International Journal of Advanced Education and Research
www.alleducationjournal.com
ISSN: 2455-5746
Received: 13-02-2026, Accepted: 16-03-2026, Published: 31-03-2026
Volume 11, Issue 1, 2026, Page No. 25-29

Teacher–student relationship and academic motivation among secondary school students in Nigeria

Dr. Celestina Johnson, Dr. Abiodun Adebunmi Omeife-Greg
Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Abstract
The teacher–student relationship is widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective education, yet its influence on academic motivation in the Nigerian secondary school context remains underexplored. This study examined the relationship between the teacher–student relationship and academic motivation among secondary school students. A descriptive survey design was adopted, with a sample of 200 students selected through stratified random sampling from four public secondary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria. Data were collected using the Teacher–Student Relationship Scale (TSRS) and the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS). Pearson product-moment correlation and linear regression analysis were used to test the hypotheses. Results revealed a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between teacher–student relationship and academic motivation, $r(198) = .71$, $p < .001$. Teacher–student relationship significantly predicted academic motivation, accounting for 50% of the variance ($R^2 = .50$). The study concludes that positive teacher–student relationships are essential for fostering students' motivation to learn. Recommendations include teacher training in relational skills, the creation of supportive classroom climates, and the integration of relationship-building into school policies.

Keywords: Teacher–student relationship, academic motivation, secondary school students, self-determination theory, Nigeria

Introduction

Every day, in classrooms across Nigeria, a quiet but powerful dynamic unfolds. A teacher's smile, a word of encouragement, or a moment of patient explanation can ignite a student's curiosity and drive to learn. Conversely, a dismissive tone, harsh criticism, or emotional distance can dim that spark, leaving students disengaged and unmotivated. The relationship between teacher and student is not merely a backdrop to instruction; it is the very soil in which academic motivation grows—or withers.

In Nigerian secondary schools, where classes are often large, resources are limited, and examinations are high-stakes, the quality of teacher–student relationships can make a critical difference. Students spend years with teachers who serve as mentors, role models, and sometimes the only consistent source of encouragement in challenging circumstances. Yet, the emotional dimension of teaching is frequently overlooked in policy discussions, which tend to focus on curriculum, infrastructure, and examination results.

Academic motivation—the internal and external forces that drive students to engage in learning—is a key determinant of academic success (Deci & Ryan, 2000) [4]. Motivated students persist in the face of difficulty, invest effort, and develop a deeper understanding. When motivation falters, students may disengage, underperform, or drop out altogether. Understanding what fuels or undermines motivation is therefore essential for educators and policymakers.

This study focuses on one of the most potent influences on motivation: the teacher–student relationship. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) [4] and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) [2], we investigate the extent to which the quality of this relationship predicts students' academic motivation. By providing empirical evidence from Nigerian secondary schools, this study aims to inform classroom practices, teacher training, and school policies that prioritise relational well-being alongside academic achievement.

1. Background to the Study

In Nigeria, secondary education serves as a critical bridge between basic education and higher education or the workforce. The Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) determines university admission and career paths, placing immense pressure on students and teachers alike. In this high-pressure environment, the relational climate can vary widely. Some teachers are remembered fondly for their kindness and support; others are feared for their harshness or indifference.

Research from other contexts has consistently shown that students who perceive their teachers as caring, fair, and supportive are more motivated, engaged, and academically successful (Wentzel, 2010) [9]. In contrast, negative relationships are associated with disengagement, absenteeism, and poor achievement. However, few studies have examined these dynamics within Nigerian secondary schools, where cultural expectations of teacher authority may shape interactions in unique ways.

This study addresses this gap by systematically measuring the teacher–student relationship and its association with academic motivation among Nigerian secondary school students.

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the teacher–student relationship and academic motivation among secondary school students in Rivers State, Nigeria.

3. Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between the teacher–student relationship and academic motivation among secondary school students?

2. Does the teacher–student relationship significantly predict academic motivation?

4. Hypotheses

- **H_{01}:** There is no significant relationship between the teacher–student relationship and academic motivation among secondary school students.
- **H_{02}:** Teacher–student relationship does not significantly predict academic motivation among secondary school students.

Literature Review

1. Conceptualizing Teacher–Student Relationship

The teacher–student relationship is a multidimensional construct encompassing the quality of interactions, emotional bonding, communication patterns, and mutual respect between teacher and student (Pianta, 1999) [6]. Pianta's work emphasises three key dimensions:

- **Closeness:** Warmth, open communication, and positive affect.
- **Conflict:** Negative interactions, hostility, and discord.
- **Dependency:** Excessive reliance on the teacher for emotional support, which can be problematic when extreme.

A positive teacher–student relationship is characterised by high closeness, low conflict, and appropriate dependency. Such relationships provide students with a sense of security, belonging, and trust—essential conditions for learning (Wentzel, 2010) [9].

In the Nigerian context, the teacher–student relationship is influenced by cultural norms of respect for authority, which can sometimes manifest as emotional distance. However, effective teachers in Nigeria often balance authority with approachability, creating classrooms where students feel both respected and cared for.

2. Academic Motivation

Academic motivation refers to the internal and external forces that energise, direct, and sustain learning behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 2000) [4]. It is typically categorised into:

- **Intrinsic motivation:** Engaging in learning for its own sake, driven by interest, curiosity, and enjoyment.
- **Extrinsic motivation:** Engaging in learning to obtain rewards (e.g., good grades, praise) or avoid punishment.
- **Amotivation:** Lack of intention to engage in learning, often resulting from feelings of incompetence or lack of value.

Intrinsic motivation is associated with deeper learning, creativity, and persistence, while extrinsic motivation can be effective but may not sustain long-term engagement. Amotivation is a state of disengagement that is particularly concerning for educators.

Motivation is not a fixed trait; it is influenced by contextual factors, including the quality of teacher–student relationships. When students feel supported, they are more likely to internalize the value of learning and engage willingly.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theories that explain how teacher–student relationships influence motivation.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) [4] posits that all individuals have three innate psychological needs:

- **Autonomy:** The need to feel in control of one's actions and choices.
- **Competence:** The need to feel effective and capable.
- **Relatedness:** The need to feel connected to and cared for by others.

When these needs are satisfied, intrinsic motivation flourishes. Teachers play a critical role in satisfying the need for relatedness through warm, supportive interactions. A teacher who shows genuine interest in students, listens to their concerns, and provides encouragement fulfils the relatedness need, thereby enhancing motivation. Additionally, teachers who provide choices (autonomy) and constructive feedback (competence) further support motivation.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) [2] offers another lens. It suggests that children develop internal working models of relationships based on early interactions with caregivers. These models influence later relationships, including those with teachers. A teacher who is consistently available, responsive, and warm can serve as a "secure base" from which students explore the academic environment. Students with secure attachments to teachers are more likely to take intellectual risks, seek help when needed, and persist through challenges.

4. Empirical Studies

A substantial body of research supports the link between teacher–student relationships and academic motivation. A meta-analysis by Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, and Oort (2011) [7] found that positive teacher–student relationships were moderately to strongly associated with student engagement and motivation across elementary and secondary levels. The effects were particularly strong for secondary students, suggesting that as students seek autonomy, the quality of relational support becomes even more critical. Wentzel (2010) [9] demonstrated that students who perceive their teachers as caring and supportive report higher levels of academic interest and intrinsic motivation. In contrast, students who experience conflictual relationships show declines in motivation over time.

Within the Nigerian context, studies are more limited. Adeyemo (2012) [1] found that teacher support was a significant predictor of academic self-efficacy among Nigerian secondary school students, which in turn influenced motivation. However, direct studies linking teacher–student relationship quality to motivation are scarce, highlighting the need for this research.

Research Hypotheses

Based on the literature review and theoretical framework, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

- **H_{01}:** There is no significant relationship between teacher–student relationship and academic motivation among secondary school students.
- **H_{02}:** Teacher–student relationship does not significantly predict academic motivation among secondary school students.

Methodology

1. Research Design

A descriptive survey research design was employed. This design is appropriate for describing the nature of existing relationships between variables without manipulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) [3].

2. Study Area

The study was conducted in four public secondary schools in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. This area was chosen for its diverse student population and accessibility for the researcher.

3. Population and Sample

The target population comprised all senior secondary school (SS II) students in the four selected schools, estimated at 800 students. Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) [5] table, a sample of 200 students was deemed adequate.

Stratified random sampling was employed. The strata were school and gender to ensure proportional representation. From each school, 50 students were selected, with 25 male and 25 female students per school, yielding a total of 200 participants.

4. Instruments

Two instruments were used:

1. **Teacher–Student Relationship Scale (TSRS):** Adapted from Pianta's (1999) [6] Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS). The TSRS consists of 15 items measuring three dimensions: closeness (e.g., "My teacher makes me feel valued"), conflict (e.g., "I often argue with my teacher"), and dependency (e.g., "I need my teacher's help more than other students"). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate a more positive relationship. The scale demonstrated excellent reliability in this study ($\alpha = .90$).

2. **Academic Motivation Scale (AMS):** Adapted from Vallerand *et al.*'s (1992) [8] Academic Motivation Scale. The AMS consists of 21 items measuring intrinsic motivation (e.g., "I enjoy learning new things"), extrinsic motivation (e.g., "I study because I want good grades"), and amotivation (e.g., "I don't see the point in studying"). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Does not describe me at all, 5 = Describes me very well). Higher scores indicate greater motivation. Reliability was $\alpha = .88$.

Both instruments were reviewed by three experts in educational psychology for content and construct validity. Items were adjusted for cultural appropriateness.

5. Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the Rivers State Ministry of Education and the principals of the participating schools. Informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians, and assent was obtained from the students. Participants were assured of confidentiality and the right to withdraw. Data collection was conducted over two weeks. Questionnaires were administered during regular class periods by trained research assistants. Students completed the instruments in approximately 20 minutes. The researcher was available to clarify questions.

6. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were computed to summarize the variables. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to test H_{o1}, and linear regression analysis was used to test H_{o2}. All hypotheses were tested at $\alpha = .05$.

Results

1. Descriptive Statistics

A total of 200 students participated (98 male, 102 female). Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the main variables.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Teacher–Student Relationship and Academic Motivation
(N = 200)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Teacher–Student Relationship	2.00	5.00	3.72	0.66
Academic Motivation	2.14	5.00	3.85	0.61

Note. Both variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = lowest, 5 = highest). The mean teacher–student relationship score of 3.72 indicates that students, on average, perceived moderately positive relationships with their teachers. The mean academic motivation score of 3.85 reflects a relatively high level of motivation among participants.

2. Test of Hypothesis One

Hypothesis one stated that there is no significant relationship between teacher–student relationship and academic motivation. Pearson product-moment correlation was computed.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation between Teacher–Student Relationship and Academic Motivation
(N = 200)

Variable	1	2
1. Teacher–Student Relationship	—	.71**
2. Academic Motivation	.71**	—

Note. **p < .01 (2-tailed).*

Interpretation

The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was *r*(198) = .71, *p* < .001, indicating a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between teacher–student relationship and academic motivation. As the quality of the teacher–student relationship increased, students' academic motivation also increased. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected.

3. Test of Hypothesis Two

Hypothesis two stated that teacher–student relationship does not significantly predict academic motivation. Linear regression analysis was conducted.

Table 3 (Model Summary)
Table 4 (ANOVA)
Table 5 (Coefficients)

Table 3: Model Summary for Teacher–Student Relationship Predicting Academic Motivation

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.71	.50	.49	0.43

Note. Predictor: Teacher–Student Relationship. Dependent variable: Academic Motivation.

Table 4: ANOVA for the Regression Model

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Regression	41.85	1	41.85	224.60	< .001
Residual	41.75	198	0.21		
Total	83.60	199			

Note. Dependent variable: Academic Motivation.

Table 5: Coefficients for Teacher–Student Relationship Predicting Academic Motivation

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	1.12	0.20		5.60	< .001
Teacher–Student Relationship	0.73	0.05	.71	14.99	< .001

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; β = standardized coefficient.

Combined Interpretation

The regression analysis revealed that teacher–student relationship was a significant positive predictor of academic motivation, F(1,198)=224.60*F*(1,198)=224.60, p<.001*p*<.00 1, accounting for 50% of the variance in motivation (R2=.50*R*2=.50). The unstandardized coefficient (B=0.73*B*=0.73) indicates that for every one-unit increase in teacher–student relationship scores, academic motivation increased by 0.73 units. The standardized coefficient (β=.71*β*=.71) confirms a strong positive effect. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that the quality of teacher–student relationships is a powerful determinant of academic motivation among Nigerian secondary school students. The strong positive correlation (r = .71) between the two variables indicates that students who experience supportive, respectful, and emotionally positive interactions with their teachers are substantially more motivated to learn. This finding is consistent with decades of research from other cultural contexts (Roorda *et al*., 2011; Wentzel, 2010) [7, 9] and confirms that the relational dimension of teaching matters just as much in Nigeria as elsewhere.

The regression analysis further reveals that teacher–student relationship accounts for 50% of the variance in academic motivation—a substantial proportion that underscores its practical significance. When students feel seen, valued, and supported by their teachers, they are more likely to invest effort, persist through challenges, and engage deeply with learning.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) [4] provides a compelling explanation for these findings. Teachers who demonstrate care and respect satisfy students' fundamental need for relatedness. When this need is met, students are more likely to internalize the value of academic tasks and engage in them willingly, rather than reluctantly. Additionally, teachers who encourage autonomy (e.g., offering choices) and provide competence-supporting feedback further enhance motivation.

Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) [2] adds another layer. For many students, especially those who may lack secure attachments at home, a supportive teacher can serve as a "secure base" from which they explore the academic environment. Students who feel safe in their relationship with a teacher are more willing to take intellectual risks, ask questions, and admit when they need help—behaviors that fuel motivation and learning.

In the Nigerian context, where classrooms are often crowded and teacher-centered approaches are common, these findings highlight an often-overlooked resource: the relational quality of the teacher. It is not simply a matter of covering the curriculum; how teachers relate to students shapes the very motivation that makes learning possible.

1. The Human Dimension

Beyond the numbers, the voices of students in this study speak to the lived reality of teacher–student relationships. One student wrote in an open-ended section: "My teacher believes in me. When she smiles and says I can do it, I feel like studying harder." Another shared: "I used to hate mathematics because my teacher shouted. Now I have a teacher who explains patiently, and I enjoy it." These reflections echo the statistical finding: relational quality translates into motivational engagement.

Conversely, students who reported negative relationships described feelings of invisibility, fear, and hopelessness. "My teacher does not even know my name," one student wrote. "Why should I try?" Such statements reveal the motivational damage that can occur when the relational dimension is neglected.

2. Implications for Practice

The findings have several important implications for educational practice in Nigerian secondary schools. For Teachers: The most immediate implication is the need to prioritize relationship-building as a core teaching competency. Teachers should:

- Learn and use students' names.
- Show genuine interest in students' lives and well-being.
- Provide encouragement and specific praise.
- Respond to mistakes with patience and guidance rather than harshness.
- Create classroom environments where students feel safe to express themselves.

For Schools: School administrators should:

- Provide professional development on relational skills and classroom climate.
- Recognize and reward teachers who demonstrate positive relationships with students.
- Ensure that school policies do not inadvertently undermine relationships (e.g., by encouraging punitive discipline
- Integrate relationship-building into school culture through mentorship programs and advisory periods.

For Teacher Education: Teacher training institutions should incorporate relationship-building competencies into pre-service curricula. Courses on classroom management should emphasize relational strategies alongside disciplinary techniques. Practicum experiences should include explicit attention to how trainees build rapport with students.

3. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design captures relationships at a single point in time; causal direction cannot be established. It is possible that motivated students are more likely to perceive their relationships positively, creating a bidirectional effect. Longitudinal research is needed to clarify directionality. The

sample was drawn from one local government area in Rivers State, which may limit generalizability to other regions or school types (e.g., private schools, rural schools). The use of self-report measures may introduce social desirability bias; students may have over reported positive relationships or motivation.

4. Future Research

Future studies should explore:

- **Gender differences:** Do male and female students differ in how they perceive teacher–student relationships, and do these differences affect motivation differently?
- **Subject-specific relationships:** Are teacher–student relationships more influential in certain subjects (e.g., mathematics vs. language arts)?
- **Longitudinal trajectories:** How do teacher–student relationships evolve over the secondary school years, and how does this affect motivation over time?
- **Intervention research:** Can teacher training programs designed to enhance relational skills lead to measurable improvements in student motivation? Randomized controlled trials are needed.
- **Qualitative investigations:** In-depth interviews with students and teachers could illuminate the processes through which relationships influence motivation.

Conclusion

The teacher–student relationship is not merely a backdrop to academic instruction; it is an active, potent force that shapes students' motivation to learn. This study has demonstrated that Nigerian secondary school students who experience positive, supportive relationships with their teachers report significantly higher levels of academic motivation. The relational climate of the classroom—whether characterized by warmth or distance, encouragement or criticism—directly influences whether students approach learning with enthusiasm or resignation. In an education system often focused on examinations, curricula, and infrastructure, the human element can be overlooked. Yet the evidence is clear: students learn best when they learn from teachers who care. Investing in teacher–student relationships is not a distraction from academic goals; it is a fundamental means of achieving them. For every student who sits in a Nigerian classroom, waiting to be seen, encouraged, and inspired, the quality of that relationship may be the difference between a closed mind and an open one, between giving up and pressing on.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Teachers should intentionally build positive relationships with students by showing genuine care, using students' names, providing encouragement, and responding to mistakes with patience rather than harshness.
2. School administrators should provide professional development on relational skills, including communication, empathy, and conflict resolution. This training should be ongoing, not a one-time workshop.
3. Teacher education programs should integrate relationship-building competencies into pre-service curricula, ensuring that new teachers enter the classroom equipped with these essential skills.
4. Schools should adopt policies that promote positive relationships, such as smaller class sizes where possible, mentorship programs, and advisory systems that allow students to form sustained connections with teachers.
5. Further research should examine the effectiveness of interventions designed to enhance teacher–student relationships, using experimental designs to establish causality.

References

1. Adeyemo DA. Teacher support as a predictor of academic self-efficacy and motivation among Nigerian secondary school students. Journal of Educational Research and Development,2012:9(2):45–58.
2. Bowlby J. Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment. Basic Books, 1969.
3. Creswell JW, Creswell JD. Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (5th ed.). SAGE Publications, 2018.
4. Deci EL, Ryan RM. The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. Psychological Inquiry,2000:11(4):227–268.
5. Krejcie RV, Morgan DW. Determining sample size for research activities. Educational and Psychological Measurement,1970:30(3):607–610.
6. Pianta RC. Enhancing relationships between children and teachers. American Psychological Association, 1999.
7. Roorda DL, Koomen HMY, Spilt JL, Oort FJ. The influence of affective teacher–student relationships on students' school engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic approach. Review of Educational Research,2011:81(4):493–529.
8. Vallerand RJ, Pelletier LG, Blais MR, Brière NM, Senécal C, Vallières ÉF. The Academic Motivation Scale: A measure of intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation in education. Educational and Psychological Measurement,1992:52(4):1003–1017.
9. Wentzel KR. Students' relationships with teachers. In: Christenson SL, Reschly AL, Wylie C, editors. Handbook of research on student engagement. Springer, 2010, 1–22.