

# Socioeconomic inequalities in teacher-student relationships at age 5<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

A large body of research has shown that the quality of teacher-student relationships strongly influences student engagement, attainment and wellbeing. A number of studies have found that this relationship quality varies by the socio-economic background of the student but there has been little research on what might explain this difference. This research looks at three potential explanations: the child's behaviour; parental interest and involvement in their child's education; and the child coming to school unprepared because they are, for example, tired or hungry.

## DATA AND METHODS

The research draws on data from Cohort '08 of the Growing Up in Ireland study, which has followed a sample of children since they were nine months old. The analyses focus on information collected when the over 7,000 children were five years of age, a point early in their schooling, before any disengagement from education might be apparent. The quality of the teacher-student relationship is measured using teacher responses to questions about closeness and conflict. Social background is measured using the social class of the household and its definition is expanded to capture those who are distant from employment, such as jobless households.

The child's behaviour is assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) which records socioemotional difficulties. To measure parental involvement, information on the frequency of informal meeting with the child's mother and on the teacher's assessment of how interested the mother was in her child's education is used.<sup>2</sup> A scale of lack of preparedness for school is based on teacher reports of how often the child came to class tired, hungry, late etc. Structural

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<sup>1</sup> This Bulletin summarises the findings from: E. Smyth, K. Barg & V. Perinetti Casoni (2026), Socioeconomic inequalities in teacher-student relationships at age 5, *Research Papers in Education*. Available at: DOI: 10.1080/02671522.2025.2610212

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<sup>2</sup> Information was also available on the father's perceived interest but is not used here in order to retain lone-parent families in the analysis.

equation models were used to estimate whether the effect of social class on teacher-student relationship quality was explained by these three sets of factors.

## **RESULTS**

Teacher-child closeness and conflict vary significantly by the child's social class background. Teachers report feeling closest to those from professional, managerial or other non-manual groups and feeling least close to those from non-employed families. Teachers also indicate less conflict with middle-class children, with the highest level of conflict reported with children from non-employed families. Differences in teacher-student relationship quality by social class are linked to three factors – the child's readiness to engage in learning, the mother's perceived interest in their child's education, and the child's own behaviour, as proxied by their level of socio-emotional difficulties. No significant relationship between social class and teacher-student relationship quality remains when these three sets of factors are taken into account.

The analyses looked separately at newly qualified teachers (less than five years) and other teachers. Newly qualified teachers show no significant social class differences in their level of closeness or conflict with students. In contrast, a clear link between student social class and closeness and conflict is found among teachers with more than five years' experience. It is not clear from available evidence whether this relates to a greater awareness of educational disadvantage fostered in initial teacher education in recent years and/or the fact that these teachers have not yet been fully socialised into the classed assumptions of their more experienced counterparts.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings show that teacher-parent contact, child behaviour and unpreparedness for learning could be leveraged to promote greater equality in relationship quality and therefore enhance equity in educational outcomes. Informal teacher-parent contact does not necessarily translate into teachers seeing working-class parents as having the same level of interest in their children's education. Initial and continuous teacher education could usefully enhance teachers' ability to work with parents from a range of backgrounds and help counter deficit perspectives on working-class students. Promoting greater social class diversity in the teaching profession would also help reduce the cultural distance between teachers and students, as would support for adopting more inclusive practices around dealing with student behaviour.

The findings point to the importance of conditions outside the school in shaping relationships within it, with poverty and deprivation impinging on a child's ability to engage in learning. This highlights the importance of family income support and measures to help low-income families cope with the cost of living. In Ireland, as in many other countries, school absence has increased in the post-pandemic period.

This pattern has the potential to put further social and cultural distance between teachers and students unless measures are taken to address it.