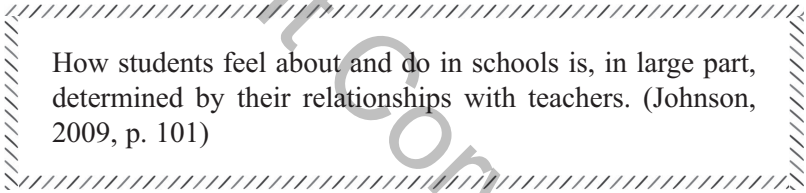





ONE

THE CENTRALITY OF STUDENT– TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS



How students feel about and do in schools is, in large part, determined by their relationships with teachers. (Johnson, 2009, p. 101)

Our narratives about student perspectives attend to three core ideas: the importance of understanding schooling through the eyes of students, the hallmark place of teacher–student relationships in discerning what students see, and the venues in which those relationships occur, the school culture and the academic program. The critical point is that we do not see nor do we present student viewpoints in a decontextualized fashion. We have a good deal of knowledge from students about how they see culture and academic program in schools, and we unpack student views in these two core domains in Parts 2 and 3. We devote Chapter 2 to an analysis of seeing schooling through the eyes of students, what it means to use such language, how such efforts can unfold, and what can be uncovered from careful attention to the needs, interests, and perspectives of students. In this chapter, we pull out the two ingrained pieces of our narrative for discussion: (1) the integrated success pathway of culture (support) and academic program (press) and (2) the hallmark role of

student–teacher relationships in determining how students come to see and describe classrooms and schools.

THE RELATIONAL VENUE: CULTURE AND ACADEMIC PROGRAM

These results suggest that classrooms must be intellectually challenging to encourage growth in achievement and understanding as well as cohesive and satisfying to encourage student interest and motivation. (Moos & Moos, 1978, p. 263)

In chapters 3 through 6 (parts 2 and 3 of the book), we employ the overarching framework of supportive culture and academic press to peer into student perspectives of education, to understand how they see schooling. We establish the importance of that framework here. We begin with the knowledge that what is “related to sustained increases in learning is the combination of academic press and social support for learning” (Appleton, Christensen, & Furlong, 2008, p. 381), the importance of “the teacher’s role in creating supportive affective and instructional contexts” (Davis, 2003, p. 212). Or, at a slightly higher level of expression: “The constitution of a classroom as a functioning social entity is dependent upon both the social and instructional activities of the teacher” (Mergendoller & Packer, 1985, p. 592).

Thus, the emergent picture of the classroom where students report a great deal of content learning combines an affective concern with students as people with an emphasis on students working hard. (Trickett & Moos, 1974, p. 8)

We also commence our journey in seeing what students convey about schooling with the knowledge that these two powerful foundations of learning are highly integrated (Bandura, 1993); “affect and

intellect [are] interconnected and inseparable” (Goldstein, 1999, p. 654), that is, there is a “seamless union of the cognitive factors and the affective volitional factors of intellectual life (Goldstein, 1999, p. 648)—a “merging of caring and the notion of the construction of knowledge” (Goldstein, 1999, p. 649).

Teachers function as attachment figures, as physical caregivers, as socialization agents, as mediators of peer contacts, and as teachers. From a systems perspective, to cleave these functions into those that are purely academic and those that are nonacademic is to create an artificial distinction that neglects important aspects of classroom life. (Pianta, 1999, p. 83)

“If schools are to be made more effective, we must understand both their academic and socialization functions” (Hamilton, 1983, p. 332) and realize that the “integration of cognitive and affective aspects of the learner [are] necessary to effective growth and development” (Hayes, Ryan, & Zsellar, 1994, p. 16). Or, as Davis (2003, p. 221) reminds us, “It is the balance between the socialization and the academic institutional functions of schools that is the issue.” The important messages here are clear. Both domains require attention in an integrated fashion. We also need to seriously question “whether any interaction or classroom task can be considered solely ‘academic’ as well as the implication of choosing to label something as ‘personal’ rather than ‘academic’” (Davis, 2003, p. 226). Finally, we will see throughout the book, but often in indirect ways, that it is attention to both culture and program in an ongoing rolling fashion that produces the largest impact. Attending to press or culture alone is not a recipe for success (Becker & Luthar, 2002).

We have penned this three-part storyline elsewhere as follows (Murphy, 2013, p. 27): “(1) Academic press and supportive culture are the two critical components of school improvement; (2) they are most powerful in tandem; and (3) they work best when they wrap around each other like strands of a rope.” Schooling marked by both a robust instructional program and a rich culture of support is essential (Thompson & O’Quinn, 2001; Becker & Luthar, 2002). So too are the harmonies between the two (Shannon & Bylsma, 2002).

RELATIONAL DYNAMICS

Students typically evaluated a given school year in terms of their experiences with the teacher. (Quiroz, 2001, p. 337)

Teacher-child interactions suggest teacher relationships make a unique contribution to children's social and cognitive development. (Davis, 2003, p. 208)

Seeing and responding to schooling through the eyes of students requires focused attention to relationships in classrooms and schools (Bandura, 1993; Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Relationships are the cardinal dimension of education, what Cruddas (2001, p. 66) refers to as “the heart of education”: “Education is fundamentally interpersonal in nature” (Davis, 2001, p. 431). As we will illustrate in chapters 3 through 6, it is these connections that bring life to the cultural and academic dynamics of schooling. That is, these personal linkages promote the development of care (Chapter 3) and support, safety, and membership (Chapter 4) and nurture the growth of engaged teaching (Chapter 5) and constructed work (Chapter 6).

Relationships with teachers, according to Pianta (1999, p. 21), “are an essential part of classroom experiences for all children and potential resources for improving developmental outcomes.” “The social interactions of the classroom become a critical element in classroom learning” (Arnot, McIntyre, Pedder, & Reay, 2004, p. 51); these “bonds are central to the learning process” (Zanger, 1991, p. 183). Indeed, “student participation, engagement, and eventual success are powered by connections and relationships (Cooper, Ponder, Merritt, & Matthews, 2005, p. 14). These relationships “either facilitate or impede motivation and learning” (Davis, 2003, p. 212). In fact, because “the teacher’s mode of interacting or relating to his or her students may be seen by young adolescents as more important than the subject matter being presented” (Veaco & Brandon, 1986, p. 221), a number of analysts conclude that respectful relationships between children and teachers must be crafted before real involvement with academic content can occur. These reviewers also conclude that these relationships “appear to be necessary antecedents of attitudes toward oneself” (Harper, 1989, p. 124) and

“toward school, education, and the wider community” (Ogbu, 1974, p. 133). On this point, Hartup (1989, p. 120) reminds us that “a child’s effectiveness in dealing with the social world emerges largely from experiences in close relationships” and that a good amount of this capital is garnered in relationships with teachers.

Researchers inform us that

experience in two major kinds of relationships seems to be necessary to the child’s development. First, children must form *vertical* attachments, that is, attachments to individuals who have greater knowledge and social power than they do. Second, children must also form close relationships that are *horizontal*, that is, relationships with individuals who have the same amount of social power as themselves.” (Hartup, 1989, p. 120)

In Chapter 7, we underscore these horizontal connections. Through most of the book, however, the spotlight is on the vertical linkages. We employ various terms to capture these teacher–student relationships (e.g., “person-centered interactions” [Veaco & Brandon, 1986, p. 227]). Scholars who study these relationships often portray a continuum of connections with “positive feelings at one end of the continuum and alienation at the other” (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004 p. 61). Lynch and Cicchetti (cited in Pianta, 1999, p. 81) capture “five patterns of relatedness between children and teachers: optimal, adequate, deprived, disengaged, and confused.” Other reviewers illuminate some of the elements of student–teacher relationships. They help us see that connections are “negotiated, context specific, dynamic, changing, and culturally bound” (Davis, 2003, pp. 222, 225).

The development of the student/teacher relationship is a dynamic process influenced by the beliefs, values, and skills of each member of the dyad. From this perspective, students are viewed as active participants in the development of the student/teacher relationship; bringing to the relationship beliefs and skills that may influence the likelihood of developing a positive relationship with their primary teacher. (Davis, 2001, p. 447)

“Relationship dimensions measure the nature and intensity of personal interactions in the setting” (Moos, 1979, p. 248). Connections here represent “an unspoken but powerfully motivating compact that depends on mutual recognition, involvement, enjoyment, communication, and respect” (Moos, 1979, p. 91).

Conditions that enable or hinder the development of relationships between children and teachers are laced through the literature. “Since teacher support, involving trust and personal concern for students, tends to evolve slowly” (Moos, 1979, p. 147), time for teachers and students to get to know each other is most valuable (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Poplin & Weeres, 1994). Relatedly, we see physical proximity as an important enabler (McMillan, 1996; Ogbu, 1974). So too is “psychological proximity seeking, the degree to which children desire to be psychologically closer to [an] adult” (Pianta, 1999, p. 92). Out of concern for the objective of the relationship, support for the “growth of the other person” surfaces (Veaco & Brandon, 1986, p. 227). The goods such as “interpersonal skills” and “self concept beliefs” (Davis, 2003, p. 211) that participants bring to the linkages are valuable relationship enablers (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1997). Organizational conditions, “environmental characteristics” (Davis, 2003, p. 211), and “environmental stimuli in schools” (Birch & Ladd, 1998, p. 943) can also work to assist or hinder relationships. Particularly relevant here is the “embedded context” (Connell & Wellborn, 1991, p. 72), or the historical debris piled high in education that views children as untrustworthy and in need of control rather than empowering relationships (Cook-Sather, 2002; Farrell, 1990; Ogbu, 1974). Especially disheartening here, scholars document, is “the bureaucratization of the adult-child relationship” (Larkin, 1979, p. 199). “Responsiveness to children’s needs” (Davis, 2003, p. 211) is an enabler as well, a reality that introduces the importance of teachers’ motivations and beliefs.

Colleagues who study the world of teacher–student connections help us peer into some of the relational dynamics here as well. As we examine in more detail below, an obvious but essential point is “that students do not enter their classrooms as ‘tabula rasa.’ Instead they bring expectations, attitudes, and behaviors that will impact the quality of relationships that they develop with teachers” (Davis, 2003, p. 214). We also know that “teachers respond differently to students in the same classroom based upon characteristics that they bring to the educational setting” (Harter et al., 1997, p. 165). A third dynamic

attends to the reciprocity of relationships (Noddings, 1988; Oldfather, Thomas, Eckert, Garcia, Grannis, Kilgore, & Tjioe, 1999). This means that the traditional focus on “view[ing] teacher–child relationships as unilateral” (Silverstein & Krate, 1975), from teacher to student, is not justified. “Students are sophisticated in assessing teachers’ attitudes and behavior . . . [they] calculate whether to invest in a cooperative teacher–student relationship on the basis of whether they think it will pay off” (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999, p. 314). What this means is that “we need to analyze how teachers and students each decide to invest in, not invest in, or disengage from the relationship” (Muller et al., 1999, p. 301). We need to get better at “connect[ing] with students’ own understandings of adult–child relationships” (Davis, 2003, p. 219), “to take into account the child’s behavior and personality as contributing to interaction” (Silverstein & Krate, 1975, p. 219).

RELATIONAL INFLUENCE

Aspects of youth identity are shaped *in relation* to schools and teachers. (Weis, 1990, p. 116)

To begin with, reviewers help us see that these student–teacher relationships are the means by which trust develops in schools (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). They also uncover trust as the bridging variable between relationships and valued outcomes (Murphy & Torre, 2014). And this carries us into a delineation of categories and a description of the evidence about the outcomes of these relationships, as seen at least partially through the eyes of students. We note here as an advance organizer that the results of trusting interpersonal relationships between teachers and students create “transcendent legitimization” (Larkin, 1979, p. 152) and the allegiance of students to the work of the school.

At the general level, we know that connections with teachers play a special and valuable role in students’ lives (Kennedy, 2011), that “student-teacher relationships matter for the development of children” (Adams, 2010, p. 258). “The nature and quality of relationships between students and teachers acts as a framework that guide[s]

actions and thought” (Davis, 2003, p. 219) and “that experience in well-functioning relationships is associated with good functioning in the child” (Hartup, 1989, p. 125). We learn of “the importance of relationship processes in many aspects of classroom performance” (Pianta, 1999, p. 71). “Personalized relationships, according to students, significantly influenced the student experiences across schools” (Rodriguez, 2008, p. 764). Perhaps most powerfully, these relationships “subtly define the child’s present being and mode of becoming, as well as constructing an image of what the child will become” (Wilcox 1982, p. 293). On this latter front, there is growing evidence that not only are student–teacher relationships at the center of productive climate but they provide significant power for academic press (Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort, 2002; Rodriguez, 2008); they provide the basis “from which specific instructional activities derive their meaning” (Moos & David, 1981, p. 59). Through their influence on press and support, we know then “that the quality of teacher–student relationships influences children’s social and cognitive development” (Davis, 2003, p. 210). They provide the resources or social capital (Adams & Forsyth, 2009) to support “intellectual, social, and emotional development” (Davis, 2003, p. 207). “Personality development is optimized through the maintenance of relatedness” (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994, p. 229).

Sense of Attachment

Productive linkages between children and teachers create “students’ sense of belonging” and attachment at the school (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Crosnoe, 2011; Voelkl, 1987). Scholars routinely “point to the importance of the interpersonal experiences between teachers and students in facilitating adaptation within the domain of education” (Ryan et al., 1994, p. 246). Productive interpersonal relationships lead to identification with the school, what Eckert (1989) labels as a merging of the personal and institutional. Scholars describe this state in a variety of ways: membership (Eckert, 1989; Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997), belonging (Battistich et al., 1995; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), integration (Scanlan & Lopez, 2012), affiliation (Newmann, 1981, O’Connor, 1997), attachment (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Conchas, 2001), inclusion (Ma, 2003; Voelkl, 1997), connection (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003), fitting in (Crosnoe, 2011), and acceptance (Goodenow & Grady, 1993).

Underlying these various markers for identification is a sense of being part of the school, of being valued by the institution and by peers, of “feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class” (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 25) and school—“of feel[ing] personally accepted, respected, included, and supported in the school” (Ma, 2003, p. 340). It is about affinity (Conchas, 2001).

Weak or unhealthy relationships, on the other hand, are an invitation to weak student identification with and/or possible disaffiliation with the school, “an absence of highly developed feelings of valuing and belonging” (Voelkl, 1997, p. 296). Students in such schools are often portrayed as “just passing through” (Eckert, 1989, p. 65). Rather than being bonded to the school, they are independent actors, ones who often feel a sense of disconnection and alienation toward teachers and peers (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006; Newmann 1981). They display what Farrell (1990, p. 112) calls “absenting behavior,” a “culture that is dominated by the private as opposed to the institutional” (Eckert, 1989, p. 172). Separation and exclusion are elements of disidentification. So also are estrangement, detachment, and isolation (Newmann, 1989)—“emotional and physical withdrawal” (Voelkl, 1997, p. 294).

Identification (or disidentification) impacts commitment to the school and a sense of obligation to those at the school (Gamoran, 1996). Positive identification helps build a sense of legitimacy around the school and a valuing of the institution (Fredricks et al., 2004; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). According to Voelkl (1997, p. 296), the idea of valuing schooling

include[s] the recognition of the value of the school as both a social institution and a tool for facilitating personal advancement. That is, the youngster regards school as a central institution in society and feels that what is learned in class is important in its own right and that school is instrumental in obtaining his or her personal life objectives . . . the belief that schoolwork is both interesting and important.

Valuing also leads to a “commitment to and identification with the goals of the institution” (Eckert, 1989, p. 103); its values and purposes (Ancess, 2003; Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997; Marsh & Kleitman, 1992); its norms and practices (Battistich et al., 1995; Battistich & Hom, 1997; Voelkl, 1997); “the means it prescribes for members to pursue goals” (Newmann, Wehlage, &

Lamburn, 1992, p. 20), that is, its structures, policies, and practices (Hallinan & Kubitschek, 1999); and its sanctioned outcomes (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002, Voelkl, 1997). In schools with healthy student–teacher connections, children become invested in the life of the classroom (Freiberg, Huzinec, & Templeton, 2009) and school (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

Psychological States

Researchers also document strong linkages between healthy teacher–student relationships and the psychological health of students (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Ma, 2003) and conclude that the relationship is reciprocal in nature (Ma, 2003). These scholars remind us that the work here is two-pronged, the creation of pathways to positive psychosocial characteristics (e.g., self-concept) and the development of fortifications to protect against negative life events and sources of stress (Wright, 1982) that could undermine mental health (Jackson & Warren, 2000). Relations with teachers “can serve as a buffer to risk—a resource for development” (Pianta, 1999, p. 20), especially during periods of school transition (Akos, 2002; Smetana & Bitz, 1996) and especially for students placed at risk (Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, Iver, & Feldlaufer, 1993; Murphy, 2010). Indeed, as Pianta (1999, p. 20) reminds us, “It is through these relationships that the social behavior, self-control, and achievement motivation of children with serious problems can be improved.”

We know that the major quest for youngsters is for personal identity (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1986; Farrell, 1990), what Crosnoe (2011) calls identity work and Feldman and Matjasko (2005) talk about as learning to understand oneself. Analysts also document that identity and self-esteem are tightly yoked. Each student’s self-concept is crafted in good measure by the relationships forged with teachers and peers (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Guest & Schneider, 2003; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). That is, students “come to an understanding of their own social worth by seeing how they are treated by others” (Crosnoe, 2011, p. 139). “The quality of a person’s functioning in terms of autonomy, confidence, and self reliance can be related directly to an experiential set one has regarding significant others” (Ryan et al., 1994, p. 227). Supportive interpersonal relationships help nourish the formation of healthy self-concept and stronger self-esteem (Demaray & Malecki, 2002a; Pounder, 1999), thus positively shaping the nature of students’

developmental pathways (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005) and, consequently, prosocial attitudes and actions (Battistich et al., 1997; Rothman & Cosden, 1995). Unhealthy relationships for students, on the other hand, can lead to reduced self-esteem, nonproductive developmental pathways, and counterproductive attitudes and behaviors (Crosnoe, 2011). These behaviors and attitudes, in turn, are related to engagement and school success (Finn & Rock, 1997; Mulford & Silins, 2003; Rumberger, 2011)—for better or worse.

Positive student–teacher relationships are associated with student sense of expectancy and self-efficacy (Battistich et al., 1995; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Scanlan & Lopez, 2012), concepts that are “among the most robust predictors of academic achievement” (Scanlan & Lopez, 2012, p. 607). Personalized relations also promote a sense of control and autonomy (Ancess, 2003; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Strong relations “ignite agency” (Rodriguez, 2008, p. 774) as well (Felner, Brand, DuBois, Adan, Mulhall, & Evans, 1995; Fredricks et al., 2004), providing students with what Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) depict as internalized standards of performance. Personalization strengthens students’ internal locus of control (Marsh & Kleitman, 1992). That is, as Osterman (2000, p. 329) in her seminal review reminds us,

autonomy develops most effectively in situations where children and teenagers feel a sense of relatedness and closeness rather than disaffiliation from significant adults.” Autonomy is not about isolation and private space” but, instead, refers to the individual’s sense of agency or self-determination in a social context.” (Osterman, 2000, p. 329)

Related dynamics of a healthy self also grow in positive student–teacher relationships. We know, for example, that self-confidence is often augmented in schools characterized by authentic membership and support (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Farrell, 1990; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Personalized relationships are also welded tightly to feelings of competence (Laffey, 1982; Osterman, 2000; Silins & Mulford, 2010) and resilience (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997; Crosnoe, 2011).

Dispositions Toward Learning

A thick line of research has established that caring teacher–student relations influence students’ orientation toward school and

learning and promote the development of positive educational values and attitudes (Battistich et al., 1995; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000; Osterman, 2000) and subsequent achievement-related behaviors (Adams & Forsyth, 2009; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Students in healthy relationships are more likely than peers in communities of low care and support to find value in school (Adams & Forsyth, 2009) and have “a positive orientation toward school” (Osterman, 2000, p. 331). These youngsters often have a greater interest in school and like school and classes more than students in communities assessed as low in relational power (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997; Osterman, 2000). They identify with their schools more and invest more in their learning (Ancess, 2003; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Wentzel & Looney, 2007). Relationships also exert a strong shaping force on “prosocial attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, including concern and respect for peers and teachers, conflict resolution, acceptance of out groups, [and] intrinsic prosocial motivation and behavior” (Osterman, 2000, p. 334). The obverse of the research-themed storyline above is true as well. Impersonal connections with teachers and perceived lack of care produce negative orientations toward school (Larkin, 1979; Ogbu, 1974; Osterman, 2000). They nurture values and attitudes that often lead to counterproductive coping strategies (Crosnoe, 2011; Eckert, 1989; Farrell, 1990), ones that undercut meaningful engagement and social and academic learning (Demaray & Malecki, 2002b; Hattie, 2009; Ma, 2003).

Motivation is the most examined learning disposition in the literature on student community. Here scholars routinely find that meaningful student–teacher connections are highly associated with student motivation to work and to succeed in school (Barnett & McCormick, 2004; Bryk et al., 2010; Opdenakker, Maulana, & Brock, 2012). According to Battistich and associates (1995, 1997), personalized relationships motivate students to adopt and honor school classroom norms and values and enhance the desire to acquire competence. Motivation is important, in turn, because it impacts engagement and social and cognitive outcomes (Battistich et al., 1995; Hattie, 2009; Opdenakker et al., 2012).

Studies have also shown that sense of support and belonging forged in relationships with teachers is correlated with student commitment to the school and the work they do there (Ancess, 2003; Baker et al., 1997; Battistich et al., 1995). Self-confidence is impacted by these linkages (Ancess, 2000; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). With strong relations in place, students become more invested in

their academic achievement (Ancess, 2000); demonstrate a greater appetite for learning (Felner, Seitsinger, Brand, Burns, & Bolton, 2007; Munoz, Ross, & McDonald, 2007), that is, “greater interest in challenging instructional activities” (Johnson & Asera, 1999, p. 100); and exhibit more “academically oriented forms of agency” (Conchas, 2001, p. 501). Relations grow the important disposition of future orientation (O’Connor, 1997). In particular, educational aspirations are shaped by strong and healthy student–teacher relationships (Laffey, 1982; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

Relations nourish possibility and hope (Eckert, 1989; Farrell, 1990; Rodriguez, 2008). Students ensconced in strong relationships are likely to develop a robust sense of industry and a robust work ethic, a commitment to and feeling of accomplishment in undertaking schoolwork, and a commitment to learn the adaptive skills (Demaray & Malecki, 2002b) and master “the habits of work necessary for school success” (Ancess, 2003, p. 21). In particular, students in such relationships demonstrate greater self-directedness (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Farrell, 1990) and exercise more leadership (Demaray & Malecki, 2002b). They are willing to take risks in the service of learning (Goodenow & Grady, 1993), exercise meaningful “pursuit in the demands and struggle for quality performance” (Ancess, 2003, p. 41), and assume responsibility for their work (Ancess, 2003; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Silins & Mulford, 2010). Students in positively anchored teacher–student relationships learn to take and display pride in their efforts and their accomplishments (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

RELATIONAL CONTEXTUAL ISSUES

The literature is rich with descriptions of the importance of the contexts surrounding teacher–student relationships (Eccles et al., 1993; Pintrich, 2003; Trickett & Todd, 1972), or more specifically “person–environmental interactions” (Hamilton, 1983, p. 314). The essential messages here are (1) “In assessing children’s teacher–child relationships, it is important to consider the context in which these relationships exist” (Birch & Ladd, 1997, p. 64) and (2) that “interactions and relationships with teachers may have different meanings for students” (Davis, 2001, p. 450) depending on a host of conditions that rest both outside and inside the school (Hamilton, 1983; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000), such as “different types of minority status and cultural frame of reference, differing conceptions

of authority and help seeking, or worldviews oriented toward social interdependence” (Davis, 2001, p. 450). “The nexus of gender, race-ethnicity, and social class may create unique spaces” (Crosnoe et al., 2004, p. 77) that “underlie social-emotional functioning” (Roeser et al., 2000, p. 465) and that both shape and help establish the meaning and values of relationships between teachers and students (Maehr & Fyans, 1989). More directly, Ferreira and Bosworth (2000, p. 118) tell us that “context plays an important role in how caring is experienced.” In short, the “educational contexts of schooling” (Davis, 2003, p. 212) and community matter a good deal for student–teacher relationships (Boekaerts, 1993; Maehr & Midgley, 1996). This, of course, “requires considering how cultural and socio-economic variables (e.g., ethnic minority status) . . . may contribute to differing student perceptions of school climate” (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997, p. 77). Because behavior in a relationship “may be responsive to the characteristics of specific settings the task is to determine the extent of this specificity, taking into account both student characteristics and the demands of varied settings” (Trickett & Todd, 1972, p. 31). Alternatively, “the principle of interdependence calls attention to the context in which a behavior is embedded as a basis for understanding or changing it” (Trickett & Todd, 1972, p. 29). “The role of contexts cannot be ignored” (Appleton et al., 2008, p. 380).

Turning first to the larger “context beyond schooling,” we discover a variety of factors that shape and define interpersonal relationships between students and teachers, almost all of which fall into the larger category of “demographic variables” (Hayes et al., 1994, p. 6). The most discussed are race, ethnicity, cultural status, and economic status. The issue of matching or discrepant racial identity is routinely cited as an influence on teacher–student relationships in schools (Davis, 2003; Hayes et al., 1994). “On an individual level, matching may provide common ground, while mismatches may hamper the ability of students and teachers to connect” (Crosnoe et al., 2004, p. 63). Because “the development of social ties to institutional agents is [so] crucial to the social development and empowerment of ethnic minority children” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 15), that is, “that affective bonds with teachers have a greater academic impact on the categories of socially and economically disadvantaged youth” (Crosnoe et al., 2004, p. 32), these mismatches and their deleterious effects receive considerable scrutiny in the research (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Silverstein & Krate, 1975; Wentzel, 2002). In a similar fashion,

there is evidence that “because individuals have strong racial in-group preferences for interaction” (Crosnoe et al., 2004, p. 63), it has been shown that “the racial-ethnic composition of the student body can affect levels of teacher-bonding in schools” (p. 63).

Investigators also establish “that gender is an important correlate of teacher bonding and that male and female students of different racial-ethnic groups may experience different levels of and reactivity to, such bonding” (Crosnoe et al., 2004, p. 62). We know, for example, that in general there are significant “gender differences in the quality of children’s teacher-child relationships . . . [with] teachers reporting having significantly more closeness in their relationships with girls and significantly more conflictual relationships with boys” (Birch & Ladd, 1997, p. 68). Whatever the causes, these “gender differences may be particularly salient when considering the role of classroom context on relationship quality and consequences” (Davis, 2003, p. 224). Certainly worthy of note here is the knowledge “that relationships with teachers play a leading role in explaining the school troubles experienced by sexual minority adolescents” (Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001, p. 124). And it is important to point out here (and for other external conditions as well) that “the interplay of gender with demographic variables” (Kuperminc et al., 1997, p. 78) requires attention.

Other conditions largely external to the school also influence the development and meaningfulness of teacher–student relationships. Economic status fits here (Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998; Pianta, 1999). So too do the special needs of children (Kennedy, 2011)—“students with learning problems” (Wenz-Gross & Siperstein, 1998, p. 98), low-achieving students (Anderman, 2003; Eccles et al., 1993), other students placed at risk (Rak & Patterson, 1996), and other “low status children and youth” (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 6). We find here also the notion of the needs, experiences, and interests that students bring to school and thus to relationships with teachers (Maehr & Fyans, 1989; Roeser et al., 2000), along with an acknowledgment that “there is too little emphasis on the fact that children and adolescents bring very powerful socialization histories from outside the classroom to their own school experience” (Harter et al., 1997, p. 158). Finally, family and community conditions are routinely seen as important in shaping connections between young persons and their teachers (Ryan et al., 1994; Smetana & Bitz, 1996). For example, investigators have shown “that there are considerable individual differences among children in the same classrooms in terms of how they experienced their teachers, suggesting the possibility that children

may have prepotent schemata for such perceptions perhaps shaped by the home environment” (Ryan et al., 1994, p. 231). Pianta (1999, p. 70) more specifically reports that “child-mother relationships influence relationships with teachers.” In particular, as we introduced above, analysts routinely reveal how family markers such as working class background (Arnot et al., 2004; Farrell, 1990) and minority status (Ogbu, 1974) shape relationships. And Pianta (1999, p. 66) brings us back to the general power of family context when he informs us that a teacher’s style of relating to children that washes over all class members “may trigger a different response” in a child “depending on this child’s history of relationships with parents.”

When we turn the lens on “school” context, we discover another series of conditions allowing “successful interpersonal relationships [to] develop between students and teachers”—or not (Veaco & Brandon, 1986, p. 228). For example, Davis, (2003, p. 209) has established that “the quality of students’ relationships with teachers may reflect the interpersonal culture of classrooms and schools, as well as their opportunities to invest in alternative relationships.” We also know that the discipline or subject matter may influence student–teacher relationships (Hoge, Smit, & Hanson, 1990; McNeal, 1998). On a personal level, teacher feelings toward children matter, and it is well established that “teachers do seem to vary in their inclination and/or capacity to communicate favorable feelings” (Davidson & Lang, 1960, p. 114). The relationships the teachers have with some students influence those with others, particularly “students’ perceptions of how much the teacher ‘likes’ the other students in the class” (Davis, 2003, p. 219). In a similar manner, the nature of peer interactions in classrooms helps shape the viability and nature of teacher–student interactions (Davis, 2003).

Student age and level of schooling receive considerable attention in the chronicle of teacher–student relationships. A variable of central interest is the transitions youngsters make as they age (Akos, 2002; Graham et al., 1998), transitions that are fraught with “unique challenges” (Birch & Ladd, 1998, p. 944), a “variety of worries” (Akos, 2002, p. 344) and “stressors” (Akos, 2002, p. 340) that influence the formation and maintenance of productive relationships between teachers and students. In general, analysts have discovered these transitions to be “particularly trying” (Patterson, Beltyukova, Berman, & Francis, 2007, p. 126). They conclude that “school transitions have been associated with increases in emotional, academic, and behavioral difficulties, especially between elementary to middle school or junior high,

and again to high school” (Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004, p. 298): “Young adolescents experience rapid changes in their physical, emotional, and interpersonal development” (Kuperminc et al., 1977, p. 76) during these times. “Children value school subjects less as they increase in age [and] . . . developing task value is assumed to parallel cognitive decrements in achievement expectations and self-perceived competence” (Graham et al., 1998, p. 619). “Student perceptions of the quality of school life and feelings of belonging also plummet” (Booker, 2006, p. 2) as do “student motivation and attitudes toward school” (Akos, 2002, p. 340). “Specifically, researchers have documented declines in children’s perceived competence, perceived autonomy, perceptions of classroom learning context, and their endorsement of adaptive learning goals” (Davis, 2003, p. 216).

Equally critical is that the “organizational characteristics of schools undergo significant changes in these transition periods” (Smetana & Bitz, 1996, p. 1167). In many subjects, students are faced with “changing classroom environments” (Feldlaufer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1988, p. 150), changes that often come under strong criticism from scholars (Eccles et al., 1993). “Contextual transitions commonly include additional and unfamiliar students and school staff, and multiple sets of behavioral and classroom rules and expectations” (Akos, 2002, p. 339). These two sets of changes, or “two major transitions” (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 556) for the students in the organizations they attend, bring with them “increased academic demands and social challenges” (Wenz-Gross & Siperstein, 1998, p. 91) and “changes in their academic motivation and performance” (Davis, 2003, p. 216). These changes, in turn, have meaningful implications for student–teacher relationships (Nolen & Nicholls, 1993). We know, for example, that at these periods, relationships with teachers become “particularly important” (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989, p. 989) for students. We also know, however, that the opportunity to form connections becomes less visible to students. We learn also that there are “documented declines” (Murdock & Miller, 2003, p. 384) in teacher–student relationships during and after these transition periods (Davis, 2003; Eccles et al., 1993), what Oelsner, Lippold, and Greenberg (2001, p. 466) refer to as “declines in bonding.” Overall, then, the picture that develops is one of less positive teacher–student relationships (Feldlaufer et al., 1988) as students age and move through school transitions (Goodlad, 1984; Sizer, 1984).

Other analysts push us even more deeply into understanding about “a broad set of social contexts” (Connell & Wellborn, 1991,

p. 721) and student–teacher relationships (Pianta, 1999; Willms, 2000). Rodriguez (2000, p. 768), for example, surfaces the issue of “the differences between school codes and street codes” in personal connections. More concretely, Maehr and Midgley (1996) raise the issue of the multiplicity of cultures and the fact that the prevailing culture is often established by the dominant group, reinforcing the cautions of academics and practitioners about the role of student backgrounds in the student–teacher storyline (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Weis, 1990). “The variation among subgroups presents a possibly very important piece of information on the character of the school” (Maehr & Midgley, 1996, p. 80) and the texture and robustness of teacher–student relations.

In a similar fashion, this understanding helps us remember that we need to “focus on the overall configuration of the developmental needs early adolescents have and the social supports and opportunities adults and institutions provide” (Roeser et al., 2000, p. 465). It is more than teachers. It is “also across the broader cast of adults charged with helping them become full members of society” (Roeser et al., 2000, p. 465). Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 18) brings this message home forcefully when he reminds us “that environmental events and conditions outside any immediate setting containing the person have a profound influence on behavior and development within that setting.” So too do Crosnoe and team (2004, p. 63), who confirm that “whom individuals know, how well they know them, and how close they are to them is dependent, in part, on the larger institutions in which lives are lived.” Important also must be the “recognition that teachers are themselves embedded in social context above and beyond that of the classroom . . . , social contexts [that] facilitate or inhibit teachers’ own needs [for] relatedness” (Connell & Wellborn, 1991, p. 71) and the linkages they form with students.

The summative message is that the study and practice of teacher–student relationships is “an interpersonal phenomenon [and] therefore, benefits from understanding the intersection of the interpersonal and the institutional” (Crosnoe et al., 2004, p. 63) of persons and contexts. Explanations for student–teacher relationships begin with “the proposition that development never takes place in a vacuum; it is always embedded and expressed through behavior in a particular environmental context” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 27). Further, these relationships “are to be found in interactions between characteristics of people and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. x).