</p>
Develop disciplinary policies that carry high expectations for students while fostering caring relationships.	<p>Use mediation strategies as alternatives to punitive discipline.</p> <p>Have teachers, parents, and administrators form collaborative teams to work together on comprehensive plans for students with chronic behavioral difficulties.</p> <p>Develop school-wide systems that reward positive behavior, rather than just punish misbehavior.</p>

solutions and alternatives for interpretation and behavior, and allow them to test such alternatives. Social–emotional programs are effective in altering the quality of the classroom climate and relationships within the classroom (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1999) by providing students with a larger emotional vocabulary, a more advanced ability to connect basic emotions to personal experiences, a more advanced understanding of emotional cues, and more confidence that they can manage their feelings (Greenberg et al., 1995). All of these factors are essential building blocks to the development of positive student–teacher relationships.

Student–teacher relationships, and the student–teacher interactions that promote them, may also be the specific target of intervention in professional development efforts involving teachers. Teachers can learn specific strategies and techniques that will help them form more supportive relationships with all students in their classroom. A few such strategies are discussed below.

***Engaging in frequent social conversation with students.*** Talking with students about their lives outside of school is one way teachers can show an interest in and appreciation for students. Teachers may ask students questions about how things are going in other classes, in their after-school activities, or at home. It is important for teachers to show genuine interest in students’ responses by spending time listening, asking follow-up questions, and remembering key information (such as the name of a sports team, or the class that the student

is having a hard time in) to ask about later. Such conversations are often made more comfortable by having them during fun activities such as playing a board game or shooting baskets with a student during recess. Young students, in particular, often initiate conversations with teachers at inopportune times, such as during the middle of a lesson. Teachers can easily convey interest without sacrificing productivity by saying something such as, “I’m really interested in hearing more about that. Let’s talk about it some more after we are done with this.”

***Being available to students who are having a hard time.*** Adults in schools can provide an important resource for students who are having difficulties, but often the school day is too busy for teachers to make themselves available to the students in that way. By letting students know that they are available 15 or 30 minutes before or after school, even if it is just a few days a week, teachers can provide an important opening for students who need to talk with an adult.

***Displaying regard for students’ perspectives and ideas.*** Teachers can work on establishing more positive relationships even during academic times of the school day. One way to do that is by actively seeking and facilitating opportunities for students to share their views and thoughts on academic subjects. Teachers who try to make curriculum meaningful to students, by incorporating aspects of their and the students’ real lives and going with the flow of students’ ideas during discussions, also indicate a greater regard for their students.

***Using behavior management strategies that clearly communicate expectations and caring.*** The way teachers choose to deal with misbehavior is key to developing supportive relationships in the classroom. From a relational perspective (Pianta, 1999), well-designed behavior management systems (a) provide clear limits and tolerances that help regulate students' behavior, (b) reinforce the idea that teachers will respond in expected (and fair) ways, (c) create opportunities to give students positive feedback about their behavior, and (d) are implemented in a way that communicates care and respect of students. A relational perspective of behavior management, as distinguished from a strict behavior modification framework, applies the notion that teachers can reduce behavior problems most effectively by spending more time with students. That is in contrast to some behavioral models, which suggest that students' misbehavior may be reinforced by attention from teachers.

These behavior management approaches are the centerpiece of an Internet-based tool that is currently being evaluated in a randomized field trial in prekindergarten classrooms (Pianta, Kinzie, Justice, Pullen, Fan, & Lloyd, 2003). The Internet resource MyTeachingPartner (<http://www.MyTeachingPartner.net>) offers teachers a two-level mechanism of professional development content and support. Using this resource, teachers can access hundreds of video examples of classroom interactions with students, along with detailed text descriptions of aspects of interaction that promote, among other things, more positive relationships. The resource provides a second layer of support to teachers who are in situations requiring intervention by giving them ongoing and individualized feedback on interactions in their own classrooms. Teachers can send in videotapes of their classrooms on a regular 2-week cycle. The MyTeachingPartner consultant edits the tapes and gives feedback, then makes the edited tape with feedback available on the teacher's private webpage. After the teacher has reviewed the edited tape and comments, the teacher and the consultant then meet face-to-face for conversation that takes place over the Internet. This 2-week cycle repeats continuously over the course of the academic year. In theory, this consulting process, because it is based on actual observations of the teachers' own classroom interactions, will provide them with a resource for professional development as well as lead to higher quality student–teacher interactions. This method of delivery needs further study but offers an innovative option for providing highly individualized feedback to teachers on a large scale.

## ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS FOR INTERVENTION

The prevention efforts described above focus largely on enhancing the promotive and protective relational resources available to students at the school and classroom level. However, even the best teachers struggle at times to form

positive relationships with certain students. These strained relationships begin to interfere with the learning environment, draining energy from teachers and leading to more frequent and serious disruptions in the classroom. Thus, even a single negative student–teacher relationship can affect many students in the classroom.

The most important components of a relationally based intervention with students who are having difficulties in the classroom include (a) conducting a thorough assessment, (b) creating time to spend with the student in which the focus is on building more positive interactions, and (c) finding ways to support the student throughout the day by creating and communicating consistent relational themes.

### Relational Assessment

Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to describe in detail some options for assessing relationships between teachers and students (see Pianta, Hamre, & Stuhlman, 2003), we present here a few key points that will help teachers, psychologists, or others to create the most effective and responsive interventions for students with relational difficulties. When describing the quality of relationships, one must approach the task from multiple points of view using multiple assessments of relational components. Relationships can be described from the inside and from the outside, with data on both the student's and the teacher's perceptions, behaviors, and beliefs. Using any one source of information about relationships almost always results in an indirect and incomplete assessment; therefore, talking with the teacher and student and conducting observations in the classroom provide important and unique information for designing an intervention. Looking for and assessing potential resources in the student–teacher relationship are also important. Being able to identify times in which things go relatively well for the student and teacher may provide information about positive aspects of the teacher–student relationship or context that the teacher can draw on in more challenging times.

### Creation of Relational Capital

A number of interventions are designed specifically to create more positive interactions between teachers and the students with whom they have the most conflict. These interventions include Primetime (Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999); Teacher–Child Interaction Therapy (McIntosh, Rizza, & Bliss, 2000); and Students, Teachers and Relationship Support (STARS; Pianta & Hamre, 2001). Although the interventions are relatively new and need more research to demonstrate efficacy, each has a strong theoretical base and derives from well-validated student–teacher interventions.

Common to all of these interventions is a focus on helping teachers and students develop new and more supportive ways of interacting with one another throughout the school day. Banking Time, the technique used in STARS to improve student–teacher interactions (Pianta, 1999; Pianta & Hamre,

**Table 2** *Relational Themes and Ways to Communicate Them in the Classroom*

Relational Themes	Ways to Communicate Relational Themes in the Classroom
I am interested in you. I accept you.	Take a few minutes out of class preparation time to watch the child during P.E., her forte. When the teacher or adult brings the student to you for starting a fight on the playground for the second time in a day, make an effort to communicate your frustration with compassion and calmness.
Adults can be helpers.	During an activity that you know is hard for the student, make a point of telling him before he begins that if he is having trouble you are available to support him.
I am consistent.	Tell the student that you are always around for the last 5 minutes of lunch if he needs to talk. Make sure you are there.
I am safe.	When he comes to you in tears because other children are teasing him, you listen, provide support, and take appropriate action to prevent a recurrence.
You have competencies.	Praise the student the first time she is able to sit through circle time without being asked to keep her hands to herself.
I will be here even when things get tough.	Make a point of listening to his side even when he is to blame for starting a fight with a classmate.
I can read your signals and will respond to them.	Notice when the student comes in more quietly than usual from recess and take a moment to ask how she's doing.

2001), uses brief, regular, play and interaction sessions in which the teacher plays the role of follower and listener. Its name is derived from the idea that relationships can be a resource that teachers and students rely on during their day-to-day interactions. When interactions are positive, the relationship provides support or “capital” that can be drawn on in stressful circumstances.

In Banking Time sessions, the teacher’s behavior is highly constrained in order to produce changes in interaction style and in beliefs. The emphasis in Banking Time sessions is on the student’s choice of activities, the regular occurrence of sessions (not contingent on the student’s good behavior), neutral verbalizations from the teacher (not focused on the student’s performance), and relational messages that convey safety, support for exploration, or predictability, to help the student and teacher define their relationship. When implementing Banking Time with a target student (typically a student with whom the teacher reports high levels of relational conflict), teachers report changes in communication with the student (the student more readily shares personal information) and less relational conflict. They also feel more effective in their interactions with the student and report knowing the student better than before.

The Banking Time technique acts on nearly every component of a relationship between a student and an adult; thus, it is a powerful source of pressure on the relationship system. By constraining the adult’s behavior, a variant of the typical interaction is created that is reportedly viewed as different, novel, and better by most student and adult participants. The student is freed to display behaviors (and competencies) that are not typically seen in routine interactions between teacher and student. The student often explores interacting at a higher level and shows interest in the teacher and the teacher’s attention. In turn, the teacher may reexamine or change his or her

perceptions. Thus, new pathways or dimensions of feedback and communication between teacher and student become possible.

The STARS approach also involves a set of other procedures that act on teachers’ perceptions about students. The procedures include videotaping interactions with students in the classroom for review with the consultant, reflecting on relationships with students through directed interviews, and analyzing classroom instruction and disciplinary practices. In combination with Banking Time sessions, the techniques offer a comprehensive approach to interventions in student–teacher relationships.

### Creation and Communication of Relational Themes

Teachers have opportunities throughout the school day to help change the nature and quality of their relationships with the most difficult students. One way they can do this is to identify specific themes or messages that may need to be communicated to the student and then to seek opportunities to reinforce these themes throughout the school day. Relational themes that will help reinforce the work being done during one-on-one sessions include messages such as “You are important,” “Adults can be helpers,” and “I am consistent.” Table 2 lists some possible relational themes, along with examples of ways teachers can reinforce these throughout the school day (Pianta & Hamre, 2001).

## SUMMARY

Throughout this chapter it was argued that students’ relationships with teachers are fundamental to their success in school, and as such, these relationships should be explicitly targeted in school-based prevention and intervention efforts. Student–teacher relationships develop over the course of the school year

through a complex intersection of student and teacher beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and interactions with one another. Forming strong and supportive relationships with teachers allows students to feel safer and more secure in the school setting, feel more competent, make more positive connections with peers, and make greater academic gains. In contrast, conflict with teachers may place students on a trajectory of school failure in which they are unable to connect to academic and social resources offered within classrooms and schools.

The theoretical and empirical study of student–teacher relationships has led to the development of programs designed to promote students’ school success by improving student–teacher relationships. Research is accumulating to support the efficacy of these efforts, but more empirical evidence is needed on aspects of these programs, such as the following: (a) the relative power of the student–teacher relationship to alter developmental trajectories in relation to the influence of the parents or peers; (b) the most effective ways to go to scale with intervention efforts targeting the student–teacher relationship; (c) how best to identify students and teachers in need of relationship support and thus target interventions; and (d) how to sustain these efforts over time and to effectively integrate them into the myriad programs for which schools are responsible. Answering these questions will refine our understanding of how teachers’ relationships with students may further positive social development and academic growth and, ultimately, help make schools and classrooms more responsive to the diverse needs of today’s students.

## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

### Books and Other Printed Material

Eccles, J. S., & Gootman, J. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

This book discusses the features of community programs that can contribute to successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. It offers insight into ways adolescents’ relationships with teachers and other adults may facilitate that transition.

Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B., & Stuhlman, M. (2003). Relationships between teachers and children. In W. Reynolds and G. Miller (Eds.), *Comprehensive handbook of psychology: Vol. 7. Educational psychology* (pp. 199–234). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons, Inc.

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the literature on teachers’ relationships with children. It summarizes historic trends in the research on child–teacher relationships and advances theoretical and applied efforts by organizing the available work that has been done across diverse areas.

Pianta, R. C. (1999). *Enhancing relationships between children and teachers*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

This book aims to provide school psychologists, child psychologists, and other mental health professionals who work with children with the theoretical and technical basis for designing interventions that enhance relationships between children and teachers. The author draws on research in social development and relationship-systems theory to describe the role of child–adult relationships in the development of social and academic competencies and the potential of child–teacher relationships to promote healthy development.

### Websites

<http://www.casel.org>

This is the website for the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL was founded in 1994 and works to establish social and emotional learning as an essential part of education, from preschool through high school. The website offers extensive resources for educators, school psychologists, and others, including reviews on the effectiveness prevention efforts in the field of social and emotional learning.

<http://www.myteachingpartner.org>

The MyTeachingPartner (MTP) website provides preschool teachers with web-based support and consultancy on effective teaching practice, with a focus on helping them develop students’ language, literacy, and social relationships. An evaluation on the effectiveness of MTP is currently under way with over 230 preschool teachers throughout Virginia.

<http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

The School Mental Health Project (SMHP) was created in 1986 to pursue theory, research, practice, and training related to addressing mental health and psychosocial concerns through school-based interventions. To these ends, SMHP works closely with school districts, local and state agencies, special initiatives, organizations, and colleagues across the country.

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