

**Relational Trust and Academic Outcomes:  
A Study of Teacher-Student Relationships in NYC's Alternative High Schools**

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## RELATIONAL TRUST AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

### Abstract

In New York City alternative high school classrooms serving young adults who have previously dropped out, the teacher-student relationship can be vital to re-engagement and academic success. These students often carry a history of trauma, rejection, and interrupted learning. When teachers lead with empathy, consistency, and cultural responsiveness, they create spaces where students feel safe enough to re-engage emotionally, behaviorally, and academically. For many, it is the first time school feels like a place they belong.

Teachers serve as a source of stability for students by modeling respect and resilience while helping students rebuild trust in themselves and in learning. This qualifying paper will examine how relationships such as Grounded in Attachment Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Ethics of Care, and Social Cognitive Theory do more than support achievement, they inspire hope. From a leadership lens, building a relational culture is an ethical responsibility. As Fullan and Quinn (2016) remind us, “Constantly improving and refining instructional practice so that students can engage in deep learning tasks is perhaps the single most important responsibility on the teaching profession and educational system as a whole” (p. 110).

In these classrooms, connection is not a bonus, it is the foundation for transformation. When students feel seen and valued, they begin to show up differently, and this is where their transformation begins.

*Keywords:* alternative education, teacher-student relationships, emotional re-engagement, academic success, relational pedagogy

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### Relational Trust and Academic Outcomes: A Study of Teacher-Student Relationships in NYC's Alternative High Schools

#### **Introduction**

Within the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE), the Alternative Schools and Programs district is designed to ensure that all students regardless of prior academic setbacks could earn a high school diploma or high school equivalency (HSE). One such initiative is a free, full-time HSE program offered citywide to students ages 18–21 (New York City Department of Education). With rolling admissions throughout the school year, the program welcomes young adults who have disengaged from traditional schooling and seek a second opportunity. While the program is inclusive and flexible, it presents unique challenges for educators, particularly in addressing the behavioral, emotional, and academic needs of students who enter with interrupted educational histories and complex life experiences.

The issue at hand is the persistent behavioral and emotional disengagement among students in these alternative HSE classrooms, which directly impedes instruction and learning. Many students exhibit disruptive behaviors, struggle with attendance, and lack foundational academic skills. These are factors that often stem from trauma, poverty, or prior negative school experiences. Teachers, though certified and committed, are often licensed in general education and lack special education credentials, which impedes their ability to address the cognitive and behavioral complexities of this population. As Souers and Hall (2016) emphasize, “One of the most powerful and rewarding ways we can help our students flourish is to provide safety of a trusting, healthy relationship” (p. 102). Establishing meaningful teacher-student relationships may be the most effective strategy for re-engaging these learners and preventing them from dropping out of school a second time.

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This issue is unfolding across New York City’s alternative HSE programs, particularly in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, which deepened educational inequities and heightened the social-emotional needs of vulnerable youth. The rolling admissions model, while necessary, disrupts classroom cohesion and places immense pressure on teachers to modify instruction and build trust quickly. As an assistant principal within one of these programs, firsthand observations reveal how lack of basic academic knowledge, truancy, and behavioral disruptions challenge both educators and the broader learning community. Teachers need immediate, practical support such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), trauma-informed strategies, and relationship-building techniques to help foster emotional safety and academic growth.

The individuals most impacted as a result include the students themselves, young adults that are navigating complex trauma and seeking educational redemption alongside their teachers, school leaders, and support staff. Teachers participate in professional development (PD) and professional learning communities (PLCs), yet few receive targeted training in behavior management or trauma-informed care. Leadership is expected to guide teachers toward instructional excellence but must also recognize the relational and emotional labor required to teach in these settings. As Schmoker (2016) notes, “Clear learning objectives, step-by-step teaching, focused practice, checking for understanding, and adjusting of instruction are the most important elements of effective lesson delivery” (p. 46). However, these instructional goals are difficult to achieve without first addressing the relational foundation that makes learning possible.

This paper will discuss how providing teachers with the necessary resources and support can help ease the current situation in New York City’s alternative HSE programs and enhance

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their ability to connect with students, manage disruptive behaviors, and foster academic success. Grounded in Creswell's (2012) qualitative framework, this paper assumptions, experiences, and obstacles faced by educators in these settings. Drawing on Attachment Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Ethics of Care, and Social Cognitive Theory, the paper will focus on relationship-centered practices such as PBIS, Growth Mindset, and trauma-informed approaches that can be adapted for older students. As Fullan (2016) reminds us, "...it is only when schooling operates in a way that connects students relationally in a relevant, engaging, and worthwhile experience that substantial learning will occur" (p. 139). By identifying strategies that foster emotional re-engagement and academic achievement, this study aims to support educators in transforming dropout into re-entry and disengagement into growth.

### **Literature Review**

In New York City's alternative high school equivalency (HSE) programs, education is not just about content, it is about connection. These schools serve students who have been pushed to the margins, often carrying the weight of interrupted schooling, systemic inequities, and emotional trauma. For many, the classroom is not a neutral space, it is a place of vulnerability, resistance, and, when conditions are right, transformation. In these settings, student-teacher relationships are not simply helpful they are foundational.

When looking into teacher support, disruptive behaviors, and student academic achievement, the literature addressed the need to establish teacher-student relationships, strategies to address behavioral and re-engagement issues, and improved outcomes to achieve academic success. This trio of relationships, re-engagement, and achievement forms the foundation of a healing-centered approach to education. It affirms that students cannot be

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expected to thrive academically until they feel emotionally safe, relationally connected, and genuinely supported.

Shawn Achor (2010), in *The Happiness Advantage*, reminds us that positive emotions cultivated through trust, belonging, and relational warmth can fuel cognitive performance and resilience. In classrooms where students feel seen and valued, their brains become more receptive to learning. This insight is especially urgent in alternative settings, where students often arrive emotionally guarded and academically disengaged. Achor's work reframes joy and connection not as distractions from learning, but as prerequisites for it.

Yet the work of building these relationships is emotionally demanding. It requires teachers to hold space for pain, to respond with empathy rather than control, and to show up consistently even when students push back. Elena Aguilar (2016) speaks to this in *The Art of Coaching Teams*, where she emphasizes that relational work must be sustained by strong, emotionally intelligent teams. Teachers need colleagues with whom to debrief the hard moments, celebrate the small wins, and remind them why they chose this path. In New York City's high-pressure school environments, where burnout is real and resources are stretched thin, relational coaching and team resilience are not luxuries, they are lifelines.

Culture also plays a decisive role. Bolman and Deal (2009), in *Shaping School Culture*, argue that school culture must be intentionally crafted to reflect shared values, rituals, and relational norms. In alternative HSE programs, this means designing environments where students are not just managed but truly known. It means embedding restorative practices into the flow of the day, celebrating effort over perfection, and creating spaces where students can reclaim their identities as learners. Only when relational trust is institutionalized and it is not just

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the work of a few caring teachers will students begin to see school not as a place of scrutiny but as a space of possibility.

This literature review explores how student-teacher relationships shape behavioral re-engagement, emotional regulation, and academic achievement in New York City's alternative education environment. It draws on foundational theories such as Attachment Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Ethics of Care, and Social Cognitive Theory and integrates existing and ongoing research to illuminate how relational pedagogy can transform not only classrooms, but lives.

### **Teacher-Student Relationships**

Teacher-student relationships are widely recognized as a foundation of academic and behavioral success, particularly in alternative education environments where students often arrive with histories of trauma, interrupted schooling, and emotional disengagement. For these students, connection is not a luxury, it is a prerequisite for learning. The literature affirms that when teachers build trust, model empathy, and create emotionally safe spaces, students are more likely to re-engage and persist. This review explores three key studies and situates their findings within four theoretical frameworks: Attachment Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Ethics of Care, and Social Cognitive Theory.

Fallon, Collier-Meek, and Kurtz (2019) examined the impact of coaching support on classroom management in high-need alternative settings. Their study found that behavior-specific praise and corrective statements, delivered through didactic and booster training, helped reduce disruptive behaviors. However, the authors noted that limited time and access to ongoing support hindered full implementation. This aligns with Attachment Theory, which suggests that



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students need consistent, reliable adult relationships to feel secure enough to take academic risks. Without continued relational investment, behavioral strategies may fall short. The study also supports Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura), which emphasizes the importance of modeling and reinforcement in shaping behavior, teachers must be equipped to model cooperative and social responses consistently.

In a related study, Fallon and Feinberg (2017) explored the use of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in a therapeutic alternative high school. Their multi-tiered approach (Tier 1–3) aimed to support students with emotional disabilities through structured routines and individualized check-ins. While the framework showed promise, the lack of baseline data and limited time for implementation weakened its impact. The authors concluded that meaningful behavioral change requires consistent reinforcement and time to build relational trust, especially in settings where students face significant emotional and behavioral challenges. This reflects the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan), which suggests that students thrive when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. In alternative settings, where students often feel powerless or misunderstood, relational strategies must be embedded into daily practice to foster motivation and ownership of learning.

Maillet (2017) offered a broader perspective by identifying six powerful practices for alternative education success, including creative instruction, service learning, and most notably intentional time for connecting with students. Building relationships was shown to increase academic engagement and improve behavior. This study strongly supports Ethics of Care (Noddings), which frames teaching as a relational act rooted in empathy, responsiveness, and moral responsibility. In high-need classrooms, care is not abstract. It is operationalized through

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daily interactions that affirm students' dignity and worth. When teachers prioritize connection, they create conditions for healing and growth.

Together, these studies and theories affirm that teacher-student relationships are essential in alternative education settings. They also reveal a common challenge: the need for sustained time-sensitive training as well as relational frameworks that can be realistically implemented within the constraints of high-need environments. Students in HSE programs are often navigating complex trauma and re-entering school with fragile academic identities. Teachers must be supported not only with behavioral strategies, but with frameworks that honor the emotional and ethical dimensions of their work. Attachment Theory reminds us that safety precedes learning; Self-Determination Theory highlights the need for autonomy and relevance; Ethics of Care demands relational accountability; and Social Cognitive Theory affirms the power of modeling and reinforcement. As a result of teacher mindsets regarding relational strategies in New York City's alternative HSE programs, these insights provide a critical foundation for understanding how connection can transform classroom dynamics and support academic success.

### **Behavioral and Emotional Re-engagement in Alternative Education Settings**

Behavioral and emotional re-engagement is a critical component of academic success for students in alternative high school programs, particularly those who have experienced interrupted education, trauma, or exclusion from traditional school environments. The literature consistently affirms that teacher-student relationships are a powerful lever for re-engaging students who exhibit at-risk behaviors and emotional withdrawal. These relationships foster trust, belonging, and motivation, key ingredients for behavioral regulation and academic persistence.

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Longobardi, Prino, Marengo, and Settanni (2016) examined the role of teacher-student relationships in supporting school adjustment during the transition from middle to high school. Their study revealed that “positive and affective teacher-student relationships may play an important role in students’ adaptation to the school environment, favoring both academic achievement and adaptive behaviors” (p. 1). Students entering new academic settings often face larger class sizes, unfamiliar peers, and increased academic demands, which can lead to feelings of exclusion and behavioral disruption. The study found that when students felt supported by teachers, they were more likely to engage, commit to learning, and demonstrate improved behavior. These findings align with Attachment Theory, which emphasizes the importance of secure relationships in promoting emotional regulation and resilience during developmental transitions.

Sumabera (2015) explored re-engagement strategies in California’s continuation high schools, focusing on social-cognitive factors that contribute to behavioral, emotional, and cognitive re-engagement. Through a three-phase qualitative study, Sumabera identified practices such as creating safe environments, treating students with respect, setting high expectations, and offering individualized instruction. These strategies helped transform disengaged students into motivated learners. Providing students with choice and autonomy was particularly effective in building genuine motivation and altering negative behavioral patterns. These findings reflect the principles of Self-Determination Theory, which suggests that students thrive when their needs for autonomy, competence, and connection are met. In alternative settings, where students often feel powerless or misunderstood, relational strategies that affirm student agency can be transformative.

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Thayer, Cook, Fiat, Bartlett-Chase, and Kember (2018) introduced the concept of “wise feedback” as a timely intervention for at-risk students transitioning into high school. Their study found that mistrust of teachers often led to disengagement and disruptive behavior. By implementing wise feedback, a strategy that communicates high expectations alongside belief in the student’s potential, educators were able to rebuild trust and foster a sense of belonging. This intervention improved both behavior and academic engagement. The study supports the application of Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes the role of observational learning, modeling, and belief systems in shaping behavior. When students perceive their teachers as trustworthy and supportive, they are more likely to internalize positive behaviors and persevere through challenges.

Collectively, these studies affirm that behavioral and emotional re-engagement is not simply a matter of discipline, it is a relational process grounded in trust, empathy, and high expectations. They also reinforce the relevance of Ethics of Care, which frames teaching as a moral and relational practice. In alternative education settings, where students often arrive with emotional wounds and academic gaps, the teacher’s role extends beyond instruction to include emotional connection and ethical responsibility. By embedding relational strategies into daily practice, educators can create conditions where students feel safe enough to learn, behave, and succeed.

### **Academic Achievement and Improved Outcomes**

In alternative high school equivalency programs, academic achievement cannot be separated from the emotional and relational conditions in which learning takes place. Students who have experienced trauma, exclusion, or chronic academic failure often enter these programs with diminished self-worth and a fragile sense of possibility. For these learners, success is not

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simply about mastering content but about rebuilding trust, cultivating resilience, and experiencing learning as a pathway to healing. The literature affirms that when educators are equipped with relational strategies, trauma-informed practices, and a growth-oriented mindset, student outcomes improve in both measurable and meaningful ways.

Gothberg, Peterson, Peak, and Sedaghat (2015) emphasized the importance of addressing both academic and non-academic skills through structured transition planning. Their triangulated gap analysis tool (TGAP) helped educators identify skill deficits and develop targeted goals to prepare students for postsecondary success. This approach aligns with Rick Hanson's (2018) insight in *Resilient* that "we grow the most when we feel safe, not when we feel threatened" (p. 12). In alternative classrooms, where students often expect rejection or failure, educators must create environments of psychological safety to activate the brain's capacity for learning and growth. TGAP's structured, goal-oriented framework provides a roadmap for educators to scaffold both academic and emotional development, reinforcing the idea that achievement is built on a foundation of relational trust.

Salgado, Mundy, Kupczynski, and Challoo (2015) found that teacher efficacy, particularly when supported through field-based training, was a significant predictor of student achievement. Teachers who felt confident in their ability to manage classrooms and engage diverse learners were more effective in promoting academic success. This finding is especially relevant in alternative settings, where students often present with behavioral challenges and complex emotional needs. As Shawn Ginwright (2016) argues in *Hope and Healing in Urban Education*, "We must shift from seeing young people as problems to seeing them as possibilities" (p. 27). This shift requires educators to move beyond compliance-based models and embrace healing-centered engagement which is an approach that honors students lived experiences and

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affirms their capacity for transformation. When teachers are trained to see students through a lens of possibility, they become agents of hope, capable of fostering both academic achievement and emotional restoration.

Social Cognitive Theory, developed by Bandura, provides a critical lens through which to understand these dynamics. It emphasizes that students learn not only through direct instruction but also by observing others, internalizing modeled behaviors, and receiving reinforcement. Wang (2024) affirms that “students’ belief in their own capabilities is shaped by the feedback and modeling they receive from teachers,” and that this belief directly influences motivation and achievement. In alternative education, where students often lack internalized models of academic success, teachers must intentionally model persistence, empathy, and high expectations. Widodo and Astuti (2024) further argue that “observational learning and peer modeling are especially effective in inclusive environments,” and that implementation of Social Cognitive Theory requires attention to individual student differences and cultural context. These insights validate the importance of relational modeling and culturally responsive teaching in fostering academic growth. Social Cognitive Theory reinforces the importance of modeling, observational learning, and belief systems in shaping academic achievement, especially in alternative education settings.

Yang, Bear, and May (2018) demonstrated that school-wide social-emotional learning (SEL) approaches significantly enhance student engagement across grade levels. Their study found that when SEL is embedded into the fabric of school culture, students are more likely to participate, persist, and succeed. This supports Ginwright’s (2016) call for educational spaces that prioritize healing, connection, and agency. In alternative education, where students often feel disconnected from traditional school norms, SEL provides a framework for re-engagement that is

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both relational and restorative. It helps students develop the emotional literacy needed to navigate challenges, build relationships, and envision a future beyond the classroom.

These studies collectively affirm that academic achievement in alternative settings is a relational journey and not a linear process. It requires educators to cultivate resilience, model hope, and create conditions where students feel safe enough to grow. As Carol Dweck (2006) reminds us, “Becoming is better than being” (p. 41). In classrooms where students are invited to become rather than judged for who they have been in the past, achievement becomes possible. When educators invest in relationships, embrace healing-centered practices, and foster growth mindsets, they transform classrooms into communities of care, where academic success is not just a goal, but a lived experience.

### **Analysis**

Alternative high school equivalency (HSE) programs serve students who have often been excluded from traditional educational pathways due to trauma, behavioral challenges, or chronic academic failure. These students frequently enter classrooms with fragile academic identities and a deep mistrust of institutional authority. As a result, academic success in these settings cannot be understood apart from the emotional and relational conditions in which learning takes place.

The literature affirms that when educators are equipped with relational strategies, trauma-informed practices, and growth-oriented mindsets, student outcomes improve in both measurable and meaningful ways. This analysis identifies three major emerging themes from the literature: relational trust, emotional re-engagement, and growth-oriented pedagogy, and explores them through the perspectives of teacher-student relationships, behavioral and emotional re-engagement, and academic achievement. Each theme is examined through the theoretical lenses

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of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), Ethics of Care (Noddings, 1984), and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986).

This analysis draws on nine empirical studies and four theoretical frameworks: Attachment Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Ethics of Care, and Social Cognitive Theory to argue that relational pedagogy is not a supplemental approach but a foundational ethic in alternative education. It is a moral, emotional, and strategic imperative for leaders committed to equity and transformation.

### **Relational Trust**

Relational trust is the basis of effective teaching in alternative settings. Bowlby's Attachment Theory suggests that secure relationships with familiar adults foster emotional regulation and academic risk-taking. Di Lisio et al. (2025) affirm that teachers function as attachment-like figures, providing a "secure base" and "safe haven" that enable students to engage meaningfully with learning. Lawrence (2022) extends this framework into educational contexts, arguing that attachment-informed teaching practices can transform classroom dynamics by offering students a sense of safety and belonging. Split et al. (2011) affirm that individual teacher-child relationships are predictive of both behavioral adjustment and academic engagement, especially for students with adverse childhood experiences.

Studies by Fallon et al. (2019) and Longobardi et al. (2016) reveal that when students feel emotionally safe and supported, they are more likely to engage, persist, and adapt to new academic environments. In alternative settings, where students often expect rejection, the teacher's role as a secure base becomes essential. Without continued relational investment, behavioral strategies and instructional interventions fall short. Additionally, Martinez and



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Wighting (2023) found that positive teacher-student relationships significantly reduce behavioral disruptions and improve classroom climate.

On the other hand, Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (1985) emphasizes that students thrive when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. Fallon & Feinberg (2017) and Sumabera (2015) demonstrate that relational strategies such as individualized instruction, respectful communication, and student choice can transform disengaged learners into motivated participants. Gothberg et al. (2015) further affirm this through the Triangulated Gap Analysis Tool (TGAP), which scaffolds both academic and emotional development. In these studies, relational trust becomes vital for successful outcomes.

Noddings' Ethics of Care (1984) reframes teaching as a moral and relational act rooted in empathy, responsiveness, and moral responsibility. Joorst (2021) emphasizes that care in education is not sentimental. It is ethical, intentional, and justice oriented. Maillet (2017) and Thayer et al. (2018) show that intentional connection through wise feedback, creative instruction, and daily affirmations creates conditions for healing and growth. Ginwright's (2016) concept of healing-centered engagement expands this ethic, urging educators to see students not as problems but as possibilities.

In high-need classrooms, care is implemented through practices that affirm student dignity and foster emotional restoration. When educators prioritize empathy, responsiveness, and dignity, they humanize the learning experience. This is especially critical in alternative HSE programs, where students often feel unseen or misunderstood. Teachers who build trust through daily affirmations and consistent presence create conditions for healing and growth. Aguilar (2016) adds that coaching teams to build relational capacity is essential for sustaining this work

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systemically. In alternative settings, where students often expect rejection, relational strategies are not optional, they are essential.

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) highlights the role of modeling and belief systems in shaping behavior. Through multiple studies, teachers who consistently model sociable behavior and communicate belief in students' potential activate self-confidence as well as behavioral re-engagement. Yang, Bear, and May (2018) demonstrate that school-wide SEL approaches enhance student engagement. This reinforces Ginwright's call for educational spaces that prioritize healing, connection, and agency. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory further emphasizes that relationships which affirm autonomy, competence, and relatedness foster intrinsic motivation. When students feel seen, respected, and supported, they are more likely to engage meaningfully with learning.

Three major themes emerge from the literature: relational trust as the foundation for learning, emotional safety and re-engagement as prerequisites for academic success, and growth-oriented pedagogy as a healing-centered practice. These themes are deeply interwoven across the domains of teacher-student relationships, behavioral and emotional re-engagement, and academic achievement. Each is illuminated through the theoretical lenses of Attachment Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Ethics of Care, and Social Cognitive Theory.

The first theme of relational trust underscores the centrality of teacher-student relationships in alternative education. Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) suggests that secure, well-adjusted relationships with adults foster emotional regulation and academic risk-taking. Fallon, Collier-Meek, and Kurtz (2019) and Longobardi et al. (2016) demonstrate that students are more likely to engage and persist when they feel emotionally safe and supported. In alternative settings, where students often expect rejection, the teacher's role as a secure base

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becomes essential. Attachment Theory explains that emotional regulation stems from secure relationships. Teachers who offer consistent, familiar support help students navigate emotionally explosive behavior and build resilience.

### **Emotional Re-engagement**

Self-Determination Theory affirms that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are key to motivation. Sumabera (2015) found that when students are given voice and agency, they reclaim ownership of their learning. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) further emphasizes that relationships which affirm student autonomy and competence foster intrinsic motivation. When students feel respected and understood, they are more likely to engage meaningfully.

Ethics of Care (Noddings, 1984) reframes teaching as a moral and relational act. Maillet (2017) and Thayer et al. (2018) show that intentional connection through wise feedback, creative instruction, and daily affirmations creates conditions for healing and growth. Teachers who prioritize empathy and responsiveness humanize the learning experience and affirm student dignity. Ethics of Care insists that emotional re-engagement is a relational process. Ginwright (2016) urges educators to shift from compliance-based models to healing-centered engagement, seeing students not as problems but as possibilities.

Social Cognitive Theory reinforces that behavioral change is shaped by modeling and reinforcement. Teachers who consistently model empathy and high expectations help students internalize friendly, considerate, and sociable behaviors. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) adds that teachers who model prosocial behavior and communicate belief in student potential accelerate behavioral and emotional re-engagement. Wise feedback, as introduced by Thayer et al. (2018), reinforces positive identity formation and self-efficacy.

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Emotional safety is not a prerequisite for compliance; it is the foundation for transformation. Students in alternative HSE programs often carry emotional wounds that manifest as behavioral challenges. Fallon et al. (2019) and Fallon & Feinberg (2017) demonstrate that relational strategies such as individualized instruction, respectful communication, and consistent feedback help students reframe their academic identities and re-engage with learning. In alternative high school equivalency (HSE) programs, academic achievement cannot be separated from the emotional and relational conditions in which learning takes place. Students who enter these programs often carry histories of trauma, exclusion, and chronic academic failure. Their academic identities are fragile, and their sense of possibility is often diminished. For these learners, success is not merely about mastering content, it is about rebuilding trust, cultivating resilience, and experiencing learning as a pathway to healing. The literature affirms that when educators are equipped with relational strategies, trauma-informed practices, and growth-oriented mindsets, student outcomes improve in both measurable and meaningful ways.

Yang et al. (2018) show that school-wide social-emotional learning (SEL) approaches enhance student engagement, reinforcing Ginwright's call for educational spaces that prioritize healing, connection, and agency. Achor (2010) adds that positive emotional states cultivated through relational connection and psychological safety enhance cognitive performance and resilience. In classrooms where students feel emotionally safe, their brains are more receptive to learning and growth.

### **Growth-Oriented Pedagogy**

The third theme of growth-oriented pedagogy positions academic achievement as a relational and emotional journey. Gothberg et al. (2015) introduce the Triangulated Gap Analysis Tool (TGAP) as a structured mechanism for identifying both academic and non-academic skill

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deficits. In alternative classrooms, TGAP becomes a relational roadmap for scaffolding student growth in emotionally attuned ways. Rick Hanson (2018) affirms that “we grow the most when we feel safe, not when we feel threatened,” reinforcing the need for psychological safety in learning environments.

Salgado et al. (2015) found that teacher efficacy, especially when supported through field-based training, predicts student achievement. In alternative settings, teacher confidence must be rooted not only in classroom management but in relational alignment. Ginwright’s healing-centered engagement expands the ethic of care, urging educators to affirm students’ capacity for transformation.

Carol Dweck’s (2006) assertion that “becoming is better than being” rings true in alternative HSE programs. Students who have been judged, labeled, or discarded by traditional systems need spaces where they are invited to become, where their past does not define their future. Growth mindset, in this context, is not a motivational slogan, it is a relational practice. Teachers who model hope, affirm effort, and celebrate progress create conditions where students feel safe enough to grow.

Academic success in alternative HSE programs is not a linear path, it is a relational journey. It requires educators to cultivate resilience, model hope, and create emotionally safe conditions for growth. When teachers invest in relationships, embrace healing-centered practices, and foster growth mindsets, they transform classrooms into communities of care. In these spaces, success is not just a goal, it is a lived experience of becoming.

For educational leaders, the challenge is to design systems that honor the relational and emotional dimensions of learning. This includes trauma-informed professional development,

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relational accountability structures, healing-centered policies, and growth-oriented evaluation systems. Relational equity demands that we interrogate not only what we teach but how we teach, whom we affirm, and what conditions we create for healing and transformation.

In the words of Ginwright (2016), “We must shift from seeing young people as problems to seeing them as possibilities.” In alternative HSE programs, this shift is not theoretical, it is the core of transformative education.

### **Ethical Implications**

The reviewed studies touch on a central insight: behavioral and emotional re-engagement is not a disciplinary outcome, it is a relational process rooted in trust, safety, and human connection. In classrooms where students have been historically marginalized, where trauma and academic failure have shaped their sense of self, re-engagement begins not with rules, but with relationships. Whether through PBIS frameworks, SEL integration, TGAP planning, or healing-centered feedback, the effectiveness of these interventions depends on the quality of teacher-student relationships. In alternative education, where students often arrive guarded, skeptical, and emotionally raw, connection is not a luxury, it is essential.

Fallon et al. (2019) and Fallon & Feinberg (2017) remind us that even the most promising strategies fail when relational work is undervalued or unsupported. Time constraints, lack of coaching, and insufficient data reflect a deeper systemic issue: we have not yet fully recognized relational labor as essential to academic success. This calls for a reimagining of leadership, one that centers emotional safety, models ethical care, and invests in the human work of teaching.

For educational leaders in alternative HSE programs, the challenge is to design systems that honor the relational and emotional dimensions of learning such as: ethical leadership that

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models relational integrity and prioritizes emotional safety, professional development that equips teachers with trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and relational competencies, and structural supports time, coaching, and reflective spaces that honor the emotional labor of teaching.

As Carol Dweck (2006) reminds us, “Becoming is better than being” (p. 41). In alternative HSE classrooms, where students are invited to become rather than judged for who they have been, achievement becomes possible. Academic success in these settings is not a linear path; it is a relational journey. It requires educators to cultivate resilience, model hope, and create emotionally safe conditions for growth.

When teachers invest in relationships, embrace healing-centered practices, and foster growth-mindsets, they transform classrooms into communities of care. In these spaces, success is not just a goal, it is a lived experience of becoming.

This work also requires a shift in how we define success. Academic achievement must be understood as a relational journey, not a linear outcome. Students need to feel seen before they can be expected to succeed. When educators embrace healing-centered practices, cultivate resilience, and foster growth mindsets, they transform classrooms into communities of care. In these spaces, success is not just a goal, it is a lived experience of becoming, of reclaiming identity, and of daring to believe in one’s own potential again. It is in these moments of connection that true learning begins.

### **Policy Recommendations**

In alternative high school equivalency (HSE) programs, academic success is not simply a matter of curriculum delivery or standardized testing, it is a relational and emotional endeavor. Students in these settings often arrive with histories of trauma, exclusion, and chronic academic

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failure. Their academic identities are fragile, and their expectations of school are shaped by past experiences of rejection, invisibility, or punishment. As a result, the work of teaching in alternative education is not only instructional, but also reparative. To meet the needs of these learners, educational policy must shift from compliance-driven models to relational environments that prioritize emotional safety, healing-centered engagement, and growth-oriented pedagogy.

The literature affirms that behavioral and academic outcomes improve when educators are equipped with relational strategies, trauma-informed practices, and culturally responsive mindsets (Fallon et al., 2019; Di Lisio et al., 2025; Martinez & Wighting, 2023). These findings are supported by four foundational theories: Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969; Lawrence, 2022), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), Ethics of Care (Noddings, 1984; Joorst, 2021), and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). Together, these frameworks offer a convincing rationale for policy reform that centers human connection as the foundation for student learning.

First, professional development must be reimagined to embed relational pedagogy as a core competency. Teachers in alternative HSE settings are not just instructors, they are emotional managers, relational leaders, and secure attachment figures. Lawrence (2022) argues that attachment-informed teaching practices can transform classroom dynamics by offering students a sense of safety and belonging. Training must include trauma-informed care, culturally responsive teaching, and ethics of care practices that center empathy, responsiveness, and moral responsibility (Noddings, 1984; Joorst, 2021). Aguilar (2016) emphasizes that coaching teams to build relational capacity is essential for sustaining this work systemically. Professional development should be ongoing, reflective, and embedded into the school culture, not delivered



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as isolated workshops. Coaching cycles, peer observation, and relational feedback circles must be institutionalized to support teacher growth and emotional connection and support.

Second, school culture must be redesigned around emotional safety and belonging. Deal and Peterson (2009) assert that shaping school culture is essential to sustaining academic success. In alternative settings, this means creating daily rituals that affirm student identity and foster connection such as morning circles, restorative check-ins, and affirmations. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) must be implemented with a relational lens, emphasizing trust-building and emotional regulation over compliance (Fallon & Feinberg, 2017). Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) must be integrated into all aspects of instruction, not as a separate curriculum but as a relational framework for teaching and learning (Yang et al., 2018). Achor (2010) adds that positive emotional states cultivated through connection and psychological safety enhance cognitive performance and resilience. When students feel emotionally safe, their brains are more receptive to learning and growth.

Third, discipline policies must be reframed through a healing-centered lens. Ginwright (2016) and Noddings (1984) argue that discipline must be relational, not transactional. Punitive approaches often further traumatize students and reinforce cycles of disengagement. Instead, schools must implement restorative justice practices that focus on repair, reflection, and rebuilding. Staff must be trained in de-escalation, co-regulation, and trauma-informed responses to behavior. Behavior data should be used to identify relational gaps and inform support not to punish students. When students are treated with compassion and given opportunities to restore trust, they are more likely to re-engage and succeed.

Fourth, policies must prioritize teacher well-being and recognize the emotional labor of teaching in high-need settings. Teachers in alternative HSE programs often carry the emotional

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weight of their students' trauma, resistance, and vulnerability. Without adequate support, this labor can lead to burnout and disengagement. Schools must provide reflective supervision, emotional wellness support, and time for relational planning and self-care. Evaluation systems must honor relational labor and include indicators of emotional alignment, student trust, and restorative practice. Achor (2010) emphasizes that when teachers feel supported and emotionally safe, they are better able to create those conditions for students.

Finally, evaluation and data systems must be aligned with relational and academic growth. Current evaluation models often prioritize compliance and performance over connection and development. Schools need to include relational indicators in teacher evaluations and use growth-oriented rubrics for student assessment that celebrate effort, resilience, and emotional development (Dweck, 2006). Student voice and feedback must be incorporated into evaluation processes to ensure that relational impact is measured and valued. Fallon et al. (2019) note that lack of baseline data undermines the effectiveness of relational interventions. Schools must collect and analyze data on teacher-student relationships, emotional safety, and SEL outcomes using both quantitative and qualitative tools.

In conclusion, academic success in alternative HSE programs is not a technical challenge, it is a relational necessity. Students who have been excluded, harmed, or forgotten by traditional systems need educators who see them as whole, capable, and worthy of investment. Teachers need systems that honor their humanity and equip them to lead with care. Leaders must design schools where healing and learning come together and where relational fairness is not simply an additional objective but an effective initiative. By inserting relational pedagogy into professional development, redesigning school culture, reframing discipline, supporting teacher well-being, and aligning evaluation systems, districts can create environments where students are not just

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taught, they are transformed. In these spaces, success is not just a goal, it is a lived experience of becoming.

### **Summary**

Academic success in the alternative urban high school equivalency (HSE) setting is a critical issue that touches every stakeholder involved: students, teachers, administrators, families, and the broader community. These programs often serve students who have experienced interrupted schooling, trauma, exclusion from traditional educational pathways, and chronic academic failure. As a result, many learners enter HSE classrooms with fragile academic identities, diminished self-worth, and a deep mistrust of institutional authority. For these students, learning is not simply a cognitive task, it is an emotional and relational undertaking. The classroom becomes a space where healing, connection, and transformation must occur simultaneously with instruction.

While it has been well established that disruptive classroom behaviors significantly impact academic success, there remains a troubling gap in how these behaviors are addressed. Teachers in alternative settings frequently report feeling ill-prepared to manage the emotional and behavioral difficulties that students bring into the classroom. These challenges are compounded by a lack of formal training in trauma-informed practices, relational pedagogy, and culturally responsive strategies. As a result, instructional time is often compromised, and the potential for meaningful learning is diminished.

Bolman and Deal (2017) remind us that “involvement and training will not ensure success unless existing roles and relationships are realigned to fit the new initiative” (p. 372). This insight is particularly relevant in alternative education, where traditional roles such as

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teacher as instructor and student as passive recipient must be reimagined. Teachers must become relational leaders, emotional co-regulators, and creators of safe learning environments. Students, in turn, must be invited to become active participants in their own growth, supported by structures that affirm their dignity and agency.

The focus of this paper, therefore, is to address the many challenges teachers face while providing instruction in alternative HSE classrooms. These challenges include managing disruptive behaviors, building trust with emotionally guarded students, and navigating the tension between academic rigor and emotional responsiveness. The paper also seeks to identify and recommend strategies that support teachers in developing strong relationships with students and integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into their daily practice.

Fullan (2016) emphasizes that the implementation and continuation phases of the change process begin at the onset of the initiation phase. This means that change must be intentional, strategic, and supported from the very beginning. For administrators and district leaders, this requires a commitment to professional development that goes beyond technical training. Teachers need opportunities to reflect, collaborate, and build relational competencies. They need coaching, mentorship, and time to engage in restorative practices, not just behavior management workshops.

Moreover, the emotional labor of teaching in alternative settings must be acknowledged and supported. Teachers often carry the weight of their students' trauma, frustration, and resistance. Without adequate support, this labor can lead to burnout, compassion-fatigue, and disengagement. Structural supports such as embedded coaching, reflective supervision, and relational accountability are essential to sustaining teacher well-being and effectiveness.

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The integration of SEL into alternative HSE programs is not a minor concern, it is central to academic success. Research consistently shows that when students feel emotionally safe, connected to their teachers, and supported in their social-emotional development, they are more likely to engage, persist, and achieve. SEL provides a framework for helping students develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These competencies are especially critical for students who have experienced instability, trauma, or exclusion.

Relationship-building strategies must also be culturally responsive and inclusive. Many students in alternative programs come from historically marginalized communities and have experienced systemic racism, poverty, and institutional neglect. Teachers must be equipped to understand and honor students' cultural identities, lived experiences, and resilience. This requires training in cultural humility, anti-bias education, and restorative justice practices.

In addition to teacher training, school leaders must examine the broader systems and policies that shape the learning environment. Leaders must ask: Are disciplinary practices relationally responsive or punitive? Do evaluation systems reward relational labor and emotional understanding? Are students given opportunities to co-create their learning experiences and express their voices? These questions are essential to building school cultures that support both academic achievement and emotional restoration.

The ethical implications of this work are insightful. To ignore the relational and emotional dimensions of learning is to sustain harm. Students in alternative HSE programs deserve educators who see them not as problems to be managed, but as possibilities to be nurtured. They deserve classrooms where they are safe enough to take risks, make mistakes, and

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grow. Teachers, in turn, deserve systems that honor their humanity, support their development, and recognize the complexity of their work.

From the analysis of literature on this topic, it appears that initiatives have been implemented to address teacher-student relationships and their impact on academic success in primary and secondary traditional school settings. Therefore, NYC alternative school programs can benefit from the implementation of relational pedagogy, trauma-informed practice, and healing-centered engagement as this would help to elevate the voices of teachers who are doing this work every day, and to advocate for systemic changes that make relational teaching feasible and effective.

Furthermore, academic success in alternative HSE settings is not a linear path, it is a relational journey. It requires educators to cultivate resilience, model hope, and create emotionally safe conditions for growth. When teachers are supported in this work, they transform classrooms into communities of care. In these spaces, success is not just a goal but a lived experience of becoming, of reclaiming identity, and of daring to believe in one's own potential again.

Therefore, it is necessary to explore how relational strategies, SEL integration, and trauma-informed practices can be scaled and sustained in alternative education. This includes studies on teacher development, student outcomes, and school climate as well as research on teacher-student relationships, and policy analysis on resource allocation and leadership practices. Only through a comprehensive, equity-centered approach can we begin to close the gap between the promise of alternative education and the lived realities of those it serves.

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