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A Framework for Motivating Teacher-Student Relationships

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Few question the value of teacher-student relationships (TSRs) for educational outcomes. TSRs are positively associated with students' achievement and engagement, as well as teachers' well-being. Building and maintaining these crucial classroom relationships, however, is not easy. Drawing on prominent motivation theories in educational psychology, I present the Motivating Teacher-Student Relationships framework for understanding what motivates teachers to build positive TSRs. In particular, I focus on how teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs energize, direct, and sustain their efforts to engage in relationship-building behaviors and, thus, lead to positive relationships with their students. To build positive TSRs, teachers must believe it is their role to build TSRs, value TSRs, and believe they can successfully build TSRs (i.e., have relational self-efficacy). These beliefs are shaped by teachers' sociocultural contexts and can facilitate or undermine the development of these learning relationships. With a greater understanding of how motivational beliefs influence social relationships, the field of education can more effectively develop theoretically grounded interventions to improve TSRs and mitigate inequality.

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Abstract

Few question the value of teacher-student relationships (TSRs) for educational outcomes. TSRs are positively associated with students' achievement and engagement, as well as teachers' well-being. Building and maintaining these crucial classroom relationships, however, is not easy. Drawing on prominent motivation theories in educational psychology, I present the Motivating Teacher-Student Relationships framework for understanding what motivates teachers to build positive TSRs. In particular, I focus on how teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs energize, direct, and sustain their efforts to engage in relationship-building behaviors and, thus, lead to positive relationships with their students. To build positive TSRs, teachers must believe it is their role to build TSRs, value TSRs, and believe they can successfully build TSRs (i.e., have relational self-efficacy). These beliefs are shaped by teachers' sociocultural contexts and can facilitate or undermine the development of these learning relationships. With a greater understanding of how motivational beliefs influence social relationships, the field of education can more effectively develop theoretically grounded interventions to improve TSRs and mitigate inequality.

Keywords: Teacher-student relationships, Teacher beliefs, Teacher motivation, Roles, Values, Self-Efficacy, Sociocultural contexts

When asked to describe their favorite teachers, students do not tell stories about effective curricula or gains they made on state tests. Students recount the teachers who cared, teachers who inspired, and teachers who expected more (Thompson et al., 2004). These anecdotal stories are overwhelmingly borne out by research: students with more positive TSRs attain a myriad of more desirable outcomes than their counterparts with less positive relationships (Pianta, 1999; Roorda et al., 2011). Cultivating positive relationships, however, is not easy (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Currently, only a handful of evidence-based practices exist that specifically support teachers in their efforts to connect with students (see Kincade et al., 2020). If we want to know how to improve TSRs, we need to understand what motivates teachers to cultivate positive relationships with students in the first place. Motivation is often defined as a set of interrelated beliefs that influence and direct behavior (e.g., Martin, 2009; Wentzel, 1999). Thus, with a goal of building toward a theory of teachers' relational motivation, I turn to several prominent theories of motivation to identify a set of interrelated beliefs that energize, direct, and sustain teachers' efforts to build relationships with their students.

I propose these motivational beliefs about TSRs influence whether teachers engage in relationship-promoting behaviors with students and, in turn, the quality of their TSRs. The hypothesized association between teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs and the quality of their TSRs has implications for designing interventions that cause teachers to build positive relationships with students. In line with this special issue, I also highlight how the sociocultural contexts in which teachers interact with students may affect teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs.

Extant research indicates that the quality of a teacher's TSRs positively correlates with their work motivation and well-being (see Spilt et al., 2011), as well as important student educational outcomes (Roorda et al., 2011). Conversely, there is little empirical research that explicitly explores whether teachers' motivational beliefs *about* relationships with students promote quality TSRs. From a theoretical standpoint, educational psychologists largely agree that individuals' motivational beliefs are associated with their behaviors (Hattie et al., 2020; Pajares, 1992), so it seems plausible that teachers' beliefs about TSRs shape how they interact with students.

I present the *Motivating Teacher-Student Relationships* (Motivating TSRs) framework to draw attention to the link between teachers' motivational beliefs and TSRs. The Motivating TSRs framework considers how teachers' beliefs about their roles, values, and abilities contribute to the energy, effort, and tenacity teachers put toward building relationships with students and, ultimately, the quality of their TSRs. This framework, which spans multiple theories of motivation, does not elevate one theory of motivation over another. Instead, it integrates aspects of each theory to further our theoretical understanding about the interrelated set of beliefs that motivate teachers to build positive relationships with students.

This article proceeds as follows: First, I define and operationalize positive TSRs. Second, I briefly introduce the correlational research demonstrating how important positive TSRs are for both students and teachers. Third, I discuss the inherent challenges teachers face when trying to build positive TSRs. Fourth, I introduce the Motivating TSRs framework. In this section I present the three categories of motivational beliefs (roles, values, self-efficacy) that I hypothesize influence and direct teachers' behaviors with students. I then examine the sociocultural contexts (i.e., the school, the professional community, the policy landscape, society) that shape these beliefs and TSRs, more broadly. Fifth, I consider how the Motivating TSRs framework can inform how we design interventions to improve TSRs. Finally, I conclude by highlighting the equity implications inherent in TSR-related work and considering future directions for research on TSRs.

Conceptualizing Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

TSRs are dyadic social processes (Pianta, 1999) that comprise ongoing interactions between teachers and students in classrooms, how teachers and students feel about one another, and how teachers and students perceive their shared relationship (see also, Wentzel, 2022/this issue). With this in mind, I draw on Brinkworth and colleagues (2018) research and define TSRs as teachers' and students' (1) interactions over time, (2) affect towards each other, and (3) aggregate perceptions of one another.

Importantly, there is no one "correct" way for teachers to interact with students (Yu et al., 2018). For example, one teacher may not be perceived as especially warm by their students, but they build positive relationships with their students by running an engaging class where students enjoy learning. Another teacher may take an interest in their students' lives outside the classroom, which could make up for an authoritarian teaching style when it comes to building positive relationships. Thus, any attempt to operationalize positive TSRs must address the unique and varied features of relationships between teachers and students. These features tend to be true of relationships, in general, but manifest in ways that are specific to the social experience of teaching and learning.

High quality (or positive) TSRs consist of caring, productive, and respectful teacher-student interactions, a warm and close personal connection, and both the teacher and student having more positive (and less negative) perceptions of the TSR. This conceptualization incorporates much of the existing academic literature on TSRs, drawing on attachment theory (e.g., Hamre & Pianta, 2001), parent socialization (e.g., Wentzel, 2002), and self-determination theory (e.g., Skinner et al., 2008). These literatures also inform how we can measure the overall quality of TSRs.

On one hand, teacher-student interactions can be directly observed. Teacher-student interactions are the daily back-and-forth exchanges that teachers and students have with one another, including those that are social and instructional in nature (Hamre et al., 2012). The Classroom Learning Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) approach assesses classroom interaction qualities, including instructional supports, classroom organization, and emotional supports (Allen et al., 2013; Hamre et al., 2012). However, CLASS is most often applied at the teacher level to assess classroom quality—it does not capture interactions at the teacher-student dyad level that comprise individual TSRs (Good & Brophy, 1970). Moreover, when it comes to measuring interactions, the whole is likely greater than the sum of the parts. In other words, because interactions can be highly unstable from moment to moment, it is important to capture the qualities of interactions over time (Pianta et al., 2012). Thus, although individual teacher-student interactions may be observable, measuring TSR quality based on interaction data at the dyad-level over time requires resource and time-intensive data collection methods (see Wentzel, 2022/this issue). For this reason, collecting teacher-student interaction data has been largely prohibitive for researchers who want to assess individual teacher-student dyads over time.

On the other hand, TSRs are more than just interactions (Downer et al., 2015). Brinkworth and colleagues (2018) developed parallel teacher and student scales to assess TSRs holistically, accounting for both parties' affect and perspectives. These scales capture constructs widely used to assess TSRs, like closeness and conflict (e.g., Ang, 2005; Hamre & Pianta, 2001) or support (e.g., Skinner et al., 2008). The holistic design of the scales accounts for the fact that certain areas of the TSR may compensate for weaknesses in other areas. As such, the scales include items that assess caring, communication, expectations, instructional support, motivation, respect, trust, and warmth, as well as disrespect, unfairness, criticism, and conflict.

These measures also recognize that teachers and students may have differing perceptions of their shared relationship that drive their actions and reactions (e.g., Gable et al., 2003). Focusing on both parties' affect and perceptions is supported by empirical research: At the dyad level, the correlations between teacher and student perceptions of their shared TSR are consistently moderate to low (Brinkworth et al., 2018; Gehlbach et al., 2011; Hughes, 2011; Robinson et al., 2019; Wubbels et al., 1987), implying that individual perceptions about the quality of the same relationship actually differ quite a bit. Focusing on just one party inevitably overlooks key information about the TSR. However, teachers' affect for and perceptions about students (which are both informed by their interpretations of their interactions with students) are likely the main factor contributing to their own motivational beliefs systems about TSRs.

In sum, I argue that assessing the overall quality of a TSR involves measuring both the observable interactions between a teacher and student, as well as teachers' and students' self-reported affect toward one another and their perceptions of the relationship. In practice, however, evaluating individual TSRs over time often relies on teacher and student self-report measures.

The Importance of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

When educators or researchers focus on building TSRs, they often do so in the service of bolstering other measures of student success, like academic achievement (e.g., Gehlbach et al., 2016) and school engagement (e.g., Martin & Collie, 2019). Positive TSRs prove time and again to be a key factor correlating with educational outcomes. Teachers' and students' perceptions of TSRs have been associated with students' academic achievement (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Brinkworth et al., 2018; Cornelius-White, 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hughes & Kwok, 2007;

Robinson et al., 2019; Roorda et al., 2011), behavior (Baker et al., 2008; Birch & Ladd, 1998; Hughes & Cavell, 1999; Resnick et al., 1997), attendance (Anderson et al., 2004), and expectations for educational success (Brophy & Good, 1974; Hughes et al., 2005; Timmermans et al., 2019). Furthermore, positive TSRs are important in their own right (Fraser & Walberg, 2005). Multiple theories identify aspects of the relational experience as foundational to human development (Bowlby, 1979), motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), well-being (Seligman, 2012), and physical and mental health (Umberson & Montez, 2010).

Despite the consensus that these crucial classroom relationships are important, TSRs may be overlooked or undervalued compared to other instructional activities designed to influence learning, grades, and test scores more directly (Valli & Buese, 2007; Wellman, 2007). However, given that human interaction permeates almost every aspect of life, scholars have made the case that developing positive TSRs should be an educational priority. Witmer (2005) endorsed relationships as the fourth "R"—after reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic—for promoting educational success. Juvonen (2007) argued schools should be designed to foster social connections, particularly relationships between teachers and students, to improve student engagement. These arguments are supported by research showing that youth who can name a caring adult are more likely to be successful across numerous domains (Grossman & Bulle, 2006) and that having a school-based mentor predicts short- and long-run successes (Kraft et al., 2021).

Evidence that teachers benefit from close relationships with students provides further support for elevating the importance of TSRs. Although challenging relationships with students are the most common source of teacher work stress (Chang, 2009), teachers who perceive more positive TSRs also report greater levels of well-being (Spilt et al., 2011) and less burnout (Corbin et al., 2019; Klassen et al., 2012). Evidence suggests underlying teacher characteristics, such as less stress or more years of experience, also correlate with the quality of TSRs (Mashburn et al., 2006; Yoon, 2002). Perhaps teachers' energies are better deployed when they have positive TSRs because their students are more cooperative and receptive to their pedagogical and social efforts (Wentzel, 1997, 1998).

The Opportunities and Challenges of Building Teacher-Student Relationships

TSRs represent a crucial pathway to student success (e.g., Martin & Collie, 2016; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Pianta et al., 2003; Wentzel, 2016), but teachers face unique challenges when trying to build positive relationships with students (Englehart, 2009). TSRs differ from many other relationships we encounter in our lives. Each year, teachers must cultivate relationships with dozens, if not hundreds, of new and diverse students assigned to their classrooms. These relationships are intergenerational, which can make finding common ground difficult for both teachers and students. Mirroring the generational divide, as well as how we conceptualize teaching and learning in schools, teachers also tend to hold more power than students (Wang & Du, 2014). Exacerbating the power differential, we expect teachers to evaluate students—something that rarely sets a relationship off on the right foot. Teachers often feel pressure from their administration to raise student test scores, and may even receive signals that investing in TSRs might not be a worthwhile pursuit (Valli & Buese, 2007).

Considering these are just a few of the obstacles teachers might confront when trying to connect with their students, it is of little surprise that building positive TSRs can be time consuming and difficult (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Moreover, educational reforms, policy initiatives, and even preservice teacher training often underinvest resources into this complex and fundamental aspect of teaching (Brekelmans et al., 2005; Bridgeland et al., 2013; Hargreaves, 1998). Whether intended or (more likely) unintended, this lack of investment can signal that developing strong TSRs is a form of “extra credit” that teachers can pursue if they so choose. To overcome the many barriers to building TSRs and realize the full potential of these social bonds, teachers need embedded supports that increase their motivation to cultivate positive relationships with all their students.

Although teachers and students construct their relationships together, the inherent asymmetry in student and teacher relationships puts the onus of building a positive relationship on the teacher. The rationale for putting the relational burden on the teacher is especially obvious in the early grades, but the power differential holds in almost all teacher-student interactions across schooling (Hurt et al., 1978). Theoretical pathways outlining how TSRs might influence student outcomes often focus specifically on how teachers’ behaviors facilitate student motivation and learning (e.g., Wentzel, 2004). Of course students can exert influence over how teachers’ feel about or perceive their TSRs, such as behaving in socially competent ways to earn the positive regard of their teachers (Wentzel et al., 2007). However, teachers tend to set the norms for the classroom climate and interactions with students (Rubie-Davies, 2015). Reinforcing the need to focus on teachers’ beliefs about TSRs, recent research showed that teachers’ (not students’) perceptions of the TSR correlates most strongly with student academic achievement (Brinkworth et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2019). There is also evidence that teachers interact differently with their high and low achieving students (Babad, 1993, 2009).

Perhaps the greatest challenge stems from the fact that, while hundreds of studies point to the advantages associated with positive TSRs, the majority of the research to date has been correlational (Gehlbach & Robinson, 2016; Wentzel, 2016). This is a problem because, as a field, we cannot definitively say that improving TSRs will *lead to* improved outcomes for students and teachers. For instance, the correlational research cannot tease apart whether positive

TSRs cause students to perform better academically or whether high-achieving students are simply more likely to have positive TSRs. Some may be hesitant to prioritize TSRs because there is no guarantee doing so will result in improved outcomes for students. Furthermore, even if policymakers and practitioners are willing to invest in improving these crucial classroom relationships, the academic literature falls short in providing robust evidence-based solutions. To date, only a handful of empirical studies have tested interventions specifically designed to create more positive relationships between teachers and their students (see Driscoll & Pianta, 2010; Driscoll et al., 2011; Gehlbach et al., 2016; Gehlbach et al., In press; Kincade et al., 2020; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2019). These interventions, diverse in both their approaches and modes of delivery, have had mixed success in improving TSRs. These studies, however, do not address the preliminary question of why teachers direct their energy, effort, and tenacity toward cultivating positive relationships with students in the first place. Perhaps interventions aiming to improve TSRs fail to demonstrate consistent results, not because the underlying theory or execution was off base, but because they do not adequately address teachers' underlying beliefs about TSRs. I address issues related to interventions more fully in a later section.

The Motivating Teacher-Student Relationships Framework

To support teachers' relationship-building efforts and to design effective interventions that improve TSRs, we need to understand what motivates teachers to build positive TSRs. Educational psychologists have highlighted the ways in which TSRs can contribute to students' achievement motivation (Martin & Collie, 2016; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Pianta et al., 2003; Wentzel, 1999, 2012, 2016) whereas, in contrast to the growing literature on correlates of TSRs, research on the factors that contribute to teachers' motivation to engage in these relationships with students is relatively rare. Fortunately, eminent scholars in educational psychology have spent decades theorizing what motivates people and applying it to education. In this section, I draw on the rich theoretical and empirical work in the discipline to identify the belief constructs—roles, values, and self-efficacy—that may explain why some teachers invest more heavily in building positive relationships with their students (or invest in building relationships with some students more than others).

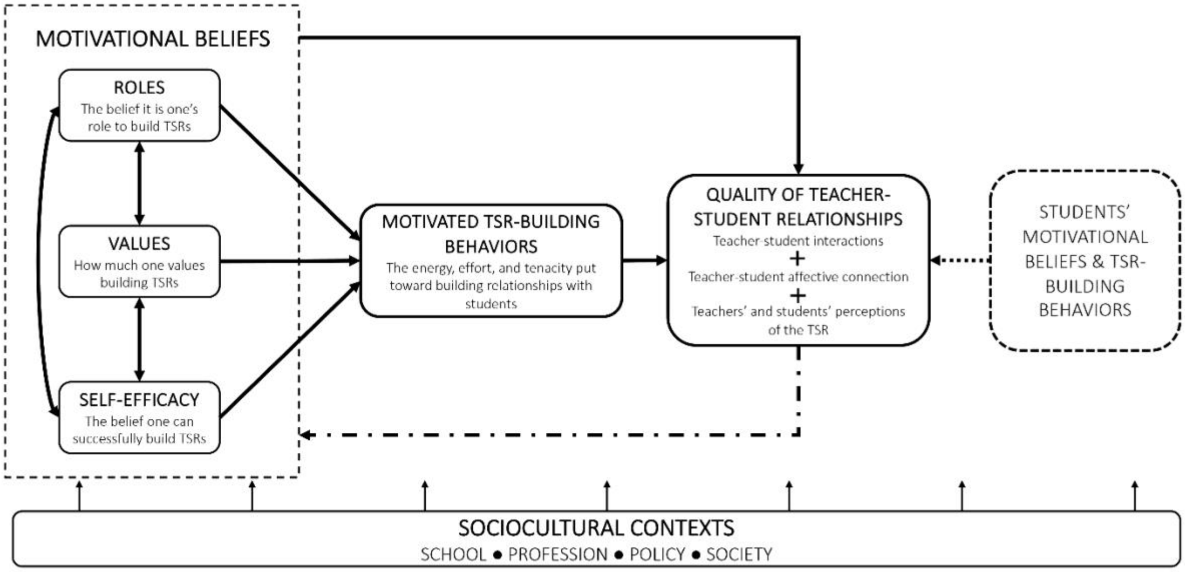
Figure 1 presents the Motivating TSRs framework for understanding how teachers' motivational beliefs may contribute to their motivated relationship-building behaviors with students and, subsequently, the quality of their TSRs. For teachers to direct (and sustain) energy and effort toward building relationships with their students, they must believe it is their **role** to build TSRs, they must **value** TSRs, and they must have relational **self-efficacy**. The salience and valence associated with each of these three motivational beliefs informs whether teachers direct energy, effort, and tenacity toward building positive TSRs (e.g., Ajzen, 1991). In other words, for teachers to engage in relationship-building behaviors with students at a given moment, teachers must attend to all three of these individual beliefs (i.e., high salience) *and* the overall assessment must be favorable towards engaging in TSRs (i.e., positive valence). Notably, these motivational beliefs do not exist in silos; they are interrelated and interdependent. To give just one example, teachers prioritization of their roles can be linked to their self-efficacy beliefs about what they are capable of in the classroom. Phillippo and Stone (2013) found that the more teachers feel capable of providing student support, the more likely they are to prioritize the role of providing social and emotional support to students.

Teachers' engagement in relationship-building behaviors then affects the quality of their TSRs, or the extent to which (1) their interactions with students are caring, productive, and respectful, (2) they share a warm personal connection with students, and (3) they and their students perceive the joint relationship to be, overall, positive. At the same time, teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs likely directly contribute to the quality of their TSRs, particularly when it comes to how they perceive their interactions with students (e.g., Babad, 2009). The dashed line connecting the quality of the TSR and teachers' motivational beliefs represents the reciprocal association between beliefs and experiences, such that each influences one another bidirectionally (Bandura, 1986). In some situations, teachers may construct their beliefs based on their experiences (Bem, 1972). This dashed line also represents the recursive nature of these processes. Teachers' interactions with students, affect toward students, and perceptions of their TSRs will serve to influence their motivational beliefs about TSRs going forward. In this framework, I also recognize that students' motivational beliefs about TSRs and their engagement in relationship-building behaviors with teachers likely impacts the quality of the TSR, however addressing students' motivations for building relationships with teachers is outside the scope of this article.

At the bottom of the figure, the sociocultural contexts are illustrated as underpinning the entirety of the associations between teachers' motivational beliefs, TSR-building behaviors, and the quality of their TSRs. Teachers' experiences are situated within the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they occur (Greeno, 1998), and an individual teacher's beliefs are likely a function of their specific, overlapping contexts (Nolen, 2020). Teachers' experiences are shaped by their school, the profession, the policy landscape, and society. Therefore, teachers' beliefs about their roles, values, and self-efficacy will vary across these sociocultural contexts, as will the salience and valence of each belief (Nolen, 2020; Wang & Du, 2014). For instance, teachers' beliefs about TSRs may be influenced by the school leaders or the student population in their school (Monzo & Rueda, 2001a, 2001b), their professional training (Bryan & Atwater, 2002), the policies they are expected to enact (Valli & Buese, 2007), and societal stereotypes about gender and racial-ethnic identities (Spilt, Hughes, et al., 2012; Spilt, Koomen, et al., 2012).

In the following sections, I introduce each belief, provide evidence from existing motivational theories for its inclusion in the framework, and consider its potential influence on teachers' motivation to build TSRs and the quality of their TSRs. I then discuss how sociocultural contexts influence teachers' TSRs, focusing specifically on teachers' personally held beliefs about TSRs.

Figure 1. The Motivating Teacher-Student Relationships Framework


MOTIVATIONAL BELIEFS
ROLES
The belief it is one's role to build TSRs
VALUES
How much one values building TSRs
SELF-EFFICACY
The belief one can successfully build TSRs
MOTIVATED TSR-BUILDING BEHAVIORS
The energy, effort, and tenacity put toward building relationships with students
QUALITY OF TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS
Teacher-student interactions
+
Teacher-student affective connection
+
Teachers' and students' perceptions of the TSR
STUDENTS' MOTIVATIONAL BELIEFS & TSR-BUILDING BEHAVIORS
SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXTS
SCHOOL ● PROFESSION ● POLICY ● SOCIETY

Note: This diagram presents a hypothesized pathway through which teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs affect their motivated TSR-building behaviors with students and, in turn, the quality of their TSRs. Teachers' beliefs, behaviors, and TSRs are influenced by the sociocultural contexts in which they occur, as exemplified by the box at the base of the diagram.

Roles: Teachers' Role Construction

Teachers are unlikely to be motivated to build TSRs if they do not believe it is their role to cultivate positive relationships with students. In this article I am specifically referring to the concept of a teacher's *role* (i.e., the sets of tasks, activities, and responsibilities expected of teachers; Biddle, 1997; Valli & Buese, 2007). This conception can be contrasted with the use the term "teacher's role" to refer to a social position or identity (i.e., the set of persons who are designated by the occupational title, "teacher"; Biddle, 1997). Thus, teachers may experience conflict in the various roles they are expected to play (Papastylianou et al., 2009; Turner, 2005; Valli & Buese, 2007). The present conception of a teacher's role is also distinct from, but related to, a teacher's social *role identity* (i.e., a situated and comprehensive system that reflects the meaning of being a teacher; Kaplan & Garner, 2017, 2018).

Early research on TSRs introduced the notion that teachers' beliefs about their roles may influence their motivation for building TSRs. Brophy (1985) found that some teachers view themselves primarily as instructors (i.e., subject matter specialists concerned with instructing their students in the formal academic curriculum) whereas others saw themselves as socializers (i.e., parent surrogates or therapists), and those conceptions related to their classroom conduct (see also McPartland, 1990; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992). Similarly, a qualitative study with preservice teachers found participants' visions of themselves as educators influenced their interpretations of classroom practice (Calderhead & Robson, 1991). In interviews, these preservice teachers tended to highlight one particular role in their teaching and were more likely to call attention to that role when providing feedback to another teacher about their lesson. For instance, a teacher who prioritized the role of positive TSRs in their own classroom was more likely to comment on relational features when observing other teachers. This research suggests it is very likely that teachers' beliefs about their roles shape the types of learning environments they create with and for students (Kagan, 1992).

Role theory (Biddle, 1986, 1988) suggests that, to understand why teachers might prioritize engaging in relationship-building behaviors with students at any given moment, we must consider how teachers construct their roles (Biddle, 1988, 1997). The *logic of appropriateness*, a sociological perspective, similarly dictates that people maintain a repertoire of roles and seek to fulfill the responsibilities encapsulated by a role in situations where they are relevant (March & Olsen, 2006). Researchers have documented the multidimensional, dynamic nature of teachers' roles (e.g., Fishburn, 1962; Valli & Buese, 2007) and these roles differ in their degree of centrality to any individual teacher. Thus, teachers may find certain teacher roles to consistently rise to the foreground in their practice whereas other roles drift to the background (Biddle, 1988; De Vries et al., 2014).

There are several ways in which teachers' motivational beliefs about their roles in the classroom likely influence whether they prioritize relationship-building behaviors. First, the opportunity to work closely with students is a strong motive for many teachers entering the profession (Klassen et al., 2011; Watt & Richardson, 2007; Weinstein, 1989) and likely elevates the role that building TSRs plays in their teaching practice. Self-determination theory posits that teachers, like students and other humans, have three basic psychological needs: the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 1991). The more these needs are satisfied, the more likely people are autonomously motivated—which involves personal volition and choice (i.e., intrinsic motivation)—to promote their own growth and wellness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). The theory would suggest that teachers who choose teaching as a career may want to fulfill the psychological need for relatedness in their job by having positive relationships with students (Deci et al., 1991). Research has found that a teacher's desire to connect with students is a significant factor in shaping their intrinsic motivation: when teachers feel connected with students, they report higher levels of engagement and enjoyment and lower levels of emotional exhaustion (Klassen et al., 2012). Correspondingly, teachers who report being autonomously motivated (including having high levels of relatedness satisfaction) show evidence of investing more in developing close relationships with their students (Abós et al., 2018). The extent to which a teacher's need for relatedness is supported by their relationships with students likely informs how much they prioritize the role of building TSRs.

Second, teachers' beliefs about how they should construct their roles have implications for their identity (Allen & Van de Vliert, 1984; Danielewicz, 2001; Wang & Du, 2014) and, therefore, their behaviors. Those who report becoming educators because they can fulfill the role of connecting with youth may perceive building TSRs as something that aligns with their identity as a teacher (Wang & Du, 2014). Expectancy-value theory (discussed more in the next section) posits that tasks associated with certain roles will be important when a person views them as central to their own identity (Eccles, 2009). Thus, a teacher who chose the career because they care about connecting with students may view relationship-building as a hallmark of who they are as a teacher.

Third, teachers may have goals related to TSRs that influence how they construct their role. A study by Retelsdorf and colleagues (2010) provides evidence that teachers' personal goals for teaching influence what they emphasize in the classroom. From the achievement goal theory perspective (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986), teachers likely differ in the way they define success and, thus, differ in their achievement goals for teaching (Butler, 2007). Specifically, four constructs explain teachers' purposes for engaging in actions: mastery goals (the purpose of learning, developing, and mastering skills as a teacher); ability-approach goals (the purpose of demonstrating superior teaching ability); ability-avoidance goals (the purpose of avoiding demonstrating inferior teaching ability); and work-avoidance goals (the purpose of getting through with as little effort as possible) (Butler, 2007). Butler (2012), however, noted that applying the achievement goal theory framework to teachers' motivation required accounting for an additional teaching objective: a relational goal, in which teachers have a goal of achieving and maintaining close relationships with students. Studies focusing on teachers' goal orientations found that the extent to which teachers endorse relational goals in their teaching practice has consequences for teachers' roles in the classroom, and thus for their motivation to build TSRs (Butler, 2012; Butler & Shibaz, 2014). Although relational goals seem like the most straightforward reason for teachers to engage in relationship-building behaviors, it is also plausible that a teacher with a mastery orientation would want to master building TSRs in their practice or one with an ability-approach orientation would be motivated to have more positive TSRs than other teachers (e.g., Nitsche et al., 2011). Although many motivational theories do not explicitly include the notion of "role," I argue that constructs like teachers' need for relatedness, identity, and goal orientations likely contribute to teachers' role construction, particularly when it comes to prioritizing the role of building positive TSRs with students.

Values: Valuing Teacher-Student Relationships

Beyond viewing interpersonal relationships with students as an essential role for a teacher, the extent to which teachers value positive TSRs will influence their motivation to engage in relationship-building behaviors. Supporting this premise, situated expectancy-value theory emphasizes how people's expectations for success in a task and their perceived value in a task contribute to their choice, effort, and persistence in that task (Atkinson, 1957; Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 2020; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). The perceived, or subjective, task value consists of four subcomponents: intrinsic value, or interest; attainment value, or importance; utility value, or usefulness; and the costs associated with engaging in the task (e.g., time and effort). Teachers' different conceptions of value regarding TSRs can all contribute to teachers' motivation for building relationships with students.

Teachers who value close relationships with students because they derive well-being or pleasure from the interactions may be more motivated to build TSRs. Teachers' intrinsic value, or interest value for building TSRs can be considered the anticipated enjoyment they expect to gain from interacting with students (Eccles, 2005). Just as teachers report connections with students as a strong motivator for entering the profession (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Watt & Richardson, 2007), TSRs are often mentioned as a reason for staying in the profession (Hargreaves, 1998) and a primary source of enjoyment (Hargreaves, 2000). Those who value building TSRs primarily because they enjoy the task will, over time, likely come to value it because of its attainment value, as it becomes part of their identity as a teacher (Eccles, 2009).

Teachers may also be motivated to build TSRs because of the utility value, or usefulness, of positive TSRs for promoting other educational-related outcomes. As noted earlier, positive TSRs consistently are correlated with student academic achievement and motivation. There is evidence suggesting that teachers are motivated to engage in behaviors that support their students' needs (Parsons et al., 2018; Rubie-Davies, 2015). For instance, teachers' utility value for engaging in TSR-promoting behaviors may increase if they come to realize that the quality of students' relationships with their teachers influence their students' motivation (Martin & Dowson, 2009; Pianta et al., 2003; Wentzel, 2012, 2016). Thus, teachers' efforts to build TSRs may, in part, reflect whether they believe positive TSRs will contribute to improved student outcomes or behaviors.

Relatedly, Watt and Richardson (2007) explored how preservice teachers' social utility value, or the extent to which teachers judge teaching as socially useful, is associated with their career choices. Teachers' desire to work with children likely influences how they prioritize the role of building TSRs in their practice, and they may also view building TSRs as having social utility value because working with and helping young people has benefits to society (Torsney et al., 2017; Watt & Richardson, 2007).

Finally, in considering how teachers' values contribute to their TSR-building behaviors with students, we must also account for the perceived costs that may come from interacting with students. Building positive relationships with students can be challenging and often requires significant time and effort (Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Time pressure, in particular, is a pervasive stressor for teachers (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007, 2016). For instance, teachers may perceive the time required to connect positively with individual students as too burdensome. As another example, teachers may view adapting curricula to embed relationship-building activities as requiring too much effort. Relatedly, there also may be opportunity costs associated with engaging in relationship-building behaviors if they replace other, presumably more productive instructional behaviors (Robinson et al., 2022). This may be particularly true if teachers are evaluated based primarily on their students' test scores, for instance, and not at all on the relational features of their teaching practice (Butler, 2012).

Self-Efficacy: Teachers' Relational Self-Efficacy

Unless teachers believe they can build positive TSRs, they likely have little incentive to engage in relationship-building behaviors with students. This basic premise is supported by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which emphasizes the impact of the social environment on motivation. The social environment consists of three interacting sets of processes: behavioral, environmental, and personal (Bandura, 1986; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020; Schunk & Usher, 2012). Decades of research on self-efficacy (a personal process) shows that the strength of people's convictions in their own abilities or effectiveness affects their choices to engage in certain activities, the amount of effort they will devote to them, and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles, thus directly impacting individual performance (Bandura, 1977, 1997; Lent, 2016; Zimmerman, 2000, 2013). I focus on how self-efficacy beliefs contribute to teachers' motivation to build TSRs, although teachers' expectancies for success (expectancy-value theory) and perceptions of competence (self-determination theory) exist in the same conceptual family (Hattie et al., 2020).

Research demonstrates that teachers' self-efficacy consistently predicts teacher motivation in the classroom (see Zee & Koomen, 2016) and self-efficacy beliefs may be among the most powerful influences on teachers' receptivity to change (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). But the highly contextualized nature of self-efficacy suggests that teacher self-efficacy should be assessed in terms of specific beliefs that vary across tasks, domains, and contexts (Ajzen, 2002; Bandura, 1997; Klassen & Usher, 2010; Pajares, 2006; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Thus, we must consider how teachers' relational self-efficacy, or teachers' beliefs about building TSRs, influence their motivation to engage in relationship-building behaviors with students (Zee & Koomen, 2016).

With this specific goal in mind, I define teachers' relational self-efficacy as teachers' beliefs about their capability to successfully form, maintain, and (when necessary) repair relationships with students. Current measures used to assess teacher self-efficacy are multi-dimensional and comprise a number of key features of teaching (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). And while these existing measures do assess teachers' beliefs about their abilities to motivate and discipline students—two aspects of teaching that certainly relate to TSRs—they do not directly address teachers' beliefs about their capacities to build TSRs (Zee & Koomen, 2016). Self-efficacy scales that are not distinctly linked to what they seek to predict usually have poor predictive validity (Bandura, 1997). Thus, if we want to assess teachers' beliefs about their ability to build TSRs, it must be measured directly. This may be why research studying the link between teachers' self-efficacy and the quality of their TSRs is mixed. On one hand, a few studies found positive associations between teachers' self-efficacy and perceptions of TSRs (Hajovsky et al., 2020; Summers et al., 2017). On the other hand, several studies have found no, or very slight, associations between teachers' self-efficacy and the quality of their relationships with individual students (Chung et al., 2005; De Jong et al., 2014; Yoon, 2002). Measures that specifically focus on teachers' relational self-efficacy beliefs may help to resolve this discrepancy.

In general, there is good reason to believe that teachers' relational self-efficacy would impact their motivation to build TSRs. If relational self-efficacy functions as it tends to in other domains, the stronger a teacher's relational self-efficacy, the more likely they will be motivated to seek out, engage with, and exert effort in relationship-building, maintaining, or repairing activities with students. Moreover, teachers' motivation to build TSRs will likely be influenced by the four primary sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and affective and physiological states (Bandura, 1997).

First, a mastery experience (i.e., when someone succeeds in a task) provides evidence that they can be successful in future, related endeavors. Mastery experiences can be especially influential when individuals overcome obstacles to be successful (Bandura, 1997). So, when teachers positively connect with a student—particularly a student who they may perceive as hard to work with—it likely contributes to their perceived relational self-efficacy and may prompt them to attempt relationship-building behaviors with other students. Conversely, if teachers try and fail to build a positive relationship with a student, it may decrease their relational self-efficacy and therefore the likelihood they engage in relationship-building behaviors going forward. Because people often first look to their own life events to inform their attitudes and beliefs, mastery experiences are most influential to self-efficacy (Kadden & Litt, 2011).

Vicarious experiences can also play a role in developing people's self-efficacy beliefs, especially when people may be uncertain about their own abilities or the domain lacks absolute measures of competence (Bandura, 1997; Usher & Pajares, 2008). When people see similar others successfully engage in a task, they can persuade themselves that they can do it too (Bandura, 1997). In this way, teachers who hear about or visualize other teachers (especially those they identify as like themselves) successfully engaging in relationship-building strategies with students may be more energized to build TSRs because they too possess the capabilities to meaningfully connect with students.

In addition to observing social models, others can directly influence self-efficacy through verbal persuasion. For teachers, verbal persuasion can be encouragements from colleagues or school leaders who express faith in their ability to carry out a particular relationship-building strategy. Or teachers may engage in professional development workshops that provide knowledge of a new strategy along with persuasive claims about its usefulness (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Verbal persuasion may also provide teachers with the encouragements they need to feel confident in their relationship-building efforts with students and encourage them to persist in the face of barriers (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009).

Finally, self-efficacy beliefs are informed by affective and physiological states. People interpret their levels of arousal, either positively or negatively, which can influence self-efficacy beliefs. People tend to expect success when they are feeling strong and positive, not when they are anxious and stressed. Reducing stress levels and increasing positive emotions associated with a task may enhance self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997). As such, linking the experience of building positive TSRs with feelings of accomplishment and pride may increase the chance teachers engage in relationship-building behaviors with students.

Sociocultural Contexts

As the articles in this special issue establish, many motivation scholars are moving to consider the influences of interpersonal relationships within larger social structures (see Graham et al., 2022/this issue; Gray et al., 2022/this issue; Starr et al., 2022/this issue; Skinner et al.,/ 2022 this issue; Wentzel, 2022/this issue). TSRs are, by definition, interpersonal and exist within existing proximal and distal social contexts (i.e., the school, the profession, the policy landscape, society) (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Therefore, teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs, their motivated TSR-building behaviors, and the quality of their TSRs are influenced by the sociocultural contexts in which they occur (Englund et al., 2018; Mashburn et al., 2006; Wang & Du, 2014). Hence, Figure 1 depicts the sociocultural context as the foundation influencing the entirety of the Motivating TSRs framework. In this article I specifically focus on how contextual factors may influence teachers' beliefs about their role construction related to building TSRs, valuing TSRs, and relational self-efficacy, but I recognize the many, often overlapping ways in which TSRs can be impacted by the socially constructed systems of meaning wherein they occur (Nolen, 2020). Though not comprehensive, the following examples aim to provide insights into how teacher beliefs about TSRs can be influenced by the sociocultural contexts in which they live and work.

The School Context. The culture and conventions of a teachers' school influence their motivational beliefs about TSRs, and about teaching more broadly (Chen et al., 2019; Englund et al., 2018; Pianta et al., 2003). Teachers will likely be motivated to perform a behavior based on the extent to which their peers or leaders model the behavior, communicate (directly or indirectly) they value the behavior, or would approve of their doing so. In this way, the school community serves as an informal social control mechanism that strongly guides teachers' role construction and valuations of tasks (Bryk et al., 1999). The norms teachers' perceive, or the normative beliefs they hold, refer to the perceived social pressure to perform or not perform a behavior (Ajzen, 1991) based on the expectations for behavior that are shared by the members of their group (Goodenow, 1992). Teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs likely depend on what they perceive to be the norm in their school (Davis, 2006). For instance, teachers may look to their colleagues or principals to inform how they construct their roles and value certain tasks (Midthassel, 2004; Milner et al., 2012). If they see their peers actively engaging in relationship-building behaviors with students, they may come to believe those behaviors are the expected norm at their school (Muller, 2001; Wang & Du, 2014). Similarly, the extent to which (and how) school leaders communicate about TSRs can send signals as to whether they believe the role of building positive TSRs is the norm. For example, teachers who work in "no excuses" charter schools (i.e., schools that reject explanations for students' low achievement; Wilson, 2009) often are socialized to emphasize teacher control and compliance, which may change how they conceive the role of building TSRs (Golann, 2018; Lopez Kershen et al., 2018). Notably, teachers' perceptions of their school community's expectations for building TSRs may or may not be accurate—but their subjective normative beliefs are a robust predictor of motivation to act (Borsari & Carey, 2003; Rogers & Frey, 2015).

Moreover, teachers must build relationships with students within the existing structural conditions imposed on them by schools. Teachers tend to have little control over externally regulated school procedures, but how these conditions are enacted likely impact teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs. For instance, there is evidence that class size is associated with teachers' interactions with their students (Brühwiler & Blatchford, 2011; Harfitt, 2013) and the perceptions of their TSRs (Mashburn et al., 2006). The size of a teacher's class may contribute to their TSR-building behaviors by influencing how they prioritize the role of TSRs (e.g., too many students make it difficult to prioritize building TSRs), their valuing of TSRs (e.g., valuing positive TSRs because they are useful for managing student behavior in a large class), or their relational self-efficacy (e.g., not being confident in their ability to cultivate positive TSRs with a large number of students in one class).

The Professional Context. Preservice teacher preparation programs and professional development programs shape teachers' motivational beliefs, but many do not devote enough time toward developing teacher capacity to build relationships with students (Bridgeland et al., 2013; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Brophy, 1988; Davis, 2006; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Studies exploring preservice teachers' beliefs found that prior to entering teacher education the majority of preservice teachers emphasized the interpersonal and relational aspect of teaching (Weinstein, 1989), whereas new teachers (who were just embarking on their teaching career) emphasized the dispensing of information (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Hollingsworth, 1989). It would appear plausible that teacher training programs communicate norms that diminish the importance of cultivating interpersonal relationships in the classroom. For instance, if preservice teachers are inundated with information on subject-matter facts, behavior management, and content delivery, while receiving no information on how to foster positive TSRs, it is easy to comprehend how teachers may come to devalue positive TSRs or lack relational self-efficacy once they enter the classroom (Davis, 2006).

The Policy Context. Policies serve as another element that may explicitly and implicitly shape teachers' beliefs. Despite the benefits associated with positive TSRs, the recommendation to cultivate positive relationships with students remains largely absent from many educational improvement efforts. Teachers are often asked to focus all their efforts on measurable increases in student achievement, or test scores (Davis, 2006). Through rigid standards and test-based accountability measures, policymakers and administrators (often unintentionally) communicate that the most important role of a teacher is to raise test scores. Teachers' perceptions of these expectations impact their beliefs (Hinnant-Crawford, 2016), potentially leading them to devalue the task of building TSRs or perceive that TSRs are not a role worth prioritizing in their practice.

An illustration of these expectations can be found in the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The 449-page document refers to the term "standard" 244 times, "assessment" 380 times, and the term "relationship" in the social context 6 times (ESSA, 2015). This federal law has major implications on setting role expectations for teachers, as evidenced by the core reforms aimed at teachers. None of the teacher initiatives that stem from ESSA address the social relationships involved in teaching (*K-12 Core Reforms*, 2016).

A study that explored the effect of the No Child Left Behind policy on teacher roles found that the demands from the high-stakes accountability effort did indeed result in teachers' relationships with students being demoted (Valli & Buese, 2007). Teachers were expected to implement data-based instruction techniques, leading to a particularly illuminating quotation from a teacher: "I don't always know [students] by face; I know them by data" (p. 548). Overall, teachers in the study felt that the additional focus on testing was not worth the cost of diminished TSRs but had little control over how the policy was enacted. At the same time, teachers' beliefs can also affect how they implement educational initiatives (De Vries et al., 2014; Eisenhart et al., 1988). Thus, if policies conflict with teachers' deeply held beliefs about their role, their values, or their self-efficacy, it likely influences their motivation to enact the policies and, subsequently, the ultimate success of the policies. Initiatives that support teachers building relationships with students may be more successful at encouraging teachers to change their behavior because they align with many teachers' ideal roles and values (De Vries et al., 2014; Watt & Richardson, 2007).

The Societal Context. We live in a society that perpetuates discrimination and inequality through policies, practices, and norms that systematically privilege certain groups of people over others. Just as a teacher's school and professional context can impact how they approach their relationships with students, so too can prevailing stereotypes and narratives that permeate our society (see Gray et al., 2022/this issue).

Racial and ethnic stereotypes can influence teachers' perceptions of students (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012; Thijs et al., 2012). These stereotypes may lead teachers to hold biases—implicit or explicit—towards groups of students (Worrell, 2021). In turn, these biases may then influence teachers' beliefs about the value of TSRs with stigmatized students or their ability to connect with these students (Denessen et al., 2020). With 80% of teachers in the United States identifying as White and an increasingly diverse student population (Spiegelman, 2020), these stereotypes may proliferate without intervention (Howard, 2016). Because teachers may have little prior experience interacting with people whose cultural or ethnic backgrounds differ from their own

(Colombo, 2007; Whitaker, 2020), they may have lower relational efficacy with students who do not share their ethnic-racial backgrounds (e.g., Kunemund et al., 2020). If the quality of teachers' TSRs differ by the race or ethnicity of their students—for which there is some evidence (Murray et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2019)—then students may encounter inequitable experiences (Cherng, 2017). The disparity in teachers' motivation to build TSRs with specific groups of students might contribute to the recent body of research showing that Black students achieve better academic outcomes after having a Black teacher, compared to having a White teacher (Blazar, 2021; Dee, 2004; Gershenson et al., 2018; Gershenson et al., 2016).

Societal stereotypes may also influence teachers' beliefs about their *own* abilities to cultivate TSRs or the value of relationships with certain groups of students. The profession of teaching has long been perceived to be a "feminine" and "caring" profession, particularly in Western culture (Drudy, 2008). This narrative leads many to *assume* female teachers and teachers in younger grades are better able to cultivate positive TSRs than male teachers and teachers in older grades (Hargreaves, 1998). If teachers internalize these stereotypical identities—even if they have no empirical support—male teachers and those at the secondary level may not be as confident in their abilities to cultivate positive TSRs. The internalization of certain identities may also lead to role conflict, particularly among male teachers who may be less satisfied engaging in what they perceive as "female" behaviors (Papastylianou et al., 2009). Or, perhaps, secondary teachers may be less likely to believe building positive TSRs with students is an important role in their practice (Hargreaves, 2000). Secondary teachers' valuing of TSRs may also suffer if they adopt prevailing negative attitudes about adolescents' attitudes, characteristics, and behaviors (Nichols & Good, 2004). Although prevailing structures and stereotypes can change over time, many have remained stubbornly rooted in our societal ethos and undoubtedly shape teachers' beliefs about TSRs.

Summary

Schools, professions, policies, and societal factors are several of the interconnected sociocultural contexts that facilitate or undermine teachers' motivational beliefs about building positive TSRs. I theorize that teachers will be motivated to engage in relationship-building behaviors with students when these contexts encourage teachers to believe it is their role to build TSRs, promote the value of TSRs, and enhance teachers' relational self-efficacy. When teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs are salient and positive, they will be motivated to engage in TSR-building behaviors. In turn, teachers will experience positive TSRs in which they have caring, productive, and respectful interactions with students; warm personal connections; and more positive (and less negative) perceptions of their TSRs as reported by themselves and their students.

In the next section, I describe how to utilize the Motivating TSRs framework to develop intervention strategies for cultivating positive TSRs. Successful TSR-promoting interventions will, at a minimum, account for the contextual factors in which teachers interact with students. However, the most influential interventions may be those that aim to change the sociocultural contexts that influence teachers' beliefs, behaviors, and TSRs.

Designing Teacher-Focused Interventions to Improve Teacher-Student Relationships

One of the most compelling reasons for understanding what motivates teachers to cultivate positive TSRs is to learn how to improve these crucial classroom relationships between teachers and students. Teachers tend to set the climate for class interactions (Rubie-Davies, 2015), so designing TSR-enhancing interventions that target teachers (as opposed to students) may be most effective. In this section, I discuss why teachers' motivational beliefs may be a promising lever for improving TSRs and consider logical intervention points and strategies.

Targeting Teachers' Beliefs to Motivate Positive Relationship-Building Behaviors with Students

As researchers explore interventions to improve TSRs, focusing on teachers' motivational beliefs may be a promising approach for a few reasons. First, from a theoretical standpoint, Lewin (1946) maintained that we need to understand how people make sense of the world in order to understand their behaviors. Correlational studies suggest teachers' beliefs are associated with their behaviors in the classroom (Roehrig & Kruse, 2005; Tobin & McRobbie, 1997) and many scholars argue teachers' beliefs can shape the types of learning environments they create for students (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992).

Second, beliefs—including a wide range of teacher beliefs—are malleable and subject to social influence (Dweck, 2006; Lewin, 1952; Tankard & Paluck, 2016). In the seminal Pygmalion experiment, researchers found that simply telling teachers that certain students were expected to make large intellectual gains made teachers act in ways that were consistent with their (manipulated) beliefs about those students (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Similarly, experimental studies show that targeted interventions can induce changes in participants' self-efficacy beliefs in specific domains (Bandura et al., 1982; Kadden & Litt, 2011). These studies demonstrate that self-efficacy beliefs can be altered independently of performance. That is, people can increase their confidence in their abilities in a domain before actually experiencing performance gains in that domain. Other studies show that preservice teachers experience changes in their role expectations as they progress through their educational training (e.g., Brookhart & Freeman, 1992), documenting the malleability of teachers' beliefs about their role.

Finally, targeting teacher beliefs may have a catalyzing effect such that teachers may begin to adopt complementary perceptions and behaviors that align with their beliefs and values (Lewin, 1952; Rogers et al., 2018). Cohen and Garcia (2008) argue that interventions that successfully shift students' identities are recursive in nature because they interact with other factors in the social environment (see also Walton, 2014). Therefore, interventions that shift the way teachers construct their roles, what they value, or their ability to carry out behaviors might affect identities and thus endure long after administered (Yeager & Walton, 2011). Changing teachers' beliefs about TSRs, in general, could potentially forever alter the dynamic between teachers and their students going forward. Moreover, because teachers can construct positive relationships with students in a multitude of ways, interventions that attempt to improve TSRs by shifting teachers' beliefs (as opposed to dictating their behaviors) may be most authentic and therefore likely to persist (Walton, 2014).

The pathway from motivational beliefs to behaviors to positive TSRs makes theoretical sense, but changing existing beliefs is not always easy (Pajares, 1992). Perhaps logically, teachers' beliefs about students become more difficult to modify when there is an existing teacher-student connection (Raudenbush, 1984). However, given the persistent link between teachers' beliefs and student success (Szumski & Karwowski, 2019), understanding how to change teachers' existing beliefs about TSRs and the students they serve seems like a worthy pursuit for scholars. One strategy to counter teachers' deeply held beliefs may involve encouraging teachers to engage in reflective and meta-cognitive processes (e.g., Westrick & Morris, 2016). For instance, presenting teachers with new ideas may awaken awareness of their unexamined assumptions about their relationships with students and facilitate new understandings. Another approach might provide teachers with scaffolded opportunities to engage relationship-building activities with students. These mastery experiences may increase teachers' relational self-efficacy and, in turn, how much they value TSRs or construct their role to prioritize TSRs going forward.

There is also evidence that changing beliefs does not always impact behavior (Wilcox-Herzog, 2002). A large body of research studies the gap between intention and action (Sheeran & Webb, 2016), and it likely applies to teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs and their relationship-building behaviors with students. Some of these issues may be tractable. For instance, interventions may need to be targeted to the right level of specificity, i.e., teachers' beliefs about their general ability as teachers may not predict their success in enacting relationship-building behaviors (Zee & Koomen, 2016). However, there are likely times when motivational beliefs alone will be insufficient to lead to meaningful behavior change. Increasing a teacher's beliefs about TSRs will not lead to productive relationship-building behaviors if the teacher does not possess the requisite ability (not just perceived ability) to produce the desired behavior (Fogg, 2009). At the same time, teachers who do possess the ability to connect positively with students will be unlikely to act upon those skills unless they align with their motivational beliefs about TSRs (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). In sum, beliefs are a required but not always sufficient mechanism for inducing behavior change. Therefore, it is worth considering when teachers' beliefs may be an effective lever for educational practitioners, policymakers, and leaders to target to enhance the quality of TSRs.

Points of Intervention and Promising Strategies

There are promising channels practitioners, policymakers, and researchers can consider for administering interventions aimed at improving TSRs via teachers' beliefs, including those that occur during preservice teacher preparation programs and those that occur once teachers are officially working in classrooms with students. No matter the outlet chosen to deliver a TSR-promoting intervention to teachers, the design and implementation needs to account for both intra- and interpersonal processes if we are to see changes in teachers' TSR-building behaviors with students.

Arguably, preservice teacher preparation programs represent the largest and most consistent point of intervention for changing teachers' beliefs and future behaviors. These programs are designed to prepare individuals to be successful teachers by providing them with the requisite skills and knowledge. Yet, while many programs include required, foundational courses in areas focused on the science of learning, very few include required courses that address teachers' relationship skills (Davis, 2006; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). Because beliefs tend to form early and self-perpetuate (Pajares, 1992), strengthening teachers' beliefs about TSRs at the outset of their careers may have outsized and lasting impacts on their practice. However, doing so may require teacher preparation programs to fundamentally shift teachers' perceptions of what it means to be an educator in ways that elevate the importance of TSRs and the social development of the child.

The increase in the popularity of social-emotional learning and 20th century skills in the past couple decades represents an encouraging movement in this direction—the majority of states include relationship skill competencies for teachers in their teacher certification requirements (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). At the same time, teacher preparation programs rarely require preservice teachers to take courses with this focus. This mismatch suggests that a first-order intervention for improving TSRs may require a much larger and more explicit focus on developing teachers' own social-emotional competencies in teacher preparation programs, particularly when it comes to building positive relationships with students (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017; Waajid et al., 2013). Teacher preparation courses can change teachers' beliefs about their interactions with students (Hamre et al., 2012), so instruction that highlights the utility value of positive TSRs or uses verbal persuasion to increase relational self-efficacy, for instance, may enhance teachers' future motivation to build TSRs. Moreover, the timing of belief-focused interventions in preservice teacher preparation programs may matter. One study found that these programs can reduce preservice teachers' entering biases towards marginalized students, but those positive changes in beliefs can dissipate when they face the stressors of their early field experiences in schools (Kumar et al., 2015). Thus, enhancing teachers' motivation to build TSRs may need to be a thread that underlies the entire preservice teacher preparation curricula, and beyond.

As teachers join the educator workforce, there are several opportunities for delivering interventions to improve TSRs, including teacher professional development programs, teacher coaching, and in-class activities. These opportunities have the benefit of occurring concurrently while teachers are working with students in the classroom, making the desired behavior change more proximal. Indeed, many existing social-emotional interventions that have shown evidence of impacting teachers' behaviors with students have been implemented with in-service teachers. For instance, long-term professional development interventions employ a range of strategies to improve teachers' interactions with students (broadly defined), including video libraries, courses, and individualized coaching (Allen et al., 2015; Allen et al., 2011; Driscoll et al., 2011; Gregory et al., 2014). Other promising strategies focus on teachers' embedding relationship-building practices into their daily behaviors (Gehlbach et al., 2016; Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007) or providing teachers with brief trainings and implementation supports for cultivating positive TSRs (Cook et al., 2018; Duong et al., 2019). Targeting in-service teachers may also shift the whole school culture to care about and prioritize TSRs, resulting in an intervention that self-perpetuates.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, studies examining the effectiveness of such interventions found that they varied based on the extent to which teachers implemented them with fidelity (Baroody et al., 2014; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Hamre et al., 2010; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2018). One possible reason why certain teachers take up and engage with these interventions and others do not could be a function of their motivational beliefs about TSRs. Evidence suggests that teachers are more likely to implement social-emotional learning programs, including those that promote positive TSRs, with fidelity when they believe (1) the program aligns with their teaching approach, (2) they can carry out the activities, and (3) it is part of their role as teachers to do so (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Given that beliefs are instrumental in defining tasks, as well as interpreting, planning, and making decisions regarding tasks (Pajares, 1992), interventions that provide teachers with skills, activities, and knowledge for building TSRs may be most effective when they are complemented with those that elevate teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs.

Improving Teacher-Student Relationships as a Matter of Equity

All students and teachers have the right to experience positive TSRs. However, attempts to improve TSRs must consider how classroom relationships manifest for different types of students and teachers. Teachers may face additional hurdles to building positive relationships with students who struggle in school or those who come from marginalized backgrounds (Whitaker, 2020). Historical and ongoing injustices have led to persistent racial and economic opportunity gaps (Reardon, 2011, 2016), and facilitating relationships between teachers and students must confront this reality. Properly addressing how TSRs can mitigate or enhance inequality requires its own review article. However, I argue that teachers' beliefs about TSRs likely influence why and how teachers build positive relationships with their struggling and marginalized students.

Teachers decide whether to invest in or disengage from a relationship with a student and, very often, teachers will invest in students whom they expect to succeed (Muller, 2001). When working with students who struggle academically, teachers tend to feel more confident in their abilities to help students with whom they have better relationships (Yeo et al., 2008). Teachers may also conflate student achievement with the TSR, leading them to interact differently with students who are low-achieving or who lack opportunities (Babad, 1993, 2009). However, teachers may be able to harness positive TSRs to help struggling students improve their performance and achieve their goals (Liew et al., 2010).

Furthermore, there is some evidence that teachers exhibit evidence of a relationship gap with students who come from marginalized backgrounds (Cherng, 2017; Robinson et al., 2019): teachers reported having less positive TSRs with Black and Hispanic/LatinX students than their White peers, even when accounting for course performance. Teachers' perceptions of the TSR strongly are associated with their expectations for students (Cherng, 2017) and student achievement (Brinkworth et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2019; Roorda et al., 2011). Thus, it seems critical that we embed supports that motivate teachers to cultivate positive relationships with traditionally marginalized and at-risk students. Teachers who want to meaningfully change their relationship-building practices with marginalized students need to know themselves, know their students, and know their practice (Howard, 2016; Whitaker, 2020). A logical first step in this process involves transforming teachers' beliefs about their role, about what they value, and about what they can do. There is evidence changing teacher's beliefs about specific types of students may be a promising strategy: a belief-focused intervention altered how teachers interacted with their struggling students and their students of color, leading to improved TSRs and a reduction in discipline referrals (Okonofua et al., 2022; Okonofua et al., 2016).

Research suggests marginalized and struggling students need—and may benefit the most from—positive TSRs (Baker et al., 2008; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Hughes, 2011; Liew et al., 2010). If teachers cannot cultivate equally positive relationships with the marginalized students in their class as they do with the privileged students, no curriculum or training will bridge the opportunity gap. We cannot continue to leave these important developmental and learning relationships to chance. Future research might continue to explore whether teachers' beliefs about specific student characteristics influence how and with whom they cultivate positive TSRs. Equity-enhancing interventions may need to be specifically designed to target teachers' beliefs about the role TSRs play in supporting their marginalized and struggling students, the value of building positive relationships with these students, and their abilities to successfully connect and repair relationships with these students.

Future Directions and Conclusion

To meaningfully improve TSRs for all students, we need to understand what motivates teachers to cultivate positive relationships with their students. In this article, I present a theoretical framework for understanding how teachers' motivational beliefs influence their TSRs. I hypothesize that teachers' beliefs about TSRs are one of the primary factors that motivate teachers' relationship-building behaviors with students. I envision the Motivating TSRs framework as a first step toward developing a more comprehensive theory of teachers' relational motivation, which aims to identify the factors that energize, direct, and sustain teachers' efforts to build relationships with their students.

As I noted at the outset, we need more empirical research that assesses teachers' beliefs about their roles, values, and self-efficacy to better understand their motivation to build positive TSRs. However, motivation research conducted by educational psychologists provides an abundance of evidence that these three beliefs may be a promising starting point for hypotheses about what factors comprise teachers' motivation to build positive relationships with students. The field has started to provide insights into how sociocultural contexts influence the quality of TSRs, but more empirical research is needed. It will be important to understand how individual teachers' beliefs about TSRs may act as a filter through which sociocultural contexts impact their behaviors with students. As more research emerges on the link between teachers' sociocultural contexts, their motivational beliefs about TSRs, their TSR-building behaviors, and the quality of their TSRs, I expect this framework will have to be revisited, revised, and updated.

There are also many future directions for advancing the theory of relational motivation and learning how to improve TSRs. For instance, teachers' baseline relationship-building skills and emotions will almost certainly influence their TSR-building behaviors and the quality of their TSRs. An obvious next step is creating a dyadic framework that more formally considers students' motivations for building positive relationships with their teachers. However, there is still much to learn about why teachers choose to engage in relationship-building behaviors with a student. For instance, teachers' baseline relationship-building skills and TSR-related emotions will almost certainly influence their TSR-building behaviors and the quality of their TSRs. We also must consider how teachers' motivational beliefs about TSRs vary based on students' academic performance, racial or cultural background, and gender. To work toward equitable TSRs and outcomes, teachers may need additional supports to build positive TSRs with their marginalized and struggling students.

In conclusion, positive TSRs set the stage for both students and teachers to succeed. Despite the importance of these learning relationships, teachers and students often face many barriers when attempting to build positive TSRs. These barriers stem from the nature of the TSR itself, but also the intersecting sociocultural contexts in which teachers are trying to build relationships with students. Ultimately, we need change at a systemic level: school leaders must elevate the importance of TSRs, teacher preparation programs must train teachers on how to build positive TSRs, educational policies must invest in initiatives that prioritize TSRs, and society must demand that all students deserve positive TSRs to flourish.

As we work towards systemic change, we must continue to learn about what drives individual teachers to build positive TSRs and design interventions that ignite teachers' motivation to do so. As Kagan (1992) states, "As we learn more about the forms and functions of teacher belief, we are likely to come a great deal closer to understanding how good teachers are made" (p. 85). If we can understand how the beliefs of these "good teachers" lead them to engage in relationship-building behaviors, we can provide a starting point for motivating the next generation of teachers to build positive relationships with all of their students.

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