Exploring Teacher-Student Relationship in the Context of Higher Education in Iraqi Kurdistan

Ali Yousif Azeez

English Department, Faculty of Arts, Soran University, Kurdistan Region-Iraq

Abstract:

The teacher–student relationship plays a pivotal role in shaping students' academic performance and overall educational experience. Positive relationships are associated with enhanced motivation, better engagement, and higher achievement, while negative relationships may hinder learning and reduce academic outcomes. In higher education, fostering constructive communication between teachers and students is essential for promoting quality learning environments. Despite its significance, this topic remains under-researched in the context of Iraqi Kurdistan. This study explores the nature, perceptions, and implications of teacher–student relationships in the region's higher education institutions. Using a grounded theory methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen students and eight teachers from various disciplines. The data were thematically analysed to identify patterns in participants' experiences and attitudes. Drawing upon the perspectives of both students and teachers, several key findings emerged. While respect and professionalism were highly valued, they were not consistently demonstrated, mismatches were identified and led to gaps to trust. Fairness in assessment and gender equity were identified as major concerns. Students frequently felt unsupported in their learning due to a lack of clear communication and feedback. Teachers were offering limited emotional support, and were also less patient due to external challenges influencing classroom dynamics. Blurred boundaries on social media and in public gatherings created doubts about professionalism. These findings have significant implications for higher education, specifically in areas of professional development, institutional policies, teacher welfare, and cultural sensitivity. Finally, a region-wide survey is needed to assess the current state of teacher-student relationships in higher education institutions.

Introduction

Teacher–student relationships (TSRs) have a strong correlation with effective teaching and learning. Numerous studies have shown that students are more inclined to be involved in academic activities if they receive support from the teaching staff, and they interact with during the learning process. In other words, teacher-student relationship is one of the influencing factors that affect student achievement, success and engagement. Therefore, the student engagement is linked to the quality of teacher student relationships (Bryson and Hand, 2007), Kahu (2013), Mann (2001), Kember's (2004), Kember and Leung (2006), Nyadanu et al. (2015), Jackling and Natoli (2011), Xerri, Radford, and Shacklock (2017). Investigating TSRs in different educational contexts reveals the areas of strength and weakness, thereby proposing necessary modifications informing policy and practice.

In Iraqi Kurdistan's higher education sector, there has been a gap between theory and practice. Although students are exposed to well-structured theoretical knowledge, they have limited opportunities for practical engagement. Yet, teaching is inherently relational, and in many cultures, including Kurdistan, teachers have traditionally been seen as role models. This demands a broader training approach that equips future educators with not only subject knowledge but also the interpersonal and social skills necessary to cultivate positive relationships with learners (Haji, 2018).

Despite global recognition of interactive and student-centered pedagogies, a teacher-centered transmission model remains dominant in many Kurdistan classrooms. In this model, teachers dictate what students should learn, while students are expected to reproduce the content when assessed. This framework leaves little space for dialogue, collaboration, or individual connection.

The quality of TSRs, ranging from caring behaviors to poor relationships, has significant implications for student outcomes (C. King, 2013; Hogekamp et al., 2016). These relationships can be perceived and affected by cultural norms and beliefs. There has been tensions due to the transition from traditional practices and cultural attitudes which grants the teacher authority to democratic teaching cultures promoted by the government. Therefore, the expectations on each side have changed, and lack of self-control from both sides have been witnessed. Given these, and due to scarcity of research, exploring TSRs within the higher education, and particularly understanding how teachers and students perceive and experience their relationships can contribute to enhancing professionalism and creating supportive learning environments.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, TSRs can be traced in a number of theories. This shows the complexity and multi-dimensionality of this issue. According to Attachment Theory, teachers are considered as attachment figures who provide support, buffer stress and guarantee students success (Walsh, 2023). The theory is critical for understanding the significance of perceived attachment (Wang et al., 2017; Ozturk, 2024). In order to refer to the societal elements, the *Social Support Theory* is an integrative approach (Jolly et al., 2021) that explains the relevance of TSR by mentioning emotional, informational, and instrumental resources in an engaging and resilient learning setting. Extracting the factor of mutual support, social support framework can be used to improve self-confidence while dealing with academic difficulties (Wang et al., 2021). The theory also exerts that supportive teachers typically help to reduce the sense of isolation and thus help individuals develop competencies to thrive in collaborative or independent settings. The other relevant aspect can be pointed out through the *Self-Determination Theory (SDT)*, which enhances motivation and engagement by focusing on the fulfilment of individuals' basic psychological needs, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as indicated by Guay (2022). The theory asserts that students are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation when they feel that their relationships with teachers are supportive and affirming (Luo & Derakhshan, 2024). Theoretically, such students not only

perform well academically, but also develop resilience and adaptability in their personality through the help of their teacher(s).

The theoretical perspectives collectively offer varied benefits in developing students with strong TSR, given their cognitive, emotional, and social development. This would allow the exploration of TSRs based on different levels of student development, precisely at the higher education level.

TSR and Academic Outcomes: A Performance Dimension

Much evidence supports the critical role TSRs play in academic success. A comprehensive review by Quin (2017) established long-term associations between better academic engagement and high-quality TSRs. According to Martin and Collie (2016), positive TSRs create a favourable learning atmosphere that improves the efficacy of instruction and makes it easier for students to acquire academic abilities. However, Fosen (2016) found that stressed TSRs often coincide with demotivation and lower performance, thus underscoring the need for relational strategies that impress respect and trust. Enhanced academic outcomes have been linked to teacher behaviours like showing concern for learners' well-being, having high expectations for themselves and students, and providing routine feedback (Knoell, 2012). This supports the conclusions of Cherry-Vazquez and Thompson (2022) that students are likely to make and achieve challenging goals when they have a supportive TSR. Furthermore, Arrascue (2023) emphasized that TSRs could promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills, particularly with younger children (Ann Bainbridge Frymier & Marian, 2000).

Behavioural and Socioemotional Development

TSR is among the most significant contributors to students' behavioural and socioemotional development. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) mentioned that TSR could be a classroom behaviour management mechanism through mutual respect and trust. According to Endedijk et al. (2022), quality demonstration of TSR in higher education influences peer relationships and collaborative behaviors among students. As for socioemotional outcomes, Gablinske (2014) noted that TSRs play an important role in emotional well-being. Martin and Collie (2016) supported this by demonstrating that such a positive relationship may alleviate anxiety and depression, especially in stressful settings. Conversely, Frymier and Houser (2000) defined TSRs as interpersonal relationships, communication, and empathy crucial to addressing students' emotional needs. Arrascue (2023) and Cherry-Vazquez and Thompson (2022) also emphasized that supportive TSRs foster resilience and adaptability, preparing students to deal with challenges in and out of the classroom.

Deployment of Divergent Methodologies

The methodological variation in studies underscores the critical role of TSRs in fostering academic engagement, socioemotional development, and behavioural outcomes while highlighting the importance of using diverse methodologies to capture their multifaceted nature.

Table 1: Summary of Methodological Studies

Study	Methodology	Focus
Gablinske (2014)	• Case study	• Examined TSRs and their effect on student learning through qualitative interviews with students and teachers.
Xerri et al. (2018).	• Mixed-methods approach (surveys and focus groups)	• Investigated the role of social support in promoting academic engagement, combining quantitative trends with depth.
Fosen (2016)	• Multiple-case study (interviews and	• Explored teachers' relational strategies and their perceptions of closeness to students.

	classroom observations)	
Hagenauer & Volet (2014)	• Literature review with qualitative analysis	• Analyzed emotional and contextual elements influencing TSRs through teacher and student narratives.
Knoell (2012)	• Mixed-methods analysis (surveys and interviews)	• Explored the role of TSRs in the lives of primary graders, integrating quantitative and qualitative data.
Quin (2017)	• A systematic review of longitudinal studies	• Focused on contextual and temporal associations between TSRs and student engagement.
Endedijk et al. (2022)	• Meta-analysis	• Examined the relevance of TSR quality for peer relationships and contributions of student behavior across studies.
HON (2015)	• Qualitative (document analysis and interviews)	• Investigated the impact of student consumerism on TSRs, highlighting cultural and systemic factors.
Arrascue (2023)	• Longitudinal study (periodic assessments and interviews)	• Tracked the impact of TSRs on academic, behavioral, and socioemotional development from primary students to graders.

The table sums up diverse methodologies' researchers utilize to consider the dynamics and impact of TSR. Fosen (2016) employed multiple-case designs, and Gablinske (2014) used case study analysis to offer deep qualitative insights into interactive experiences and strategies, emphasizing the nature of TSRs. Xerri et al. (2018) and Knoell (2012) showed a balanced approach using mixed method approaches by portraying the quantitative trend and the depth of the qualitative findings to achieve TSRs' in-depth contribution toward academic and socioemotional results. In another strand of literature, meta-analyses were executed by Endedijk et al. (2022) to generalize findings regarding the implications of TSR further. At the same time, a systematic review by Quin (2017) provided strong evidence that contextual factors are shaping TSRs. Longitudinal designs, such as in the study by Arrascue (2023), captured how TSRs impact students over time, thus revealing their long-term effects on development. Qualitative methodologies applied by Hon (2015) and Hagenauer and Volet (2014) investigated the systemic and emotional dimensions, uncovering cultural and contextual factors.

Challenges and Opportunities

Positive and effective TSRs can be maintained through various strategies such as professional development programs (Arrascue, 2023), policy reform, and fostering a supportive learning environment (Martin & Collie, 2016). Nevertheless, some challenges have been identified in the literature. They include time constraints and large class sizes (Hagenauer and Volet, 2014), cultural and systemic factors, such as rigid hierarchies and student unrest (Ghose, 1989). Therefore, a research-based, data driven, multifaceted approach, including teacher training, leveraging technology and adopting inclusive practices will lead to personalized communication and feedback through digital tools, as well as inclusive pedagogies through which students feel valued and supported (Martin & Collie, 2016).

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives—attachment theory, social support theory, and self-determination theory—highlight the multidimensional nature of teacher–student relationships, showing how they shape students' cognitive, emotional, and social development. Yet, despite the strong theoretical grounding, the literature also underscores significant challenges and methodological variation in assessing

TSRs. Much of the existing work emphasizes general correlations, but fewer studies provide nuanced, context-specific, empirical insights, particularly in under-researched higher education contexts such as Kurdistan. Therefore, there remains a research gap in systematically examining how teachers and students perceive and experience their relationships in practice. Addressing this gap can enrich the theoretical perspectives with empirical evidence, offering a more comprehensive understanding of TSRs and their impact on academic engagement, socioemotional growth, and professional practice.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the nuanced nature of teacher–student relationships within higher education in Iraqi Kurdistan. A qualitative approach is well-suited to uncovering participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations, particularly in culturally specific and under-researched contexts. By prioritizing depth over breadth, the design allows for an in-depth examination of the interpersonal, institutional, and cultural dynamics shaping these relationships. The research focuses on capturing the voices of both teachers and students, providing a balanced understanding of the relational factors influencing learning and teaching in the region's universities.

Methodology

Grounded theory methodology is employed to guide the research process, as it is particularly effective for generating theory from empirical data in areas where limited prior research exists. This approach enables the systematic collection and analysis of data to identify recurring patterns, themes, and relationships, ultimately leading to the development of a conceptual framework that reflects participants' realities. Grounded theory's iterative nature—where data collection and analysis occur concurrently—ensures that the emerging theory is firmly rooted in the participants' experiences and the specific sociocultural context of Iraqi Kurdistan's higher education (Holton, 2008).

Data Collection Method

Data collection is conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing for both consistency in key questions and flexibility to probe deeper into participants' unique perspectives. Semi-structured interviews also encourage participants to share personal reflections and examples, which enrich the qualitative dataset (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The semi-structured interview questions were developed by the researcher based on a review of the literature on teacher–student relationships and adapted to the local higher education context. Questions covered perceptions of respect, fairness, communication, feedback, boundaries, and support. (See the translated version of interview questions in Appendix II) Interview schedules are designed to elicit detailed narratives about the nature, challenges, and perceived impacts of teacher–student relationships.

With regard to data collection procedures, the researcher approached participants from University A, explained the purpose of the study, and obtained informed consent. Interviews were scheduled at neutral locations (quiet campus rooms) to ensure privacy and comfort. Interviews were all conducted in Kurdish Language upon the request of the participants. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim. Regarding the data analyses, data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding following grounded theory procedures. Themes and categories were derived iteratively from the data, ensuring that emerging patterns were grounded in participants' experiences. (See a table of codes, categories and themes in Appendix III)

Sampling

At the level of university selection, convenient purposive sampling was utilized. Similarly, for participant selection, purposive sampling is used to ensure that participants have direct and relevant experience with teacher–student relationships in higher education. The sample comprises 15 undergraduate students and 8

university lecturers from various academic disciplines, ensuring diversity in perspectives. Selection criteria include at least one year of experience within the same institution to ensure familiarity with its academic culture (Marshall, 1996). This targeted sampling strategy ensures that the collected data reflect a range of experiences across gender, academic fields, and institutional roles. Regarding the university, random sampling was implemented among a number of universities that were convenient for the researcher in terms of accessibility and practicality.

Ethical Issues

Ethical considerations are prioritized to safeguard participants' rights and well-being. Informed consent is obtained from the institution and all participants prior to data collection, with a clear explanation of the study's aims, procedures, and the voluntary nature of participation (See the translated version informed written consent in Appendix I). Anonymity is preserved by assigning symbols (such as S1 for Student 1 and T1 for Teacher 1 are used instead of full forms), and identifiable information is removed from transcripts. No information is given that could potentially reveal the institution under the study. Data are stored securely and accessible only to the researcher. Participants are reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Given the potential sensitivity of discussing institutional relationships, interviews are conducted in neutral, private settings to ensure comfort and confidentiality (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001).

Research Questions

1. How do university lecturers and students in Iraqi Kurdistan perceive the nature and purpose of teacher–student relationships in higher education?
2. What institutional, cultural, and interpersonal factors influence shape the status of teacher–student relationships in this context?

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study on teacher–student relationships (TSRs) in higher education in the Kurdistan Region. The analysis is organized around key themes that emerged from the interviews with the total of 23 participants (15 students and 8 teachers). Each theme captures both positive and negative as well as the prevalent and rare perceptions, illustrated with students' voices, and interpreted in light of the wider cultural and institutional context. The major themes are: Respect and Professionalism, Clear Communication, Fairness and Integrity, Patience and Flexibility, Active Listening and Student Voice, Feedback and Motivation, Boundaries and Informal Relationships, and Work Ethics, Behaviour, and Values. While distinct, these themes often intersect and together highlight the multifaceted nature of TSRs in this context.

Respect and Professionalism

Respect emerged as one of the most fundamental expectations students hold toward their teachers. Nearly all participants stated that, in general, their teachers treated them respectfully, regardless of background or academic ability. As S7 explained, "Most of my teachers have shown us respect, and that made me feel more comfortable to learn." Respect was often described as empathy, politeness, and acknowledgement of students' efforts.

However, some students noted that respect was not consistent across all interactions or stages of study. For instance, S2 recalled that, during her first year, one lecturer occasionally dismissed students' questions abruptly, which "made us feel embarrassed in front of others." Others described moments of sarcasm or public criticism that undermined respect. Such occasional lapses did not define the whole relationship but were remembered as significant, particularly in the early years when students were still adjusting to university life.

The issue of professionalism, which is closely related to respect, emerged from the data. According to the students, professionalism manifests itself through teachers' conduct, language, and appearance. S11 noted that "teachers' dresses and behaviour indicate their professionality and commitment." Students also linked professionalism to how teachers managed boundaries with students. For instance, S9 referred to frequent cases of lecturers sharing personal problems in class, explaining that "there are teachers who talk about their own life; this is not comfortable." These cases of blurred boundaries violate professionalism and result in emotional leakage. It has been reported that some teachers occasionally revealed their personal frustrations to the class. As S5 put it, "sometimes the teacher complains about problems such as delayed salaries and institutional challenges. We can easily see their mood change."

In response to the students' concerns, the teachers strongly agreed that respect and professionalism help maintain a healthy teacher–student relationship. Nevertheless, they considered those instances of unprofessional behavior rare that only occur under unusual stress. They also drew comparisons with their own student days, stressing that they had once experienced extremely harsh treatment from their teachers—behavior that, as they pointed out, "would not be tolerated by institutions today." (T2)

Overall, students' and teachers' views partly matched. Both agreed that respect and professionalism are vital for a good relationship. Students said most of their experiences with teachers were respectful and professional, and teachers confirmed this as the general norm. The difference lay in how lapses were seen. This shows that while both groups shared the same values, they differed in judging what counts as a "serious breach" of respect and professionalism.

Clear and Proper Communication

The students had concerns about the current communication quality. The students mentioned a number of issues such as late replies, unclear instructions, simple and vague feedback on performance, and approachability. S12 noted that "we use different channels of communication, such as social media; but most of the time, we don't receive timely answers". They were also disappointed with the teachers' communication through email. S8 explained that "sometimes we feel disappointed or discouraged to ask questions or clarifications." With regard to feedback, several students complained that they are either too general, delayed, and only focused on mistakes. For example, S1 stated that "even in assessing our work, we just get a mark; details about what we did wrong or how to improve are in most of the cases are missing." Such a communication can negatively impact students' academic outcomes as well as their confidence in engaging with teachers.

The teachers, similarly, acknowledged the importance of improvements in communication. They attributed some of the problems to large classes and their heavy commitments. For example, T5 referred to the difficulty of providing detailed written feedback for every student. They emphasized that they respond to any request if clarification is needed. They argued that misunderstandings might occur due to how clarification is viewed by each side. For example, T6 pointed out that "students often require oversimplifications and spoon-feeding, avoiding any approach that requires critical engagement with additional materials". In their view, the lack of effort on the students' part sometimes contributed to the communication gap.

The teachers' perspectives mostly aligned with the students in that clear communication is essential and that shortcomings exist. Concerns about unclear communication were closely tied to issues of fairness and integrity, since students often judged the fairness of assessment and grading practices through how clearly expectations and feedback were communicated.

Fairness and Integrity

Fairness was among the most sensitive themes. While many students acknowledged that some teachers were objective and impartial, complaints about unfair treatment were frequent. One recurring concern was

gender bias. S14 noted that "female students often get more attention and sometimes better marks, even if the work is the same." Others reported that female students occasionally received preferential treatment in classroom interactions.

Assessment practices were another area of concern. Several participants suggested that grades were not always based purely on merit. S6 recounted that "sometimes you feel marks depend more on who you are than on what you wrote." Perceptions of favoritism extended beyond gender, with some students mentioning ethnic or regional bias. While these claims cannot be independently verified, their persistence shows how integrity in assessment is closely tied to the trust students place in their teachers.

A few students also questioned whether teachers maintained professional boundaries in granting favors. S12 explained that "when a teacher is close to some students outside class, it creates doubts about fairness in grading." Such remarks connect fairness to broader issues of boundaries, which are explored later.

At the same time, fairness was not only about grades. S3 highlighted fairness in classroom participation, observing that "some teachers always choose the same students to answer, and the rest are ignored." Overall, the findings suggest that fairness and integrity are central to how students evaluate teacher–student relationships, and perceived lapses can quickly erode trust, even if they are isolated incidents. The question of fairness often intersected with patience and flexibility, particularly when students struggled academically or required additional support.

When these concerns were presented to teachers, they acknowledged that such perceptions may exist but offered different interpretations. They explained that, in a socially interactive culture, it is common to know students outside the university—for instance, a student might live in the same neighborhood. According to the teachers, this familiarity can create the impression among classmates that there is a stronger, friendship-like relationship, even when the interaction is coincidental rather than intentional. They emphasized that if students believe genuine favoritism exists, they can report it to the grievance committee, where such cases would be taken seriously. Teachers also commented on grading perceptions, noting that sometimes when they encourage a student by saying "well done," the student interprets this as a sign they deserve the highest mark. When that expectation is not met, students may believe bias is at play.

The perspectives of students and teachers showed both overlap and tension. Both sides acknowledged the importance of fairness and integrity in teacher–student relationships. For students, fairness was viewed in teachers' classroom practices, through gender bias, favoritism, and blurred boundaries. Teachers, on the other hand, referred to these perceptions and misunderstandings that occur due to the cultural dynamics. For example, social familiarity outside the classroom and verbal encouragement within it have been misinterpreted as favoritism. Moreover, although students often considered fairness as teacher's responsibility, teachers focused on the role of institutional policies and activation of grievance committees. The mismatch lies in interpretation: what is considered by students as unfair treatment, teachers mostly define as cases of misperception, cultural context, or misplaced expectations.

Active Listening and Student Voice

Students often complained about teachers' being sometimes unresponsive to their suggestions claiming that their voices did not matter. They felt that their opinions and concerns were not seriously taken into consideration. S7 observed that "when we try to give ideas in class, the teacher often interrupts or moves quickly to their own point; we feel that we are excluded from meaningful participation." Some students believed that the feedback they give at the end of each semester, is not acted upon by the institution. S10 explained, "we reported that a teacher's pace was too fast, but nothing changed." Such issues build a perception that students' voice was accepted, yet unwelcome. Advantageously, cases of teachers' active listening were highlighted. For example, S11 stated that "active listening makes a big difference when one

teacher asks if we have questions and waits until someone finishes speaking." This shows that when teachers practice active listening, students feel more respected and engaged.

Teachers responded to students' concern by emphasizing the challenges of meeting students' various expectations. Teachers argued that most of students' demands cannot be met as they are mostly personal. As T3 put it, "We cannot accommodate students' all desires and requests in our classes." They also argued that students' request for a slower pace and reduced coverage of material in both lectures and assessments contradicts their commitment towards the learning outcomes outlined in the module descriptors.

Both sides acknowledged the vital role of active listening and student voice, but with different perspectives. Students felt undervalued when exposed to specific classroom experiences such as being interrupted, ignored, or unheard. Teachers, on the other hand, attributed their practices to structural realities, and argued that it is impractical to accommodate every individual preference, especially when students' demands contradict that of the curriculum. Another area of mismatch is revealed through a mismatch in students' expectations for positive response, and teachers' interpretation as attentiveness within reasonable limits.

The disagreement over listening and voice is also related to how students perceive feedback and motivation. Just as students expect their input to lead to adjustments in teaching, they also look for constructive and personalized feedback as evidence that their efforts are acknowledged—an issue that emerges strongly in the following theme.

Feedback and Motivation

Students valued feedback that was constructive, detailed, and timely. Yet many felt this was not the norm. S8 noted that "most of the time we just receive a mark without comments, so we do not know how to improve." This lack of feedback was seen as a missed opportunity for learning.

When feedback was given, its tone mattered. Several students reported that feedback focused mainly on errors without recognizing achievements. As S5 explained, "the teacher only points out mistakes and never says what we did well, so it feels discouraging." Such negative-only feedback often reduced motivation.

In contrast, positive reinforcement was highly appreciated. S14 recalled that "when the teacher told me, 'good job, you improved,' I felt motivated to work harder." Students emphasized that even small words of encouragement made a significant difference in their confidence.

The findings suggest that feedback and motivation are not just technical aspects of assessment but key relational practices. They reinforce or undermine students' sense of being supported, which in turn influences their engagement with learning.

When teachers were presented with these points, they acknowledged that feedback is a challenging area. They explained that it takes considerable time to provide inclusive, detailed feedback that covers all aspects of student performance. Some admitted that they lacked "adequate feedback literacy," meaning they were not trained in how to deliver feedback effectively. Others emphasized that feedback has been traditionally limited and writing detailed comments has not been so widespread. Teachers also expressed concern, that if this process is not applied with proficiency and insight, it could either have reverse impact, or could backfire, leading students to become overconfident or complacent rather than motivated.

Overall, even though students and teachers had different perspectives, both sides acknowledged the importance of feedback. The students viewed it as incomplete in detail and negative in tone; they considered a detailed and motivating feedback process as a central part of learning and confidence-building. On the other hand, teachers attributed this gap to the structural and cultural factors such as time constraints, lack of training, and cultural norms, in addition to being cautious about the use of praise, due to it's potential unintended negative effects. This mismatch reflects a broader tension between students'

expectations of supportive communication and teachers' adherence to established cultural and institutional practices.

Boundaries and Informal Relationships

A key finding was the unclear boundary between teacher–student relationships and friendship. According to many students, it was considered normal to be Facebook friends with their teachers, to react on their posts, and even to go to picnics together. It was mentioned that universities had not provided clear codes of conduct regarding such interactions. For instance, S6 explained that "the university has not prohibited the social media connections between teachers and students such as being friends with teachers on social media." This informality and out of university connection was considered normal by most of the students; however, a few students identified areas of potential causes of favouritism. S12 observed that "when teachers and students are close friends outside, it can create doubts about fairness in class." For them, social closeness was perceived as favoritism, whether or not it directly affected grading. In general, institutional silence left students to navigate boundaries without any obligations or reservations, often leading to confusion.

Contrary to the dominant viewpoint, the liberty of having such informal interactions was favoured by some students, describing them as a catalyst to approach their teachers. This contradiction here highlights the cultural complexity of boundaries in this context that causes dual interpretations as friendliness on one hand, and as unprofessional on the other hand.

When teachers were exposed to students' accounts, similarly, they confirmed lack of a clear code of conduct related to the regulation of teacher–student relationships and particularly interactions. They attributed the rapid change, from a sharp line in the past to blurred boundaries in the present time, to rapid changes in teaching approaches as well as dominance and prevalence of internet-based methods of interaction, namely social media. In addition to that, teachers believed that the oral and collectivist culture, it is sometimes hard to maintain a clear-cut boundary with students regardless of their acquaintance with them outside the university setting. They also agreed that such informality could potentially result in misunderstandings; however, they advocated the activation and accessibility of grievance mechanisms, as stated by T3 that "if students report concerns, the cases would be taken seriously and worked upon for a proper resolution".

The absence of a clear code of conduct has contributed to uncertainty in defining professional boundaries. What students considered as potential favoritism affecting fairness and trust, was framed by teachers as a by-product of modern educational practices and digital life creating concerns that can be resolved by resorting to grievance procedures as safeguards. This difference underscores how evolving norms around boundaries shape perceptions of integrity and professionalism in the teacher–student relationship.

Overall, the findings show that students in Kurdistan want their teachers to be respectful, professional, fair, patient, good listeners, and ethical. They also expect clear communication, useful feedback, and proper boundaries. Although students shared many positive examples, they also often expressed strong complaints about failures in these areas.

Based on the findings and recurring themes, it could be argued that the status of TSRs is determined by the interplay of experiences across multiple areas. The main findings will be discussed in relation to existing literature and their implications for policy and practice will be highlighted.

Discussion

One key finding was that although many students considered their teachers as respectful, issues like sarcasm, inconsistent behavior, and informality were common concerns. Teachers viewed these as minor or situational, but students stressed that they negatively impact trust and engagement.

These results support Rogers and Freiberg's (1994) view that respect and empathy are key to good teaching and reflect Danielson's (2007) focus on professionalism. They also align with Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982), which stresses the importance of trust and consistency for strong relationships, and with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which sees respect as essential for students' sense of connection and motivation. Practical implications include embedding relational professionalism in teacher training and developing institutional codes of conduct that explicitly articulate behavioral expectations.

Students frequently raised concerns about perceived unfairness, citing gender bias, unequal treatment, and favoritism in assessment practices. Teachers tended to downplay these claims, framing them as misinterpretations of grading criteria or isolated misunderstandings. However, the consistency of students' accounts suggests that perceptions of unfairness remain a significant barrier to trust.

The literature confirms the salience of fairness in TSRs. Ferguson (2010) notes that perceived injustice undermines academic engagement, while Leventhal's (1980) theory of procedural justice emphasizes consistency, neutrality, and transparency as essential for maintaining legitimacy. From the lens of Self-Determination Theory, unfair treatment diminishes students' sense of competence and autonomy, discouraging motivation.

In Kurdistan's collectivist context, fairness extends beyond individual equity to group harmony. When favoritism or bias is perceived, it not only erodes individual trust but also disrupts peer relationships, undermining the sense of academic community. Institutional measures such as clearer grading rubrics, transparent moderation systems, and mechanisms for student appeals could reduce ambiguity and reinforce perceptions of fairness.

A prominent theme across student accounts was dissatisfaction with unclear communication of expectations, vague instructions, and insufficient feedback. Teachers generally acknowledged communication challenges but attributed them to large class sizes, time pressures, or students' lack of attentiveness. Students, however, viewed unclear communication as a failure of teacher responsibility that directly hindered their learning.

The significance of clarity in instruction is well documented. Hattie (2009) identified clear communication and timely feedback among the most powerful influences on student achievement. Similarly, Brookhart (2008) stresses that feedback must be specific, actionable, and linked to learning goals. From a theoretical standpoint, the findings resonate with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, where communication serves as a scaffold for learning, and with Self-Determination Theory, as clarity and feedback enhance competence.

In Kurdish universities, many students are the first in their families to study at this level, and resources are limited, so clear communication is very important. When teachers are unclear, it worsens inequalities and harms less experienced students the most. To address this, universities need to support teacher training, especially in assessment and feedback.

Many students described their teachers as lacking patience, attributing this to personal stressors such as delayed salaries or workload pressures. Teachers, in turn, acknowledged that external constraints sometimes limited their emotional availability. Students emphasized that a lack of patience—such as explaining concepts only once or discouraging questions—contributed to frustration and disengagement.

This theme echoes literature emphasizing the emotional dimensions of TSRs. Noddings (2005) highlights the ethic of care as essential to effective teaching, while Jennings and Greenberg (2009) note that teachers' emotional regulation directly influences classroom climate. Attachment Theory further suggests that patience and availability provide the secure base students need for a better progress.

Another striking finding was the blurred boundaries between teachers and students, normalized through social media connections, participation in public events, or informal outings. Some students saw these

interactions as friendly and positive, while others felt they were inappropriate or unprofessional. Teachers often explained them as normal in the culture or as ways to build good relationships.

The Previous studies related to the management of boundary in teacher-student relationship in educational settings emphasize that although warmth and accessibility are important, closeness poses risks to professional authority and creates perceptions of favoritism (Kelchtermans, 2009). According to Social Support Theory, well-defined boundaries are crucial to ensure that the assistance given is appropriate and does not create imbalance. In the Kurdish context this issue is even more complicated because boundary-crossing practices are sometimes considered normal, and hospitality and sociability are highly valued. In addition, the absence of clearly outlined institutional codes of conduct is the reason why students have varied perceptions of professionalism.

Another finding of the study was that students found the teachers' enthusiasm, preparedness, and willingness to adapt lessons motivating, and on the contrary, teachers' lack of preparation or rigid adherence to routines were demotivating. Having acknowledged these challenges, the teachers attributed them to structural barriers such as limited institutional support or inadequate training. The literature has also acknowledged that teacher enthusiasm and flexibility are linked to student motivation. For instance, Patrick et al. (2000) found a positive correlation. Similarly, a teacher's adaptability aligns with the principles of differentiated instruction, as highlighted by Tomlinson (2014).

In the context of this study, the challenge is fortified by a number of factors such as delayed salaries and heavy workloads that negatively affect the consistency of their work ethic. Therefore, to promote motivation, institutional attempts to guarantee teacher welfare, as well as necessary training need to be implemented.

In general, the findings demonstrate that teacher–student relationships in the context of higher education in Kurdistan are complex, multi-layered, and deeply affected by cultural expectations, institutional realities, and global pedagogical principles. The discussion highlights that promoting TSRs requires should be implemented through systematic institutional reforms and culturally responsive policies that bring about professionalism without affecting warmth and accessibility.

Conclusion

This study investigated teacher–student relationships in Kurdistan higher education context. Drawing upon the perspectives of both students and teachers, several key findings emerged. While respect and professionalism were highly valued, they were not consistently demonstrated, mismatches were identified and led to gaps to trust. Fairness in assessment and gender equity were identified as major concerns. Students frequently felt unsupported in their learning due to a lack of clear communication and feedback. Teachers were offering limited emotional support, and were also less patient due to external challenges influencing classroom dynamics. Blurred boundaries on social media and in public gatherings created doubts about professionalism. The findings showed that this study provides comprehensive insights into teacher–student relationships within higher education in Iraqi Kurdistan. It demonstrates that respect, professionalism, fairness, effective communication, and proper boundaries are central to positive TSRs. The study fills a critical gap in the literature by providing empirically grounded evidence from both teachers' and students' perspectives, revealing mismatches in expectations and interpretations of relational behaviors. In addition, the findings underscore the importance of institutional support, teacher training, and culturally sensitive policies to enhance TSRs. By linking theoretical frameworks such as Attachment Theory, Social Support Theory, and Self-Determination Theory to practical outcomes, this study demonstrates that positive TSRs foster motivation, engagement, resilience, and academic success. The study also introduces new ways to frame TSRs in contexts transitioning from traditional hierarchical models

to more student-centered approaches, emphasizing the role of institutional culture, digital interactions, and teacher welfare.

Implications of the Study

These findings carry important implications for higher education in the region in terms of professional development, institutional policies, teacher welfare, and cultural sensitivity. To promote professional development, raining programs should focus on communication skills, feedback strategies and pedagogical practices. With regard to institutional policies, universities should develop policies to promote professionalism, fairness, and boundaries in teacher–student relationships. As far as teacher welfare is concerned, the challenges should be reported to higher authorities. In terms of cultural sensitivity, policies and trainings should be provided to hold local values and professional standards in a balanced way to prevent favoritism and over-familiarity.

Additionally, the findings call for immediate action to systematically assess the state of teacher–student relationships through a large-scale survey across all higher education institutions in the region. This could render a comprehensive picture of current practices, challenges, and strengths.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into teacher–student relationships in higher education in Iraqi Kurdistan, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study is limited to a relatively small number of participants—fifteen students and eight teachers—which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Second, the research was conducted in only one higher education institution, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and practices across the region's universities. Third, the reliance on self-reported data through semi-structured interviews may introduce subjective bias, as participants may consciously or unconsciously present themselves in a favorable light. Additionally, the study's cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time, limiting the ability to examine how teacher–student relationships evolve over time. Finally, although cultural and institutional contexts were considered, other external factors such as socio-economic background, prior educational experiences, and disciplinary differences were not fully explored, which may have influenced participants' perspectives.

In terms of recommendations for further research, larger-scale studies can draw from an build upon this study to provide policymakers with actionable data to guide targeted reforms in Kurdish higher education. Comparative studies across universities can be undertaken to explore variations in TSRs within different institutional or cultural settings. Similarly, longitudinal researches can be conducted to investigate the dynamics of teacher–student relationships over time, particularly in response to institutional reforms. Methodologically, mixed-methods approaches could be carried out to capture both breadth and depth.

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Appendix I
Informed Consent Sheet
Translated From Kurdish

Title of Study: Exploring the Teacher–Student Relationship in the Context of Higher Education in Iraqi Kurdistan

Researcher: Dr. Ali Yousif Azeez

Institution: Soran University

Purpose of the Study:

You are invited to participate in a study examining teacher–student relationships in higher education institutions in Iraqi Kurdistan. The study seeks to understand perceptions, experiences, and challenges of TSRs to improve educational quality.

Procedures:

- Participation involves a one-on-one interview lasting approximately 45–60 minutes.
- Interviews will be audio-recorded for accurate transcription.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality:

All information will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms (e.g., S1, T1) will be used in transcripts and publications. Identifiable data will not be disclosed.

Risks and Benefits:

- Risks are minimal; however, discussing experiences may cause slight discomfort.

- Benefits include contributing to knowledge that may improve teacher–student relationships and educational practice.

Consent:

By signing below, you acknowledge that you have read and understood the above information, and you agree to participate voluntarily.

Participant Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix II
Interview Schedule
Translated From Kurdish

Student Interview Questions (Semi-structured; open-ended)

How would you describe your overall relationship with your teachers?

What qualities do you value most in your teachers?

Can you share examples of positive or negative experiences with teachers?

How do teachers communicate instructions, feedback, and expectations?

How do you perceive fairness in grading, classroom participation, and teacher attention?

How do teachers respond to your questions, suggestions, or concerns?

Can you describe any experiences where boundaries between teachers and students were unclear?

How do teacher behaviors influence your motivation, engagement, or learning?

What improvements would you suggest to enhance teacher–student relationships?

Lecturer Interview Questions (Semi-structured; open-ended)

How do you perceive your relationship with students?

What strategies do you use to maintain respect, fairness, and professionalism?

How do you communicate expectations and provide feedback?

How do you balance student engagement and institutional requirements?

How do you manage boundaries with students in and out of class?

What challenges do you face in fostering positive TSRs?

How do cultural, institutional, or social factors influence your interactions with students?

How do you respond to student feedback or concerns about your teaching?

What recommendations would you make to improve TSRs in your institution?

Appendix III

Codes, Categories, and Emergent Themes with Representative Participant Quotes
Translated From Kurdish

Codes	Categories	Themes	Representative Quotes
Empathy, Politeness, Acknowledgement of effort	Respect and Professionalism	Respect and Professionalism	"Most of my teachers have shown us respect, and that made me feel more comfortable to learn." (S7)
Late replies, Vague instructions, Minimal feedback	Communication Issues	Clear Communication	"Sometimes we feel disappointed or discouraged to ask questions or clarifications." (S8)

Gender bias, Favoritism, Perceived unfair grading	Equity Concerns	Fairness and Integrity	"Female students often get more attention and sometimes better marks, even if the work is the same." (S14)
Interrupting, Ignoring suggestions	Listening Issues	Active Listening and Student Voice	"When we try to give ideas in class, the teacher often interrupts or moves quickly to their own point." (S7)
Negative-only feedback, Lack of encouragement	Feedback Quality	Feedback and Motivation	"The teacher only points out mistakes and never says what we did well, so it feels discouraging." (S5)
Social media interactions, Informal outings	Boundary Ambiguity	Boundaries and Informal Relationships	"When teachers and students are close friends outside, it can create doubts about fairness in class." (S12)
Delayed lectures, Lack of enthusiasm	Teacher Engagement	Work Ethics, Behaviour, and Values	"Some teachers lack preparation or rigidly adhere to routines, which makes the class less motivating."
Stress, impatience, workload challenges	Emotional Availability	Patience and Flexibility	"Sometimes the teacher complains about problems such as delayed salaries and institutional challenges." (S5)

A Study on the Relationship Between Teachers and Students in Higher Education Institutions in Iraqi Kurdistan

Ali Yusuf Aziz

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Soran University, Kurdistan Region - Iraq

Article Info		Abstract:
Received	**August, 2025**	The teacher-student relationship plays a key role in shaping students' academic performance and overall educational experience. Positive relationships are associated with higher motivation, better engagement and higher achievement, while negative relationships may hinder learning and reduce academic outcomes. In higher education, developing constructive relationships between teachers and students is crucial to fostering a high-quality learning environment. Despite its importance, this issue is still being studied in the context of Iraqi Kurdistan. This study examines the nature, perspective and effects of teacher-student relationships in higher education institutions in the region. Using grounded theory methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 students and 8 teachers from different departments. The data were analysed in a conceptual manner to identify important concepts based on the experiences and attitudes of the participants.
Accepted	**September, 2025**	
Published:	**December , 2025**	
		Taking advantage of the perspectives of both sides, i.e. students and teachers, a number of key findings have been made. While respect and professionalism were highly valued, they were not consistently demonstrated, and the shortcomings and mistakes that lead to the trust gap were identified. Equity in assessment and gender equality were identified as top concerns for students. Students often feel a lack of support in their learning due to a lack of communication and clear feedback. Teachers offered limited support, and were less patient due to external challenges that affected classroom dynamics. The blurring of boundaries on social media and in meetings or in public places has raised doubts about the professionalism of the profession. These findings have a significant impact on higher education, particularly in the areas of professional development, institutional policy and cultural sensitivity. Finally, the study suggests that a statewide survey should be conducted to assess the current state of teacher-teacher relations.
Corresponding Author ali.aziz@soran.edu.iq		