

Article

Not peer-reviewed version

Teacher-Student Relationships and Their Impact on Student Motivation at a Private University in Cambodia

[Borey Be](#)*, Sreynoch Nut, Davan Son, Sreytob Vang, Sophea Run

Posted Date: 9 December 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202512.0704.v1

Keywords: Cambodia; higher education; motivation; relational pedagogy; teacher-student relationships



Preprints.org is a free multidisciplinary platform providing preprint service that is dedicated to making early versions of research outputs permanently available and citable. Preprints posted at Preprints.org appear in Web of Science, Crossref, Google Scholar, Scilit, Europe PMC.

Copyright: This open access article is published under a [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](#), which permit the free download, distribution, and reuse, provided that the author and preprint are cited in any reuse.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.

Article

Teacher-Student Relationships and Their Impact on Student Motivation at a Private University in Cambodia

Borey Be *, Sreynoch Nut, Davan Son, Sreytob Vang and Sophea Run

University of Cambodia

* Correspondence: boreybe@gmail.com

Abstract

The study explores the influence of teacher-student relationships on student motivation and engagement in private universities in Cambodia. Drawing on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students across different academic years, the research investigates students' perceptions of relational dynamics with their teachers and examines how these interactions shape their academic motivation. Thematic analysis revealed five key themes: mutual respect and approachability, teacher support and encouragement, communication style and emotional tone, the balance between friendliness and formality, and the impact of cultural norms on classroom interactions. Findings indicate that positive, respectful, and supportive teacher-student relationships foster intrinsic motivation, enhance engagement, and promote a sense of belonging among students. Conversely, negative communication, favoritism, and excessive formality can undermine motivation and participation. The study highlights the importance of culturally sensitive relational pedagogy, suggesting that teachers who balance empathy with professionalism and adapt to local cultural expectations are most effective in motivating students. Implications for teacher training and institutional policy are discussed, emphasizing the need for professional development in relational and socio-emotional skills.

Keywords: Cambodia; higher education; motivation; relational pedagogy; teacher-student relationships

Introduction

1.1. Background

Teacher-student relationships are widely recognized as a foundational influence on students' motivation, engagement, and academic success (Cornelius-White, 2007; Roorda et al., 2011). High-quality, developmentally attuned teacher-student interactions create classroom climates in which learners feel respected, supported, and competent, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement (Baker, 2006; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Empirical syntheses and meta-analyses indicate that affective aspects of teacher-student relationships—warmth, trust, responsiveness, which are robustly associated with students' emotional and behavioral engagement as well as achievement (Roorda et al., 2011, 2017, 2021). Theoretical models of motivation, including expectancy-value and self-determination frameworks, identify relatedness and teacher support as central social-contextual factors that shape students' valuing of academic tasks and their persistence (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

At the classroom level, interactional patterns—teacher questioning, feedback, teacher expectations, and emotional tone—structure opportunities for students to develop competence beliefs and goal orientations (Brophy & Good, 1970). Teacher behaviors such as expectancy communication and reference-norm orientations influence students' self-concepts and effort regulation (Brok et al., 2023; Dickhäuser et al., 2017). Further, the quality of classroom management and teacher

interpersonal competence has downstream effects on students' academic attitudes and school belonging (Obermeier et al., 2024).

In higher education, teacher-student relationships remain influential though the relational form may differ from earlier schooling: students expect both intellectual challenge and academic mentoring, and they value accessibility, respectful dialogue, and feedback that supports autonomy (Be, 2025; Cornelius-White, 2007). Research in tertiary contexts suggests that lecturers' interpersonal approaches, clarity, and feedback empirically predict student engagement, course satisfaction, and persistence (Martinez, 2015). Moreover, teacher support functions as a buffer against stressors-financial constraints, work-study conflicts-and can mitigate dropout risk (Duncan et al., 2023; X. Wang, 2023).

The Cambodian higher education context merits focused attention. Since the post-1990s expansion of tertiary education, Cambodia has pursued reforms to expand access and improve quality, yet challenges remain large class sizes, limited teaching resources, continuing teacher-centred instructional norms, and uneven urban-rural provision (World Bank, 2019; Sok & Han, 2018). These conditions can constrain the relational bandwidth available to university teachers, limiting opportunities for individualized feedback and supportive interaction that are critical to student motivation (Be, 2025; X. Wang, 2023). Reports also highlight that Cambodian students often experience difficulties accessing mentoring and experiential learning, particularly those from rural backgrounds or lower socioeconomic status; classroom interaction quality is therefore a salient policy and practice issue (Yoshimoto et al., 2023).

Given these structural and pedagogical constraints, examining how teacher attitudes and behaviors operate in Cambodian universities is essential. Not only do teacher-student dynamics influence immediate engagement and grades, but they also shape longer-term outcomes-vocational preparation, postgraduate study, and social mobility that are central to Cambodia's development goals (UNESCO, 2020). Investigating relational processes in both urban and rural university settings can illuminate inequities in interactional quality and identify leverage points for teacher professional development and institutional supports.

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite the recognized importance of relational pedagogy, there is limited empirical evidence on how teacher-student relationships manifest and affect student motivation in Cambodian universities. Much of the extant literature focuses on primary and secondary levels or on Western and East Asian settings (Hagenauer & Raufelder, 2021; Roorda et al., 2011). Where higher education studies exist, they frequently note that traditional didactic practices and scarce resources hinder relationally rich teaching (Be, 2025). In Cambodia specifically, differences between urban and rural universities such as in teacher workload, class size, and availability of learning resources. Understanding both students' perceptions of ideal teacher behaviors and how actual interactions differ across contexts is crucial to designing interventions (e.g., teacher training, mentoring programs, workload adjustments) that are responsive to local constraints and that can enhance student motivation, retention, and achievement.

Moreover, sociocultural factors (collectivist norms, deference to authority, family expectations) intersect with relational pedagogy: in some contexts, strong power distance may lead students to value different relational signals than in Western contexts (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020; Efendy et al., 2023). Thus, research in Cambodia must be attentive to locally meaningful forms of support, communication styles, and expectations for teacher roles (Hughes, 2012; Raufelder et al., 2013). Finally, contemporary motivation theory (situated expectancy-value, self-determination theory) suggests that relatedness and autonomy support from teachers are critical yet how this manifests in Cambodian universities, and how they vary by urban/rural setting, remains underexplored (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

1.3. Purposes of the Study

The purpose of the study is to examine university students' perceptions of teacher-student relationships and to understand how these relationships shape their engagement and motivation in higher education. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students perceive teacher-student relationships in their university learning environment?

RQ2: In what ways do teacher-student relationships influence students' engagement and motivation?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how undergraduate students perceive teacher-student relationships and how these relationships influence their motivation and engagement. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth examination of students' lived experiences, emotions, and relational dynamics, which cannot be meaningfully captured through quantitative instruments alone. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of inquiry, allowing flexibility to probe further into students' explanations while ensuring consistency across interviews.

2.2. Sample

The target population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in a Bachelor's degree program at a Cambodian university. Eight students participated in the study, selected through convenience sampling based on accessibility and willingness to participate. Although non-probability in nature, this sampling strategy was suitable for an exploratory qualitative study seeking rich, experience-based insights rather than generalizable patterns. Participants represented different academic levels, ranging from freshman to senior year. This distribution allowed the study to capture perspectives from students at varying stages of their academic journey. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings.

Table 1. Participant Information.

Students (Pseudonym)	Gender	Major
Malin	Female	English Language and Literature
Heng	Male	Educational Administration
Pin	Female	English Language and Literature
Youn	Male	English Language and Literature
Thida	Female	English Language and Literature
Ty	Male	Educational Administration
Nita	Female	English Language and Literature
Sochan	Male	Educational Administration

2.3. Data Collection and Tool

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews developed in alignment with the study objectives. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to prompt students to discuss their interpersonal interactions with teachers, their emotional responses, and the perceived impact of these relationships on their learning behaviors. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was conducted in a quiet and accessible location chosen to ensure comfort, privacy, and minimal distraction. Prior to each interview, informed consent was obtained. With permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and later transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details that enhanced the interpretation of students' responses.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following iterative stages of familiarization, coding, categorization, and theme development. After transcription, all interview files were read multiple times to gain an overall understanding of the narratives. Initial codes were generated manually, capturing meaningful segments related to perceptions of teacher-student relationships and their influence on motivation and engagement. Codes were then compared, refined, and clustered into broader thematic categories. Through an inductive-deductive approach, the final themes were developed based on both emerging patterns in the data and the conceptual focus of the research questions. Thematic analysis provided a systematic yet flexible framework for interpreting similarities and differences in participants' experiences, resulting in a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomena under study.

3. Results

The findings are presented in line with the two guiding research questions: (1) How do students perceive teacher-student relationships in Cambodian universities? and (2) In what ways do these relationships influence student motivation and engagement? Thematic analysis yielded five major themes: (1) mutual respect and approachability, (2) teacher support and encouragement, (3) communication style and emotional climate, (4) balancing friendliness and professionalism, and (5) cultural norms shaping interaction and motivation.

3.1. Students' Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships

Mutual Respect and Approachability

Through interviews, students consistently described their relationships with teachers as respectful, supportive, and generally positive. Respect emerged as the baseline expectation for relational quality. Students suggested that respect is reciprocal. Students expect teachers to demonstrate patience, fairness, and kindness, while students themselves are expected to act politely and responsibly.

Pin captured this sentiment clearly, "The relationship is respectful and supportive. The main factors are teachers' kindness, their patience in explaining lessons, and their encouragement when students make mistakes." Similarly, Thida explained that teachers' "friendliness and constructive encouragement make students more open to expressing their opinions."

Approachability was also essential. Students valued teachers who were attentive and responsive to individual needs. For example, Nita noted that she sometimes "initiates the relationship" to engage more deeply, indicating that proactive students often experience closer interactions. However, student personality acted as a mediating condition. Individuals like Lin and Ty described minimal relational closeness due to shyness or introversion. Lin admitted, "I do not like talk too much... I just listen and complete the tasks," suggesting that interpersonal comfort and confidence shape the extent to which relationships develop.

Teacher Support and Encouragement

Teacher encouragement, such as emotional, academic, or moral, was among the most influential relational features identified by students. Students consistently associated “good teachers” with those who not only teach content but also guide, advise, and care for students’ wellbeing.

Heng commented, “They always encourage, educate, and give good advice,” while Ty appreciated teachers who “encourage students but also remind them to take care of their health.” Students regarded encouragement as a form of relational investment that enhances their confidence and willingness to persist.

Pin recalled a turning point, “One time I was struggling with a presentation, but my teacher told me that I had good ideas and encouraged me to speak with confidence. After that, I felt motivated to prepare harder and perform better.” Such narratives illustrate that affirmation functions as a catalyst for self-efficacy, academic persistence, and emotional resilience.

Communication Style and Emotional Climate

Communication style emerged as a critical dimension shaping relational quality. Students value teachers who communicate with warmth, respect, and inclusiveness. Thida stated, “When teachers use encouraging language and foster students’ confidence, it makes them feel valued and motivated to learn.” Conversely, harsh, or excessively formal communication undermined motivation. Ty remarked, “When my teacher scolds me harshly, I lose motivation to learn.”

Humor, empathy, and an inviting tone were frequently cited as motivating forces. Nita observed, “When the teacher incorporates humor and maintains a relaxed demeanor, students feel more comfortable and willing to participate.” However, concerns about favoritism and inequitable treatment surfaced as demotivating factors. Sochan noted that “favoring only high-achieving students” discouraged peers, underscoring the critical role of fairness in creating an emotionally supportive learning environment.

Balancing Friendliness and Professionalism

While friendliness was appreciated for reducing interpersonal distance, students also emphasized the importance of maintaining professionalism. Most students preferred a balanced approach, teachers who are warm yet authoritative, approachable yet disciplined. Pin succinctly summarized this expectation, “Being friendly makes students comfortable, but being formal demonstrates professionalism. A mix of both is best.” Similarly, Thida noted that friendliness “bridges the gap,” whereas formality “ensures respect and discipline.”

This dual preference reflects shifting expectations in Cambodian higher education, where students desire more relational warmth than in traditional teacher-centered models but still value the authority and credibility associated with formality. A few students, such as Nita, leaned more toward friendliness, arguing that it signals trust and respect for students as young adults.

3.2. Influence of Teacher-Student Relationships on Motivation and Engagement

Encouragement as a Motivational Driver

Students overwhelmingly reported that teacher encouragement directly enhances their motivation to participate, attempt new tasks, and persist through academic challenges. For example, Thida shared that after receiving praise despite giving an incorrect answer, she felt “brave enough to answer again and work harder.” Similarly, Youn explained that encouragement from teachers to be courageous in answering questions significantly increased his engagement in class. These accounts highlight the powerful role of positive reinforcement in fostering student motivation and active participation.

Positive reinforcement, including praise, recognition, and emotional support, played a key role in motivating participation, reducing anxiety, and building confidence. Students consistently link encouragement with greater willingness to engage actively in classroom discussions and collaborative activities.

Communication, Fairness, and Emotional Safety

Students emphasized that communication style significantly influences their motivation. Respectful, inclusive, and supportive communication fosters psychological safety and a sense of belonging. Pin explained, "When my teacher communicates in a friendly and respectful manner, I feel more confident and motivated."

Harsh criticism, public reprimands, or favoritism had the opposite effect, often causing students to withdraw from class participation. Sochan emphasized that discriminatory treatment "discouraged others from participating," particularly when teachers focused attention exclusively on high-performing students. These accounts underscore that emotional safety, maintained through respectful communication and equitable treatment, is a critical determinant of student engagement.

Teacher Behaviors that Inspire Motivation

Beyond relational warmth, students highlighted specific teacher behaviors that stimulate motivation, including clear explanations, interactive teaching strategies, constructive feedback, and linking content to real-life examples. Nita noted that "interactive methods, group work, and constructive feedback" enhanced her learning experience. Thida added that "creating a fun atmosphere" keeps students engaged.

Professionalism, consistency, and ethical behavior also contributed to students' respect for teachers and their desire to work harder. Ty emphasized the importance of teachers who "guide us... and encourage us without discrimination," noting that such behavior inspires students to put in more effort.

Cultural Values as Mediating Factors

Cultural norms, particularly respect for elders, hierarchy, and collectivism, shaped the dynamics between students and teachers. Students commonly viewed teachers as authority figures whose knowledge should not be questioned openly. Pin remarked that students respect teachers highly, sometimes making them shy to ask questions.

Thida explained that many students fear to challenge their teachers' ideas due to cultural assumptions about age and authority. While these norms promote discipline and harmonious interactions, they can inadvertently restrict open dialogue and critical thinking. Lin reflected that cultural expectations "limit my willingness to debate concepts," even when such debate would deepen understanding. However, students noted that culturally sensitive teachers, those who encourage participation within respectful boundaries, can ease this tension, and foster more active engagement.

Differences in Motivation Based on Relationship Quality

The findings revealed clear distinctions between students with strong teacher relationships and those with weaker connections. Students who reported positive relationships described higher intrinsic motivation with learning out of genuine interest and personal growth. Lin explained, "A positive relationship increases intrinsic motivation, the learning for the sake of knowledge."

In contrast, weaker relationships were associated with extrinsic or compliance-based motivation, including completing tasks primarily to meet requirements. Heng echoed that students feel "more motivated when they feel that the teacher cares and supports them," underscoring the relational roots of intrinsic engagement.

4. Discussion

4.1. Relational Warmth and Mutual Respect as Foundations of Motivation

The present study underscores that Cambodian university students perceive mutual respect, emotional support, and teacher approachability as fundamental to building positive teacher-student relationships. These findings align with recent evidence emphasizing relational warmth as a key determinant of students' academic engagement and self-efficacy (Liu et al., 2025). Students in this study consistently associated respect with both moral obligation and emotional reciprocity, a notion

that mirrors the socio-cultural emphasis on hierarchy and collectivism in Cambodian society, where teachers are traditionally regarded as moral exemplars (Be, 2025).

Consistent with expectancy-value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2023), students' perceptions of being respected and supported by their teachers enhance their expectancy of success and perceived task value. Encouragement and recognition, as several participants described, helped them feel capable of mastering learning challenges. Liu et al. (2025) similarly found that emotionally supportive teacher communication strengthens students' perceived self-efficacy and promotes sustainable learning behaviors. The present data indicate that respect operates not only as a social norm but also as a motivational cue signaling teacher care and investment in student success.

These relational dynamics resonate with Cornelius-White's (2007) meta-analysis, which concluded that learner-centered relationships characterized by empathy, warmth, and respect yield positive academic outcomes. In the Cambodian higher education context, such respect is both culturally and pedagogically significant. As Be (2025) reported in his cross-cultural case study, Southeast Asian students interpret teacher respect as an affirmation of their dignity, thus promoting engagement and academic persistence. Similarly, Nazish et al. (2024) found that positive TSRs, encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions, mediate students' intrinsic motivation by fostering a sense of belonging and psychological safety.

However, the relational warmth observed here must be contextualized. Cambodian students' respect for authority may simultaneously constrain open dialogue and critical inquiry. Several participants reported hesitancy to question or challenge teachers, echoing earlier findings by Henry & Thorsen (2021) that hierarchical classroom cultures can limit learner agency and communicative confidence. This tension reveals a culturally embedded duality: respect nurtures trust and motivation but can inhibit assertive participation. Therefore, fostering "mutual respect" rather than unilateral deference may be key to sustaining intrinsic motivation.

These findings suggest that in collectivist contexts such as Cambodia, mutual respect and teacher approachability operate synergistically to create a psychological contract (Efendy et al., 2023), an implicit understanding that teachers care for students' learning and well-being, while students reciprocate with engagement and effort. The quality of this contract appears crucial for transforming relational respect into active motivation and persistence.

4.2. Communication, Emotional Climate, and the Role of Encouragement

Students' accounts reveal that communication style and emotional tone decisively influence their motivation and engagement. Teachers who use positive, inclusive, and empathetic language create an emotionally safe classroom climate, while harsh criticism or favoritism undermines confidence and participation. This finding supports recent research emphasizing that communication behaviors are integral to relational pedagogy and motivation (Phan, 2025; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021).

According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), supportive communication satisfies students' basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. In this study, students' narratives about teacher encouragement, humor, and warmth reflect an environment conducive to these needs. For instance, a teacher's constructive feedback not only improved comprehension but also fostered emotional resilience, a finding congruent with Wang et al. (2023), who demonstrated that emotional support predicts students' willingness to take intellectual risks and engage in deeper learning.

Teacher encouragement emerged as a particularly potent motivational driver. It functions as a form of verbal persuasion, one of Bandura's (1997) key sources of self-efficacy, reinforcing students' belief in their ability to succeed. When students reported that encouragement from teachers boosted their confidence to participate or present, they effectively described a feedback loop between teacher affirmation and learner effort. Similar mechanisms have been reported in other Asian contexts, where affective support enhances student persistence despite limited material resources (Be, 2025; Deng, 2024). Furthermore, communication fairness and inclusivity were perceived as indicators of teacher professionalism. Several participants emphasized that discriminatory or selective encouragement,

such as favoring high achievers, diminished their motivation. Bowers and Sprott (2012) found that supportive TSRs mediate the relationship between teacher expectations and students' longitudinal changes in motivation. In the current study, emotionally equitable communication promoted both participation and perceived fairness, key components of classroom justice.

The emotional climate cultivated through communication thus extends beyond interpersonal comfort to shape academic identity. Students who felt heard and valued described themselves as more willing to express opinions and take initiative. As Atkinson's (1957) achievement motivation theory posits, individuals' motivation to achieve is moderated by perceived probability of success and incentive value. Teachers' encouragement and non-punitive feedback raise both perceptions, leading to higher engagement. In Cambodian higher education, where students often come from teacher-centered schooling traditions, this communicative shift toward warmth and inclusivity may be transformative. Teachers who adopt dialogic and emotionally supportive communication styles not only enhance comprehension but also reposition learning as a collaborative endeavor, consistent with contemporary constructivist pedagogy.

4.3. *Balancing Friendliness, Professionalism, and Cultural Sensitivity*

The third major theme concerns the delicate balance between friendliness and formality. Cambodian students desire approachable and empathetic teachers but equally value professional distance that signals competence and fairness. This dual expectation reflects a transitional pedagogical culture, moving from hierarchical traditions toward relational pedagogy (Be, 2025; Wang et al., 2023). Students' preference for balanced relational styles aligns with findings from Australian Education Research Organization (2023), which notes that maintaining professional boundaries while demonstrating care is essential for classroom management and trust. The participants in this study echoed this balance, perceiving excessive formality as emotionally distant and excessive friendliness as potentially unprofessional.

From a sociocultural perspective, this balance embodies what Bourdieu might term cultural habitus, a learned disposition that shapes both teacher and student expectations. Cambodian cultural norms emphasizing respect for elders and authority figures influence how "friendliness" is interpreted. As some participants indicated, overt informality may risk being perceived as disrespectful or diminishing the teacher's moral authority. Conversely, a balanced approach communicates relational trust without eroding academic standards.

The influence of cultural norms was further evident in students' hesitation to challenge teachers' views; a behavior rooted in hierarchical respect. While such restraint preserves harmony, it can restrict critical engagement. Liu et al. (2025) argued that sustainable motivation requires balancing social harmony with opportunities for autonomy and voice. Hence, pedagogical approaches that allow "respectful dialogue", encouraging students to express disagreement within cultural boundaries, may optimize both relational and cognitive engagement.

Recent scholarship reinforces this cultural mediation. Efendy et al. (2023) found that in collectivist societies, relational closeness enhances motivation only when it aligns with social norms of respect and duty. Similarly, Be (2025) emphasized that international students from Southeast Asia often interpret teacher friendliness as care rather than equality, suggesting that cultural interpretations of relational behavior significantly shape motivation.

Teacher professionalism also emerged as a critical component of relational quality. Participants viewed fairness, ethical conduct, and consistent behavior as markers of credibility. As Bowers & Sprott (2012) and Brok et al. (2023) observed, teacher consistency and agency directly correlate with students' trust and sustained motivation. In the Cambodian context, where education remains a vehicle of moral formation, professional integrity strengthens the legitimacy of relational warmth.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the most effective TSRs in Cambodian universities are those that combine relational empathy with cultural attunement. Teachers who demonstrate genuine care within professional boundaries respect both students' emotional needs and cultural expectations.

This relational balance fosters an environment of psychological safety and academic respect, conditions vital for intrinsic motivation (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

4.4. Implications for Practice and Future Research

The findings carry several pedagogical and policy implications. First, teacher education programs in Cambodia should integrate relational pedagogy and socio-emotional communication training. As the findings show, emotional tone, inclusivity, and encouragement profoundly shape students' learning engagement. Training teachers to recognize how communication patterns affect student motivation could improve classroom climates and learning outcomes. Second, universities should foster institutional cultures that value relational quality alongside academic rigor. Creating feedback mechanisms where students can safely express relational concerns, such as through mentorship or student-faculty dialogues, may strengthen mutual understanding and respect. Third, future research should examine how these relational dynamics interact with digital learning environments. Given Cambodia's increasing integration of online and blended education, exploring how warmth, encouragement, and fairness manifest in virtual spaces could expand the scope of relational pedagogy. Finally, longitudinal and comparative studies across cultural contexts could clarify how collectivist values mediate the motivational effects of TSRs. This is particularly pertinent as Cambodian higher education internationalizes and confronts the tension between global pedagogical trends and local cultural expectations.

4.5. Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing literature on the socio-emotional foundations of learning by elucidating how Cambodian university students perceive and experience teacher-student relationships. Respect, encouragement, and culturally balanced professionalism emerged as core elements of relational quality that foster intrinsic motivation and engagement. When teachers communicate supportively, respect students' dignity, and balance friendliness with formality, they not only build trust but also activate students' psychological readiness to learn. In alignment with recent international research (Be, 2025; Liu et al., 2025; J. Wang et al., 2023), the findings affirm that positive TSRs serve as a psychological bridge linking social connectedness with academic persistence. In Cambodian higher education, where cultural respect intersects with pedagogical modernization, such relationships are not merely affective bonds but vital mechanisms of motivation and sustainable learning.

References

- Atkinson, J. W. (1957). Motivational determinants of risk-taking behavior. *Psychological Review*, 64(6 PART 1), 359–372. <https://doi.org/10.1037/H0043445>
- Australian Education Research Organisation. (2023). *Positive teacher–student relationships: Their role in classroom management*. Australian Education Research Organisation. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/summaries-explainers/explainers/positive-teacher-student-relationships-their-role-classroom-management>
- Baker, J. A. (2006). Contributions of teacher–child relationships to positive school adjustment during elementary school. *Journal of School Psychology*, 44(3), 211–229. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.JSP.2006.02.002>
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W H Freeman/Times Books/ Henry Holt & Co.
- Be, B. (2025). International Student Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationships Affecting Academic Motivation: A Case Study of One University. *Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems*, 8(8), 575–583. <https://doi.org/10.56334/sei/8.8.52>
- Bowers, A. J., & Sprott, R. (2012). Why Tenth Graders Fail to Finish High School: A Dropout Typology Latent Class Analysis. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 17(3), 129–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2012.692071>
- Brok, P., van Tartwijk, J., & Mainhard, T. (2023). Effective interpersonal relationships: On the association between teacher agency and communion with student outcomes. *Effective Teaching Around the World: Theoretical,*

- Empirical, Methodological and Practical Insights*, 489–507. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31678-4_22/FIGURES/1
- Brophy, J. E., & Good, T. L. (1970). Teachers' communication of differential expectations for children's classroom performance: Some behavioral data. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 61(5), 365–374. <https://doi.org/10.1037/H0029908>
- Cornelius-White, J. (2007). Learner-Centered Teacher-Student Relationships Are Effective: A Meta-Analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 113–143. <https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298563>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01
- Deng, Q. (2024). The Impact of Interpersonal Relationships on Students' Academic Achievement in Primary and Secondary Schools. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 29, 49–55. <https://doi.org/10.54097/KBV61K56>
- Dickhäuser, O., Janke, S., Praetorius, A. K., & Dresel, M. (2017). The Effects of Teachers' Reference Norm Orientations on Students' Implicit Theories and Academic Self-Concepts. <https://doi.org/10.1024/1010-0652/A000208>, 31(3–4), 205–219. <https://doi.org/10.1024/1010-0652/A000208>
- Duncan, A., Risley, S., Combs, A., Lacey, H. M., Hamik, E., Fershtman, C., Kneeskern, E., Patel, M., Crosby, L., Hood, A. M., Zoromski, A. K., & Tamm, L. (2023). School Challenges and Services Related to Executive Functioning for Fully Included Middle Schoolers With Autism. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 38(2), 90–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10883576221110167>
- Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2002). Motivational beliefs, values, and goals. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 109–132. <https://doi.org/10.1146/ANNUREV.PSYCH.53.100901.135153>
- Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2020). From expectancy-value theory to situated expectancy-value theory: A developmental, social cognitive, and sociocultural perspective on motivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 61, 101859. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CEDPSYCH.2020.101859>
- Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2023). Expectancy-Value Theory to Situated Expectancy-Value Theory: Reflections on the Legacy of 40 Years of Working Together. *Motivation Science*, 9(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1037/MOT0000275>
- Efendy, M., Murwani, D., Hitipeuw, I., & Rahmawati, H. (2023). Rethinking Achievement Motivation in Indonesian Students: The Influence of Teacher and Peer Relationships Amid a Shifting Collectivist Culture. *Journal An-Nafs: Kajian Penelitian Psikologi*, 8(2), 294–312. <https://doi.org/10.33367/PSI.V8I2.4606>
- Hagenauer, G., & Raufelder, D. (2021). Lehrer-Schüler-Beziehung. *Handbuch Schulforschung*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-24734-8_47-1
- Henry, A., & Thorsen, C. (2021). Teachers' self-disclosures and influences on students' motivation: A relational perspective. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 24(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1441261>
- Hughes, J. N. (2012). Teacher-student relationships and school adjustment: progress and remaining challenges. *Attachment & Human Development*, 14(3), 319–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2012.672288>
- Liu, J., Gao, J., & Arshad, M. H. (2025). Teacher-student relationships as a pathway to sustainable learning: Psychological insights on motivation and self-efficacy. *Acta Psychologica*, 254. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.104788>
- Martinez, A. (2015). *In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education*.
- Nazish, A., Kang, M. A., & Fatima, S. R. (2024). Exploring the Positive Teacher-Student Relationship on Students' Motivation and Academic Performance in Secondary Schools in Karachi. *Academy of Education and Social Sciences Review*, 4(2), 149–159. <https://doi.org/10.48112/AESSR.V4I2.710>
- Obermeier, R., Schlesier, J., & Heinrichs, K. (2024). The mediating role of social relationships between perceived classroom management and adolescents' attitudes toward school: a multilevel analysis. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 39(4), 4647–4670. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S10212-024-00894-7/FIGURES/2>
- Phan, T. A. (2025). The Role of Positive Communication in Enhancing Educational Outcomes. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294906251345789;PAGE:STRING:ARTICLE/CHAPTER>

- Raufelder, D., Jagenow, D., Drury, K., & Hoferichter, F. (2013). Social relationships and motivation in secondary school: Four different motivation types. *Learning and Individual Differences, 24*, 89–95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.LINDIF.2012.12.002>
- Roorda, D. L., Jak, S., Zee, M., Oort, F. J., & Koomen, H. M. Y. (2017). Affective teacher-student relationships and students' engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic update and test of the mediating role of engagement. *School Psychology Review, 46*(3), 239–261. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.17105/SPR-2017-0035.V46-3>
- Roorda, D. L., Koomen, H. M. Y., Spilt, J. L., & Oort, F. J. (2011). The Influence of Affective Teacher–Student Relationships on Students' School Engagement and Achievement. *Review of Educational Research, 81*(4), 493–529. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311421793>
- Roorda, D. L., Zee, M., & Koomen, H. M. Y. (2021). Don't forget student-teacher dependency! A Meta-analysis on associations with students' school adjustment and the moderating role of student and teacher characteristics. *Attachment & Human Development, 23*(5), 490–503. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2020.1751987>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2020). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a self-determination theory perspective: Definitions, theory, practices, and future directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 61*, 101860. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CEDPSYCH.2020.101860>
- UNESCO. (2020). COVID-19 and higher education: Today and tomorrow. Impact analysis, policy responses and recommendations. *Unesco Iesalc, 1–46*. <http://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-EN-090420-2.pdf>
- Wang, J., Zhou, C., Song, Q., & Xu, F. (2023). The relationship between teacher support and positive emotions in Chinese higher vocational students: multiple mediating effects of procrastination behavior and interpersonal assistance. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, 1201864. <https://doi.org/10.3389/FPSYG.2023.1201864/BIBTEX>
- Wang, X. (2023). Exploring positive teacher-student relationships: the synergy of teacher mindfulness and emotional intelligence. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*, 1301786. <https://doi.org/10.3389/FPSYG.2023.1301786>
- Xie, F., & Derakhshan, A. (2021). A Conceptual Review of Positive Teacher Interpersonal Communication Behaviors in the Instructional Context. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 708490. <https://doi.org/10.3389/FPSYG.2021.708490/BIBTEX>
- Yoshimoto, H. K., Murakami, D. Y., & Osamu, Y. (2023). The Influence of Teacher-Student Relationships on Student Motivation and Achievement: Perspective from Japan. *Journal of Education, 6*(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.53819/81018102T4157>

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.