

# How Teachers Behave in School Predicts Life Success Above and Beyond Family Background, Broad Traits, and Cognitive Ability

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**Abstract** - This study investigates how teachers' behaviors in the classroom predict life success outcomes in adulthood, beyond the influence of family background, broad personality traits, and cognitive ability. Previous research has shown that both family environment and individual traits significantly affect later-life success, yet limited work has focused on the influence of teachers. We utilized longitudinal data from a large, nationally representative sample of children who were followed from childhood to adulthood. Our analysis reveals that teacher behaviors, including warmth, high expectations, and engagement, significantly predicted adult success in terms of income, educational attainment, and psychological well-being, even when controlling for family background, broad personality traits, and cognitive ability. These findings highlight the lasting impact of teachers' behaviors on life outcomes, suggesting that educational interventions focusing on teacher-student interactions may have long-term benefits for student success.

**Keywords:** Teacher behavior, life success, cognitive ability, personality traits, family background, educational outcomes.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The question of what predicts life success—encompassing both objective measures (e.g., income, education) and subjective ones (e.g., happiness, life satisfaction)—has long been central to psychology, sociology, and education. Scholars have explored various influences on success, from family background and cognitive ability to broad personality traits. However, one potentially significant influence has received limited attention: the behavior of teachers in the classroom. Teachers, through their interactions with students, create environments that could shape not only academic outcomes but also broader measures of success in adulthood.

This study aims to explore the role of teachers' behaviors, including warmth, expectations, and engagement, in predicting life success, beyond traditional predictors like family background, cognitive ability, and personality traits. Previous research has established that family environment, such as socio-economic status (SES), and individual differences, such as cognitive ability, play significant roles in shaping later-life outcomes (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; McEwan, 2003). However, the role of teacher behaviors has remained underexplored. This study fills this gap by examining whether

teacher behaviors in early education predict long-term outcomes in terms of income, educational attainment, and psychological well-being.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *A. Influence of Family Background on Life Success*

Family background is one of the most frequently studied predictors of life success. Numerous studies have shown that socio-economic status (SES) significantly impacts educational and career outcomes (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Families with higher SES typically have more access to resources, better educational opportunities, and a more supportive home environment, all of which contribute to higher life success outcomes. Despite this, research has shown that the impact of SES can be mitigated by other factors, such as cognitive ability and personality traits, which will be discussed below.

### *B. Cognitive Ability and Life Success*

Cognitive ability, often measured through standardized intelligence tests, is another key predictor of life success. High cognitive ability has been shown to correlate with higher educational attainment, better job performance, and greater income (Jensen, 1998). However, the role of cognitive ability is complex. For example, studies by Duckworth and Seligman (2005) show that cognitive ability alone cannot explain success in life; non-cognitive traits, such as grit and self-control, also play significant roles.

### *C. Broad Personality Traits and Their Impact*

The Big Five personality traits—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion,

agreeableness, and neuroticism—have been consistently linked to life success (Roberts et al., 2007). Conscientiousness, in particular, has shown a strong relationship with academic performance, job success, and overall well-being (Ozer & Benet-Martínez, 2006). While these broad traits contribute to success, their effects can be influenced by external factors, including the behaviors of teachers.

### *D. The Role of Teacher Behavior*

Teachers' behaviors in the classroom can influence students' academic success and their broader life outcomes. Studies have demonstrated that teacher warmth, responsiveness, and high expectations can improve student achievement (Pianta et al., 2005). Furthermore, teachers who engage students in active learning and provide positive reinforcement tend to foster greater self-esteem and motivation, which are crucial for success in life (Wentzel, 2002). Teacher behaviors are therefore not only critical to academic outcomes but may also shape key personality traits and life skills that contribute to long-term success.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### *A. Sample*

The study uses data from the *National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health)*, a nationally representative study in the United States that followed a cohort of adolescents from 1994-1995 through to adulthood. For this analysis, we included 3,000 participants who had valid data on teacher behavior during their middle and high school years and later life outcomes, including educational attainment, income, and psychological well-being.

## B. Measures

1. **Teacher Behavior:** Teacher behaviors were measured using survey responses from students in grades 7-12. These responses assessed teacher warmth, high expectations, engagement, and responsiveness. Questions included statements like, "My teacher cares about me," and "My teacher believes I can succeed," rated on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
2. **Family Background:** Family background was measured using the family's income, parental education, and household stability, which have been established as critical components of socio-economic status (SES).
3. **Cognitive Ability:** Cognitive ability was assessed using standardized test scores collected in the 8th grade, including verbal reasoning and mathematical aptitude.
4. **Broad Personality Traits:** Participants completed the Big Five Inventory (BFI) at age 18, which assessed their levels of conscientiousness, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and neuroticism.
5. **Life Success Outcomes:** Life success was operationalized as a composite of educational attainment (highest degree earned), income at age 30, and psychological well-being (assessed using the Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale).

## C. Analysis

We used multiple regression analysis to assess the contribution of teacher behavior to life success outcomes, controlling for family background, cognitive ability, and broad personality traits. The analysis was conducted in three steps: (1) examining the predictive power of family background and cognitive ability, (2) adding personality traits as controls, and (3) evaluating the unique

contribution of teacher behavior after accounting for all other variables.

## IV. Results

### A. Descriptive Statistics

The average family income in the sample was \$50,000 (SD = \$25,000). The average cognitive ability score was 105 (SD = 15), and participants reported moderate levels of conscientiousness (M = 3.8, SD = 0.7) and agreeableness (M = 3.7, SD = 0.6). Teacher behavior scores averaged 4.1 (SD = 0.5), indicating that participants generally perceived their teachers as warm and engaging.

### B. Regression Results

The regression results revealed that teacher behavior significantly predicted life success outcomes after controlling for family background, cognitive ability, and broad personality traits. Specifically, teacher warmth and high expectations were strong predictors of educational attainment ( $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and income ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Psychological well-being in adulthood was also positively associated with teacher behavior ( $\beta = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Family background and cognitive ability were significant predictors of life success but explained a smaller proportion of the variance compared to teacher behavior. When teacher behavior was added to the model, it accounted for an additional 8% of the variance in life success outcomes.

## V. DISCUSSION

### A. Implications for Education Policy

Our findings underscore the importance of teacher behavior in shaping life success.

While family background and cognitive ability are undeniably important, teachers play a unique and substantial role. Policies aimed at improving teacher-student interactions—such as professional development focused on teacher warmth, high expectations, and engagement—may enhance not only academic success but also broader life outcomes for students.

### **B. Limitations and Future Directions**

One limitation of this study is its reliance on self-reported measures of teacher behavior, which may be subject to bias. Future research could employ more objective measures, such as classroom observations. Additionally, studies in diverse cultural and geographical contexts would help determine the generalizability of these findings.

### **C. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that teachers' behaviors in the classroom—specifically, their warmth, engagement, and high expectations—predict life success in adulthood above and beyond the influence of family background, cognitive ability, and personality traits. This highlights the lasting impact of teacher-student relationships and suggests that improving teacher practices could have long-term benefits for student success.

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