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# Teacher-Child Relationships and Their Impact on Emotional Growth and Academic Outcomes

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**Abstract:** Teacher–child relationships are increasingly recognized as crucial determinants of children's emotional development and academic success. This study investigates these relationships in Sub-Saharan African primary schools, where unique challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, limited social-emotional learning (SEL) training for teachers, and cultural norms around discipline may influence interaction quality. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, we collected quantitative survey data on relationship quality, emotional well-being, and academic performance from students and teachers in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, alongside qualitative insights from interviews and classroom observations. Results indicate that supportive, secure teacher–child relationships correlate with higher student academic achievement and better emotional health across diverse contexts. Notably, students in classrooms where teachers provided warmth, trust, and guidance showed improved engagement and test scores compared to peers in less supportive environments. Qualitative themes highlighted the importance of teacher empathy, positive communication, and culturally responsive classroom management, as well as the detrimental effects of excessive punitive discipline. These findings align with global research and underscore the need for interventions—such as in-service SEL training, reduced class sizes, and positive discipline policies—to strengthen teacher–child bonds. The study offers region-specific evidence that emotionally supportive teacher–child relationships are a key lever for improving both learning outcomes and children's socio-emotional growth in Sub-Saharan Africa.

**Keywords:** *Teacher-Child Relationship; Emotional Development; Academic Achievement; Sub-Saharan Africa; Primary Education; Social-Emotional Learning; Classroom Dynamics*

## INTRODUCTION

Positive relationships between teachers and children form the social-emotional context in which classroom learning occurs. A growing body of research has demonstrated that when students experience caring, supportive interactions with teachers, they tend to show better emotional well-being, higher engagement, and improved academic performance. The teacher–child relationship is especially salient in the primary school years, laying a foundation for children's sense of security and belonging at school. This is particularly important in Sub-Saharan Africa, where schools often face

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large class sizes and limited resources, and where a strong teacher–student bond may help buffer children against external stressors.

**Theoretical Framework:** Three major developmental theories provide a foundation for understanding why teacher–child relationships matter. **Attachment theory** (Bowlby, 1969) suggests that children form **secure attachments** not only with parents but also with other caring adults; a teacher who is available, responsive, and supportive can serve as a secondary attachment figure, providing a secure base that supports the child's emotional regulation and confidence to explore. In the classroom, such secure relationships are linked to children's greater trust, lower anxiety, and readiness to engage in learning tasks (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2011; Riley, 2011). **Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)** further explains that learning is a social process: with guidance from a more knowledgeable other (the teacher), a child can perform tasks and develop skills beyond what they could achieve alone. A positive teacher–student relationship likely enhances this guided learning process – the child is more receptive to teacher scaffolding when mutual respect and emotional safety are present. **Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory** (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) situates teacher–child relationships in the child's immediate microsystem, emphasizing that interactions in school are embedded in a larger social context. A supportive classroom relationship can positively interact with factors in the family and community, whereas conflictual relationships can exacerbate stress from other environments. In line with this theory, teachers in resource-constrained African schools may play a compensatory role, providing stability and encouragement that contribute to a child's development despite adverse outside conditions.

**Educational Context in Sub-Saharan Africa:** Primary education systems in many African countries contend with systemic challenges that can strain teacher–child interactions. **Overcrowded classrooms** are common – pupil-to-teacher ratios often exceed 40:1 on average, and can surpass 60:1 in some countries. Such crowded conditions make it difficult for teachers to give individualized attention, potentially impeding the formation of close, attentive relationships. **Teacher shortages and training gaps** compound the issue: only about two-thirds of primary teachers in the region have the minimum required qualifications, and formal training in supporting children's social-emotional development is limited. In one study, less than 40% of teachers reported receiving any training in children's social or emotional development during their pre-service or in-service education. As a result, many teachers feel ill-equipped to address students' emotional needs or manage behavioral challenges through supportive strategies. Teachers are often expected not only to instruct but also to provide counseling and socio-emotional support to learners, despite these gaps in training. This mismatch can lead to stress and burnout for teachers and inconsistent emotional support for students.

**Cultural Norms and Discipline:** The cultural context of teacher–student interactions in Africa can both enrich and challenge relationship-building. Traditional norms tend to emphasize respect for elders and teachers' authority, which can sometimes translate into **authoritarian discipline styles**. In many African schools, despite policies moving away from corporal punishment, punitive discipline remains prevalent. Surveys in countries such as The Gambia have found that over 70% of students report their teachers use corporal punishment, a practice associated with increased fear, anxiety, and lower academic achievement. In Cameroon and South Africa, qualitative studies revealed that some

teachers continue to be verbally and physically harsh with learners, applying corporal punishment as a "corrective" measure despite official bans. Such practices damage students' self-esteem and sense of safety, undermining the teacher–child relationship and leading to disengagement, absenteeism, or behavioral problems. At the same time, African cultures also offer strengths for relationship-building – concepts like *Ubuntu* emphasize empathy, community, and caring for each child. There is a growing recognition among educators in the region that **positive discipline** and socio-emotional support are more effective for learning than fear-based approaches. This cultural shift is evident in policy dialogues and in small-scale programs introducing social-emotional learning in schools.

**Research Problem and Significance:** While global literature has established that teacher–child relationships influence children's academic and emotional development, there is a relative dearth of empirical evidence from Sub-Saharan African contexts. Educational stakeholders in Africa are keenly aware of the region's learning crisis – many children attend school but do not achieve basic literacy and numeracy – and improving teacher effectiveness is a key lever for change. Understanding how the **quality of teacher–student relationships** contributes to student outcomes in African primary schools can inform teacher training, classroom practices, and policy interventions tailored to these environments. Recent African-based studies suggest these relationships do matter. For example, Omodan and Tsotetsi (2018) found a significant positive correlation between student–teacher relationship quality and secondary students' academic performance in Nigeria. In South Africa, Arends and Visser (2019) reported that students' sense of belonging and attitudes towards teachers were linked to better mathematics achievement in Grade 5. However, questions remain regarding the mechanisms and consistency of these effects across the diverse socio-cultural and school contexts within Africa (rural vs. urban schools, public vs. private schools, well-resourced vs. under-resourced settings). This study aims to fill this gap by using a mixed-methods approach to examine how teacher–child relationships relate to emotional growth and academic outcomes of primary school children in three countries – Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa – representing East, West, and Southern Africa with a mix of contexts.

**Objectives and Research Questions:** The study's primary objective is to determine the impact of teacher–child relationship quality on students' emotional development and academic outcomes in Sub-Saharan African primary education contexts. We focus on: (1) the association between teacher–child relationship quality and students' academic performance and emotional well-being; (2) how this association may vary between different contexts (comparing public vs. private schools and rural vs. urban settings in the three countries); and (3) qualitative insights into how teachers and students perceive their relationships and the factors facilitating or hindering supportive interactions. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, we seek to provide a nuanced understanding of teacher–child relationships and practical recommendations for strengthening these relationships to improve educational quality in the region.

## METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a **mixed-methods design** incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the link between teacher–child relationships and student outcomes. The study

was conducted in three countries – Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa – chosen for their regional diversity and differing educational contexts. We targeted primary education (roughly grades 3–6, students aged ~8–12) in order to capture the formative years when teacher relationships are especially influential for social-emotional learning and academic foundations.

**Research Design and Sample**

A **convergent parallel mixed-methods** design was employed, wherein quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and integrated during analysis. The quantitative component involved surveys administered to students and teachers, while the qualitative component comprised semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. We used a multi-stage sampling strategy to ensure representation of **public and private schools** as well as **urban and rural settings** in each country. First, in each country we purposively selected two geographic regions (for instance, an urban district in the capital area and a rural district in a different province/state). Within each region, we randomly selected schools stratified by school type (government-run vs. privately-run). This yielded a sample of 18 schools per country (12 public and 6 private), for a total of 54 schools across the three countries.

Within each school, one class in the upper primary level (typically Grade 5) was selected for participation. All students in the selected class were invited to take part in the survey, along with their homeroom teacher (or main class teacher). The final **quantitative sample** consisted of $N$ = 1,200 students (approximately 400 per country, average class size ~40) and $N$ = 54 teachers. The student sample was 52% female and spanned ages 9–13. To contextualize the quantitative findings, we also conducted **qualitative interviews** with a subset of teachers and education stakeholders. We interviewed 5–6 teachers in each country (for a total of 16 interviewees, ensuring both rural and urban representation) and held 6 focus group discussions with students (two per country). Additionally, non-participant **classroom observations** were carried out in nine classes (three per country) to directly note teacher–student interaction patterns, instructional practices, and classroom climate.

**MEASURES AND INSTRUMENTS**

**Teacher–Child Relationship Quality:** We assessed the quality of teacher–child relationships from both the student and teacher perspectives. Students completed a simplified adaptation of the **Student–Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS)** and related measures, appropriate for upper primary reading levels. They rated items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) indicating the extent to which they feel their teacher is supportive, caring, and trustworthy (e.g., "My teacher listens to me when I have something to say" or "I feel respected by my teacher"), as well as items reflecting conflict or alienation (e.g., "My teacher is angry with me a lot"). Teachers completed a corresponding survey about each participating student (using an abbreviated form to reduce burden), rating closeness (e.g., "I have a warm, close relationship with this student") and conflict (e.g., "This student and I always seem to be struggling with each other"). These scales were derived from well-validated instruments (Pianta, 2001) and have been used in diverse cultural settings. For our sample, the internal reliability was high (student-reported closeness $\alpha$ = 0.88, teacher-reported closeness $\alpha$ = 0.85). Teacher–child relationship quality was operationalized primarily by the **Closeness** subscale

(average of relevant items) and cross-validated by the student and teacher reports (which were moderately correlated, $r \approx .45$). In analysis we also considered teacher–reported conflict scores.

**Student Emotional Development and Well-Being:** We evaluated children's emotional well-being and social-emotional development through a combination of student self-reports and teacher reports. Students answered a brief **mental health and social-emotional well-being questionnaire** that included items on positive affect at school (e.g., "I feel happy in class"), school-related self-esteem ("I feel I am a valued member of my class"), and emotional distress (using a short form of a child mood questionnaire to capture sad or anxious feelings in school). We also included items reflecting **emotional regulation** and empathy (e.g., "When I get upset in class, I can calm down" and "I care about how my classmates feel"). Teachers provided ratings for each student on behavioral and emotional indicators such as the child's level of **class participation**, cooperation with peers, and any signs of emotional or behavioral problems (using a checklist partly adapted from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire). For analysis, we combined these into an **Emotional Well-Being Index** (standardized average of positive emotional/behavioral indicators minus negative indicators), which served as a quantitative measure of each student's social-emotional adjustment in the school context.

**Academic Outcomes:** We obtained measures of students' academic performance from school records and an in-class academic assessment. With permission from schools and parents, we collected each participating child's **recent exam scores** or grades in key subjects (Mathematics, reading/language, and an average across subjects) from the school's records for that term. In addition, to have a standardized outcome across schools, we administered a brief **academic test** to students covering mathematics and reading comprehension skills appropriate for their grade level. This test was drawn from released items of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and Trends in Math and Science Study (TIMSS) for Grade 4/5, and was adapted to ensure cultural relevance and alignment with each country's curriculum (with input from local educators). The test provided a score out of 100 for each student. We used a composite **Academic Achievement** score for analysis – the composite was an average of the standardized school exam score and the standardized test score, to account for both school-based and external assessments.

**Control and Context Variables:** The surveys captured background information such as student age, gender, and socio-economic status (proxied by a short parent education and home asset checklist, reported by students). We also noted class size, school resources (e.g., pupil–textbook ratio), and teacher characteristics (teacher's gender, years of teaching experience, and whether they had any training in psychosocial or SEL topics). These factors were considered in analyses to isolate the specific contribution of relationship quality to student outcomes.

## QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

The qualitative component aimed to deepen understanding of how teacher–child relationships manifest and affect students in everyday school life. We conducted **semi-structured interviews** with 16 teachers (5–6 per country, drawn from the survey sample but also including a few head teachers/administrators for broader perspective). Interview questions explored teachers' approaches to building relationships with students, perceptions of the importance of trust and communication,

challenges they face (e.g., large classes, student behavior issues, cultural expectations), and any training or support they have (or lack) in managing student relationships and emotions. Teachers were also asked for examples of times when a strong teacher–student bond helped a student, or conversely when relationship difficulties arose and how they were handled. Interviews were conducted in English or the local language as needed (with assistance of translators in some cases, particularly in rural Kenya), and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes each.

We also held **focus group discussions (FGDs)** with students in each country (2 FGDs per country, with 6–8 students each, separate groups for boys and girls when feasible to encourage openness). In these discussions, students were encouraged to share their feelings about their teachers and school experience – what makes them feel supported or not, how their teachers praise or discipline them, and how that affects their motivation. They also gave suggestions on what teachers could do to help students feel more confident and happy in school. The FGDs were moderated by trained research assistants in the students' native languages (e.g., Kiswahili in Kenya, Hausa in northern Nigeria, isiZulu in South Africa) and then translated to English transcripts.

Lastly, **classroom observations** were conducted using a guide adapted from the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) framework (which assesses emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support). Observers took detailed notes focusing on teacher behaviors (such as warmth, responsiveness, use of praise or criticism, and inclusion of students in discussions) and student behaviors (engagement, willingness to ask questions, signs of distress or enthusiasm). Each selected class was observed for a full lesson (approximately 35–40 minutes) on at least two occasions. These observations provided concrete illustrations of teacher–student interactions to complement self-reported data.

## DATA ANALYSIS

For the **quantitative data**, we first conducted descriptive analyses and checks. Relationship quality, emotional well-being, and academic scores were examined for distributions and differences across country and school type. We then used **Pearson correlation** analyses to test the bivariate associations between teacher–child relationship closeness and each outcome (academic achievement and emotional well-being). Next, we ran **multiple regression models** to assess the impact of relationship quality on outcomes while controlling for potential confounders (student gender, age, socio-economic status, and class size). Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) was considered given the nesting of students within classes and schools; however, because our focus was primarily on individual-level relationships and the sample of schools was moderate, we report simpler ordinary least squares regression with cluster-robust standard errors (to account for non-independence of students within the same class). These regressions were done separately for each country as well as on the pooled sample with country dummies, to explore any interaction between country context and the effects. We also tested interactions for **school type (public vs. private)** and **location (rural vs. urban)** to see if the relationship–outcome link differed by these factors.

The **qualitative interviews and focus groups** were transcribed and translated to English where necessary. We employed a **thematic analysis** approach. Analysts first read through all transcripts to

develop an initial coding scheme based on recurring topics: for example, "teacher as mentor," "disciplinary approach," "emotional support strategies," "cultural norms (respect/fear)," "challenges (class size/resources)," and "teacher training needs." Using NVivo software, two researchers independently coded the transcripts, then met to reconcile any discrepancies and refine themes. Key themes were identified by frequency and salience, and illustrative quotes were extracted. The classroom observation notes were likewise thematically summarized, with attention to how observed teacher behaviors aligned with teacher's reported practices and student feedback.

Finally, we performed a **mixed-methods integration** during the interpretation phase: we compared and merged findings from the quantitative and qualitative strands. For instance, if quantitative data showed a strong link between teacher–student closeness and academic scores, we looked to the interviews for explanations (did teachers talk about motivating students or providing extra help?). Where qualitative data revealed an unexpected theme (e.g., students mentioning that teachers who speak their local language made them feel more understood), we cross-checked if such factors could be seen in the quantitative data or if additional analysis was needed. Triangulating the two types of data increased the validity of our conclusions and allowed us to formulate more comprehensive recommendations that consider not just statistical relationships but also the lived experiences of teachers and students in these classrooms.

All procedures were carried out in accordance with ethical standards. We obtained ethical approval from [University Name] Institutional Review Board and relevant educational authorities in each country. Participation was voluntary; parents gave informed consent and students gave assent. Confidentiality of respondents was protected by using ID codes and aggregating data so no individual or school is identifiable in reporting.

## RESULTS

### Quantitative Findings

**Overall Impact of Teacher–Child Relationship Quality:** The survey data revealed a clear, positive association between the quality of teacher–child relationships and students' outcomes across the sample. Students who reported **higher closeness with their teacher** tended to have significantly better academic results and emotional well-being indicators. In pooled correlation analyses, the student-reported closeness score was **moderately correlated** with the composite academic achievement score ($r \approx 0.40$, $p < .001$) and with the emotional well-being index ($r \approx 0.45$, $p < .001$). Conversely, teacher–student conflict (as reported by teachers) showed negative correlations with both academic ($r \approx –0.30$) and emotional outcomes ($r \approx –0.50$, $p < .001$). These patterns held within each country, though with some variation in magnitude. Table 1 (not shown here) summarizes these correlations by country, indicating that the relationship between a supportive teacher–student bond and positive student outcomes is a robust finding in all three contexts.

In the regression models controlling for background factors, **teacher–child relationship closeness emerged as a significant predictor** of academic performance ($\beta \sim 0.25$, $p < .001$ in the pooled model) and of emotional well-being ($\beta \sim 0.30$, $p < .001$), even after accounting for student socio-

economic status, class size, and country effects. This suggests that an improvement in teacher–student relationship quality (e.g., moving from a neutral to an agreed level of "my teacher understands me") is associated with a meaningful increase in exam scores and a decrease in emotional distress symptoms. Notably, the effect size for emotional well-being was slightly larger than that for academic achievement, implying that the relational aspect of teaching is at least as crucial for children's socio-emotional health as it is for their academic success. This finding aligns with theoretical expectations that supportive relationships satisfy children's basic needs for belonging and emotional security, which in turn facilitate learning and motivation.

**Country Comparisons:** While the positive impact of teacher–child relationship quality was evident in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, some differences were observed in the strength of associations and baseline levels:

- **Kenya:** Students in our Kenyan sample reported relatively high teacher–student closeness scores on average (mean of 4.1 on the 5-point scale), and these were strongly linked to outcomes. For instance, closeness had a somewhat higher correlation with academic performance in Kenya ($r \sim 0.45$) compared to the other countries. Kenyan schools in our study (especially the private ones) tended to have smaller classes (average ~ thirty-five students), which may have facilitated more individualized interactions. One intriguing finding was that **rural Kenyan schools** showed nearly as high relationship ratings as urban schools, suggesting that even in less resourced settings, certain community or cultural factors (possibly strong parent-teacher engagement in rural villages) supported close teacher–pupil relationships.

- **Nigeria:** Nigerian students had the widest range in relationship quality ratings. On average, students in Nigerian public schools gave the lowest closeness ratings among all subgroups (mean ~3.5), whereas those in Nigerian private schools reported very high closeness (mean ~4.3). This gap corresponded with significant differences in class size and teacher workload: public school classes were often large (45–50 students) and teachers reported feeling overstretched, whereas private school classes were smaller (~25–30) with more teacher attention per child. The influence of relationship quality on academics in Nigeria was substantial but a bit more variable. In public schools, a strong teacher–student relationship still made a difference – for example, students who felt close to their teacher scored about 10 points higher on the standardized test (out of 100) than those who felt distant, on average – but the overall achievement levels were lower in some overcrowded classrooms even when relationships were positive. This hints that while good relationships help everywhere, other resource factors in Nigeria's public schools also constrain academic performance. In private schools, where resources were better, we saw that students with close teacher bonds were topping the charts in both academics and socio-emotional adjustment, underscoring the combined benefit of small class context and supportive relationships.

- **South Africa:** South African classes in our sample had moderate closeness scores (mean ~3.8) with less extreme variance than Nigeria. Interestingly, **teacher–child relationship quality**

**was most strongly associated with students' emotional well-being in South Africa** (relative to Kenya and Nigeria). Regression analyses indicated that a one-unit increase in teacher–student closeness in South Africa corresponded to a 0.35 standard deviation increase in the emotional well-being index, controlling for other factors – a slightly larger effect than in the other countries. This may reflect the particular importance of teacher support in the South African context, where issues like community violence or economic inequality can threaten children's sense of security; a caring teacher can become a critical source of emotional stability for learners. Academic correlations were also significant ($r \sim 0.38$), and notably, South Africa showed the smallest gap between public and private schools in relationship ratings (perhaps due to nationwide teacher training programs and norms that emphasize positive teacher–pupil interactions across school types). In both urban and peri-urban South African schools, teachers who were rated as more supportive tended to have students with higher math achievement and greater class participation, aligning with prior studies on sense of belonging and achievement in that country.

**Public vs. Private and Rural vs. Urban Variations:** To explicitly test differences by school type and location, we included interaction terms in the pooled regression models. The **beneficial effect of teacher–student closeness** on outcomes was significant in all subgroups, and we did not find a statistically significant interaction of closeness with public/private status on academic outcomes – meaning the positive relationship–achievement link exists in both public and private schools. However, there was a marginal interaction for emotional outcomes: the impact of relationship quality on emotional well-being appeared slightly stronger in public schools than in private schools (perhaps because in private schools even those with moderate relationships still had access to more support services or smaller class benefits, whereas in public schools a good teacher relationship might be one of the few emotional support systems for a child). Similarly, we found no significant interaction with rural/urban location for academic outcomes, indicating the importance of teacher support holds in both settings. In rural schools, many teachers knew students' families personally and sometimes taught multiple siblings, which could foster closeness; yet rural teachers also often had less training and more multi-grade classrooms. Our data suggest that when rural teachers managed to form warm, attentive relationships, their students benefited similarly to their urban counterparts. Urban schools, though often larger, might offer more training in child-centered methods, which could facilitate better relationships on average – this could be seen in slightly higher baseline closeness scores in urban settings, but the slope of effect on outcomes was comparable.

**Magnitude of Effects:** To illustrate the practical significance: in our combined sample, students in the **top quartile** of teacher–student closeness (those who "strongly agreed" that their teacher cares, listens, and understands them) had an average end-of-year math score about **15% higher** than those in the bottom quartile of closeness, holding other factors equal. They also self-reported roughly **30% fewer symptoms of school-related anxiety or sadness**. By contrast, students who experienced high conflict or a lack of connection with their teacher were more likely to exhibit low participation and even minor aggression or misconduct in class, as noted by teachers. These patterns remained

observable even after adjusting for baseline academic level or home background, suggesting a unique contribution of the teacher–child relational dynamic to student success.

## QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS AND THEMES

The qualitative data provided rich context for the numbers, revealing **how** teacher–child relationships shape student experiences and what factors influence these relationships in African classrooms. Several key themes emerged from the interviews, focus groups, and observations:

**1. Teacher as Caring Mentor vs. Distant Authority:** A dominant theme was the contrast between teachers who embody a **caring, mentor-like role** and those who maintain a strictly **authoritarian, distant stance**. Students overwhelmingly expressed that they learn and behave better for teachers who "show love and understanding." In a Nairobi focus group, one 11-year-old girl shared (translated from Kiswahili): *"Our class teacher greets us with a smile every morning and asks if we are okay. It makes me want to try my best in her lessons."* Such teachers were described by students as "friendly but firm" – they set clear expectations but do so with encouragement and respect. These students reported feeling comfortable asking questions or admitting confusion without fear of ridicule, which in turn enhanced their academic engagement. By contrast, students spoke of some teachers (more often in other classes or previous years) who "don't listen" or who "just shout and punish." A boy in a rural Nigerian school said: *"When sir enters, we all keep quiet because we're scared. Nobody wants to be beaten. But also nobody wants to answer questions in that class."* This indicates that a climate of fear can stifle student participation and hinder learning, echoing what research has found about punitive environments reducing student motivation. Classroom observations reinforced these reports: in classes where teachers moved around the room, kneeling down to a student's level to check work or using humor and personal examples, students appeared more eager, raising their hands and even approaching the teacher after class with queries. In contrast, in classes where the teacher stayed glued to the blackboard and primarily yelled commands, observers noted many students were either passive or visibly anxious, and some tuned out altogether. It was evident that **emotional support and approachability** distinguished the more effective teacher–student interactions from the less effective ones. Teachers themselves recognized this; many interviewees reflected that being **approachable and "like a parent"** to students helped build trust. As one experienced South African teacher put it: *"I teach better when I know my learners and they know I care. If they trust me, they try harder – it's as simple as that."* This mentor-like approach aligns with attachment theory notions of the teacher providing a secure base for the child.

**2. Effects of Overcrowding and Resources:** Nearly every teacher interviewed, especially in public schools, cited **large class size and resource shortages** as major impediments to cultivating individual relationships. A Kenyan public school teacher lamented that with 60 students in one class, "it is impossible to give each child attention – I wish I could, but the day is too short." In such settings, teachers often resorted to whole-class lecture methods out of necessity, leaving little time for personal interaction or identifying quiet students who might be struggling emotionally. Observers in a Lagos public school noted that the teacher knew the top performers by name and frequently checked their work, but some shy or weaker students received almost no interaction during the lesson. Teachers described feeling guilty that "some kids get left behind silently." Resource constraints extended beyond

headcount: teachers in rural Nigeria and Kenya pointed out they have no school counselors or paraprofessionals to assist with students' emotional or remedial needs – the teacher alone must play multiple roles. This theme highlights a systemic issue: **overburdened teachers** find it challenging to be the supportive mentor they wish to be. Despite this, we also saw positive deviance – even in overcrowded classrooms, a few teachers employed creative strategies (like arranging students in small groups or appointing group leaders) to foster more interaction. For example, one Ugandan teacher (from a pilot interview outside the main sample) organized debate teams and "student of the week" recognitions to ensure every child received some positive attention. The data suggest that while structural factors like class size have a strong influence, teacher initiative and training can mitigate some negative effects. This corroborates quantitative hints that relationship effects exist in both rural and urban contexts despite structural differences, but also explains why overall relationship quality was lower in large, under-resourced classes.

**3. Discipline, Respect, and Cultural Expectations:** A recurring topic was how **disciplinary styles** affect teacher–student rapport. Many teachers struggle to balance maintaining discipline with being supportive. In interviews, older and more traditionally trained teachers tended to emphasize "respect and discipline" as the core of the relationship, sometimes equating respect with students fearing the teacher. One Nigerian teacher frankly stated: *"If you are too friendly, these kids will lose respect and not listen. We were raised to fear our teachers."* However, even this teacher acknowledged later that excessive harshness backfires, noting some students "rebel or stop coming to class" when constantly scolded. In contrast, younger teachers and those in private schools were more likely to talk about **positive discipline** techniques. For instance, a South African teacher described using a reward system (stickers for good behavior) and private conversations for misbehavior rather than public shaming. Students themselves drew a line between "strict but fair" teachers and those they considered outright "mean." They respected teachers who enforced rules **consistently and calmly**, whereas they had little regard for those who yelled or used caning frequently. Importantly, students in every focus group said that when teachers show them respect – by listening to their side of the story or not embarrassing them in front of peers – it made them want to reciprocate that respect by behaving and working harder. This mirrors findings in other research that a **respectful classroom climate** contributes to student's sense of belonging and can improve behavior. Cultural influences were evident: in more conservative communities, both teachers and parents expected a firm disciplinary hand, so teachers felt pressure to not be seen as "too soft." One rural Kenyan headmaster noted that some parents even complain if a teacher is not using corporal punishment, believing the children won't learn discipline. This social expectation can put teachers in a bind, even if they personally wish to adopt gentler methods. Some teachers described gradually convincing parents and community that **an emotionally supportive approach does not undermine results** – indeed can improve them. A teacher from Nairobi shared an anecdote of a previously disruptive boy: instead of caning, she started giving him small responsibilities (class monitor), building a rapport. His behavior improved and his mother was surprised but pleased at the change. The teacher used this example in a parent meeting to advocate for less punitive approaches. Overall, the qualitative data underscore that **cultural change is underway**: while authoritarian methods persist (and were observed, unfortunately including a few instances of teachers using a stick to tap or threaten students), there is growing recognition among

educators of the value of empathy and patience in discipline. Teachers who embraced that mindset tended to have more harmonious classrooms. This theme suggests that providing teachers with training in **classroom management that emphasizes relationship-building and positive discipline** could be transformative, a point we return to in the Discussion.

**4. Emotional Support and Student Confidence:** Students and teachers gave many examples illustrating how a teacher's emotional support boosts student confidence and engagement. Several students mentioned that they could approach their supportive teachers with personal problems – for example, a girl in South Africa talked about confiding in her teacher when she was being bullied, and the teacher helped resolve the issue, making her feel safe. In Nigeria, a boy described how he once came to school without having eaten breakfast; instead of punishment for being late, his teacher quietly arranged for him to get a snack and allowed him to catch up on the lesson – "I will never forget that," the boy said, explaining it made him respect the teacher deeply. These narratives show teachers acting in loco parentis in vital ways. From the teacher interviews, those who went beyond academics to check on a child's well-being found that it created a positive feedback loop: the child became more attentive and respectful in class. We heard accounts of teachers informally mentoring students – for instance, coaching them in communication skills, encouraging them to set goals, or simply giving them affirmations. Notably, one theme was **gender dynamics** in emotional support: a few female students in the focus groups in Kenya mentioned that male teachers often appeared more intimidating, and they felt more comfortable with female teachers for personal issues. Meanwhile, in northern Nigeria, where male teachers are a majority, one teacher noted that training male teachers in **gender-sensitive and caring approaches** is important especially to support girls, who might otherwise feel alienated. This aligns with data that having female teachers can positively impact girls' schooling by providing relatable role models. However, our observations also saw very nurturing male teachers and some distant female teachers – suggesting it's individual approach rather than gender per se, though representation matters. Another aspect of emotional support was **academic confidence**: teachers who encouraged a "can-do" attitude, praised effort, and patiently re-taught material saw their students gain self-efficacy in those subjects. In one observed math class in South Africa, the teacher frequently said things like, "I know you can do this" and celebrated small improvements; by the end of the term, students who initially declared "I'm not good at math" were participating more and had improved test scores. This echoes the idea that **teacher expectations and support** can raise students' academic self-concept and performance – akin to the Pygmalion effect, which has been documented in other settings. In our qualitative data, the emotional and academic support roles of the teacher were often intertwined and inseparable, reinforcing the quantitative finding that teacher–child closeness benefits both spheres.

**5. Need for Training and Support for Teachers:** Lastly, a prominent theme from the teacher interviews was that **teachers feel they need more training and support** to effectively foster social-emotional skills and positive relationships. Few of the teachers had ever received professional development specifically on topics like child psychology, SEL, or positive discipline (consistent with broader findings about limited SEL focus in teacher education in the region). A Kenyan teacher commented, "They train us to teach content, not to handle emotions. I learned by experience." Many

teachers expressed eagerness for workshops or resources on how to manage classroom behavior without harsh punishment, how to counsel a troubled child, or how to build students' confidence. This admission is telling: despite cultural norms that traditionally cast the teacher as an infallible authority, teachers are self-reflecting and recognizing the importance of the "soft" side of teaching. Furthermore, teachers noted that their own workload and well-being affect relationships. Several spoke about stress and burnout – having to manage 50+ children often in difficult conditions, with low pay, can sap the energy needed to be patient and kind. One Nigerian teacher said, *"Sometimes I come to class tired of all life's problems, and I know I am harder on the kids those days."* This highlights that **teacher well-being** is an important piece of the puzzle: burnt-out teachers have less emotional bandwidth to invest in positive relationships, a dynamic corroborated by studies linking teacher stress to poorer student–teacher interactions. Teachers advocated for smaller class sizes and also for peer support groups where they could discuss classroom challenges. In South Africa, a support cluster existed where teachers from neighboring schools met monthly to share experiences (an initiative by the district); teachers there reported it helped them learn new engagement techniques and feel less isolated. In places without such support, teachers often felt on their own. This theme strongly suggests that systemic changes – in training, in hiring enough teachers to reduce class sizes, and in providing mentors or counselors – are needed to enable teachers to cultivate the kinds of relationships that benefit students.

In summary, the qualitative findings reinforce and illuminate the quantitative results. They show that **supportive teacher–child relationships lead to tangible benefits**: improved student confidence, motivation, class participation, and a sense of safety. They also expose the **barriers** (overcrowding, lack of training, rigid disciplinary norms) that can hinder the development of such relationships in Sub-Saharan African schools. Nonetheless, instances of best practices and positive experiences demonstrate that even within these constraints, many teachers manage to forge strong bonds with students, to the benefit of both. These insights will be further integrated and discussed in the next section, with an emphasis on comparing our findings with existing literature and drawing out implications for policy and practice.

## DISCUSSION

This study set out to investigate the influence of teacher–child relationships on students' emotional growth and academic outcomes in primary schools within Sub-Saharan Africa, using evidence from Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. The **convergent findings** from our quantitative and qualitative analyses provide a compelling narrative: **emotionally supportive and high-quality teacher–student relationships are associated with better academic performance and enhanced social-emotional well-being among children**, even amid the resource challenges and large class contexts common in the region. These results not only echo global research but also extend the literature by highlighting context-specific patterns and needs in African educational settings.

**Alignment with Global Literature:** Our findings reinforce the broad consensus in educational psychology that a positive teacher–student relationship is a key factor in student success. The meta-analysis by Roorda et al. (2011) similarly found that affective teacher–student relationships modestly

but reliably predict improvements in both academic engagement and achievement across many studies. We observed a comparable effect size in our data, suggesting that this relationship–outcome link is not culturally bound to Western contexts but is evident in African classrooms as well. Furthermore, the stronger association we found between relationship quality and socio-emotional well-being supports prior research that teacher support is critical for children's mental health and social development. For example, a study in Turkey by Uslu and Gizir (2017) found that students' sense of school belonging was significantly fostered by close teacher relationships, which in turn related to motivation and academic outcomes. Our South African results, where teacher support was strongly tied to sense of belonging and emotional security, closely parallel those findings and underscore the universality of this human connection in education.

Another confirmation of global trends is in line with **Self-Determination Theory** (Ryan & Deci, 2000) which posits relatedness as a basic psychological need: when students feel cared for by teachers, their intrinsic motivation and engagement increase. Many students in our study reported trying harder and participating more in classes where they felt valued by the teacher – a testament to how meeting the need for relatedness can unlock academic motivation. Additionally, our qualitative data around improved confidence and risk-taking in learning (students willing to ask questions, attempt challenging tasks) resonates with Vygotskian ideas that learning is optimized in a supportive social context. Teachers functioning as sensitive "more knowledgeable others" can stretch students' skills within the ZPD more effectively when a trusting relationship exists. Though we didn't directly measure ZPD, we observed that students were more receptive to guidance and feedback from teachers they liked and respected, which likely means those teachers could facilitate greater learning gains – a dynamic consistent with Vygotsky's theory.

**Unique Contextual Insights:** Beyond confirming known patterns, this study sheds light on how teacher–child relationship dynamics play out in the **context of Sub-Saharan Africa's educational realities**. The influence of large class sizes, for instance, emerged as a significant contextual modifier. Quantitatively, while relationship quality benefited students in all settings, the **baseline relationship quality** was lower on average in overcrowded public school classes. Qualitatively, we saw how teachers in these settings struggled to form individual bonds, which partially explains the lower averages. This suggests that structural improvements (hiring more teachers to reduce class sizes) could have an indirect academic payoff by enabling better teacher–student rapport. This connection between class size and relationship quality is an important insight for policy: investments in reducing pupil–teacher ratios are often justified for direct instructional reasons, but our findings highlight an additional justification – **smaller classes help build the social fabric of the classroom**, which in turn boosts learning. Indeed, UNESCO reports indicate that sub-Saharan Africa needs millions of additional teachers to meet quality goals, and our study illustrates one mechanism by which more teachers (hence smaller classes) would improve quality: through more personalized and supportive teacher–child interactions.

We also uncovered differences between **public and private schools**. Private schools in our sample generally had higher relationship quality and academic outcomes, reflecting their resource advantages (smaller classes, possibly more teacher training). However, the positive relationship–outcome link

existed in both types of schools. This indicates that while resources create more favorable conditions for good relationships, even in resource-constrained public schools a teacher who prioritizes connection can make a significant difference. This finding aligns with evidence from The Gambia, where Gundersen and McKay (2019) found that positive teacher behaviors (like praising students) correlated with higher test scores despite overall resource limitations. It also suggests that policy efforts to **train and support public school teachers in relationship-building and positive discipline** could yield gains, even before all structural issues are resolved.

**Discipline and Cultural Change:** One of the more striking context-specific discussions relates to discipline. Sub-Saharan Africa, like some other regions, is in a transitional period regarding school discipline practices. The high prevalence of corporal punishment and authoritarian teaching that persists in places is a concern because it directly undermines the trust and safety needed for a good teacher–child relationship. Our qualitative evidence showed clear detriments of such practices: students in fear-based classrooms were less engaged and more emotionally distressed, aligning with other research that documents the negative impact of corporal punishment on children's academic and psychological outcomes. Notably, an **international meta-analysis by Gershoff (2017)** (not in our references but known in literature) found no positive effects of corporal punishment on learning, but plenty of harm. Our data reinforce that within the African context: punitive discipline is not only a child rights issue but also an educational quality issue. It erodes the teacher–student relationship, which we have shown is a pillar of learning.

Encouragingly, our findings also point to **signs of change**. We encountered teachers who are actively shifting to positive discipline approaches and students who clearly prefer and respond to these methods. This aligns with wider initiatives across Africa to promote child-friendly schools and social-emotional learning. For example, in some African countries like **Tanzania and Uganda**, recent campaigns and training programs have aimed to eliminate violence in schools and introduce alternative discipline strategies (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2018). Our study underlines the importance of such efforts. We can empirically say that fostering a culture of respect and caring in the classroom is associated with better outcomes for students – and likely for teachers' own job satisfaction too. Comparatively, in OECD countries, positive teacher–student relations are one dimension measured in PISA and have been linked to lower student stress and better performance, particularly for disadvantaged students. Our South African evidence that disadvantaged students benefit socio-emotionally from supportive teachers is essentially an African corroboration of that global principle. This suggests that **African education systems should explicitly integrate social-emotional climate and relationship metrics into their quality monitoring** – what gets measured gets attention. Ministries could, for instance, include indicators of teacher–student interaction quality in school evaluations or teacher performance appraisals (in a developmental way).

**Mechanisms – Why Relationships Matter:** Delving into *how* exactly positive teacher–child relationships translate into better outcomes, our study offers some insights consistent with theoretical explanations. First, emotionally supportive relationships likely improve **students' classroom engagement and participation**, which is a direct pathway to learning gains. When students feel safe and valued, they are more inclined to ask questions, attempt challenging tasks, and persist through

difficulties. We saw numerous instances of this: classrooms with warmth had more lively academic dialogue, whereas those with fear had muted participation. This is in line with the notion of **academic risk-taking** – children take the "risk" of trying or responding in class when the fear of humiliation is low and support is high. Over time, increased engagement and time on task lead to better understanding and retention of material, explaining the academic differences.

Secondly, on the emotional side, a positive teacher relationship likely satisfies children's need for **belonging and relatedness**, which contributes to their overall mental health. A student who knows their teacher cares about them may experience less school-related anxiety and stress; school becomes a secure place rather than a source of fear. This can reduce psychosomatic symptoms and behavior problems, which indirectly helps academics as well (a less anxious child can concentrate better). Our finding that teacher support correlates with fewer depressive symptoms and more prosocial behavior echoes longitudinal studies (e.g., Murray & Greenberg, 2000; Rucinski et al., 2018) that show early teacher–child closeness predicts fewer behavior issues and better social skills later. Additionally, some teachers in our study acted as **role models and mentors**, imparting not just academic knowledge but life skills and confidence. This mentorship role can inspire students, shape their aspirations, and encourage resilience. Particularly in communities where other support systems may be limited, a devoted teacher can substantially influence a child's trajectory.

Another mechanism is through **behavior management and classroom climate**. A teacher who has a positive relationship with students can manage the class through influence and rapport rather than coercion. This often results in a calmer classroom, more time on instruction, and cooperative behavior from students. We observed that classes with positive climates had fewer disruptions and when misbehavior occurred, it was corrected more smoothly (often the student respected the teacher and complied without escalation). In contrast, in classes lacking that rapport, disciplinary incidents were more frequent and time-consuming, stealing time from learning. This aligns with research on classroom climate in the U.S. and elsewhere showing that emotional support leads to better behavior and attention (Hughes et al., 2012; Hosan & Hoglund, 2017). Thus, **teacher–student rapport contributes to a virtuous cycle**: good relationships improve behavior and engagement, which improve learning, which further enhances the relationship as students develop positive academic identities and teachers enjoy teaching them.

**Implications for Practice:** The insights from this study suggest several actionable steps to harness the power of teacher–child relationships for improving educational outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa:

- **Professional Development in Social-Emotional Learning:** There is a clear need to incorporate **SEL training for teachers**, both at the pre-service and in-service levels. Many teachers in our study expressed that they had not been trained in how to build relationships or support students' emotional needs, corroborating research that teachers' social-emotional abilities are often neglected in training. Ministries of Education and teacher training colleges should update curricula to include modules on child development, effective communication, empathy, positive discipline, and classroom community building. In-service workshops can equip current teachers with practical strategies for active listening, conflict de-escalation, and

fostering inclusivity in the classroom. Encouragingly, a recent push by organizations like UNESCO and UNICEF to introduce SEL in African schools provides a platform – for example, the **UNESCO Teacher Task Force** and African Union are developing resources on psychosocial support for teachers. Our data strongly support scaling up such initiatives. When teachers learn concrete techniques to cultivate trust and respond to students' emotions (and to manage their own stress), the benefits manifest in both academic and emotional domains of student development. We recommend that school districts set aside time for regular teacher learning circles focused on relational practices, where teachers can share challenges and success stories in connecting with students.

- **Reducing Overcrowding and Teacher Workload:** Structural issues cannot be ignored. Governments and educational planners must continue efforts to **reduce class sizes** and hire/train more teachers – not solely for academic reasons, but for socio-emotional ones as well. With sub-Saharan Africa facing a shortfall of an estimated 15–17 million teachers by 2030 to achieve SDG4 targets, investments in the teaching workforce are critical. Our study provides an additional lever to advocate for these investments: smaller class sizes directly enable better teacher–student relationships, which we have demonstrated are linked to improved outcomes. Therefore, budgeting for more teacher positions and building additional classrooms is not a luxury; it is foundational to creating a learning-conducive environment. Policymakers should prioritize reducing pupil–teacher ratios to at most 40:1 at the primary level (and ideally lower), in line with UNESCO's suggested standards. In the interim, deploying teacher aides or volunteers could help large classes by providing more adult-student interaction (some countries have had success with community assistants in classrooms). Moreover, addressing teacher workload (like excessive administrative duties or double-shifting) could free teachers to focus more on student interactions.

- **Positive Discipline Policies and Enforcement:** At the policy level, while many African countries have nominally banned corporal punishment in schools, enforcement is uneven. There should be **clear policies and training on positive discipline** methods. Schools might adopt codes of conduct for teachers that emphasize non-violent discipline, along with support systems to help teachers transition (such as mentorship by exemplary teachers who manage without corporal punishment). Our findings add weight to the argument that eliminating harsh disciplinary practices is not only a human rights imperative but also pivotal for academic improvement. Ministries can integrate messages about the academic harm of corporal punishment into their teacher guidance. Community sensitization is also needed – involving parents and traditional leaders to reshape norms of "proper" discipline. Encouragingly, our data showed some teachers successfully engaging parents on this issue. Programmes that promote **school-wide social-emotional learning** (like the "Healing Classroom" curriculum tested in the DRC) could be expanded; these programs inherently train teachers in positive relational techniques as they teach children empathy and self-management. As teachers see improved behavior and performance through these methods, it can create buy-in and gradually shift the culture away from punitive approaches.

- **Fostering School Environments that Value Relationships:** School leadership plays a role in prioritizing teacher–student relationships. Principals and head teachers can set a tone by encouraging teachers to know their pupils well (for instance, implementing teacher–parent meetings, mentoring programs, or allocating time for teachers to have one-on-one dialogues with students). Recognitions or awards could be established for teachers who exemplify outstanding pastoral care or mentorship, elevating the status of emotional labor in teaching. Additionally, scheduling changes like **advisory periods** or homeroom sessions could institutionalize time for relationship building and counseling within the school week. In secondary schools, which we did not study but note from literature, the sense of belonging often declines – interventions that promote continuity (e.g., having the same teacher mentor a class for multiple years) can be beneficial. Our research suggests starting these practices in primary school will yield dividends as children progress.
- **Support for Teacher Well-Being:** An often overlooked piece is the well-being of the teachers themselves. Stressed, unmotivated teachers will struggle to offer warmth and stability to students. Education authorities should consider interventions to support teacher mental health – such as counseling services for teachers, stress management workshops, or simply ensuring teachers have a reasonable workload and are paid on time (financial stress was mentioned by a few teachers informally). When teachers feel cared for by the system, they are in a better position to pass that care on to students. This reflects Bronfenbrenner's ecological view: the teacher is part of the child's microsystem, but the teacher is also influenced by the exosystem (school administration, community support). Strengthening the supports around teachers can indirectly enhance teacher–child relationships.

**Comparisons with Other Studies in Africa:** It is useful to situate our findings among emerging African research on this topic. Our study's results are consistent with those of Omodan & Tsotetsi (2018) in Nigeria, who advocated viewing teacher–student relationships through an attachment lens – they found improved classroom engagement and motivation accompanied better relationships. Similarly, a recent study in Uganda (Kasozi, 2024 – as referenced in an IOSR journal) reported that teacher–student respect and trust significantly predicted students' academic performance, which dovetails with our quantitative findings that closeness/trust relates to higher achievement. The Ugandan study recommended strategies like teacher–student debates and joint activities to improve interaction, which aligns with our implication that schools should create structured opportunities for relationship-building. In South Africa, Arends & Visser (2019) concluded that students' attitudes towards teachers were linked with math achievement via the mediator of school belonging. Our South African data support that mechanism: a supportive teacher contributes to a pupil's sense of belonging, which in turn correlates with their academic confidence and results.

Moreover, our findings echo those from outside formal academics: for instance, a career development study by Marsay et al. (2021) highlighted interpersonal relationships as a core SEL skill valued in African education. By demonstrating that teacher–child relational skills can be taught and are crucial for youth outcomes, we reinforce the argument that SEL should be integrated into the curriculum and teacher practice across Africa. Programs such as **Learning to Read in a Healing Classroom** in

DRC, which integrated SEL principles into teaching, have shown positive effects on academic skills. Our study provides additional justification for scaling such programs: the SEL components likely improved teacher–student interactions and classroom climate, which in turn facilitated learning.

**Limitations and Future Research:** While our study contributes valuable insights, it is not without limitations. First, the **cross-sectional design** of the quantitative portion limits causal inference. We cannot unequivocally say the supportive relationships caused the better outcomes – it is plausible that higher-achieving or well-behaved students elicit more warmth from teachers, or a third factor (like a supportive school principal or smaller class) independently produces both good relationships and good outcomes. We attempted to control for some confounding factors and used qualitative data to bolster causal interpretations (teachers consistently reported that when they made relational improvements, they saw academic improvements, rather than the other way around). However, future research employing **longitudinal or experimental designs** (e.g., interventions that train teachers in relationship-building and then track student outcomes) would be invaluable to confirm causality.

Second, our study, while spanning three countries, is not fully representative of the entire Sub-Saharan region. We had a modest number of schools, and the countries each have unique contexts (for instance, our Nigerian sample was from one state, and conditions in another state or country might differ). Thus, caution is warranted in generalizing to all of Africa. More research in other countries – especially Francophone African countries, which were not represented here – would enrich understanding. Comparative studies could examine if francophone or Arabic-speaking African classrooms have similar relational dynamics or if colonial education legacies produce differences.

Another limitation is our reliance on **self-report measures** for relationship quality and emotional well-being. Students' and teachers' perceptions, while crucial, may be subject to biases (e.g., some students might be fearful to rate a teacher poorly even on an anonymous survey, or some teachers might inflate their closeness ratings due to social desirability). We mitigated this by assuring confidentiality and triangulating with observations, but still, objective measures of relationship quality (if they can be devised) or peer ratings could complement self-reports in future work. Additionally, we focused on a specific grade range; relationships at earlier grades (lower primary) or in secondary school may have different characteristics and effects that we did not capture. For instance, adolescent students might value autonomy and peer relations more, possibly moderating the effect of teacher relationships. Research focusing on adolescent-teacher relationships in African secondary schools (especially considering issues like guidance in adolescence, teacher–student trust around sensitive topics) would be a useful extension.

Finally, our qualitative sample of teachers was relatively small and may be biased towards those willing to talk about these issues. It's possible that teachers who declined interviews might include those who are less relationship-oriented or more authoritarian, whose perspectives we heard less of directly (though students certainly described some such teachers). Future qualitative studies might incorporate classroom ethnography over longer periods to observe naturally how relationships develop and to include voices of teachers who are harder to recruit in research (perhaps through anonymous journals or wider surveys of teacher beliefs).

**Despite these limitations**, the convergence of evidence in our study gives confidence in the robustness of the main conclusions. The practical implications remain strongly supported. Future interventions can build on these findings by explicitly designing programs to improve teacher–student relationships and testing their impact on student outcomes. For example, a randomized controlled trial could implement a teacher professional development program on SEL and positive discipline in a set of schools and compare student engagement and scores with control schools. Our study suggests such an intervention would likely yield positive results, and if so, it could be scaled up by education ministries.

## CONCLUSION

This research contributes to a growing recognition that "**learning is relational**" – the interpersonal context of education, particularly the bond between teachers and students, is a vital ingredient in achieving academic success and nurturing well-rounded, emotionally healthy children. In the Sub-Saharan African primary school settings we examined, we found that teacher–child relationships characterized by warmth, trust, and open communication are associated with significant improvements in students' academic achievement and emotional development. Conversely, strained, conflictual relationships or indifferent, punitive teaching environments correspond to poorer student outcomes and well-being. These findings carry an unequivocal message: **educational quality in Africa (and indeed everywhere) is not solely determined by curricula or infrastructure, but also by the quality of human connections in the classroom.**

For policymakers and practitioners aiming to improve educational outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on teacher–child relationships offers a high-leverage strategy. Enhancing these relationships is not an isolated "soft" initiative; it is fundamentally linked to academic goals and student retention. A child who feels understood and supported by their teacher is more likely to attend school regularly, participate actively, and persevere through difficulties – behaviors essential for learning. Additionally, emotionally supportive schooling helps develop the social and emotional competencies (such as empathy, self-regulation, and teamwork) that are increasingly recognized as key 21st-century skills alongside academic knowledge. In the long run, investing in the relational and emotional aspects of education can yield benefits for society by producing not only higher academic achievers but also more confident, socially skilled, and resilient citizens.

The **way forward** includes implementing the recommendations discussed: integrating SEL into teacher training, reducing class overcrowding, eliminating corporal punishment in favor of positive discipline, and providing ongoing support for teachers' professional and emotional needs. Such changes require commitment and resources, but the payoff – as indicated by our research and corroborated by numerous studies – is significant. It will lead to classrooms where teachers have the time, skills, and disposition to truly connect with each child, and where children in turn feel safe and motivated to learn. This creates a virtuous cycle: improved student outcomes, improved teacher satisfaction, and overall a more humane and effective education system.

In conclusion, our study underscores that **teacher–child relationships are not a luxury to consider after "hard" academic concerns, but rather a foundational element of quality education**.

Especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, where teachers often serve as both educators and key adult figures in children's lives, strengthening these relationships can be a linchpin for tackling the twin goals of improving learning and supporting children's holistic development. As African education systems strive to meet global development targets and prepare the next generation, ensuring that every child has an **emotionally supportive teacher** who believes in them may be one of the most impactful steps we can take. The old adage that "students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" holds true – caring and knowledgeable teachers are the drivers of positive emotional growth and academic excellence in our schools. We owe it to both teachers and students to create the conditions that allow those caring relationships to flourish.

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