

# **THE AFFECT EFFECT**

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**A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10  
teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship  
influences academic achievement.**

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A dissertation presented to the Euro-Mediterranean Centre for Educational  
Research in the University of Malta for the degree of Master of Arts  
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ta' Malta

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## DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

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I, Nadia Mercieca, 285680M, declare that this dissertation which is titled “The Affect Effect: A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement” is my original work whereby all sourced material has been acknowledged. I confirm that it has not been presented in fulfilment of other course requirements at the University of Malta or any other University.

This work has been carried out under the guidance and supervision of Professor Carmel Cefai, who hereby certifies that the dissertation is ready for submission.

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Prof. Carmel Cefai

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Ms Nadia Mercieca

March 2020

## ABSTRACT

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### **The Affect Effect**

#### ***A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement.***

In Dewey's words, there is more to education than instruction (Dewey, 1938, as cited in William, 2017). Among the paths education takes towards academic success, the teacher-student relationship is highly regarded to be a valuable agent that may improve academic attainment. This comparative study seeks to understand the perceptions of teachers and students about how their relationship influences academic achievement. It adopts a social constructivist lens to study the perceptions of a sample of students and teachers in three secondary schools in Malta. Data was collected through focus groups with Year 10 students and through open-ended questionnaires with teachers. The thematic analysis approach led to three main areas: elements that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship, the extent of the impact of this relationship on academic achievement and ways to improve it. Teachers and students generally agreed that certain qualities, behaviours and strategies, serve to strengthen the teacher-student relationship, which in turn, may improve academic attainment. The findings also highlight that teachers wish to be supported by school management in order to dedicate time to build relationships with their students. The study makes recommendations to policymakers in education to include this resource in educational policies and frameworks, while indicating areas for further study about the teacher-student relationship and its impact on academic achievement.

*Key words:* teacher-student relationships; the role of affect in education; academic achievement; the achievement gap; social constructivism

*To my beautiful children, Nina and Thomas.*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY .....	II
ABSTRACT .....	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	V
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	VI
LIST OF TABLES .....	VIII
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS .....	IX
<b>CHAPTER 1   AN INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1   INTRODUCTION .....	2
1.2   STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM .....	3
1.3   RATIONALE OF THE STUDY .....	6
1.4   RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	10
1.5   DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS.....	11
1.6   SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY.....	12
1.7   OUTLINE OF THE STUDY .....	13
1.8   CONCLUSION.....	13
<b>CHAPTER 2   A LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>15</b>
2.1   INTRODUCTION .....	16
2.2   THE MALTESE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT.....	18
2.3   ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP .....	23
2.4   ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP.....	25
2.4.1   <i>A social constructivist lens</i> .....	25
2.4.2   <i>Lev Vygotsky and the zone of proximal development</i> .....	29
2.4.2.a   The zone of proximal development .....	30
2.4.2.b   The affective dimension of the zone of proximal development .....	31
2.5   THE FORMATION OF THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP.....	34
2.6   PERSPECTIVES ON THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT.....	36
2.7   THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP IN SECONDARY SCHOOL .....	41
2.8   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS RELATED TO THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP .....	44
2.8.1   <i>Self-determination theory</i> .....	44
2.8.2   <i>Developmental-systems theory</i> .....	46
2.9   THE ROLE OF TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS IN THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP.....	51
2.9.1   <i>Qualities of skill as well as competence important for the teacher-student relationship</i> .....	51
2.9.2   <i>The teacher-student relationship and behaviour management</i> .....	52
2.9.3   <i>The role of the teacher’s personality in the teacher-student relationship</i> .....	55
2.10   THE ROLE OF STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS IN THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP .....	57
2.11   SCHOOL PRACTICES AND THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP .....	59
2.12   EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS VIS-À-VIS THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP .....	62
2.13   EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP.....	66
2.14   CONCLUSION.....	70
<b>CHAPTER 3   THE METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>71</b>
3.1   INTRODUCTION .....	72
3.2   CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE RESEARCH PROJECT .....	72
3.3   PILOTING THE METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION .....	75
3.3.1   <i>Setting and participant selection of the pilot project</i> .....	76

3.3.2	<i>Feedback obtained from the pilot study</i> .....	77
3.3.2.a	Piloting the selection process .....	78
3.3.2.b	Piloting the instruments of data collection .....	79
3.4	SETTING AND PARTICIPANT SELECTION IN THE STUDY.....	80
3.5	METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION.....	84
3.5.1	<i>The focus groups</i> .....	86
3.5.2	<i>The email interview: An open-ended questionnaire</i> .....	92
3.6	DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION .....	95
3.6.1	<i>Thematic analysis</i> .....	96
3.6.2	<i>Interpretation of data</i> .....	99
3.7	ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	99
3.8	CONCLUSION .....	102
<b>CHAPTER 4  </b>	<b>RESULTS.....</b>	<b>103</b>
4.1	INTRODUCTION .....	104
4.2	PRESENTATION OF RESULTS FROM THE STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS.....	104
4.2.1	<i>Elements that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship – Teacher qualities, behaviours and strategies</i> .....	105
4.2.1.a	The empathic teacher .....	106
4.2.1.b	The outgoing and enthusiastic teacher .....	107
4.2.1.c	The friendly teacher .....	109
4.2.1.d	The caring teacher .....	110
4.2.1.e	The funny teacher .....	112
4.2.1.f	Flexible classroom management.....	113
4.2.2	<i>Academic success and the teacher-student relationship and its importance for motivation, engagement and achievement</i> .....	115
4.2.2.a	The teacher-student relationship is highly important for motivation, engagement and achievement .....	115
4.2.2.b	The teacher-student relationship is important but there are other things which matter too .....	117
4.2.3	<i>Improving the teacher-student relationship: The non-formal aspect</i> .....	119
4.2.3.a	Live-in activities.....	119
4.2.3.b	Sports-related activities .....	120
4.2.3.c	Free lessons.....	121
4.2.3.d	School educational visits .....	121
4.2.4	<i>Improving the teacher-student relationship: The considerate and flexible teacher</i> .....	122
4.3	PRESENTATION OF RESULTS FROM THE TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRES .....	123
4.3.1	<i>Elements that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship: Teacher qualities, behaviours and strategies</i> .....	124
4.3.1.a	The caring and empathic teacher.....	124
4.3.1.b	The versatile and efficient teacher.....	126
4.3.1.c	The teacher with a sense of humour who does not cross boundaries.....	126
4.3.1.d	The fair and consistent teacher .....	127
4.3.1.e	The inclusive teacher .....	128
4.3.2	<i>Elements that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship: Student behaviour</i> .....	129
4.3.3	<i>Academic success, the teacher-student relationship, and its importance for motivation, engagement and achievement</i> .....	130
4.3.3.a	The teacher-student relationship is highly important for motivation, engagement and achievement .....	131
4.3.3.b	The teacher-student relationship helps but other factors matter too.....	133
4.3.4	<i>Improving the teacher-student relationship: The non-formal setting</i> .....	134
4.3.5	<i>Improving the teacher-student relationship: Resources, support and opportunities to fulfil expectations</i> .....	136
4.3.5.a	Adequate time .....	136
4.3.5.b	Teacher training .....	137
4.3.5.c	Opportunities not appraisal .....	138
4.4	CONCLUSION .....	140

<b>CHAPTER 5   DISCUSSION</b> .....	<b>141</b>
5.1   INTRODUCTION .....	142
5.2   QUALITIES, BEHAVIOURS AND STRATEGIES: THE ELEMENTS WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO A POSITIVE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP .....	142
5.2.1   <i>A caring and empathic approach in the teacher-student relationship</i> .....	143
5.2.2   <i>The outgoing and enthusiastic teacher, the versatile and efficient teacher, or both?</i> .....	146
5.2.3   <i>The firm but friendly teacher</i> .....	148
5.2.4   <i>The inclusive teacher</i> .....	150
5.2.5   <i>Classroom management</i> .....	150
5.2.6   <i>A two-way relationship</i> .....	154
5.3   TO WHAT EXTENT DOES THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP IMPACT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT? .....	155
5.4   THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NON-FORMAL ASPECT IN THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP .....	157
5.5   "I HAVE A LIFE BEYOND THE SCHOOL WALLS," SAYS THE STUDENT .....	159
5.6   "I NEED RESOURCES, SUPPORT AND OPPORTUNITIES," SAYS THE TEACHER .....	160
5.7   CONCLUSION .....	164
<b>CHAPTER 6   CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>166</b>
6.1   INTRODUCTION .....	167
6.2   OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY .....	168
6.3   SUMMARY OF THE OUTCOMES OF THE STUDY .....	170
6.3.1   <i>The qualities, behaviours and strategies that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship</i> .....	170
6.3.2   <i>Perceptions on the importance of the teacher-student relationship on academic achievement</i> 171	
6.3.3   <i>Improving the teacher-student relationship</i> .....	172
6.4   IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY .....	172
6.5   LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY .....	177
6.6   RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH .....	181
6.7   CONCLUDING REMARKS .....	183
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>185</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>197</b>
APPENDIX 1   LETTERS OF CONSENT AND ASSENT .....	198
APPENDIX 2   TOOLS OF DATA COLLECTION .....	216

## LIST OF TABLES

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Table 1   Organisation of data from thematic coding analysis – Focus groups .....	105
Table 2   Organisation of data from thematic coding analysis – Teacher email interviews .....	123

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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DQSE	Department for Quality and Standards in Education
EU	European Union
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TSR	teacher-student relationship
ZPD	zone of proximal development

# **CHAPTER 1 | AN INTRODUCTION**

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## 1.1 | Introduction

Education can be viewed as having a basic purpose: to enhance the transfer of knowledge and skills to students, resulting in new forms of learning. What takes place in schools has always intrigued researchers, and within the school walls, learning and the variables which shape it, have been the focus of many research endeavours around the world (Carnoy, 2001). Learning takes various paths and students attend school and leave after several years, to move on with their lives. Within this timeframe, they learn through various media with a common aim of achieving higher skills and aptitudes. Academic success has often been understood as heavily dependent on instruction and delivery of core content knowledge (Caballero, 2010).

Schooling is often characterised by standardised tests, league tables, class composition, school premises, budgeting, as well as other logistical facets, with yearly academic progress often at the core of numerous scholastic systems. In the past decades, the educational landscape has also been shaped by international tests such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies (Carnoy, 2001).

As a result of the above, educational policy actors as well as those who enact policy dedicate a lot of their time to stimulate academic growth in their pupils; growth that is beneficial, sustainable and which simultaneously serves to narrow the achievement gap. Over the past years, various studies undertaken locally and abroad have focused on education in this regard, concentrating on educational achievement and outcomes of schooling (Kyriakides, Georgiou, Creemer, Panayiotou & Reynolds, 2017) to improve standards through reforms in education (Braun, Maguire & Ball, 2010). Comparison in educational systems worldwide focus on making meaningful comparisons of pupil scores and why students in one nation perform

better than in others, followed by reforms in educational policy to ameliorate educational systems (Carnoy, 2001). Central to these reforms are ways of creating opportunities for learning either through the adaptation of educational frameworks that are already in place or else to transform access to education through different modes of learning (Vongalis-Macrow, 2010). In overcoming difficulties with education and achievement, the authors argue that that these can be effectively addressed through a systemic approach which seeks to solve problems in education, while introducing new knowledge and also increase possible productivity in terms of learning.

## **1.2 | Statement of the problem**

In assessing the difficulties that countries face in their educational systems in order to ameliorate the prognosis of educational attainment, Vongalis-Macrow (2010) states that this is often carried out through recurrent measuring and testing. This relates to the idea that academic success is highly reliant on effective instruction and delivery of core content (Caballero, 2010). However, several other studies show that these strategies might not be the only pathway towards more effective educational systems and, as several authors suggest, focusing on building relationships among students and teachers may also yield positive results in academic achievement (Eschemann, 1991; Whitaker, 2004; Pianta & Hamre, 2001; Marzano, 2003; Pianta, 2016). The premise for this kind of reasoning lies in the understanding that relatedness with an environment may have a tremendous impact on an individual's response to that environment, a notion that garners relevance when one considers the basic human need to form relations that are interpersonal (McHugh, Horner, Colditz and Wallace, 2013).

In schools, this basic need is present still and teachers may act as social agents and develop a sense of caring between student and teacher that is reciprocal. Research shows that when this basic need is met, student motivation increases and higher academic outcomes ensue (Roorda, Koomen, Split and Oort 2011). Consequently, students start to understand that their relationships with their teachers may in fact have an impact on their learning (McHugh et al., 2013). In this regard, a positive student-teacher relationship may have a direct impact on academic achievement for years to come (Pianta & Hamre, 2006); yet, as these authors claim, this aspect is often not afforded the attention it warrants.

As a professional educator, I am in constant contact with students in the upper grades of compulsory school in Malta and I perceive the relationship I have with my students as central to the learning process. Being a teacher in a secondary school puts me at the forefront in experiencing the reality of how such relationships matter. I currently teach English in the upper two grades in a secondary school in Malta, Grade 10 and Grade 11. Furthermore, I have a head-of-year role of Grade 11 at the school where I teach, whereby my duties entail integrating the daily academic, social and emotional needs of students. In this respect, I exercise empathy, care, understanding and behaviour management all throughout the scholastic year. In this way, I work very closely with students and do not only get to know them as pupils but also as individuals with a whole baggage of experiences.

Before, when the thought of becoming a teacher was still an ambition in a closet, I watched movies such as “To Sir, with Love” (1967) and “Dangerous Minds” (1995), which dramatise and romanticise a teacher’s positive relational experience with rowdy, misbehaved students and which ultimately, leads to a fruitful educational experience for them. Becoming a teacher made me realise that the idea behind these movies is not entirely a fictitious circumstance but

could well rather be a reality. Personally, as a teacher, I dedicate a lot of attention to various ways of getting along with students, not for the sake of it, but rather as my way of getting through to them and engaging with them in a way that shows them that I truly care. I share the occasional joke in class, I keep abreast with things they are interested in and involve myself in extra-curricular activities whenever possible. I truly feel that when I invest in a positive relationship, respect becomes reciprocal, at least, most of the time, and students are more eager for my lessons or for lessons of teachers who have a similar approach, than for lessons of others. Daily, I look at colleagues struggle with the same students who behave in a totally different way when they are in my class. I often notice that students seem to be more inclined to study and follow lessons with teachers whose attitude at school leans toward a positive disposition not only within the classroom walls but also in other non-academic activities. On the other hand, teachers who have a negative and stringent attitude at school encounter more issues of misbehaviour and lack of motivation from their students.

On reading further about this hypothetical statement, I could see that literature seems to be in line with my intuitions. Besides efforts on a personal level to address the affective aspect of teaching and learning, there have been attempts on a national level to address this domain. Some educational measures that have been adopted along the years, such as the introduction of Personal and Social Development (now referred to as Personal, Social and Career Development), were meant to achieve the goal of giving schools a humanistic aspect with the aim of increasing motivation (Sultana, 1997). Darmanin (1990, as cited in Sultana 1997) explained that such measures were means to respond to perceived student needs. Furthermore, reference to the social aspect of teaching is also made in the Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024, which is a national policy document. The Strategy opens a door to addressing the social dimension of teaching through the teacher-student relationship.

In these documents and policy, one could argue that as mentioned by Hughes (2012), the social and emotional dimensions are locally being incorporated into the curriculum to help increase student achievement.

Yet, in my opinion and based on personal experience in the field, it seems that not all parties involved in the teaching and learning process are aware of the importance of such a relationship. In my view, there may be times when the teacher-student relationship is sidelined and its fruit does not yield the positive outcome it can potentially generate in the students' educational paths. Having said this, prior to engaging in this study, mine was only a personal view and romanticising the whole thought was a sentimental feeling I had had for a long number of teaching years without ever placing the notion in any theoretical framework or monitor its practice.

Following this personal belief, I decided to embark on a research journey whereby I investigate whether this is merely a perception which I have or whether others share my views. Furthermore, results from the study, should they support my ideas, may contribute to the important body of research that there is about the topic and link present findings to existing research. Lastly, considering the findings from this project, action-oriented suggestions addressed to national and school-level policy actors will be offered in order to give the quality and value that the teacher-student relationship deserves.

### **1.3 | Rationale of the study**

The study seeks to compare perceptions of teachers and students about the teacher-student relationship and how it may influence academic achievement. The teacher-student

relationship (TSR) refers to the interaction between students and teachers at school to which interpersonal meaning is attached (Wubbels, Brekelmans, den Brok, Levy, Mainbard & Tartwik, 2014). It is not restricted to the academic relationship related to the instructional element of schooling only but may also extend to interactions during break, between classes or during extra-curricular activities related to the school. The definition adopted here extends to that referred to by Kelley, Berscheid and Christensen (1983), as one that is characterised by an interdependence which is strong, frequent, and diverse, lasting over a considerable period.

As a qualitative, comparative researcher, I am interested in the perceptions of the teachers and the students since they are the main stakeholders in the teacher-student relationship. I am interested in gaining access to their experience when interacting with each other in their respective roles in order to understand the meaning and implications of the relationship (Munhall, 2012). As a comparative researcher, I will delve into these two subjective perceptions, possibly similar or in disparity, which occur in the same setting, namely at school. The study will delve into how the teacher-student relationship may be perceived to be an influencing factor in academic attainment, through the eyes of both students and teachers, as the central participants in classroom interactions. As such, they have strong views regarding what effectively constitutes a student and teaching relationship and how this may influence teaching and learning (Egeberg & McConney, 2018).

As Woolfolk Hoy and Weinstein (2006, as cited in Egeberg et al., 2018) assert, it would be to the detriment of teaching and teacher education if the voices of these stakeholders were to be ignored. In addition, Sointu, Savolainen, Lappalainen and Lambert (2017) quote Tsai and Cheney (2012) who assert that studies which investigate social, behavioural or academic adjustment cannot be carried out using one informant only, namely the teachers, since this

would cause the findings to be biased. They suggest that the use of multiple informants so that the data gathered would be more objective in terms of teachers' and students' perspectives.

Masko (2018) maintains that in literature about education, the voice of the students is often left out, especially when the topic of discussion centres around reforms at school and improvement, quoting research by Burke, Collier and McKenna (2014) and Mitra (2003). Masko also refers to Burke (2014) when claiming that student engagement in formulating decisions and policies related to schooling is very often missing. Hence, this study will adopt the comparative approach in that it will not only include perceptions of teachers related to the research questions but it will also seek to explore perceptions of students in order to form a clearer picture of how the teacher-student relationship impacts academic achievement.

As a teacher and a mother, I felt that students being given a voice is important especially when the objective in question may impact their academic path, as suggested above by Masko (2018). Bassett, Beagan and Ristovski-Slijepcevic (2008) assert that since adolescents are often perceived to lack the cognitive abilities to make decisions, it has been the general approach to treat them as passive subjects when conducting research. Therefore, as suggested by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in this study, I felt it was important that students will be listened to with the aim that their voice is subsequently used to lead to whole school improvement (2006, as cited in Engeberg, 2018).

The reason why secondary schools were chosen is because as the principal investigator, my interest lies within this sector. Furthermore, several studies have been conducted in primary schools, with very little being researched in the upper years of compulsory education (Pianta & Hamre, 2006; Darmanin, 2018). Given that adolescents are highly emotional and social

beings (Allen, Gregory, Mikami, Lun, Pianta & Hamre, 2013), the recognition of the teacher-student relationship assumes paramount importance in secondary schools. As Eschenmann (1991) posited, adolescent motivation to learn can be amplified if teachers take the time to build relationships, especially at a time when, in the midst of it all, students in these years of school will sit for important examinations that determine their prospective career pathways.

The study will adopt a comparative analysis between the perceptions of teachers and those of students regarding this relationship and its perceived impact on student achievement. The comparative dimension will extend the qualities of a teacher which may in fact facilitate the students' educational path, as perceived by both teachers and students. Bray, Adamson and Mason (2014) and Carnoy, Louzano, Khavenson and Carnuaba (2017) posit that even though comparative education focuses primarily on studying education across different countries, it is still very important to compare educational practices intra-nationally. The latter, they say, focus on educational issues which provide political reason and justification. Furthermore, Carnoy et al. mention how methodologically speaking, intra-national comparative studies make it easier to identify educational policies that are effective.

Hence, for the purpose of this study, the comparative dimension will serve to provide a framework whereby new knowledge from perceptions of different participants will act as a source for developing ideologies that may serve to inform policymakers in education, regarding what works in education and what does not (Carnoy, 2001). In other words, the outcomes of the investigation seek to compare perceptions of teachers and students with the aim of shedding light on the implications of formally addressing the teacher-student relationship as a means to reduce the achievement gap in Maltese secondary schools.

## **1.4 | Research questions**

Considering the above, the research questions seek to explore the teacher and student relationship as one of the means to reduce the achievement gap in the later years of formal schooling in Malta. At the initial stage of the research project, three research questions are being postulated:

- 1. *What factors do teachers and students perceive as contributing to developing a positive teacher-student relationship in the latter years of secondary school?***
  - a) What qualities of a teacher do students and teachers perceive to be essential to a learning environment?*
  - b) What student and teacher qualities and practices are inductive of a positive teacher-student relationship?*
  - c) What can be implemented to improve the teacher-student relationship?*
  
- 2. *What do students and teachers think about the impact of their relationships on the students' academic success in the latter years of secondary school?***
  - a) How do teachers and students look at the teacher-student relationship as an influence on the academic success of students?*
  - b) What value, if any, is attributed to the teacher-student relationship in the latter years of secondary school?*
  
- 3. *How do the above perceptions of teachers and student compare or contrast in terms of the role that the teacher-student relationship plays in increasing students' academic engagement and attainment in the latter years of secondary school?***

My hypothesis outlines that if teachers and students have a positive relationship within the school walls, not necessarily related to academic input, student motivation to learn is perceived to increase. This will eventually result in more interest in the material being taught. Henceforth, delving into the views of teachers and students will provide a clear picture of whether this praxis is present in secondary schools in Malta and whether the teacher-student relationship is being given the limelight it deserves.

### **1.5 | Definition of key terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined and they will serve as guidelines throughout the research project.

*Academic achievement* may be understood to incorporate attainments and achievements that students need to have reached as part of compulsory education (Ward, Stoker & Murray-Ward, 1996).

The *achievement gap* is defined as the lagging in academic performance of a group of pupils when compared to another (Langham, 2009).

The *teacher-student relationship* will be understood “as the generalized interpersonal meaning students and teachers attach to their interactions with each other” (Wubbels et al., 2014, p. 364). It is seen to be a form of interdependence which is strong, frequent, and diverse, lasting over a considerable period (Kelley et al., 1983).

The *latter years of secondary education* refer to Year 10 and Year 11, which are the last years of compulsory education in Malta, when students are between 14 and 16 years old.

*Perceptions*, in this study, refer to a way of understanding reality and experience in order to discern behaviours or actions, including opinions, judgments, understanding of a situation, meaning of an experience and how a person responds to it. Understanding these perceptions involves comprehending the meaning of the experience under investigation for the individual or social group (Munhall, 2012).

## **1.6 | Significance of the study**

The findings of the study will shed light into how the teacher-student relationship is viewed in Malta in the latter years of compulsory schooling. The information it will yield will add to the pool of current literature about the topic, which though prevalently addressed in foreign settings, is generally lacking in Malta. Having teachers and students share their ideas and experiences about the matter will provide insight into the importance of this tool as a way to improve academic achievement and will also serve as an eye opener to policy actors who draft policy heavily reliant on instruction and delivery of core content. These may not be the only pathways towards a successful educational system, but as I see it, the affective aspect of teaching and learning may be generally overlooked in the formal drafting of policies and frameworks. Finally, the data that will be generated may enable teachers to dedicate greater importance and assign more value to this element of student accomplishments. Hence, it will hopefully encourage teachers be more attentive to building positive relationships with their students not only as a subject teacher, but also beyond the scope of syllabi and curricula.

## **1.7 | Outline of the study**

This study set to explore the teacher-student relationship and how this impacts academic achievement in the secondary school years. It will be presented in six chapters, namely the introduction, the literature review, the methodology, the results, the discussion and lastly, the conclusion. The research questions set have been outlined in the introductory chapter as was the rationale and the significance of this study. Following the introductory chapter, a literature review will serve to provide a thorough portrayal of existent literature about the topic. A review of the Maltese educational context will be provided to help the reader base the findings in the national scheme of education. Secondly, the literature review will focus on works by Lev Vygotsky and the theory of social constructivism, followed by literature about the importance of the teacher-student relationship and academic achievement. The third chapter provides an outline of the methodology employed in the study, wherein detailed descriptions are provided with respect to the methods of data collection, the analytic approach adopted to analyse the findings as well as ethical considerations. In the fourth chapter are presented the results obtained from the different methods of collecting data. This is followed by the discussion chapter where the findings will be interpreted. Lastly, a concluding chapter will seek to outline the most salient points of the study. It will also comprise of the implications of the study, its limitations as well as recommendations for future research.

## **1.8 | Conclusion**

This introductory chapter put forward the presenting problem and outlined the rationale of the study, delving into the reasons why the investigation will take place. It sought to present the personal views of the researcher as well as to posit the aim of the study and the subsequent

research questions. Furthermore, the key terms were defined in order to facilitate comprehension from here on and the significance of the study was also put forward.

In the next chapter, the first part of the literature review will be presented. A detailed account of the local educational system in Malta will be outlined, delving into the different systems of education. Academic achievement and the role of the teacher-student relationship will be addressed as will educational interventions and policy in relation to the research questions.

## **CHAPTER 2 | A LITERATURE REVIEW**

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## 2.1 | Introduction

It is a known fact that the pathway to academic success has been widely investigated by those interested in the educational field for a long time (Doleck & Lajoie, 2018; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Hwang, Lim, & Ha, 2017; Mattern & Shaw, 2010; as cited in Lai Lam & Zhou, 2019). It is widely known that for many years, formal education to reach high academic gains centred around the teacher and was driven by a curriculum of which objectives need to be met through direct instruction (Kumar, 2006). Bugge and Wikan (2014) assert that in terms of academic progress, student variables including time spent studying and student ability have been looked at as factors which play a role in academic performance. The teacher has been viewed as that person with knowledge who is expected to spread what he or she knows among the students. To plan for and predict academic success, cognitive ability has been widely used for a long time as the main tool to get there (Lai Lam & Zhou, 2019). In this respect, if students translates what they have learnt into good results in tests and examinations, the teaching process would have reached its aims (ibid.).

Cefai and Cavioni (2016) maintain that academic learning and performance have become a “benchmark by which the quality of education is evaluated” (p. 1) and this places emphasis on the cognitive aspects of education, leaving little opportunity for non-cognitive aspects to play their part. Yet, back in 1938, John Dewey asserted that there is more than instruction to education (Dewey, 1938, as cited in Williams, 2017). He commented on how teachers must use relational experience with their students since they are the agents through which learning occurs. In this regard, he tapped on the relationship between teachers and students as a social human experience which may lead to effective learning. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vygotsky proposed his notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) within a

social constructivist dimension. In 1983, Minuchin, Shapiro and Weinstein were interested in the social context of education whereby they investigated the nature and the impact of the relationship between students and teachers (as cited in Davis, 2003).

Kumar (2006) notes that traditional notions of learning have continued to be revisited over the years and the learning process has started to incorporate ways how to motivate students to find delight in learning and acquiring knowledge while at the same improving academic attainment. Cefai and Cavioni (2016) emphasize that education has a dual role: the cognitive as well as the socio-emotional, since arguably, at the end, happy students will be more productive and will succeed more. Kell, Lubinski and Benbow (2013, as cited in Moore, 2019), while recognizing academic achievement as a result of formal education, also note that research in the field has increasingly started to focus on social and emotional factors in the life of students as determinants of a more positive learning outcome.

In view of the above, academic learning and socio-emotional learning are not exclusive of each other but rather, they mutually support each other (Cefai and Cavioni, 2016). Liew (2012, as cited in Sointu et al., 2017) also highlights this affirmation stating that it is important to view the behavioural, emotional and cognitive processes as complementary of each other rather than as separate factors in teaching and learning. Students must be looked at in their entirety in order to achieve the ultimate goal of education. Moore (2019) mentions how there is little doubt that academic achievement plays a very important role in a student's life but notes how, as outlined above, nowadays researchers and policymakers are taking into consideration social and emotional factors when addressing the well-being of students. Moore goes on to mention that the social and emotional aspects of teaching and learning have

become so important that they have been recently incorporated in the tests carried out by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) such as PISA.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a literature review which will serve as a foundation for the present study and to present an array of research on how teacher-student relationships may have an influence on achievement. It will first outline the local educational landscape followed by literature that addresses the concept of the achievement gap. Following that, the literature review will review the conceptual design which is adopted in the study amalgamated with theories of Lev Vygotsky. Finally, the teacher-student relationship will be discussed in terms of its significance to the research questions posed as well as in terms of its impact vis-à-vis policies in education.

## **2.2 | The Maltese educational context**

Since the study takes place in Maltese secondary schools, it is important to provide the reader with background information about the local education system since this will serve to put the results in context.

In Malta, the Ministry of Education and Employment is responsible for the educational system in the country, ensuring that all students locally receive a quality education. The tripartite system of state, church and independent schools comprises an educational system guided by policies and frameworks (Mifsud, 2017), all of which seek to address various educational milestones. The Ministry of Education and Employment is empowered to monitor the functioning of all schools within the sectors, hence assuming responsibility for the overall educational system. Education is compulsory and free from early childhood through to tertiary

education in the institutions governed by the state. Church schools are also subsidised by the state, with no tuition fees charged for students attending such schools. On the other hand, parents pay fees and receive tax rebates on the amounts paid for students who attend independent schools.

Education policy is marked by two main premises, equity as well as quality, a commitment that is evident in policies which foster an inclusive environment in schools at all levels of education (Eurydice, 2019). At present, the Ministry of Education and Employment lists several policies, strategies and reports in its 'Policy Documentation' section. It splits them into two categories, 'Education for All' and 'National Frameworks'.

When in 1987, the Nationalist party was elected to government, the country saw a shift towards neo-liberal ways of governing, which led to a market that was more open to foreign trade and investment (Darmanin, 2002). This reflected a shift in education since, as stated by Borg and Mayo (2005), there is an intimate link between the provision of education and the labour market. Hence, a series of educational reforms and formulation of new policies ensued.

In 2004, Malta joined the European Union (EU) in response to global political pressure (ibid.). Hence, strategies set in motion by the EU now also applied to Malta. One such strategy is the Europe 2020 strategy, which is aimed at the growth and increase of jobs between 2010 and 2020 (European Commission, 2010). This strategy impacts the field of education locally in that it clearly states that improvement in education is related to employability. It outlines how, in EU countries, employment needs to be at 75 per cent for people aged between 20 and 64. The strategy further outlines that the rate of school leavers needs to be below 10 per cent and that a minimum of 40 per cent of persons between the age

of 30 and 40 would need to have completed higher education. Following this defining moment for the country, policy drafting and enactment had to be at par with the agenda of the EU and as Mifsud (2017) states, Malta's educational system has undergone major reforms, all geared at increasing academic attainment.

In 2005, a college system was established whereby an element of decentralisation was introduced. State schools are split into primary, middle and secondary schools and a lot of church and independent schools follow the same pattern. The Department for Quality and Standards in Education (DQSE) within the Ministry regulates all schools throughout the eleven years of compulsory schooling between age 5 and age 16. At the end of secondary school, all students are encouraged to sit for the Secondary Education Certificate examination, which allows students, if they so choose, to proceed to post-secondary schooling (ibid.).

Several policy documents in the field of education were drafted and implemented since then. These came about since, as the Minister for Education and Employment, the Hon. Evarist Bartolo (2014) put it, results from international studies and from the report issued by the European Commission in 2014, depicted a worrying picture of the local situation. This was so since the Maltese economy needed to create jobs but at the same time, have at its disposition a workforce of skilled workers at the local level that could assume such employment. Further to this, the Minister for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties, the Hon. Dr Helena Dalli (2014) claimed that the government had an obligation to encapsulate diversity, inclusion and equal opportunities in its educational framework. Hence, here one may draw comparisons to what Bacchi (2009, as cited in Mifsud, 2017) posits in that policy is formulated by looking at the "problematization of an existing phenomenon" (p.22). In the local context, as Mifsud (2017) puts it, this phenomenon would be the unacceptably high

number of low achievers in international studies, and coming up with a solution to address that problem; hence the EU2020 target to diminish this percentage of students to less than 15 per cent.

One important milestone for academic achievement was the implementation of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) in 2012, which retained the aims of the National Minimum Curriculum of 2000 and proposed educational entitlement to students in eight learning areas, at par with the Competences Framework of the EU. The NCF addressed gaps in learning which have led to a drop in academic achievement over the years with a vision for lifelong learning. It also proposed a Learning Outcomes Framework, which sought to free schools from “centrally-imposed knowledge-centric syllabi” in order to “better address the learning needs of students” (LOF, 2014).

Besides the ‘Learning Outcomes Framework’, the Ministry for Education and Employment also issued a series of other documents that target the social and emotional aspect of schooling. These documents indicate that the caring aspect is also important aside from the instructional and academic aspects that other policies target. These namely include the ‘Respect for All Framework’ (2014) as well as the more recently issued ‘National Inclusive Framework’ (2019). Both these documents emphasise the importance that learners must be respected and supported to overcome obstacles in learning through the provision of learning opportunities which are founded in the students’ strengths and interests, while at the same time, ensuring that students are respected and encouraged to play an active role in their learning path.

Mifsud (2017) describes these strategies and frameworks as landmarks in compulsory education in Malta. In a sense, this can be viewed as an instance of “incrementalism” of policy as proposed by Taylor, Henry, Lingard and Rizvi (1997, as cited in Mifsud, 2017), whereby the policy is an extension of a reform process which has started gradually in earlier years and did not take place suddenly. Since the nineties, major policy documents have been enacted including the ‘National Minimum Curriculum’ (1999). These documents have then led to another important document, ‘For All Children to Succeed’ (Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment, 2005). Later in 2009, a review of the National Minimum Curriculum led to the NCF in 2012. The Framework for the Education Strategy for Malta 2014-2024 was a strategy that followed, together with others, namely the ‘Learning Outcomes Framework’ and ‘My Journey’ (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014). Therefore, the idea of this incremental result of policies, which is outlined in Mifsud (2017), from previous ones, can be identified as a result of an attempt at improving Malta’s performance in education.

Despite these policy initiatives and a higher amount of national investment than other countries in the EU, local results have not met expectations. The Education and Training Monitor Report (2019) issued by the European Commission shows that in 2018, Malta still had 17.5 per cent of early school leavers compared to the 10.6 per cent average in the EU. Another result that supports this sense of underachievement when compared to the EU average was related to tertiary educational attainment. Malta scored at 34.2 per cent whereas the EU average was 40.7 per cent. The proportion of 15-year-old students who were underachieving in reading, mathematics and science was also significantly lower than in other EU countries. The report itself affirms that as a country, Malta invests significantly in education, more than most countries in the EU, but as the figures show, despite a steady improvement over the 2014 report, concerns over the rate of early school leavers and tertiary

educational attainment persist. In so far as these figures show, Malta's National Lifelong Strategy refers to raising achievement by 2025/26 to a higher percentage of student participation in further and higher education, to improve student academic achievement in any five subjects at SEC level, augment the rate of students who obtain the School Leaving Certificate and Profile, better student performance in international tests and decrease the amount of early school leavers. All in all, these projections are all aimed at reducing the achievement gap and ameliorating educational attainment in Malta within the next few years.

### **2.3 | Academic achievement and the achievement gap**

Cachia, Lynam and Stock (2018) posit that academic achievement and success are strongly associated with attainment in summative assessments which are stipulated in learning outcomes. Furthermore, they assert that besides the attainment of assessment grades, it also incorporates the students' goal of securing a profession when they grow older. This affirmation by Cachia et al. (2018) is reflected in the outcomes and outputs listed in the NCF (2012). The NCF establishes that in the primary and secondary years of school, education in Malta should lead to the following outcomes: 1) learners successfully develop their full potential as lifelong learners; 2) learners become capable of sustaining their chances in the world of work; and lastly, 3) learners becomes engaged citizens able to secure social justice in a constantly changing world (p. 40-41). Yet, quoting Mihaela (2015), Cachia et al. maintain that in order to achieve the goals of education as highlighted above, academic achievement has to be viewed as the result of students and teacher factors, not only in terms of the intellectual dimension but also in terms of other emotional and psychological factors. The NCF (2012) in Malta also recognises this by addressing such factors as an important element to a student-centred approach.

In 2017, Minister Bartolo commented that despite years of educational reform in Malta, as outlined above, the country was still among the lowest achieving in international test scores. His comment reflects that achievement gap assumes an important role in the education of a country, including Malta. Langham (2009) defines the achievement gap as “the lagging academic performance of one group of students when compared to another” (p.1). While she asserts that this is often associated with scores obtained by minority groups or socially disadvantaged and low-income groups, it can be generalised to refer to wider international measures of educational achievement. In relation to this, according to results obtained in the 2018 international studies and as referred earlier, Malta scored significantly lower than other EU member states in all three areas, namely reading, science and mathematics (European Commission, 2019).

Locally, as mentioned in the previous section, several reforms have taken place over the past decade all of which are aimed at improving educational outcomes. In 2014, a ten-year Framework for the Educational Strategy for Malta was launched by the Ministry of Education and Employment. In it, the achievement gap is specifically targeted and stated in the document is that one of the aims of this ten-year framework is to “reduce the gaps in educational outcomes...and increase student achievement” (p.3). Yet, in 2018, Borg maintained that findings from multiple sources have indicated that locally, the country was still suffering from what he refers to as a ‘serious achievement gap’ which must be attended to as soon as possible. He relates that in Malta, the difference in academic achievement is significant between students from a high socio-economic background and those coming from a low socio-economic background. A further variable is parental cultural capital, whereby maternal tertiary education was positively associated with a higher chance of access to higher education.

In view of this ‘serious achievement gap’ (Borg, 2018) that is ever present, additional examination of current contexts of learning need to be revisited and considered (Davis, 2003), one of which is the recognition that the teacher-student relationship is a form of social interaction which takes place at school (Davis, 2003; Marzano, 2003; Pianta & Hamre, 2006; Pianta, 2016).

## **2.4 | Academic achievement and the teacher-student relationship**

In 1997, Pianta (as cited in Davis, 2003) maintained that it had long been recognised that the teacher-student relationship has ‘affordance value’ in that the relational experience lays out itself as a resource to support, not only the child’s social and emotional development but also his or her intellectual abilities. Literature, ranging back decades, highlights Dewey’s affirmation that education is not solely the result of instruction (1938, as cited in Williams, 2017) and that the teacher-student relationship as means to achieve higher academic attainment must be viewed in this context.

The role of the social context of teaching and learning is central to the teacher-student relationship since teachers can be viewed as socialising agents (Davis, 2003). In this respect, the teacher and the student can be described as constructing knowledge through their relational encounter in a social setting which is the school, drawing on the notion of social constructivism.

### *2.4.1 | A social constructivist lens*

Ritchie, Tobin and Hook (1995) maintain that there are learners who are told about the world and are expected to replicate and repeat the content. In this sense, knowledge is looked at as

something which is fixed. Yet, they add that emphasis must be placed on what the learner already knows, whereby the learner constructs knowledge through a subjective, active learning process, drawing on personal experience (Ritchie et al., 1995). This is at the core of constructivism.

Kumar (2006) claims that when examining innovative ways in teaching and learning, constructivism stands out as one of the most promoted alternatives as opposed to more traditional approaches. Constructivist epistemology considers what individuals have mastered and in what way they have learnt it. It also considers a lot of factors that are associated with learning through understanding, while at the same time placing value on sociocultural influences in the learning process. It also encapsulates previous learning as an important element in the learning process taking place at any given time. In other words, a constructivist approach views learning as happening in an environment that mirrors a small society, where the community of learners are “engaged in activity, discourse, interpretation, justification and reflection (Fosnot, 2005, p.9).

In educational practice, the constructivist eyes the teacher and the student as a pair who construe knowledge that leads to learning. Cobern (1993) states that in this sense, learning does not merely mean transplant knowledge from the teacher to the student as means to fill up a blank slate, but rather serves as a means of building new knowledge on existing knowledge. Learners start to challenge existing knowledge because of new encounters, acquiring new knowledge or modifying pre-existing understanding (Cobern, 1993).

As constructivism recognises how new knowledge is built on existing knowledge, the teacher’s role in practice comes to the forefront. Constructivist teaching involves a mediation

process, whereby the teacher serves to bring curriculum and students together in a way which brings meaning to the learner. It develops and improves within communities through discourse, influenced primarily by historical and cultural factors (Prawat & Floden, 1994). All that is acquired is embedded in the society in which it occurs and is influenced by values of the given society. Therefore, one here may comfortably say that, as Tobin and Tippins (1993) claim, for the social constructivist educator, learning is a social process.

Amineh and Asl (2015) define social constructivism as “a theory of knowledge...that examines the knowledge and understandings of the world that are developed jointly by individuals” (p.5). This theory presupposes that understanding, its significance and meaning thereafter are developed in conjunction with other human beings. Quoting Leeds-Hurwitz (2009), Amineh and Asl assert that there are two important elements in this theory: firstly, the assumption that experience is rationalised when humans create a model of their social world and how it functions and; secondly, a belief that the most essential system through which humans construct reality is through language. This approach refutes that there is an objective reality which can be found and that there are as many realities as there are participants, including that of the researcher (Robson, 2011).

Social constructivism blossomed from theories of Lev Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Cooper, 2007), who proposed a social constructivist model whereby the motivation for learning may be contextually based and guided by the interaction with people who are significant for the learner. Roth (2000, as cited in Amineh & Asl, 2015) adds to Vygotsky’s notion of social constructivism by claiming that the roots of knowledge in individuals are found in how they interact with surroundings and other people before they internalise the knowledge. A process

of collaborative sharing results in learner constructing understanding jointly, a construction which would not be possible within individuals alone.

Further to the above, Amineh and Asl (2015) maintain that teachers in this conceptual framework are facilitators rather than instructors, helping the learner to get to his or her own understanding of the content being delivered. They suggest that the skills that the social constructivist teacher needs are different from the traditional idea of a teacher who instructs. Among these skills, which include asking not telling and lecturing by giving support, they also mention providing guidelines and creating the appropriate learning environment so that the learner may arrive at his or her own conclusions while at the same time fostering continuous and interactive dialogue with learners. In this regard, Robson (2011) implies that social properties, such as the teacher-student relationship, are constructed through interactions between people and how they interpret their interactions.

Cooper (2007) maintains that social constructivism may play a significant role in later compulsory school years since these are marked with physiological and psychological changes in the student. He asserts that social development seems to be more dominant in the mind set of such students and hence the role of the educator becomes more prominent to facilitate active and focused learners adding to their motivation for future learning. Cooper states that this calls for a shift in teacher pedagogy in order to meet the demands that these changes give rise to. He opposes traditional educators who, according to him, maintain that students are empty vessels and a 'tabula rasa'. In this regard, Cooper supports Vygotsky's social constructivism as a model which serves to expand the understanding of students' learning in schools.

#### *2.4.2 / Lev Vygotsky and the zone of proximal development*

Social understanding, for humans, is highly sophisticated and it is believed to be unique to the species (Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne & Moll, 2005). Mental functioning in humans is deeply rooted in their social world, and cognitive processes underlying various forms of understanding may be attributed to an array of social-cognitive capacities (Nelson, 2004, as cited in Fernyhough, 2007). These ideas are central to the ideas and thoughts of Lev Vygotsky, who grounded his work in the early years of the twentieth century in the interpersonal contexts in which the human mind develops (Lloyd & Fernyhough, 1999, as cited in Fernyhough, 2007). With the role of social interaction as the nucleus of his works, Vygotsky thought that community plays a very important role in the making of meanings in our worlds (McLeod, 2014) and has been increasingly recognised as highly influential in explaining how socio-environmental influences impact social understanding (Fernyhough, 2007).

Vygotsky believed that learning is social in its origins and that children's thinking is transformed through their social interactions (Wass, 2012). This affirmation made Vygotsky a seminal educational and psychological thinker. Aside from this, he was also an advocate for social constructivism as he believed that learning cannot be separated from its context.

Central to his works is the concept of mediation, whereby the teacher and the student interact in a mediational process which helps to scaffold development and learning through the ZPD (Thompson, 2013).

#### 2.4.2.a | The zone of proximal development

Murphy, Scantlebury and Milne (2015) claim that Vygotsky's most influential educational concept is the ZPD. This notion has gained significant prominence in the West, especially in the 1980s (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992). The ZPD refers to

‘the distance between the actual developmental level, as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers’ (Vygotsky 1978, p.86).

The concept points at the discrepancy between a child's actual level of development established after certain developmental cycles have been completed (Vygostky, 1978) and the level the child may reach in solving problems if assistance is provided by a more knowledgeable person. It can be viewed as a collaborative production of knowledge through interaction between student and educator (Tudge & Scrimsher, 2003 as cited in Murphy et al, 2015).

The concept of scaffolding arises when speaking of the ZPD. David and Miyake (2004, in Wass, 2012) define scaffolding as that the support a person who is learning is given in order to achieve a task or skill which would otherwise be unattainable. Support is slowly decreased, hence allowing the learner to exert more control over the task at hand. Wass asserts that scaffolds can be material, whereby tangible items such as books and technological tools are used, as well as non-formal aspects. The latter may include peer conversations or engaging in conversation with the educator. In this respect, teachers act as role models for the structuring of a student's thought processes since they allow the learner to generate questions in order to resolve that which is unknown together with the more experienced and knowledgeable participant (ibid.).

#### 2.4.2.b | The affective dimension of the zone of proximal development

Levykh (2008) claims that some theorists, including Mahn and John-Steiner (2002) and Nelmes (2003) developed Vygotsky's notion of the ZPD a step further by incorporating the affective dimension, including emotions and desires. These authors recognise that "emotions are a vital part of human learning and development" (p.1). Social-constructivist theorists DeVries and Zan (2005) maintain that most schools are so preoccupied with subject matter that the affective component is negatively influenced. According to them, this may lead to a situation where the cognitive component does not flourish since the interpersonal framework has not been created. They assert that "interpersonal relations are the context for the child's construction of the self, of others and of subject-matter knowledge" (p.132).

Levykh (2008) explains how emotions play an important role not only in learning but also in the process of teaching. He states that teachers must exhibit behaviours which transmit the idea that, they do not teach simply because they want to share instructive information with students but, more importantly, because there is a sense of caring for the students' present and future well-being as well as their overall development. Vygotsky (1997, as cited in Levykh, 2008) believed that this caring process led toward the development of trust between teacher and student, thereby creating a more complete ZPD. It also serves to motivate the student's further intellectual and emotional development to its highest potential by aiding in the process of mediation where emotions play an important role to establish and maintain an effective ZPD. This builds on the idea that affect and intellect are inseparable higher mental functions (Chaiklin, 2003).

The above corresponds to a concept mentioned by Vygotsky, namely 'perezhivanie'. This concept, Gonzales Rey (2016) claims, has been overlooked for a long number of years since Vygotsky did not get the time to explore it as much as other concepts due to his early demise. Perezhivanie describes the affective aspects which act as mediators in the ZPD of an individual. Gonzales Rey notes that the avid interest in the role of emotions in the last 10 years has brought Vygotsky's less known concept to light.

Vygotsky (1978) believed that at the centre of the concept of perezhivanie is the emotional aspect, which is related to the importance of human connectedness in social interaction. He draws on the textures of language used between educator and learner, which may be motivated by feelings that are augmented by experience and absorbed by volition. He goes on to argue that the emotional aspects of social interaction have a great impact on learning, as we need to connect emotionally to know and think (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) note that if the teacher does not instil the confidence necessary to mediate acquisition of knowledge, students with a lot of baggage of experience might not achieve the emotional state that is required for the optimisation of learning within the development zone. Here the concept of mediation and emotion emerges, substantiated by Levykh (2008)'s observations on how Vygotsky includes gestures, language, sign systems and human emotions as psychological tools which mediate the development of higher mental functions. Vygostky (as cited in Levykh, 2008) maintains that culturally developed emotions are psychological tools in their own right, which contribute to the child's learning process and behaviour as well as help him or her develop their personality and cultural growth. In fact, as he says, "emotion is not less important a tool than is thinking" (p.94) when it comes to help

the student's internalisation, which is the process which allows lower mental functions to become higher mental functions (ibid.).

Levykh (2008) further argues that the educational advantage of demonstrating appropriate culturally developed emotions during the process of teaching and learning is not only limited to the students. He mentions Vygotsky's idea of collectivity in education and claims that when there is a successful teacher-student relationship, a solid platform is created for successful learning to begin. This happens when the teacher shows a sense of emotional openness, facilitating a sense of wonder in the learners, stimulating their imagination and strengthening the learning process.

A Vygotskian, social constructivist lens encapsulates students and teachers together as part of a collaborative educational environment, which allows not only for the cognitive aspects of teaching and learning but also for the importance of the affective dimension (Levykh, 2008). Students can create and internalise knowledge in a safe, emotionally supportive environment, displaying mastery of skill. At par with Vygotskian ideas, a substantial amount of literature supports the idea that one aspect of teaching which provides support within what can be understood as the ZPD, is the teacher-student relationship, claiming that strong and positive relationships between the two is essential for teaching to lead to development and learning (Mueller, 1999, as cited in Barile, Donohue, Anthony, Baker, Scott and Henrich, 2012; Pianta & Hamre, 2006; Pianta, 2016).

## **2.5 | The formation of the teacher-student relationship**

It is good to note here that Newberry (2010) asserts that teacher-student relationships take various pathways to form and evolve in different phases. The author maintains that teachers and students go through four stages to establish their relationship: appraisal, agreement testing and planning. The appraisal phase allows teachers and students to get to know each other and to gather information about one another. Following that, in the agreement phase, routines and patterns of interaction are established, including any form of attachment between the two. The next phase is the testing stage, whereby the limits and boundaries of the relationship are explored including those related to personality, roles and authority. Students and teachers here observe the bounds of aspects like kindness, patience, authority as well as other aspects of the school environment. Finally, in the planning phase, students and teachers dedicate time to forward the relationship further. Newberry (2010) asserts that the teacher-student relationship does not follow a linear trajectory but may in fact involve cycling back and forth through phases for varying amounts of time.

Pianta (2006) insists that when examining the teacher-student relationship, it is important to consider where these interactions take place, hence underlining the importance of the scholastic environment. Pianta elaborates that the scholastic environment is one that offers a considerably different environment from other environments where children meet with significant others, including the home setting. At school, the environment students are in is continuously changing, be it in the classroom, among peers, on an academic level, as well as in terms of teachers they interact with. Hence, the relationships children build at school change over time, unlike in the home setting where for most children, relationships remain constant and consistent.

McCormick, O'Connor, Capella & McClowry (2013) also maintain that if the teacher-student relationship is of high quality, students feel that teachers are what they call a secure-base, which in turn boosts the pupils' learning. In this manner, students are more likely to engage in classroom activities in a more active and appropriate way (Ladd & Burgess, 1999, as cited in McCormick et al, 2013).

Pianta (1999, as cited in McCormick et al, 2013) asserts that a bidirectional mode of communication takes place between teachers and students, in proximal or distal systems. The former refers to the interpersonal relationship that is created between the two parties, whereas the latter refers to the contexts in which they occur, encompassing not only the classroom but also, other environments at school.

Further to the above, this interpersonal relationship can also form through informal ways. Hafferty (1998), as cited in Doja, Bould, Clarkin, Eady, Sutherland and Writer (2016), pays credit to interpersonal forms of teaching and learning that take place as a result of what is called the "informal curriculum". Hafferty maintains that this form of interaction between students and teachers is unscripted; yet, it still plays a part in the students' learning path. Doja et al. (2016) recognise conversations which take place in corridors or in other parts of school outside the classroom as having a direct impact on learning.

Additionally, Claessens, Tartwijk, van der Want, Pennings, Verloop, den Brok and Wubbels (2017) state that informal talk which takes place between students and teachers, including talking about mutual interests or interest in the other's life, joking as well as greeting one another when passing, all contribute to build rapport between teachers and students. They quote findings by Frelin and Grannas (2010), who assert that out-of-class spaces are used as

“relational arenas” (p. 489) whereby teachers and students co-construct informal interactions where the relationship between student and teacher can be re-negotiated. They contrast these interactions with those that take place in the classroom and which are, hence, pre-determined and related to content delivery. In their study, Claessens et al. (2017) found this informal interaction to be particularly inductive of positive relationships among students and teachers, claiming that teachers and students tend to be more proactive and in search of contact in informal settings than inside the class.

## **2.6 | Perspectives on the teacher-student relationship and academic achievement**

Pianta and Hamre (2006) maintain that there is a sizeable amount of literature which provides evidence that when the relationship between teachers and students is strong and supportive, it contributes to the healthy development of all students. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the teacher-student relationship is understood to encapsulate the interpersonal meaning that teachers and students attribute to the interactions between them (Wubbels, Brekelmans, den Brok, Wijsman, Mainhard and van Tartwijk (2014).

Further to this definition of the teacher-student relationship, Pianta, Steinberg and Rollins (1995, as cited in McFarland, Murray and Phillipson, 2016) mention three important aspects which they say, have been reported in numerous studies in a variety of countries. They maintain that the relationship is characterised by closeness, conflict and dependency. The aspect of closeness involves open communication and warm interactions between the teachers and the students. With regard to conflict, this is characterised by negativity and discord, whereas dependency involves a student’s clinginess and the tendency to over-rely on a teacher. The authors comment on how an effective teacher-student relationship predominantly

shows closeness that predicts a higher level of student engagement. On the contrary, McFarland et al. go on to say that lack of closeness and dependency are more associated with grade repetition, peer rejection, negative school adjustment and externalising behaviours, quoting Pianta and Hamre (2001), Ladd and Burgess (2001) and Pianta (1995).

Marzano (2003) as well as Pianta and Hamre (2006) further support the above findings, stating that educators at school have the power to mould a student's educational path through the close relationship they share with their students. Research carried out by Marzano in 2003 showed how the actions of teachers had double the influence on the achievement of students when compared with the influences resulting from policies that target the curriculum, staff collegiality, assessment and community involvement. Pianta and Hamre (2006) also note how the teacher-student relationship provides what they refer to as "a unique entry point for educators and others working to improve the social and learning environments of schools and classrooms" (p.59), as they may be a direct effort to intervene and to successfully implement interventions.

Marzano (2003) investigated the practices of effective teachers and maintains that when teachers dedicate time to get to know the students well, including details which are not academically related, students will register greater academic gains. In other words, the teacher-student relationship allows other aspects of schooling to work better. Benard (2006) shares the same viewpoint, mentioning how the achievement gap can be effectively narrowed by teachers and educators who offer loving support, compassion as well as interest in the lives of students in general, not simply in relation to school. This was also found locally in Malta through the research carried out by Darmanin (2018), who reported that students wish for a good relationship with their teachers that goes beyond the scope of academics, which in turn

ameliorates the educational experience overall. Additionally, further recent research by Roorda et al. (2011) has reaffirmed that the quality of the relationship shared between the teacher and the student is significantly associated with academic achievement, quoting studies by Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, Swanson and Resier (2008).

In their meta-analytic study about the influence of affective relationships between students and teachers on student engagement and achievement, Roorda et al. (2011) found that all their analyses had shown that there is a significant association between the teacher-student relationship and school achievement. On the contrary, their study, also asserted that when there was a negative relationship with teachers, engagement and achievement were also negatively influenced. They maintained that when there is a positive relationship between teachers and students, engagement is also positively influenced and this in turn, leads to higher academic gains.

More recent work by Koca (2016) also echoes this notion as he claims that teachers act as social agents since they can affect the intellectual and socioemotional experiences of students by creating environments at school that stimulate students' motivation and learning. He adds that the teacher-student relationship has a regulatory function, which contributes to the development of social, emotional, and academic skills. Koca (2016) reaffirms previous findings by Marzano (2003), Pianta and Hamre (2006) and Downey (2008), among others, in pinpointing the key role which the teacher-student relationship plays in children's learning and achievement. He states that student learning increases when the relationship between the two is positive, and it leads to environments that are warm and receptive thereby facilitating successful adaptations in school.

Sointu et al. (2017) have likewise carried out research that investigates longitudinal associations of teacher-student relationships and how these relate to academic achievement. They maintain that when the teacher-student relationship is strong, it fosters a self-regulatory behaviour in students that in turn serves to increase their attention and eventually, their academic attainment. According to them, their research as well as previous research quoted in their studies shows how the teacher-student relationship is “one of the most important factors in the school achievement and outcomes of students” (p.459), including those with behavioural and emotional difficulties.

McHugh et al. (2013) tap on the importance of the teacher-student relationship but also explore it from a different perspective. They affirm that a relationship between teachers and students can foster academic value systems that may lead to sustained long-term engagement of learners but affirm that those students who have a perceived negativity of or a negative teacher-student relationship may experience anxiety, alienation or apprehension. This will in turn discourage them from bonding further with the teacher (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004, as cited in McHugh et al., 2013) or from future academic tasks (Connell, 1995, as cited in McHugh et al., 2013).

Engels, Colpin, Van Leewen, Bijttebier, Van Den Noorgate, Claes, Goosens and Verschueren (2016) claim that a negative teacher-student relationship is characterised by conflict between students and teachers and as a result, it may lead to lower academic gains. This is also reported by Sointu et al. (2017) who found that a negative teacher-student relationship is linked to problematic behaviour in students, lower academic achievement as well as low-self-esteem. They provide an example in their study of teachers who have fewer interactions with students than others and spend less time to promote success with students who show difficult

behaviour and spend more time trying to control that behaviour. This leads to further underperformance in academic achievement and socio-emotional skills.

This links closely with the role of student resilience in teaching and learning, with particular reference hereby made to a study carried out by Downey (2008), who investigated educational resilience. In this context, education resilience is defined as the chance of educational success despite personal vulnerabilities and adversity resulting from environmental conditions and experiences. This is not a construct that is considered to be a personality trait, but rather “a dynamic set of interactions between the student and resources in his or her environment that work together to interrupt a negative trajectory and support academic success” (p.56).

Downey recommends that students need to build strong interactions with teachers and that negative teacher-student relationships must be prevented. Among several recommendations, she recognises the importance of developing a caring classroom community, build healthy interpersonal relationships that foster respect, trust, caring and cohesiveness, setting high and realistic expectations for academic performance and using the strengths of the students to promote high self-esteem (ibid.).

Sointu et al. (2017) also examined the role of behavioural and emotional strength vis-à-vis the teacher-student relationship and academic achievement. In their study, they found that stronger behaviour and emotional strengths are related to the teacher-student relationship, which in turn can influence academic attainment. Their study specifically mentions how teachers, students and other persons involved in a student’s academic journey must bolster student strengths since these eventually improve relationships and lead to better academic results.

To conclude this section, it is worth mentioning that some authors who were interested in the teacher-student relationship have found it to be very important for academic achievement but not sufficient to improve engagement and achievement. O'Connor and McCartney (2007, as cited in Roorda et al., 2011) and Skinner (2009, as cited in Roorda et al., 2011) assert that there are other variables within the parameters of education that also play an important role in academic outcomes. These authors mention factors such as the quality of instruction, autonomous support for teachers as well as educational structure as being important together with the teacher-student relationship in determining educational gain. However, Roorda et al. maintain that while they recognise these factors as being important, the affective aspect of the teacher-student relationship is still often used as a starting point to promote academic success.

## **2.7 | The teacher-student relationship in secondary school**

The importance of the relationship between students and teachers does not diminish as the years in school unfold but it endures through the years. Pianta and Hamre (2006) claim that the importance of the teacher-student relationship is not only applicable to the early years of school but also in the latter years of compulsory schooling, saying that “the need for positive relationships with teachers does not diminish as children mature” (p.59).

In their adolescent years, children go through a scholastic transition into secondary school, which transition may be characterised as a challenge in their development (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2018). Amid it all, adolescents are the “learners” who within a few years or months of school, will sit for very important end of secondary school examinations. Yet, apart from results and examinations, one must remember, as Allen et al. (2013) assert, that these youngsters are “first and foremost highly social and emotional beings” (p. 94). The authors

continue that it is of paramount importance that school administration and staff recognise this affirmation as it may be a key predictor of adolescent learning.

Bakadorova et al. (2018) state that the fact that the shift to secondary school happens during adolescence can pose a challenge to students' development. This is mainly because students find themselves immersed in a school with possibly new rules, classes, systems and learning demands. These in turn are shaped by social relationships that are formed with peers and educators. The authors quote Brown and Larson (2009), who mention that in secondary school there is a greater number of teachers, all of who have demands that vary from one another, making this world much less personal than primary school. They add that all of the above, coupled with a period in life characterised by intense physical, emotional and cognitive changes, make students more vulnerable at an individual as well as at a social level.

Engels et al. (2016) maintain that associations between positive teacher-student relationships and academic gain are stronger in secondary school when compared to primary school, particularly due to the afore-mentioned importance of the adolescent developmental period, which is characterised by socio-emotional growth and changes in social relationships. They note how it is likely that in secondary school, academic engagement begins to decline. They proceed to state that in adolescence, children experience the need to build relationships with peers and non-parental adults, such as teachers. This leads to a higher sense of emotional security and sense of belonging, which in turn stimulates their adaptation to the environment (Martin and Dawson, 2009, as cited in Engels et al. 2016). The relationship also stimulates positive self-perceptions of academic competence and leads to an increase in the student's level of academic engagement. Similar findings were found by Roorda et al. (2011) in their meta-analytic review of the teacher-student relationship and its impact on academic

achievement. They identified a strong association between relational interaction with teachers and student engagement in secondary schools, which was at times stronger than relationships between teachers and students in primary schools (Furrer & Skinner, 2003, as cited in Roorda et al., 2011).

Pianta and Hamre (2006) cite a longitudinal study about adolescent health carried out in 1997. They note how secondary school students who reported greater connectedness to teachers also had lower rates of emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and behaviour, substance abuse, violent behaviours and early sexual activity, placing connections with teachers as a better predictor of a multitude of outcomes than family connectedness. The authors argue that besides social and emotional outcomes, student achievement was another positive outcome in this longitudinal study, especially student-perceived teacher connection. The latter was the aspect that was most closely associated with progression of achievement from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Gregory and Weinstein, 2004, as cited in Pianta and Hamre, 2006).

In contrast, secondary school students who have been expelled from school highlighted that one of the most salient reasons behind their experience was the teacher-student relationship. Lewis, Romi and Roache (2012) claim that these students, perceive the qualities of a teacher as either fostering development or else, as it was in their case, hindering it. They reported how when teachers failed to listen to them and when the school adopted a hierarchical structure with the teacher at the top and the students at the bottom, the students failed to form any close relationships with their educators and hence, this contributed to their expulsion from school.

Despite the importance of the teacher-student relationship in secondary school, Pianta and Hamre (2006) comment how it is unfortunate that the older students grow, the less time they

get to spend with any one teacher. This results in difficulty in forming connections, as opposed to the situation in primary school where students spend all day predominantly with one teacher. Roorda et al. (2011) also note this aspect of secondary school relationships when they consider that there are fewer contact moments, which may result in a perceived lack of support students receive from their teachers.

## **2.8 | Theoretical frameworks related to the teacher-student relationship**

The relationship between students and teachers has been conceptualised by several models and theories (Davis, 2003; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Pianta, Hamre & Stuhlman, 2003; as cited in Roorda et al., 2011). Further understanding of the teacher-student relationship and how this impacts academic achievement is facilitated through these various models and theoretical frameworks. These shed light into why the achievement gap may be effectively narrowed if teachers and students share a relationship that is positive within the school environment. Self-determination and self-systems theories as well as a model consistent with developmental-systems theory will be discussed below.

### *2.8.1 | Self-determination theory*

Koca (2016) describes self-determination theories whereby children start to value behaviours that they see reinforced, including their own behaviours as well as the behaviours of significant others. McHugh et al. (2013) also use self-determination theory to explain why students perceive certain teacher behaviours as powerful in moulding their educational path. They say that this theory highlights the role of needs fulfilment within relationships. Furthermore, it serves to shed light on the self-evaluative processes that students engage in

and which are likely to determine if a positive teacher-student relationship will translate into positive outcomes including academic achievement.

McHugh et al. (2013), quoting Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier and Ryan (1991) describe how self-determination theory suggests that humans have three innate needs: a) autonomy, b) competence, and c) relatedness. The authors posit that *autonomy* delineates a sense of personal control and direction, *competence* refers to a sense of efficacy within a given context, while *relatedness* denotes quality personal connectedness. McHugh et al. (2013) maintain that students read the relational climate of a classroom, which in turn leads to student engagement in the learning context. In the context of the teacher-student relationship, a student determines whether to invest in a relationship with the teacher based on his or her evaluation of the context. The authors give the example of a teacher-student interaction that allows a student access to certain resources he or she needs to reach an academic goal. In turn, this situation supports the need for competence and therefore the student is likely to pursue this relationship. Once student engagement is achieved, students will start to perform better on achievement tests and will achieve higher results too (Roorda et al., 2011).

With regard to the basic need of relatedness, McHugh et al. (2013) claim that this need has a great potential to influence a student's response to the learning environment. Keeping in mind that the concept of relatedness is defined as an interpersonal connection within a social context that is perceived to be secure and satisfying (Deci, 1991, as cited in McHugh et al., 2013), relatedness plays a very important role in fostering student engagement. Henceforth, when the need for relatedness is met through the collaboration of the teacher and the student, external motivation in the learning context can be internalised, thereby prompting

engagement. McHugh et al. (2013) quote several studies that support this claim, including Burton, Lydon, D'Alessandro and Koestner (2006) and Skinner and Belmont (1993).

Koca (2016), citing Ryan and Deci (2001), agrees with McHugh et al. (2013) and maintains that when students see behaviours being reinforced, these behaviours are internalised and students start to engage in activities that are consistent with their own feelings. Children who view their teachers as significant adults can learn from these same adults that achievement behaviours and motivation are valued by society and eventually internalise such behaviours and start to behave in ways that are consistent with them. One of the motivators for the development of the basic needs of relatedness, autonomy and competence, according to Koca (2016), is the teacher-student relationship. He claims that the teacher-student relationship is crucial for the development of these needs within the social environment of the school since the latter, being complex and unique systems, require the students to accomplish several intellectual and social tasks. Henceforth, in the case where teachers support students' basic psychological needs and create healthy classroom environments, they are simultaneously promoting positive teacher-student relationships. In this kind of environment, students achieve better levels of competence, autonomy and positive relatedness.

### *2.8.2 / Developmental-systems theory*

A model consistent with developmental systems theory has been proposed by Pianta (1999, as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006). Pianta maintains that the relationship between teachers and students needs to have certain primary components, including a) features of the individual including developmental history and psychological factors; b) processes by which information is exchanged between students and teachers who are relating to each other and lastly; c)

external influences of the systems where these relationships take place, in other words, at school.

Pianta and Hamre (2006) state that at the basic level, relationships incorporate features that belong to individuals. These may include biological factors, biological processes, features that develop within the individual, as well as the perceptions that individuals have of the person they are relating to and the relationship itself. Teacher and student characteristics will be discussed further below.

With regard to teacher demographic factors, Pianta and Hamre (2006) maintain that there was an inconsistent association with the quality of the teacher-student relationship. Among these factors were teacher experience and education, both of which showed poor relation to reports by teachers and students about the quality of their relationship. On the other hand, teachers' beliefs and perceptions about the students and their roles seem to be more prominent in the formation of relationships that are supportive in the classroom environment. The authors add that certain student characteristics lend themselves more to the formation of a positive teacher relationship. Here, they refer to the students' social and academic competencies as having an impact on whether the teacher-student relationship is supportive or else conflictual, citing works by Pianta and Hamre (2001), Ladd, Birch and Buhs (1999) as well as Murray and Greenberg (2000).

This conceptual model also encapsulates student characteristics that may be associated with the relationship they develop with their teachers (Pianta, 1999, as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006). For instance, across grade levels, several studies have shown that girls tend to form closer relationships with their teachers that are characterised by less conflictual episodes than

with boys (Harter, 1996; Lynch & Chicchetti, 1997 as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006).

Furthermore, adolescent literature shows that when the dyad in the teacher-student is gender-matched, relational closeness is higher (Drevets, Benton & Bradeley, 1996 as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006).

Pianta and Hamre (2006) maintain that students who have low intrinsic motivation and who display disruptive behaviour may in fact have more difficulty to form relational ties with their teachers. Ironically, the authors assert, they would be the one who need it the most. A substantial body of research supports the notion that when students display social and emotional difficulties or else, are at risk of early school leaving, they stand to gain from establishing a positive relationship with their teachers (*ibid.*).

To elaborate on the primary components of the relationship between teachers and students proposed by Pianta (1999, as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006), information exchange processes are found in teacher-student interactions. The dyadic relationship is characterised by feedback processes. The quality of the information and how it is exchanged plays a very important role, including tone of voice, posture and proximity, contingency or reciprocity of behaviour as well as timing of behaviour. The authors maintain that these may, at times, be more important than what is said or done.

In this respect, Brophy (1985, as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006) suggests that this conceptual model of the teacher-student relationship establishes that on an individual level, teachers may see themselves as those who instruct or else, as socialisers. As a result, their perception in relation to these two roles determines how they interact with students. Instructors may also view those who underachieve, who are unmotivated or else disruptive in a negative way, as

negatively influencing the expectations of what those students can achieve. On the other hand, the author points out that when teachers act as socialisers, they will hold higher expectations in terms of what students are expected to achieve. Consequently, these students will more likely achieve more and experience a higher sense of self-esteem and feel more competent as learners (ibid.).

Regarding other information exchange processes which take place within this model of interaction between students and teachers, Skinner and Belmont (1993, as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006), speak of a reciprocal association between the behaviour of the teacher and the response of the students. Skinner and Belmont assert that when students manifest a higher amount of engagement in class, teachers become more motivated and more involved in the students' learning. As a result of this, the bond between the teachers and the students becomes stronger and such students, the authors affirm, are at an advantage and they benefit more.

The last component mentioned by Pianta (1999, as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006) relates to external influences. This supposes that neither teachers nor students interact in isolation. On the contrary, the teacher-student takes place within the larger context of the school community that may either support or limit the development of a positive relationship. Pianta and Hamre assert that at this point, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the relationship between teachers and students and the school climate influence one another. Having said this, they quote Crosnoe (2004) by stating that there is an adequate amount of evidence which shows that school climate and the quality of the teacher-student relationship have a reciprocal association.

In fact, also embedded in this component of this conceptual model is the affirmation by Pianta and Hamre (2006) that the need of students to be continually emotionally supported at school is hindered by the increased departmentalisation that may be found in schools beyond the primary school years. Quoting a study by Roesner, Eccles and Sameroff (1998), they maintain that a control-oriented organisation is leading teachers to feel less motivated, which then results in student disengagement and hostility. This, they say, is at the detriment of the teacher-student relationship.

Developmental systems theory effectively provides an extension towards another developmental phenomenon which includes the extended attachment perspective. This can be further related to the teacher-student relationship through research findings from studies about mother and child relationships (Roorda et al., 2011). Central to this perspective is that the relationship between parents and their children encourages feelings of security in the latter. Therefore, this theory supposes that for a child to explore an environment, he or she must first feel emotionally secure. The extended attachment perspective then denotes that sensitive teachers serve as a secure base for their students, which allow children to feel safe exploring the learning environment and hence, be more engaged in learning activities (Pianta, 1999, as cited in Roorda et al., 2011).

The above is supported by findings of Thijs and Koomen (2008, as cited in Roorda et al., 2011), who found that children's emotional security acts as a mediator between teachers support and the engagement of children during tasks. Hence, a teacher-student relationship which is favourable is considered to kindle learning behaviour and provides support for the child when he or she is dealing with school demands. This relates to a concept mentioned in previous sections, namely the three aspects of the relationship between students and their

teachers, as put forward by Pianta, Steinberg and Rollins (as cited in McFarland et al., 2016) – closeness, conflict and dependency. In the extended attachment perspective, the aspect of closeness is viewed as typical of a teacher-student relationship, denoting warmth and openness.

## **2.9 | The Role of teacher characteristics in the teacher-student relationship**

Brookfield (1995, as cited in Liu, 2013) maintains that for the teachers and students to develop a positive relationship, the teacher must be able to “see themselves through their students’ eyes” (p.22). Liu (2013) says that teachers must possess traits that play a positive role in how they relate with their students, referring to it as that “affective facet” which has a powerful impact on students’ academic growth and learning journey. Cheung, Cheng and Chee (2007) argue that good and effective teachers are ones who possess a series of qualities, distinguishing between qualities that are related to the teacher’s skills and competence in the delivery of the subject and qualities which are related to personality and attitudes.

### *2.9.1 | Qualities of skill as well as competence important for the teacher-student relationship*

Quoting Tamblyn (2000), Cheung et al. (2007) claim that effective teachers are ones who possess qualities which are related to instruction and delivery of core content. These include proficiency and creativity, motivating through positive reinforcement and ability to adapt the curriculum according to the needs of the student. Quoting a myriad of studies, such as Wubbels, Levy & Brekelmans (1997), they claim that teachers must be subject specialists who use their time effectively. Moreover, they mention student participation and preparing tasks that are relevant to students as examples, while at the same time providing feedback and rendering themselves keen to learn.

The above-mentioned authors further maintain that a good teacher also uses a variety of teaching strategies that vary according to the needs of their students. This related to the work of Pianta and Hamre (2006), who suggest that teachers must try to make the curriculum as meaningful as possible by “incorporating aspects of their and the students’ lives and going with the flow of students’ ideas during discussions, also indicating a greater regard for their students” (p.65).

### *2.9.2 | The teacher-student relationship and behaviour management*

The above-mentioned study by Cheung et al. (2007) also refers to strategies the teacher adopts when disciplinary measures are necessary and how the teacher handles challenging behaviour in class. They state that by using a method which is systematic but varied, teachers reflect that they are good managers. Tauber (2007, as cited in Fosen, 2012) asserts that the approach a teacher adopts to exercise discipline reflects whether the teacher is democratic in his or her approach or not. Furthermore, he maintains that it is important that students have a say in decisions pertaining to their behaviour. An element of commonality could be drawn with the earlier work undertaken by Pianta and Hamre (2006), wherein they state that one key aspect of developing supportive relationships which may contribute to a positive academic outcome is the way the teacher chooses to deal with misbehaviour.

According to Pianta (1999, as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006), four key elements ensure that a behaviour management strategy is well-designed. These include a) providing clear restrictions and tolerable behaviour that help regulate students’ behaviour; b) responding in fair and consistent ways; c) providing students with positive feedback whenever possible; and d) when dealing with behaviour, teachers must do it in a caring and respectful way. Pianta and Hamre

insist on a relational rather than a strict behaviour modification approach, stating that it reduces behavioural problems more effectively.

This reflects an idea of Lewis et al. (2012), who maintain that the teacher's class management style is also a very significant factor in this regard. They state that this influences a myriad of aspects including how much a student concentrates, which attitudes students form towards schoolwork and their educators, as well as their social values. Lewis et al. further state that "students are not passive recipients of a teacher's classroom management actions" (p.870). On the contrary, they state that students form interpretations which later determine how they subsequently behave in the class. The authors go on to mention that when teachers exercise classroom management techniques, students are more inclined to respect teachers who show concern for the safety of the student and who take a humoristic approach to get the students to exercise good behaviour in their management style.

In their research, Lewis et al. (2012) also found how important it is that when exercising behaviour management techniques with students, teacher must engage in conversation with the same students. They quote studies by Roache and Lewis (2011), Romi, Lewis and Katz (2009) and Osher, Bear, Sprague and Doyle (2010), which highlight that engaging in conversation with students who misbehave, involving them in decision-making and recognising appropriate behaviour when they show it, leads to a more productive learning environment. They highlight this in contrast with coercive disciplinary approaches which have been found to increase students' aggression, leading to a disrupted educational path. This was also found by Fosen (2012), who posited that through engaging with students in discussion post challenging behaviour, teachers encounter less instances of negative

behaviour and improve their relationship with students as a result. Tauber (2007, as cited in Fosen, 2012) describes this an interactionist approach to discipline.

In this regard, Pianta (2006) captures the relationship between class management and the teacher-student relationship by stating that the latter encompasses “the complex social, psychological and emotional process involved in interactions and relationships between teachers and children that are the focus of classroom management” (p.704). He goes on to state that in the context of classroom management and instruction, the emotions, perceptions and motivations are interwoven together, making the teacher and student relationship a “dynamic relational system” (Pianta, 2006, p.686).

Newberry (2013) further elaborates on discipline and developing positive relationships with students by arguing that the two constructs are not exclusive of each other. The author states that when the teacher is caring and friendly but at the same time is adamant that rules are respected, students tend to look positively on that teacher if he or she exercises discipline in a fair and balanced way. She adds that teacher-student relationships evolve over time and students start to better understand the position teachers take when they exercise classroom management. Flores and Day (2006) take the argument a step further by stating that the power of the teacher-student relationship can be used to the advantage of the teacher in that it allows her to get to know the students better and therefore, find it easier to manage their behaviour. Martin and Dowson (2009) agree in that they claim that when the relationship between a student and a teacher is good, students are more likely to adhere to the teacher’s rules since a process of internalisation of the teacher’s values would have taken place. In this regard, this type of classroom management can be described as a proactive strategy rather than a reactive strategy, which would include coercive disciplinary measures (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

### *2.9.3 / The role of the teacher's personality in the teacher-student relationship*

Cholewa, Amatea, West-Olatunji and Wright (2012) also stress the importance of empathy, humour, love and care that serve a social function, since they strengthen relationships between teachers and students. Furthermore, the same authors also mention smiling, tone of voice, facial expressions and eye contact as other determinants of a good relationship, since these factors are likely to increase self-esteem and motivation in students. These authors further elaborate that the relationship improves since the proactive use of such attitudes from the teacher helps to prevent instances of bad behaviour and students feel liked by the teacher in an inclusive climate.

Cheung et al. (2007) also state that a good teacher is one who has certain personality traits and attitudes towards her students. Wubbels et al. (1997, as cited in Cheung et al., 2007) describe good and effective teachers as ones who are caring in their approach, displaying “warmth, love and a sense of humour” (p.2). Egeberg et al. (2018) elaborate on this caring aspect, whereby they state that students place a lot of importance on the teacher's disposition to be present for the student, to listen to them and to show concern in their regard, not only in terms of their academic lives but also for their personal one. Egeberg et al. even distinguish between teachers who are caring in an academic fashion and those who show care for the personal life of the student, stating that students appreciate both.

Cornelius-White (2007, as cited in Roorda et al., 2011) has carried out a meta-analysis of the teacher-student relationship. The author has found that there is a substantial association between variables that are person-centred in teachers and student outcomes. He outlined several person-centred variables manifested by the teacher, namely affective variables, as well as instructional variables, like including encouraging learning and higher order thinking.

Among these qualities, Cornelius-White found that the affective variables that are more strongly associated with educational outcomes are empathy and warmth. In this respect, the author states that when these variables are present, the relational interaction between student and teacher is likely to be a positive one.

Apart from the quality of care, literature also points in the direction of fairness and enthusiasm as qualities befitting of a good teacher. These strong interpersonal skills are also accompanied by respect for their learners and an ability “to be dominant and cooperative, and yet, empathic in control” (p.2). Wubbels et al. (1997, as cited in Cheung et al., 2007) mention how a teacher who creates a climate of respect and a relationship with students that fosters commitment and a good rapport is an effective teacher. Egeberg et al. (2018) also mention fun as being crucial to a positive teacher-student relationship. They quote studies by McIntyre (1991), wherein it was established that students who “act out” tend to behave better and work more with teachers who show them respect and who enthusiastically present learning activities for the students. Pianta and Hamre (2006) also tap on this by suggesting that teachers can actively work on ways to improve the rapport they have with their students, by making themselves available outside the classroom environment. Liu (2013) asserts that when teachers and student communicate not only in class but also, outside of it, learning is more likely to take place.

In light of the above, while Cholewa et al. (2012) assert that these attributes are of a subjective nature and hence are very dependent on the personal baggage and experiences of the teacher, others like, Shechtman and Tutian (2016) emphasise that through teacher training, these qualities can be enhanced. The latter authors maintain that with training, teachers can better understand a student’s behaviour. This entails learning to listen more, which in turn

allows the students to sense attributes like care and empathy, resulting in higher cooperation and less disruption. Shechtman et al. further state that a teacher's training programme must provide "the necessary knowledge, experiences and skills to convey empathy" (p.28) in a structured and practical way.

## **2.10 | The role of student characteristics in the teacher-student relationship**

Maguire, Egan, Hyland and Maguire (2017) insist that in order to assess what determines student engagement and achievement, it is imperative that student characteristics are acknowledged as ones that play a role in guiding the learning process. Roorda et al. (2011) comment that there is evidence in literature which shows that the impact of the teacher-student relationship on academic achievement can be weakened or strengthened depending on characteristics which pertain to the student, not only to the teacher. They list age, gender, ethnic origin and socio-economic status as variables that relate to the students and which influence how they interact with their teachers.

Quoting a series of studies (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Hargreaves, 2000; Lynch & Chicchetti, 1997), Maguire (2017) claim that literature supports the idea that older students form weaker relationships with their teachers than do younger children, since older students become more inclined to form relationships with peers and become less emotionally invested in relationships with their teachers. Yet, in their meta-analysis which investigated the teacher-student relationship and academic achievement, they found that academic adjustment and relational interactions with teachers at school was more important the older the students are. The affirmations are in line with findings of Furrer and Skinner (2003, as cited in Roorda et

al., 2011) who assert that there was a stronger association between the teacher-student relationship and engagement for older students than there was for younger ones.

One further student characteristic that could impact the teacher-student relationship is student gender. Pianta and Hamre (2001) and Roorda et al. (2011) maintain that the influence of the relationship with teachers may be different for boys and girls. Maccoby (1998, as cited in Roorda et al. (2011) refers to the 'gender role socialisation perspective', whereby it is stated that girls stand to gain more from forming close relationships since they tend to be more intimate and affiliate when they relate to others. Furthermore, since girls are less likely to be aggressive and strive for dominance, there is a tendency that they behave in a less conflictual manner than boys. On the contrary, the 'academic risk perspective' predicts the opposite, in that the relationship between teachers and students shows a stronger association between boys' academic gain rather than that of girls. In this perspective, boys, are more influenced by the quality of the teacher-student relationship since they are at a higher risk of dropping out of school than girls are (Baker, 2006; Brendgen, Wanner, Vitaro, Bukwiski, & Tremblay, 2007; Murray, Waas, & Murray, 2008, as cited in Roorda et al., 2011). Yet, contrasting with both perspectives is the hypotheses that was tested by Cornelius-White (2007). In his study, gender did not seem to influence the teacher-student relationship and the outcomes that it led to was equal for boys and girls in his findings.

Risk of school failure and dropping out of school are two other characteristics that may influence the teacher-student relationship. In fact, the 'academic risk perspective' can be extended to also apply to students who are at risk of school failure and drop out (Roorda et al., 2011). Pianta and Hamre (2001) and Roorda et al. (2011) assert that the relational interaction between students and teachers is very important when considering the outcomes of schooling

for students who risk dropping out of school. Both studies list students from ethnic minorities and students from low socio-economic background. Studies quoted in Roorda's work (Burchinal, Peiser-Feinberg, Pianta & Howes, 2002; Pallock & Lamborn, 2006) have argued that the teacher-student relationship is more meaningful in terms of student outcomes for those who belong to these at-risk groups. Yet, Roorda et al. (2011) also outlined a series of other studies which have found no difference between such groups of students and the teacher-student relationship in terms of academic achievement, quoting Cornelius-White (2007), Garner and Waajid (2008), as well as Ladd and Burgess (2001), respectively.

### **2.11 | School practices and the teacher-student relationship**

When considering knowledge of student-teacher interactions, the goal in schools is to enhance wellness and to strengthen developmental competencies in students (Cowen, 2000 as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006). In this context, improved relationships between teachers and students can be one of two things. They can be the focus of efforts of intervention or else a by-product of efforts that are meant to improve aspects related to students, teachers, classrooms or schools in general. Pianta and Hamre (2006) refer to a model of school processes and structure by Eccles and Roeser (1999), which researchers can use to discuss a variety of educational and psychological aspects that can improve the teacher-student relationship, directly or indirectly. These aspects are discussed hereunder.

In relation to using the teacher-student relationship as a tool to increase academic attainment, Pianta and Hamre (2010, as cited in Allen et al., 2013) highlight the notions of school-level prevention as well as classroom-level efforts that can serve to ameliorate the relationship. They came up with an assessment approach called the Classroom Learning Assessment

Scoring System – Secondary. The test captures, via an assessment procedure, positive classroom climate, teacher sensitivity and regard for the adolescent perspective. The tool was implemented in a study that involved 1,267 students enrolled in 78 different classrooms. The findings demonstrated that, regardless of student grade level and content area of study, the connection between observed relationships between students and teachers vis-à-vis student achievement in secondary school classrooms supports the theoretical proposition that the teacher-student relationship has value for student learning and development (ibid.).

Quoting Felner, Favazza, Shim and Barnd (2001), Pianta and Hamre (2006) propose intervention and change to school structures based on their results. The authors mention how there is often an unparalleled relationship between conditions and practices in schools with the developmental needs of students, including readiness and abilities throughout the school years, from early years up to Grade 12.

Pianta and Hamre (2006), when writing about the teacher-student relationship, speak about restructuring an educational community to greatly influence the way how teachers and students feels while they are at school. They maintain that when the school climate is emotionally and socially positive, students' self-confidence and achievement are boosted, hence claiming that it is important that students and teachers relate in a caring community, which is the school. The authors go on to mention how unfortunately, it is often the case that middle and high school students' relationships with their teachers are constrained by several structures, among which are time available to integrate the curriculum and to increase "coherence and support available to students" (p.64). Pianta and Hamre state that when the school system makes efforts to restructure the educational programme, this reduces the complexity of students and teachers and helps to build a sense of community and continuity.

When this takes place, Pianta and Hamre, quoting a study by Felner (2001), state that schools which have taken a step in this direction have reported a decline of between 40 to 50 per cent in school dropout, achievement level maintenance and behaviour or emotional problems. Furthermore, in this study, teachers have reported higher job satisfaction and a lesser amount of burnout.

Barile et al. (2012) also stress the importance of a whole-school approach when addressing the teacher-student relationship. They suggest that school should create spaces where students can have the opportunity to participate in processes including the drafting of rules as well as the organisation of school events. They quote a study carried out by Vieno (2005) and based in Italy, whereby a school encouraged student participation in the establishment of rules and in organising events. They found that students felt more involved and were more invested in their overall scholastic experience. Vieno also asserted that because students felt they had a voice, they were more likely to form positive relationships with their teachers, which in turn, potentially led to higher academic accomplishments.

If schools restructure in a way that would accommodate these needs, spaces and time which foster the relationship between students and teachers would be created. Such practices may include educating the teacher about social and emotional development at any stage in the student's life, giving teachers the opportunity to engage in social conversations with their students, showing students regard for the latter's perspectives and ideas and using behaviour management strategies that communicate expectations and caring in a clear manner (Felner et al., 2001, as cited in Pianta and Hamre, 2006).

## **2.12 | Educational interventions vis-à-vis the teacher-student relationship**

Pianta (2016) maintains that several aspects in educational practice add to the growing interest in improving the quality of teacher-student interactions through intervention strategies. Cefai and Cavioni (2016) assert that in order to promote social and emotional aspects of education, teachers need to be offered support in order to fulfil their role as caring educators.

Cowen (2000, as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006) proposes that the qualities, behaviours and strategies that serve to create a positive teacher-student relationship should be considered at an organisational level and in school processes, with the aim of improving the well-being and competencies of students. Pianta and Hamre recommend that the teacher-student relationship can be the focus of interventions or a by-product of other interventions that are directed towards the students. The authors mention a model by Eccles and Roeser (1999) wherein educational and psychological aspects of learning that improve the relationship between students and teachers can be applied to the school organisation. They mention working on the school ethos, classroom ethos, classroom structure, the character of the teacher, as well as social interactions between pupils and educators, all of which can play a role in building positive teacher-student relationships.

Pianta and Hamre (2006) also suggest steps that can be taken at school-level which support interactions between students and teachers. They set a series of goals that improve the relationship. These include increasing the amount of time available to students to spend with their teachers, creating a network of adults (teachers and non-academic staff) to engage with students in after-school activities, having a top-down modelled approach of good relationships, as well as developing disciplinary measures that set high expectations for

students while at the same time, fostering a caring environment. The authors maintain that if the school adopts such approaches, these will in turn influence how the students spend their time at school.

Cheung et al. (2007) agree with the above and they consider that there are aspects about teacher effectiveness and student learning that can be addressed through teacher support and teacher training. They maintain that such training can teach those qualities that pertain to skill and competence and raise awareness about personal attributes in one's character and which contribute positively to a healthy teacher-student relationship. In a study they conducted in Hong Kong, Cheung et al. (2007) further propose that school administrators should provide support to their teachers in terms of how they can make better use of qualities they possess and how to develop others which can help them with their students.

Cefai and Cavioni (2016) also recommend a series of opportunities which should be provided to teachers. Among these opportunities, they mention staff education, wherein they state that training in social and emotional aspects is important. They also mention continuing professional development which can be offered to teachers about relationship building and adolescent development, among other things. The authors further suggest that school administration must be supportive, not only in terms of providing resources but also, for example, by furnishing teachers with the possibility of participating in the life of the school.

In addition to interventions such as the above, Pianta, Hamre, Burchinal, Field, LoCasale-Crouch, Downer, Howes, LaParo, & Scott-Little (2012), among others, also propose teacher performance appraisals in relation to how they relate to children. Sarason (1999) asserts that after the Second World War, the goal of education was to disseminate subject matter, and this

often took place at the detriment of pedagogy. He believes that teachers must be made aware that productive learning is dependent of three features: a) recognising and respecting the student; 2) knowing the subject matter and being able to help learners overcome difficulties related to it; and lastly, c) engage the students and stimulate their learning. Sarason states that in doing so, teachers would be reaching the goal of schooling because they incorporate the personal with the cognitive aspect of development. However, he then relates his views to the idea that all this must be monitored whereby the way teachers interact with their students has to be assessed in order to ensure that the delivery of education is holistic.

Relational assessment is also proposed by Pianta and Hamre (2006) who maintain that relational components can be approached and observed by gathering information from students' and teachers' perceptions and behaviours. Moreover, they stress that the instances when the relational experience is harmonious between teachers and students or, contrarily, more challenging between the two, important insights into what works and what does not come to light. Through such an approach, they maintain that educational interventionists can use the information gathered to design interventions, mentioning 'Primetime' (Hughes, Cavell & Jackson, 1999), 'Teacher-Child Interaction Therapy' (McIntosh, Rizza & Bliss, 2000) and 'Student, Teachers and Relationship Support' (Pianta & Hamre, 2001), which are aimed at improving relationships between teachers and students. Such interventions, they say, seek to help teachers and students to form better connections between them. These interventions provide the teachers with opportunities to alter and work on how they relate with their students.

Barile et al. (2012) investigated teacher evaluation and reward systems in order to monitor teacher-student relationships. They claim that teacher effectiveness, in certain schools around

the world, is evaluated by those higher in position than teachers. Citing the United States of America as a case in point, Barile et al. indicate that such positions are predominantly held by school principals. However, they also made reference to instances when evaluations were carried out by students or other teachers. In as far as reward systems are concerned, Barile et al. maintain that when teachers are rewarded for good relational behaviour by placing high achieving students in their class, the climate related to the teacher-student relationship was influenced negatively, whereas if rewards included monetary incentives or an increase in pay, no statistical significance was found on their effect on the way teachers related to students. On the other hand, this same study investigated how school-level policy influenced the teacher-student relationship and it found that when students are asked to evaluate teachers, the teacher-student climate improved. As a result of this type of intervention, the authors maintain that there was lower student drop-out (Barile et al., 2012).

In addition to the above, Barile et al. (2012) also suggest that school financial investment in resources also reflected a better teacher-student relationship. In this respect, the authors suggest that when a school has adequate funding, they are worth investing in activities and training that are targeted at the teacher-student relationship, since in these cases, the quality of the teacher-student relationship improves as do the eventual academic successes.

Andrews (2014, as cited in Attard Tonna, 2014) also speaks of recognition measures and merit systems targeted at rewarding teachers for their excellence and at providing motivation for a higher degree of teacher effectiveness. Andrews outlines several possible ways how this can be achieved, mentioning small bonuses, public recognition or letters of commendation as examples. He also mentions periodic teacher effectiveness performance assessments which already take place in countries such as the United States and Australia, which are aimed at

assessing teacher behaviour and delivery with the goal of improving learning outcomes for students. These performance appraisals, Andrews goes on to say, must be context based for the specific school the teacher teaches in and must also address specific teaching attributes, some of which can directly influence the teacher-student relationship, as seen from previous literature. Andrews' justification for such measures to be implemented is the fact that it is widely known that the way the teacher interacts and behaves profoundly influences the success of students.

As such, through interventions such as the ones mentioned in this section, the teacher-student relationship can be targeted as a school-based measure to improve such relationships, which as previous literature has shown, are fundamental to the students' academic success.

### **2.13 | Educational policy and the teacher-student relationship**

Braun, et al. (2010) maintain that improvement in education "will not come from the mindless adoption of someone else's plan" (p.742). They postulate that educational policy must consider the engagement of people's hearts and minds and that policies have to enable teachers to create conditions that make learning more likely through support and encouragement. McHugh et al. (2013) highlight the importance of being aware that the importance of "supportive relationship" between teachers and students cannot be romanticised. For these relationships to yield academic outcomes, ideas must be translated into policies at national level.

Over the past three decades, numerous comparative studies have focused on education in terms of educational achievement, while outcomes of schooling have been the object of study

in multiple studies worldwide (Kyriakides, Georgiou, Creemers, Panayiotou & Reynolds, 2017). Consequently, in an attempt to enhance student outcomes, educational policy has been at the forefront in the educational field (Reynolds, Sammons, De Fraine, Van Damme, Townsend, Teddlie & Stringfield, 2014, as cited in Kyriakides et al., 2017). As Levin (1998, as cited in Braun et al, 2010) states, policymaking has assumed a role of global proportion. Braun et al (2010) further state that education policymaking is regulated by the central state in an attempt to reform education and provide better standards.

Guile (2003) maintains that when reforms in education are driven by the economy, learning and knowledge are recognised and measured according to qualifications or certification. In 1992, more than twenty years ago, APEID (Asia and Pacific Programme for Educational Innovation for Development) pointed out that cognitive domains in education were very well established and yardsticks were being widely used across countries and schools in order to measure how well students perform in these domains worldwide (UNESCO, 1992).

Almost ten years later, Vongalis-Macrow (2010) claimed that various policies presented the mindset mentioned above and that this was still recognizable in education policies from across nations and regions a decade later, whereby policies continued to aim at improving educational achievement through measuring and testing. Nowadays, countries invest significant resources in international studies such as TIMMS, PISA and PIRLS, all of which reveal variation in the performance of students in different countries (Kyriakides et al., 2010). Hence it seems that over a long number of years, the outcome of education has centred around coming up with strategies and policies that improve scores with the aim of reaching better outcomes in terms of employability and economic growth (ibid.).

Levin (2010) argues that in education, many of the policies have been unsuccessful in improving student outcomes or in minimising inequitable situations in education and have also had a negative effect on teachers' morale. He adds that several policies sought to generate changes in structural aspects of educational systems and that it was opportune to look at evidence which showed that sustained improvement in outcomes could be achieved through other means. Therefore, one might posit that educational policy, whether at international, national or school level, can address other ways to improve a country's educational performance. Several studies, as in fact shown in previous sections, maintain that there is scientific evidence that one of the key aspects in schools, which is considered an asset to improve student learning and development, is the teacher-student relationship (Sabol, Hong, Pianta & Burchinal, 2013; Pianta, 2016).

In 2010, Caballero wrote that policies often disregard the affective aspect of the learning process and instead understand academic success as being heavily dependent on instruction and delivery of core content knowledge. Pianta (2016) asserts that schools have raised demands for academic success and that there is a focus on teachers' qualifications and output including student test scores rather than on the relational experiences that students have at school. This view was previously proposed by Vongalis-Macrow (2010), who maintained that policies in education focused highly on improving educational achievement through measuring and testing.

Yet, as recognised by Levin (2010) and Pianta (2016), students still have the basic human need to form interpersonal relationships and, in this respect, teachers may act as social agents and develop a sense of caring that is reciprocal. Hence, relational ties that students form with teachers can be viewed as an educational resource to decrease the achievement gap. This was

also noted by Lui (2013) who, quoting Bao (2003), claims that some recent educational reforms have moved away from the traditional view of education with the teacher as an authority figure, to incorporate the teacher-student relationship as one which is “democratic, equal, interactive, and learning together” (p.22).

Pianta (2016) goes on to quote large-scale studies such as those by Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Mikami, & Lun (2001) and Kane, Kerr, & Pianta (2014), among others, which have described the connection between the teacher-student relationship and academic achievement. He adds that policy in education ought to recognise this aspect of the learning process as a “unique and powerful resource” (p. 102). As schools worldwide have faced incessant reforms addressing academic demands, Pianta (2016) states that policies that focus on the teacher-student interaction may in fact act as key for improved teaching and learning. Levin (2010) had also pointed at the fact that an adequate infrastructure is needed, and reforms and strategies must be geared in this respect. He asserts that educational policy cannot view teachers as assembly line workers who are simply there to follow instruction, but rather as a resource which schools have at their disposal. Teachers as a resource cannot simply be understood to be as disseminators of knowledge but also as mediators of affect.

One argument against this idea includes what McNamara (1986) refers to as ‘prescriptive problems’, referring to the fact that when the teacher-student relationship is used as a tool in itself, assessing its effectiveness may pose to be challenging since it is difficult to make judgments based on the personal attributes of character. Having said this, Pianta (2016) proposes that this can be bypassed if pre-service and in-service training can incorporate practices that nurture a positive social and emotional climate for learning. He goes on to say that quality assurance should also target the teacher–student relationships since in his view, if

something is expected, then it will get inspected. Henceforth, recognition of the value of teacher–student interactions could take shape in policies that target teacher preparation programs and teacher accountability.

Although Hughes (2012) maintains that research still has to be more elaborate in this regard, and Pianta (2016) contends that this aspect is still generally lacking from the formulation of policies in education, both authors posit that the “current state of knowledge is sufficient to inform educational practice and policy” (p. 325). Therefore, through evidence-based research, policy makers can recognise the value the teacher-student relationship has on academic achievement and use it as a tool in order to narrow gaps in educational achievement.

## **2.14 | Conclusion**

The literature review examined the teacher-student relationships from various angles, with attention being given to those aspects of the teaching pedagogy that teachers practice to encourage academic achievement. The review of literature has delved into the social-constructivist approach to teaching and learning and has provided insight into the works of contemporary authors about the topic.

The next chapter will put forward the methodology employed in this study by delineating how participants were selected, which data collection tools were employed, as well as how the results obtained will be analysed in consideration of the literature review.

## **CHAPTER 3 | THE METHODOLOGY**

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### **3.1 | Introduction**

Denzin and Lincoln (2013) claim that at the centre of a research project is the methodology, which they define as the strategies of enquiry, involving an array of skills, assumptions as well as practices that the researcher employs as he or she moves from the research paradigm to the empirical world. In other words, the methodology is a theorised approach employed in the investigation of the social world that involves the steps taken in order to examine the reality of the group of people being studied (ibid.).

The present comparative research study seeks to compare perceptions of students and teachers in the latter years of education about how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement. In the research project, I will have a role in the data gathering process and will directly be involved in collecting data through various approaches that will be outlined in a subsequent section of this chapter. I planned to meet the participants in their own school setting since, as Hatch (2002) claims, if the researcher aims at understanding the perspective of participants, he or she has to spend time with them in their natural settings and in a context where they feel confident to express themselves. Given that, as Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1996) put forward, “the choice of topic determines the range of appropriate sites” (p. 286), three schools were identified, one from the state sector, another from the church sector and another from the independent school sector.

### **3.2 | Conceptual framework for the research project**

In a research study, the choice of a conceptual framework serves to guide the study in terms of methodological approach (Patterson & Williams, 2002). As the researcher, the choice of

approach was determined by three main factors: a) the nature of the questions guiding the research; b) assumptions about the phenomenon under investigation; and c) making judgements about the importance of the aim of the study as well as anything that might pose credibility to the data (ibid.).

Central to this present research study is the idea that teachers and students share a relationship between them at school, which is an aspect of human nature that serves to ameliorate the teaching and learning process. The epistemology of this project is constructivist in nature, in that it will seek to investigate how teachers and students construct a reality which is subjective and how the two co-construct realities that lead to a relationship which may or may not be perceived to impact the students' academic achievement. Consequently, a social constructivist epistemology will place a priority on the phenomenon of study and will look at data that is created from shared experiences and relationships between the participants (Charmaz, 2006). Hence, a qualitative approach was identified as the right way forward.

A qualitative approach is adopted in this research study because, in terms of methodology, it allows flexibility when exploring the perceptions of the students and the teachers of the world around them (Bell, 1993). This approach emphasises inductive and interpretative methods applied to everyday experiences and therefore, is seen as being subjective and socially created (Hatch, 2002). Mason (2002) comments on how, through qualitative researching, a researcher can delve into different dimensions of the social world encapsulating the weave of everyday life as well as the understanding and experiences of the participants taking part in the research. Goalshani (2003) asserts that the phenomenon under investigation in qualitative research is not explored in terms of its statistical significance but rather to result in a body of data that emerges from real-world settings. Creswell (2008) also maintains that the qualitative

researcher pays attention to the perceptions of the participants, which are collated through asking open-ended questions and gathering data in situations where the topic of interest unfolds in a natural manner. Hence, since the teacher-student relationship takes place in a school, data was collected in the schools where the teacher-student relationship takes place.

Consequently, the research design adopted a constructivist paradigm. Guba and Lincoln (1994, as cited in Hatch, 2002) claim that through a constructivist approach, realities of individuals are understood to be “abstract mental constructions that are experientially based, local, and specific” (p. 15). Robson (2011) maintains that in a social setting, social constructivism plays a role, whereby social properties are built through the interactions between people. Furthermore, this approach accentuates experiences that are lived, felt and undergone by the people acting in that social situation. In view of this, as a researcher, I was vigilant of the notion that there are as many realities as there are participants, including my own, hence putting aside the notion of an objective reality, as suggested by Robson.

Epistemologically speaking, this research project sought to understand how teachers and students construct a reality that is subjective and how the two co-construct realities which lead to a relationship that may or may not be perceived to impact the students’ academic achievement. In this sense, this constructivist epistemology placed a priority on this phenomenon of study and looked at data that is created from shared experiences and relationships between the participants (Charmaz, 2006).

Henceforth, the choice of participants, setting and data collection methods have been chosen in such a way that they allow for multiple realities to be discovered (Robson, 2011). These

will be discussed in further detail as will the methods of data analysis and ethical considerations.

### **3.3 | Piloting the methods of data collection**

Prior to the collection of data, “instrumentation rigour” (Chenail, 2011) was investigated through a pilot project, conducted prior to the full-scale study. The pilot study served a useful function in the conduct of this qualitative inquiry (Kim, 2011), as it provided me, as the researcher, with “a clear definition of the focus of the study” (Frankland and Bloor, 1999, p. 154, as cited in van Teijlinger and Hundely, 2001).

As suggested by Chenail (2011), the rationale behind the pilot project was so that the investigator tests the proposed methods to verify whether the planned procedure unfolds in the way envisaged by the researcher (Kim, 2011). In order to refine the research design that would later be employed in the full-scale study, the pilot project was conducted a year prior to the commencement of the full-scale investigation in one of the many secondary schools that provide education to students in Malta.

Chenail (2011), among others (Muoio, 1995; Prescott & Soeken, 1989, van Teijlingen et al., 2002 as cited in Kim, 2011), believes that instrumentation is a very important element of research as it gives what he calls “advance warning” (p. 257, citing van Teijlingen et al., 2001) about where the research design could possibly fail or whether it is too complicated or inappropriate. Therefore, the pilot research project in this case tested the research protocol, assessing among other aspects the data collection procedure and the sample recruitment strategy (Kim, 2011).

Henceforth, as suggested by van Teijlingen et al. (2001), the pilot study served to 1) gain insight into sampling frames and proposed recruitment approaches, 2) identify logistical problems with proposed methods, 3) determine outcomes related to sample size, and 4) expose the researcher to as many elements as possible related to the research process.

The validity of piloting the full-scale study led to an increased accountability of the researcher in order to ensure that in the study, the best possible results were generated (Crosswaite & Curtice, 1994).

### *3.3.1 / Setting and participant selection of the pilot project*

The pilot study took place in one of the many secondary schools that provide education to students in Malta. The choice to conduct the pilot study in a secondary school was because this was one of the criteria of the main study, as suggested by Chenail (2001). A convenience sampling method was used whereby the school where I, as the researcher, teach was selected to be the appropriate site for piloting.

As a researcher, I approached the headmaster of the school. Access was obtained after a letter of permission and consent was given to the head of school. When permission to conduct the pilot study was granted, the research tool was prepared. Participant students were selected based on convenience sampling. Furthermore, the selection was purposive in that students and teachers were chosen purposefully through a deliberate selection based on the qualities they possess (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016), namely that they were in the tenth grade of school. The head of school identified a group of Grade 10 students because they were conveniently available for the research to be conducted based on the fact that at the time I was available, the students identified would not miss any lessons. A letter of consent was sent out to the

parents of these students and students were also given an assent letter. Assent letters were intended to be an agreement between the researcher and the participant students to take part in the research, with the possibility that they did not fully understand its purpose (Robson, 2011). Because of this, obtaining informed consent from the parents was essential (ibid.) The assent letter was written in language that children could understand since, as stated by Robson, it is the responsibility of the researchers to find ways of obtaining consent from individuals, which reflects a way that they can understand regardless of their abilities. Hence, the language used, particularly in the assent letter, was simple, clear and unambiguous.

Once consent and assent were obtained, these students were gathered in one of the PSCD classes in the school. Their PSCD teacher informed them that the lesson would be conducted by myself and that it was in partial fulfilment of a course I was following at the University of Malta. In this way, students were at ease that they were not being formally assessed nor observed for any other reason aside than for the purpose of the research.

The teachers identified to participate in this pilot study were teachers who are close colleagues of mine since, as the researcher, I wanted to be sure that feedback from them would be constructive and honest as well. A letter of informed consent was given to them and collected thereafter. Teachers were then emailed the interview questionnaire, as outlined in the subsequent section, which they emailed back once it was filled in.

### *3.3.2 / Feedback obtained from the pilot study*

The pilot study generated information about different aspects of the data collection process namely participant selection and instruments of data collection.

### 3.3.2.a | Piloting the selection process

Regarding participant recruitment, purposeful sampling yielded information-rich data in the pilot study. Billups (2012) asserts that students should be asked to participate in focus groups based on the special knowledge and experience they have as students and therefore, according to him, purposeful selection is appropriate. This also coincides with Patton (2002) who points at students' "information rich potential". Given the aforementioned, this method of sampling was to be used in the main study.

As to access to local secondary schools, approaching the head of school as the gatekeeper of the school was key in ensuring participation. This has been stressed by Han (2007, as cited in Kim, 2011).

In the pilot study, it emerged that the focus groups could not be composed of students who the researcher teaches to ensure neutrality and a non-judgemental pre-disposition, as put forward by Kim (2011). Therefore, for the full-scale study, it was decided that the recruitment of students needed to affirm that students of the researcher are ineligible for the study and student participants must be chosen according to this exclusionary criterion. This ensured what Kim (2011) refers to as the "Epoche Process", whereby I, as the researcher, had to be disciplined and make an effort to set aside any pre-judgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated so that the study may be free of preconceptual ideas as much as possible. It also ensured that I was as open and receptive as possible to listen to the experiences disclosed by the participants, who I subsequently did not know.

### 3.3.2.b | Piloting the instruments of data collection

Regarding the research tools, through the pilot focus group, a rich body of data has been gathered, confirming what Patton (2002), among others, has stated, in that this research tool is ideal for obtaining in-depth feedback about attitudes, opinions, behaviours, motivations and perceptions. This collective experience encouraged self-disclosure and yielded several examples of perceptions of students that depict the teacher-student relationship and its worth in reducing the achievement gap.

The fact that students knew each other also seemed to facilitate the process of sharing since the interaction, which according to Morgan (1997, as cited in Billups, 2012) is important, had already been consolidated prior to the focus group. With this in mind, it was confirmed that focus groups will be used with students from the same schools since, as maintained by Billups (2012), a focus group setting encourages students to express ideas particularly if they are with other acquaintances and is especially so of students “since their entire educational experience is rooted in classrooms settings” (p.6) and group environments.

One shortcoming in the pilot study was the fact that the focus group lasted more than one lesson and it spilled over the lesson that followed PSCD, which happened to be a core subject lesson. As mentioned in Mason and Zuercher (1998), this aspect of the pilot project was more time-consuming than anticipated, resulting in the interruption of the students’ lessons beyond what was stated in the letters of consent. This confirmed that the amount of time for focus group sessions had to be longer than a single lesson, an aspect also suggested by Billups (2012) who maintains that with students approximately 60 minutes is an ideal time before they get distracted.

As to the interviewing guide used during the focus group, several points needed to be addressed. Flick (2006) comments on how qualitative questions need to be refined throughout the stages of the research process. After the focus group was conducted, it was necessary to reflect and reformulate certain questions since they either did not yield the desired outcome or else they were repetitive of another question in the same interview guide.

Further to the above, the pilot study also included testing of the email interview through the open-ended questionnaire that was distributed to teachers. All teachers agreed that sometimes, questions were challenging and required an element of thought before answering. Therefore, questions were broken down into sub-questions whenever it was possible to facilitate understanding. When asked about the idea of participating in an email interview, all teachers stated that they preferred it to a face-to-face interview. The main reasons given were the teachers' busy schedules and lesson preparation times. Therefore, the choice of a questionnaire that they can complete at their leisure was received well and it was established as one of the two methods of data collection.

Once the pilot study was concluded, the process of starting the full-scale study ensued, as is outlined in the next sections.

### **3.4 | Setting and participant selection in the study**

Since my intention was to investigate and compare perceptions of teachers and students about the teacher-student relationship vis-à-vis academic achievement, the primary field of research was the school setting. It was decided that the perceptions of students in Year 10 and

perceptions of teachers of students in Year 10 will be the target population in this study, in view of the fact that these participants would have “information-rich potential” in relation to the topic under investigation, as mentioned by Billups (2012). Year 11 students and their respective teachers would also have been equally fit into the profile of the study, since both Year 10 and Year 11 are latter years in compulsory schooling. Yet, in view of the fact that Year 11 is a very crucial and demanding year given that MATSEC examinations take place then, it was decided to choose the samples from Year 10. Therefore, three local schools were selected to form part of the data collection process, primarily three secondary schools, each one from a different local education provider, that is the State, the Church and the Independent sectors.

The schools were identified through a convenience sampling approach, which is a non-probability sampling method. Through this method, participants from the target population who meet certain practical criteria were chosen to take part. These criteria were namely how accessible the sample was, travelling-related issues, the length of time available to complete the study and willingness to participate (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the nearest and most convenient schools were identified and contacted, in all three cases through personal contacts of the researcher, which played a role in gaining access to the three schools (Lofland, 2006, as cited in Robson, 2011). These schools will be referred to from here onward as the State School, the Church School and the Independent School.

As Robson (2011) states, real world research necessitates that formal agreement is required from someone to gain access, which is defined as “the appropriate ethical and academic practices used to gain entry to a given community for the purpose of conducting formal

research” (Jensen, 2012, p.1). As Hayes (2005, as cited in Robson, 2011) points out, gaining access is a long and winding road. Once the research proposal was accepted by the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee, it was time to start the process to contact the schools formally. Each of the schools required that a series of departments and persons are formally asked for permission to carry out the interviews. In the case of the State School, the Directorate for Education and Employment had to grant permission to the researcher to contact the head of school. Once this permission was granted, I contacted the head of school through email and a letter of information was sent to him/her. Subsequently, through an email, a designated person gave me permission to conduct the study in the said school. As to the Church School, the Secretariat for Catholic Education was contacted, and research permission was also granted by email. Lastly, with regard to the Independent School, the Head of School was contacted and eventually granted permission as well.

In all three settings, the gatekeepers were contacted as an entry point to the potential participants. They have helped me as the researcher to identify the participants and eventually introduce me to them. In all cases, the gatekeeper was a member of the senior management team of the school, either the head of school or else a designated member of the same team. This was particularly important since part of the data collection involved carrying out focus groups with students who, given their age, are a vulnerable group and hence, such collection of data is considered to be sensitive (Robson, 2011).

Consent forms were prepared in line with the aforementioned Code of Practice of the University of Malta (2017). In the case of students, the process was long in that as mentioned by Bassett, Beagan, Ristovski-Slijepcevic and Chapman (2008), recruitment of adolescents is very challenging. Parental consent or consent from another legally authorised guardian was

obtained in the case of students, since they are still under 18 years of age. Yet, given that participant students are in Year 10 and therefore are 14 years old, agreement to take part in the study was also obtained from the students themselves, as suggested in the Code of Practice. A Maltese and English version of the letters was given to all teachers, students and parents. These can be viewed in Appendix 1. Anonymity was guaranteed throughout the write-up in order to safeguard privacy and participants' personal data.

On confirmation of access and participation from the chosen schools, ten students in Year 10 from each school and three teachers teaching the same students were identified through purposive sampling after consultation with the senior management team of each participating school. Through this method, students and teachers were chosen purposefully through a deliberate selection of participants based on the qualities they possess (Etikan et al., 2015). Students had to be in the tenth year of school and teachers had to be ones who teach that same grade. In other words, through purposive sampling, teachers and students were chosen and took part by virtue of the knowledge or experience they have, their availability, their willingness to participate as well as their ability to communicate their views in relation to the objective of the study "in an articulate, expressive and reflective manner", as suggested by Elkin et al. (2015, p.2).

First, each head of school identified three teachers who would be willing to participate in the study. All heads of school gave me the email addresses of the teachers who were interested and agreed to be contacted by the researcher. I emailed the information letter, the consent form as well as the questionnaire to collect data from these participants. This method of data collection will be discussed subsequently.

With regard to further selection and contact with students, information letters and consent forms were given to the heads of three schools so that they could distribute them among the potential student participants. Once all parents' and students' information letters and consent forms were distributed (see Appendix 1), a week was allowed for them to be returned. The researcher, with the support of the heads of school of all three schools, collected the consent forms of the students who had been identified. I then scheduled a date that was convenient for the schools in order to conduct the focus groups with ten students, which was to serve as the primary tool of data collection from students.

### **3.5 | Methods of data collection**

When doing research, the researcher must consider and anticipate what will lend credibility to the data and hence, in this study, more than one method of data collection has been used in order to gather the data required. This is so since:

“no single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival casual factors. Because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of data collection must be employed. This is termed triangulation.”  
(Denzin, 1978, p.28)

Triangulation is a powerful solution to the danger of relying too much on any single data source or method that would undermine the validity or reliability of findings as a result of the weakness of any single method (Quinn Patton, 1987; Adams & Cox, 2008). In essence, triangulation is the use of two or more methods of data collection in order to minimise the degree of specificity of certain methods to forms of knowledge (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996). In the case of this comparative study, the use of two methods of data collection served to obtain information about the same phenomenon from multiple data

sources and identifying issues which are common across the groups (Adams & Cox, 2008). The strategy of triangulation is especially true of a constructivist paradigm, whereby multiple realities of people are being investigated and therefore, as Johnson (1997, as cited in Goalshani, 2003) asserts, the method of triangulation used to construct realities of people is appropriate.

For the purpose of this research project, data collection was twofold since two methods of data collection were used to gather information from multiple sources. Given the qualitative nature of the research design, focus groups and email interviews through open-ended questionnaires were the main tools for data collection. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) state that one of the features of qualitative research is that an open-ended approach is used in order to collect data for analysis. This open-ended approach facilitates analysis with respect to the research questions posed. As Goalshani (2003) states, these methods are among those which are dominant in naturalistic paradigms like the constructivist paradigm and the role of the researcher as the “instrument” (Patton, 2001 as cited in Goalshani, 2003) adds to the credibility of the research design. In this respect, credibility is intended to refer to how far can the researcher claim that the findings of the study are worth paying attention to (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, as cited in Goalshani, 2003).

Considering that this research is qualitative in nature, the term ‘credibility’ is being used to refer to the validity and reliability of the study. Although validity and reliability are terms that are primarily used in quantitative research, Patton (2001) claims that the two constructs are still important in qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Goalshani, 2003) assert that, in qualitative research, reliability and validity correspond to the credibility, consistency and applicability of the results and are essential criteria for quality. In fact,

Goalshani asserts that the terminology used in qualitative research to encompass validity and reliability includes terms such as credibility, trustworthiness and transferability.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985 as cited in Goalshani, 2003), validity refers to how appropriate the tools selected and the processes of data collection are in the research project. On the other hand, reliability refers to whether replicability of the study would be consistent and yield the same results (Leung, 2013). To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, a pilot study was conducted, as presented in earlier sections. The pilot study assessed methodological rigour and was aimed at identifying strengths and barriers in the research process that could aid or interfere with the research design and findings of the full-scale study. In addition, meetings between the researcher and the supervisor served as peer debriefing sessions, useful in providing an external examination on how the research project was progressing (Guba & Lincoln, 1985, as cited in Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). Based on that suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Goalshani, 2003), as a further step to safeguard the credibility of the study, two methods of data collection were used in order to have multiple data sources, so as to have more complete and precise research findings.

### *3.5.1 | The focus groups*

Kamberlis and Dimitriadis (2005, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2013) state that at the broadest level, focus groups can be understood to be group interviews that involve collective conversations. This understanding is supported by Adams and Cox (2008), who refer to them as a reflection on collaborative experiences. According to Pabst, Strom and Reiss (2010), “focus groups are an appropriate data collection method when one wants to listen to and gather information from a homogenous group of participants” (p. 1). Similarly, Krueger and Casey (2009, as cited in Billups, 2012) define a focus group as “a carefully planned series of

discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (p.2).

As one of the methods of data collection, it was decided to use focus groups with students as means to obtain rich information. Moreover, the choice of the focus group as the method of data collection with students also stemmed from the idea that teens may be reluctant to be interviewed individually as well as the fact that in the focus group, students are not required to read or write. Billups (2012), in parallel with the aim of the present study and quoting several studies including Barbour and Kitzinger (1999), Fern (2001) and Liamputtong (2011), further elaborates in this regard when mentioning that focus groups have recently gained popularity in educational spheres to explore student perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and experiences in an in-depth manner. Krueger and Casey (2000, as cited in Xerri, 2018) also maintain this point, that through the use of focus groups with students, factors that affect the opinion, behaviour and motivation of students emerge.

For the purpose of the research project, ten students from each school were invited to take part in the focus group interview. Robson (2011) quotes Morgan (1998) who suggests that the optimum size of the group should be between 8 and 12 participants. As such, the group was a homogenous group, in that all students belonged to one school and from the same tenth grade. In Church and State School focus groups, ten students participated. In the Independent School group, nine students attended, two of who joined the group but did not verbally participate. In the Church School, all the students were male. In the State School, six students were female and four were male. Lastly, in the Independent School, five students were male and four students were female. The focus groups in each school became sites for collective knowledge, as suggested by Kamberlis et al. (2005, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2013) and as the

researcher, I made use of this method of data collection to understand the complexities of how students understood and interpreted their relationship with their teachers vis-à-vis academic achievement.

A semi-structured interview guide was prepared, which included a series of structured open-ended questions and probes that were prepared after a thorough review of the literature. Robson (2011) maintains that this kind of schedule allows freedom in the sequencing of questions, in how they are worded and in terms of how much time is dedicated to specific topics that the questions address. In other words, this semi-structured approach allowed me as the researcher to be flexible, since questioning could be guided by the interview guide but could also be adjusted to the developing discussion as the interview unfolded (Adams & Cox, 2008). A copy of this can be found in Appendix 2.

As suggested by Morgan and Kruger (1998, as cited in Billups, 2012), the questions in the interview guide of the focus group were divided into different sections depending on the research questions. An introductory question was formulated to break the ice with students and make them feel as comfortable as possible. Following this, questions were prepared in order to orient the student towards the topic. These also addressed teacher characteristics followed by questions which target the importance of the teacher-student relationship. The fourth section focused on the teacher-student relationship and academic achievement. The last section explored activities which are school based and that may enhance the teacher-student relationship. Students were also given the opportunity to ask other questions they might have or to provide further related input.

As the researcher, I was very flexible with respect to the scheduling of the focus groups. The choice of time was entirely up to the school I was carrying out the research at and this helped ensure that the cancellation of appointments was avoided (Adams & Cox, 2008). The focus groups were conducted during lessons that were identified by the head of school, in order to minimise the interruption of lessons. In the State and Independent schools, I was asked to conduct the focus groups during double lessons of PSCD whereas in the Church school, the groups took place during a lesson of PSCD and the lesson that came after. Each focus group took around one hour, spreading over two lessons and an audio-recording device was used.

The audio-recording device increases accuracy of the data collection process and permits the interviewer to be more attentive to the interviewees (Quinn-Patton, 1987). Yin (1994) adds that audio-recordings allow the research a more precise interpretation of the interviews held with participants. Furthermore, as a researcher, I felt more comfortable recording and later transcribing rather than relying solely on hand-written notes. This process helped avoid misinterpreting what the participant had said. Having said this, as a researcher, I was careful when using an audio-recorder. Basset, Beagan, Slijepcevic and Chapman (2008) suggest that teens may be intimidated by recording equipment. Therefore, this aspect of data collection was mentioned in the information letter and a mobile phone was used as the audio-recording device, which is something that teens are very familiar with. In all groups, student passed the audi-recorder between them when they wanted to speak, even though there were times when they spoke far from the recorder. In that case, I tried as much as possible to encourage them to repeat what they had just said when the recorder was closer to them in order to be heard.

The location where the interviews took place were all classrooms and, in each school, the place was identified by the head of school. Billups (2012) asserts that the environment where

focus groups should be conducted must be one that has familiar surroundings so that students may have a candid and relaxed conversation. Furthermore, the place where the group interviews took place had to be one which provides privacy, whereby the participants do not risk being overheard (Bassett et al., 2008). In the State and Church school, the PSCD rooms were used and in the Independent school, an empty class was deemed to be a good place.

As the researcher, I played the role of the moderator during all focus groups and this served to facilitate the discussion as well as to make sure that the responses of the students were being recorded appropriately. This role necessitated that I seek to strike a balance between being active and passive during the interview and tried to generate interest and discussion about the topic being discussed. At the same time, I was very cautious not to lead the conversation towards particular hypothesis or prior expectations, as suggested by Sim (1998, in Robson, 2011). Therefore, I tried to generate interest in the discussion about the topic while at the same time, paid attention not to lead the group to preconceived ideas to confirm my initial hypothesis (Robson, 2011). I was very careful not to express judgement when the students were sharing information. They knew that I was a teacher and therefore, I could see that at times, when they spoke negatively about a teacher, they did it with caution so as not to offend me or risk being exposed. I kept on reassuring them that whatever they said will not be shared with anyone and that their names will not be presented in the study. Furthermore, I sought to include every student in the conversation, as suggested by Adam & Cox (2008, as cited in Xerri, 2018) and Barbour (2007, as cited in Xerri, 2018). Yet, this was not always possible and there were some students who were more dominant than others in the group. In this case, I sought to include every participant as much as possible through prompt and round-robin techniques. Despite this, two students from the Independent School focus group still did not verbally contribute at all. Furthermore, being teenagers, at times the participants in the focus

group found some difficulty to engage in lengthy conversation (Bassett et al., 2008) and hence, ongoing prompting was necessary especially in one group.

During all the focus groups, student used two languages to respond, namely Maltese and English. In all, students code-switched between Maltese and English, which locally are the two official languages. As the researcher, I felt that students could be allowed to do that given that focus groups were kept as informal as possible so that students feel comfortable to share their views on the topic (Prelovskaja, 2013). To differentiate between groups, students in the State School predominantly preferred Maltese but still used English sparingly, in the Church School, student used both languages consistently and in the Independent School, almost all the students used English as their preferred language. As I stated beforehand, based on that proposed by Xerri (2018), creating a comfortable atmosphere was something I sought to ensure, even though, it was a challenge for me as the researcher. Hence, I encouraged self-disclosure in the students' preferred language so as not to compromise their perceptions due to the language barrier.

The audio-recordings of the three focus groups were later fully transcribed, since as highlighted by Robson (2015), a detailed transcript of the data is important in the analysis phase of the research study. The contents of the recording were listened to and transcribed on the same day, or the day after the focus groups took place to get a more accurate representation of what was said. Full verbatim transcriptions were made and all verbal, intelligible utterances were written down (ibid.). Students were encouraged to speak one at a time throughout the interview so that transcribing the material would be easier. The transcribed student responses from the focus groups have not been included in the write-up since some of the information might otherwise jeopardise the anonymity of the participants.

As mentioned above, transcription included text in English and Maltese given that students were code-switching all throughout the focus groups in all three sectors.

### *3.5.2 | The email interview: An open-ended questionnaire*

In addition to the focus groups used to collect data from student participants, a sample of teachers teaching in the same grade in the same schools were invited to answer an e-mail interview by completing a questionnaire with open-ended questions directed at identifying key aspects outlined in the literature review. This source of data collection allowed the teachers to elaborate on their experiences in order to express their positions and thoughts eloquently. Robson (2011) states that this kind of interview involves a full set of open-response questions that allow the participants to reflect on their answers before replying. It also gives the opportunity to the participant to modify previously answered questions and to say things that are easier said in an email given the impersonal nature of replying in writing as opposed to face-to-face. Further to the above, an email interview is also time effective, in that teachers had the time to reflect on what answers to give prior to submitting their responses, while avoiding the more time-consuming face-to-face interview. My intention as the researcher was to allow the participant teachers to express their thoughts freely, with spontaneity and in their own language (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996). In this way, my approach was sympathetic to the teacher's situations in terms of restrictions and lack of flexibility they have due to timetabling during the school day.

The construction of the questionnaire was undertaken in several stages, whereby the researcher began with the research problem and then went through the process of generating questions, always bearing in mind the format and the type of questions to be used (Frankfort-Nachmais & Nachmais, 1996). This facilitated the interpretation and completion of the tool

and hence, aimed at increasing the accuracy of the responses given by the participants (Adams & Cox, 2008).

The idea of using an open-ended approach with participant teachers is suggested by Schumann (1966, as cited in Singer & Cooper, 2017) and Kabilan (2013), who claim that open-ended probes in questionnaires capture a full range of responses. They provide an opportunity through which the participant can express what is on their mind in relation to the topic of discussion (Singer & Cooper, 2017). Wenemark (2010, as cited in Singer & Cooper, 2017) points at the fact that these types of questions empower the participants and motivates them to respond. Roulston (2012) maintains that the way participants respond in questionnaires with open-ended questions takes place after the respondent has had the opportunity to think about the meaningful experiences and thoughts they would like to share with the researcher. The same author also emphasises that the questions asked in this case are not presumptuous and are non-directive. Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1996) also support these claims as they assert that open-ended questions are virtuous by nature in that they do not force the person responding to adapt to preconceived answers.

An interview guide with set open-ended questions was prepared from the research questions of the project and informed by the related existing literature. Robson (2015) argues that questions in questionnaires should be designed to answer the research questions and eventually the goal of the research project. Czaja and Blair (2005, as cited in Robson, 2015) provide a model which stresses the importance of the task that the respondents have in order to interpret the questions, recall the information related to it, decide on how to answer and report that answer. As suggested above, questions were written in a non-directive manner and as the principal investigator, I made no presumptions about the type of answer that the

researcher wanted but rather, gave the opportunity to the participants to construct their own perceptions.

To facilitate the usability and how effective the questionnaire is as a tool for data collection, attention was given to the way it was structured (Adams & Cox, 2008). In this respect, questions were set in sequence according to the research questions, aimed at helping the participants contextualise their answers (ibid.). The wording of the questions was kept simple so that teachers would understand them easily, a factor which also lends credibility to the answers given since simple wording is likely to be uniformly understood by all (ibid.). As also put forward by the same authors, the questions set in this questionnaire were opinion and attitudinal, open-ended questions which required a deeper concentration on behalf of the respondents.

The questions delved into characteristics that constitute a positive or a negative relationship according to students and teachers, and were aimed at obtaining results about perceptions from both types of participants about the topic under investigation, which would well serve the comparative aspect of the study. Teachers were asked to give their views on academic achievement and whether the relationship they have with students plays a role in it.

Furthermore, the questionnaire addressed the qualities of a good teacher as well as looking at the teacher-student relationship as a tool in the learning process. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 2.

Teachers were first approached by the head of school who handed them the information letters. Four teachers who showed interest in participating were then contacted by email, which was provided to the researcher by the head of school. The consent form and the

questionnaires were then emailed, teachers filled them in electronically and the completed questionnaires were received by the researcher via email. I retained the emails submitted by the teachers in case I needed to clarify some answers which they had provided. However, this turned out to be unnecessary since all the responses they gave were clear enough to be understood.

After data was collected, an aggregate of information that depicts the multiple realities of the participants at the moment of data collection was collated. As the researcher, a diary of notes which included my reflections about the process of investigation was kept. This has enabled me to capture insights and inferences occurring in the field as well as when analysing the findings, as suggested by Robson (2015). Therefore, through note taking, a trail of thoughts was kept throughout the data collection process and in the analysis thereafter.

### **3.6 | Data analysis and interpretation**

An account of the results, which can be found in the next chapter, has been produced in order to facilitate the analysis and interpretation stage. The findings of the study have been collated thematically and presented according to the method of data collection. Raw data, in the form of representative quotes, were presented in the language they were uttered. In cases when Maltese was used (by students only since all teachers responded in English), a transliterated version was written and presented alongside the original version. Transliteration was used in order to capture the exact equivalent meaning of what the participants said in view of the fact that a simple translation would not have been possible because the exact meaning of Maltese corresponding words did not exist in English (Regmi, Naidoo, Pilkington, 2010).

Henceforth, the next step was to analyse and interpret it since the raw data did not speak for itself and needed light to be shed for its meaning to emerge (Robson, 2011). Analysis and interpretation of the data collected involves adding meaning and significance to the raw data by ordering and organising it into patterns, categories and basic descriptions (Quinn Patton, 1987). Missing this stage in the investigative process would mean that messages would not emerge but stay hidden and therefore, it is an integral part of the design process for any investigation. Thorne (2000) describes this phase of the research as a complex phase in qualitative research whereby the researcher becomes an instrument for analysing data.

### *3.6.1 / Thematic analysis*

Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic approach that is used to identify, analyse, organise, describe and report themes which emerge from the data in the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006 as cited in Nowell et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke (2006, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017) describe this rigorous approach as one that leads to trustworthy and insightful conclusions.

Part of thematic analysis involves coding the raw data. Gibbs (2007, as cited in Robson, 2015) describes coding as that which defines what the data one is analysing is about. Gibbs delineates that this process comprises “identifying and recording one or more passages of text or other data items such as the parts of pictures, that, in some sense, exemplify the same theoretical or descriptive idea” (p. 38). Nowell et al. (2017) maintain that at this stage of the research, the researcher would be familiar with the data and formed ideas about what is in it and what is interesting about it. They go on to say that this phase of coding is a reflective process which allows the researcher to interact with the data.

The mechanism employed to analyse data in this research study was thematic coding analysis, which is defined by Nowell et al. (2017) as “a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing and reporting themes found within the data set” (p.2). Robson (2015) suggests that the thematic coding approach can be used as a constructionist method (Robson, 2015), whereby the realities, meanings and experiences of participants are examined as being part of a range of discourses operating in society. This method was chosen to analyse the data since it generates findings that are insightful and which can be trusted (Braun & Clarke, 2006, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017). It also enabled me, as the researcher, to summarise the key elements from the large body of data collected. It involved identifying patterns in the data, reviewing them, defining and naming them and finally producing a report related to theoretical, methodological and literary analysis (ibid.). This method allows for flexibility, not only in terms of theoretical flexibility but also regarding the research questions, the size and constitution of the samples, the data collection tools as well as which approaches to follow to generate meaning (ibid.).

Thematic coding involves looking at the raw data, coding the data into meaningful sets and grouping identified codes into themes (Robson, 2011). Denzin and Lincoln (2013) define themes as “abstract constructs that investigators identify before, during, and after data collection” (p.13). As put forward by Denzin and Lincoln (2013), themes could be derived from reading the literature and then developed into more themes and sub-themes as the data analysis unfolds. In this research project, the themes identified captured the perceptions of the teachers and the students about the teacher-student relationship and how it impacts academic achievement.

In the present research project, all parts of the data collected were identified as being of potential interest and accordingly labelled. As suggested by Xerri (2018), in order to generate coding categories and themes, I did not rely solely on the focus group interview guide nor the questionnaire, but also on the data itself. This provided the flexibility to include themes that were introduced by the participants themselves; in other words, it helped to produce an account which was analytical rather than simply descriptive (*ibid.*). Subsequently, raw data was transformed into important segments (Nowell et al., 2017) that represent something of meaning (Robson, 2015). In other words, as Boyantzis (1998, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017) outlines, the codes captured the qualitative richness of the perceptions of teachers and students regarding their relationship and academic achievement.

Once all the data was coded and named, a list of different codes was developed, including details of each code and highlighted quotes that identified potential themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Codes with the same identifier were grouped into themes. Hence, data was collated into three main areas and different themes for each area were identified. These themes were regarded as entities that are abstract, but which brought meaning and identity to the experience of the teacher-student relationship. They were recurrent and captured the nature and basis of the experiences into one whole (DeSantis and Ugarizza, 2000, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017). Relationships between codes and themes were highlighted manually using mind maps, diagrams and tables. The latter, which are presented in Chapter 4 and labelled as Table 1 and Table 2, were particularly useful for comparative analysis, since they took the form of conceptually clustered tables which served to bring together data that related to the same themes (Robson, 2011).

### 3.6.2 | *Interpretation of data*

Denzin and Lincoln (2013) assert that interpretation is the last stage of qualitative enquiry. It involves the perceptions of all the participants, the reflectivity of the researcher and a discussion of the underlying phenomenon in relation to the findings of previous literature (Creswell, 2008).

As suggested by Hatch (2002), in this study, hermeneutic principles served to guide the researcher in interpreting these codes and themes. In this case, these illustrate co-constructed experiences and perspectives regarding the relational encounter between teachers and students. Patterson and Williams (2002) maintain that the hermeneutic researcher addresses the subject under investigation by utilising a conceptual framework, in this case constructivism, through data collection strategies and data analysis, all of which are geared toward guiding the researcher to find an understanding without any attempt at predetermining the nature of the responses.

Following these principles, there was no right or wrong responses but only truths that are dependent on the individual experiences of the participants and data collected was consistently viewed as being subjective. In other words, the data collected was interpreted and discussed only in terms of the experiential ambience it pertains to and therefore, limited to the context, space, time and individuals it was experienced in (Hatch, 2002).

### 3.7 | **Ethical considerations**

The design of any research study is an important aspect since it ensures that a framework for addressing ethical issues is explored and implemented (Seymour & Ingleton, 1999). When the

experimental design involves people, ethical problems may arise, as Robson (2011) states, in “sharp form” (p. 198), even more so when it involves participants from vulnerable groups, including children (Kimmel, 2007, as cited in Robson, 2011). In fact, because the focus groups involved children, access to these groups was negotiated through a range of gatekeepers (ibid.), from the respective bodies which oversee State schools and Church schools and then through the headmaster for all three schools.

As the researcher, it was my responsibility to ensure that integrity and professionalism is maintained in the conduct of this research study. Frankfort-Nachmais and Nachmais (1996) assert that since qualitative research methods entail active participation and meetings with participants, ethical considerations need to be made. Ethics refers to rules that guide behaviour and typically include conformity to a code or set of principles (Reynold, 1979, as cited in Robson, 2011). Hence, the University of Malta’s Code of Practice (2017) was followed in order to observe all the principles of ethical research conduct.

To start with, it was essential to gain clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Malta. Following this formal procedure, during which all necessary amendments were carried out to the research proposal, the proper channels of authority were contacted prior to any form of communication with the potential participants. Gaining consent was of primary importance. I felt that it was important that participants are fully informed about what the research project was about and hence a detailed letter of information was sent to all stakeholders prior to the commencement of the data collection process. Consent forms and assent forms in the case of students were also sent out and collected by all the participants involved.

As stated in previous sections, voluntary informed consent was given by all participants after letters of information about the study were given, including to parents of student participants. In all the information letters, the intention of the study was outlined, and participants were given the option to withdraw at any time, as suggested by Robson (2011). Apart from this, since the settings where data was gathered from were schools, the participants were allocated to the researcher by the gatekeeper (ibid.).

An important obligation which I had, as a researcher, was to safeguard the confidentiality rights of the participants by being vigilant in my writing, since as Adams and Cox (2008) postulate, participants need to be assured that their identity will be confidential and not divulged nor accessible to anyone other than the researcher and possibly the supervisor. Robson (2011) maintains that providing participants with anonymity is the norm in research and it is regarded as good practice across ethics boards worldwide. Schools have been anonymised, and all participants were given fictitious names in order to maintain their privacy. Transcribed focus group interviews and completed questionnaires have not been included in the appendices since information pertaining to the schools or teachers and students were mentioned. Apart from giving pseudonyms to the participants, all the recordings are not accessible to others, in order to further protect the interest of the participants.

Lastly, being a teacher myself, I was careful not to be judgmental when the student spoke negatively about fellow teachers like me. I sought to remain objective as much as possible in order not to let my bias as well as my inclination towards building positive relationship with teachers, transpire in my reaction in front of the students during the groups. I did not want to be unethically judgemental of those teachers whose approach in class and at school did not match mine. Therefore, I limited my responses to prompts and further questioning and

refrained from any non-verbal or verbal personal reactions to any of the respondents' contributions.

### **3.8 | Conclusion**

In this chapter, the methodological process employed in this research project was outlined. A pilot project was conducted in order to assess the tools of data collection prior to the full-scale study. Participant selection has been described, as were the methods of data collection.

Following this, ways to analyse and interpret the data have been put forward. Lastly, ethical considerations adopted along the course of the study have also been mentioned.

In the next chapter, the results of the study will be presented.

## **CHAPTER 4 | RESULTS**

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#### **4.1 | Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to compare the perceptions of teachers and students of the impact the teacher-student relationship has on academic achievement. The theoretical framework adopted throughout the whole process was constructivism, whereby the participant students were viewed as ones who construct knowledge as part of an active learning process, as suggested by Tippens et al. (1993), while the teacher participants are the ones to deal with learners as individuals and who also recognise that the behaviour of the student is “a direct reflection of his/her life experiences” (Plourde & Alawiye, 2003).

The results obtained from the data gathered from the focus groups and the teacher questionnaires are presented here under. Firstly, the themes and sub-themes which emerged from the focus groups are presented followed by those of the teacher questionnaires. The same approach to presenting the results has been taken in order to facilitate the comparative analytic approach in the following chapter.

#### **4.2 | Presentation of results from the student focus groups**

This section will present the results collected from data generated among students during the three focus groups held in the three different schools. The main areas identified are: 1) elements that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship; 2) academic success and its relation to the teacher-student relationship; and lastly, 3) ways to improve the teacher-student relationship. These are summarised in Table 1.

Main area	Theme	Sub-themes
Elements that contribute to a positive TSR	Teacher qualities, behaviours and strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The empathic teacher</li> <li>- The outgoing and enthusiastic teacher</li> <li>- The friendly teacher</li> <li>- The caring teacher</li> <li>- The funny teacher</li> <li>- Flexible classroom management</li> </ul>
Academic success and the TSR	TSR is important for motivation, engagement and achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The TSR is highly important</li> <li>- The TSR helps among other things</li> </ul>
Improving the TSR	The non-formal aspect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Live-in activities</li> <li>- Sports-related activities</li> <li>- Free lessons</li> <li>- School educational visits</li> </ul>
	The considerate and flexible Teacher	

*Table 1 | Organisation of data from thematic coding analysis – Focus groups*

#### *4.2.1 | Elements that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship – Teacher qualities, behaviours and strategies*

The teacher-student relationship was recognised as important by participants, with students particularly dedicating a lot of their contributions to this aspect of learning. In this category, students spoke a lot about teacher qualities, behaviours and strategies, all of which students and teachers considered as contributing to the development of this relationship.

In their responses, many students mentioned experiences and ideas that can be grouped into a theme which addresses qualities that students feel teachers have, behaviours that teachers perform and strategies that teachers used in class. According to students, the latter three

aspects of the teacher-student relationship all contribute to a positive relationship with their teachers.

#### 4.2.1.a | The empathic teacher

A quality of the teacher which was recognised by students was empathy. Many students mentioned how they like it when a teacher walks in their shoes. David<sup>1</sup> in the Church school remarked that the teacher he prefers most is one “who understands the life of a student and that it can be a difficult life as much as the life of a teacher” (“Hi persuna li tifhem il-ħajja ta’ student u li tista’ tkun diffiċli daqs ħajja ta’ teacher”). Among students in the state school, this aspect of the teacher-student relationship was very evident and three students spoke about it at length. Tammy stated that her favourite teacher understands her, giving the example that when she has a problem with homework, the teacher tries to put herself in her position, understands that the student had a lot of work to do and gives more time to hand in the work, without shouting or giving consequences (“Hi tifhmek. Eżempju, meta tghidilha problema bil-homework, it-teacher tpoġġi lilha nnifisha fis-sitwazzjoni tiegħek, eżempju, tghidilha kelli x’ nagħmel u ma kellix ċans. Tgħidlek OK, ha nagħtik iktar ċans. Mhux toqgħod tgħajjat u tagħti l-punishments għalxejn”). Another two students, Abel and Nat, also noted that they like teachers who understand them and who give chances, without resorting to issuing warnings or sending notifications home.

In the focus group with students from the Independent School, Zane claimed that it is not only important that the teacher makes sure that he is doing well in the subject but “if we have a

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<sup>1</sup> The names given to students and teachers are fictitious and attributed to the participants at random without association to the true identity of the participants.

problem, in life not necessarily in school, they understand and help out”. On the contrary, in the same school, Martina commented on how frustrated she feels when a teacher enters the class and exhibits no regard to what the student had been through during that day or possibly even at home. She added that there may be times, which hinder the relationship with the teacher, when the teacher sees a behaviour, does not make an effort to understand why and simply gives a punishment, such as sending the student out of class or reporting the bad behaviour.

Related to the theme of empathy is when the teacher listens to his or her pupils. Students gave examples of instances when teachers actively listened to them, both in and out of the classroom. David, a student in the Church School emphasised that his favourite teacher “actually listens and [he’s] not afraid to ask questions”. Leon further commented how his favourite teacher is someone he can go to because he knows that what he will share will not fall on deaf ears. Rupert commented on how he feels “valued when [he] feels the teacher is listening to what [he] is saying and that she actually properly listens and pays attention.” This was shared by Giorgio in the Independent School, who maintained that the teacher is great when he or she is able to listen and is one “who I can share with, feeling comfortable while doing so”.

#### 4.2.1.b | The outgoing and enthusiastic teacher

A further quality that some students pointed out which, in their view, contributes to a positive teacher-student relationship was a teacher with an outgoing personality and an enthusiastic appeal during lessons as well as out of class. All the students appreciated these qualities; yet, whereas students in the Church and Independent Schools commented on how a good number

of teachers are outgoing and enthusiastic, students in State Schools commented that they would like to see more of this aspect in their relationships with their teachers.

David, in the Church School, remarked that whether a student bonds or not with their teacher depends on whether the teacher is outgoing or not, since if the latter is outgoing, that makes him or her more approachable and therefore easier to relate to. The same students said that his favourite teacher is one with whom he “is able to actually have a laugh.” Leon added that his favourite teacher is easy to talk to (“tista’ tmur fuqu u fa’li biex tkellmu”). Nat, in the State School, commented that the teacher he is fondest of allows him and his friends to joke during lessons as long as they still work at their task, showing a balance between discipline and fun (“Huwa persuna li thallina niċċajjaw fil-lesson. Qisu fl-istess ħin, niċċajjaw imma naħdmu ukoll allura l-lesson tiġi bbilanċjata, bejn strict u nieħdu gost”).

Joann, in the State School, commented that her favourite teacher is the only one who is not boring and who does not complain all the time (“M’hiġiex boring u ddaħqek. Ma teqridx. Mhux dak it-tip li ħa toqgħod teqred u ddejjeq”). The same opinion was shared by Tom, who said that for him to like a teacher, he or she would have to refrain from being boring or very frigid in his or her approach, like most of his teachers are. He added that he is more attentive and quieter with the few teachers who do not resort to raising their voice and who are more approachable and fervent in their teacher approach (“It-teacher ma tridx tkun qerda. Jekk noqgħod imqareb u jkollha raġun, ok. Imma mhux il-ħin kollu jgħajtu. Jekk it-teacher ma tgħajjatx miegħi u tkun nice, iktar noqgħod kwiet. Iktar ma tkun boring jew tgħajjat, iktar intellef jew hekk”). Doris added that the class is more calm with teachers who are friendly and fun to be with (“Meta t-teacher tkun orrajt, peress li tkun ok, iktar inkunu kalmi”), adding

later that it is better when she is able to joke in class with a teacher who likes to joke (“Iktar inkun ok meta naf li nista’ niċċajta, li tkun tista’ tiċċajta magħhom”).

Finally, Nat in the State School mentioned that in her case, even the fact that the teacher makes an effort to provide attractive notes and gives a thorough, fun explanation that everyone understands in class is another quality that, in her opinion, improves the relationship she has with particular teachers.

#### 4.2.1.c | The friendly teacher

In addition to the above, several students spoke about the friendly disposition that some teachers have during school hours, such as greeting them not only when they are in class, but also when they are out of class, such as in the hallway or in the corridors. This was particularly mentioned in the focus group held in the Church School by Ricky. He said he feels valued when a teacher “asks [me] how [I] feel during the lesson or even in the hallway”.

Phil seconded Ricky, claiming that when a teacher passes through the corridor and says good morning or good afternoon, he feels very appreciated as a whole person and that he “is not just a number” (“Anka meta xi għalliema tkun għaddejja mill-kuritur u tgħidlek bonġu jew good afternoon. Dik ukoll hija...tħossha. Inti taf li huma jirrispettaw u jittrattaw bħala persuna mhux biss bħala student. I’m not just a number”).

Some students spoke of this theme, but from the other side of the coin, that is, when the teacher is not friendly some feel that the teacher-student relationship suffers. Zane, in the Independent School, shared the views regarding how he does not like it when a teacher walks

into class angry because of something unrelated to the class and “we end up getting the blame.” He noted how, for him, it is nice when the teacher’s behaviour in class has to be friendly regardless of what happened before the lesson.

Doris, in the State School, also commented on the above. She complained of teachers who are not sociable and who tend to project personal feelings unrelated to the students onto the students. Doris finds it very frustrating when those same students would have nothing to do with the reason behind the teacher’s negative mood at that point in time. Doris said that she gets very annoyed when the teacher comes into class in a bad mood, with an unpleasant attitude and the students get the blame (“Ikollha burdata ħażina u neĥlu aĥna magħha”).

#### 4.2.1.d | The caring teacher

Lastly, another quality that emerged and which students appreciate in a teacher is when the latter is supportive, not only in terms of the academic aspect of the teacher-student relationship but also beyond the academic. Aron in the State school said that her least favourite teacher does not ever go next to her when she has a difficulty despite that she is one of the students who struggles the most in that particular subject (“Mhux kollha jifhmuk. Jien fil-Maths batuta u lanqas qatt tiġi ħdejja biex tgħini. Lanqas taġti każ”). Some students also noted that a good teacher is one who is supportive not only in terms of the subject they teach but also in other aspects, which might be related to personal issues. Phil, in the Church School focus group, remarked that apart from subject teaching, a good teacher must teach about life in general by possibly including examples in the lesson which may be applied to everyday life.

“I think that apart from the fact that a teacher teaches you Maths, English or Maltese, he should at a certain point teach you about life too. That is that in part of the lessons, he should incorporate, for example, things which are related to life. But apart from that, it helps that the teacher gives advice and not remain close minded about the subject and then, life outside is as if it is just about exams.”

(“Jien naħseb li apparti li teacher għandu jgħallmek fuq Maths, English jew Malti, għandu ukoll f’xi perjodi ta’ żmien jgħallmek fuq il-ħajja ukoll. Iġifieri f’xi partijiet tal-lesson idañħal ukoll per eżempju dak li għandu x’jaqsam fuq il-ħajja. Imma apparti minn hekk, tgħin naqra biex tagħti pariri mhux qisu jibqa’ close minded fuq is-suggett imbagħad il-ħajja ta’ barra qisha eżamijiet biss.”)

The same opinion was expressed by Marcus, who hailed from the same school, by referring to an incident that happened at school.

“When I had something and he (the teacher) had nothing to do with it. He still spoke to me about it to try and help me deal with what had happened. It had nothing to do with the subject. I had got into trouble and the teacher spoke to me and he tried to help me”.

“Meta dat-teacher jien kelli xi haġa u hu ma kellux x’jaqsam magħha. Imma hu xorta kellimni fuqha biex jgħini fuq li ġara biex jara għal x’hiex u hekk. Ma kellux x’jaqsam mas-suggett. Kont ġejt f’xi trouble u kien kellmni u pprova jgħini u hekk”

Loris shared a similar experience.

“I remember that there was a particular teacher who tried everything, everything, in the sense that every second of free time he had, he used to try to help me and he even spoke to my parents even when I told him there was no need. He knew that even though I used to tell him so, he still knew that there was the need.

“Niftakar li kien hemm teacher partikolari li pprova minn kollox, minn kollox ta’, dak it-tip li kull sekonda tal-free time kien jipprova jgħini u anka jitkellem mal-ġenituri anka meta kont ngħidli li m’hemmx għalfejn. Kien jaf li għalkemm kont qed ngħidli hekk, kien jaf li kien hemm bżonn”

In the Independent School, Martina agreed with the above, adding that besides helping a student in life, the teacher is also great when he or she tries to show the student the right path, highlighting behaviour that is undesirable and guiding the student towards the right choices.

Zane shared a similar opinion, stating that the teachers he has a good relationship with are the

ones who do not only seek the student's success in a subject but ones who, in case of a problem the student has, help as much as they can.

Another form of supportive behaviour mentioned by students is when student feel they can share their thoughts when the teacher creates a climate in class which opens room for discussion. Several students in all focus groups spoke about PSCD as that one subject which gives them the opportunity to open up. In Ricky's words, "it makes [me] get closer to the group and the teacher, which makes it easier later down the road to open up". Neil commented how one of his teachers even plays music during lessons while they are working, making the atmosphere in the class a more relaxed and stress-free situation.

#### 4.2.1.e | The funny teacher

One of the most common responses that students gave refers to the teachers' sense of humour during lessons. Joann, in the State School, explained how when the teacher jokes during lessons, it makes a difference to whether he or she enjoys learning that particular subject or not ("Is-sugġett sabiħ għax it-teacher tiċċajta. Tagħmel differenza"). This point was also raised by Mike in the Church School ("Hi ċajtiera u tieġu gost fil-lesson magħha). Leon also mentioned this point when he explained how his favourite teacher is the one he is fondest of because she is not boring and she makes him laugh ("Mhux boring u ddaħqek").

In the Church School, Dean commented that "the teacher is actually able to have a laugh and she does not crack the whip. [We] can actually laugh with her". In the same focus group, Neil stated that his favourite teacher lets him and his classmates joke during lessons ("Huwa persuna li tħallina niċċajtax fil-lesson"). In the Independent School group, Michele added that

for him, it is important the teacher “is able to have a laugh, not whenever I joke, I get kicked out”, ending his affirmation that he would like teachers to be able to have a sense of humour. To this, the same student comments on how he expects a teacher to be able to see that the sense of humour of a fourteen-year-old is different to the sense of humour of a grown man, since “the level of maturity is not the same. The teacher is an adult and the students are not.”

In relation to this point, in the Independent School, one student, Isabella, commented on how at times, the students share a joke with some teachers who laugh at the joke, feeling that a bond starts to build up as a result. However, she added that students feel perplexed when they share the same joke with other teachers, who not only do not appreciate the joke but may also apply consequences as a result. Isabella, with the rest of the group agreeing with her subsequent statement, affirmed that in this case the teachers who do not appreciate the joke end up in a negative light due to their lack of a sense of humour when compared to other teachers.

#### 4.2.1.f | Flexible classroom management

Another teacher behaviour which emerged as being related to elements that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship was the mode of discipline which teachers exercise in class, particularly that they in general prefer teachers who are flexible in the way they exercise disciplinary measures.

Neil said that he particularly likes one of the option subjects in his school because the teacher is not very strict during lessons and is flexible in the way he or she addresses challenging behaviour. He said that because of this he is not afraid to talk or ask questions in class. In the

same focus group, Dean also said that he likes teachers who are not strict, as Loris had commented. The latter students said that even though their teacher is strict at times, he is still approachable enough not to shun students away when they need to talk to him. This was further explained by Neil who summed it up as “balance between being strict and having fun”, seconded by Marcus who added that talking to this teacher is like talking to a friend, in spite of the fact that “when push comes to shove, he disciplines [us] whenever [we] need”.

In the focus group held in the State School, this teacher behaviour was also mentioned. Tom explained how he is put off when the teacher shouts and gives punishments that students perceive as given without reason (“Mhux toqghod tghajjat u taghti punishments ghalxejn”). Tom spoke about how his behaviour tends to be better when the teacher does not shout at him and conversely, how he tends to be disruptive with teachers who raise their voice as a behaviour management strategy (“Jekk it-teacher ma tghajjatx mieghi, iktar noqghod kwiet. Iktar ma tghajjat, hekk noqghod iktar intellef”). The same opinion was shared among several students, including Aron and Rania, with the former claiming that she does not like it when the teacher gives reports or break detention and especially when the students are asked to leave the class (“Itlaqli ‘l barra”).

In the Independent School, modes of discipline were mentioned in that students seem to dislike it when the teacher resorts to reporting a student without trying to understand the reason why, as mentioned by Martina. Michele also said that one of his teachers, who he does not have a good relationship with, keeps on changing his seating place even when he does not show bad behaviour, causing the student to show lack of interest in the subject from the very moment the teacher enters the class, regardless of the subject matter.

#### 4.2.2 / *Academic success and the teacher-student relationship and its importance for motivation, engagement and achievement*

The second research question focused on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement. From the students' responses to these questions, a theme of association between the two constructs has surfaced. The majority of students thought their relationship with their teachers was highly significant and that it made them more motivated and engaged in their learning process. On the other hand, others believed that this relationship was one of many other variables, which also play a part in whether a student does well or not at school.

##### 4.2.2.a | The teacher-student relationship is highly important for motivation, engagement and achievement

Neil, in the focus group held in the Church School, maintained that he feels that the lesson is interesting only if the teacher makes it so.

“I think that if a student is having fun during a lesson because of the teacher, it is more likely that one listens to the teacher and he would learn since learning takes place when one is enjoying himself. Something that interest you is more likely to be learnt as opposed to something that bothers you and that you do not pay attention to.”

“Jien naħseb li jekk inti qed tieħu pjaċir waqt lesson ħabba t-teacher, għandek iktar ċans li se tisma' minnu jew minnha u se titgħallem għax inti titgħallem iktar meta tieħu pjaċir. Xi ħaġa li tinteressak ħa titgħallem iktar minnha milli xi lezzjoni li ddejjeq u mhux se tagħti kasha”

He adds that when the relationship with the teacher is well-developed, there is a higher chance that his grades are better since he would not find the subject tedious, even if it is not a favourite subject (“Jekk ir-relazzjoni ta' bejn it-teacher u student tkun żviluppata, hemm ċans li l-marki jaf ikunu aħjar għax is-suġġett ma jdejjeqkx daqshekk, anki jekk ma jkunx għal

qalbek”). Leon shares the same view, maintaining that he thinks grades increase when the relationship between him and his teachers is a positive one.

“I think that the marks, I believe will be higher if you have a good relationship with the teacher since you would not go in for the lesson saying that how sad today I have that lesson. You would say I’m going to have fun in that lesson so I believe that even when it comes to studying, I would say to myself that today I’m revising that subject because I like how the teacher teaches it.”

“Jien naħseb li il-marki, nemmen li jistgħu jitolgħu jekk għandek relazzjoni tajba ma’ l-għalliem għax int ma tidholx għal lesson, isma illum jaqq għandi dik il-lesson. Tgħid u le jien nieħu gost f’dik il-lesson allura nemmen li anki x’hin tiġi biex tistudja, ngħid illum se nagħmel dak is-sugġett għax jogħgobni kif jgħallmu t-teacher”).

Further to the above, Loris shared how he is not tempted to skive lessons with teachers who show him respect and who he has a positive relationship with.

“If the teacher shows me respect, I’d say to myself that I am not going to skive. I’d say that in order to show respect, I am going to try harder and show that I would not like to disappoint the teacher. Even if in that subject your relationship with teacher is a good one, it is more likely that you move forward.”

“Anka jekk inti dak iċċertu teacher jurik ċertu rispett, ngħid mhux se niskarta jew hekk. Ngħid biex nuri rispett, ha nipprova aktar u nuri li niddejjaq li niddizappunta lit-teacher. U anka jekk is-sugġett għandek relazzjoni tajba mat-teacher, tmexxi iktar.”

In the State School group, Abel further describes how in his opinion, the teacher makes or breaks in terms to obtaining results, claiming that even though he is a native speaker of English, when his teacher of the same subject “was miserable and not to [my] liking”, his grades dropped drastically, causing him great embarrassment since he speaks very good English. One other student, Doris, describes this issue with a lot of anger, saying that it is the teacher’s fault (“Tort tat-teacher”) that she failed Maths and Physics because the teacher is displeasing (“antipatika”) and as a result she obtained very low grades. She adds that this

year, because she has a teacher who is nice (“vera ħelwa”), she has done much better at both subjects.

Gabriel, in the Independent School, mentioned how when the teacher is approachable he tends to do better than in other subjects, especially when the teacher takes particular interest in individual students and uses praise as a way to bolster the students’ esteem. Martina also commented on this matter, stating that she believes that a good relationship with teachers gives her motivation to revise and study (“Iva għax meta t-teacher tkun nice miegħi, I get motivated to study and revise more”).

4.2.2.b | The teacher-student relationship is important but there are other things which matter too

David, in the Church School, believes that grades are something that a student must work hard for himself but that having a good relationship with the teacher helps.

“One must work for the grades himself but the teacher one has can influence how much you study the subject. It is true that it may be the case that you will not be needing the subject again in the future but it is still an O’level. If the teacher encourages you and speaks to you, it always helps.”

“Grades huma xi ħaġa li trid taħdem għalija inti imma l-għalliem li jkollok jista’ jinfluenza kemm inti tistudja dan is-sugġett. Vera s-sugġett forsi mintix se tużah iktar ‘il quddiem imma o’level huwa xorta o’level. Jekk it-teacher tħeġġek, tgħidlek u tkellmek, dejjem jgħin.”

The same view is shared by a student, Rita, this time in the State School, who believes that marks improve if there is a positive teacher-student relationship; however, she also believes that the student has to do her best as well, since having a good relationship is still not enough to pass, in his case (“Skont. Xorta trid tagħmel ħiltek, ovvjament biex ittejjeb il-marki. Jekk it-teacher tkun ok, tgħin. Imma mhux biżżejjed għax xorta ma ngħaddix imma nsomma.”).

In the Independent School, Isabella elaborated on this point as well. She said that academic success is the result of studying and also how much a student likes the teacher. She spoke of how she “prefers doing HW of teachers who I like” adding that studying is also very important. Isabella also commented on how she finds it difficult to study those subjects that are taught by teachers who she does not like, stating that she does the HW just the same, but not with dedication at home, but in the morning before class.

Further to the above, in the Church School group, Phil claims that no matter how nice the teacher is and how good the relationship is, the responsibility is still the student’s. Phil maintains that if the student does not do his part, he will still fail (“Tista’ mhux ikollok teacher helwa u orrajt ghax jekk ma tistudjax, xorta ma tghaddix”). Doris, in the State School, shared the same opinion and said that she dislikes Biology, but it has nothing to do with her teacher, who is nice (“Eżempju jien Biology, mhux sugġett favorit tiegħi. Imma mhux ghax mhux orrajt it-teacher ghax hi ok jaħasra. Imma jien ma jogħgobnix”).

This point was also mentioned in the focus group held in the Independent School. Michele claimed that “if the teacher is good and nice but I don’t like the subject, I’m still not going to study it”, adding that if it is the case that he does not like the teacher either, things will obviously get worse. Greta also affirmed that it does not make a difference to her whether she has a good relationship with the teacher or not because ultimately, she still has to study to pass. Interestingly, Zane concluded this part of the discussion saying that in his case, when he does not like the teacher, he takes it on as a challenge to show the teacher that even though things between them are not fine, he as a student still succeeded without the teacher’s positive disposition.

#### 4.2.3 / *Improving the teacher-student relationship: The non-formal aspect*

The third area that emerged from the data collected from the focus groups is related to perceptions about ways to improve the teacher-student relationship. Students' responses could be organised into two themes: improving the teacher-student relationship through the non-formal aspect of schooling and through a considerate and flexible approach from teachers. In their responses, students spoke of several activities which are non-academic in nature or which lend themselves to occurring in an informal setting. Students viewed these instances as ones that could help to improve their relationships with their teachers. The activities students mentioned were live-in activities, sports activities, free periods as well as educational visits outside the school premises.

##### 4.2.3.a | Live-in activities

A lot of the student interviewed replied to questions related to ways to help them build better relationships with the teachers, including Marcus, Loris and Ricky in the Church School, who mentioned having live-in activities. Marcus described this activity as non-academic and therefore it allows him to interact with his teachers in a very non-formal way (“Live-ins hux. Nkunu nistgħu noqogħdu mat-teachers mhux għas-sugġett jew għall-eżami hux”). He added that during such an activity, he has the opportunity to see the teachers in a different environment other than school and observe how a teacher who is strict at school, would turn out to be totally different during a live-in (“Hija opportunità biex it-tifel ikollu relazzjoni barra mill-iskola ma’ l-għalliema. Jien naf ħafna teachers li l-iskola huma vera strict imbagħad tmur live-in magħhom, u totalment differenti”). Loris went on to say that during a live-in, one gets to know their teachers better, they talk to the student and also, perhaps view

the student through a different lens (“Għaliġa live-ins ukoll. U lit-teachers issir tafhom, jikkellmu miegħek u fosri jarawk differenti”).

In the State School, live-in types of activities were mentioned as well by Aron, who said that they never have such activities and that he thinks that these would certainly help. In the same group, Tom showed frustration at the fact that in their school they have a programme for students with challenging behaviour who have live-ins but finds it unfair that such activities are only available to those students and not to all of them (“Dawk tal-\*\*\*<sup>2</sup> għandhom live-in imma aħna le. Mhux fair hux”). Rita agreed with Tom on this point. Nat added that these children who belong to this group have a better relationship with their teachers, saying that it seems that more activities are organised for those who are naughty at school (“Heqq huma vera jmorru mat-teachers. Imqarbin imma jmorru tajjeb mat-teachers. Qisu min ikun imqareb iktar jagħmlulhom affarijiet”). Tom and Rania agreed.

#### 4.2.3.b | Sports-related activities

Further to live-in activities, some students also mentioned sports activities as ones which play an important role in the kind of relationship students have with their teachers. Phil maintained that sports leagues held at school where teachers and students take part helps the relationship since during these activities teachers and students have the opportunity to bond with one another, even if the teacher is playing against you. He adds that sports and competition help to strengthen the teacher-student relationship (“Leagues mat-teachers bħal futbol, handball, basketball. Dik tista’ tgħin ir-relationship għax waqt li qed tilgħab sport li tħobb, inti qed

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<sup>2</sup> The \*\*\* stands for the name of the group of students with challenging behaviour in this particular school. Naming the group could jeopardize the anonymity of the school. Therefore, \*\*\* was used instead.

tibbondja mat-teacher. Anki jekk ikun kontrik. L-ambjent ta' sports u competition qisu jghin biex issaħħah ir-relazzjoni bejnietna"). In the State School, Rita mentioned this point too and gave an example of how her Maltese teacher went down into the school pitch to play football with the students during a free lesson, which was a much-appreciated gesture.

#### 4.2.3.c | Free lessons

Free lessons, which are free periods when the subject teacher is absent from school and therefore a replacement teacher supervises the class, were mentioned by some more students as opportunities for the teacher-student relationship to improve. Dean, in the Church School, described how during a free lesson, having a teacher who he can talk to, helps to “strengthen the relationship” since he felt he could talk to his teachers about a topic not necessarily related to their subject during time that is not restricted by syllabic content delivery.

#### 4.2.3.d | School educational visits

In the State School, Kate commented on how outings and educational visits are helpful in building positive relationships with teachers. Furthermore, in this group, Martina spoke of one teacher who organises a club for her students. Martina said that during this club, “I have chance to socialise and speak about life, not just about school, like talking about life in general”, comparing the relationship between her and this teacher as one similar to a friendship rather than a -teacher-student relationship.

#### 4.2.4 / *Improving the teacher-student relationship: The considerate and flexible teacher*

Apart from non-formal activities, students also stated that a considerate teacher who is flexible in approach may also improve how they relate to her or him and therefore, is another matter that can help to improve the teacher-student relationship.

Some students, when asked about what can help to improve the relationship between students and teachers, mentioned how teacher communication with students regarding the amount of homework they have and understanding that students have multiple subjects to study, also helps them build a more positive relationship with their teachers.

Neil, in the Church School, said that when he sees that teachers are interested in what work students have to complete other than that of their subject, the students like that teacher better. He adds that some teachers actually take into consideration that students have a life outside of school and therefore, give less homework, for example, during recesses (“Anki fil-holidays, xi teachers jaraw x’homework ikollna u ippruvaw li f’dawk il-holidays ma jagħtunix balla xogħol biex inqattgħu ħin mal-familja għax aħna ma nistgħux inlaħħqu ma’ kollox.”). Dean elaborates on this matter and says that he would like his teachers to be more considerate of the fact that his life goes beyond him as a student of that particular subject.

“all teachers not only PSCD teachers, must understand us and if they are going to give us a substantial amount of work, they have to see ‘Oh, they have Math as well!’, and so give us less. They have to see me as a whole not just as a student in their subject but see the bigger picture.”

### 4.3 | Presentation of results from the teacher questionnaires

This section will present the results collected from data collected from the questionnaire, which consisted of open-ended questions sent to teachers and collected thereafter. The main areas identified were the same as those identified for students, namely: 1) elements that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship; 2) academic success and the teacher-student relationship; and 3) improving the teacher-student relationship through various ways. These are summarised in Table 2.

Main Area	Theme	Sub-themes
Elements that contribute to a positive TSR	Teacher qualities, behaviours and strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The caring &amp; empathic teacher</li> <li>- The versatile &amp; efficient teacher</li> <li>- The teacher with a sense of humour who keeps boundaries</li> <li>- The fair and consistent teacher</li> <li>- The inclusive teacher</li> </ul>
	Student behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Well-behaved students</li> </ul>
Academic success and the TSR	TSR is important for motivation, engagement and achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The TSR is highly important</li> <li>- The TSR helps but other factors matter too</li> </ul>
Improving the TSR	The non-formal setting	
	Resources and support to fulfil expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adequate time</li> <li>- Teacher training</li> <li>- Opportunities not appraisal</li> </ul>

*Table 2 | Organisation of data from thematic coding analysis: Teacher email interviews*

#### *4.3.1 | Elements that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship: Teacher qualities, behaviours and strategies*

Teachers, like students, have mentioned that there are certain characteristics that teachers have which may contribute positively or negatively to the relationship they build with their students. These characteristics have been coded into a theme that depicts those qualities, behaviours and strategies which teachers use effectively and which contribute to the teacher-student relationship. Further to the theme, sub-themes emerged regarding specific qualities, behaviours and strategies, as described in detail hereunder.

##### 4.3.1.a | The caring and empathic teacher

Ms Brenda spoke of how being understanding of students' situations is very important, implying that the teacher must be perceptive of what the student is going through. She says that "students have feeling, moods and other problems that the teacher might not know about and therefore, as a teacher, I must be understanding in their regard", adding that compassion is very important. Ms Brenda further spoke of the concept of "being there for the students, listen to what they have to say and if necessary, get the appropriate help". Ms Julie also spoke of empathy, saying that a teacher should be able to "empathise by having the ability to relate to students even though you may not share similar life experiences or problems".

Ms Kate also shared the same views as the other two teachers, stating that in order for a good relationship with students to develop, the teacher must be able to "listen to her students and show an interest in their general well-being." She adds that "the first requisite is that students feel cared for....comfortable to speak to you without being judged." Ms Frida, from the State School, also tapped on this quality maintaining that "students like a teacher who is able to talk

to them without making them feel inferior.” One other teacher, Ms Nina maintains that students sometimes come to school wanting to share what has happened at home and it is here, that the teacher “must allow enough time in her schedule to let student impart sensitive information in order to try to help”.

Mr Paul stated that teachers must also be humble in their approach and not impose their authority. To the contrary, he said that teachers must do “the opposite of what there is in books and at university, and keep students as close to you as possible”. He spoke of “keeping the door always open for the students, who would then return one day and thank you, not for the Math you have taught them but for listening on that particular day”. The same teacher also spoke of giving students what they want at times and when possible rather than what they need, such as allowing them to have the last ten minutes of the lessons free or else spending the lesson outside in the grounds playing some sports instead of doing the lesson in class, obviously if he is ahead in the syllabus, he adds. Mr Paul concludes his argument in this regard by saying that a teacher must always remember that for some students “school is a form of escapism from home and so it is important that it is fun.”

Lastly, Mr Mario was of the opinion that he must care for his students no matter what. He adds that he finds it unfair that the teacher walks into class with an angry attitude from something that had happened before or even unrelated to school, when the students are not to blame.

#### 4.3.1.b | The versatile and efficient teacher

Another quality that was mentioned by one of the teachers is the ability to be versatile and adjust to “sudden change, without making it a distraction” (Ms Julie). The same teacher was also adamant that a teacher quality which is a must, is the idea of efficiency and being effective. Ms Julie emphasised that for a teacher to be a good one, she must “complete lessons with accuracy and efficiency”.

Ms Julie recognises the fact that in order for the teacher-student relationship to be positive, the teacher has to be ready to address the curriculum while at the same time contribute to positively improve the relationship shared between students and teachers.

“the activities organised by the teacher must be fun and easy to understand, ones which get the students moving whenever possible, since at this age, students like to move about and not simply sit in their chairs for six hours at a stretch.”

This view was also shared by Mr Kurt who added that the teacher must be focused on what he or she is required to do by law. He said that teachers must constantly keep in mind the syllabic constraints in order to be effective, adding that “time efficiency is key”.

#### 4.3.1.c | The teacher with a sense of humour who does not cross boundaries

Ms Brenda wrote of an attitude that the teacher should have which is engaging through fun activities in class, during lessons. She mentions how the teacher must wear different hats including that of the clown in order to reach her students. The same was mentioned by Ms Frida who specifically said that “a good sense of humour could ease the relationship” between students and their teacher, adding that a lack of enthusiasm is detrimental to the learning

process. She adds that her students want a teacher “who is able to laugh with them and who creates a comfortable atmosphere in the class”.

Another teacher to elaborate on this category was Ms Nina, who believes that “students need a person who can joke in the same way they do without crossing any boundaries.” Ms Nina believes that a teacher who is mischievous in class wins the students over not only for that particular lesson but for all the years they are at school. She adds that one must not mistake a funny disposition with lack of discipline but rather, as two complimenting qualities.

Ms Kate, in the State School, further added that in her opinion, there must be clear boundaries between students and teachers. Students must “know that [I] am the teacher no matter what circumstance. Once they know this and understand it, students and teachers can build their relationship, knowing what is ok and what isn’t.” Ms Julie, from the Church School, also mentioned this point, whereby she stated that “being too friendly and failing to respect professional standards” will lead to a negative relationship which does not contribute well to academic achievement.

#### 4.3.1.d | The fair and consistent teacher

One other behaviour that a teacher highlighted and which, in his opinion, has an impact on the teacher-student relationship is related to the concept of fairness and consistency in giving consequences. Mr Mario spoke of a firm approach with his students and elaborated that some might view a firm attitude as one which hinders the relationship between students and teachers. Ms Nina also addressed this matter, saying that when students are given fair consequences in a consistent manner, especially in the first years of secondary school, then

their respect towards the teacher grows along the years, leading to a better, more trustworthy relationship between the two.

In addition to the above, Ms Frida also feels that “being always fair and trying to have clear rules, that the teacher holds onto no matter what, helps since the students know where they stand”, adding that in this way, students see that the teacher does not prefer one student over another. The idea of consistency was also pointed out by Ms Kate who stated that “disciplinary procedures have to be made clear and executed consistently” so as to avoid instances of unfair treatment. In relation to this, Ms Brenda said that “unfairness is the one thing students hate the most”, therefore, further adding to the perception that being fair contributes positively to the teacher-student relationship.

Mr Paul spoke of how he likes to explain the rationale behind a consequence. He says that in doing so, he makes the student realize that “he has done something undesirable at school and that for every action, there is a ripple effect.” He adds that “simply giving a student a consequence without any explanation does not solve anything and it certainly makes the student hate you.”

#### 4.3.1.e | The inclusive teacher

In their replies, teachers referred to different strategies that they use and which are perceived to improve the teacher-student relationship. To start with, various participant teachers mentioned an inclusive, student-centred approach to teaching and learning.

Mr Paul believes that students must be included in their learning process. He believes that segregating them away from the teacher only leads to a negative relationship between the two.

Ms Julie says that teachers must teach the student not the subject in order to promote a student-centred approach. She adds that students appreciate when the approach of the teacher is individualised to their needs and abilities since students would feel that the teacher values them more.

Ms Julie adds that the teacher must be able to create “lessons that are engaging and incorporate strategies to individualise for every student and for every class, since even classes may vary even when the lesson being delivered is the same.” She believes that students recognise and appreciate when she makes this extra effort for them. Ms Nina also tapped on this when she mentioned how going around the class when students are doing a task and helping student individually depending on their level in her subject makes students feel that she is attending to them personally and not part of the rest of the class.

#### *4.3.2 | Elements that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship: Student behaviour*

From the teacher questionnaires, one other theme that emerged in the area of elements that contribute to the teacher-student relationship is the behaviour of the students themselves.

Teachers have mentioned how the teacher-student relationship is positive or negative does not only depend on their own behaviour but also on how the student behaves as well, whether he or she is respectful as well as how hard-working the students are.

In the latter respect, Ms Lilian commented on how students who are polite and hard-working tend to be the ones she finds it the easiest to bond with, simply because they are more open to the process of learning and accept authority more easily.

Other teachers maintained that, since often times they are on the receiving end of the relationship, the bond they have with some students may suffer if the latter's behaviour is negative. When asked about this, Ms Frida answered that "students who are rude or do not want to work" do not facilitate the relationship between the two. She adds that when a student clashes with a teacher, the former forms grudges that at times are difficult to overcome.

Ms Julie also tapped on this category, stating that "being rude and feeling superior to educators can lead to a negative relationship with the teacher". Similarly, Ms Nina asserted that "there are times when a student treats the teacher with such disrespect that it is difficult for the teacher to continue to view that student beyond the argument". She gave examples of students who would swear at teachers for exercising discipline or ones who are defiant in their attitude repetitively, in spite of the fact that she tries to be caring, fair and approachable. In this case, she adds "it is very difficult to form a bond with such students and these grudges tend to persist, if not escalate".

#### *4.3.3 | Academic success, the teacher-student relationship, and its importance for motivation, engagement and achievement*

As the second research question posited, teachers were asked to comment about their perception of how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement. The theme that emerged from this data addressed factors which highlight that somehow, the relationship they have with students impacts academic achievement. Yet, the views that the teachers shared differed on two counts – those who believe that the relational experience between students and teachers is extremely important for the success of the student's educational journey and those who maintain that the relationship is one of many other

variables that determines the eventual accomplishments that students obtain in terms of academic achievement.

4.3.3.a | The teacher-student relationship is highly important for motivation, engagement and achievement

A theme that emerged from the data gathered through teacher questionnaires was that the teacher-student relationship does play a role in whether the student is motivated to learn or not. In addition to this theme, the data showed that the relationship itself can lead to more engaged students and henceforth, a higher academic outcome.

Mr Mario expressed that “if the basic needs of students are not met, then learning cannot simply take place”, adding that if students are reached on a personal level, academic learning improves greatly. Mr Mario emphasised that “through a positive relationship, teachers can help their students to create the basis needed to start learning and hence, achieve.”

Ms Frida proclaimed herself a “firm believer” of the idea that a positive environment in the classroom is inducive of a positive relationship between students and teachers which in turn, she adds, “can impact the students’ learning in a positive way”. Ms Frida maintains that she has experienced this personally. She said that she “noticed that if students and teachers have a good relationship, they trust each other and work harder towards a common goal”, specifying that this goal would either be academic or skill oriented. The same teacher further noted that in a school which lacks discipline, students would not be focused, leading to an unhappy environment for everyone, as work would be generally lacking standard.

In the Church School, Ms Julie said that when the teacher-student relationship is a positive one, it definitely contributes to a better academic outcome. She asserted that “once you have a good relationship with your students, learning becomes easier, both for the teacher and the students themselves”. Ms Nina expressed very similar perceptions, adding that she feels that students “almost feel obliged to work in that particular subject when they feel their teacher is working hard for them to achieve more”, further mentioning receiving homework from almost every student almost as if they feel uncomfortable not doing what she asks of them.

Ms Nina also mentioned how she has a very nice relationship with her Grade 10 students as well as her Grade 11 pupils, who she also teaches. She said that she has “invested in the relationship both with the boys and the girls” every time she encountered them, even if they were students she did not teach and this gives its fruit, not only in terms of socialisation, but also academically. The same teacher noted that she observes colleagues who do not have a good relationship with their students, who often are her own students too. She says that with these particular teachers, the students do not dedicate time at home to those particular subjects and display disruptive behaviour in their class, as opposed to when in hers.

A definite affirmative answer to the question about whether the teacher student relationship helps to reduce the achievement gap was also given by Ms Kate in the State School. This teacher affirms that “one of the teacher’s jobs is to help students believe in themselves, so they can build a healthy level of self-confidence and self-efficacy, which then enables them to set goals and have ambitious aspirations.” Ms Kate adds that when the teacher-student relationship is a good one, students enjoy their lessons more, showing that fun and learning go together. Ms Kate also mentioned the idea of asking questions in class, which in her opinion,

is facilitated when students and teachers have a good relationship, since the former “feel more comfortable to participate in class.”

#### 4.3.3.b | The teacher-student relationship helps but other factors matter too

In relation to this theme, a further sub-theme emerged whereby teachers’ perceptions showed they were of the opinion that the relationship they have with their students, matters but is not the only thing that leads to higher academic achievement.

Ms Lilian, in the Independent School, commented on how while the teacher-student relationship helps, there are various other important aspects of teaching and learning which play a part in reducing the achievement gap. She mentions discipline and rules as two of the things that, in her view, certainly make a difference. Ms Lilian adds that “students cannot just have a good relationship with me but then, think they can do whatever they want in class”, and mentioned that she enforces basic rules which are conducive of learning, such as waiting for one’s turn to speak in class, not being distracted by things which are not related to the lesson as well as being in class on time so she can start the lesson.

Mr Kurt, from the same school, referred to the fact that while building good relationships with students contributes positively to academic achievement, “it certainly is not the only thing. Teachers must deliver the course content in its entirety. Just having a good relationship will not get things done”, referring to the fact that syllabi must be covered so that students know what content to study for their exams. He adds that “just being friendly with students is not enough but it helps so that students are more open to learn during lessons.” Mr Kurt also specified that students must show respect during class and must be able to distinguish

between the time he spends with his students chatting during break and the time he is trying to teach them the subject matter.

In addition to the above two teachers, Ms Brenda from the Church School shared the same view. She asserts that while a good connection with students definitely helps, “it is not all one needs to lead to a better academic outcome.” She refers to a holistic approach to learning, adding that “attending to the relationship is wise, but one cannot forget the other aspects of learning, such as the course material and student behaviour.”

Ms Brenda also referred to student determination and dedication to do well. She refers to the end of secondary school examinations saying that students know that some subjects are a must and so whether they have a great relationship or not with the teacher of that subject will not matter at the end. They must overcome the negative vibe and study for it just the same” especially those students, she adds “who are determined enough to do well.”

#### *4.3.4 | Improving the teacher-student relationship: The non-formal setting*

The research questions necessitated that the study investigates how the teacher-student relationship can be improved. The responses of teachers could be grouped into two themes, one of which reflected the importance of the non-formal setting at school and other instances when teachers get to interact with students in an informal manner.

A lot of the participant teachers mentioned activities through which they are able to relate to students in an open and humane way, outside the classroom walls and within. They indicated that in their understanding these activities contribute to the improvement of their relationship

therewith. Some teachers felt that when the setting within which the relationship takes place is a non-formal or non-curricular setting, students relate better.

Ms Brenda recognises the fact that in non-formal settings beyond the walls of the classroom, teachers and students get to know each other more.

“The relationship improves when the teacher and her students get to know each other out of the classroom. During educational visits, sports activities or other school activities, the relationship is seen from a non-formal point of view, therefore lowering the barrier between one another.”

According to her, one way of ensuring that this takes place is if the school imposes that teachers engage with students in at least one non-formal activity during the year.

The same perception was shared by Ms Frida in the State School, who believes that,

“creating activities that are non-curricular helps to create a deeper bond between the teacher and the student, as they would get to see a different side of each other outside of the classroom environment, which at times can be restrictive.”

Extra-curricular activities were also mentioned by Ms Kate as a way to improve the teacher-student relationship. Similarly, Ms Julie wrote about organising team-building activities between students and teacher, whereby “teachers either mingle with students and play against other teams in various organised competitions or else, compete during teacher versus student activities.”

Ms Nina, from the Independent School, spoke of concerts which she is fondly part of year after year. She says that in such circumstances, “students get to see [us] with the guard down, wearing a completely different hat than the one we wear in class”. She also mentions that the

kind of language teachers use in this non-formal environment allows students to see that teachers are normal human beings, which while making sure that the language is never rude, “it is still very different and much less formal than how we speak in class.” Ms Nina added that in her school, she organises a sports club during break, whereby students train this particular sport twice a week and then participate in a local tournament for all schools. Such a club allows her to get to know the students who are part of it so well that when she then finds them in the class, she can see that they are more respectful towards her than they are towards other teachers.

#### *4.3.5 / Improving the teacher-student relationship: Resources, support and opportunities to fulfil expectations*

A different theme in this area of how to improve the teacher-student relationship was noted and this is related to attending to the teachers’ need for support in terms of their job description, delivery of course content and the time they have available to properly execute their duties and responsibilities. This theme also encapsulates teacher training as a positive contribution to the teacher-student relationship, as well as creating opportunities rather than appraise teachers on their current performance.

##### *4.3.5.a | Adequate time*

Mr Kurt, in the Independent School, said that authorities are partly to blame for a lack of space and time when it comes to building relationships with students. He said that he, as are others, are “expected to reach so many goals in so much time” many times not leaving enough time to dedicate to the relationship at all. He said he feels that if he, for instance, dedicates time to joking with students, he is afraid that he will not manage to cover all of the material

required on time. The same perception was shared by Ms Kate who maintained that teachers are very stressed and lack time, therefore “less stress and more time at hand” can help teachers develop the qualities they need to improve their relationship with their students.

Another teacher, this time in the State School, said that teachers must be supported by the authorities in the school and outside the school “to help reduce exhaustion and burnout”. Otherwise, Ms Frida adds, “teachers cannot function well, not in terms of syllabic delivery nor in terms of investing in relationships with students”, suggesting that one way to do this is by increasing time available by reducing the teaching load, which at present in Malta, stands at 24 lessons plus one in extra-ordinary circumstances including replacement lessons. Ms Lilian also commented on the above, stating that for her “to dedicate time to building relationships, she first has to have the time to calm down herself” mentioning that, being a teacher of one of the core subjects, she spends all her free time including her break correcting in order to finish the amount of corrections she has weekly.

Mr Mario, also tapped on this behaviour stating that “teachers are overworked, and due to the amount of tasks they have to do, they end up fed up of what they’re doing”, therefore inhibiting the teacher-student relationship.

#### 4.3.5.b | Teacher training

In relation to this sub-theme, Ms Nina commented that, at times, other teachers seem to think that the “friendly attitude she displays with students is for self-gain in terms of gaining good-teacher points with students”. Ms Brenda adds that she would like to be supported by the senior management team of the school in this regard, stating that they should use such

exemplary relationships like hers with her students to show other teachers that the teacher-student relationship can be key to academic success. In her opinion, this could be done by “possibly even addressing the benefits of positive student teacher relationship in COPE [say what this is in square brackets] sessions or SDP [say what this is in square brackets] afternoons” so as to encourage other teachers to see the benefits of the teacher-student relationship.

Mr Paul, in the Church School, proposed group discussions between teachers whereby teachers share ideas of how to reach students more, describing the opportunity as a way to “facilitate the need for some to understand the realities of students in class and of how to improve the relationship with students.” Comparably, Ms Julie from the same school suggested ongoing support through seminars in small groups whereby teachers “have the possibility to see that there are other ways, perhaps less conventional, of how their students can be reached, possibly according to the subject they teach or even, cross-curricular.” Also, Mr Mario addressed this idea of seminars whereby, in his view, teachers can be given interpersonal skills training so as to help them relate more to their pupils.

#### 4.3.5.c | Opportunities not appraisal

The positive responses that teachers gave in relation to teacher training were not always mirrored in responses to the question that addressed teacher monitoring and assessment in terms of the teacher-student relationship. While Ms Julie and Ms Nina were like-minded, agreeing that teacher monitoring may be beneficial, others did not see it in the same way.

Ms Julie said that “if done correctly, and constructive feedback is given, the teacher can learn from past mistakes to improve the relationship with students.” Likewise, Ms Nina mentioned that she is ready to be appraised on this aspect, saying that “if the relationship between teacher and students has so much to contribute to the students’ academic achievement, then [I] see nothing wrong with being assessed to be able improve.” Ms Nina adds that she is fine with having a member of the senior management team who observes her as long as this is done with the students’ and teachers’ best interest in mind.

On the contrary to the perceptions of the above two teachers, Ms Brenda in the Church School said that one cannot assess a relationship that should come naturally. She believes that an assessment “will make the relationship less real for the sake of doing well in the assessment since some teachers will feel the pressure to show how good they are.” Moreover, Ms Kate held that “it is hard to assess such a relationship objectively given that every teacher has his or her own way that works or otherwise.” This teacher also expressed her concern that monitoring how a teacher relates to her students “can influence the teacher’s sense of empowerment since it can be understood that her professional judgment is being scrutinised.” Ms Frida’s response agreed with Ms Kate’s answer in that, according to her, “assessing teachers on their relationship would be unfair since relationships are subjective and each class and teacher interaction is different.”

Mr Mario viewed being assessed on how he relates with students as an added stress as teachers “are already assessed on multiple things” and that “such practice will be seen as an intrusion to their profession and another burden.” Ms Lilian said that whoever will do the assessment will probably not know the students as well as the teachers and therefore, “it will be hard for this person to justify or otherwise the kind of relationship that exists with

students.” Moreover, Mr Kurt said that one must know whether the result of such monitoring has an impact on career progression or not. In his views,

“if the assessment is simply a way to provide feedback, it is one thing. But if it is done to determine promotions, for example, it may be unfair since relationships may be interpreted in different ways by different people. And therefore, such monitoring may not be reliable enough to impact one’s career.”

Lastly, Ms Frida mentioned that teachers have to be supported, not assessed, by those in higher positions to help them improve the teacher-student relationship. She spoke of how “first and foremost, teachers need to feel respected and that they are important in society”, adding that teachers must have “the autonomy and the knowhow to know what is right and wrong for their students.” She further elaborates that in doing so, the teacher cannot be afraid of being criticised or expected to “fit the box without being able to think outside of it.”

#### **4.4 | Conclusion**

In this chapter, the results obtained from the three focus groups held with students and the questionnaires given to teachers have been presented. The results have been presented according to the method of data collection and the type of participants. This was done in order to facilitate the comparative nature of the analysis that will be put forward in Chapter 5. The subsequent chapter will consist on an in-depth analysis of the results obtained in light of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

## **CHAPTER 5 | DISCUSSION**

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## **5.1 | Introduction**

After presenting the results in Chapter 4, the analysis and interpretation of the findings will be presented, in light of the initial research questions. The purpose of the study was primarily to look into the teacher-student relationship and to compare perceptions of teachers and students on how this relationship influences academic achievement. The findings will be analysed hereunder in light of the literature review presented in Chapter 2, which has acted as a guideline to examine the topic in focus and to interpret results as well as draw inferences from them (APA, 2019).

Analysis and interpretation of data were guided by the thematic analysis approach, which gave rise to themes that related to the co-constructed perspectives of students and teachers (Hatch, 2002). The analysis will be presented through a comparative approach, in order to understand how the perceptions of teachers and students compare and contrast vis-à-vis the teacher-student relationship and how this impacts academic achievement. Therefore, the themes identified in the previous chapter will be discussed from the point of view of teachers as well as students concurrently.

## **5.2 | Qualities, behaviours and strategies: The elements which contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship**

Given that as the researcher, I am a firm believer in the importance of the teacher-student relationship in a students' educational path, the study set to investigate the perceptions of students and teachers in relation to this topic of interest. As Dewey (1938) postulated, it is important for an educator to look at those factors that are conducive to learning and educational growth, particularly the relational experience that students and teachers share. In

view of this, the first area that was identified in an attempt to answer the research questions of the study was about the elements that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship. In this respect, an overarching theme developed, namely focusing on the qualities, behaviours and strategies that teachers have and use which are perceived to be conducive to a positive teacher-student relationship.

These elements certainly lend themselves well to the concept of mediation within the ZPD, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978). Teachers and students alike who participated in this study, have identified certain qualities, behaviours and strategies which act as mediators of the affective domain in areas of teaching and learning. As a result of these elements, both parties feel that students move closer to their academic goals, which can be viewed as the higher mental functions which Vygotsky proposed. The majority of participants believe that, the teacher-student relationship can be described as a means to an end, whereby through it, students' learning is scaffolded further, thereby contributing to an increase in attainment. In this case, they view knowledge as being jointly constructed by individuals (Amineh & Asl, 2015), whereby the students' learning path is highly influenced by the interaction between them and their educators (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Cooper, 2007).

Among the characteristics that contribute to this social construct which is referred to in this study as the teacher-student relationship, the study posits the following aspects as being important for a positive teacher-student relationship to take shape.

### *5.2.1 / A caring and empathic approach in the teacher-student relationship*

The role of the teacher as an empathic figure was recognised by students and teachers, with many participants agreeing that when affective processes, such as empathy and listening, are

present, the teaching approach is deemed to be person-centered and one that leads to better outcomes (Cornelius-White (2007, as cited in Roorda et al., 2011). Effectively, empathy implies a close interactive process whereby teachers and students understand each other, satisfying the aspect of closeness which was highlighted by Pianta et al. (1995, as cited in McFarland et al., 2016). This kind of approach that the teachers and students recognised as important was found to predict better school adjustment and higher academic gains by the same authors. The number of students who have tapped on these affective variables was high, suggesting that when teachers are sensitive to the situations of students, the teachers find themselves in a position where they have to give students a secure base and make them feel that school is a safe place to be. This in turn, contributes positively to achieving a higher level of student engagement.

Pianta (1999, as cited in Roorda et al., 2001) and Thijs and Koomen (2008, as cited in Roorda et al., 2001) shed light on these findings and merge into Vygotsky's concept of mediation, describing responses such as the ones provided by many students as well as teachers, namely listening and empathy, as mediators between teacher delivery and the engagement of the students during tasks. The perceptions here, presented by teachers and students alike, support the extended attachment perspective (Pianta, 1999, as cited in Roorda et al., 2011), whereby the relationship between the teacher and the student promoted feelings of security in the latter, whereby "students feel cared for", giving the student more sense of safety to explore their learning environment, satisfying the aspect of closeness.

Both teachers and students indicated that the teacher-student relationship must encapsulate what Vygotsky termed as 'perezhivanie', or the emotional aspect. The majority of participants have attributed a lot of importance to the emotional aspect affirming that it is central to human

connectedness, thus perceiving this to be at the heart of the teacher-student relationship. From a social constructivist point of view, Year 10 students are going through years in their life which are marked by significant psychological development (Cooper, 2007) and as such, teachers who value social engagement with their students, effectively recognise this aspect of students' development. Hence, it emerges that as educators, one must swing towards a mindset which necessitates a shift in pedagogy. Therefore, from the traditional educator who assumes a *tabula rasa*, these teachers and students feel that attention must be given to the students' social development and their motivation for future learning (ibid.).

Further to the above, in the present study, students were very appreciative of teachers who offer them support beyond the scope of the syllabi, in support of John-Steiner and Mahn's (1996) proposition that the teacher must take note of the baggage of the student in order to help the student achieve the emotional state that is required for learning to take place in as optimal a way as possible. Vygotsky (as cited in Levyk, 2008) would describe this support as a psychological tool which helps to mediate the development of higher mental functions and hence, which lead to learning and higher academic achievement.

In addition, the caring quality that students have mentioned can be interpreted as their wish for the teacher to show a sense of emotional openness. This was also recognised by some of the teachers themselves, who spoke of this psychological tool as valuable to their interaction with their students. Such responses from teachers augur well for strong relationships to form, which in turn, as Pianta and Hamre (2006) maintain, help students to "grow exponentially as the year progresses" (p. 62). Pianta et al. (1995, as cited in McFarland et al., 2016) also recognise this aspect of closeness between students and teacher, maintaining that it predicts higher student engagement.

Marzano's claim (2003) that greater academic gains are achieved when teachers dedicate time to know students well also featured in various teachers' responses who remarked how when teachers are not focused on matter related to academic subjects only, students are more comfortable with the teacher and would be more inclined to dedicate time to study those, hence building on their higher mental functions (Vygotsky, 1978). This affective aspect relates to the provision of emotional security that students need since, as stated in the literature review, it acts as a mediator between the support that the teacher gives and the attention that the students dedicate, hence kindling a type of learning behaviour which is important for academic gain (Thijs & Koomen, 2008, as cited in Roorda et al., 2011).

On the other hand, lack of care or understanding from the teacher resulted in a negative student-relationship. All the students who referred to teacher behaviours that lead to a negative relationship with their teachers perceive this aspect of the relationship to be detrimental to their overall learning experience in that students feel offended by the teacher's behaviour. In other words, this negativity is perceived to lead to a lack of student enthusiasm for learning, to alienate students from academic tasks and henceforth, to possibly lower academic gains (Bernstein Yashamiro 2004, as cited in McHugh et al., 2013).

### *5.2.2 | The outgoing and enthusiastic teacher, the versatile and efficient teacher, or both?*

Further to empathy and a caring disposition, other aspects that pertain to the teacher which may impact the relationship between teachers and students include the teacher's outgoing and enthusiastic disposition. I analyse these aspects in relation to two other factors identified in the study, namely the versatility and efficiency of the teacher.

From the students' point of view, it was very important that their teacher has an outgoing personality, that she or he is ardent about teaching and zealous in approach. In this respect, given that, as Engels et al. (2016) mentioned, students are going through a time in their life which is characterised by socio-emotional growth, they perceive a teacher's outgoing personality and enthusiasm as one of the signs that encourages the development of relations with their teachers, since the latter are more approachable and easier to relate to in a social context.

To this end, the teacher's personality serves to ease the context whereby information is exchanged between the two parties involved. As such, this aspect of the relationship between teachers and students is very important and is consistent with the developmental systems theory proposed by Pianta (1999, as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006). Furthermore, within the same theory, Brophy (1985, as cited in Hamre & Pianta, 2006) would describe such teachers as ones who are sociable and who transpire esteem and self-confidence in their students.

Yet, to further elaborate on Brophy's idea, teachers spoke of enthusiasm during class by relating it to the mode of delivery, therefore, from an instructor's lens, they considered versatility and efficiency as key to forming good relationships with students, while at the same time delivering a lesson in an enthusiastic way. Their views on promoting an enjoyable experience of teaching and learning seem to be constrained by the thoughts of having to cover all the material, suggesting that their focus is not only on socialising but also on instruction. This contrasts with students' perceptions, in that students did not express any concern related to the syllabi but were solely concerned with delivery in an enthusiastic and engaging way.

In addition, when students are given the opportunity to determine what happens in some aspect of the lessons, they satisfy the need for autonomy, as proposed in the self-determination theory (Deci et al., 1991, as cited in McHugh et al. 2013). When students are, for instance, allowed some form of decisionmaking in their lessons, a relational climate forms. In this respect, the perception of the teacher tallies with that of students, who appreciate when the teacher does not adhere solely to the strict academic aspects of the subjects but includes other features such as playing music and time dedicated to informal discussion during lessons. The idea is to let students assume some control and give direction to the lessons by letting them choose the type of music to listen to as they work. This, in turn, makes them feel as if they have had a say in the unfolding of the lesson, hence, the autonomous aspect. In this way, the students enjoy the freedom allowed to them by bridging schoolwork with their interests (Roorda et al., 2011, p. 495).

Hence, while students and teachers view an outgoing and enthusiastic teacher as key to the social aspect of learning, teachers also maintain that versatility and efficiency are also important when displaying zeal in their teaching approach. Teachers value a passionate and a versatile approach since they see that it results in students who are more behaviourally and cognitively motivated to learn and therefore, as a means which allows them to be more efficient in terms of student engagement.

### *5.2.3 | The firm but friendly teacher*

Another sub-theme which was noted to contribute positively to the teacher-student relationship by both participants is related to the friendly disposition of the teacher during lessons and beyond the classroom walls. The students and teachers alike agree that a friendly

attitude leads to a positive relationship and to less misbehaviour in class since the students feel well-accepted by the teacher.

For the students, a friendly teacher who smiles and greets them in the corridor is a determinant of a good relationship that is likely to motivate them in their learning. Cholewa et al. (2012) maintains that such behaviours serve a social function in the social context of school. Once again, one can draw on self-determination theory (Deci et al., 1991, as cited in McHugh et al. 2013) to describe a friendly attitude by the teacher as one that denotes a sense of personal connectedness between an adolescent learner and his or her teacher. In this respect, the students' need for relatedness is met by the teacher's friendly disposition and this in turn, prompts engagement. Furthermore, this study also highlights the social function that the teacher's sense of humour serves in the student's learning path (Cholewa et al., 2012). Students believe that a teacher who jokes during school hours contributes to a stronger bond between them and their teacher. Wubbels et al. (1997, as cited in Cheung et al., 2007) recognise this as an interpersonal skill which lends itself to an effective teacher.

However, one cannot fail to mention that some teachers expressed the concern that being friendly might be interpreted as a lack of discipline by the students. Hence, albeit recognising a friendly approach as pivotal in forming positive relationship, they also stressed, in contrast to the students, that the relationship also entails keeping clear boundaries, being firm, displaying fair conduct and maintaining consistency in behaviour management. Deci et al. (1991, as cited in McHugh et al., 2013) stated that part of the way how teachers support the needs for relatedness, competence and autonomy is through providing structure, including setting clear rules for class and by giving consequences when the need arises. Some of the teachers' perception that a firm attitude may be perceived as negative by the student but is

beneficial to the teacher-student relationship in the long-term, reflects the notion posited by Newberry (2010) that the relationship between a teacher and a student is always evolving and passes through various stages.

#### *5.2.4 / The inclusive teacher*

Embracing diversity in class and addressing students' needs on an individual basis were prominent perceptions held predominantly by teachers. These aspects, according to participant teachers, help to build stronger relationships with students since they recognise that the teacher tailors her instruction to their needs. Wubbels et al. (1997) maintain that this is a key quality in the teaching and learning processes.

This inclusive approach, coupled with the caring approach that teachers and students cherish, reflects local policies and frameworks in the area, such as The 'Respect for All Framework' (2014) and the 'National Inclusive Framework' (2019), which encourage schools and teachers to engage in inclusive practices in order to help students overcome barriers of learning. It is interesting to note though, that this issue was not emphasised by students who were more concerned with other aspects of the teacher-student relationship, more related to the affective component of learning.

#### *5.2.5 / Classroom management*

How the teacher manages his or her classroom and the myriad of behaviours that take place in it, is another sub-theme that emerged from the data. Students and teachers shared perceptions about the matter; yet, these perceptions varied in some ways. Since class management was heavily spoken about by most teachers reflects that, as Lewis et al. (2012) maintained, this

aspect of education is very important. Teachers mentioned discipline to maintain boundaries but also as a way to manage the syllabus in the long run, since they believe that it increases the students' ability to focus when the class is calm.

Students commonly perceived that a strict and coercive approach from the teacher when addressing challenging behaviour in class is not one which is to their liking. To start with here, the fact that students felt that they have a lot to say about behaviour management proves right an affirmation by Lewis et al. (2012), that students are not passive recipients of how the teacher chooses to manage the class. On the contrary, their responses showed that in their eyes, how the teacher manages the class influences how they behave in subsequent lessons.

Students in the study hinted at preferring a teacher who has a democratic approach to discipline (Tauber, 2007, as cited in Fosen, 2012), which in turn facilitates a positive climate in class. Students spoke of a balance in the teachers' approach, reflecting the aspect of autonomy in self-determination theory (Deci et al., 1991, as cited in McHugh et al. 2013), whereby students are not expected to simply accept strict measures without questioning, but rather prefer if they are given the opportunity to explain themselves.

Moreover, students were generally in agreement with the idea that receiving explanations about the consequences of their behaviour is conducive of a positive teacher-student relationship. Over here, one can relate once more to self-determination theory and the need for autonomy, which the students need to fulfil when they are involved in challenging behaviour (Deci et al., 1991, as cited in McHugh et al. 2013). The students mentioned that they would like to take part in decisions which pertain to them directly since it helps them to recognise where they went wrong and how to improve. Also, they feel that when this process

takes place, they perceive that the teacher wants to listen to their reasons and not simply apply a disciplinary measure, as suggested by Lewis et al. (2012).

Likewise, teachers perceived the importance of engaging in conversation with students on the consequence of their behaviour as a way to ameliorate the students' and the teachers' experience. Pianta (1999, as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006) referred to this aspect of the teacher-student relationship as one of the four key elements of a well-designed behaviour strategy, whereby the teacher provides the student with positive feedback while at the same time offering clear restrictions. Therefore, in this respect, teachers in the study believe in the interactionist approach to discipline mentioned by Tauber (2007, as cited in Fosen, 2012). In fact, according to the perceptions they shared, they view the need to explain decisions taken due to inappropriate behaviour as an effective behaviour management technique and one of the ways how to maintain a positive relationship with their students.

Furthermore, teachers underlined the need for clear and consistently executed disciplinary procedures. Students also recognised the importance of a balanced approach between fun and discipline, asserting that, as Pianta (1999, as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006) mentions, being fair, consistent and respectful also reduces behavioural problems in a more effective way, hence improving the students' openness to learning and academic engagement. This has also been demonstrated by Lewis et al. (2012), in that engaging in conversation with students about their conduct is a very effective behaviour management strategy. In this respect, teachers and students have expressed the wish to have behaviour management techniques which are fair and consistent but that are enforced in a caring way. From the responses gathered, it seems that teachers and students view this aspect of teaching and learning as

being a proactive strategy that ameliorates the scholastic experience for both overall (Newberry, 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

The importance of such a balance between behaviour management and developing a good relationship with students was also referred to in particular by one of the teachers. Her example highlights a point put forward by Sointu et al. (2017), who posit that fostering a relationship and attending to students' behaviour in class are important. The teacher's statement about the teacher who focuses too much on discipline at the detriment of the relationship with her students goes parallel with the affirmation by Sointu et al. (2017), that teachers who do not try to balance the two factors will end up with students who manifest problematic behaviour. In this respect, the teacher's example highlights the importance, as suggested by the authors cited, of a balanced approach between discipline and caring so as to avoid underperformance due to negative relationships between teachers and students. This lack of flexibility in administering consequences is also viewed by students as a deterrent to the teacher-student relationship. These were generally of the opinion that when the teacher's approach to dealing with bad behaviour in class is strict and coercive and no explanation is given, students tend to shun away from learning (Romi and Roache, 2012).

The concentration of perceptions that pertained to behaviour and class management by both sets of participants emphasizes that there is a "dynamic relational system" going on between the two which is significant in education (Pianta, 2006). Within this context of the classroom, a lot of participants in the study are aware that the teacher-student relationship and class managed are interlaced (ibid.) and that the two notions are not exclusive of one another (Newberry, 2013).

### 5.2.6 / *A two-way relationship*

It is interesting to note that teachers viewed that the way that students behave during lessons also mattered to the teacher-student relationship. They perceived it as being conducive to, or to the detriment of, the teacher-student relationship, depending on how the students behave. Here teachers recognise the conceptual model of the teacher-student relationship in relation to developmental systems theory, in that the information exchange process between teachers and students has to be in both directions.

Teachers in the study are generally of the opinion that they can relate better to students who are respectful and hard-working during lessons as opposed to students who are disruptive and who manifest challenging behaviour. Teachers asserted that they find it more difficult to bond with the latter types of students since the reciprocal association that Pianta and Hamre (2006) refer to is not being fulfilled. Teachers expect a form of give and take in this regard and when this is not present, they find it difficult to form relational ties (Pianta and Hamre, 2006). Lack of respect from the students towards the teacher causes the teacher-student relationship to suffer and as the participant teachers recognise, it often leads to a conflicting relationship. These students fail to recognise the importance of forming strong and positive relationships with their teachers (Pianta, 2016). As a result, they may register lower academic gains due to reluctance to dedicate the necessary amount of attention towards the lessons of those teachers they do not like.

### **5.3 | To what extent does the teacher-student relationship impact academic achievement?**

The second area identified encapsulated themes that address another of the study's research questions. These themes yielded evidence regarding whether and the extent to which, students and teachers perceive their relationship as important for academic achievement.

Several students strongly associated academic achievement with the relationship they have with their respective teachers, believing it to be a pivotal variable in their journey towards academic success. They stated that when they are engaged in a relationship with the teacher, they feel they register higher academic gains, resonating with the findings by Ladd and Burgess (2001, as cited in McFarland et al., 2016), Marzano (2003), Pianta (1995) as well as Pianta and Hamre (2001). Sointu et al. (2017) described the teacher-student relationship as “one of the most important factors in the school achievement and outcomes of students” (p. 4). Pianta et al. (2012) also strongly tied this interpersonal relationship to academic achievement, a connection that was further supported by McCormik et al. (2013), among others. The latter's reference to high quality teacher-student relationships echoed in responses in the teacher questionnaires, indicating that the relationship between students and teachers makes or breaks the attainment of good academic results. The teachers assigned a lot of importance to the social and emotional aspect of teaching and learning when describing what they think about the teacher-student relationship and academic achievement, which resonates with the work of Moore (2019), who maintained that in the secondary school years, the social and emotional dimensions in learning are becoming increasingly more valid to academic success. Some teachers believed that the teacher has an obligation to enhance the student's self-confidence and self-efficacy, which in turn facilitates learning greatly. Martin and Dawson (2001, as cited in Engels et al., 2016) observe that the relationship between teachers

and students, kindles students' positive perceptions of their academic performance, thereby leading to an increase in academic commitment and attainment. These perceptions of student and teacher participants stressed on the importance of investing in good relationships with students, enhancing academic engagement (Engels et al.,2016).

A variation of perceptions was noted since this high association was not shared equally by all, with some participants, be it students and teachers not entirely in agreement. These participants believed that there is a perceived association between the relationship and academic achievement but that there are several other variables which contribute to academic success. In particular, teachers refer to certain pedagogical strategies that must be used in class including class control, behaviour management, determination to succeed, as well as course content. Teachers who were of this view believe in the dual role that education has, in that it has to attend to the cognitive as well as the socio-emotional aspects of teaching and learning (Cefai & Cavioni, 2016).

The above perceptions were also shared by a number of students who also believe that other factors besides the teacher-student relationship, influence academic achievement. They mentioned that apart from having a good relationship with one's teacher, the student's effort must take place. These students were expressing perceptions about how knowledge gained from studying is a dynamic which cannot be ignored when talking about academic achievement. This affirms that these perceptions of some teachers and students encapsulate the idea that student ability and time spent on studying may influence academic achievement, apart from the relationship between teachers and students, as asserted by Bugge and Wikan (2014).

A few students were also inclined to state that the onus is ultimately in the hands of the student, that they may at times need to be resilient and overcome negative teacher-student relationships when these form (Mwang et al. 2015). They addressed the notion of academic resilience, speaking of how they need to be able to overcome setbacks posed by a teacher they do not have a good relationship with to succeed just the same. In this respect, these participant student perceptions go against what was found by Engels et al. (2016) and Sointu et al. (2017), in that these students do not believe that the negative relationship they have will be detrimental to their academic path, but rather view it as a challenge to prove they are worth more than their teacher perceives them to be. Moreover, the importance of the end-of-secondary school examinations goes beyond the role of the teacher-student relationship since they must still thrive and succeed no matter what. This brings such perceptions closer to what has been found by Bugge and Wikan (2014), in that student motivation to reach

In sum, most participants view the teacher-student relationship as important for academic achievement, with some maintaining that it is one of other factors that contributes to academic attainment. Hence, the view of these participants could be described to be one whereby academic learning and the affective aspect of learning are not exclusive of each other but in effect, two constructs that can both influence attainment, as stated by Cefai et al. (2016).

#### **5.4 | The importance of the non-formal aspect in the teacher-student relationship**

The last research question addressed practices that are perceived to improve the teacher-student relationship by students and teachers. Even though certain practices were viewed as beneficial to enhancing the teacher-student relationship by teachers and students alike, there were other aspects which varied as is analysed hereunder.

Among the various ways mentioned, activities that take place outside the formal academic curriculum were deemed to be highly important. Locally, the non-formal aspect of schooling encapsulates those activities that are not considered as formal learning but which still take place at school, such as for example, mid-day break activities. Teachers and students alike mentioned student retreats during non-school days and sports activities that are attended by teachers as being highly important to improve the teacher-student relationship. Participants also mentioned free periods and educational visits outside the school as other contexts when their relationship with their teachers can improve. In all these circumstances, the participant teachers who perceive this aspect as one way of improving the teacher-student relationship are effectively working on building a greater rapport with students by making themselves available in settings other than the classroom (Pianta and Hamre, 2006 and Liu,2013). The perceptions these students and teachers have are in fact conducive to learning even though strictly speaking, they do not specifically refer to an academically oriented task.

The settings mentioned above provide a space for interaction between the two parties to take place in a non-formal setting, where students could be themselves and teachers would wear different hats, since the interactions take place “outside the classroom environment, which at times can be restrictive”. Students felt that they could “speak about life, not just about school”; hence enabling them to form stronger bonds with their teachers, which according to Pianta and Hamre (2006) is a great predictor of higher academic gain. Such activities also allow these secondary school students to spend a longer time than they otherwise would in a lesson, which is necessary, as the same authors maintain, to form a strong connection.

The above also further confirms that students and teachers view connectedness to be important for the teacher-student relationship. This concept delineates the self-determination

theory, whereby activities such as live-ins and sports activities fulfil the need of students to form interpersonal connections with their students (Deci et al., 1991, as cited in McHugh et al. 2013). Through these activities, the need for relatedness is met since these create a social context whereby teachers and students can build on and develop their relationship.

Furthermore, these teachers recognise the importance of having time to get to know their students informally as being key to improving their relationship with their pupils. McHugh et al. (2013) described these activities as bridges that lead to meaningful connection, seeing such activities as engagements which involve efforts on behalf of the teacher to “actively and deliberately engage on an interpersonal level” (p. 11). Effectively, when teachers like the ones who mentioned such activities, seek to socialise with students, they are in fact investing in a relationship which, according to Brophy (1985, as cited in Pianta & Hamre, 2006), may help students achieve an improved self-esteem and hence, feel abler as learners.

### **5.5 | “I have a life beyond the school walls,” says the student**

Students generally feel that their relationship with their teachers can stay on the right path, if the teacher understands that they have a life which goes beyond their role as students. In this respect, students would like their interactions with their teachers to involve a degree of what Pianta et al. (1995, as cited in McFarland et al., 2016) called open communication, which would satisfy the need for closeness. When the teacher is ready to communicate about matters beyond the academic, including the reality that students have other commitments to attend to besides school, students feel that they can build a more positive relationship with the educator. From the students’ point of view, the fact that the teacher would be flexible enough when giving homework, for instance, is seen as an act of compassion and a way of illustrating that the teacher is interested in the student’s life beyond the school walls. In Darmanin’s

(2018) words, this would be an instance when the teacher goes beyond the scope of the academic, and would consequently improve the educational experience.

### **5.6 | “I need resources, support and opportunities,” says the teacher**

A considerable number of teachers noted that in spite of the fact that they are aware of the importance of the teacher-student relationship, they feel with their backs against the wall due to lack of resources, support and opportunities. This burden on teachers may be described as the result of a perceived lack of provision of adequate support, which teachers need in order to fulfil their duties (Cefai and Cavioni, 2016).

These teachers in fact highlight that there seems to be a mismatch between the fact that students need emotional support all the time and the increasing demand of school systems on the academic staff, through departmentalisation and the fostering of impersonal climates, as suggested by Pianta and Hamre (2006). Some of the teachers, feel the burden of lack of time on their shoulders since they are inundated with curricular demands. These views confirm previous studies by Pianta and Hamre (2006) in that the teacher-student relationship in secondary schools tends to be constrained by other variables, among which is the time available for teachers to integrate the academic curriculum with other aspects of teaching and learning. In Grade 10, this point was particularly salient in the responses of the teachers since the students are barely a year away from the end-of-school national examinations.

When teachers do not have the time to dedicate to the affective aspect of education and the teacher-student relationship is disregarded or not given the attention it deserves, students also noted that this impacts their learning path negatively. Having a teacher who adopts an approach solely driven by meeting curricular demands has been described by students in this

study to be unsatisfying and one which may lead to student disengagement. In such a case, students feel compelled to interpret the behaviour of a curriculum driven teacher as indicative of a lack of interest in the student as a whole person and as only being focused on one aspect, which is the instructional, academic aspect. In actual fact, the perceptions of the teachers in this study were not that they are only concerned with instruction but rather that, they are constantly being challenged by demands imposed on them by the constant implementation of new policies. In other words, even though teachers would like to invest in the relationship, they feel that they cannot do more since they are actually being faced with less opportunities available to them, as highlighted by McHugh et al. (2013).

To add to the above, teachers find themselves genuinely wanting to make a difference in the lives of their students, yet simultaneously struggle to do so because of a heavily loaded syllabus that they must cover. This obviously hinders the positive outcomes that the relationship may generate since the time available to dedicate to it is very restricted. It seems that, in the three schools where the study took place, there is the conflict which was mentioned by Mowat (2018), whereby the “culture of performativity and accountability acts” to limiting other, more innovative ways to increase performance. The findings of the study also affirm what was mentioned by the same author, that with a Maltese educational system that has become so politicised and so overly concerned with expectations and performance, the process is perceived to have negated the address of other aspects of schooling, including the social and emotional aspect.

However, the teachers believe that in spite of the present stress-loaded situation, there is a need for intervention in order for them to dedicate enough time to the teacher-student relationship (Pianta and Hamre, 2010, as cited in Allen et al., 2013). They would like their

schools and higher authorities to take make efforts to restructure the educational systems to one that allows them more time to dedicate to relationships with less stress-inducing curricula. In their views, the competitiveness-driven reforms in education, referred to by Carnoy (1999), do not necessarily imply that innovative ways to get there exclude affective aspects of teaching and learning. Among strategies of giving autonomy to schools, of reforming education to reach higher economic realities as well as addressing issues of globalisation, teachers feel that policy in education can still recognise aspects such as the teacher–student relationship as a unique, unorthodox yet powerful resource for student achievement and development. In this way, teachers expressed the wish that local policy makers start to look at the teacher as a resource and a mediator rather than as simply a disseminator of knowledge (Levin, 2010).

Yet, when asked whether they are willing to be monitored and appraised on how they relate to students, the general feel among teachers was very negative as this was seen as an added burden rather than a way to improve academic achievement. Furthermore, evaluation of this relational aspect of teaching students was doubted by most teachers in terms of the validity and fairness of the appraisal system. Teachers believe that given the subjectivity of the teacher’s personality and attitude (Cholewa et al., 2012), they thought that assessing these attributes would be unfair. This opposition towards appraisals goes against what Pianta et al. (2012) suggest when they claim that school systems should include measures such as the Classroom Learning Assessment Scoring System, which is an assessment procedure developed to monitor positive classroom climate, teacher sensitivity and regard for the student’s perspective. In effect, the teachers who oppose this kind of assessment procedure find difficulty understanding that through monitoring the teacher-student relationship, the quality of the education they work hard to offer can in fact improve. Furthermore, since

teachers thought of attributes such as empathy, as being very subjective characteristics that cannot be assessed, it may reflect the need for more teacher training that highlights that certain qualities can be prepared for, as suggested by Shechtman and Tutian (2016).

Relationships between students and teachers could essentially improve through teacher preparation since such attributes are not entirely dependent on the teacher's experiences but can effectively be enhanced through training.

Further to the above, in the study none of the teachers maintained that a reward system of some sort, if implemented, could help to improve how they related with their students. These perceptions reflect Barile et al.'s (2012) findings, in that rewards or incentives do not play a statistically significant role in how teachers relate and interact with their students. This perhaps further reflects that teachers in the study perceive the relationship to be of such a personal and subjective nature, that not only is it limited in terms of assessment, but it has nothing to do with extrinsic reward either, other than perhaps the success of the students themselves.

Instead of appraisals, participant teachers preferred opportunities whereby they could be supported and trained on how to improve the relationship with students. One of the teachers asserted that the teacher-student relationship cannot be ignored at a time in their life when students in Grade 10 are so concerned with the relationships they form with others. Hence, she perceives the relationship is very important and must be incorporated into the teachers' training programme and even in school development plans. In this respect, the participant teachers recognise that the teacher-student relationship is not something to simply romanticise, but that it can effectively generate successful academic outcomes, if formally

incorporated in educational practice (Pianta and Hamre, 2006; Pianta, 2016, Cefai et al., 2016).

The above would mean that teachers are willing to benefit from interventions such as the ones outlined by Pianta and Hamre (2006) about the affective aspect of teaching as a mediator of the ZPD as well as that academic attainment can be a byproduct of the teacher-student relationship (Felner et al., 2001, as cited in Pianta and Hamre, 2006). Teachers in the study perceive that there is a need to increase the teachers' awareness of those attributes and competences which contribute positively to the teacher-student relationship, as put forward by Cheung et al. (2007), since this would finally benefit all stakeholders.

In other words, as suggested by Levin (2010) and Pianta (2016), these teachers value their position as social agents who, if time and support were adequate, could use their relationship with their students as an education resource which would eventually contribute to higher academic gains.

## **5.7 | Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to analyse and discuss the findings of the study. Three main areas were identified in an attempt to answer the research questions. From the findings, one could say that students and teachers perceive various factors as contributing positively to the teacher-student relationship by acting as affective mediators in the student's ZPD. The participants view this relationship as being important albeit to varying extents, with some maintaining that the teacher-student relationship is essential for academic performance but that it is one of many other facets in a students' academic journey. Finally, both students and teachers highly value the non-formal aspect of education as key to forming positive teacher-

student relationships. But whereas students shift their focus on expecting teachers to be considerate of their situation, teachers are very concerned with the lack of resources they have available to be able to dedicate enough time to their relationship with students.

The next chapter will serve as conclusion to the study. In it, the limitations of the present study as well as the implications of the findings of this study will be put forward, followed by recommendations for future research.

## **CHAPTER 6 | CONCLUSION**

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## 6.1 | Introduction

Being a teacher in a Lasallian school, I am a firm believer in something that the founder of my school, St John Baptist De la Salle has once said: “to touch the hearts of students, is the greatest miracle you can perform” (Meditation 139.3, as cited in Christian Brothers, 1994). This affirmation by De la Salle, who also happens to be the patron saint of all teachers in the Catholic tradition, encapsulates in it that which ignited my interest to conduct this comparative study. Teachers are in a very unique position to make the affect-effect happen. In their endeavour to lead students towards knowledge and competence, they are in an inimitable situation to support students to mould their life beyond secondary school. This can happen not only through their expertise in the subjects they teach, but also through building a relationship which can influence the path of the individual students. By dedicating time and making effort to build close relationships with their students, the latter’s educational experience will not only be enriched emotionally but it will also contribute to greater academic gains.

The comparative approach adopted in this study has fulfilled the expectation that the perceptions of teachers and students have shown that the teacher-student relationship is an important factor that both stakeholders value in education. Albeit the lens through which school is viewed is different for teachers and students, the majority of the participants in this study spoke fervently about the relationship they share, shedding light on its significance and meaning in teaching and learning.

This chapter will serve to conclude this research project. It will present the implications of the findings that have been put forward in Chapter 4 and discussed in light of previous literature

in Chapter 5. Furthermore, the limitations pertaining to the research investigation will also be put forward. Lastly, recommendations for future research will be given thereafter.

## **6.2 | Overview of the study**

A student's journey in compulsory education in Malta takes 11 years to complete and through these years, students meet with various teachers, all of who impact their lives in different ways. In this study, particular attention was given from the very start to the way teachers and students build a relationship which, even though may go beyond the academic aspect of schooling, it still may play a significant role in the students' level of academic achievement.

The research questions posed were three, namely:

*a) which are those factors that students and teachers perceive to contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship in the latter years of secondary school?*

*b) what do students and teachers think about the impact of their relationship on the students' academic success in the latter years of secondary school; and lastly,*

*c) how do the perceptions of teachers and students compare or contrast in terms of the role that the teacher-student relationship plays in increasing academic engagement and attainment in students in the latter years of secondary school?*

The research design adopted a constructivist paradigm and the realities of the teachers and the students were seen as ones which are constructed through shared experiences and the

relationship between the two. With this in mind, Lev Vygotsky's notion of the ZPD as well as his less known concept of "perezhivanie" have guided the research process (Cooper, 2007). As the researcher, I focused on the affective dimension of teaching and learning and viewed this dimension as a mediator in the student's learning process, allowing the student to reach higher mental functions and therefore, improve his or her academic achievement. More works, especially by Pianta and Hamre (2006), two prominent researchers in this field of education, were reviewed in order to help build a thorough understanding of the concept of the teacher student relationship. This in turn, helped to formulate a methodology in order to gather the data necessary to answer the research questions.

Information was collected through two qualitative methods of data collection. These were focus groups and email interviews through open-ended questionnaires, which as Goalshani (2003) says, are instruments that lend themselves well in constructivist paradigms. Three focus groups were held in three secondary schools from the three different sectors in Malta and consisted of students in Grade 10. Furthermore, the other participants included teachers from the same schools who teach the same students. These teachers were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire whereby they could share their perceptions about the research questions.

Following data collection, thematic analysis was used in order to organise the data, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach has yielded a rich array of responses from teachers and students that could be coded to identify patterns which could then give rise to themes. The teachers and students have been instrumental in generating a large amount of data which was analysed thereafter in light of the literature reviewed in the initial stages of the

project. The richness of the data from both sets of participants made it possible to compare and contrast the views of the students and teachers respectively.

### **6.3 | Summary of the outcomes of the study**

The outcomes of this study included the perceptions of teachers and students about the relationship the two build while at school and how these perceptions link to each other. In this respect, the relational experience was viewed by all the participants to be one which arises from a collective experience, as postulated in Vygotsky's writings (1978, as cited in Levykh, 2011). There were several aspects of the teacher-student relationship which emerged from the data, but three main areas were identified, namely a) the qualities, behaviours and strategies which are viewed as elements which contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship; b) how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement; and lastly, c) how the teacher-student relationship can improve so as to contribute to academic achievement.

#### *6.3.1 | The qualities, behaviours and strategies that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship*

Sharing Dewey's (1938, as cited in Williams, 2017) viewpoint, that as an educator one must look at factors that are conducive to learning, this comparative study found that teachers and students value affective attributes to be favourable to the student's teaching and learning.

From the findings, the approach the teacher takes was viewed as having the potential to mediate the student's development, including the caring, empathic, enthusiastic and friendly approaches teachers adopt, which were spoken about so fervently by both parties. This affective aspect reflects the desire by teachers and students to include human emotion while at

school, recognising Vygotsky's notion that emotions are a vital part of learning and development, aside from the cognitive aspect (Vygotsky, 1978, as cited in Levykh, 2008).

### *6.3.2 | Perceptions on the importance of the teacher-student relationship on academic achievement*

With a lot of concern nationwide to minimise the achievement gap and to perform better on an individual and a national level, various pathways to a better learning outcome may be taken, one of which was a focus in this study: the teacher-student relationship as means to achieve better academic attainment. Keeping in mind the epistemology of the study involved looking at the construction of a subjective reality of the teacher-student relationship and how this is perceived to impact the students' academic achievement, the extent of the latter varied across perceptions held by both students as well as teachers.

A number of students and teachers agreed that the relationship and academic achievement are highly associated. Through a social constructivist point of view, such teachers and students believe that when the teacher-student relationship is strong and it fosters the affective aspect in the process of teaching, students develop a sense of trust towards their educators, coupled by an interest and positive predisposition to the subject matter being taught (Vygotsky 1997, as cited in Levykh, 2008).

However, having said this, some teachers and students viewed the teacher-student relationship as one variable among many that contributes to academic attainment. Among students and teachers who held this viewpoint, there was a shared concern with course content, which must still be covered and studied regardless of how invested teachers and students are in the relationship. Moreover, the idea of academic resilience in the face of adversity was also

mentioned as something that must be overcome if one were to academically succeed and this was viewed to be beyond something related to the teacher-student relationship.

### *6.3.3 | Improving the teacher-student relationship*

Since a lot of literature supports the notion that a positive teacher-student relationship leads to a better academic outcome, the last research question attempted to look at perceptions about how to ameliorate this relationship. These include more opportunities of informal meetings and activities between students and teachers, teacher recognition of a student's 'life-after-school hours', as well as overcoming hurdles imposed by an overloaded curriculum and lack of time on the part of the teachers.

The findings pertaining to the three areas identified and the themes that emerged from the study link to the implications of the findings which will be outlined in the next section.

## **6.4 | Implications of the study**

This study provides a lens through which the perceptions of teachers and students vis-à-vis their relationship and how it may impact academic achievement could become evident. Such findings were analysed and discussed in the hope that they could guide school management and policymakers on how to utilise the teacher-student relationship as a tool to the benefit of all stakeholders in the field of educational. Even though these findings cannot be generalised due to the small number of participants, they may serve as guidelines for school improvement in the local context.

As expected, most students and teachers attribute a great importance to the teacher-student relationship. The affective aspect of teaching and learning was found to act as a mediator between the relationship and academic achievement. The elements identified as positively contributing to the relationship and therefore, to academic attainment, are not simply seen as something that add lustre to the scholastic experience but rather, as predictors of learning in secondary school.

Consequentially, the various factors that have been mentioned as influencing the teacher-student relationship have provided practical insights of what can effectively contribute to a positive learning outcome. When students are engaged in an affective manner with their teachers, they feel more academically motivated, linking this to future academic gains. This can be interpreted as one of the means to narrow the achievement gap in order to meet the agenda set nationally in the past years to improve the country's performance in international studies (Bartolo, 2014).

In order for teachers, school management, as well as education policymakers to recognise the teacher-student relationship as an important tool in education, it is of prime importance for all of them to recognise that adolescent students are highly social and emotional beings (Allen et al, 2013). This finding from the present study underlines the need for teachers to understand that during this period in their life, students need relationships that are positive and supportive from persons who are non-parental adults (Engels et al., 2016). Therefore, it is imperative that in school development plans and other teacher-training programmes, it will certainly be of advantage if teachers are made aware of this aspect, as proposed by Allen et al. (2013), so as to ensure that the teacher's approach takes into consideration the adolescent's development stage.

At the centre of the responses given by teachers and students was the importance of having non-formal activities taking place in local schools. In general, participants agreed that getting the opportunity to meet informally through various activities was of paramount importance to the teacher-student relationship and in turn to higher academic gain (Pianta & Hamre, 2006). Here, as the researcher, I will draw a comparison between responses of students and teachers in the Church and Independent Schools and those given by participants in the State School. In the latter, students, especially when speaking during the focus groups, clearly expressed their disappointment at the lack of opportunity to meet their teachers in non-formal ways. These students maintained that they barely have any such opportunities, hence maintaining that their need for relatedness was not being met as much as they would like, unlike students in the Church and Independent Schools.

In sum, all perceptions pertaining to this area effectively show that most teachers and all students yearn for opportunities to engage on an interpersonal level, given the time to do so. From these findings, it is implied that instances when the ‘informal curriculum’ can take place must be created within school systems so as to benefit from the interactions that take place between students and teachers in such “relational arenas” (Frelin and Grannas, 2010, as cited in Claessens et al., 2017). Such spaces would also facilitate communication between students and teachers about matters that may be unrelated to the academic curriculum. They would serve to ease out the wedge noted by students, in that teachers, at times, would not know much about the student’s life outside their role as students. An increased opportunity to interact informally in this way, as literature suggests, would therefore help to strengthen the teacher-student relationship in a positive way.

This research has valid implications for comparative education in that it suggests that there is a need for increased consideration of the teacher-student relationship when drafting educational policy, which lies in the interest of students and teachers. The need of teachers to be supported emerged from the perceptions of teachers and to a certain extent even from students. Yet, as Borg and Mayo (2005) highlight, the local neo-liberal ideology which reflects in education may tend to alienate the economic aspect from the social aspect. This perceived gap, as they say, needs to be addressed. This links well to the fact that policymakers need to come up with innovative interventions, which may in fact address this gap by focusing on educational policy that seeks to improve the teacher-student relationship. The evidence from the present findings as well as from previous literature place the teacher-student relationship as one of the most salient aspects of education and therefore, it is a facet of education that certainly cannot be disregarded.

Interventions targeting the relational interaction between students and teachers need to be backed up by policies which give enough space to the educator to explore the relationship as a tool for academic engagement. Even though teachers who participated in this study generally seemed to want to interact as much as possible with their students and to invest in the relationship, they feel heavily constrained by the demands that the system poses on them. They recognised the discrepancy between the need to form relationships and the curricular demands they are faced with on a regular basis (Pianta & Hamre, 2006) and are heavily frustrated as a result of this. This frustration hints at the fact that educational policy cannot simply focus on increasing educational attainment (McHugh et al., 2013), since there is the understanding that other learning processes are being sidelined and therefore, are not playing the important role they can equally play to improve academic attainment. Good will from teachers will not suffice unless policymakers recognise that teachers such as the ones taking

part in the study are feeling overwhelmed with curricular demands at the expense of other aspects of school, including the social and emotional aspect. Policy and regulations can focus, among other things, on how to improve teacher effectiveness on classroom processes in respect of their relation to the affective aspect of the educational development of the child, and not only on teachers' degrees or outputs such as student test scores and finished syllabi (Pianta, 2016).

McNamara (1986) posits that policymakers in education may speak of the presence of 'prescriptive problems' to establish such practice, referring to the fact that when the teacher-student relationship is used as a tool in itself, assessing its effectiveness may pose to be difficult since it is difficult to make judgments based on personal attributes of character. This affirmation was reflected in the responses of most teachers, who opposed being appraised about how they relate to their students. In fact, there was a great opposition to the idea of formally assessing performance on how teachers relate with students since this was viewed as something that is very subjective to review and appraise besides it being an added burden. However, this negative impression of an appraisal system exposes a need for teachers to be made aware that appraisals are not a test but rather a way to provide systematic feedback. In this regard, Barile et al. (2012) also recommend the possibility of benefiting from student evaluations of their teachers, which according to their findings, have improved the teacher-student climate and also decreased school drop-out rates. If such practice was to be implemented, it would help teachers form stronger relationships with their students and would in turn promote academic engagement (Pianta & Hamre, 2006; Allen et al., 2011; Engels et al., 2016). Pianta (2016) adds that quality assurance should target the teacher-student relationships since, in his view, if something is expected then it will get inspected. This implies that there is the need for an increased awareness among teachers on how the

relationship between student a teacher can be used formally as a tool in their approach to teach. In this respect, there needs to be a better understanding of appraisals as a means to provide teachers with systematic feedback that can help their students achieve higher. Teachers need to be provided with initial as well as lifelong learning programmes which specifically target the teacher-student relationship through school development plans, pre-service or in-service training, which as Pianta (2016) insists, must incorporate practices that nurture a positive social and emotional climate for learning. Henceforth, one of the implications of the present study is that teachers need to be educated to appreciate the benefits that performance appraisals can yield rather than view such measures as a policing gauge or an added burden.

In sum, the implications highlighted above suggest how the findings of the study may be important for policy as well as for the improvement of the country's level of educational attainment through a channel that has perhaps not been given the attention it merits in present policies and educational strategies. These conclusions have been substantiated by evidence from the present results as well as through the reviewed literature about the teacher-student relationship. Notwithstanding this, the study does not come without its limitations and this will be outlined in the next section.

## **6.5 | Limitations of the study**

Braun and Clarke (2013) assert that a study has its limitations, which may arise, among other variables, from the subjective nature of the researcher as a human being. Aware of the possibility that the investigation will have its limitations as the researcher, I sought to take the necessary precautions so that study is still thorough and rigorous in its findings and

implications. Yet, even though several steps have been taken in this regard, such as piloting the methods of data collection to check for ‘instrumentation rigour’ and adopting other measures to ensure the validity and reliability of the study, certain limitations still need to be outlined.

Given the qualitative nature of the way data was collected and analysed, the major concern pertains to the generalisation of the results since confident generalisations from the sample to the whole population of teachers and students in Malta cannot be made (Lyons & Cole, 2016). To start with, participants were selected through convenience sampling, which by definition is a non-probability sampling method. This type of sampling was acceptable since it was not the intention of this study to extend the findings to the whole population of teachers and students in Malta (Robson, 2011). The sample size of teachers and students allows that interpretations of the findings could only be significant and meaningful to the participants themselves and not on a nationwide level. The findings are considered to be truths that are solely dependent on the experience of the individual participants (Patterson and Williams, 2002) and hence, they are limited to the context, space, time and the participants who experienced it (Hatch, 2002).

The above does not mean that the outcomes of the study are not meaningful and useful. The use of more than one method of data collection and the continuous discussion of the findings between researcher and supervisor helped to validate the findings and their trustworthiness. Moreover, as Yin (2013) maintains, even if statistical generalisations cannot be made, analytic generalisations can be inferred since the perceptions of teachers and students were being investigated in a real-life setting.

A further limitation of the study may well be that my role as investigator could have been biased as a result of my role as a teacher of Year 10 students in a local secondary school. I was fully aware that as suggested by Rust (1999, as cited in Bray, 2003), the reality I was investigating was subjective, as opposed to objective and singular. My research, as he goes on to say, cannot be described as value-free nor is it unbiased. To the contrary, it must be accepted as “value laden and includes the biases of the researcher” (p.216). As a secondary school teacher, I naturally had my own views about the teacher-student relationship. In view of this, when interpreting the data, there were instances when my personal experience and perceptions about the topic may have played a role on the way I interpreted the perception of others. However, throughout the discussion phase of the study. I have highlighted commonalities and differences in the findings and also compared the present results in light of existent literature review without letting my own thoughts and experiences bias the findings as much as possible. This interrogative stance helped to keep biases at bay. Discussion of the emerging themes with the supervisor also helped to prevent instances of undue bias influencing the interpretation of the findings.

Other methodological challenges may be considered as limitations in the study. These include limitations related to the methods of collection themselves, namely the email interviews and the focus group interviews. With regard to the email interview, since the questions were asked through an emailed structured open-ended questionnaire, non-verbal cues from the participants could not be recorded (Robson, 2011). Moreover, since the questionnaire was made up of structured, pre-determined open-response questions which the participant teachers responded in their own time, as the researcher I did not have the opportunity to clarify answers as I would have otherwise had in an interview. However, I replied to the teachers by email when I received the completed questionnaires and would have emailed back in case

there were any clarifications that needed to be made. Having said this, the questions asked were answered very clearly and there was no need for any clarifications.

As to the focus groups, there was the risk that the less articulate did not share their views as much as others, hence bias may have been introduced as a result of the more dominant students (ibid.). Having said this, as the person leading the group, I sought to prompt students in a round-robin so that everyone would have their turn. Yet, three students from the Independent School group still found it difficult to answer and hence, their views could not be recorded.

The students who were interviewed during the focus group did not know the researcher well and therefore, issues of trust may have impinged on the extent of how willing they were to divulge details about their relationships with teachers with a stranger. As the researcher, I tried to keep focus groups as informal as possible to allow the participant students to feel at ease when sharing information. Moreover, in the consent and assent forms given as well as at the beginning of each session, I assured them that confidentiality and anonymity will be respected all throughout the research project as well as afterwards. Bassett et al. (2008) maintain that adolescents typically find it difficult to engage in extended conversation and therefore, there were times when as the interviewer, I had to be careful not to ask questions which involved a yes or no answer that subsequently yielded little information. I also found myself adjusting the questions set in the interview guide when students required further clarification and prompting.

In addition to the above limitation, even though the findings of this study have yielded valuable information about the teacher-student relationship and how it impacts academic

achievement, the data gathered may have lacked an understanding of the dynamics of the class which the student groups formed part of as well as insight into the history of the students who have been in the same school for more than ten years. Furthermore, the responses of teachers and students in both methods of data collection rely on the participants' subjective memory and cannot be considered as objective truths (Adams & Cox, 2008).

Finally, this study investigated one dimension that may lead to higher academic gains. One must keep in mind that academic achievement is a multi-dimensional concept (Engles et al, 2016), which in the present study was examined only in relation to the teacher-student relationship. Other individual (such as self-efficacy, motivation), pedagogical (for instance, culturally responsive pedagogy), and social dynamic (such as peers and friendship as well as parental support) factors could also be potentially influential to academic achievement.

As stated above, the acknowledgment of these limitations serves to highlight those aspects of the research that may have influenced the interpretation of the results. With the above implications and limitations in mind, recommendations for future research will be put forward in the next section.

## **6.6 | Recommendations for future research**

The outcomes of this study can serve to lead future research in this field of education in order to encourage further insight and action with regard to pedagogy, teacher training and educational policy. The present study as well as subsequent others can serve to set in motion the practices that have been outlined as being beneficial to the teacher-student relationship and how this impacts academic achievement.

Locally, the teacher-student relationship and how it influences academic achievement has not been researched extensively, a commonality shared among many countries (Pianta,2016). Yet, as previous findings from international studies as well as the present findings have shown, this phenomenon deserves more importance than it is given in the educational field. The teacher-student relationship as a resource serves to increase academic gains and hence, research in the field can serve to inform educational practice and policymakers to recognise the relationship as a tool that may help to narrow the achievement gap. The present study serves to give but a small glimpse into the perceptions of teachers and students about the subject matter. However, if research had to focus more in depth and on different aspects of the teacher-student relationship, the findings of such research could help school management and policymakers to recognise the impact of relationships on achievement.

The study was carried out among a cohort of students in Grade 10 in three schools in Malta. It would be very interesting to carry out a similar study using the same tools among students and teachers in lower grades in schools. In these grades, there will not be the pressure of the end of secondary school national examinations and therefore, one can see if there are any different outcomes.

One further recommendation pertains to the cross-sectional nature of the present study. The participants were interviewed at a particular point in time, whereby a snapshot was taken of their educational experience in relation to the teacher-student relationship. As recommended by Pianta and Hamre (2006) and Roorda et al. (2011), future studies could take a longitudinal approach and focus on the students and teachers across the different years they are at school, to observe how the perceptions and function of the teacher-student relationship develop as they grow older.

Lastly, this study was an intra-national qualitative study, which according to Carnoy et al. (2017), can still be considered to be valuable to inform educational practice. However, future investigation can go beyond the shores of Malta and compare perceptions of the teacher-student relationship and academic achievement in countries abroad, perhaps ones which compare to Malta. Simultaneous comparison of findings in different countries with different educational systems can yield rich information which could serve to better inform about the value of the teacher-student relationship vis-à-vis academic achievement (Bray et al., 2014)

## **6.7 | Concluding remarks**

Throughout the course of this investigation, students' relationships with their teachers have been at the epicentre of the whole study, with particular focus on comparing the perceptions of students and teachers on how their relationship influences academic achievement. These relational encounters take place within the walls of the school and they potentially lead to higher academic gains, as is believed by most participants who took part in this study and who live this relational experience on a daily basis. I believe that this aspect of teaching and learning warrants formal and informal address in the local educational field, particularly when one considers the present findings that are supported by existing literature on this phenomenon. It is a pity that when looking through national policy documents, the teacher-student relationship is seldom, if ever, referred to as a resource in its own right even though significant literature about the topic as well as the present findings point towards its great potential to reduce the achievement gap and increase academic gain.

As this study shows, the teacher and student relationship takes academic success beyond the instructional domain, and its social nature encapsulates in it the importance of the affective

aspects of teaching and learning for teachers and students alike. It transpires affect which can strongly influence the students' educational paths. Hence, the teacher-student relationship deserves prominence in the educational journey of every student, as it can be, by its very nature, a catalyst of positive change in student academic achievement.

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## **APPENDICES**

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# APPENDIX 1 | Letters of Consent and Assent

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## LETTER OF ACCESS TO HEADMASTERS

Nadia Mercieca



25<sup>th</sup> May 2018

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### Permission to collect data for an experimental study

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Dear Head of School,

I am a student at the University of Malta and I am reading for Masters in Euro-Mediterranean Comparative Education. I am at present preparing to conduct a research project titled “The Affect Effect: A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement”. The latter project is being carried out under the supervision of Prof. Carmel Cefai. The University requires that informed consent is obtained from all stakeholders and therefore, through this letter, I am asking you permission to gain access to participants in relation to my studies.

The purpose of this research is to investigate whether teachers and students view their relationship as one of the ways to reduce the achievement gap in the students’ educational path. Several research projects have proved that this interaction yields very positive outcomes, as suggested by Hughes (2012) and Pianta (2016). Yet, as educators, we constantly strive to work in an academically driven and scores-oriented educational field in order to reduce the achievement gap which locally, is becoming more and more prominent. Therefore, my interest in the field stems from the idea that affective aspects of teaching and learning can be equally effective in yielding positive learning outcomes. However, as teachers and students, I am not sure how well we are familiar with this aspect of education as a formal way to ameliorate students’ learning outcomes. Hence, I would like to delve deeper into this matter through the current research project.

If access is granted, data will be collected from students and teachers. A focus group of 10 students in Grade 10 will be led to generate the data needed from the students’ point of view and this will be led by myself as the researcher using a semi-structure interview guide. Student selection can be guided by your good self who, for the purpose of this research project, need to be in Grade 10. The focus group can take place at a time and place which will cause the least disruption to the learning process of the students and this can be discussed if access is granted. Informed consent will be obtained from teachers, parents of the students and the students themselves. The focus group discussions will be recorded and later

transcribed. Three teachers teaching in Grade 10 will be given an open-ended questionnaire which will target the same objective. Data will then be coded and interpreted in light of current literature.

Throughout the research process, personal information about the school as well as the participants involved will not be divulged and pseudonyms will be used instead. Recording of the data collection process will be kept private and access is limited to the researcher only. The study will not pose any risk to the teachers or the students. Refusal to participate will have no effect on any of the stakeholders involved and participation is totally voluntary.

I am attaching a copy of the interview guides and the questionnaire which will be used, for your perusal.

I thank you for your kind consideration and for any subsequent communication. I look forward to hearing from you and to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Nadia Mercieca, B.Psy (Hons), PGCE

██████████

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**Statement of Consent for access into the school to collect data as part of a study titled “A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement”.**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, in my capacity as Head of School at \_\_\_\_\_, have read and understand the information presented above. I hereby give my consent to Mrs Nadia Mercieca to conduct research at school about “The Affect Effect: A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement”.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher: Mrs Nadia Mercieca

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## LETTER OF CONSENT TO TEACHERS

Nadia Mercieca



1<sup>st</sup> June 2018

### Consent Document

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Dear Teacher,

I am a student at the University of Malta and I am reading for Masters in Euro-Mediterranean Comparative Education. I am at present preparing to conduct a research project titled “The Affect Effect: A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement.” The latter project is being carried out under the supervision of Prof. Carmel Cefai. The University requires that informed consent is obtained from all stakeholders and therefore, through this letter, I am asking you to participate in the research study in your capacity as teacher in Grade 10 at your school.

The purpose of this research is to investigate whether teachers and students view their relationship as one of the ways to reduce the achievement gap in the students’ educational path. Several research projects have proved that this interaction yields very positive outcomes, as suggested by Hughes (2012) and Pianta (2016). Yet, as educators, we constantly strive to work in an academically driven and scores-oriented educational field in order to reduce the achievement gap which locally, is becoming more and more prominent. Therefore, my interest in the field stems from the idea that affective aspects of teaching and learning can be equally effective in yielding positive learning outcomes. However, as teachers and students, I am not sure how well we are familiar with this aspect of education as a formal way to ameliorate students’ learning outcomes. Hence, I would like to delve deeper into this matter and to compare the viewpoints of teachers and students about the matter in question.

As a participant, you will be given an open-ended questionnaire. You will have some days available to answer the questionnaire after which I will collect it and analyse it. The information yielded from your questionnaire will be compared to responses given by students you teach who will share their viewpoints about the topic in a focus group. Students will not be asked to mention any names of specific teachers at any point in the discussion and if they do, these will be omitted from the study.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can opt to retract from the study at any point. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research process and your name will not show in any documents. Pseudonyms will be used instead. Recording of the data collection process will be kept private and access is limited to the researcher only.

If you have any questions which you may wish to ask, you can contact me on [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Nadia Mercieca, B.Psy (Hons), PGCE  
[REDACTED]

**Statement of Consent for participation in a study titled “The Affect Effect: A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement”**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, in my capacity as Teacher at \_\_\_\_\_, have read and understand the information presented above. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. I have received answers to any questions I had and I understand that I can contact the researcher should I need to.

I hereby give my consent to participate in the study being conducted by Mrs Nadia Mercieca about “The Affect Effect: A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement.”

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher: Mrs Nadia Mercieca

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## LETTER OF CONSENT TO PARENTS – ENGLISH VERSION

Nadia Mercieca



1<sup>st</sup> June 2018

### Consent Document

---

Dear Parents,

I am reading for Masters in Euro-Mediterranean Comparative Education at the University of Malta. I am at present preparing to conduct a research project titled “The Affect Effect: A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement.” The latter project is being carried out under the supervision of Prof. Carmel Cefai. The University requires that informed consent is obtained from all those involved and therefore, through this letter, I am asking you to give your consent to your son so he participates in the research study in his capacity as student in Grade 10.

The purpose of this research is to investigate whether teachers and students view their relationship as one of the ways which could help students improve their learning. Several other researchers before me have proved that this interaction minimises the achievement gap. Yet, as teachers and students, we constantly strive to work in an academically driven and scores-oriented educational field in order to reduce the achievement gap which locally, is becoming more and more prominent. Therefore, my interest in the field stems from the idea that affective aspects of teaching and learning can be equally effective in yielding positive learning outcomes. However, as teachers and students, I am not sure how well we are familiar with this aspect of education as a formal way to improve students’ learning outcomes. Hence, I would like to delve deeper into this matter and to compare the viewpoints of teachers and students about the matter in question.

As a participant, your son will be asked to take part in a focus group composed of ten students which should last about one hour and which will be held during school hours at a time which will not hinder the academic input of lessons. I will ask the students some questions in a group about how they interact with their teachers and if they think this helps them in their studies and learning outcomes. During the session, a recorder will be used to record what they say in order to be transcribed later to analyse the data.

Participation is entirely voluntary and participants can choose to stop participating in the study at any point. I will not be writing or telling anyone who the students are or what they have said. Whatever they say will not be to their benefit or harm them in any way. The recordings will be transcribed and stored until the research project is carried out.

If you have any questions which you may wish to ask, you can contact me by email at [REDACTED]. **Please fill in the attached statement of consent and return to Mrs Mercieca together with your son by not later than \_\_\_\_\_.**

Sincerely,

Nadia Mercieca, B.Psy (Hons), PGCE

**Statement of Consent from parents for participation of their children as students in a study titled “The Affect Effect: A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement.”**

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We, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, in our capacity as parents of \_\_\_\_\_, a student in Grade 10 at \_\_\_\_\_, have read and understand the information presented above. We understand that my son’s participation is voluntary and that he can withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. We have received answers to any questions we had and we understand that we can contact the researcher should we need to.

We hereby give our consent to our son so he participates in the study being conducted by Mrs Nadia Mercieca about “The Affect Effect: A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement.”

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher: Mrs Nadia Mercieca

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## LETTER OF CONSENT TO PARENTS – MALTESE VERSION

Nadia Mercieca



30 ta' Ġunju 2018

### Dokument ta' Kunsens Infurmat

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Għezież Ġenituri,

Jiena studenta fl-Università ta' Malta u jiena qed nistudja għall-Masters fl-Edukazzjoni Komparattiva Ewro-Mediterranja. Bħalissa qed nipprepara biex nagħmel proġett ta' riċerka intitolat "L-Effett tal-Affett: Studju Komparattiv li jhares lejn il-perċezzjonijiet tal-ghalliema u tal-istudenti fis-Sena 10 dwar kif ir-relazzjoni ta' bejn l-ghalliema u l-istudent tinfluwenza l-kisba akkademika."

Dan l-aħħar proġett se jitwettaq taħt is-superviżjoni tal-Professur Carmel Cefai. L-Università teħtieġ li jinkiseb il-kunsens infurmat mill-partijiet interessati kollha u għalhekk, permezz ta' 'din l-ittra, qed nitolbok biex tagħti l-kunsens tiegħek lit-tifel/tifla tiegħek sabiex t/ jipparteċipa fl-istudju ta' riċerka fil-kapaċità tiegħu/tagħha bħala student/a fil-Grad 10.

L-għan ta' 'din ir-riċerka huwa li jinvestiga jekk l-ghalliema u l-istudenti jarawx ir-relazzjoni tagħhom bħala wieħed mill-modi kif titnaqqas id-differenza fil-kisbiet fil-mogħdija edukattiva tal-istudenti. Bosta proġetti ta' riċerka wrew li din l-interazzjoni tagħti riżultati pożittivi ħafna, kif issuġġerit minn Hughes (2012) u Pianta (2016). Madankollu, bħala edukaturi, aħna dejjem naħdmu f'qasam edukattiv orjentat lejn istruzzjoni diretta u marki għoljinmiksuba akkademikament sabiex innaqqsu d-differenza fil-kisbiet. Lokalment, dan qed isir dejjem aktar prominenti. Għalhekk l-interess tiegħi fil-qasam ġej mill-idea li l-aspetti affettivi tat-tagħlim jistgħu jkunu ugwalment effettivi biex jinkisbu riżultati ta' tagħlim pożittivi. Madankollu, bħala għalliema u studenti, m'hemmx ċertezza dwar kemm aħna familjari ma 'dan l-aspett tal-edukazzjoni bħala mod formali biex jitjiebu r-riżultati tat-tagħlim tal-istudenti. Għalhekk, nixtieq niddiskuti aktar fil-fond din il-kwistjoni biex inqabbel l-opinjoni tal-ghalliema u l-istudenti dwar il-kwistjoni.

Bħala parteċipant/a, it-tifel/tifla tiegħek se t/ jintalab biex t/jieħu sehem ffokus grupp magħmul minn għaxar studenti li għandu jdum madwar siegħa u li se jsir matul il-ħin tal-iskola f'ħin li ma jfixkilx l-input akkademiku tal-lezzjonijiet. Se nitlob lill-istudenti xi

mistoqsijiet fi grupp dwar kif jinteraġixxu mal-ghalliema tagħhom u jekk jaħsbu li dan jgħinhom fl-istudju u r-riżultati tat-tagħlim tagħhom. Matul is-sessjoni, se jintuża registratur biex jirreġistra dak li jgħidu sabiex jiġi traskritt aktar tard biex nanalizzza d-data.

Il-partecipazzjoni hija għal kollox volontarja u l-partecipanti jistgħu jagħzlu li jieqfu milli jippartecipaw fl-istudju fi kwalunkwe mument. Il-kunfidenzjalità se tinzamm matul il-proċess ta' riċerka u l-isem mhux se jidher fl-ebda dokument. Minflok se jintużaw psewdonomi. Ir-registrazzjoni tal-proċess tal-ġbir tad-dejta tinzamm privata u l-aċċess huwa limitat għar-riċerkatur biss.

Jekk għandek xi mistoqsijiet li tixtieq tistaqsi, tista' tikkuntattja lili bl-email lil



Jekk jogħġbok imla d-dokument tal-kunsens meħmuż u rritornah lis-Sinjura Mercieca flimkien mat-tifel /tifla tiegħek mhux aktar tard minn \_\_\_\_\_.

Dejjem tiegħek,

Nadia Mercieca, B.Psy (Hons), PGCE

**Dikjarazzjoni ta' kunsens għall-partecipazzjoni tal-ulied fil-kapaita` tagħhom bhalha student fi studju intitolat "L-Effett tal-Affett: Studju Komparattiv li jħares lejn il-percezzjonijiet ta' għalliema u studenti fis-sena 10 dwar kif ir-relazzjoni bejn l-għalliem u l-istudent tinfluwenza l-kisba akkademika."**

Aħna, \_\_\_\_\_ u \_\_\_\_\_, fil-kapaċità tagħna bħala ġenituri ta' \_\_\_\_\_, student/a fil-Grad 10 fi \_\_\_\_\_, qrajna u nifhmu l-informazzjoni pprezentata hawn fuq. Aħna nifhmu li l-partecipazzjoni tat-tifel/tiefla hija volontarja u li t/jista' jirtira mill-istudju fi kwalunkwe hin mingħajr konsegwenzi. Irċevejna twegibiet għal kwalunkwe mistoqsija li kellna u aħna nifhmu li nistgħu nikkuntattjaw lir-riċerkatur jekk ikollna bżonn.

Aħna hawnhekk nagħtu l-kunsens tagħna lit-tifel tagħna sabiex jippartecipa fl-istudju li qed titmexxa mis-Sinjura Nadia Mercieca dwar "L-Effett tal-Affett: Studju Komparattiv li jħares lejn il-percezzjonijiet tal-għalliema u tal-istudenti fis-Sena 10 dwar kif ir-relazzjoni ta' bejn l-għalliema u l-istudent tinfluwenza l-kisba akkademika."

Isem: \_\_\_\_\_

Firma: \_\_\_\_\_

Data: \_\_\_\_\_

Isem tar-Riċerkatur: Mrs Nadia Mercieca

Firma: \_\_\_\_\_

## LETTER OF ASSENT TO STUDENTS – ENGLISH VERSION

Nadia Mercieca



1<sup>st</sup> June 2018

### Assent Document

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Dear Student,

I am reading for Masters in Euro-Mediterranean Comparative Education at the University of Malta. I am at present preparing to conduct a research project titled “The Affect Effect: A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement.” The latter project is being carried out under the supervision of Prof. Carmel Cefai. The University requires that informed consent is obtained from all those involved and therefore, through this letter, I am asking you to participate in the research study since you are a student in Grade 10 at your school.

The purpose of this research is to investigate whether teachers and students view their relationship as one of the ways which could help students improve their learning. Several other researchers before me have proved that this interaction yields very positive outcomes. Yet, as teachers and students, we constantly strive to work in an academically driven and scores-oriented educational field in order to reduce the achievement gap which locally, is becoming more and more prominent. Therefore, my interest in the field stems from the idea that affective aspects of teaching and learning can be equally effective in yielding positive learning outcomes. However, as teachers and students, I am not sure how well we are familiar with this aspect of education as a formal way to improve students’ learning outcomes. Hence, I would like to delve deeper into this matter and to compare the viewpoints of teachers and students about the matter in question.

As a participant, you will be asked to take part in a focus group which should last about one hour and which will be held during school hours at a time which will not hinder the academic input of lessons. I will ask you some questions in a group about how you interact with your teachers and of you think this helps you in your studies and learning outcomes. During the session, a recorder will be used to record what you say.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can choose to stop participating in the study at any point. I will not be writing or telling anyone who you are or what you have said and whatever you say will not be to your benefit or harm you in any way. The recordings will be transcribed and stored until the research project is carried out.

If you have any questions which you may wish to ask, you can contact me by email at

[REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Nadia Mercieca, B.Psy (Hons), PGCE

**Statement of Assent for participation in a study titled “The Affect Effect: A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement.”**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, in my capacity as Student in Grade 10 at \_\_\_\_\_, have read and understand the information presented above. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. I have received answers to any questions I had and I understand that I can contact the researcher should I need to.

I hereby give my consent to participate in study being conducted by Mrs Nadia Mercieca called “The Affect Effect: A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement.”

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher: Mrs Nadia Mercieca

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## LETTER OF ASSENT TO STUDENTS – MALTESE VERSION

Nadia Mercieca



30 ta' Ġunju 2018

### Dokument ta' Assent

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Għażiż/a Student/a,

Jiena studenta fl-Università ta' Malta u jiena qed nistudja għall-Masters fl-Edukazzjoni Komparattiva Ewro-Mediterranja. Bhalissa qed nipprepara biex nagħmel proġett ta' riċerka intitolat "L-Effett tal-Affett: Studju Komparattiv li jhares lejn il-perċezzjonijiet tal-għalliema u tal-istudenti fis-Sena 10 dwar kif ir-relazzjoni ta' bejn l-għalliema u l-istudent tinfluwenza l-kisba akkademika." Dan l-aħħar proġett se jitwettaq taħt is-supervizjoni tal-Professur Carmel Cefai. L-Università teħtieġ li jinkiseb il-kunsens infurmat mill-partijiet interessati kollha u għalhekk, permezz ta' din l-ittra, qed nitolbok biex tipparteċipa fl-istudju ta' riċerka fil-kapaċità tiegħek bħala student fil-Grad 10 fl-iskola tiegħek.

L-għan ta' din ir-riċerka huwa li jinvestiga jekk l-għalliema u l-istudenti jarawx ir-relazzjoni tagħhom bħala wiehed mill-modi kif titnaqqas id-differenza fil-kisbiet fil-mogħdija edukattiva tal-istudenti. Bosta proġetti ta' riċerka wrew li din l-interazzjoni tagħti riżultati pożittivi hafna, kif issuġġerit minn Hughes (2012) u Pianta (2016). Madankollu, bħala edukaturi, aħna dejjem naħdmu f'qasam edukattiv orjentat lejn istruzzjoni diretta u marki għoljinmiksuba akkademikament sabiex innaqqsu d-differenza fil-kisbiet. Lokalment, dan qed isir dejjem aktar prominenti. Għalhekk l-interess tiegħi fil-qasam ġej mill-idea li l-aspetti affettivi tat-tagħlim jistgħu jkunu ugwalmment effettivi biex jinkisbu riżultati ta' tagħlim pożittivi. Madankollu, bħala għalliema u studenti, m'hemmx ċertezza dwar kemm aħna familjari ma 'dan l-aspett tal-edukazzjoni bħala mod formali biex jitjiebu r-riżultati tat-tagħlim tal-istudenti. Għalhekk, nixtieq niddiskuti aktar fil-fond din il-kwistjoni biex inqabbel l-opinjoni tal-għalliema u l-istudenti dwar il-kwistjoni.

Bħala parteċipant/a, inti se tintalab tiegħu sehem f'fokus grupp li għandu jidmug madwar siegħa u li se jsir matul il-ħin tal-iskola f'ħin li ma jfjixkilx l-input akkademiku tal-lezzjonijiet. Ser nistaqsik xi mistoqsijiet fi grupp dwar kif tinteragixxi ma' l-għalliema tiegħek u jekk inti taħsibx li dan jgħinek fl-istudju u r-riżultati tat-tagħlim tiegħek. Matul is-sessjoni, se jintuża registratur biex jirreġistra dak li tgħid.

Il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek hija għal kollox volontarja u tista' tagħzel li tieqaf tiegħu sehem fl-istudju fi kwalunkwe mument. Mhux se nikteb jew ngħid lil xi hadd dak li tghid u dak kollu li tghidli mhux se jkun għall-benefiċċju tiegħek jew jagħmel ħsara lilek b'xi mod. Ir-registrazzjonijiet se jigu traskritti u mażżuna sakemm jitwettaq il-proġett ta 'riċerka.

Jekk għandek xi mistoqsijiet li tixtieq tistaqsi, tista' tikkuntattja lili bl-email lil



Dejjem tiegħek,

Nadia Mercieca, B.Psy (Hons), PGCE

**Dikjarazzjoni ta' assent għall-partecipazzjoni fi studju intitolat "L-Effett tal-Affett: Studju Komparattiv li jhars lejn il-percezzjonijiet ta' għalliema u studenti fis-Sena 10 dwar kif ir-relazzjoni bejn l-għalliem u l-istudent tinfluwenza l-kisba akkademika."**

Jien, \_\_\_\_\_, fil-kapaċità tiegħi bħala student/a fi Grad 10 fi \_\_\_\_\_, qrajt u nifhem l-informazzjoni ppreżentata hawn fuq. Nifhem li l-partecipazzjoni tiegħi hija volontarja u li nista' nirtira mill-istudju fi kwalunkwe ħin mingħajr konsegwenzi. Irċevejt twegġibiet għal kwalunkwe mistoqsijiet li kelli u nifhem li nista' nikkuntattja lir-riċerkatur jekk għandi bżonn.

Jiena hawnhekk nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi biex nipparteċipa fl-istudju li qed titmexxa mis-Sinjura Nadia Mercieca dwar "L-Effett tal-Affett: Studju Komparattiv li jhars lejn il-percezzjonijiet tal-għalliema u tal-istudenti fis-Sena 10 dwar kif ir-relazzjoni ta' bejn l-għalliema u l-istudent tinfluwenza l-kisba akkademika."

Isem: \_\_\_\_\_

Firma: \_\_\_\_\_

Data: \_\_\_\_\_

Isem tar-Riċerkatur: Mrs Nadia Mercieca

Firma: \_\_\_\_\_

# APPENDIX 2 | TOOLS OF DATA COLLECTION

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## FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE – ENGLISH VERSION

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Data gathering tool for the purpose of collecting data for the project titled:

**“The Affect Effect: A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement.”**

### Step 1

---

Introduce myself and who I am. Explain why I have gathered the group.

#### Question 1

---

Focus: Introduction

**1. *What can you tell me about your lives as students?***

#### Question 2

---

Focus: Orientation towards topic

- 2. *Do you have a favourite subject?***
- 3. *What makes these subjects your favourite?***
- 4. *Think of your favourite teacher (allow some time).***
  - a. *What qualities do you like in that teacher? (Possible suggestions: behaviour; teaching style)***
  - b. *What qualities would you like to see in a teacher?***

### Question 3

---

Focus: The importance of the TS Relationship

- 1. Can you describe experiences which you had as students with your teachers?*
- 2. Can you now describe instances or situations, if any, when you as a student felt valued by a teacher?*
- 3. What kinds of things do teachers do to have a lasting positive effect on students' lives?*
- 4. What do teachers do to make you feel that you are valued and respected?*

### Question 4

---

Focus: The TS relationship and academic achievement

- 1. Think of a teacher you have a good relationship with.
  - a. Do you like that subject more than others?*
  - b. Do you think you will achieve higher grades in that subject? Why?**
- 2. Has there been an experience when your teacher has negatively influenced your success in the subject she teaches you?*
- 3. Is the relationship between you and your teachers an important influence in what you consider personal success? Why / Why not?*
- 4. a. How important are your teachers to your success in school exams?  
b. Do you think you study more those subjects which are taught by teachers you like? Why?*

### Question 5

---

Focus: School based activities that enhance the TS relationship

- 1. Are there any activities that take place at school which help to improve your relationship with teachers?*
- 2. What would you like to see at school that might help you to have a better relationship with your teachers?*

### Question 6

---

Focus: Conclusion

- 1. Is there anything else you would like to add?*

## FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE – ENGLISH VERSION

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Għodda għall-ġbir tad-data għall-proġett intitolat:

**"L-Effett tal-Affett: Studju Komparattiv li jhares lejn il-perċezzjonijiet ta' għalliema u studenti fis-Sena 10 dwar kif ir-relazzjoni bejn l-għalliem u l-istudent tinfluwenza l-kisba akkademika."**

Stadju 1

---

Nintroduċi ruħi u min jien. Nispjega għaliex ingabar il-grupp.

Mistoqsija 1

---

Fokus: Introduzzjoni

***1. X'tista tgħidli dwar hajjek bhala student/a?***

Mistoqsija 2

---

Fokus: Orjentazzjoni lejn is-suġġett

***2. Ghandek suġġett favorit?***

***3. X'jagħmel dan is-suġġett il-favorit tiegħek?***

***4. Ahseb fl-għalliem favorit tiegħek (halli ftit hin).***

***a. Liema kwalitajiet joghgbuk f'dak l-għalliem? (Suġġerimenti possibbli: imġiba; stil ta' tagħlim)***

***b. Liema kwalitajiet tixtieq tara f'għalliem?***

### Mistoqsija 3

---

Fokus: L-importanza tar-Relazzjoni TS

- 1. Tista' tiddeskrivi esperjenzi li kellek bhala student mal-ghalliema tieghek?*
- 2. Tista issa tiddeskrivi kazijiet jew sitwazzjonijiet, jekk hemm, meta inti bhala student hassejtek ta' valur minn ghalliem?*
- 3. Liema tipi ta 'affarijiet jaghmlu l-ghalliema biex ikollhom effett pozittiv fuq il-hajja ta' l-istudenti?*
- 4. X'jaghmlu l-ghalliema biex thossok apprezzat u rrispettat?*

### Mistoqsija 4

---

Fokus: Ir-relazzjoni TS u l-kisba akkademika

- 1. Ahseb f'ghalliem li ghandek relazzjoni tajba mieghu jew magha.*
  - a. Dak is-suggett huwa ghal qalbek aktar minn ohrajn?*
  - b. Tahseb li se tikseb gradi oghla f'dak is-suggett? Ghaliex?*
- 2. Kien hemm esperjenza meta l-ghalliem tieghek influwenza b'mod negattiv is-suċċess tieghek fis-suggett li hi/hu j/ tghallem?*
- 3. Ir-relazzjoni bejnek u l-ghalliema hija influwenza importanti fis-suċċess personali tieghek? Ghaliex / Ghaliex le?*
- 4. a. Kemm huma importanti l-ghalliema tieghek ghas-suċċess tieghek fl-eżamijiet tal-iskola?*
  - b. Tahseb li tistudja aktar dawk is-suggetti li huma mghallma mill-ghalliema li thobb? Ghaliex?*

### Mistoqsija 5

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Fokus: Attivitajiet skolastici li jtejbu r-relazzjoni TS

- 1. Hemm xi attivitajiet li jsiru fl-iskola li jghinu biex itejbu r-relazzjoni tieghek mal-ghalliema?*
- 2. X'tixtieq tara fl-iskola li tista' tghinek ikollok relazzjoni ahjar mal-ghalliema tieghek?*

## Mistoqsija 6

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Fokus: Konkluzjoni

***1. Hemm xi haġa oħra li tixtieq iżżid?***

## EMAIL INTERVIEW - TEACHER QUESTIONNAIRE

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Dear Teacher,

As you were informed in the letter given to you where you have given your consent for participation, hereunder please find the questions I would like you to answer. This will help me complete my investigation for the project titled:

**“The Affect Effect:**

**A comparative study of the perceptions of Year 10 teachers and students on how the teacher-student relationship influences academic achievement.”**

Wubbels, Brekelmans, den Brok, Wijsman, Mainhard and van Tartwijk (2014) define the teacher-student relationship as “*as the generalized interpersonal meaning students and teachers attach to their interactions with each other*” (p. 364). Keeping this in mind, kindly answer the questions below.

**Details of Participant**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

School: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What characteristics make up a positive relationship with a student?

a. According to you?

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b. According to your students?

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2. What characteristics make up a negative relationship with a student?

a. According to you?

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b. According to your students?

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3. What happens at school that leads to a positive teacher-student relationship?

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4. What do you think makes a good teacher?

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5. Do you think that having a positive relationship with your students will lead to better academic achievement? Why / Why not?

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6. Do you think that having a negative relationship with your students will lead to lower academic achievement? Why / Why not?

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7. A. What are the qualities of a good teacher-student relationship?

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B. How can teachers be supported to develop positive student-teacher relationships?

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8. What do you think can be done to help teachers improve their relationship with their students at school level? (for example, through activities, SDPs, etc.)

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9. Do you think it helps if teachers are assessed on their relationship with students at school? Why/ Why not?

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10. Is there anything you would like to add about the topic?

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If you have any questions to ask or to clarify, kindly email me at [REDACTED]

Please email the completed questionnaire to the same email address. As the researcher, I might need to email you back to ask for clarification. Should you wish, at any point after sending the completed questionnaire, to inform me that you do not wish that your responses are included in the study, kindly let me know thereafter. I take the opportunity to remind you that your participation is safe-guarded and your anonymity will be respected throughout the research study.

Thank you for your input.

Nadia Mercieca