

TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP AND ACADEMIC MOTIVATION: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SELF- DETERMINATION THEORY

Rodica PISCUPU-DOBRESCU

”Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu Jiu
r.dobrescu@yahoo.com

Abstract

From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, the teacher–student relationship can be examined in connection with academic motivation through the lens of the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In this context, the interpersonal relationship with the teacher and teachers’ practices, such as autonomy support, the provision of structure through the clarification of expectations, guidance and feedback, as well as involvement, represent relevant dimensions of students’ school experience. Although conceptually distinct, these dimensions can support one another and may contribute to the creation of contexts that facilitate psychological need satisfaction and the development of more autonomous motivation and students’ academic engagement.

Keywords: teacher–student relationship; academic motivation; Self-Determination Theory; autonomy; competence; relatedness; autonomy support; structure; school engagement

1. Teacher–student relationship and psychological need satisfaction

According to Self-Determination Theory, people have three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). The satisfaction of these needs is considered important for individuals’ functioning and development and is influenced, among other factors, by how individuals perceive and experience the social environment in which they are situated (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). From an SDT perspective, autonomy refers to a sense of initiative and ownership of one’s actions, competence to a sense of effectiveness and the ability to cope with demands, and relatedness to a sense of connection and belonging.

In the school environment, teachers play an important role in students’ social experiences, which are influenced both by the relationship students have with their teachers and by how teachers behave and conduct their activities. However, it is important to conceptually distinguish between these two dimensions. The teacher–student relationship refers to the interpersonal bond that is formed and develops through interactions between teachers and students, whereas teacher practices refer to the concrete behaviors through which teachers can support students’ psychological needs, such as autonomy support, the provision of structure, and involvement.

This distinction is important because the literature does not always use these terms consistently. Burns and Van Bergen (2025), in a systematic review of research on adolescent motivation, identified a tendency to use the concepts of teacher–student relationship and teacher support interchangeably, as well as considerable variation in how relationships are conceptualized and measured. The authors emphasize the need for clearer conceptual and methodological distinctions between relationships and the forms of support provided by teachers.

1.1. Teacher–student relationship and the need for relatedness

Of the three psychological needs, relatedness is the one most closely connected to the interpersonal dimension of the teacher–student relationship. It refers to the need to feel connected to others, accepted, and part of relationships characterized by closeness, respect, and care (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Ryan and Deci (2020) describe relatedness in terms of a sense of belonging and connection and emphasize the importance of respect and care in satisfying this need. At school, this need can be supported when students feel that their teachers respect them, listen to them, and show interest in them. Interactions characterized by warmth, respect, and trust may contribute to students’ sense that they are accepted and that they belong in the school environment.

Research on teacher–student relationships also supports the relevance of the affective dimension of these relationships for student engagement. For example, the meta-analysis conducted by Roorda et al. (2011), based on 99 studies, found associations between the affective quality of teacher–student relationships and school engagement. These associations were generally of moderate to large magnitude, whereas associations with academic achievement were small to moderate in magnitude.

With regard to teacher involvement, behaviors such as warm and respectful interactions with students, demonstrating trust, showing interest in students’ learning, and being willing to invest time and effort to help them are relevant (Ahn et al., 2021). Ahn et al. (2021) include involvement, alongside autonomy support and the provision of structure, among teacher practices perceived by students as relevant to psychological need support.

However, it is important not to confuse teacher involvement with the teacher–student relationship. Involvement represents a set of teacher behaviors, whereas the teacher–student relationship describes the interpersonal bond that develops through interactions between the two. Likewise, a positive relationship does not automatically mean that the need for relatedness is satisfied. What matters is how students experience the relationship and the overall set of experiences they have within the school environment.

Therefore, the teacher–student relationship can create a context that is conducive to satisfying the need for relatedness, but the relationship itself should not be considered equivalent to the satisfaction of this need.

1.2. Teacher–student relationship and the need for autonomy

Autonomy refers to the sense that one’s actions are self-endorsed and reflect one’s own values, interests, and intentions (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). In the school environment, autonomy does not mean that students must decide everything for themselves, nor that rules or requirements are no longer necessary. Rather, it involves enabling students to understand the meaning of activities, express their perspectives, and, when the situation allows, have opportunities to make relevant choices. In SDT, autonomy is therefore distinct from independence and primarily refers to a sense of initiative and ownership of one’s actions.

Teachers can support autonomy through concrete behaviors such as taking students’ perspectives into account, providing meaningful opportunities for choice, and explaining why certain activities or requirements are important. Ahn et al. (2021) include offering choices, listening to students, highlighting the relevance of activities, and providing rationales for certain requirements among autonomy-supportive practices.

The teacher–student relationship can influence how these practices are perceived and experienced by students. When interactions are characterized by respect and openness, students

may find it easier to express their views and discuss matters with their teachers. However, a positive relationship is not sufficient in itself to constitute autonomy support. Autonomy support involves concrete behaviors through which teachers take students' perspectives into account, provide some degree of choice, and help students understand the meaning of activities.

Therefore, a positive relationship with the teacher and autonomy support are distinct dimensions, even though they can reinforce one another. A close relationship does not guarantee the presence of autonomy-supportive practices, just as autonomy support does not necessarily require a very close relationship between teacher and student.

Autonomy support should not, however, be confused with the absence of structure. The two practices can function complementarily, with teachers providing guidance and clear expectations while simultaneously respecting students' perspectives and initiative. Autonomy support and the provision of structure are distinct constructs, but they can reinforce one another, with both being associated with motivation, engagement, and psychological need satisfaction (Patzak & Zhang, 2025).

1.3. Teacher–student relationship and the need for competence

Competence refers to the sense that one is capable of coping with environmental demands, managing the activities in which one is engaged, and making progress (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). In the school context, this need is relevant to students' experience of being able to understand what they need to do, cope with tasks, and improve their performance. Ryan and Deci (2020) associate competence satisfaction with feelings of effectiveness, mastery, and progress and emphasize the importance of well-structured environments, optimal challenges, and feedback.

A sense of competence can be supported when students understand what is expected of them, receive assistance when they encounter difficulties, and receive feedback that helps them evaluate their work and identify aspects they can improve. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, the provision of structure represents one of the ways in which teachers can contribute to the satisfaction of the need for competence. Ahn et al. (2021) include structure among teacher practices that can support students' psychological needs.

When activities are clearly organized and students know what they are expected to do, receive guidance, and benefit from feedback, they may find it easier to understand task requirements and monitor their progress. Patzak and Zhang (2025) identify clarification of expectations, guidance, and feedback as components of structure, while the SDT literature emphasizes the role of structured environments in supporting competence.

The teacher–student relationship provides the interpersonal context in which these interactions take place; however, the sense of competence is directly supported through practices such as clarifying requirements, providing guidance, and offering feedback. Thus, relationship quality and the provision of structure represent distinct dimensions, even though they may reinforce one another in students' school experiences.

2. The relationship between psychological needs, students' experiences, and academic motivation

From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, academic motivation should be understood not only in terms of its intensity but also in terms of its quality or degree of self-determination. The theory distinguishes between intrinsic motivation and different forms of extrinsic motivation according to the extent to which behavior is endorsed and internalized by

the individual. Thus, a high level of effort does not necessarily indicate autonomous motivation: a student may exert considerable effort because of external or internal pressure, but may also be motivated by interest, personal value, or identification with the importance of the activity (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

From this perspective, the relevance of the teacher–student relationship and teacher practices lies not only in their potential association with greater engagement but also in the conditions they may create for a more autonomous motivational experience. Ahn et al. (2021) tested a model linking teacher motivation to teacher practices as perceived by students, psychological need satisfaction, student motivation, and academic outcomes. Their findings support the view that a rigid correspondence between a particular teacher practice and a single psychological need is not appropriate. Ahn et al. (2021) treat autonomy support, the provision of structure, and involvement as distinct practices, but discuss the possibility that these practices may contribute to the satisfaction of multiple needs and emphasize the complexity of the relationships among these constructs.

This perspective is also important for understanding the relationship between autonomy and structure. The provision of structure should not be viewed as the opposite of autonomy support. Teachers can provide rules, expectations, and guidance without these elements necessarily constituting forms of control. Patzak and Zhang (2025) show that the two practices are distinct but can reinforce one another; their meta-analysis indicates a substantial positive association between teacher autonomy support and structure and shows that both are associated with outcomes such as motivation, engagement, and psychological need satisfaction.

In this regard, the teacher–student relationship and teacher practices represent two distinct but interconnected aspects of students’ school experience. The relationship constitutes the interpersonal bond formed through interactions between teachers and students, whereas teacher practices refer to behaviors through which teachers provide support, structure activities, communicate expectations, offer opportunities for choice and feedback, and respond to students’ perspectives. Burns and Van Bergen (2025) draw attention precisely to the need not to treat the teacher–student relationship and teacher support as automatically equivalent.

Considered together, these elements allow for the formulation of a conceptual relationship in which interpersonal experiences and teacher practices may create contexts conducive to psychological need satisfaction, while such satisfaction is relevant to the quality of academic motivation. From this perspective, a supportive educational environment involves not only students being engaged in activities but also being able to perceive these activities as meaningful, feeling capable of completing them, and experiencing a sense of connection and belonging. Ryan and Deci (2020) emphasize that autonomous forms of motivation, including intrinsic motivation and well-internalized forms of extrinsic motivation, are facilitated by the support of basic psychological needs.

Thus, the teacher–student relationship should not be considered in isolation as the cause of academic motivation, and teacher practices should not be reduced to the effect of a single psychological need.

It is more appropriate to analyze these elements as components of an educational context in which interpersonal relationships, supportive practices, and students’ psychological experiences intersect.

This perspective provides a framework for understanding how students’ school experiences may be related not only to the level of their engagement but also to the quality and degree of self-determination of their motivation.

Conclusions

The perspective of Self-Determination Theory provides a framework for understanding the relationship between students' experiences in the school environment and academic motivation. The analysis highlights that the teacher–student relationship and teacher practices represent distinct but interdependent dimensions of the educational experience. The interpersonal relationship is formed and develops through interactions between teachers and students and may contribute to a sense of connection and belonging, whereas teacher practices, such as autonomy support, the provision of structure, and involvement, may contribute to the creation of conditions conducive to psychological need satisfaction.

A central point is that these dimensions should not be rigidly associated with a single psychological need. The same practice may contribute to the satisfaction of multiple needs, depending on how it is perceived and experienced by students and on the context in which it is used. In this regard, autonomy support and the provision of structure should not be considered opposing practices. They can function complementarily: teachers can provide clarity, guidance, and expectations while simultaneously respecting students' perspectives and initiative. The evidence synthesized by Patzak and Zhang (2025) supports this complementarity.

The relationship with academic motivation should be understood not only in terms of the intensity of motivation but also in terms of its quality or degree of self-determination. Within SDT, the satisfaction of the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness is associated with conditions that are more conducive to autonomous motivation and the internalization of the values and goals underlying activities. However, the contribution of each need may vary depending on the context and on how the constructs are measured. For example, the study by Ahn et al. (2021) provided clearer empirical support for the role of autonomy and competence than for relatedness in its full model.

Overall, the teacher–student relationship and teacher practices can be understood as elements of an educational context in which psychological need experiences are related to the quality of motivation and student engagement. This perspective makes it possible to avoid both reducing the teacher–student relationship to a single teacher practice and assuming that a particular practice automatically produces a particular type of motivation. Instead, it highlights the role of the educational experience as a whole in supporting an approach to learning characterized by a higher degree of self-determination, a sense of competence, and connection with others.

It is also important to interpret these conclusions in light of the limitations of the empirical evidence. Relationships identified in the studies reviewed do not always permit causal inferences, and findings may vary according to students' age, educational context, school subject, and the way constructs are measured. In addition, the research by Burns and Van Bergen (2025) shows that the literature on teacher–student relationships still exhibits considerable diversity in how these relationships are conceptualized and measured.

Therefore, an appropriate interpretation from the perspective of Self-Determination Theory does not consist in identifying a single teacher practice as an explanation for student motivation, but rather in examining how interpersonal relationships, teacher practices, and students' experiences of psychological needs combine within specific educational contexts.

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