Teaching for Transformation: The Impact of Instructional Methods and Teacher-Student Relationships on Early Adolescent Development

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Early adolescence, spanning ages 10 to 14, is a period marked by rapid cognitive, emotional, and social development. During this time, school becomes a central environment in adolescents' lives, where they spend much of their day and encounter key opportunities for growth. This paper explores how teaching styles and teacher-student relationships (TSRs) influence youth development during this formative stage. Four different instructional approaches are examined on the basis of how they meet different educational goals and developmental needs. . This paper also analyzes how these teaching styles are applied across public, private, and Montessori school settings, showing how institutional structures, class size, and educational philosophy shape instructional methods. Central to all effective teaching, however, are strong teacher-student relationships. Grounded in trust, emotional support, and high expectations, TSRs foster student motivation, engagement, and resilience, particularly among vulnerable students. Drawing upon literature in developmental neuroscience and educational psychology, research shows that emotionally supportive teaching can buffer stress, improve behavior, and promote academic success. Ultimately, this review argues that effective education for early adolescents depends not only on adapting teaching methods to meet developmental needs, but also on building caring, responsive relationships that help students thrive. By blending structured instruction with autonomy-supportive practices and prioritizing relational pedagogy, educators can foster academic achievement, social-emotional growth, and long-term student well-being during this pivotal stage of life. These findings can guide teachers, school leaders, and policymakers in creating developmentally responsive classrooms that better support early adolescents' diverse needs and promote lasting educational success.

Introduction:

Early adolescence is a critical developmental stage that typically spans from ages 10 to 14, often corresponding to grades 5 through 8 (Berenbaum, Beltz, & Corley, 2015). This period marks the beginning of puberty, a time of rapid physical growth, hormonal changes, and significant brain development (Blakemore, Burnett, & Dahl, 2010). Adolescents begin to experience heightened emotions, increased self-awareness, and a deepened concern with identity and independence (Pfeifer et al., 2020). Socially, they shift focus from family to peers, often placing great importance on friendships and peer approval, while also navigating evolving relationships with parents, caregivers, and teachers (Pfeifer et al., 2020). Within the brain, the prefrontal cortex, responsible for decision-making and impulse control, is still developing during adolescence, and can contribute to unpredictable behavior and a heightened sensitivity to reward and risk (Lewis, Haworth, & Plomin, 2013). This behavior can often be attributed to a developmental mismatch between the socioemotional system, which matures rapidly during

early adolescence, and the cognitive control system (including the prefrontal cortex), which develops more gradually (Steinberg, 2010). Overall, early adolescence is a time when young teens prioritize belonging, autonomy, and exploration, making it a formative stage for academic, emotional, and social growth.

Adolescents spend a significant portion of their day in school, making teaching and learning especially crucial during this time of rapid brain development (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Teaching and learning are central to the educational experience, shaping how students engage with knowledge, develop skills, and grow as individuals (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Effective teaching is about more than just sharing information; it also encourages curiosity, critical thinking, and creates a supportive classroom environment (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Given their developmental stage, early adolescents especially benefit from instructional methods and relational support that align with their cognitive, emotional, and social transitions (Eccles et al., 1993). Understanding which teaching styles and classroom relationships work best during this critical window is essential for optimizing student growth and engagement.

Educators employ a range of teaching styles to address the diverse learning needs of students, to accommodate varying subject demands, and to reflect their instructional philosophies. Teacher-centered approaches such as **direct instruction** prioritize structured, explicit teaching, often characterized by the teacher standing at the front of the classroom, using a whiteboard or projector to deliver content while students listen, take notes, or complete guided practice (Rosenshine, 2012). In contrast, student-centered methods like **inquiry-based learning** involve students working in groups or individually at desks or learning stations, asking questions, conducting experiments, or exploring problems with the teacher acting as a facilitator (Bruner, 1961; Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006). **Cooperative learning** often features students seated in small clusters, actively discussing tasks, sharing resources, and dividing roles to accomplish a common goal (Slavin, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Similarly, **active learning** strategies may include students moving around the room for peer instruction, engaging in lively discussions, solving problems on whiteboards, or participating in hands-on activities that promote deeper understanding and retention (Freeman et al., 2014). These varied instructional methods highlight the importance of adapting teaching to both content area and learner needs in order to support meaningful, lasting educational outcomes.

Different teaching methods are often emphasized depending on the type of school. For example, Montessori schools focus on hands-on learning and student independence, and studies have shown they can lead to strong academic and social development (Ahmad & Reba, 2018). Public and private schools may follow different teaching approaches too, based on their goals, resources, and class sizes (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006). Overall, there is no one right way to teach. What matters most is that the teaching style fits the needs of the students and helps them grow (Hattie, 2009).

However, while existing research acknowledges the effectiveness of varied teaching methods, less is known about which specific approaches work best for which groups of

students, particularly when considering factors like background, ability, or learning preferences. Moreover, teaching style alone may not fully account for student outcomes. An often overlooked yet critical factor is the teacher-student relationship (TSR), which can shape how students respond to different instructional methods. My research addresses this gap by exploring how teaching style and TSR interact to influence student engagement and achievement, highlighting that how teachers connect with students may be just as important as how they teach.

The goal of this paper is to explore different teaching styles and how teacher-student relationships impact youth development. It will look at how various approaches to teaching (direct instruction, inquiry-based learning, cooperative learning, active learning) and methods used in different school settings (public, private, and Montessori schools), influence student learning. The paper will also examine how strong, supportive relationships between teachers and students can shape students' academic success, motivation and personal growth.

Results:

Understanding Teaching Styles: Adapting Methods to Fit Learners and Goals

Teaching styles refer to the broad approaches educators use to deliver content and engage students in learning (Grasha, 1996). Teaching styles vary widely, each supporting different educational goals and student needs. No single teaching style is universally superior; effective educators adapt their methods based on factors such as student age, subject matter, class size, and individual learner needs. Four commonly used teaching styles, direct instruction, inquiry-based learning, cooperative learning, and active learning, each offer distinct advantages and challenges.

Direct instruction is a teacher-led approach that is highly effective for teaching foundational skills and structured content, particularly in subjects like math and reading (Stockard et al., 2018; Gersten et al., 2009). In this model, students primarily learn by watching or listening to the teacher, with limited initial opportunities for discussion or independent practice. Direct instruction enhances learning outcomes by breaking content into manageable steps, using clear explanations, and providing guided practice to reinforce understanding (Rosenshine, 2012; Archer & Hughes, 2011). This structured approach tends to be especially beneficial for younger students, learners with diverse abilities, or those from disadvantaged backgrounds because it minimizes confusion and provides clarity (Swanson & Hoskyn, 1998; Archer & Hughes, 2011). It is also effective in large classrooms, where individualized attention is limited, allowing efficient transmission of core knowledge (Hattie, 2009).

A key challenge is keeping students engaged during extended periods of teacher-led instruction. To address this issue, effective direct instruction incorporates techniques like frequent questioning, "think-pair-share," and response signals to keep students cognitively involved and to provide real-time checks for understanding (Rosenshine, 2012). Lessons are broken into small, digestible segments to avoid cognitive overload (Sweller, 2011), and made more engaging through visuals and real-world examples (Mayer, 2009). Scaffolded practice

follows explanations to reinforce learning (Archer & Hughes, 2011), while differentiation and regular, specific feedback help meet individual student needs and maintain motivation (Tomlinson, 2014; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). For students in early adolescence, given that executive functioning skills are still developing (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006), direct instruction may offer the structure and clarity students often need (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). This method helps prevent cognitive overload and is especially effective for building core skills in subjects like math, grammar, and reading comprehension, where step-by-step learning and practice are essential.

In contrast, inquiry-based learning (IBL) emphasizes student exploration and questioning, encouraging learners to actively investigate topics and construct their own understanding. Rather than centering on teacher presentation, this method promotes curiosity, critical thinking, and deeper engagement through discovery and problem-solving. It is particularly effective in subjects like science and social studies, where hypothesis testing and open-ended inquiry deepen comprehension (Hmelo-Silver, Duncan, & Chinn, 2007). A related variation in inquiry-based learning is guided inquiry, in which teachers provide more scaffolding and support throughout the learning process. The key distinction between pure inquiry and guided inquiry lies in the level of teacher involvement: guided inquiry offers structured support to ensure students can navigate complex ideas while still exercising autonomy (Alfieri et al., 2011).

Both inquiry-based approaches are most successful with older students who have developed stronger cognitive and self-regulation skills (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008). For example, a study by Gormally et al. (2009) revealed that university students participating in inquiry-based science labs reported higher confidence in their scientific abilities and a deeper understanding of scientific concepts. However, research indicates that IBL can also benefit younger learners, particularly when it comes to science instruction. For instance, a study by Enger (2016) found that elementary students who engaged in inquiry-based science instruction demonstrated increased science content knowledge and positive attitudes toward science. Similarly, Wheatley (2018) observed that middle school students showed greater engagement and improved understanding when taught through inquiry-based methods.

In summary, inquiry-based learning fosters a student-centered approach that cultivates critical thinking, engagement, and deeper understanding across various educational levels. For early adolescents, guided inquiry, where the teacher offers scaffolding and support, is often more effective than pure inquiry, which may overwhelm learners still developing metacognitive and self-regulatory skills (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008). At this stage, students are beginning to question authority, explore identity, and develop abstract thinking, making structured opportunities for investigation and discussion especially powerful (Eccles et al., 1993).

Cooperative learning and active learning are two additional teaching styles that involve significant student interaction. Cooperative learning centers on peer collaboration and teamwork, enhancing engagement, social skills, and motivation, especially among adolescents who value peer relationships. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2014) found that cooperative

learning improves retention and fosters a more inclusive learning environment. It works particularly well in diverse classrooms, though it requires careful planning to ensure balanced participation and accountability (Gillies, 2016; Slavin, 2014). Similarly, active learning engages students directly through discussion, hands-on activities, or problem-solving tasks. Freeman et al. (2014) demonstrated that active learning increases academic performance across disciplines and grade levels by encouraging deeper engagement with content. These methods are flexible and adaptable, making them suitable complements or even alternatives to more traditional, teacher-centered approaches. Cooperative and active learning are especially suited for early adolescence, a stage where peer relationships become central and social validation strongly influences motivation (Pfeifer et al., 2020; Steinberg, 2010). These approaches allow students to co-construct knowledge while practicing communication, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution: key developmental tasks during this age.

Simply stated, each teaching style serves different purposes and learners. Direct instruction provides clarity and efficiency, making it ideal for foundational skills and structured content. Inquiry-based and guided inquiry approaches foster independence and critical thinking, especially in exploratory subjects. Cooperative and active learning emphasize collaboration and engagement, supporting both academic achievement and social development. To be an effective educator, teachers must intentionally align instructional methods with both their learning goals and the diverse needs of their students. It is not the method alone that matters, but the fit between approach, context, and learner.

Understanding Teaching Styles: Aligning Methods with School Environments and Learner Development

Teaching styles often vary significantly across school settings due to differences in educational philosophy, available resources, and institutional goals. In public schools, teaching styles are often shaped by standardized testing requirements and state curriculum guidelines. Because these schools are held to strict accountability standards, teachers commonly rely on direct instruction to ensure students master core material efficiently (Rowan, Correnti, & Miller, 2002). Public schools also tend to have larger overall enrollments and class sizes than private schools, with the average public school serving around 500 students, and classrooms often containing 20 to 25 students, depending on grade level (Choy, 1997; NCES, 2023). In contrast, the average private school enrolls about 150 to 200 students, with class sizes typically ranging from 12 to 17 students (NCES, 2023). These smaller class sizes in private schools can allow for more individualized instruction, greater flexibility in teaching style, and increased use of student-centered approaches such as inquiry-based or project-based learning. Meanwhile, larger class sizes in public schools can make it more difficult for teachers to give individual attention, manage behavior, or implement interactive learning strategies like group work. Additionally, public school teachers may face more restrictions in terms of curriculum pacing, testing schedules, and access to resources. These structural factors, along with limited teacher

autonomy and more diverse student populations, can significantly influence the types of teaching styles that are most practical in each setting.

One study highlighted that teachers' perceptions of autonomy are influenced by various structural factors, including school leadership and organizational climate, which in turn affect their teaching practices (Ingersoll, 2007; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). Additionally, the diversity of student populations necessitates adaptive teaching strategies to address varied learning needs and backgrounds, emphasizing the importance of flexible and responsive teaching styles (Gay, 2018; Tomlinson, 2014). While some teachers still find ways to incorporate cooperative or active learning strategies, public school settings often make teacher-centered approaches more common. Still, class size is just one piece of a larger picture; factors like school funding, teacher preparation, and overall educational philosophy also play major roles in shaping how instruction is delivered. For early adolescents in public schools, especially those in under-resourced settings, the predictability and structure of direct instruction can be beneficial. However, the growing need for autonomy and peer interaction means that supplementing direct instruction with group work or student choice is crucial to maintain engagement (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

In private schools, teaching styles are often shaped by greater autonomy, more flexible curriculum standards, and access to additional resources (Choy, 1997; Salokangas & Wermke, 2020). Unlike public schools, private institutions are not always required to follow state-mandated curricula or participate in standardized testing, giving teachers more freedom to design lessons that reflect their students' needs and the school's educational philosophy. According to Choy (1997), who analyzed data from the National Center for Education Statistics, private school teachers reported having significantly more control over instructional decisions such as curriculum content, teaching methods, and student assessment. These findings were based on large-scale survey data using Likert-scale items that measured perceived autonomy across various dimensions of teaching. A more recent study by Salokangas and Wermke (2020) used qualitative interviews to explore how teachers' perceptions of autonomy are shaped by structural factors like school leadership and organizational climate. Although not all participants had experience in both public and private settings, their reflections underscored how different institutional environments can support or constrain professional decision-making. As a result, methods like inquiry-based learning, cooperative group work, and project-based activities are more commonly used in private schools, giving students greater opportunities for exploration, creativity, and collaboration.

On average, private schools tend to be smaller than public schools, which makes it easier for teachers to provide individualized attention and foster close student-teacher relationships (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; NCES, 2023). Many private schools also benefit from more stable funding through tuition or donors, allowing for better facilities, updated technology, and enrichment programs that support active learning. However, private schools can vary widely depending on factors like religious affiliation, academic focus, or tuition level, meaning that not all private school experiences are the same. Even so, the combination of smaller classes, increased teacher autonomy, and a more flexible structure tends to create an environment

where student-centered teaching styles can thrive. In private school teaching styles can be particularly advantageous for early adolescents seeking autonomy and closer relationships with adults and peers (Eccles et al., 1993).

Montessori schools use a unique style of teaching based on the constructivist approach, which means students learn best by doing things for themselves. Instead of just listening to a teacher or following a textbook, students in Montessori classrooms explore topics through hands-on activities, work at their own pace, and make choices about what they want to learn. This method comes from Dr. Maria Montessori, who believed that children learn naturally when given freedom in a well-prepared environment (Montessori, 1964). In a Montessori classroom, the teacher is more similar to a guide than a traditional instructor. Instead of leading the whole class in lessons, teachers observe students, offer help one-on-one, and provide materials that match each student's level and interests (Lillard, 2005). Students are grouped by age ranges rather than strict grade levels and typically stay in the same multi-age classroom for about three years. This setup allows older students to mentor younger ones, while all students develop responsibility, independence, and social skills in a supportive environment. While this approach is most commonly found in early childhood and elementary education, some Montessori programs have been adapted for adolescents. However, Montessori middle and high schools are relatively rare, and implementing the model at those levels requires significant modification to accommodate more complex academic content and adolescent developmental needs. As a result, Montessori education remains primarily geared toward younger learners and stands in contrast to traditional public and private school models, which are typically structured around grade-level instruction, teacher-led lessons, and set curriculum.

Studies show that Montessori students often do well both academically and socially (Dohrmann, Nishida, Gartner, Lipsky, & Grimm, 2007; Lillard & Else-Quest, 2006). Students in Montessori classrooms demonstrate enhanced problem-solving abilities and improved collaboration skills. Research indicates that Montessori education fosters greater persistence in problem-solving tasks and promotes effective teamwork among students. For instance, a study by Lillard and Else-Quest (2006) found that Montessori students exhibited superior social skills, academic performance, and executive function compared to their peers in traditional classrooms. Additionally, a systematic review by Randolph, Prescott, and Cochrane (2023) reported consistent positive effects of Montessori education on various outcomes, including problem-solving and collaboration, across multiple studies. These results are often linked to the way Montessori schools give students freedom to explore, as well as long, uninterrupted work periods that let them focus deeply on tasks (Lillard, 2017). Another study found that Montessori students showed more creativity and motivation than students in traditional classrooms (Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). Montessori education aligns well with early adolescent needs by promoting independence, self-paced learning, and hands-on exploration. This model supports the developmental tasks of identity formation and autonomy while also offering opportunities for peer mentoring through mixed-age classrooms (Lillard, 2005).

Even though Montessori schools are usually private, they are very different from most private schools. Private schools, which often have smaller classes and more flexibility than public schools, still tend to follow traditional methods, like teacher-led lessons, grading systems, and standardized testing (Choy, 1997; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006). Montessori schools do not use grades or regular tests, and the goal is to help students become curious, responsible, and confident learners.

Montessori is not always the best choice for every student. Some students may need more structure, clearer directions, or more guidance than the Montessori method usually provides. And like any school, how well it works depends on how well it is run. High-quality Montessori programs that follow the original model closely tend to get the best results (Lillard, 2019). In the end, Montessori schools offer a real alternative to the traditional ways of teaching used in most public and private schools. Their focus on independence, hands-on learning, and personal growth can help many students succeed, especially those who thrive in creative, self-paced environments.

Taken together, the wide variation in teaching styles across public, private, and Montessori schools reflects how educational context, institutional structure, and teacher autonomy shape the ways students experience learning. While public schools often emphasize structure and efficiency through direct instruction due to larger class sizes and accountability pressures, private schools tend to support more student-centered approaches by offering smaller class sizes and greater teacher freedom. Montessori schools stand apart entirely, offering a constructivist, child-led model that nurtures independence and social-emotional growth, particularly effective for younger learners and some early adolescents. These differences underscore a central theme of this paper: there is no universally "best" teaching style. Instead, effective education depends on aligning instructional methods with student developmental needs, available resources, and the broader school environment. By understanding how different teaching styles function across various school contexts, we can better assess what works for whom, and under what conditions, moving beyond one-size-fits-all models to support more responsive and equitable teaching practices.

Understanding Teacher-Student Relationships: Building Connections to Support Learning and Development

Strong teacher-student relationships (TSRs) are foundational to effective education and play a pivotal role in shaping students' academic, emotional, and social development (Roorda et al., 2011). When grounded in trust, mutual respect, and emotional attunement, these relationships create classroom environments where students feel safe, supported, and motivated to engage with learning (Wentzel, 2012). The importance of TSRs extends beyond academic instruction. They form a relational framework through which students interpret their broader experiences of schooling.

This is especially critical during early adolescence, a developmental period marked by heightened emotional sensitivity and an increasing need for social belonging (Pfeifer et al.,

2020). At this stage, TSRs are particularly influential, as adolescents begin to shift away from parental dependence and look to teachers and peers for guidance, affirmation, and identity development (Eccles et al., 1993; Blakemore, Burnett, & Dahl, 2010). Because the prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functions such as emotion regulation, is still maturing, emotionally supportive teachers play a crucial role in helping adolescents co-regulate during stressful moments, enhancing self-control and reducing impulsive behavior (Steinberg, 2010).

Measuring teacher-student relationships is important for understanding their impact. Most research relies on self-report questionnaires completed by students and/or teachers to capture how they perceive the quality of their relationships. A commonly used tool is the Student–Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS), which measures aspects like closeness, conflict, and dependency, usually from the teacher's perspective (Pianta, 2001). From the student side, instruments such as the Student version of the Teacher–Student Relationship Inventory (S-TSRI) assess satisfaction, helpfulness, and conflict in the relationship (Ang et al., 2020). These surveys use rating scales to quantify emotional warmth, trust, and tension, which are key to predicting student outcomes. Other culturally adapted tools exist too, like the Student–Teacher Relationship Measure (STRM) used with Omani students (Al-Yaaribi et al., 2019) and the Student Perception of Affective Relationship with Teacher Scale (SPARTS) for younger students (Vervoort, Doumen, & Verschueren, 2015). Despite differences in tools, many studies find that students' perceptions of teacher support are especially important predictors of motivation and engagement, particularly for vulnerable youth. Thus, building and assessing strong, supportive TSRs is essential for promoting equity and helping at-risk adolescents succeed both academically and personally.

Research consistently highlights the positive outcomes of high-quality teacher-student relationships (TSRs). For example, Hamre and Pianta (2001) found that young children who experienced close, supportive relationships with their teachers demonstrated higher academic achievement and more positive classroom behaviors. Their longitudinal study, based on detailed classroom observations, emphasized the long-term benefits of emotionally supportive teaching, particularly in early childhood settings. More broadly, research shows that TSRs significantly influence students' mental health and emotional well-being (Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Roorda et al., 2011). When students perceive their teachers as caring and responsive, they are better able to manage stress and anxiety, leading to improved resilience and psychological functioning. A meta-analysis of 99 studies by Roorda et al. (2011) confirmed that positive TSRs are associated with increased engagement and reduced behavioral problems across age groups. These emotional connections can serve as a protective factor, offering stability and a sense of belonging, especially for students facing adversity.

In addition to emotional benefits, strong TSRs contribute to the development of critical social-emotional skills such as empathy, communication, and conflict resolution. Teachers who model respectful, supportive interactions help shape how students engage with peers, authority figures, and future mentors (Downer et al., 2015). This influence is especially significant for students from marginalized backgrounds or those who may lack consistent support systems

outside of school. Recent studies continue to affirm these findings. Sanders (2024) emphasizes that supportive teacher-student relationships are particularly impactful for students facing systemic challenges, promoting a stronger sense of belonging and attachment to school. Similarly, Cardenal, Díaz-Santana, and González-Betancor (2024) show that these relationships, along with inclusive teaching styles, play a key role in creating effective and equitable learning environments. Taken together, this growing body of evidence suggests that investing in the relational dimensions of teaching is not merely a matter of care. It is a foundational element of effective pedagogy that enhances both academic and social outcomes.

Vulnerable students, such as those experiencing poverty, trauma, unstable home lives, learning difficulties, or social marginalization, benefit greatly from strong, supportive teacher-student relationships, especially during early adolescence (O'Connor et al., 2011). These relationships can act as a protective buffer, helping students stay engaged in school and build emotional resilience even when facing significant adversity. Research shows that vulnerable students who feel supported by their teachers report higher self-esteem, greater motivation, and more active participation in class. Teachers who demonstrate genuine care, set high expectations, and provide consistent emotional support help students develop a positive self-concept and confidence in their abilities. These benefits are not only immediate, supportive TSRs also predict long-term outcomes such as improved grades, fewer behavioral issues, higher high school graduation rates, and increased college aspirations (Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Allen et al., 2013). For students who lack strong support systems outside of school, a teacher's belief in their potential can offer a critical sense of safety, stability, and belonging. Emotional connections with teachers have also been shown to reduce stress, promote healthy coping strategies, and limit behavioral disruptions (Baker, 2006).

Because of this strong evidence, relational pedagogy, which includes trauma-informed teaching, culturally responsive practices, and restorative discipline, should be treated as a core component of effective instruction, not as an optional or supplemental approach. By prioritizing relationship-building, educators can create emotionally safe learning environments that foster resilience, belonging, and academic growth for all students, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Conclusion

Middle school is a critically important time in a young person's life; it is when students go through numerous changes, not just physically, but emotionally and socially as well. During this stage, teachers play a huge role in helping students learn and supporting their growth as individuals. This paper reviews different teaching styles, and analyzes how these methods are used in various school settings. It also explores how strong teacher-student relationships can make a big difference in students' impressions of school and how much they are able to achieve. There is no one standard way to teach. Students have diverse learning needs, and effective teachers are able to adapt their instructional approaches to support the success of all learners.

Among early adolescents, teaching strategies that blend structure with opportunities for autonomy, such as guided inquiry, cooperative learning, and scaffolded active learning, have been shown to be especially effective. When paired with strong teacher-student relationships, these approaches promote not only academic growth but also emotional resilience and social development during this key transitional stage (Eccles et al., 1993; Roorda et al., 2011).

Research consistently emphasizes that how teachers treat their students is just as important as what they teach. A strong, positive relationship between a teacher and student helps students feel safe, motivated, and more willing to participate in class (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). This support is especially important for students facing challenges at home or in their social lives. When students feel that their teacher believes in their potential and genuinely cares about them, it can transform their attitude toward school and learning (Dweck, 2006). Teachers should intentionally foster this kind of encouragement by promoting a growth mindset, the belief that abilities and intelligence can improve with effort. Doing so helps students view mistakes as opportunities to grow rather than as failures (Dweck, 2006). To ensure all students feel empowered to take academic risks, especially those who may otherwise feel discouraged or disconnected, teachers should create classroom environments that celebrate effort, support perseverance, and emphasize learning over performance (Claro, Paunesku, & Dweck, 2016). By combining responsive teaching with intentional relationship-building, educators can support not only students' academic success but also their emotional resilience and long-term engagement in school.

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