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# Using theoretical frameworks to analyze democratic student–teacher engagement and autonomous learning for academic achievement in Zimbabwe

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Positive student–teacher engagement that fosters independent and supported learning is the fulcrum for academic success. This paper investigates stakeholder opinions on the intrinsic importance of a democratic student–teacher relationship and autonomous learning in mediating students' academic progress in Zimbabwean secondary schools. This case study's qualitative data was gathered through interviews and focus groups. We used Foucault's theory of power relations and the self-determination theory of motivation to frame our findings. The 40 participants from two secondary schools were general teachers ( $n = 12$ ), guidance and counseling teachers ( $n = 2$ ), educational psychologists ( $n = 2$ ), and form 5 students ( $n = 24$ ), selected through purposive sampling techniques. The data were analyzed using the thematic content analysis approach. Findings revealed participants' perceptions that democratic student–teacher relationships and autonomous learning opportunities may serve as a panacea to enhance students' participation, motivation, and overall academic performance. The study recommends in-service training to teachers regarding policies, directives, and public acts that inform and educate on how student–teacher relationships may be enhanced to foster autonomous learning. Future longitudinal studies could investigate the long-term effects of positive student–teacher engagement and teacher-supported autonomous learning on student academic achievement.

## KEYWORDS

academic achievement, autonomous and guided learning, Foucault's theory of power relations, self-determination, student-teacher relationship

## Introduction

The United Nations' 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989, Article 12) vests children and adolescents with responsibilities and rights while preserving their right to express their ideas and opinions (McCormack et al., 2021). These tenets have been adopted significantly in schools over the years, increasing student input and participation (Almusharraf, 2020; Intraboosom et al., 2020; McCormack et al., 2021). Zimbabwe's government has recognized these responsibilities and rights in a similar fashion. Table 1 describes the participants' details. Zimbabwe's education system has seen dramatic changes recently because of new teaching methods and diverse communication strategies that incorporate student input into teaching and learning processes (Magwa, 2016). The implication is that with the emergence of online classes and experiential learning, how students interact with the educational content has significantly changed. Traditional teaching methods of chalk and board and pen and paper that omit technology are no longer relevant in the 4IR. Nonetheless, some secondary school teachers adhere rigidly to conventional pedagogical approaches requiring students to submit to teachers whose authority should not be questioned. This implies that all duties and powers are vested in the teacher, who, as the lecturer and instructor, is the ultimate decision maker of what to teach and how to teach.

Teachers, in this view, are the suppliers of knowledge who oversee the lesson from start to end (Almusharraf, 2020). Students are rarely considered as policymakers or reformers but as passive products of the educational system, as they were in the past. This gradual disempowerment of students, brought about by a failure to give them significant ownership of their learning, involve them in decision-making processes, and assign them responsibility rather than constantly monitoring, directing, and supervising, has a detrimental effect on their performance, motivation, and participation (McCormack et al., 2021). In fact, the student-teacher relationship is affected when students feel disempowered. Studies show that when children feel valued and heard, they are likely to learn better (Frederickson, in Roffey, 2019). When students develop a passive mindset with little to no power and influence (McCormack et al., 2021), it causes teachers to become increasingly authoritarian and arbitrary (Magwa, 2016). This study is critical because it explores students' and teachers' perspectives of how democratic student-teacher relationships and supported yet independent learning might eventually assist students in achieving academic success, thereby de-emphasizing the teacher-student power hierarchy. In this sense, positive relationships supporting independent learning in school systems amount to social capital. When students acquire valuable skills and competencies as part of their social and educational capital, it plays a role in other social and educational issues (Claessens et al., 2017; Roffey, 2019, p. 22).

Academic success for most students is contingent upon their ability to direct their education and progress at their own pace (Padmadewi, 2016; Kashefian-Naeeni and Kouhpeyma, 2020). The issue is that Zimbabwean schools are still developing their sense of competence. Most teachers are unaware of the critical impact democratic classroom alliances can have on students' academic performance. At the same time, students must be empowered to engage in self-directed learning. When teachers adhere to the conventional educational model, they likely undervalue students' self-regulating capacity, frequently dismissing them as too young to self-regulate (Padmadewi, 2016).

According to Wubbels et al. (2012), the International Conference on Interpersonal Relationships in Education (ICIRE) deliberated on the theme of relationships in education.

*A positive teacher-student relationship strongly contributes to student learning. Educators, parents, and students understand that problematic relationships can affect student outcomes and development. While the importance of interpersonal relationships in education has been appreciated*

TABLE 1 Participants' details.

Category	Number (n)	Research site	Inclusion criteria
Students	24	School	Form five students, male and female. To provide insight into how student-teacher involvement influenced their performance on ordinary-level tests.
General teachers	12	School	Male and female teachers with at least 5 years of teaching experience. They were selected because they have continuous contact with students and familiarity with classroom interactions and dynamics.
Educational psychologists	2	District office	They were chosen because they address the psychological wellbeing of students.
Guidance and counseling teachers	2	School	Both male and female participants with at least 5 years of experience. They were chosen because they are well-versed in the effects of student-teacher relationships on academic achievement as they counsel students.

*for decades, research in this field is still young. Therefore, it is an appropriate time to celebrate, evaluate, and advance these efforts through a conference that focuses on the state of the field and avenues for future research.*

The study of teacher–student interactions and student participation in education is still in its infancy. Hence, knowledge is sparse at the secondary level in Zimbabwe in particular. At the time of this study, no research had been conducted on student–teacher interactions and student opportunities for self-directed learning in Zimbabwean students, as well as the implications these might hold for students' academic achievement (Magwa, 2018). As such, this study aimed to ascertain opinions on whether integrating student input into the teaching and learning process could result in substantial potential for secondary school students' academic advancement.

In this light, this study was guided by the research question: *What are stakeholder views on the role that democratic student–teacher engagement and autonomous learning play in improving students' academic achievement in secondary schools?*

Adolescence is the stage of life when a person must engage in self-directed activities that foster their sense of mastery over various tasks within their abilities (Mwamwenda, 1996). At this stage, adolescents must experience independent and supported learning.

The term “learner autonomy” refers to students' increasing potential for self-directed learning (Dam, 2003; Andriani et al., 2018). The concept is synonymous with learner autonomy, self-direction, and self-directed learning and reflects the idea that students bear the primary responsibility for what and how they learn. However, autonomy is not synonymous with self-direction or self-education (Little, 1991, p. 3). Additionally, it is not synonymous with self-education. Instead, Magwa (2016, p. 288) recommends that teachers and students co-manage the learning environment. Given that adolescents desire greater autonomy over their choices, emotions, and behaviors, the democratic connection is an apt illustration of secondary school student–teacher collaborations. Thus, teachers should encourage students to take the initiative to foster their autonomy and assist them in developing their abilities. Varga (2017, p. 3) concurs and asserts that teachers should create opportunities for students to contribute their perspectives to the design of classroom activities. This suggests that instructors' autonomy greatly supports students' learning and academic progress. Varga (2017, p. 3) also argues for reciprocal power-sharing in student–teacher partnerships, in which students participate in classroom procedures and choices. This emphasizes that the teacher should not be a dominant figure in the classroom but instead engage in reciprocal sharing with students.

Previous research on student–teacher interactions and independent learning focused on adult learners, with very few studies undertaken on young learners. While

college and university circumstances have been extensively explored (Padmadewi, 2016; Gutierrez and Tomas, 2019), secondary students have received less attention. Many people underestimate young children's capacity for self-directed learning. Within the limits of their cognitive development, young children can be assisted in organizing their internal and external resources (Padmadewi, 2016). Despite the capacity for self-direction that young students possess, it cannot be disputed that some teachers continue to subscribe to the conventional perspective of education that the teacher's authority should not be questioned.

We drew from Michel Foucault's theory of power relations and the self-determination theory of motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2000) to understand how classroom power relations underline democratic student–teacher engagement, student motivation, and autonomous learning.

Knowledge creation, according to Gunnarsdottir (2012, p. 11), is a social action endeavor in which students and teachers collaborate to learn, teach, and explore. There is a balance of power in this collaboration; sometimes, the teacher knows more than the student, and sometimes, the student may be more knowledgeable. The Foucauldian perspective seeks to understand better how power operates and is exercised within social structures and relationships (Freie and Eppley, 2014, p. 654). While different power relations exist between students and teachers inside an educational institution, the classroom power dynamic should shift by democratic student–teacher interaction.

According to Koupal (2011, p. 36), Foucault offers an alternative to the conventional view of power. In this study, the variables considered were (1) power should not be a thing but a relation, (2) power should not be repressive but productive, (3) power should be exercised throughout the social body, and (4) power should operate at the most micro levels of social relations. Power should permeate all levels of the social body in this sense. Given that knowledge is generated *via* interaction between the student and the teacher, the power balances of the participants must shift in response to the dynamics of classroom engagement. When students and instructors share control in the classroom, there is a better likelihood of increased motivation and academic accomplishment (Koupal, 2011).

According to the self-determination theory of motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2000), there are three essential psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these three requirements are met during adolescence, one is more likely to be intrinsically driven (Magwa and Magwa, 2017). Deci and Ryan (2000) define intrinsic motivation as the desire to engage in an activity for enjoyment and the readiness to do so without concrete benefits. In other words, the student's drive and willingness to study must originate from the inside. When students are genuinely driven in school, they become more engaged in their studies, likely higher academic achievement (Black and Deci, 2000; Jang et al., 2012).

As such, intrinsic motivation and autonomous learning are inextricably linked. Ushioda (2003), on the other hand, believes that the social-learning environment plays a multifaceted role in independent learning and student motivation. Students require support in a dynamic environment that stimulates their desire to engage in autonomous learning; nevertheless, there are hazards and pressures inherent in social learning settings that may deter student motivation (Ushioda, 2003). Accordingly, Ushioda (2003) emphasizes the need for establishing “scope” for autonomy or circumstances that favor independence.

## Materials and methods

We used a qualitative approach with a case study design to facilitate the data collection *via* multiple methods (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Two secondary schools in Masvingo District were purposively sampled, resulting in a sample of 24 students, 12 general teachers, two educational psychologists, and two guidance and counseling teachers, comprising 40 male and female participants. The different settings of the schools mean that students are exposed to various educational environments, hence the need for participant representation from all types of schools within the district (Magwa, 2015, p. 132). The selection of these secondary schools allowed individuals from diverse backgrounds and experiences to engage in the research, resulting in a comprehensive knowledge of student–teacher interactions in secondary schools (Yin, 2011, p. 90).

The selection criteria were the participants’ potential to contribute rich and valuable information to the study. Form 5 students were selected because they could reflect on how student–teacher relationships affect their performance at ordinary level examinations. It was also assumed that form 5 students had cognitive maturity and could evaluate the implications of student–teacher relationships. Regarding the selection of general teachers, preference was given to teachers who had been at the school for longer, implying experience in that context. According to the researchers, guidance and counseling teachers were more likely to provide rich information on student–teacher interactions since they had ongoing contact with and understanding of students and their teacher-based relations. Lastly, the educational psychologists were purposively selected as the only psychologists in the province. They were assumed to have knowledge and experience in dealing with student psychological issues and could offer unique insights into the investigated problem.

Data were gathered from semi-structured interviews with educational psychologists and guidance and counseling teachers. Focus group discussions were conducted with students and general teachers. The primary author conducted the interviews and focus group discussions in English. The length of each interview ranged from 45 to 60 min. The focus group talks lasted between 70 and 90 min.

We used Braun and Clark’s (2006, p. 87) six phases of thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were read and re-read to align with the first step or familiarization of the data. In the second step, the data were coded. In this case, coding schemes were used to simplify the correlations between the data. In the third instance, patterns and repetitions in the data sets were recorded, and finally, the recurring patterns were collated into themes. Both authors independently coded the data and jointly developed the themes.

## Results

In this section, we present the results according to two themes.

Theme 1: Democratic student–teacher engagement and student academic success.

Theme 2: Autonomous learning, motivation, and student academic success.

### Theme 1: Democratic student–teacher engagement and student academic success

It was established that if the teacher and student control the learning environment, students are more likely to perform well in schoolwork, participate actively in the learning process, and stimulate their motivation. Excerpts from general teachers, guidance and counseling teachers, students, and educational psychologists during interviews and focus group discussions are presented below to support the above finding.

Students defined a democratic relationship as allowing open discussions with their teachers. It seemed to help them in improving their performances in their schoolwork. In support of this view, some of the students narrated their experiences during focus group discussions:

*Personally, I was not good at Mathematics from form 1 up to form 2 but when I got to form 3, we were given a teacher who created a friendly environment that promoted interaction between the teacher and students. The teacher allowed students to correct her, and she accepted students’ corrections. This was one aspect that I liked about that teacher. I developed ties and I was free to express my difficulties to her. This helped me to pass her subject at an ordinary level.*

According to the student’s remark, students should be encouraged to communicate directly with their teacher. This would provide opportunities for teacher–student interaction. In other words, participants perceived reciprocal connections to be associated with much greater academic achievement. During a focus group discussion about the impact of democratic

relationships on students' performance, one student offered the following:

*Likewise, when I was in form 3, I was very poor in History because the teacher was very authoritative, undisputed, unapproachable, unconcerned, impatient, and disrespectful. Fortunately, when I got to form 4, we were given a teacher who treated everyone equally, who was very supportive and patient, and he accepted criticism and corrections from students. From that time onward, I became the best student in History.*

Teachers who build a good rapport with their students and create a more comfortable learning atmosphere have a higher pass percentage in their subjects. This implies that teachers who construct supportive learning environments will have no difficulty dealing with students' lower academic performance, as mentioned by one of the teachers:

*I still remember when I came to this school, I developed a democratic and fair relationship with a student who was said to be very lazy and unconcerned with his schoolwork. The relationship developed when he helped me to carry my bags from the bus stop to the school on my first day, and we would talk openly. What surprised other teachers was that he passed my subject with an A and got Us in other subjects at "O" Level Examinations.*

Accordingly, it also seems that when students can choose learning activities that are significant to them personally, they engage more actively in the learning process. A guidance and counseling teacher elaborated on this point of view:

*When students are presented with choices in their classrooms and feel a sense of control and security, they are meaningfully engaged in challenging learning opportunities. Students become active participants in the learning process.*

During the interview session, an educational psychologist responded to the same topic on the relevance of democratic student-teacher involvement in boosting students' academic achievement as follows:

*If students are presented with choices in selecting and developing teaching and learning materials, they are more likely to participate actively in the learning process.*

The above remark emphasizes that teachers should actively foster teaching and learning connections that allow students to participate in selecting and producing instructional materials. Students' ownership over the learning environment would motivate them to

participate in classroom activities. One of the general teachers narrated his experiences in the following manner:

*It is very true that democratic and egalitarian relationship motivates students to learn. I experienced this with my Form 4 English Literature class. The early first term, these students did not care about the subject, but when I gave them a voice in the selection of teaching and learning materials, their motivation to learning was stimulated [sic].*

Democratic student-teacher relationships allow students to participate actively in the teaching and learning processes, which increases their enthusiasm to learn. During the interview process, a guidance and counseling teacher added the following:

*Students should be given voice or choice in the classroom in order to argue their motivation to learn [sic].*

This teacher appears to imply that learning may occur from either side. Teachers and students should have equal authority in the teaching and learning process. To inspire students to learn, they should share control of the learning environment with their teachers.

## Theme 2: Autonomous learning, motivation, and student academic success

The study found that participants believed that students motivated to learn autonomously could acquire self-management abilities that would enable them to become more independent and effective in academic work. Self-management skills are geared toward developing students' independence and capacity for goal planning, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement. Furthermore, it was established that if students are presented with choices in their classrooms and feel a sense of control and security, they are motivated to engage in challenging learning opportunities and become active participants in the learning process.

In support of the above, one of the general teachers expressed his sentiments as follows:

*If students are presented with choices in the selection and development of teaching and learning materials, they are more likely to take the initiative to set their goals, make clear study plan, select skills and methods to be used, monitor the procedure of acquisition properly and evaluate what they have learned.*

An educational psychologist had this to say:

*There is a strong relationship between learner autonomy and motivation. Autonomous learning motivates the student to learn. For example, if students are given the responsibility to set their learning goals, they tend to be more motivated to complete a task and perform better when they choose to engage in the task themselves.*

The above lines imply that autonomous learning enables a favorable learning environment that prioritizes students' needs and interests. Students should have a say in the media they consume and the design of their learning activities to remain motivated to study.

One of the general teachers narrated his experiences in the following manner:

*From the time I gave my students a voice in the selection and development of teaching and learning materials, their motivation to learning was stimulated [sic].*

In support of this view, during a focus group discussion, a student narrated her experiences as follows:

*If my memory serves me well, I had a negative attitude toward Fashion and Fabrics when I was doing form 3. When I got to form 4, we were given a new teacher, who presented us with choices and freedom to set our own learning goals. This motivated me to work very hard to achieve the goals I set myself and as a result Fashion and Fabrics became my best subject.*

Once more, these remarks confirm the general view that students are motivated to learn if they are given a voice in the selection and development of learning activities. Autonomous learning allows students to be actively involved in the teaching and learning process, stimulating their motivation to learn. Additionally, a guidance and counseling teacher stated that: *autonomous learning augments the student's participation in classroom activities. Students become meaningfully engaged in challenging learning tasks.* According to the statement above, it is established that when students are given the flexibility to take greater responsibility for their learning, they actively participate in the learning process.

## Discussion

This study aimed to elicit stakeholder perspectives on the potential for democratic student–teacher involvement and autonomous learning to mediate academic performance in

Zimbabwean secondary schools. The findings are then explored in reference to the literature and theory.

## Democratic student–teacher engagement and student academic success

Participants saw a tangible link between democratic engagement approaches and improved academic achievement. [Tawana's \(2020\)](#) recent study reveals that when students have a sense of control and ownership over their learning environment, they are more involved in the process, which results in increased academic accomplishment. Other studies ([Liberante, 2012](#); [Short, 2013](#); [Fosen, 2016](#); [Longobardi et al., 2016](#); [Roffey, 2019](#)) concur that supportive relationships can improve academic skills in students. According to Foucault's theory of power relations, reciprocal power interactions in which students and teachers share control of the learning environment strengthen learners' capacity to handle complex tasks. This is because students would feel more at ease discussing their experiences with teachers and seeking help from them when confronted with academic difficulties. Establishing social and cultural connections are significant indicators of learning success ([Roffey, 2019](#)).

The study established that students who experience democratic interactions with their teachers are more likely to participate actively and cooperatively in the learning process ([Short, 2013](#); [Rimm-Kaufman, 2014](#); [Fosen, 2016](#); [Varga, 2017](#)). The notion is that if students engage in reciprocal engagement with the teacher in a shared learning environment, get more advice and praise than negative criticism, and are involved in decision-making, they will be driven to participate more actively in the learning process. [Kitching \(2010, p. 37\)](#) showed that facilitating ways of relating to and engaging with other people increases students' feeling of satisfaction and engagement with their school community. In this scenario, a supportive school environment allows active engagement in school-related activities. According to Foucauldian philosophy, the classroom should have reciprocal power connections for students to feel comfortable participating in classroom activities without fear of the teacher. In this way, when students feel safe in the classroom, they develop a sense of attachment, increasing their engagement and active participation in the learning process ([Varga, 2017, p. 3](#)).

The current study's findings indicate a substantial association between a democratic student–teacher connection and increased students' enthusiasm to learn. Previous research on student–teacher relationships ([Liberante, 2012](#); [Short, 2013](#); [Urooj, 2013](#); [Longobardi et al., 2016](#); [Varga, 2017](#)) demonstrates that students engage in democratic dialogues and self-directed learning with their teachers are more likely to learn. Ultimately, a shared learning environment,

according to Foucault, is essential to stimulate interaction and learning.

## Autonomous learning, motivation, and student academic success

Students' autonomy is related to several positive academic outcomes (Gutierrez and Tomas, 2019). In the same vein, Kitching (2010, p. 5) asserts that creating an enabling school environment is essential for learners to perform optimally. This means that students are more likely to succeed academically when they have a voice in the classroom. Additional benefits include assisting students in developing self-management abilities, such as setting personal learning objectives, engaging in self-monitoring, and assessing progress (Agadzhanova, 2020). Self-management is a critical ability for academic achievement. A study by McCormack et al. (2021) confirms that empowering students by giving them significant ownership over their learning can increase their participation in school life. Similarly, Ushie et al. (2019) point out that autonomous learning is often identified to signify students' active participation. In this sense, if students can influence their learning environment, they show greater school engagement and better student–teacher relationships. Previous studies presented similar findings (Short, 2013; Rimm-Kaufman, 2014; Fosen, 2016; Varga, 2017).

The current study's findings have established perception of solid links between autonomous learning and increased students' motivation to learn. This finding aligns with Gutierrez and Tomas (2019), who confirm the link between independent learning and increasing student motivation. Furthermore, other studies show that when students are intrinsically motivated, they engage with their education deeper and achieve greater academic success (Black and Deci, 2000; Jang et al., 2012). Therefore, students must be brought to view their motivation as emanating from within themselves and thus regard themselves as agents of autonomous learning (Ushioda, 2003, p. 98). However, students' capacity to regulate their motivation must be mediated, usually by the teacher, through social-interactive support and co-regulation (Ushioda, 2003, p. 98).

For this to happen, there must be scope for autonomy (Ushioda, 2003). Yet, Ushioda (2003) view was that students' capacity for autonomy stems from “supportive interpersonal interactions (student and teacher) and an optimal learning environment to grow in positive ways (active academic success).” This means that if students have opportunities for self-directed learning in a supportive

and enabling environment, they may be motivated to learn.

## Reflexivity

As in all qualitative studies, researchers must reflect on the research and how their roles could have potentially influenced the outcome (Haynes, 2012). To this end, we approached the study and our participants with empathy and respect. We ensured that all ethics obligations were adhered to. Although the primary author is a citizen of the country in the study, he bracketed his personal views and potential for bias and subjectivity by ongoing engagement with the co-author and other senior colleagues. The co-author is a registered psychologist who understands the power dynamics in research with adolescents. Throughout the research process, we engaged in self-reflection, carefully chose our words in reporting, and were cognizant of how we positioned our participants and their experiences (Haynes, 2012).

## Conclusion

According to stakeholders interviewed for this study, democratic student–teacher interaction can help students achieve academic success. According to this argument, students who are appreciated and listened to feel valued and motivated to succeed. Additionally, this study found that teacher-supported autonomous learning activities may mediate students' academic progress. Allowing students to work freely in a teacher-supported environment, giving them a strong sense of ownership over their learning, including them in decision-making processes, and assigning them responsibility may motivate them to put in more effort during educational activities. Although the study was conducted in Zimbabwe, the findings have implications for student–teacher engagement and academic achievement worldwide.

## Recommendations

In the light of the above findings, the following recommendations are made for policy, practice, and further research in all teaching and learning environments:

- Teachers should nurture and create a very enabling and suitable learning environment for the development of independent learning and democratic student–teacher relationships.

- Zimbabwe's Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, as well as educational institutions around the world, could offer training to teachers on policies, directives, and public acts as a strategy to improve classroom relationships from a pedagogical viewpoint bearing in mind the potential it has for improved educational achievement.
- Future studies could focus on longitudinal, mixed-method approaches to investigate the impact classroom relationships have on adolescent students' mental health, wellbeing, and motivation.

## Limitations

We acknowledge the limitations of this study in this section. Due to the case study research design, the generalizability of the findings is limited. As a result, the findings represent a restricted range of student–teacher experiences within two schools in one district. They may not fully reflect the experiences of students and teachers in the country. Nonetheless, we endeavored to provide extensive descriptions of the work to enable replication.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Ethics statement

The study involved human participants and was therefore reviewed and approved by the University of South

Africa, College of Education, Research Ethics Committee: 2017/03/15/55491901/31/MC. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants/participants' legal guardian/next of kin for their participation in this study.

## Author contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the research, analysis, interpretation, and writing aspects.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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