

# Student-teacher relationship

Just like parents, teachers are significant adults in young people's lives. The quality of a student-teacher relationship has a powerful influence on students' success at school, one that is sometimes underestimated by teachers. Students must feel a certain level of safety and well-being in order to engage in the intellectual endeavour of learning, and teachers can contribute to this by way of warm and positive interactions. Teachers also have a major impact on students' self-perception of their abilities, on their engagement at school, on the value they place on school subjects, on their expectations of success, and on their performance at school. The student-teacher relationship is even more important for students exposed to a number of risk factors for dropping out. Conflicts with teachers are often cited by dropouts as a reason for leaving school.

## What the research says

Researchers are unanimous in ascribing an impact of student-teacher relationship on school perseverance and success, in particular for at-risk students. The student-teacher relationship is especially important for children with behavioural or learning problems. It has been shown that establishing meaningful relationships with adults outside the family at a very early age allows more vulnerable children to learn social and behavioural skills necessary to develop and remain in school.<sup>1</sup>

Students with behavioural problems show a better ability to adapt and get better grades if they have experienced positive relationships with their teachers upon starting school.

As part of the Québec Longitudinal Study of Child Development (QLSCD), the *Institut de la statistique du Québec* revealed that students from disadvantaged environments who have favourable and helpful relationships with their teachers early on in their schooling have a more positive view of school.<sup>2</sup>

A good student-teacher relationship is also an important protection factor during periods of school transition, whether upon entering school, from preschool to elementary, or from elementary to high school.<sup>3</sup> Data from a longitudinal study in the US also indicate that high school students who form meaningful relationships

with their teachers have lower rates of psychological distress, suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts, violent behaviour, drug use, and risky sexual behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, when youth do not have meaningful relationships, at-risk students are particularly susceptible to these negative behaviours.

The QLSCD also sheds light on how student-teacher relationships change over time. It shows that while 68 percent of kindergarten teachers feel they have a close and warm relationship with the young children, this rate drops to 47 percent by grade 4 for the same students. Similarly, the percentage of students who say they like their teacher drops from 89 to 75 percent between grade 1 and grade 4.

### For more information

*Persévérance ou décrochage : que deviennent des élèves de maternelle 12 ans plus tard ?*  
<http://www.pierrepotvin.com/6.%20Publications/AQETA%20AAnime%20190309FIN-DL.ppt>

[1] K. Hamre and C. Pianta (2006), *Student-Teacher Relationships*. Downloaded at: <http://www.pearweb.org/conferences/sixth/pdfs/NAS-CBIII-05-1001-005-hamre%208%20Pianta%20proof.pdf>

[2] H. Desrosiers, C. Japel, P. R. P. Singh, and K. Tétreault (2012), *La relation enseignante-élève positive : ses liens avec les caractéristiques des enfants et la réussite scolaire au primaire*. Je suis, je serai, Institut de la statistique du Québec, 6(2), June 2012. Downloaded at: [http://www.jesuisjeserai.stat.gouv.qc.ca/pdf/publications/feuillelet/ELDEQ\\_fasc6no2.pdf](http://www.jesuisjeserai.stat.gouv.qc.ca/pdf/publications/feuillelet/ELDEQ_fasc6no2.pdf).

[3] K. Wentzell (1998), Social Relationships and Motivation in Middle School: The Role of Parents, Teachers, and Peers, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90(2) 202–209.

[4] The National Longitudinal Study on Adolescents Health (1994–2008), More information can be found at: [http://ucdata.berkeley.edu/pubs/addhealth\\_data\\_presentation\\_suli.pdf](http://ucdata.berkeley.edu/pubs/addhealth_data_presentation_suli.pdf)

## Taking effective action

While the quality of the student-teacher relationship can affect students' behaviour or learning, the inverse is also true. According to the QLSCD, teachers generally feel they have poorer relationships with students who have behavioural problems or those from disadvantaged environments.

The fact that teachers have generally poorer relationships with these types of students has also been reported in a number of studies from the US. These findings are of concern given that such students who experience positive relationships with teachers early on in their schooling have a more positive view of school. In addition, when students with behavioural problems experience positive relationships with teachers early on, they show a better capacity to adapt and get better grades. It would therefore seem essential to take priority action on the student-teacher relationship to improve the situation for these types of vulnerable students.

### Avenues for effective action related to student-teacher relationship

**Make sure that teachers form supportive and positive relationships with students as soon as they enter school, especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, by making the entire school staff aware of this reality:**

- to foster smooth transitions during various stages of schooling (entry into school, elementary-high school, high school-CEGEP, etc.);
- to put conditions in place very early on for active and positive parental involvement before, during, and after entry into school;
- to attenuate the negative effects of conduct or behavioural problems by certain students on the quality of the student-teacher relationship (early intervention programs that encourage behavioural and emotional self-control and the development of social and cognitive skills, as well as training designed to help teachers take positive measures with these youth rather than isolate or exclude them).

**Develop positive disciplinary models that maintain high expectations for all youth:**

- by implementing a constructive conflict-management system (conflict mediators, positive communication, etc.);
- by rolling out systems to support positive behaviour that are based on explicit instruction and reinforcement of expected attitudes and behaviours;
- by putting in place an individualized follow-up system for students with difficulties (mentoring, psychosocial monitoring, brainstorming workshops, etc.);
- by focusing on positive reinforcement and encouragement rather than on systems of punishment, rewards, and exclusion.

**Put activities in place that help increase the quality time that students, teachers and school staff spend together (extracurricular activities, mentoring, community involvement, tutoring with teachers, stable groups, etc.).**

**Broaden the network of adults who are able to support and guide youth:**

- to give non-teaching staff and practitioners from the community a chance to work on or take part in projects with students,
- to create networks of supportive adults around certain youth and their families.