

The Role of Teacher-Student Relationships in Adolescent Emotional Development

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore how teacher-student relationships influence the emotional development of adolescents.

Methods and Materials: The study employed a qualitative research design using an exploratory approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 29 participants, including both secondary school teachers and adolescent students from diverse urban and rural regions of Bangladesh. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, experience, and context. The interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software to systematically code and categorize data into emerging themes.

Findings: Three major themes emerged from the data: emotional support from teachers, trust and communication, and the impact of teacher relationships on adolescent emotional growth. Emotional support included teacher empathy, motivation, and individualized attention. Trust and communication were characterized by open dialogue, cultural sensitivity, and confidentiality. Finally, emotional outcomes such as increased self-confidence, emotional regulation skills, and a stronger sense of belonging were linked to positive teacher-student relationships. Quotations from participants highlighted how emotionally attuned teacher behaviors shaped students' psychological safety and well-being.

Conclusion: In the context of Bangladesh, where emotional expression in schools is often overlooked, the study suggests that teachers can be pivotal figures in guiding emotional maturity.

Keywords: Adolescence, Emotional Development, Teacher-Student Relationship, Qualitative Research, Bangladesh, School Psychology, Emotional Support.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a formative stage of life during which emotional, social, and cognitive development converge in ways that shape an individual's long-term well-being. Among the many influences that shape this period, interpersonal relationships—particularly those between adolescents and their teachers—play a crucial role in determining emotional health and adaptive functioning in school settings. Emotional development during adolescence involves acquiring skills to understand, express, and regulate emotions in socially appropriate ways, and teacher-student relationships have emerged as powerful social contexts for this learning process (Ye et al., 2019). Within this framework, a positive teacher-student relationship serves not only as a source of academic motivation but also as a stabilizing emotional force, especially in cultures and environments where adolescents spend a significant portion of their developmental years within the school system (Kim, 2021).

Numerous studies have examined the ways in which teacher-student relationships influence adolescent adjustment, highlighting their association with emotional well-being, resilience, and psychological functioning. These relationships provide scaffolding for adolescents' emotional regulation, offering guidance and modeling through empathetic, secure, and responsive interactions (Endedijk et al., 2021). Adolescents with supportive teachers are more likely to display prosocial behaviors, report fewer emotional disturbances, and show greater self-efficacy in navigating life challenges (Wu & Zhang, 2022). In contrast, the absence of emotional support in the school environment—or worse, victimization by teachers—has been linked to increased psychological distress and social withdrawal (Chen et al., 2022).

The importance of the teacher-student bond extends beyond individual outcomes and encompasses broader social and developmental domains. It has been found that teacher-student relationship quality significantly predicts peer relationships and classroom social dynamics (Endedijk et al., 2021). These relationships can mediate other influential factors such as family socioeconomic status and school connectedness, affecting adolescents' overall adjustment and sense of belonging (Jiayu Li et al., 2020). When students perceive their teachers as emotionally available, caring, and fair, they are more likely to internalize emotional coping strategies and develop emotional resilience (Longobardi et al., 2020). This is particularly

important during periods of rapid emotional change and identity formation, which are characteristic of adolescence.

In various cultural contexts, including Asian and South Asian societies, where respect for authority and hierarchical structures are emphasized, teacher-student relationships take on unique dimensions. In these settings, teachers are often perceived as moral role models and emotional guides (Ibrahim & Pertiwi, 2020). In Bangladesh, as in many countries with collectivist traditions, the school is more than an academic institution—it is a relational environment where adolescents learn emotional expression and receive social feedback. Understanding how emotional development is fostered or hindered in such settings through teacher interactions is essential for educators, policy-makers, and mental health professionals.

Several theoretical frameworks support the understanding of teacher-student interactions as emotionally formative. Attachment theory, for example, suggests that secure attachments with teachers can substitute or complement those with primary caregivers, offering emotional safety and responsiveness in a structured environment (Cheung, 2019). Self-determination theory also provides a useful lens, proposing that autonomy, relatedness, and competence—three psychological needs—can be satisfied within emotionally supportive teacher relationships, thus promoting optimal development (Wu & Zhang, 2022). In line with these theories, empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that when students feel emotionally connected to their teachers, they display reduced behavioral problems, better emotional regulation, and improved academic outcomes (Longobardi et al., 2019).

The quality of teacher-student relationships has also been shown to act as a buffer in times of stress, such as during transitional school periods or public health crises. During the COVID-19 pandemic, emotionally supportive teachers were found to mitigate loneliness and promote psychological stability among students, especially those with limited familial support (Scheer & Laubenstein, 2021; Shen et al., 2021). Moreover, the protective function of these relationships extends to shielding adolescents from the negative emotional impact of parental conflict, peer pressure, and academic failure (Dong et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). In such circumstances, students' emotional security is enhanced not only by their family systems but also through consistent and empathetic interactions with teachers.

Recent findings also point to the longitudinal influence of teacher-student emotional closeness. Zheng et al.

demonstrated that repeated positive interactions with teachers significantly shaped adolescents' sense of career adaptability and reduced ambivalence about the future (Zheng et al., 2022). Similarly, other longitudinal studies have confirmed that emotionally warm teacher-student relationships are strong predictors of reduced bullying behavior, higher social integration, and better psychological outcomes over time (Ling et al., 2022; Wu & Zhang, 2022). This long-term perspective is particularly relevant as emotional competencies developed during adolescence are known to predict adult well-being and relational success (Kim, 2021).

The relational dynamics in the classroom are also intertwined with cultural values and social expectations. Adolescents' emotional responses to teacher behaviors are not universally experienced; they are filtered through lenses of cultural norms, family upbringing, and peer dynamics. For instance, in high-context societies, emotional expression may be more subdued, and respect for teachers may hinder open emotional disclosure (Özdemir & Özdemir, 2019). Nevertheless, students still seek emotional validation and understanding from their teachers, even if the pathways of expression differ from Western norms. Teachers who are able to adapt their relational style to these cultural nuances tend to form stronger emotional bonds with their students (Luo et al., 2021).

The indirect effects of teacher-student relationships on emotional development are equally significant. These relationships influence social cognition, peer affiliation, and self-concept, which are all integral to emotional maturity. For example, Clem et al. found that the quality of teacher-student interaction influenced students' emotional achievement through their evolving self-concept (Clem et al., 2020). Furthermore, adolescents who experience teacher warmth and responsiveness tend to internalize values such as empathy and compassion, further shaping their interpersonal behavior (Chamizo-Nieto et al., 2021). These findings highlight the emotional transmission that occurs in the classroom—where students learn to mirror emotional responses modeled by teachers.

Peer influence remains another important variable that interacts with teacher-student relationships. Tan et al. demonstrated that the relational network comprising parents, teachers, and peers plays a crucial role in predicting adolescent behavior, such as gaming disorder (Tan et al., 2024). When teacher-student relationships are strong, adolescents are more likely to resist negative peer pressure and form healthier social bonds (Wachs et al., 2020). Thus,

the emotional tone set by teachers indirectly shapes the emotional climate of the peer group.

While much of the existing research focuses on the structural and functional aspects of these relationships, there remains a need for qualitative inquiry that captures the lived experiences of adolescents and their emotional perceptions of teacher interactions. Quantitative findings, while valuable, often overlook the emotional subtleties, language, and symbolic meanings attached to teacher behaviors as perceived by students. In this context, qualitative research can offer rich insights into how emotional connections are interpreted, internalized, and reflected in the everyday school lives of adolescents (Zhu et al., 2024). For instance, it allows us to explore how students describe feeling emotionally supported or neglected, how teachers interpret their own emotional roles, and how these perceptions differ by gender, age, or school context.

Moreover, adolescents' perceptions of emotional safety in the classroom are deeply shaped by the consistency, authenticity, and accessibility of teacher behaviors. In emotionally attuned classrooms, students are more likely to disclose their personal concerns, seek support, and engage in emotional risk-taking, such as expressing vulnerability or asking for help (Whitehead et al., 2021). On the contrary, emotionally distant or punitive teachers can trigger anxiety, fear of judgment, and emotional suppression among adolescents (Siregar et al., 2018).

Despite growing recognition of the importance of teacher-student emotional relationships, the research remains sparse in low- and middle-income countries, where contextual factors such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of teacher training, and social stigma around emotional expression may limit relational depth. In South Asia, and particularly in Bangladesh, the sociocultural context provides a unique background to explore these issues. Schools in Bangladesh are marked by rigid teacher hierarchies, academic pressure, and often minimal training in emotional or psychological support. Yet, it is precisely in such contexts that emotionally responsive teacher-student relationships can have the most transformative impact, offering adolescents emotional validation, a sense of belonging, and psychological safety. In response to this research gap, the present study aims to explore the role of teacher-student relationships in adolescent emotional development from a qualitative perspective, focusing on the lived experiences of both teachers and students in Bangladesh.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research design with an exploratory approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the role teacher-student relationships play in the emotional development of adolescents. The participants of this study consisted of 29 individuals from Bangladesh, including secondary school teachers and adolescent students aged between 13 and 18 years. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure maximum variation in terms of gender, age, type of school (urban and rural), and teaching experience in order to obtain rich and diverse perspectives. The sampling process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no new themes or insights emerged from the data.

2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a flexible yet guided exploration of participants' experiences and perceptions. Interview protocols were developed based on the existing literature and refined after initial pilot interviews. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted in a quiet and comfortable setting, either face-to-face or via secure online platforms depending on participant preference and accessibility. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

For data analysis, NVivo qualitative analysis software was used to facilitate systematic coding and theme development. Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and report recurring patterns within the data. The analysis followed an iterative process that involved reading and re-reading transcripts, generating initial codes, categorizing codes into broader themes, and refining themes through constant comparison. Credibility of the findings was enhanced through peer debriefing, member checking with selected participants, and maintaining an audit trail of analytical decisions throughout the process.

3. Findings and Results

The study involved a total of 29 participants from various regions of Bangladesh, comprising 15 adolescent students (51.7%) and 14 secondary school teachers (48.3%). Among the student participants, 8 were female (27.6%) and 7 were male (24.1%), with ages ranging from 13 to 18 years ($M = 15.3$). The teacher participants included 9 females (31.0%) and 5 males (17.3%), with teaching experience ranging from 4 to 28 years ($M = 13.2$). Participants represented both urban ($n = 17$; 58.6%) and rural ($n = 12$; 41.4%) schools, ensuring diversity in educational and social contexts. The variation in gender, age, teaching experience, and school location contributed to a broad and rich understanding of how teacher-student relationships influence adolescent emotional development.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional Support from Teachers	Teacher Empathy	Active listening, validating emotions, showing concern, emotional availability
	Encouragement and Motivation	Positive reinforcement, academic encouragement, building confidence
	Conflict Resolution	Managing classroom disputes, addressing emotional distress, mediating misunderstandings
	Non-verbal Communication	Eye contact, tone of voice, facial expressions, body language
	Emotional Safety in Classroom	Safe space, acceptance without judgment, open dialogue
	Role Modeling	Demonstrating emotional control, modeling respectful behavior, showing compassion
2. Trust and Communication	Individual Attention	Recognizing personal struggles, personalized responses, emotional check-ins
	Open Teacher-Student Dialogue	Safe expression of feelings, open-ended questioning, approachable demeanor
	Consistent Interaction	Regular check-ins, informal conversations, teacher availability
	Confidentiality and Respect	Keeping secrets safe, respecting personal boundaries, non-judgmental responses
	Feedback and Responsiveness	Constructive criticism, timely responses, listening to student input

3. Impact on Adolescent Emotional Growth	Cultural Sensitivity in Communication	Acknowledging cultural values, language use, avoiding stereotypes
	Development of Self-Confidence	Feeling valued, speaking up in class, reducing fear of judgment
	Emotional Regulation Skills	Managing anger, coping with stress, recognizing emotional triggers
	Sense of Belonging	Feeling included, connectedness to school, peer acceptance
	Reduction in Emotional Distress	Reduced anxiety, improved mood, emotional stability
	Encouragement of Future Aspirations	Discussing goals, positive vision for future, feeling supported in dreams

The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed three overarching categories: Emotional Support from Teachers, Trust and Communication, and Impact on Adolescent Emotional Growth. Each category contained several subcategories that reflect the nuanced ways in which teacher-student relationships influence the emotional development of adolescents in the context of Bangladeshi schools.

Under the category of Emotional Support from Teachers, one major subcategory was Teacher Empathy. Participants consistently emphasized how emotionally attuned teachers who listen actively and validate students' emotions can foster trust and emotional openness. One student noted, "When my teacher notices I'm sad and asks me what's wrong, it makes me feel like someone cares." This emotional availability often took the form of attentive listening, showing concern, and a general willingness to understand student perspectives.

Encouragement and Motivation emerged as another important subcategory. Teachers who offered verbal affirmations and recognized students' efforts were seen as pivotal to emotional growth. As one adolescent participant described, "Even when I get low marks, my teacher tells me to keep trying, and that helps me not give up." Motivational support was reported to boost self-worth and persistence among students.

The subcategory of Conflict Resolution reflected how emotionally supportive teachers handled interpersonal tensions and student distress. Several students described situations where teachers mediated peer conflicts or addressed individual emotional concerns in calm, constructive ways. One teacher shared, "When two students argue, I try to help them see each other's point of view instead of punishing them."

Non-verbal Communication also played a role in emotional expression. Participants described the importance of teachers' eye contact, tone of voice, and body language in signaling care or disapproval. "I know when my teacher is proud of me, even if she doesn't say anything," said one student.

In the subcategory of Emotional Safety in Classroom, students noted that they felt free to express emotions when teachers created a non-judgmental and supportive environment. A participant remarked, "Our teacher tells us it's okay to be sad or stressed. That makes it easier to talk."

Role Modeling was also frequently mentioned, where adolescents viewed teachers as examples of emotionally regulated behavior. Teachers who demonstrated patience, compassion, and respectful interaction were perceived as influential. A student shared, "My teacher never yells. Even when she's upset, she talks calmly. I want to be like that."

Finally, Individual Attention was highlighted, as students felt more emotionally secure when teachers acknowledged their personal struggles. One participant recalled, "When my teacher asked about my mother's illness, I knew she really cared about me, not just my grades."

The second main theme, Trust and Communication, included the subcategory of Open Teacher-Student Dialogue. Students stressed the emotional benefits of being able to talk to teachers openly. "Sometimes I just need someone to talk to, and my teacher listens without judging," one adolescent explained. The space for open-ended communication helped adolescents feel seen and heard.

Consistent Interaction emerged as another subtheme, where regular and informal conversations contributed to emotional trust. Teachers who made themselves available outside of class time or checked in frequently were praised. A teacher mentioned, "Even if it's just asking 'how are you' every day, it makes a big difference."

The subcategory of Confidentiality and Respect highlighted the emotional safety students felt when teachers respected their privacy and boundaries. "I told my teacher something personal, and she never told anyone else. That built my trust in her," a student stated.

Feedback and Responsiveness also contributed to emotional connection. Students appreciated when teachers gave timely, constructive feedback and responded to their emotional cues. "When I didn't do well on a test, my teacher didn't scold me—she asked if something was bothering me," shared one participant.

Lastly, Cultural Sensitivity in Communication was mentioned, especially in cases where teachers were mindful of students' cultural and familial backgrounds. One student reflected, "My teacher understands how our families think and respects that when she talks to us."

The third category, Impact on Adolescent Emotional Growth, began with the subcategory of Development of Self-Confidence. Supportive teacher interactions were strongly linked to greater student confidence. As one adolescent noted, "I used to be scared to speak in class, but now I feel brave because my teacher encourages me."

Emotional Regulation Skills were also reported to be influenced by teachers' guidance and modeling. Students shared that teachers helped them understand and manage their emotional responses. "When I get angry, I remember how my teacher handles anger and try to do the same," said one participant.

The subcategory of Sense of Belonging reflected how positive teacher-student relationships increased students' emotional attachment to the school environment. One student remarked, "I feel like I belong in my class because my teacher makes everyone feel important."

In terms of Reduction in Emotional Distress, participants reported feeling less anxious, stressed, or emotionally overwhelmed when they had a supportive teacher to turn to. "Before, I used to cry a lot after school. Now I feel better because I can talk to my teacher," one adolescent shared.

Finally, Encouragement of Future Aspirations was a subtheme in which teachers' emotional support fostered students' hopes and dreams. "My teacher always tells me I can be a doctor if I work hard. It makes me believe in myself," said a participant.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed three primary categories that illustrate how teacher-student relationships influence adolescent emotional development in the Bangladeshi context: Emotional Support from Teachers, Trust and Communication, and Impact on Adolescent Emotional Growth. These categories reflect the nuanced emotional dynamics within classrooms and affirm the central role of teachers as both academic guides and emotional anchors for adolescents navigating a critical period of identity formation and psychological adjustment.

The first category, Emotional Support from Teachers, emphasized the significance of teacher empathy, emotional availability, and encouragement. Participants consistently

highlighted how emotionally attuned teachers, who actively listen and validate students' feelings, provide a secure environment for emotional expression. This aligns with previous findings that emphasize the role of teacher responsiveness and emotional sensitivity in reducing psychological distress and fostering student flourishing (Chamizo-Nieto et al., 2021). When teachers recognize emotional struggles and respond with warmth and understanding, adolescents are more likely to regulate their emotions constructively and develop internal coping mechanisms (Longobardi et al., 2020). Moreover, teachers who served as role models for respectful and emotionally controlled behavior were seen as shaping students' own emotional patterns, confirming earlier research that positions teachers as emotional exemplars (Dong et al., 2021).

Participants also emphasized the role of encouragement and motivational support, where teachers' positive reinforcement contributed to students' self-confidence and persistence. These findings echo the work of Clem et al., who found that teacher-student relationship quality directly affects students' achievement emotions and self-concept of ability (Clem et al., 2020). Emotional safety in the classroom, another subtheme, was linked to a sense of acceptance and reduced fear of judgment, which supports previous literature on the protective effects of emotionally supportive environments on adolescent mental health (Jing Li et al., 2020). These supportive dynamics help mitigate the emotional burden of academic stress and interpersonal challenges, especially in contexts where adolescents lack other emotional resources (Chen et al., 2022).

The second category, Trust and Communication, further deepened our understanding of the relational fabric that binds teachers and students emotionally. Participants valued open dialogue, consistent interaction, and respectful boundaries. Emotional trust was established through teachers' availability and responsiveness, reaffirming the notion that trust is a foundational element of emotionally secure classrooms (Whitehead et al., 2021). Moreover, adolescents who described positive emotional exchanges with teachers felt more willing to disclose personal issues and seek support, highlighting how relational accessibility promotes emotional openness. This is consistent with research showing that teacher-student communication quality contributes significantly to students' willingness to seek help and develop emotional regulation skills (Wu & Zhang, 2022; Zhu et al., 2024).

An important finding within this theme was the role of confidentiality and respect in shaping emotional safety.

Adolescents expressed appreciation for teachers who respected their emotional boundaries and kept private disclosures confidential. This finding supports Luo et al.'s research, which demonstrated that emotionally secure teacher-student relationships reduce loneliness and foster psychological well-being by enhancing self-concept (Luo et al., 2021). Cultural sensitivity in communication was also emphasized by participants who valued teachers' awareness of their cultural and familial contexts. Given the collectivist and hierarchical norms of Bangladeshi society, where emotional expression may be more restrained, such cultural sensitivity is vital. Previous work has shown that adolescents' perceptions of teacher fairness and cultural respect contribute to greater classroom engagement and emotional comfort (Özdemir & Özdemir, 2019).

The third category, Impact on Adolescent Emotional Growth, captured the long-term emotional effects of teacher-student relationships. Participants described how supportive teachers helped them build self-confidence, regulate emotions, reduce emotional distress, and develop a sense of belonging. These findings are supported by numerous studies indicating that emotionally positive teacher-student relationships contribute to greater resilience, self-efficacy, and prosocial behavior (Endedijk et al., 2021; Longobardi et al., 2019). Notably, participants emphasized that their teachers' emotional investment had encouraged them to envision future aspirations and dream beyond their current circumstances. This finding echoes Zheng et al.'s longitudinal study, which found that emotionally supportive teacher interactions positively influenced adolescents' career adaptability and reduced ambivalence (Zheng et al., 2022).

One important insight from this study was the protective role of teacher-student relationships in managing emotional stress and anxiety. Adolescents reported that when they had a teacher who acknowledged their emotional struggles and offered support, their overall emotional stability improved. This aligns with research showing that emotionally available teachers act as buffers against the effects of family conflict, peer pressure, and academic stress (Shen et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). Particularly during transitional or stressful periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, emotionally positive teacher-student relationships were shown to reduce feelings of isolation and improve mental health outcomes among students (Scheer & Laubenstein, 2021).

5. Limitations & Suggestions

One limitation of this study is the relatively small and specific sample size, consisting only of 29 participants from Bangladesh. This sample may not fully represent the diversity of adolescents or educational contexts across different regions or socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which can introduce biases such as social desirability or recall bias. The qualitative design, while rich in detail, limits the ability to generalize findings to a broader population. Furthermore, the study did not examine the perspectives of parents or other school staff, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing teacher-student relationships and emotional development.

Future research could expand the sample size to include a more diverse group of participants, such as adolescents from different regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, or educational levels in Bangladesh or other South Asian countries. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable in examining the long-term effects of teacher-student relationships on adolescent emotional development. Additionally, exploring the role of parents, peers, and other school staff in shaping these relationships could provide a more holistic understanding. Research that compares teacher-student dynamics across different cultural contexts would help identify universal factors versus culture-specific influences in adolescent emotional growth.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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