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Exploring the Relationship Between Teacher-Student Interactions and Social Anxiety in Middle School Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The bond between educators and learners is essential in shaping the student community and serves as a primary means through which schools impact the psychological (social anxiety), physical, and social growth of students. The research aims to investigate the impact of teacher-student relationships on social anxiety in students.

Methods and Materials: The descriptive design (a cross-sectional study) was used. The study sample consisted of 398 students from various public and private schools, who participated in the Directorate of Education of Al-Najaf. The schools were selected using a simple random sample method, and the students were selected using a systematic random sample method. Data were collected through two questionnaires: one measuring the relationship between teachers and students, and the other assessing social anxiety among students. The study period extended from November 10, 2024, to January 9, 2025.

Findings: The majority of students (85.9%) rated their relationship as moderate. Social Anxiety among Students indicates that the majority of students (55.3%) had mild social anxiety, while 28.3% experienced moderate anxiety, and 2.3% had severe social anxiety. The influence of the student-teacher relationship on social anxiety among students is minimal, with no statistical significance.

Conclusion: The study concluded that the influence of the relationship between the teacher and the student on social anxiety is that the higher the connection between the teacher and the student (positive relationship), the lower the rate of social anxiety among students. The study recommended designing an educational program to be distributed to all schools in the governorate by the directorate of education in Najaf governorate, which reduces social anxiety among students and developing social communication skills among teachers through participation in workshops, seminars, and courses in schools and departments of education directorates to improve the relationship between teacher and student.

Keywords: Students, Social Anxiety, Teacher-Student Relationships.

Introduction

Social anxiety is characterized by a considerable fear or apprehension regarding one or more social scenarios where an individual might be observed and judged unfavorably by others, which is referred to as a social anxiety disorder (Jefferies & Ungar, 2020). The most prevalent anxiety condition is called social anxiety disorder (SAD), which is linked to social, intellectual, and professional impairment as well as a predictor of depression and suicidality in the future. Most cases start before a person reaches maturity (Chiu et al., 2021).

Students study with numerous peers rather than alone in classrooms, which are natural social spaces (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996). Middle school students in their upper grades are going through a crucial stage in their physical and mental development, which is causing significant changes in their psychological and physical characteristics (Chronis-Tuscano et al., 2018).

Adolescence is an important stage of development characterized by transformations in the biological, emotional, cognitive, and social domains (Hussein & Ajil, 2024; Saiwan & Huusein, 2022). Adolescents represent the primary demographic in which social anxiety disorders develop, with 90% of cases manifesting by the age of 23 (Jaleel & Hussein, 2023). Schools and various educational institutions are significant cultural forces that shape and influence student behavior (Habeeb, 2013; Jabr & Mohammed, 2023). The teacher's role in the learning process is crucial, as they are expected to guide and instruct students based on their abilities (Malisi et al., 2023).

A significant increase in interest in social anxiety disorder has occurred in recent decades, the majority of the data that is currently accessible from the United States, Europe, and the Arab world highlights its high prevalence, comorbidity, and morbidity as well as its correlation with low quality of life due to stress, depression, and substance use disorders, as well as occupational, educational, and social factors (Xin et al., 2022).

Effective educators are generally presumed to possess an understanding and appreciation for the students they instruct. They demonstrate a thorough understanding of the curriculum that should be delivered to students, as well as the ability to make the learning process engaging (Zan & Khudhair, 2018). With evaluative skills, they ensure that their students have acquired knowledge. Furthermore, effective educators are adept at collaborating with colleagues to foster a professional and welcoming educational environment. They also understand the importance of cultivating a classroom atmosphere that enables every student to flourish (Brinkworth et al., 2018).

Regardless of whether they are instructing very young children, adolescents, or adults, these attributes of exemplary educators are universally applicable. Positive educational environments contribute significantly to the success of both educators and learners, as they inspire one another to develop and mature into constructive individuals (Carter-Penny, 2023; Olsen & Buchanan, 2019).

Adolescents who encounter animosity between teachers and students are more likely to internalize issues, such as elevated anxiety and sadness (D'Antonio et al., 2014; Weymouth & Buehler, 2018). Therefore, this study focused on the impact of teacher-student interaction on social anxiety.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

A descriptive cross-sectional study design was employed for this research. Descriptive research offers important insights into the relationships between variables within a natural environment. The research took place from November 10, 2024, to January 9, 2025.

The study was conducted from November 10, 2024, to January 9, 2025, in middle schools in Najaf City, Iraq.

The study employed a simple random sample method, which involved selecting participants for the study. The target community size for the study was 82,926 students, distributed across 188 schools, including 178 government schools and 10 private schools. The sample size estimation was done by using an equation from a cross-sectional study to determine the number of samples to be recruited for the study (Charan & Biswas, 2013). The final sample size was 396 participants.

Instruments

Part I: The study instrument includes the socio-demographic characteristics of the student, which include gender, age, grade, type of study, family

economic status, family type, and birth order of the student.

Part II: The Arabic version of the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (TSR) was used from (Mohammed, 2023). Consists of 36-item respondents rate various aspects of their relationships with teachers on a 5-point Likert scale and are scored as follows: disagree strongly 1, disagree 2, neutral 3, agree 4, and agree strongly 5 (Jaleel & Husain, 2023). TSR's Cronbach's alpha was 0.719.

Part III: Arabic version of Social Anxiety Scale (SAS) (Yusoff, 2019). SAS were measured using a five-point Likert type scale, with zero representing never and four representing always, the dependability of SAS's Cronbach's alpha was 0.90, while the alpha coefficients for the three subscales were: Anxiety related to performance (0.84), interactions (0.81), and evaluation (0.78) (Ejaz et al., 2020).

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26, was utilized for coding and analyzing the data. The data distribution was not normal. Consequently, non-parametric statistical methods were applied. The Spearman's rho correlation, Mann-Whitney U-Test, and Kruskal-Wallis Test were employed.

Findings and Results

The descriptive analysis in Table 1 shows that the students' sex is equally distributed between males and females, with 50% each, ensuring sex parity in the study. Regarding age, more than half of the students (58.6%) fall within the younger age group of 12-14 years, with a mean age of 14.3 years, indicating that the sample predominantly comprises early adolescents. The school grade for students refers to the distribution across grades, which is equal, with each grade (first, second, and third) comprising exactly one-third (33.3%) of the sample. This balance minimizes bias related to educational level. The school system reveals a significant majority (91.7%) of the students attend public schools (Governmental), while only 8.3% are enrolled in private schools. The perceived monthly income refers to the fact that students perceive their monthly income as moderate (66.4%), while a smaller proportion reports poor (17.7%) or good (15.9%) income levels. Concerning family type, the highest percentage among students (65.2%) belongs to nuclear families, with a smaller percentage (34.9%) coming from extended families, reflecting a societal trend toward nuclear family structures. The birth order reveals that nearly half (48.2%) of the students identify as middle-born, while the youngest (27.5%) and oldest (24.3%) siblings are less represented. This suggests a relatively even distribution among birth order categories, but with a notable emphasis on middle-born individuals.

Table 1

Distribution of Students According to their Socio-demographic Characteristics (N = 396)

List	Characteristics		f	%
1	Sex	Male	198	50
		Female	198	50
		Total	*396*	*100*
2	Age (year)	12 – 14	232	58.6
	M±SD= 14.3 ± 1.2	15 – 17	164	41.4
		Total	*396*	*100*
3	School grade	First	132	33.3
		Second	132	33.3
		Third	132	33.3
		Total	*396*	*100*
4	School system	Private	33	8.3
		Public	362	91.7
		Total	*396*	*100*
5	Perceived monthly income	Poor	70	17.7
		Moderate	263	66.4
		Good	63	15.9
		Total	*396*	*100*
6	Family type	Nuclear	258	65.2

		Extended	138	34.9
		Total	396	100
7	Birth order	Youngest	109	27.5
		Middle	191	48.2
		Oldest	96	24.3
		Total	396	100

The findings in Table 2 reveal that 55.3% of students report mild social anxiety, while 28.3% experience moderate anxiety, and 2.3% report severe social anxiety. The mean score for social anxiety is 38.02 (SD = 14.130), indicating that the average student experiences mild social anxiety.

Table 2

Assessment of Social Anxiety among Students

Social anxiety	f	%	M	SD	Ass.
Not clinical	56	14.1	38.02	14.13	Mild
Mild	219	55.3			
Moderate	112	28.3			
Severe	9	2.3			
Total	*396*	*100*			

Not clinical= 0 – 22, Mild= 22.1 – 44, Moderate= 44.1 – 66, Severe= 66.1 – 88

Table 3 presents the overall assessment of the student-teacher relationship, indicating that the majority of students (85.9%) rated their relationship as moderate (M ± SD = 118.10 ± 13.72), while a smaller proportion (14.1%) rated it as good.

Table 3

Overall Assessment of Students-Teacher Relationship (N=396)

Relationship	f	%	M	SD	Ass.
Poor	0	0	118.10	13.720	M
Moderate	340	85.9			
Good	56	14.1			
Total	*396*	*100*			

f: Frequency, %: Percentage M: Mean for total score, SD: Standard Deviation for total score, Ass: Assessment; Poor= 36 – 84, Moderate= 84.1 – 132, Good= 132.1 – 188

The findings in Table 4 indicate that the majority of students (93.7%) report a high level of emotional connectedness with their teachers (M ± SD = 37.38 ± 6.429). On the other hand, 87.9% of students report high anxiety (M±SD = 26.52 ± 5.054).

Table 4

Assessment of Students' Emotional Perception toward the Relationship with the Teacher

Assessment	Student-teacher Connectedness		Student-Teacher Anxiety	
	f	%	f	%
Low	25	6.3	48	12.1
High	371	93.7	348	87.9
Total	*396*	*100*	*396*	*100*
Mean ± SD	*37.38 ± 6.429*		*26.52 ± 5.054*	

Low connectedness= 11 – 27, High connectedness= 27.1 – 55
Low anxiety= 8 – 20, High anxiety= 20.1 – 40

The findings in Table 5 suggest that the student-teacher relationship has a minimal influence on social anxiety among students, with no statistically significant effect. The negative values indicate that higher levels of connectedness or anxiety in the student-teacher relationship are associated with a slight decrease in social anxiety.

Table 5

Influence of Students-Teacher Relationship on Social Anxiety among Students (N=396)

Social anxiety relationship	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Student-teacher Connectedness	-.083	.142	-.038	-.582	.561
Student-teacher Anxiety	-.168	.232	-.060	-.727	.468
Overall relationship	-.147	.096	-.142	-1.525	.128

Discussion and Conclusion

General evaluation of the relationship between the teacher and the student, which indicates that the majority of students (85.9%) classified their relationship as moderate. In comparison, a smaller percentage (14.1%) classified their relationship as good. A similar study was conducted to examine the perceptions of students and teachers regarding the quality of the relationship between students and teachers (Witherspoon, 2011). The results were similar; most of them were average to strong. Additionally, a study was conducted on the social relationships between teachers and students, and the results indicated that approximately 53% of the relationships were positive. From these results, we conclude that the more moderate to good the relationship is, the more flexible the teacher's approach tends to be in dealing with students. Their sense of respect and concern reflects a higher level of positive attachment to the teacher. In contrast, teachers who deal with their students violently often have poor relationships with their students (Sajem & Khalifa, 2011).

Results of the social anxiety assessment among students showed that 55.3% suffer from mild social anxiety, while 28.3% of students suffer from moderate anxiety, and 2.3% from severe anxiety. The average score of social anxiety was (38.02), meaning that the average student suffers from mild social anxiety, according to previous studies.

A study similar to ours was conducted on the percentage of social anxiety. It was conducted in Erbil Governorate in Iraq on the prevalence of social anxiety among high school students. The results were that 83.3% of the total sample had social anxiety (Gardi, 2016). These results may stem from a student's fear of embarrassment in front of the teacher or the possibility of rejection in social situations. Many students experience emotional maladjustment, which can manifest in activities such as presenting a specific topic to classmates or writing on the blackboard while being observed by their peers and the teacher (Al-jubouri & Alwan, 2022; Ghyadh & Abdul-Wahid, 2016). Additionally, this fear may be compounded by the aggressive behavior exhibited by students towards themselves, one another, or their belongings (Qasim, 2023).

The effect of the relationship between the student and the teacher on social anxiety indicates minor or insignificant effects; these findings emerged from a study that investigated student-teacher conflict and the unique role of shyness, anxiety, and emotional problems (Zee & Roorda, 2018). The negative values in the results indicate that high levels of the relationship between the student and the teacher are associated with a decrease in social anxiety. Compatible with a study conducted on anxiety and relationships between the teacher and the student in secondary school, where the results were that the more positive the relationship between the teacher and the student, the less anxiety among the students (Filgona et al., 2020). As we mentioned previously in the results, the

relationship between the teacher and the student was good to moderate.

This, in turn, reduces social anxiety, so Table 3 shows insignificant results on anxiety. The reason for this is that the teachers' dealing with of the students was good because simplifying the study material, reducing pressure on the students, and creating rest times in the weekly schedule also, when the teacher cares about the students' well-being in terms of dealing with them calmly, being friendly, being closer to the students, and understanding their economic, health, and social backgrounds, his relationship with them improves towards a positive relationship, strengthens the bond between them, contributes to improving their feelings towards the teacher, and makes them feel a sense of belonging.

This study reveals that the overall assessment of the student-teacher relationship was moderate, primarily due to the teachers' flexibility with the students, which in turn strengthened the positive relationship between the student and the teacher. The results of the social anxiety assessment showed that more than half of the students suffer from mild social anxiety because of embarrassment from the teacher as well as from the students, and excessive shyness in social situations. The influence of the relationship between the student and the teacher on social anxiety was not statistically significant; negative signals indicated that the high correlation in the relationship between the student and the teacher reduces social anxiety.

Recommendations:

1. Designing an educational program to be distributed to all schools in the governorate by the Directorate of Education in Najaf governorate reduces social anxiety among students.

2. Through courses and brochures, teachers are provided with more information and awareness on how to deal with the symptoms of social anxiety in students.

3. Activating the role of the psychological counselor in all schools and increasing their numbers to provide guidance and psychological support to teachers and students, and how to deal effectively with each other, especially students who suffer from social anxiety.

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