

TEACHER-STUDENT INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS: A NARRATIVE  
INQUIRY STUDY OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EDUCATIONAL  
RELATIONSHIPS IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL IN RURAL TEXAS

by

Samuel Massie Parrott, B.M., M.M.

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
with a Major in School Improvement  
December 2021

Committee Members:

Duncan Waite, Chair

Bergeron Harris

Rolf Straubhaar

Barry Aidman



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank the many teachers, professors, and colleagues who helped inspire me to attend college in the first place, let alone complete multiple degrees, and pursue my PhD in School Improvement. I want to thank Mrs. Evilsizer, Mrs. Stone, Mr. Munsell, Mr. Wagner, and the many other teachers I had throughout my public school career for always working to build relationships with me, taking care of me, and believing in me.

To my cohort, Dr. Waite, Dr. Straubhaar, Dr. Harris, and Dr. Aidman, you helped me realize that it was possible to complete this even though I had no idea who Kant, Foucault, or Ranciere were before attempting this PhD.

I would also like to thank my work family, Tommie, Lyndsey, Mitchell, Louie, Liz, Jasmine, Kelly H., Kelly F., and Anarra for supporting me throughout this process, for picking up my slack when I needed help, and for listening to me talk continuously for four years about writing this dissertation.

To my family and partner-in-all-things Emily, I cannot thank you enough for lifting me up, listening to my long rants about the education system, and cheering me on till I finished.

Finally, I must thank my kids. I have been blessed to teach over 1000 students in my first decade of teaching and each and every one of them has brought a light to my life



and have inspired every bit of research that I have completed and will take on in the future. To my participants, thank you for making this all possible. Because of you all, I can now be Dr. Mr. Coach Parrott.



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## **ABSTRACT**

As students leave their primary school and transition into secondary school, they begin a seven-year journey of self-realization, exploration, and development. Secondary students, conventionally, will interact with upwards of fifty or sixty teachers during their middle and high school careers, each with the potential to develop a lasting and profound relationship with their students. The interpersonal relationships developed between teachers and students have been studied since the late 1980s for their effects on student self-efficacy, motivation, self-actualization, and academic achievement. While most research focuses on teacher perceptions of their relationships with students, little is known about the lived experiences of these relationships from the student perspective. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the narratives surrounding middle school students and the positive relationships developed with their teachers. The study involves nine students, ranging from 6<sup>th</sup> grade through 8<sup>th</sup> grade in a rural school district in central Texas who participated in reflective journaling and interviews about their previous and current experiences with teacher-student relationships. I observed these students at their schools to include the day-to-day experiences shared between the students and their teachers, highlighting the direct interactions between students and their teachers. All participants were selected for this project based on their expressed interest in the study and previous conversations we had about the impact of the relationships they



share with their secondary teachers. I collected and analyzed data through the lens of connoisseurship (Eisner, 2017), or a rich understanding of the environment and participants using my above-average knowledge of the cultural norms of the students and schools. I also tapped the theoretical lenses of Systems Theory (Pianta, 1999), Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1971), and ethnomethodology (Garfinkle, 1967; Garfinkle, 2006). This study has the potential to influence teachers' understanding of the relationships they share with their students and provide a richer insight into how these relationships affect their students' self-efficacy, agency, and motivations concerning schooling. Another potential significance of this study is that it can influence teacher professional development at the collegiate level for pre-service teachers and throughout their service by creating awareness of the importance of educational relationships. An analysis of the data revealed that students do not naturally separate characteristics of their teachers' personality from how they view their relationships with the teacher, but rather are comfortable describing who their teacher is to them and how that affects them in and out of school. While the primary purpose of this study was to understand the characteristics of positive teacher-student relationships, the final analysis and discussion covers the broader topic of how participating students view their teachers and what this perspective has done for them on a social-emotional, as well as educational level. In the discussion chapter, I make recommendations for future research surrounding the topic



and the need for future research into the in-school personas of teachers and their need to adjust to fit the needs of students continually.



## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Growing up, there were four teachers that completely shaped the person I became as an adult and as an educator. The connection I developed with these teachers in kindergarten, third, ninth, and eleventh grades came from their sincere interest in who I was as a person and demonstrating love in their interactions with me. Mrs. Evilsizer was my kindergarten teacher in a magnet school in Temple, Texas. She was present during the most difficult moment of my life, the loss of my father. Mrs. Evilsizer was kind and understanding, but still firm with her expectations. Though my memories of her class are few and far between, I will always remember her support through her few years of influence. I met Mrs. Stone my first year after moving to San Marcos, Texas. She was a loving and compassionate third grade teacher for whom I was an incredible pain daily. I was a quiet child until I felt it was time to lash out against my peers or her. She tried everything she could to make sure that I felt part of the class and to feel the love she doted on all her students. I can remember our multiplication table unit of study where students would recite their multiplication facts from memory to earn paper cutouts of an ice cream sundae proudly displayed on the wall. While my peers filled their paper bowls and reached the cherry on top, I was left behind with the bowl and the spoon, destined to not receive any ice cream at the end of the month. Mrs. Stone worked tirelessly to review my math facts, but I continued to struggle. The day of the sundae party and I was greeted with a bowl and two scoops of ice cream. Mrs. Stone knew that I would eventually learn my multiplication chart and knew the effects being left out would have on me. Mr. Munsell was the gruff, new band director for my high school. He was demanding, strict,



and firm, but got to know every student on an individual level. As I neared the end of my Sophomore year, he approached me about leadership potential for the band. I was completely shocked by him pointing out specific moments he witnessed during my first two years in band and was even more surprised when my name was announced as a Drum Major for my Junior year. Mr. Wagner was my eleventh grade U.S. History teacher who I also worked for my Senior year as his student aide. Mr. Wagner taught his class through storytelling, reenactments, and a lot of charisma. He spoke to his students as if they were his own children, often imparting life-lessons daily that had nothing to do with his course. On the eve of my eighteenth birthday, he asked if I had registered for Selective Service, a requirement of which I was completely unaware. After minutes of research, I explained my utter fear of going to war and dying. He spent the next period calming my nerves and walking me through the process, ensuring me that the possibility of the draft was highly unlikely, and that college was the safest way for me to stay out of the army. Clicking submit was much easier with Mr. Wagner by my side.

These teachers did not sign their contract to make a difference in my life specifically, nor were they trained to work with students like me with my specific needs. I developed a connection with these teachers because of their interactions with me and their obvious love for their work and students. I find it very difficult, reflecting on my years as a student at public school, to define the specific characteristics and qualities these teachers displayed, but rather remember the events that shaped my opinion of them. Though, memories of middle school teachers continue to elude me. This could be for a



myriad of reasons, but I believe the stark transition from elementary to middle school during early adolescence has slightly clouded my memory of my teachers.

As a music teacher for nearly the past decade, I have had the pleasure of working with hundreds of students, and each year brings a new challenge of connecting with and understanding the next generation. Each group of students who enter the school seem to change from year to year, mostly in cultural trends, but also in their interest in and motivation towards the educational process. School, as a center of mass education of youth through regimented curriculum and traditional practices, has not changed dramatically in structural form since its early inception with Horace Mann and the dissemination of public schools in the mid-1800s. School curriculum, as a concept for spreading knowledge and development of citizenship, has changed repeatedly to match the trends of the community and country as a means of fixing “specific social and economic ills” (Tyack & Cuban, 2001, P. 1-11). Though *school*, in form and function, has not changed, current teachers could argue that the requirements of *teaching* have transformed over the past few decades to meet the changing needs of the students in the classroom and society with a new shift of meeting more of the social and emotional needs of the students. There is a contradictory purpose to schools as presented by reformers over the history of public school in America, with most applied reforms surrounding the need to quantify, measure, and standardize education (Bowles & Gintis, 2012; Mehta, 2015; Tyack & Cuban, 2001), all the while educators have been tasked with helping students achieve based on the moving target of standards and becoming functioning members of an ever-changing society (Mehta, 2015, P. 27). Student social and emotional



needs have not necessarily changed over the decades of public education, but there is an observable shift in focus in public schools towards meeting the needs of the students beyond the academic arena. Many reforms, including an emphasis on social-emotional learning and restorative practices have moved to the forefront of modern pedagogical reforms as a means of helping students on multiple levels to become more successful.

Until recently, many conversations and studies surrounding public education focused on the need for better instructional practices and standardization to help students based on a deficit model of kids falling behind, as seen in *A Nation at Risk*, (Mehta, 2015, p. 3-4; Tyack & Cuban, 2001, p. 14), *No Child Left Behind*, *Race to the Top*, *Every Student Succeeds*, and many state and local educational reforms. While research on pedagogy and educational reforms continues, there is a new interest in developing a safer environment for students to grow emotionally within the school system to accompany traditional teaching and learning practices. The world of social-emotional learning has probably been an aspect of pedagogy for decades, but has recently become a more well-advertised standard in teaching with programs developed specifically around social-emotional learning and restorative practices. Discipline and instructional practices that are more equitable and asset-based, such as restorative justice, have dominated the conversations and research for culturally responsive teaching, but at the heart of teaching and learning are the interpersonal relationships between teachers and students. Positive teacher-student relationships have been identified by Hamre and Pianta (2006) as bonds formed over the year, or multiple years, through interactions between the teacher and the student that create a sense of safety and self-efficacy for both parties. While there is an



anecdotal understanding of teacher-student relationships in public schools expressed by current teachers, educational leaders, and educational celebrities through conversations and social media posts, there is a gap in research literature about the characteristics of these interpersonal relationships and their effects on student motivations towards schooling. Motivation is an important area of research because motivation has been linked to academic involvement and success, (Bosman et al., 2018; Crosnoe et al., 2010; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jerome et al., 2009; Pianta et al., 2002), but beyond the current research, teachers in the field often express that students with whom they share a positive teacher-student relationship are more motivated to engage in the class. Increased engagement in school can have a myriad of positive effects from increased attendance to improvements in mental health. More research is necessary to understand student-perceived motivations towards school due to their interpersonal relationships with teachers. While an inverse relationship between motivation and positive teacher-student relationship is described by Pianta and Meeus, where an already motivated student develops strong relationships with their teacher because of their engagement in the class, this is often studied from the teacher's perceptions of the student's motivation and the relationships that is developed rather than the student's perspective of the connection between motivation and relationship (Meeus, 2019; Pianta 1999). Some studies in teacher-student relationships aim to understand the academic outcomes of these relationships, with an emphasis in learning progress, grades, and scores (Bosman et al., 2018; Crosnoe et al., 2010; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jerome et al., 2009; Pianta et al.,



2002), but the bonds formed between teachers and students may have a greater effect beyond the quantifiable, academic outcomes.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Students go through many changes with the primary to secondary school transition from fifth grade through early high school years including new scheduling practices, more class options, combining with students from other schools across the district, and, of course, meeting new teachers (Crosnoe et al., 2010; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Klem & Connell, 2004). A student's teacher load can completely change annually as they progress through their school years, which can cause stress and uncertainty for the students as they navigate the transitions. The addition of more stress and uncertainty in the daily life of the student can lead the child to look for stability within the changes. As a child develops through early-to-middle adolescence, they often seek safety and comfort within their relationships with family, friends, and teachers as their developmental needs change (Meeus, 2019, p. 50-54). There is an assumed physiological safety provided by schools with a building, access to meals, and other resources that may or may not be present in the home, but it cannot always be assumed that all students have their psychological safety needs met at a school. Students spend over a third of their day at a school campus with their teachers, so teachers are a vital part of a third of the daily experiences for each student. From personal experience, many students throughout my career have expressed that specific teachers are the biggest motivating factor for participating in school, besides the compulsory schooling laws. Positive teacher-student



relationships can be a primary basis for a student's interest in and motivation towards school.

Current research surrounding teacher-student relationships suggests that positive teacher-student relationships can have a positive effect on student's self-efficacy (Alfaro, Weimer, & Castillo, 2018; Moorefield-Lang, 2008; Won, Lee, & Bong, 2017), motivation (Nayir, 2017; Shen et. al, 2015), and academic success (Bosman et al., 2018; Crosnoe et al., 2010; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jerome et al., 2009; Pianta, 1999; Pianta et al., 2002; Roorda et al., 2011). Many news articles, viral videos, and professional development sessions are devoted to the importance of positive teacher-student relationships. Viral videos shared on social media by teachers and school officials often show a teacher in a school with whom the students share personalized handshakes or greetings, emotion-filled stories of receiving help, and shared experiences that lead to positive outcomes, but there is a lack of research data that identify relationship characteristics of and factors contributing to how the relationships are formed and maintained as seen by the students.

I enacted a pilot study for this dissertation in 2018 with seven participants in seventh and eighth grades to start developing questions and methods that would elicit the richest responses from middle school students. My pilot study was eventually utilized as part of a final project for a beginning qualitative methods course, as well as a professional development for my school district surrounding student voice collection and utilization. From the pilot study I developed questions that helped shape the semi-structured interview questions for this dissertation, as well as protocols to help students feel more



comfortable during the interview process (e.g., setting up groups of peers and forming a student-friendly exit clause). My pilot study also helped develop early analytical tools, such as transcription process, data collection methods, and early codes, which I developed into the codes for this dissertation. The results of the pilot study suggested a need for expanded questions and the use of a narrative inquiry study as the primary methodology for this dissertation.

### **Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

The primary purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand the characteristics of and factors contributing to positive teacher-student relationships as seen by the students. A secondary purpose of this study is to understand the connection between the relationships and the motivations of students towards schooling. The following research questions which guided my study emerged from previous studies surrounding teacher-student relationships and a gap in modern literature.

Q1: What are the characteristics of positive teacher-student relationships at the secondary school site in Texas as perceived by the student?

Q2: How are teacher-student relationships developed and maintained?

Q3: What motivates students, in their own words, and what effect does the teacher-student relationship have, positive and/or negative?

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

Many theories can be utilized to view teacher-student relationships, but this study employed a combination of systems theory, attachment theory, and ethnomethodology to better understand the characteristics of teacher-student relationships and their connections



to motivation. Attachment theory is predominately utilized in childhood therapy to explain and address trauma caused by separation or distrust between parent and child (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991), but the theory has been developed to understand the nature of teacher-student relationships and their effects on educational outcomes and interest (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Hamre & Pianta, 2006). Ethnomethodology is the understanding that common interactions are the basis for the development of knowledge. While not a conventionally utilized theory, the work of Garfinkle (2006) indicates that individual interactions shape and develop knowledge that cannot be generalized, but are an important aspect of the global knowledge base. Ethnomethodology is a lens to understand the importance of the mundane interactions between teacher and student as a basis for developing relationships and a way to better understand the meanings of the interactions themselves and an observer's experience with them. The commonplace experiences of daily connections are not specifically emphasized in current research surrounding teacher-student relationships, but an ethnomethodological lens provides insight into how these contribute to the greater relationship. Systems Theory (Pianta, 1999) suggests that children have spheres of influence that have varying levels of effect on the social-emotional development of the child. Combined with attachment theory and ethnomethodology, systems theory lays the groundwork that previous experiences with teacher-student relationships can have long-lasting effects on the development of the child.



## Nature of Study

The design for this qualitative study is narrative based, through the lens of connoisseurship (Eisner et. al, 2017), utilizing triangulation from a variety of data sources to corroborate the findings (Yin, 2014). There are thousands of small events that occur within a day, from the first sensory experiences of waking up with the alarm clock, the inner dialog on the way to work, the conversations in the lunchroom, and so many more that may be observable by all but not completely understood. Researchers could utilize a variety of quantitative methods to identify and catalog these lived experiences, but the essence of the experiences can become lost in the analysis. Clandinin and Connelly explain in *Narrative Inquiry* that “educational experience should be studied narratively” (p.19) and that the “temporality” of the studied phenomena requires narrative descriptions to capture the essence of the experience. Since the experiences of students are lived narratively, this study requires narrative explanations of the phenomena that occur through the shared relationships between students and teachers. These narrative descriptions included observations in the field, or school setting, reflective journals, and semi-structured interviews. Students were recruited from a rural middle school and high school in central Texas from grades six through eight; students who have previously expressed interest in participating in this research.

Students submitted reflective journals every week with prompts to consider throughout the week through email. Prompts included reflections on interactions with teachers throughout the year and in previous years, as well as developing a collection of descriptors of characteristics of their interpersonal relationships. While students engaged



in reflective journaling, I observed the students for the first two months of study and utilized field notes. Observations included interactions between the teachers and students, verbal and non-verbal cues, and frequency of interactions. My insider positionality (Chavez, 2008), coupled with the lens of connoisseurship (Eisner et al., 2017) allowed for a richer understanding of the situational interactions that fall into the realm of the mundane that may have gone unnoticed by the students in their reflections. Finally, students participated in semi-structured interviews to collect more data on the characteristics, causes, and effects of their shared relationships. I recorded and transcribed the interviews and field notes, which were included with the written journals of the students and teachers for coding and analysis.

Coding and analysis of the data occurred throughout the data collection process. As reflective journals were submitted and interviews were conducted, the data were read multiple times to allow for an inductive process to inform the creation and editing of themes and codes to help ensure a more reflective analysis (Delamont, 2016). I separated data by thematic information and confirmed the findings utilizing triangulation to ensure the reliability, or trustworthiness of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once the data were coded and analyzed, I synthesized the analysis into the conclusions, with suggestions for future research. Validity for this research is not seeking objectivity, but a grounding of spoken, reflective, and observable truths that exist in the commonplace, as understood through ethnomethodology. Instead of validity, which is commonly used in quantitative research, I used triangulation of the data “within-method” to confirm the trustworthiness of the data with the participants throughout the analysis and coding



process (Delamont, 2016). This was an inductive method, in which the data informed the coding of current data and will inform future questioning in reflective journals and interviews.

### **Significance of the Study**

From personal experience, positive relationships developed between teacher and student can have profound effects on both parties. Throughout the past nine years as an educator, I have worked with over one thousand students and have experienced meaningful relationships every year. As I began my career as a choir director at the middle school level, I noticed that the students with whom I shared a positive interpersonal relationship displayed high levels of motivation in my class and classes with teachers who also shared positive relationships with their students. Inversely, students expressed that less-than-positive or neutral relationships with their teachers had adverse effects on their interest in attending those classes, despite the subject matter or their peers' participation in the class. Students often shared that they were more willing to work for teachers who cared for them and showed them respect, which led me to question how these relationships looked from the perspective of the students. While most relationships with my students remained positive throughout their time in my class, there were some relationships that were severed and needed to be repaired to continue to build on the positive relationship that existed before. This was often caused by communication style, traumas outside of the classroom, or frustration within the classroom. Casual observations and conversations with students revealed a need for deeper understanding of the phenomenon of teacher-student relationships. Past interactions and experiences that



are contributing factors to the development of students and teachers directly influence their current interactions, which in turn influence the way students and teachers interact with each other throughout their educational time together. Each factor influencing teacher and student interactions could be understood and cataloged with copious time allotted, which could make them generalizable across any population, but it is the combination of past influencing factors that make the relationships between individuals unique. While our understanding of each relationship is that they are special and formed through unique interactions, there may be common characteristics of the relationships that may be shared with other positive connections between teachers and students. Developing the vocabulary surrounding these characteristics should come from the perspectives of students, as most research has rarely included student voice as the primary data source.

This study is different because it relied on the descriptive narratives of students to develop the characteristics of positive relationships and to find if there are factors of these relationships that influence the motivations of students towards schooling. Most current research surrounding teacher-student interpersonal relationships utilize survey data, in the form of the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale by Pianta and Hamre (Pianta, 2001), to understand to what extent teachers see the effects of their relationships with students. While this is valuable data in determining how teachers understand their relationships, it lacks student descriptions of the connections, which could provide rich data for individual sites to utilize. Though these data are not completely generalizable, it is



possible for different schools to use the methods of data collection, questions, and experience of this research to guide future projects applicable to their own school.

This study could also influence the way secondary schools create and implement professional development surrounding teacher-student relationships. The current model in the research site does not provide insight to the student experience, but rather reflects on the broad generalization that relationships are good, and all teachers must “do relationship building.” This has led to a series of one-off activities and complementary frustrations when the “relationship” is either misunderstood or does not have a noticeable effect on the student’s motivation or achievement in the classroom. Professional development derived from this study could give teachers at the research site the tools to engage students on an interpersonal level, guided by their reflections on the characteristics of teacher-student relationships. This could help teachers plan and implement better relationship development activities that move beyond surface-level connection and move towards meaningful support for the students. Along with professional development, teacher preparation programs could also utilize the student voice aspect of this study to help future teachers reflect on their own experiences during their childhood and help shape how they approach teacher-student relationships in their future career. This could also help prepare preservice teachers for the upcoming emotional labor that is found in the school system.

Along with teacher preparation programs, this research could aid administrators in their hiring of future practitioners. While the efficient interview model of teacher candidate meeting with administrators and teachers can provide an overview of the



teacher's background and work history, engaging the teacher candidate in student interaction could help principals hire teachers with the ability to quickly build relationships with students. A richer understanding of relationship characteristics by the administrator can also provide skills for them to work with teachers at their own schools to help work towards more meaningful and positive relationships with their students.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

*Connoisseurship*: A deep appreciation for and understanding of a subject, environment, activity, etc. Connoisseurs not only know about the subject, environment, activity, etc., but can identify and explain the nuances beyond the non-connoisseur. Often compared to a rich understanding of wine as a sommelier, educational connoisseurship is the understanding of the school environment, connected community, students, teachers, and other factors that are part of daily interactions within a school system.

*Relationship Characteristics*: Relationship characteristics are the definable qualities of the relationship (i.e., loving, caring, and empathetic).

*Relationship Factors*: Relationship factors are, but are not limited to a combination of previous relationships, current interactions, timing of the interactions, and circumstances of the interactions.

*Teacher-Student Relationship*: The bond formed between teachers and students due to interactions in and out of class.



*Educational Relationships*: Relationships in the educational setting are as varied as outside of the school, with an array of positive, negative, and neutral connections. Some connections result in short-term relationships, while others may last indefinitely. While each type of relationship warrants the need for greater understanding, my study surrounds the topic of positive educational relationships between students and teachers. The term relationship in this study and all referred studies within my research, is defined as the connection developed between a teacher and student throughout their educational experience together. For many teachers, this may consist of a single year of direct influence in the classroom setting, like a first-grade homeroom teacher, or many years of influence in a variety of settings, like a high school athletics coach. Like ripples in the water caused by a dropped stone, the impact of the connection will trigger the breadth of the aftereffects. The stone, or educational relationship, can vary in size and significance or could even be a series of stones dropped at different points, changing the trajectory of the relationship.

There is a large amount of legislation surrounding improper relationships between students and teachers. Districts also create acceptable terms of communication between students and teachers, often surrounding the types of digital communication allowed (e.g., social media, text messages, and email), as well as reinforcing the state and federal statutes surrounding proper and improper relationships between students and teachers. The Texas Penal Code (Offenses Against the Person, 2021) describes inappropriate connections between students and teachers in a purely physical sense, but also including the solicitation of potential physical activities, while the student is under the educational



care of the teacher. Districts can expand on the state statute by explaining in more detail how a teacher can break the communication code of conduct. At the research site, the district requires that teachers utilize district communication methods (e.g., school-based emails or communication applications where the parents and students are in the same message). The only exemption to this is if the teacher is a sponsor of an extracurricular activity which requires more communication with the student. In this situation, the teacher must include parents in the communication, but can utilize a broader array of digital communication methods (Seguin Independent School District, 2021, p. 54).

The use of “positive relationship” as the focal point for my research is in the normative sense of relationships strictly driven by educational influence. While there are many definitions of positive relationships, I focused on the education-centered connections between teachers and students. In many communities, and specific subjects like extracurriculars, the influence of a teacher expands beyond the walls of the traditional school. Some teachers may be an indigenous insider as a native to the district and active member of the community, or even an external insider who is welcomed into the community after gaining their trust (Chavez, 2008). Extracurricular teachers and coaches often spend more time with their students in activities that they selected, which could increase the level of connection and influence through the relationship. Changes in the role of the teacher with their students, i.e., greater focus on mental health and safety, more emphasis on soft skill instruction, and expansion of online learning has modified the breadth of educational connection between students and teachers. This is even more evident in the transition to online or distance learning over the spring and summer of



2020. A teacher is no longer restrained to the classroom, but now has been inserted into the community and students' homes.

Throughout this research, I assumed that all participating students have a connection with one or more teachers in their previous or current school because they have expressed interest in the study over the past three years. It cannot always be assumed that all students have developed positive connections with one or more teachers, though the possibility of these connections should be present at all schools. It would be difficult to assume that a school would be void of all opportunities to develop connections between teachers and students.

Though there are a variety of relationship types and outcomes in the educational setting, my study utilized the normative aspects of positive teacher-student educational relationships as the basis for data collection and understanding.

*Educational Relationships in Distance Learning:* The world of education was completely flipped to distance learning at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic with schools shifting their entire teacher-student interactions to online platforms. This is not the first instance of distance learning, as post-secondary and homeschool models often include a combination of face-to-face and distance learning opportunities, but this is the first instance of mass dissemination of online learning platforms across the world. The traditional teacher-student relationship in the face-to-face format may not be available to all students until the end of the pandemic, which could alter the connections between students and teachers across the world. This is an area of research that should emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, but will also be addressed within my study.



## **Summary**

Positive teacher-student relationships have been identified as an influence on student academic achievement, self-efficacy, and motivation, but studies rarely seek narrative data directly from students regarding these relationships. While most studies center on quantitative data to analyze the efficacy of interpersonal, education relationships, student voice can provide a breadth of knowledge to the field that is missing from the past forty years of educational relationship research in the field. Characteristics of educational relationships between students and teachers can help strengthen claims by educational leaders and school districts that developing connections between students and teachers assists with desired learning outcomes (Hattie, 1992).

This study provides necessary groundwork for future analyses of educational relationships at all levels. While most modern literature suggests that positive teacher-student relationships are a vital part of the school experience, little is known about the characteristics of these connections. The primary purpose of this study was to identify relationship characteristics that are common among the participants. More research is necessary to generalize the data across the entire school population, the school district, and beyond.



## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Academic relationships between teacher and student have consistently been a topic of conversation throughout the education system and research since the mid-nineties with researchers such as Crosnoe, Bronfenbrenner, Morris, Hamre, and Pianta. Researchers and practitioners have sought the essence of the relationships between students and teachers, the characteristics of these relationships, and their effects on student development. While much research centers around the academic effects of the relationships between teachers and students (Bosman et al., 2018; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jerome et al., 2009; Pianta, 1999; Pianta et al., 2002; Roorda et al., 2011), few studies undertake the effects of teacher-student relationships on student motivation and self-efficacy, as well as the general characteristics of the relationships and their causes from the perspective of the students (Pianta, 2001).

The theoretical basis for current research on teacher-student relationships commonly utilizes John Bowlby's Attachment Theory. This theory was developed to understand the connections between parent and child, most often mother and child, and how these attachments are determined by both biological and experiential factors (Holmes, 2014; Wilson-Ali et al., 2019). Attachment theory is utilized by educational researchers when studying teacher-student relationships because of the often-parental nature of teachers when working with students due to time together and the non-academic role of teachers with their students. Other theories used as lenses for studying interpersonal relationships between students and teachers include Systems Theory, which was developed by Vygotsky and modified for educational use by researchers like Ford,



Lerner, and Pianta, and Ethnomethodology, developed by Garfinkel. Systems Theory for relationship research describes the levels of interactions between the subject, students, and their social circles. Pianta and Walsh designed the graphic representation for systems of social development for the child with levels of influence starting from the self, biological and behavioral systems, stretching out to the culture and community. Systems Theory can be utilized in a variety of ways to understand the nuances of the interactions between students and their environment throughout their educational career.

Ethnomethodology is not a conventional theory like Attachment and Systems Theories, but lends itself to the understanding of how relationships build in a variety of settings.

Students are exposed to many teachers throughout their school tenure. Depending on the size of the district, students can have close to forty or fifty teachers in a conventional public-school system with whom they will share at least a school year of interactions. Students form bonds with these teachers, whether they are familial, formal, or confrontational throughout their school-age years and somehow students continue to navigate these connections and build on them from teacher to teacher. This plasticity is different from the relationships formed with their peers, as peer-peer relationships in adolescence can change quickly due to proximity, choice, and changes in personality and are fueled by an exchange of connection that is optional, where teacher-student relationships are often based on circumstance and do not always feature an option to leave the relationship (Meeus, 2019). Ethnomethodology is a lens through which to understand the normal and mundane interactions between individuals and groups that can lead to the development of interpersonal relationships (Garfinkle & Rawls, 2006).



Ethnomethodology is a subset of constructivism, in which knowledge (experiences in relationships) is developed from previous encounters and experiences that inform future knowledge. These theoretical lenses were explored as pieces of the larger whole that is the lived experience of teacher-student relationships from the perspective of the student. Relationships are a vital part of adolescent development and an area that is difficult to fully understand because of the individualistic nature of each relationship (Meeus, 2019). Middle and High School teachers engage with adolescents daily for most of a student's year and can be understood as an example of positive interactions, communication styles, and conflict resolution. Teacher-student relationships at the elementary level are studied for their predictive qualities for the remaining educational trajectory for students (Bosman et al., 2018; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Nimetz, 1991). These studies suggest that relationships at the elementary level are secure, with slight changes in qualities from kindergarten to fifth grade, but the transition to secondary school often poses a challenge for educational relationship researchers. As students transition into secondary school and adolescence, there are many factors that contribute to each student's development including hormonal changes, changes in size of the school and class, less time with individual teachers, more social pressures, increasing demand on students' time, etc. (Crosnoe et al., 2010; Eidner & Bishop, 1997; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Jerome et al., 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004; Luckner & Pianta, 2011).

Teacher-student relationships have been studied utilizing descriptors, in the form of surveys, and observation methods such as those developed by Pianta and Hamre, who sought to understand the factors of interpersonal relationships and how they affect their



participants. Pianta and Hamre developed a survey, the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale, which evaluates teacher's perceptions of their relationships with students, focusing on the areas of dependency, closeness, and conflict (Pianta, 1999). The characteristic of dependency refers to the amount of need a student has for their teacher's time, effort, and attention, closeness describes the amount of warmth and love experienced by the participants, and conflict is the amount of turmoil felt between the participants. Closeness and conflict remain the most discussed factors of relationship quality from the teacher perspective, but few studies include student-centered research design that could reveal new characteristics or reasons for closeness, dependency, and conflict.

Finally, the effects of teacher-student relationships are often emphasized in research to understand the need for close connections between students and teachers. Academic effects, such as increased proficiency in single subjects, growth in standardized test scores, and success throughout a student's educational career are large features in modern research. Most studies suggest that positive teacher-student relationships can enhance the academic outcomes for students, while less-than-positive connections can delay progress (Bosman et al., 2018; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jerome et. al, 2009; Pianta et al., 2002). Other effects of teacher-student relationships such as self-efficacy, agency, motivation, and educational interest require expanded research to understand how students change, non-academically, with each relationship throughout their educational career.

Through this literature review, I analyzed the themes of adolescent development, transitions to secondary school, relationship development, characteristics of teacher-



student relationships, academic outcomes, motivation and educational interest, and self-efficacy and agency through modern and seminal research, as well as critiques of current research. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this research are also explored throughout the literature review.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

My research is grounded in a combination of Attachment Theory, Systems Theory, and Ethnomethodology through the epistemological stance of Constructivism. Attachment Theory and Systems Theory were originally developed for psychology, but have been expanded for use in educational research by John Bowlby (Bowlby 1974; Holmes, 2014) and Robert Pianta (Pianta, 1999) to better understand the relationship needs of students during their educational career. Ethnomethodology, which is a subset of Interpretivism, is not currently utilized as a theoretical lens for educational relationship research, but serves to ground our understanding of relationships in the commonplace exchanges of person to person and that exchange in each environment. Interactions between teacher and student are influenced by the environment in which the interactions occur and all previous connections made by the teacher and students. Ethnomethodology reinforces that every teacher-student relationship is formed from a combination of common interactions and are influenced by past relationships and experiences which form something both unique and common within each relationship. Our assumptions of the meaning behind each relationship are difficult to generalize, but through a combination of the above theories, researchers can better understand the commonalities of teacher-student relationships.



The Constructivist epistemologies are derived from philosophers and psychologists such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Taylor with the central idea that knowledge and meaning are created or constructed from the interactions between people and their world and that meaning is grounded in previous experiences and the social contexts in which the interactions occur (Crotty, 2015, p. 42; Fosnot, 2005, p. 3; Hickman et al., 2013, p. 48-55). Constructivism provides an overarching lens for my research.

Constructivism allows for the understanding that interpersonal relationships are informed by previous relational experiences and are developed through unique interactions that also create expected patterns for all future relationships. This does not require all connections between people and their world to maintain these patterns, but rather allows for the evolution of those patterns to fit the needs of the individual in their social contexts. Differing from the Positivist epistemological stance, Constructivist thought does not require these patterns to be generalizable or causal, but only observable by researchers and the participants in the interactions.

Attachment Theory was originally developed by John Bowlby in the mid-twentieth century as a response to Freudian drive theory and object-relations theory, which explained a child's need to be comforted by a mother, or mother figure, for the internal instinct to feed and through a natal-sexual drive to be close to the mother (Holmes, 2014; Wilson-Ali et al., 2019). Bowlby believed that the need for love and connection was just as instinctual as the need for food and that "attachment is a 'primary motivational system' with its own workings and interface with other motivational systems" (Holmes, 2014, p. 63). Attachment theory characterizes the needs of children,



through external responses, to feeling connected or the severing of the connection through acts of closeness or dependency, which could be physical connection, a visible feeling of ease through exploration or play, or an emotional closeness, or acts of stress from separation, which can manifest themselves in verbal or physical cues displaying discomfort from the separation (Holmes, 2014, p. 67-72). Bowlby believed that attachment was more than a physical need for food, as described by Freud and Darwin, but a psychological need that is just as innate as the need for food, shelter, and safety. The formulation of attachment, as hypothesized by Bowlby, is found in the anticipated patterns of the connections shared with the mother, meaning that as the mother builds a pattern of reactions to different situations, the child becomes habituated to the reaction and then naturally weens itself away from the mother's reactions as comfort is developed (Bowlby, 1971, p. 179). Attachment Theory hypothesizes that it is an evolutionary trait of all humans to seek interpersonal relationships for their part in one's psychological safety. In educational research, Attachment Theory provides a lens through which to understand the common need of students to feel connected to someone in the educational setting. While students are not physically connected with their parent, the teacher can become a surrogate, like goslings latching onto an alternate mother goose in the absence of their own mother (Holmes, 2014, p. 64). While students can express knowing the difference between teacher and parent, the same type of physical responses can be observed in classrooms at all levels. From personal experience, students in lower elementary often attempt proximity and verbal expressions of care for their teacher, while also acting out when attention is not given or confusion towards directives exists.



Secondary students also display proximity by asking for hugs or just being near the teacher with whom they have a connection and can display visual levels of frustration with the teacher when they feel their needs are not being met. Attachment theory is the base theory for most educational research in interpersonal relationships between teachers and students and serves as the foundation for this research.

Systems Theory, as developed for educational relationships by Pianta and Walsh (1996), describes the levels at which different interpersonal relationships are connected to the child. The systems begin at the macro-level, known as “culture and community” and move towards the “biological and behavioral systems” at the self, or the child (Pianta & Walsh, 1996). The four systems of relationships and their connection to the development of the child are the culture and community, small social groups, dyadic, and the biological/behavioral systems. Each system contains both people and environment which affect the child at the center. On the second level, or the dyadic system, teacher, parent, and close friends are present. Pianta and Walsh (1996) state that each level has a significant impact on the development of the child, but the dyadic level plays the greatest role in directly developing the child’s behavioral system through expected pattern development within the interpersonal connections. The connection between adult and child are “asymmetrical” because the adult is older, more mature, and leads the example of the expected patterns of behavior, which makes their influence very strong over the child (Pianta, 1999, p. 30). Pianta’s Systems Theory not only takes the levels of influence over child behavior into consideration, but also the child as their own unique system. When considering the child as its own system, Pianta uses his theory to explain



that children are unique beings with behaviors that cannot be singled out and isolated. Each behavior and need builds upon each other and then manifest in a variety of ways, which makes the behaviors and needs difficult to pinpoint and diagnose. Pianta's version of Systems Theory can be utilized to understand the individuality of every child in social research, but also to display the closeness of teacher to student due to their physical proximity, temporality of interactions, and the academic and social power difference between the student and teacher.

Ethnomethodology, though not conventionally categorized as a theory, is the study of the "mundane" and normal interactions from person to person or person to environment. While much of social research surrounds the easily describable, observable, and quantifiable/qualifiable phenomena of interactions, ethnomethodology is concerned with finding the "order" of the phenomena of "ordinary" society and things that might be overlooked by researchers searching for specifics (Garfinkel & Rawls, 2006, p. 93). The ethnomethodological lens also requires the researcher to understand that the ordinary events that occur are understood in the context in which they happen, meaning that the observer considers the environment, the timing, and the culture of the participants of the interaction, as well as the observer's own interpretation of these events (Garfinkel, 1967). Garfinkel's development of Ethnomethodology began as a reaction to Emile Durkheim' and Max Weber's sociological approaches to understanding observable interactions. Weber's approach was to assume the role of participant in the interactions and see through the lens of those who were creating connections and classify those connections from their perspective, where Durkheim believed in finding the observable



truths that were present in the interactions (Garfinkel & Rawls, 2006, p. 48). Garfinkel's work in Ethnomethodology was a continuation and reconstruction of Durkheim's sociological contributions with an emphasis on the observable, seemingly commonplace interactions that make up a given society. The Ethnomethodological lens allows researchers to view educational interactions on varying levels, from macro to micro, and record observable traits of these connections as true and important aspects of the relationships (Mehan, 1976). Along with the observable aspects of the educational interactions, ethnomethodology allows for an understanding of the context of interactions and the researcher's assumptions of the interactions themselves. This can influence the interpretation and analysis of social interactions, which can make reporting of the observed skewed towards the researcher's interpretation, but adds to the literature for future interpretation and analysis.

The theoretical lenses of Attachment Theory, Systems Theory, and Ethnomethodology, under the epistemological stance of Constructivism can be applied to the understanding of teacher-student relationships in secondary school settings and served as the theoretical framework for my study. I utilized these theories to understand the characteristics of positive teacher-student relationships in a rural, secondary school in Texas, to describe how positive interpersonal relationships in schools are developed, maintained, and repaired, and to reveal any connections between positive teacher-student relationships and students' motivations towards schooling.



## **Theoretical Framework Composition**

To understand the connection between Attachment Theory, Systems Theory, and Ethnomethodology, I created a visual and auditory representation of the theoretical framework that encompassed my experiences as a musician and a teacher (Appendix A). The main thematic material for the piece is “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” which is assumed to be a well-known children’s song for most of the Western world. This multi-layered composition reflects a variety of aspects of the theoretical framework for this research. First, ethnomethodology is represented using “Mary Had a Little Lamb” as a common work known by “all,” but the tune without text may not be familiar, which changes the perspective and context of the listener. Systems theory is represented by different voice parts. The voicing represents, from the highest to lowest, the parent, child, teacher, peers, and community. While each voice has an influence on the voice of the child, the influence and effect on the child’s voice decreases with distance. Attachment theory is first represented by the “innate” thematic material. “Mary Had a Little Lamb” is widely used throughout the English-speaking world and it contains ascending seconds and minor third leaps, which are considered the two most common melodic motions in most countries. Beyond the structure of the piece, the harmonic interplay represents the many transitions a child experiences from early life through adolescence.

Theme one is early infancy as the parent and child are the only voices performing in unison. Theme two is the introduction into primary school as the individual teacher voice joins in the unison performance of the melody. Theme three represents the transition into adolescence and the change into secondary school. The parent voice



transition into adolescence and the change into secondary school. The parent voice attempts to perform the melody in the original rhythmic configuration, but the child's voice changes. The teacher attempts to match the child as their melody changes and obvious frustration is heard in the parent voice. Theme four represents the changing of relationship roles, described in adolescent development research (Meeus, 2019). The parent and child voices are on the same melody and rhythmic idea, but in different keys, which causes harmonic clashing. The teacher's voice modifies throughout to keep up, but only as a response to what they observe and hear from the parent-child interplay. Theme five represents the closeness characteristic, as the parent, child, and teacher voice move closely, while the further voices offer supporting harmonies. Theme six represents the conflictual characteristic with harmonic dissonance occurring throughout the section. Theme seven represents the dependency characteristic of relationships with a symbiotic relationship between all voices, passing each portion of the melody around to the different systems. The final theme resolves the relationship in a consonant reflection on the influence of positive relationships.

The composition serves as a means of personal understanding of the theoretical framework and multiple areas of adolescent development, but also as a graphic and aural representation of these frameworks for a different perspective.

### **Transition to Secondary School**

Middle school, conventionally grades six through eight, creates many structural changes that can affect a young adolescent's development. During the transition from primary to secondary school, students leave a primary campus after conventionally



working with one to two main teachers with a handful of auxiliary teachers and move to a campus with five or more primary teachers. The number of primary teachers is not only a change, but the secondary level can be more stressful than the primary in terms of amount of work, grading standards, high stakes testing, rules and regulations, expectations, time in school, homework, after school activities, etc. (Crosnoe et al., 2010; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Klem & Connell, 2004). According to Social Setting Theory, developed by Luckner and Pianta for understanding educational relationships, the drastic changes from primary to secondary school can also greatly impact the way students interact with their schoolwork, their peers, and their teachers. The transition into secondary school poses many problems with how relationships are developed between teachers and students for a variety of reasons such as less individual time to work with teachers, the increased number of classes on a student's workload, larger class sizes, greater emphasis on competition with class rank, and more teachers to know.

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed the world of education. Students in all grades grapple with the increased reliance on technology and an underlying stress and anxiety of the COVID-19 virus. Students across the country are feeling the effects of the pandemic in the school system by either attending school from home, limited in person attendance, or a hybrid of systems. Students in many elementary schools are still learning from a single teacher with a handful of additional teachers such as Physical Education and Music Specialists. Secondary students at my research site are still expected to maintain the traditional workload of middle school with the added stress and restrictions caused by the pandemic.



## **Adolescent Development**

Adolescence is often understood as the developmental stage between 12 and 21 years old and has been studied since the early 1900's as a transitional and transformational time during which a child begins to shape their personal identity, develop norms for themselves, and start to regulate their relationships (Meeus, 2019). The development of adolescent identity was explored by Erikson and Marcia in the 1960's as they identified two steps in how adolescents find their identity, exploration and commitment. Exploration deals with the process in which adolescents seek differing perspectives from peers, adults, and other prominent figures in their lives, and then commit to absorbing and portraying the new traits or reinforcing current personality traits (Marcia, 1966). Though every person experiences adolescence and puberty in different ways, during this transitional period, children develop mentally, emotionally, and physically with some common personality characteristics including seeking independence from authority, developing individual identity, developing meaningful and rich relationships, and solidifying empathetic feelings towards others (Erikson, 1994; Meeus, 2019). These common features can be influenced even more during the transition from primary to secondary school as students enter middle school. This transition creates a series of structural issues that can affect how a student develops their personality, sense of belonging within school society and the greater society as well, and their interpersonal relationships with peers and adults (Luckner & Pianta, 2011).



## **Adolescent Relationship Needs**

During adolescence, the child attempts to separate from authority dominance, conventionally with parental figures, and begins to assert themselves as an individual (Meeus, 2019). The relationship shift between parent and child during adolescence can be seen as maturing beyond the need for the parent to supervise and provide for every aspect of the child's life and moving towards a symbiotic relationship, with a transition from commensalism in which the child benefits from the parent without harming the parent's needs, to mutualism in which both parties feel a balance in the relationship and both can benefit from the relationship (Smetana & Asquith, 1994).

Peer-to-peer relationships also begin to develop differently during adolescence. Children begin to move away from the authority driven relationships as their closest bonds, to those of chosen connections with their peers. Though children form connections with peers as young as infancy, many of the connections are not created by choice based on personality traits and shared characteristics, but by proximity and chance in familial connections or primary school settings. As children mature into adolescence, research by Piaget, Laursen, Youniss, and Smollar suggests that the children will begin to seek relationships that already display the mutualistic nature that they are wanting from their parents and have a healthy balance of close connection with the peer with the ability to still explore their own individuality as well (Lauresen, 1996; Meeus, 2019; Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

Research suggests that the relationship needs of adolescents are similar, though the manifestation of these relationships remains entirely unique and varied throughout the



population. Since access to school is a conventionally common area in which children do not differ widely, as home life cannot be controlled, it can be inferred that the teacher-student relationships is commonly accessible to adolescents despite their parent-child and peer-peer relationship differences.

### **Teacher-Student Relationship Development**

Teacher-student relationships can be developed in a variety of ways. Shared experiences, acts of kindness, empathy, and conversation are examples of the how interpersonal relationships are developed between students and teachers. Positive teacher-student relationships can be special, long-lasting, and an integral part of a student's development throughout their educational career.

According to the Systems Theory and Social Settings Theory, both developed through Pianta's research in educational relationships, there is a natural connection that is made between teachers and students throughout a student's educational career. Students in primary grades are often associated with one or two predominate teachers, who interact with the smaller group of students for most of the school day throughout the entire year. Since these primary teachers are present through the entire day, students have more opportunity to build connections with their elementary school teacher (Crosnoe et al., 2010; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Kelm & Connell, 2004; Luckner & Pianta, 2011; Pianta & Walsh, 1996). Research suggests that as students move past their earliest grade level, either Pre-Kindergarten or Kindergarten, the students begin to disassociate with their teacher on an emotional level because the student begins to recognize there is a limited time with each teacher (Pianta, 1991). Research exists concerning the effects of



“looping,” which is when the teacher moves with their class over a series of grade levels, and the students’ academic achievement, but most research does not explicitly focus on the relationship development throughout the looping (Daniels, 2017; Hill & Jones, 2018). As students transition into secondary school, students are faced with many structural changes that can affect relationship development with their teachers.

The factors that conventionally hinder a student’s ability to develop interpersonal relationships with their secondary teachers include a new school environment, more students, larger and more rigorous course load, less time to interact with teachers and peers, more choices for class types, and of course, more teachers with whom the student interacts (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Eineder & Bishop, 1997; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Jerome et al., 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004; Luckner & Pianta, 2011; Pianta et al., 2012). A student will conventionally have upwards to eight teachers annually at their middle school, which greatly reduces the amount of time spent with each teacher. Middle school core subject teachers in Texas are often restricted to teaching individual grade levels or subjects due to the structure of the certifications available, which can impede many teachers from looping with their students as they progress through middle school and into high school. Some subject area teachers, such as Fine Arts, are certified to teach all grade levels, which can allow for more looping with students over multiple years. Research suggests that some teachers are at an advantage for developing stronger interpersonal relationships because they provide multi-year instruction, which could allow students to create similar bonds that they experienced in primary school (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Eineder & Bishop,



1997; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Jerome et al., 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004; Luckner & Pianta, 2011; Pianta et al., 2012).

Each relationship developed between students and teachers is unique and little research attempts to identify common characteristics of each relationship, but three common relationship categories, dependency, closeness, and conflict, have been identified as key components of teacher-student relationships.

### **Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships**

Many studies emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships between teachers and students and their effects on student learning and academic achievement (Bossman et al., 2018; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jerome et al., 2009; Pianta, 1999; Pianta et al., 2002), but more research is necessary to understand the macro significance of these relationships on student development. While many schools and curriculum systems describe the need to educate the whole child, the way in which we develop and utilize the relationships between students and teachers is primarily in a transactional style (Valenzuela, 1999, pg. 22). In her seminal work studying the interactions between Mexican American immigrant students and their teachers in California, Valenzuela identified many factors affecting the development of relationships between students and teachers, especially when both parties are from differing backgrounds. Valenzuela's study is one of few that utilize students' lived experiences to describe the interpersonal relationships with their teachers. While the study is predominantly focused on the specific needs of the Mexican American immigrants in



schooling, it highlights the importance of these relationships beyond academic achievement.

Students in conventional public schools experience a wide variety of educational relationships at all levels. Throughout their time in school, students will normally engage with teachers in a transactional style, where the interactions are focused on the input of knowledge by the teacher and the output of progress by the student. The transactional model of caring is also known as an aesthetic of caring (Noddings, 1984), in which an outsider could view the classroom as a loving environment, but the participants in the classroom are focused on the exchange of curriculum information, rather than emotional connections for the sake of the connection. When teachers emphasize the value of schools simply as a place for exchanging knowledge, there is a lack of compassion for the values of the students and teachers within the school itself (Valenzuela, 1999, pg. 22).

Valenzuela identified that students and teachers from different backgrounds make different connections to school, in turn, requiring different types of interaction to feel safe and loved. Students within the study specifically stated that their experiences with teachers were devoid of an understanding of who they are, which led to a withdrawal from their interest in schooling (Valenzuela, 1999).

The full importance of interpersonal relationships between teachers and students is not known and may never be completely covered through research. Feeling of belonging, academic outcomes, and human growth and development are just a few of the areas studied through research, but outcomes of this research continue to leave large holes for both future research and interpretation. Research continues to develop the



common characteristics with an emphasis on broad umbrellas under which the unique characteristics can be categorized.

### **Common Characteristics of Teacher-Student Relationships**

Modern interpersonal relationship literature describes three common characteristics of all relationships between people; closeness, dependency, conflict (Crosnoe et al., 2010; Jerome et al., 2009; Pianta, 2001; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012) and transactional interactions (Xiao, 2017). While there are many factors of relationships that contribute to the creation and maintenance of each relationships, such as warmth, closeness, trust, care, and cooperation (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), the levels of closeness, dependency, and conflict between people have been identified as the main factors in relationship development and maintenance. The dimensions of closeness, dependency, and conflict are often analyzed in research utilizing Pianta's Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Each of these three characteristics have positive and less-than-positive connotations in the literature that reflect how a balance between and within each characteristic is a contributing factor to relationship development and the effects of the relationship on each party involved.

Closeness: Closeness, in teacher-student interpersonal relationship research, is described as the emotional connection between the student and the teacher. This includes the warmth and openness of the communication, utilization of the teacher as a source of calm in difficult situations, and how freely the student can connect with the teacher (Pianta, 2001; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). The positive connotation with closeness in teacher-student relationships is that the closer the connection between the two



participants, the greater the influence the teacher can have on the student, but too close of a relationship can lead to a larger dependency on the teacher or loss of formal teacher-student boundaries.

Dependency: Dependency can be viewed as the less-than-positive impact of closeness between teacher and students during the development of interpersonal relationships. Dependency is characterized as possessive tendencies and overreliance on the emotional resources provided by a teacher for their students (Bossman et al., 2018; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). This can be displayed through demanding time and attention from teachers on a sliding scale of age-appropriate reactions to the teacher. Research suggests that level of dependency can be a predictive factor for student success in the school environment, both academically and socially (Bossman et al., 2018).

While dependency can be a less-than-positive aspect of teacher-student educational relationships, it is possible that the traditional style of teaching, where the teacher is the primary explicator of knowledge and the student is meant to absorb and synthesize the knowledge given to them, has caused a required dependency. It is perceived that students depend on the teachers to explain subjects to the point where the student can master the topics and the teacher is dependent on the student to reflect the teacher's effort and work. This establishes an immediate dependent relationship between the teacher and students that may be difficult to overcome. This style of dependency is rampant in the traditional classroom, but little is understood about the emotional dependency felt between teachers and students. Emotional dependency is one of the least



explored factors of teacher-student relationships, but could be one that determines the level of conflict present within any given relationship.

*Conflict:* Conflict is a regularly studied aspect of teacher-student relationships, as conflict has been identified as a factor that can influence the student's academic success, self-efficacy, and motivation towards schooling, as well as the relationship itself. Conflict between teachers and students can arise for a variety of factors including differences in personality, rigor and expectations of the class, discipline style, and a variety of non-school related factors from previous relationship experiences to issues at home (Crosnoe et al., 2010; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jerome et al., 2009; Murray & Zvock, 2010). Conflicts occur daily between teachers and students. While many of these conflicts are single actions with brief outcomes (e.g., a teacher and student arguing about the student's behavior during a test resulting in the teacher warning the student and the student changing their behavior), a conflictual relationship characterizes continued negative feelings between a teacher and student. High levels of conflict in interpersonal teacher-student relationships can lead to decreased academic performance, lower levels of self-efficacy, and decreased motivation in school settings.

Conflict can be initiated or perpetuated by actual or perceived power struggles between teacher and students. The traditional power dynamic of a classroom sets the teacher in a place of authority over the students, often imposing rules and norms that are meant to maintain a civilized classroom. While these norms have long been standard practice in classrooms and are often supported by classroom management researchers, the subjectivity of active classroom settings may not support such practices. Cultural norms



or age-level expectations can often cause conflicts between the teacher and students as the latter may not be able to comfortably conform to the wishes of the authority figure, whether that be the teacher's wishes or the expectations of the school system. Conflicts caused by a disconnect between teacher and student expectations of the classroom environment can have long lasting effects on the emotional connection between students and teachers.

*Interaction:* Educational relationships require some type of interaction or transaction between parties, student to student or student to teacher (Xiao, 2017). The interactions experienced between the parties shape the relationship and help develop future interactions. In the common classroom, these interactions occur through the class material, verbal and non-verbal cues, interpersonal discussions, and many other commonplace activities. How students and teachers engage in these interactions and perceive their outcomes are at the heart of the interpersonal, education relationships.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, interactions between students and teachers have shifted from traditional face-to-face activities to fully online interactions or a hybrid of face-to-face and online. Online educational interactions have existed prior to the 2020 school year, but were not utilized on the grand scale as caused by the pandemic. The outcomes of these interactions will not be completely understood for years as researchers should reflect on how shifting learning to platforms like Zoom, Google Meets, and Canvas affected students' academic outcomes, mental health, and sociability.



## **Academic Outcomes of Teacher-Student Relationships**

Academic outcomes because of teacher-student relationships are one of the most studied areas of interpersonal, educational relationships (Bossman et al., 2018; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jerome et al., 2009; Pianta, 1999; Pianta et al., 2002). Academic outcomes are often measured through progress made throughout a student's educational career or a variety of assessments, such as grades or test scores. Most research suggests that students who share positive teacher-student relationships will have greater academic development than those who have predominantly conflictual or neutral relationships with their teachers. Researchers often look to the quality of teacher-student relationships as a predictive factor of future student academic progress, sometimes utilizing data as early as kindergarten to predict academic success through high school (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jerome et al., 2009; Pianta et al., 2002). Relationship development in the classroom can be influenced by a student's progress prior to arriving to the classroom. Students who have already displayed advanced academic progress, greater interest in school, and engagement in learning activities often develop stronger relationships with their teachers (Jerome et al., 2009). This can occur because teachers may develop a less conflictual relationship with students who do not struggle in their class and display preferred engagement with the teacher. Students who already struggle academically may develop more conflictual relationships with their teacher due to their connection with the subject itself. While academic progress, both positive and negative, can be a product of interpersonal teacher-student relationships, other outcomes of interest include self-efficacy/agency and motivation/educational interest of students.



## **Distance v. Face-to-Face Educational Relationships**

The COVID-19 pandemic, beginning in the spring of 2020, drastically reshaped the way students and teachers interacted as schools shuttered their doors and redirected learning to online platforms. While virtual education is not a new system in the world, the rapid transition caught conventional schoolteachers and students off guard, which caused a quick disconnect between teachers, students, and learning. Education and psychology researchers such as Dewey and Vygotsky describe the act of learning as an exchange from peer to peer and student to teacher and that engagement must include a sense of two-way transaction. Much of the distance learning experienced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic is categorized as asynchronous, meaning students interacting with written or pre-created materials from the teacher. This could be due to a variety of reasons from lack of technological knowledge with the teachers or students to the convenience of facilitating face-to-face and online in a hybrid model. From personal experience and observations of fellow teachers, attempting to interact synchronously in the hybrid model causes much stress on all parties involved. The effects of the transition from traditional school to fully online and some hybrid models on the connections between students and teachers remains to be fully explored and could have lasting effects for many years. Some previous research into the efficacy of virtual learning relationships can help researchers understand how interpersonal relationships were affected in the past due to distance learning situations.

Theories surrounding distance learning include Moore's definition of three types of interactions through distance learning, student to content, student to student, and



student to teacher (Moore, 1989) and subsequent additions expanding interactions to include how teachers interact with the content. The basis of this theory is that students engaging in distance learning need multiple means of interaction to make connections to the content, but that the socialization aspect of school is often lost when distance learning emphasizes a predominately asynchronous model. Student to content interaction is recognized by scholars as the primary source of knowledge attainment and can compensate for the lack of interaction between students and teachers or students and their peers (Moore, 1989 & Xiao, 2017). If we accept that the primary purpose of schooling is simply to attain knowledge and move through the content, then student to content interaction is all that is necessary for schools to be considered successful, but there is the act of socialization and the development of concepts through discourse and conversation that can only occur with connections between students, their peers, and teachers. Beyond schooling as a source of information, the socialization aspect of school leads to the relationship development that is identified as vital to the development of children from early childhood through adulthood (Meeus, 2019).

### **Power Dynamics Between Students and Teachers**

Conventional schooling dynamics establish an ingrained sense of power difference between students and teachers where the teacher is the primary source of knowledge and control, whereas the student is subservient to the adults within the school (Manke, 2009). While this may be the common understanding that is utilized in traditional education research, Manke (2009) attempts to rearrange the concepts of power



from teacher powering over students to shared relationships between students and teachers.

Aspects of the educational relationships between teachers and students that perpetuate the normative view of power include internal and external pressures to maintain order in the classroom (classroom management), cultural undertones of children needing to listen to adults, and an antiquated, though highly practiced, understanding of the teacher as lead explicator of knowledge (Manke, 2009). There is a consistent feeling of pressure on teachers from administrators, parents, fellow teachers, and internally to maintain order within the classroom. Hordes of management books speak to the need for a calm and “civilized” classroom to create an environment conducive to learning, but how one creates that often relies on the teacher establishing a sense of control through rules or procedures which students are expected to follow. An alternative approach to classroom power dynamics was established by psychologist and classroom management researcher, Haim Ginott in the late 1960s. Ginott established a method of “congruent communication” that establishes an equality between students and teachers through reflective communication practices. This requires the teacher to understand the mental and emotional development of adolescents and reflect on the meaning behind a child’s actions. This is contrary to instinctual reactions to conventionally negative behaviors of children. Especially when working with middle school students, a teacher may encounter a wide variety of emotional states from the same group of children in a short period of time (Brown, 2005). When utilizing Ginott’s congruent communication methods, the traditional power dynamic in classroom management is shifted from the adult wielding



power, to a shared power through mutual understanding. Manke, like Ginott, views the classroom power dynamic as an area of interest for research, which often pertains to teacher-student relationships.

Manke (2009) approaches the concept of power in classroom management through the lens of a moral discourse between the cultural understanding of power dynamics and her own desire to create a democratic setting in which students share “power.” This first requires the definition of power to be understood. While traditional belief is that power is a force that is utilized through a variety of means, Foucault describes power as a much more complex idea as opposed to an object to be wielded. Foucault (1982) states that power is a creation of the people and environment in which the power is perceived and is found in a struggle between or opposition to the one exerting the power. Foucault also focuses on how power is used.

"How," not in the sense of "How does it manifest itself?" but "By what means is it exercised?" and "What happens when individuals exert (as they say) power over others?" (Foucault, 1982, p. 786).

Our understanding of power dynamics between students and teachers has traditional underpinnings that are derived from ingrained norms of adult/child interplay. A differing view of power by Manke (2009) describes power as a shared responsibility between students and teachers, which is established through the development and maintenance of interpersonal connections for the greater good of the classroom and its participants. Like Foucault, Manke’s description of power requires there to be shared



interactions between parties to “use” the power, but Manke’s “how” is through reflective practices that place teacher and student on an equal field. This act can be seen as a diminishing of traditional power dynamics in the classroom, but Foucault would describe the act of diminishing the teacher’s power as an actual act of power. Manke (2009) describes a process like Ginott’s congruent communication, but applies it to all activities within the classroom. Manke wanted her classroom to reflect her moral beliefs of parenting, that children and adults should share in the “power” of their connections.

Educational relationships between teachers and students begin with an established power distance, most often derived from the ingrained norms of the schooling system. Individual teachers create a sense of equality and will actively try to distribute power to their students, possibly to develop a sense of community within the classroom or to satisfy one’s moral beliefs on child-rearing. No matter how teachers and students interact, the concept of power within the relationship must be acknowledged and understood. Unless society modifies the ingrained power separation between children and adults, connections shared between teachers and students will be viewed through the traditional lens of the adult wielding power over the child. Regarding Pianta’s Systems Theory, the power distance between a teacher and a student may resemble that of the parent and child because of the assumed authority of the adult over the child. This authority can be seen through the adult’s ability to implement and enforce rules or restrictions in a given setting or through the adult’s use of educating (through a standard curriculum or through life lessons) to guide the child. This complicates the area of research into teacher-student educational relationships because the relationships



themselves may seem coerced because of assumed power. Greater research into the child's lived experiences of these relationships could enhance our perspective of the importance of these relationships within and outside of the school environment.

## **Methodology**

I utilized a narrative inquiry design for this qualitative study surrounding teacher-student relationships. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe their journey towards narrative inquiry as their primary methodological design for educational research through multiple stories from researchers with whom they interacted. Narrative inquiry studies are grounded in the belief that the common interactions of life can only be properly portrayed through the living, telling, retelling, and reliving of experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 71). Narrative inquiry, in an educational setting, is an offshoot of the work of John Dewey who believed that narrative researchers should reflect on a “three-dimensional space” of interactions, continuity, and situation. “Interaction” refers to both the internal and external social interactions that occur continuously in one's life, “continuity” is the understanding of temporality of the experiences, and “situation” is the place in which the experiences occur. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe their understanding of experience through a four-frame analysis of inward, outward, backward, and forward (p. 50). Inward refers to the experiencer's feelings and thoughts, outward is towards the environment, and forward/backward is time.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believe that researchers utilizing narrative inquiry need to not only understand the stories they collect through these four frames, but how their previous experiences inform their data collection. Narrative inquiry cannot be void



of researcher bias because the researcher should often reflect on their past so they can become more engrossed in the present and keep an eye on the future within their participant's experiences. Narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and Connoisseurship (Eisner et al., 2017) require similar focuses from the researcher. The researcher must be able to understand the nuances of the environment and its players, understanding the historical perspective and current situation of both with enough depth to analyze even the smallest interaction and clearly relay the meaning. By grounding this study in a narrative inquiry methodology, informed by connoisseurship, I hope to enlighten readers and future researchers to the relational experiences of the participants, the nuances of middle school life, and the characteristics of positive teacher-student relationships.

### **Summary**

Modern teacher-student relationship research has become a source of increasing interest for educators, administrators, and educational reformers, but the large gap in the body of research exists, an understanding of the child's perspective of their relationships. While most research studies surround the teacher's experience of their educational relationships and how those relationships can predict academic success (Bossman et al., 2018; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jerome et al., 2009; Pianta, 1999; Pianta et al., 2002), the research has left out the insight of a section of stakeholders in the educational world, the students.

Our understanding of educational relationships primarily exists in the transactional outcomes of schooling, i.e., if a teacher and student share a good rapport,



the student will become more successful in academics, but that assumes that the primary purpose of education is strictly for academic success. If one takes the perspective touted by most modern educators that schooling is for the enrichment of the “whole child,” then researchers should explore the socialization and personal enrichment aspects of interpersonal, educational relationships. The current study seeks to identify the common characteristics of positive educational relationships between teachers and students to begin a new focus in modern literature.



### **III. METHODS**

Chapter three examines the methodological approach to this study of teacher-student relationships and their characteristics in a school setting. The chapter contains the following sections: research questions, participants, instrumentation and data collection, data analysis, assumptions, limitations and delimitations, and positionality.

#### **Research Questions**

The following research questions have emerged from previous studies surrounding teacher-student relationships and from a gap in modern literature and guided the study.

Q1: What are the characteristics of positive teacher-student relationships at the secondary school research site in Texas as perceived by the student?

Q2: How are teacher-student relationships developed and maintained?

Q3: What motivates students, in their own words, and what effect does the teacher-student relationship have, positive and/or negative?

#### **Participants**

This study involved nine students, grades ranging from sixth through eighth, attending a public middle school in a rural school district in central Texas. The sample of students for this study was selected because they each expressed interest in participating in my research while working in my classes and because I believed there was already a level of trust present between the students and myself. The COVID-19 pandemic limited the number of students with whom I could safely interact and made continuous interaction more difficult with quarantines and school closures. Participants in the study included three students from each grade level with eight identifying as female and one



identifying as genderfluid. Four students identified as White, while five identified as Hispanic. All students were current students of mine and participated in school predominantly face-to-face, with one student only attending virtually and one student attending in a hybrid model for a portion of the year due to COVID-19 restrictions. Participants selected pseudonyms for this study, Amber, Kendal, Ryuk, Jessica, Melissa, Sarah, Alyssa, Charlie, and Oliver, as well as pronouns to be used throughout the written report; participants all selected she/hers and them/they pronouns. Data from a previous pilot study involving seven participants in seventh and eighth grades are also included in the analysis and discussion. Pilot study participants included two seventh graders identifying as female, four eighth graders identifying as female, and one eighth grader identifying as male. The original pilot study was held in 2018 at the same research site as a final project, “They Treat Us Like People: A Qualitative Analysis of Student and Teacher Thoughts” for my beginning qualitative methods course. The data and original analysis were reconsidered in the context of the current study.

I have completed the CITI certification test for ethical human research and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the original pilot study and the current research for human participants.

## **Recruitment**

Initial recruitment for the current study began in August 2020 after successfully defending my proposal and beginning the IRB process. Uncertainty with the upcoming school year under COVID-19 restrictions made the potential of working with students face-to-face difficult to predict. The initial recruitment phase included observing students



at the research site for a sense of developed trust between us and for continuity in the student's school attendance. Students in the research site were given three options for the 2020-2021 school year; participate face-to-face all year, attend virtually all year, or evaluate attendance every six weeks (the grading period). I wanted there to be continuity in the student's attendance, whether face-to-face or online, and I attempted to avoid the hybrid model. This recruitment phase continued until early December when the IRB application was approved.

Selected students were initially emailed through their school email addresses and each took the weekend to discuss study participation with their parents and guardians. Parents were informed of their student's invitation to participate through individual conversations and through personal emails. Selected students returned signed consent forms and agreed verbally to participation in the study. Initially, thirteen students were recruited for the study, with eleven agreeing to participate in the beginning. Two students left the study in the first week because of changing to a hybrid model of school attendance.

Participants attended an initial meeting with me to discuss the purpose and procedures of the study. The meeting also included a reading of the verbal consent form and time for questions concerning the study.

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

The qualitative narrative study includes three data collection instruments: student reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and member checks. Reflective journals contained structured questions concerning the students' current and previous teacher-



student relationships and their perceptions of these relationships. The reflective journals were submitted every other week through email. As the journals were read and analyzed, previous answers from the participants informed future questions in an inductive manner. Previous questions were revisited to allow for more reflection time for the participants and expansion of previous responses. Journals were collected for eight weeks, but more time was allotted for further reflections and unforeseen circumstances surrounding changes in the school system during data collection.

Throughout the journaling process, I met with students in small groups to hold semi-structured interviews to clarify information from the journals, as well as give the participants an opportunity to expand on and verify their written statements as needed. The semi-structured interview allowed the participants to guide the trajectory of the interview, allowing for a more natural flow of information. Interviews can create a one-sided power shift in this process, with me as interviewer controlling the opportunity for the participants to expand on their written statements (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), so the interviews consisted of reflections on the student's written responses and open-ended questions, allowing for greater response and expansion (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 154). Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis throughout the data collection process. By transcribing the interviews consistently, there was less of a data backup and the transcriptions were used to inform later reflective journals, interviews, and information gathered during participant observations (Delamont, 2016).

The final instrument for this study was participant observations with field notes. Students were observed during the first two of eight weeks of journaling and interviews



to the narrative of the student's accounts of their relationships with the teachers, but observation time became less available due to COVID-19 restrictions and school health requirements. Observations can provide an immediate impression of the interactions between students and teachers and can inform the biases of the observer. Since each relationship is unique, this required an established relationship with the student participant and the lens of connoisseurship (Eisner et al. 2017) to understand the nuances of the mundane interactions between the teachers and students in the population. Connoisseurship requires the observer to recognize that each situation (relationship) is unique, but often follow certain commonalities. These common or expected observations can possibly cloud the observer's interpretation of the events, but also offer insights that are useful. Researchers observing through the lens of connoisseurship need to acknowledge the extent of their knowledge of the environment, participants, community, etc. and find opportunities for the knowledge to inform their interpretation, as well as allowing the observations to broaden the connoisseurship (Eisner et al., 2017). After five years of working in the primary research sites, I consider my understanding of the common interactions between teachers and students in the community as deep and nuanced, which both informs my observations and creates biases that need to be identified and acknowledged throughout the research process. While I expected participating students to behave naturally during the observations, my assumption required a great level of rapport between the participants and me to find the trustworthiness in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 164). Unfortunately, the formal observations concluded after the second week of the study. Informal observations



continued throughout the research process, but were utilized to confirm my own assumptions about student interview and journal data.

Member checks, in the form of interviews, were held towards the end of May to reflect on the information gathered from the previous five months. Student participants were given the opportunity to confirm or adjust their earlier responses, as well as expand on the data collected. This included refining the definition and characteristics of terms such as love, trust, and humor, which all became the predominate positive characteristics of teacher-student relationships described by the student participants.

Though formal observations were not completely possible during the COVID-19 pandemic, reflective journals, interviews, and member checks served as valuable data sources throughout the research period.

### **Data Analysis**

Participants submitted reflective journals through email bi-weekly for four weeks. I read the participant journals multiple times following submission and coded them using the multi-tiered system described by Saldana (2009, p. 3). Coding required multiple readings of the data, beginning with broad concepts and re-coding with each subsequent read. Codes derived during the first tier were compared across each journal and interview for refinement and consolidation. The process of returning to the data throughout the collection allows for the development of better questions in analyzing subsequent journals and interviews (Delamont, 2016). I began the coding process by separating data points from the journal entries into individual statements. After reading each statement thoroughly, I gave individual codes to start separating the data points with



phrases such as “emotional response from talking to teachers,” “learning in the classroom,” and “conversations about student’s lives.” Saldana suggests using keywords from the data to organize thoughts (Saldana 2009, p. 4) which was a step I unconsciously performed. During my initial reading and coding, I performed this task verbally, which helped me organize my thoughts in the early codes. After all journal data points had been coded, I started the second tier of coding where I revised the codes to more concise ideas and combined previously coded data into new groupings. The final codes were more specific ideas that naturally turned into the categories. Final codes included “traditional learning,” “helping in school,” and “supporting.” Data were coded using both a deductive method, which is derived from the theoretical stance of the research and research questions, and an inductive method, which is derived directly from the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 249). The advantage of using both deductive and inductive methods of analysis is that I can find different perspectives from the journal data. Coded data were arranged into emerging categories and themes began to emerge from the data. The categories that I developed from the rounds of coding included conventional educational and non-educational interactions, specifically named characteristics of positive relationships, less-than-positive interactions, extrinsic rewards, and less-than-positive interactions with neutral outcomes. Thematic elements that I derived from the journals (and eventually the interviews) included students’ underlying need for positive connections in order for them to be actively engaged in their schoolwork, a feeling of dread for or disinterest in classes in which they do not feel a positive connection with



their teacher, not being able to separate class subjects from the teacher, and a student's felt humanization when sharing a positive connection with their teacher.

As I recorded and transcribed the interviews, I applied a similar inductive and deductive process to the data. I coded the data and combined them with the data from the reflective journals, as well as previous data from the original pilot study in 2018. I performed a brief quantitative analysis of the frequency of response categories to help guide my focus for the discussion of my findings. I triangulated the data through "within-method triangulation," which occurs throughout the data gathering process by confirming my observations, assumptions, and analysis with the research participants. This helped clarify any misunderstandings from the reflective journals and the interviews and gave the participants a chance to either affirm their position or rethink their narrative (Delamont, 2016).

As another data collection tool, I observed students and collected field journals. Early in the research process, I started taking simple notes to keep track of interactions I was having with my research participants and any kind of observations I could collect, but it quickly became impractical to observe the students outside of my classroom or hallway due to COVID-19 restrictions. My school required ample cleaning of the classroom after each class and the time available to observe my participants with other teachers was extremely limited. Notetaking opportunities became sparse, so I relied heavily on the reflective journals and interviews for data. In lieu of taking conventional field notes, I would return to the primary dissertation document to add sections of personal reflection as I could each week. Field journals (in the form of additions to the



final document) were often reflections of the day or week, as opposed to real-time notetaking because most observable interactions occurred during passing periods, which did not allow for quick notetaking. Also, due to COVID-19, it was difficult to predict if the student participants would be on campus for observation, but most students attended face-to-face, uninterrupted by quarantines and school cancellations. Students attending school virtually could not be observed due to limited synchronous learning experiences, so their data come primarily from their own reflections. I had intended to utilize field journals and observations more regularly, but was unable so I relied heavily on participant journals and interviews.

The final data collection tool was a member check interview at the end of the school year. I held this member check with five student participants who were the most vocal about their experiences with positive teacher student relationships. During these member checks, I asked student participants focused questions that I was left with after the initial journals and interviews. Participants met in groups of two and three for their comfort, similarly to the initial interviews.

### **Positionality**

Throughout my PhD and development of this study, I was an employee of the research site as a middle school choir director, cheerleading coach, and fine arts team lead. I have been an employee for the school for the past six years and I am one of ten male teachers on campus, as well as one of fifteen staff members who have served the campus for more than five years. My experiences at the middle school directly informed my pursuit of this research topic. I am taking the position of a non-indigenous, or



external, insider (Chavez, 2008) as I am a recognized member of the community through my teaching. Since choir and cheerleading are both performative activities, my work is often on display for the community. Also, as an electives teacher, I am given the opportunity to work with the same group of students for many years, enriching the connections with students, family, and community. My non-indigenous insider positionality informs my understanding of the community, district, students, and research site and enhances my analysis of the data collected during this study. I do not believe that my race or gender had any effect on my rapport with participants or created a bias in my data analysis or discussion. I do believe that holding a non-core subject teaching position provided a different opportunity and level of rapport with my participants. Since most participants had been a student of mine for one to two years prior to the study, there was already an established rapport that assisted in conversations about the students' connections with teachers. It is possible that had I been a new teacher or someone who did not already have an established rapport with the participants, that data collection would have been more difficult.

### **Assumptions**

There are many assumptions I have made regarding this research study. First, I assumed that relationships between teachers and students are a natural part of the educational experience. I also assumed that students and teachers feel a similar connection within these relationships and wish to further them, though there is a power difference between the students and teachers. I assumed that the participants in this study were open and honest throughout the research process. I also assumed that the student



participants will engage naturally with their teachers throughout the observation process. I also assumed that the students felt comfortable speaking openly with me about their interpersonal relationships because I have been a teacher of record for them in the past. While we can control for many aspects of research, adolescent behaviors cannot always be controlled for, but rather anticipated. To assist with these assumptions, the conversations leading to the beginning of data collection included language surrounding non-compulsory participation, suspension of judgement, and building on the already developed rapport from previous interactions between me and the participants. There may also be an assumed bias in the collection and analysis of data.

### **Limitations**

This study contained a few limitations, mostly by the uncontrollable situations surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Primarily, the world of education was not anticipating the effects of the virus, so this study was at the mercy of student enrollment, access to technology, and sudden changes of the learning environment caused by federal, state, and local COVID-19 restrictions. These included the possibility of quarantining students for up to ten school days through positive virus testing or contact tracing, limits of technology and technological understanding of students and teachers in the virtual learning environment, and sudden withdrawal of student enrollment for any number of reasons.

Secondly, the study was limited to students with whom I already had access because of school district restrictions on student interactions. This can be viewed as both



a limitation and delimitation because restricted access meant working with students with whom I already had a positive rapport.

### **Delimitations**

This study was specifically designed to develop a set of common characteristics describing positive relationships with teachers through the lived experiences of middle school children. Most modern research observes educational relationships at the primary and post-secondary levels, but often ignores the difficult life stage that is middle school. The primary objective of most teacher-student educational relationship research is to learn the effects of varying relationships on the academic progress and achievement of the students. There is a large gap in modern research that seeks to define common educational relationship characteristics and to view those relationships through the narratives of students.

This study is delimited to one rural Texas middle school. Participants were selected because of their proximity to and established connection with the primary researcher and reflect a large portion of the middle school population at the research site. Due to COVID-19 restrictions and complications, the participant group was a good representation of the students with whom I would have access. This study is also delimited by being a male researcher working predominately with female, gender fluid, and gender non-binary student participants. It is possible that the students would have responded differently to a female, non-binary, or gender fluid researcher or that if there were male identifying students participating in the study that they may have responded differently to their female, gender fluid, and/or gender non-binary peers.



## **Ethical Assurances**

As part of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process, many safeguards were put in place to help ensure an ethical approach to this research study. Since this study involves students under the age of eighteen, also classified as a vulnerable group, and the student participants are my current students, additional review was necessary from the IRB committee to ensure the safety of all participants.

All participants and their parents signed an informed consent form that was written for both the adult and the child to understand the expectations and procedures of the research. The form also contained information about how to exit the research study and a review of participants' rights of participating voluntarily, without gain or loss due to participation or non-participation, and right to anonymous participation in the study. No financial or other benefit was given to participants, including special treatment or improvement in school grades, but participants understood that the benefit would be to the educational and research worlds.

I attempted to achieve complete anonymity of participants in the day-to-day life of school through interacting with participants away from other students, working on field notes outside of the normal school time, and keeping all study-related information in an encrypted file. Participants also got to choose their own pseudonyms for the final dissertation, which is void of any real names or other identifying characteristics, as well as all sources of coding and data analysis. Student names only appear on their signed consent forms, which were scanned for digital collection and physical copies were kept in a locked file.



## Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methods utilized in this narrative inquiry study into the characteristics of positive teacher-student educational relationships. I also discuss the procedures for selecting, recruiting, and engaging the participants and how data were collected and analyzed.

Narrative inquiry methodology, as described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), was established to collect and retell the lived stories of participants through a three-dimensional lens that explores not only the experience of the participants, but also the observer. There is much more involved in the schooling life than can be told with quantitative methods. While quantitative methods can describe a swath of data present in schooling, a narrative understanding can increase the depth of knowledge by giving readers insight into the people, environment, and time surrounding the data. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that since life is lived narratively, that research should reflect the experiences narratively as well.

This study began as a pilot study with seven middle school students, which established the research questions for the current study. The pilot study also revealed preliminary data surrounding characteristics of educational relationships at the middle school level. Data for this study were collected through reflective journaling, interviews, and intermittent participant observations. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, data collection methods were revised throughout the research period to keep up with changes in teaching and learning environments. All data were transcribed and analyzed using a self-created coding system.



Data collected in this study filled gaps in current research of teacher-student educational relationships by adding to the literature of middle school data, especially data from the perspective of students, that is currently limited. Chapter four of my study will display the data collected using the methods from Chapter three.



#### **IV. REFLECTIONS**

The purpose of this study was to analyze the characteristics of the interpersonal relationships between teachers and students from the perspective of some middle school students. In this study, I sought to reveal how educational relationships can be formed and maintained, as well as the possible effects of interpersonal relationships on the educational motivations of students. The data informing the results and analysis of this study were derived from four reflective journals, two interviews, informal observations, and two member checks which took place during the fall of 2020 and early spring of 2021 at the middle school research site. Surveys and interviews were completed by nine middle school students, ranging from sixth grade through eighth, over the course of eight weeks spanning the two semesters. Interviews were conducted in pairs and one group of three because the students expressed there would be a greater level of comfort with their peers than individually. Initial data are presented as a series of personal journal entries, to help tell the students' stories in their entirety before breaking them into individual research questions. Participants confirmed the stories within the portraiture prior to utilization. Most dates of the personal journal entries are set on a specific date, but since some of the stories occurred two years ago, the actual date of occurrence was not recalled and was placed within the greater scheme of the other journal entries for the sake of continuity.

##### **Student Journal Entries**

The following is a composite of student responses in the form of a single chain of journal entries derived from participant reflective journals and interviews.



August 24th, 2018: It's my first day of sixth grade and we were in first period today and our teacher made a reference to the musical "Hamilton: An American Musical." I am really into musicals and was shocked to see adults enjoy things I like too. I thought that after class I should tell them something like "hey, that was a nice reference" or "hey, we have a similar interest" but no, instead what happened was lots of stuttering and something along the lines of "hey, that uh that was ummm. I got that reference, yeah." I left and tried to comprehend how embarrassing that was. Luckily, it all worked out in the end.

October 12th, 2018: So, it has been about six weeks in my 2nd period class, and I was shy and pretty quiet for a good while in the class, and I didn't really like talking to teachers in general since it would make me nervous (being a 6th grader and new to the environment), so we never had conversations besides work ethic and grades. That was until I noticed how other kids interacted with the teacher, they were playful and friendly with each other, joking around and talking more as friends than teacher and student.

December 13th, 2018: My mom and I were going back to school (it was like 5pm, I think) to watch the talent show. We went up to buy tickets and the person selling them was my 4th period teacher. The tickets were around 10 dollars I think so I pulled out my money to pay. They told me that I gave them way too much money and I soon realized that instead of counting my twenty-dollar bill as twenty I counted it as one dollar. Here we are again with me being stupid and creating embarrassing encounters, but like the last story it all worked out. I had my mom go back and tell them that I can indeed count because I was thinking "Uh, no, they're going to think I can't count" and all was fine.



July 30th, 2019: Just got back from volleyball camp at my new school! I worked with this one coach, and we really got to know each other throughout the camp and she told me that she's going to be my coach when I get to 7th grade sports. I'm excited to work with her more this year in volleyball, basketball, and track!

September 9th, 2019: I'm back in my theatre class again and I have the same teacher as last year. I feel much more comfortable and can act a little more cheery and playful and make a few jokes time to time. I ended up being able to talk with them without any trouble and uncomfortableness, and I felt like I could be more open and myself in their class.

November 13th, 2019: My teacher, he's nice to me and he'll make jokes and he'll be sarcastic, and he'll make fun of me and embarrass me, but I won't get mad about it, and I'll just laugh about it. He's a little strict but that's good to have a teacher who is a little strict and can push you harder. My teacher knows the best I can do and what my 100% is and he's nice to me a lot.

January 9th, 2020: With some of my teachers that I'm close with I feel like I give them respect and they respect me back and that I can joke around with them without them getting upset or being sensitive about something. I feel comfortable and I feel like I can act like my normal self. I can be weird around them too, which is something I like because it's comfortable to talk and be with someone and not be shy with someone you don't know because they can judge you and you just don't like that.

February 11th, 2020: I was having a really bad day today. I'm not one to show when I'm upset, you can usually tell but I will pretend that I'm not upset and keep smiling even if it's a fake smile and not a really good fake smile. So, my teacher could tell that I



was having a bad day, so they cut me some slack in class. After class was over, they came over to me and were asking me what was wrong and what they could do to help and gave me some advice on what I was going through and it made me feel a lot better. I ended up being able to get through what I was dealing with because of that teacher because they were there for me. I like having a connection with my teacher, not just necessarily when you are just doing the work, it can affect you more personally.

November 18th, 2020: I was eating lunch in my theatre classroom with my friends which we had begun to do frequently because of COVID stuff. We had all finished eating our lunch and still had a lot of time left before lunch ended. We usually go and talk with my teacher after we're done so we joked a bit and started talking about a lot of the items on their desk which were very "unique" in their own way. We happened to land on the topic of a paper Shakespeare figure they had, they ended up letting us decorate it with stickers that came with it, we ended up making Shakespeare look ridiculous with ballerina shoes, glasses, a bandana, and a book that we wrote "holy bible" on. The whole time we decorated him I couldn't stop laughing at how funny he looked, and as it kept getting more ridiculous the more my laugh increased and soon I was wheezing and crying from laughing so much, I just couldn't stop. The teacher ended up joking, telling my friend that they broke me due to my uncontrollable laughter. We all ended up laughing together not just at how ridiculous Shakespeare looked but at how much I was giggling. I hadn't laughed that much in a long time, and had forgotten how much I actually missed it. I'm glad I got to experience a good laugh like that again with them.



January 19th, 2021: I think my 5th period teacher understands what it's like to be a kid and that you can't be forced with the rules all the time and so they get a little laid back with you but not to the point where you can do anything you want in the classroom. They don't hold me to the perfect student standard when I'm comfortable with them and they're comfortable with me. They don't hold me to the perfect "A" student who has good behavior. They don't keep me up to that standard. They let me loosen up and be more myself.

Student participants lived very different experiences while attending their middle school, but all shared positive connections with one or more teachers throughout the year that left a lasting impression on the student. Common characteristics of positive teacher-student relationships were revealed through participant journal entries and how relationships were developed and maintained. Students also started hinting at motivational factors for participating in school activities developed from connections with their teachers. The following section will reflect on my guiding research questions and the data collected throughout the research process.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed the data throughout the collection phase through rounds of coding and recoding of individual quotes and ideas. I started the analysis process with simple coding of hundreds of quotes and data points. These codes were reflections of the present data, which began is large phrases or individual words or ideas that were found within the data. I used the advice of Saldana (2009) to flesh out early analysis and coding. I started the process by reading the entries out loud and reviewing the recording of interviews to understand how and in what context the student reflections were said. Reviewing these



ideas out loud gave me an opportunity to hear everything again while I started coding. I refined the codes to reflect the changing experiences of student participants throughout the late Fall and early Spring within the COVID-19 pandemic. The second round of codes were more refined versions of the original coding set, but were still broad enough to envelop all data. Refining codes was a difficult step because many participants gave similar answers about their connections with teachers but with different types of experiences, so separating these data into different codes posed an issue. Student participants agreed on the underlying feelings that were evoked from their relationships with teachers, but each student had a unique experience that led to that relationship. Finding the underlying meaning of journal entries became much easier after the group interviews because the student responses gave me a more focused perspective through my theoretical framework, and I was able to further separate journal responses based on the newly collected data. After reviewing the data during and after the collection process and all codes, I noticed patterns and grouped the codes into categories. I developed categories of interactions and meaning, which included educational, school-based interpersonal, non-school interpersonal, named characteristics, less-than-positive, negative actions with neutral outcomes, and extrinsic rewards. Each category helped me understand the nuanced connections between students and teachers from the lived experience of the students.

### **Reflections on Research Question 1**

Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of positive teacher-student relationships at the secondary school research site in Texas as perceived by the student?



Students highlighted a variety of characteristics individually through their reflective journals which described both their understandings of interactions between the teacher and themselves, as well as personal characteristics of the teacher. While participants described a variety of teachers, with only a few of the same teachers ever being named throughout the journaling and interview process, each student presented similar lists of common characteristics of positive relationships. While initially I expected that students would describe characteristics of the relationships themselves, participants did not separate traits of the teacher from characteristics of the relationships. When describing a teacher, classroom environment, or relationship characteristic, student participants used the same vocabulary fluidly, e.g., students described a teacher and their relationship as loving, but expressed they had not experienced a teacher who was loving, but lacked a loving connection. This could be from limited vocabulary to separate the teacher from their classroom or the relationship, but I believe that it is challenging for people to disconnect what they are experiencing from with whom they share the experience. Since student participants used the characteristic vocabulary fluidly, it remains fluid throughout the analysis and discussion. To the first journal prompt of “describe three teachers from previous years and three teachers from this year,” students primarily focused on positive experiences with current teachers while only briefly touching on teachers from the past. I divided responses into eight categories; educational actions, education-based interpersonal interactions, non-educational interpersonal interactions, named characteristics, less-than-positive interactions, negative actions with neutral outcomes, self-reflective responses, and extrinsic rewards. Though the questions



in reflective journals predominately centered on positive relationships with their teachers, student participants described less-than-positive interactions at least once.

### **Educational Actions**

Participants described some teacher/relationship characteristics as grounded in strictly education-based actions. Students described positive relationships with teachers who “helped me learn,” “pass[ed] my test because they helped me,” “complimenting me on my work,” “helps out as often as she is available,” and “helps me understand what I need to do.” These interactions were recognized strictly for their enhancement of the participant’s learning and did not include an emotional descriptor about how these interactions made the student feel. Characteristics of educational actions include how teachers worked with students on classroom assignments, how a teacher gave additional supports when a student struggled with the lesson, or how the teacher structured the learning environment. When asked about how the teacher’s teaching style affected student participant connection with their teachers, participants focused primarily on the interpersonal interactions like the teacher telling personal stories to enhance a lesson. Participants did not exhibit an emotional response about day-to-day teaching during the interviews. In student descriptions of “educational actions” during the interview, the general act of teaching was an assumed responsibility of the teacher, but the teacher’s teaching ability was described as having a direct impact on student interest in connecting with the teacher. Participant Oliver describes a teacher whose teaching strategies enhanced their learning process in math.



“[My teacher] helped me a lot because I never really understood math concepts, so she helped me a little more in class when I was struggling and now, I understand” (Oliver, Reflective Journal #2).

“For distance learning, she worked with me well. She put instructions before every assignment and if you commented a question, she answered it at a reasonable time” (Melissa, Reflective Journal #2).

Conversely to “educational actions,” which are strictly descriptors of teaching methods or strategies, “educational-based interpersonal interactions” are moments between students and teachers that are grounded in the act of teaching and learning, but elicit a more emotional response from the participants in their journal or interview.

### **Education-Based Interpersonal Interactions**

Participants described in their journals and interviews, interactions between themselves and their teachers that were based in school activities, but elicited an emotional response from the student. Interpersonal interactions, both education-based and non-educational, were the most described among all participants. Education-based interpersonal interactions include how the teacher listens to, speaks with, and works with a student about their school experience. One characteristic of education-based interpersonal actions include a sense of happiness or enjoyment from the educational interaction with their teacher, e.g. “She praises me a lot and tells me I’m a genius. I don’t get much praise for things I do, so I always get happy at her compliments” (Ryuk, Reflective Journal #1). Another characteristic is that the student connects the educational experience with a positive memory, e.g., “A positive experience was when she took the



class outside to color with sidewalk chalk and to make our own solar system” (Melissa, Reflective Journal #1). The connection between learning and emotion relates to Bowlby’s Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1971). Children feel an innate need to be loved and cared for, so when a teacher connects the emotion of being cared for with the learning, the theory suggests that action will build the relationship connection beyond the act of learning. Jessica describes how she feels heard in her positive teacher-student relationships, “They were so nice and helpful. They don’t make me stressed; they help me take my time, and they listen and understand what I’m trying to say” (Jessica, Reflective Journal #2). Ryuk expressed the way one of their teachers allowed students to work in their advanced-level class, helped develop a deeper connection with the teacher and the subject area, “He usually lets us all be pretty independent while working and answering any questions we have” (Ryuk, Reflective Journal #3). The ability to work independently in classes that are conventionally teacher-led gave Ryuk a feeling of importance and independence that helped them feel more comfortable. Independence from the teacher, in this case, was important because Ryuk expressed that many teachers “don’t compliment [their] work” and that giving a sense of freedom made them feel appreciated and trusted by their teachers. That feeling of trust to complete work without a sense of micromanaging can be especially important with younger adolescents as they develop their independence as they mature. I followed up in the interview about how a sense of freedom strengthened positive relationships and participants agreed that reducing restrictions in the classroom helped them enjoy the class more, but that there is a fine line between a supportive teacher who creates a relaxed environment conducive to learning



and a teacher who allows students, as participants perceived, too much freedom. My participants expressed that having some limited level of freedom led to a greater enjoyment of the class, which in turn helped develop stronger positive relationships with their teachers.

“When the teacher isn’t against a little bit of freedom, I feel like I can really be myself and I don’t just have to follow and obey” (Ryuk, Group Interview, March 22).

“There are some classes where my teacher can joke around with me, but they can also get serious, but it’s fun to go to that class. It makes you feel like you have free will where you aren’t forced or pressured to do something” (Charlie, Group Interview, March 22).

Originally, I expected participants to favor teachers who allowed students too much free rein in the classroom (not establishing classroom rules and norms, requiring less rigorous work, or attempting to become more of a peer to the students than a teacher), but the students appreciated structure within the freedom. Pianta’s Systems Theory could support the idea that when students are faced with a more “friendly” connection with their teacher, that they may begin to exhibit similar characteristics as they do with their peer. Pianta suggests that the peer, parent, and teacher all have equitable amounts of direct influence on the child, but does not explore what happens when the child starts to view an influence as something different (e.g., a student beginning to view their teacher or parent as more of a friend than an adult influence).



Amber suggests that they prefer a structured classroom with a modicum of leniency instead of too much freedom.

“I feel like at least a little bit of leniency should be in every classroom, but there are certain times when they should uphold certain rules. In some classes, I’m able to focus if there’s a little bit of talking, but in some classes, I’m not” (Amber, Group Interview, March 22).

During the group interview process, participants reflected on what teaching style made their teacher and class more enjoyable. In most cases, the participants did not separate the teacher from the class, often combining them into the same entity. This reflects a similar phenomenon to participants fluidly describing both their relationship to the teacher and the personality of the teacher.

“Whenever one of my teachers is more laid back with me, it makes me enjoy their class more and want to go to their class. It makes me want to do more work in their class because I'm not completely dreading going whereas if there's a teacher where they are no fun at all. I don't want to go to that class and if I don't want to be there, then I especially don't want to do the work that I'm given” (Jessica, Group Interview, March 22).

The participants agreed that a “laid back” teacher gave more freedom in the classroom for academic and non-academic conversation, flexible seating, and using comfort items, like allowing cell phones and listening to music while working.



## **Non-Educational Interpersonal Interactions**

Non-educational interpersonal interactions were difficult to separate from the education-based, but the distinguishing factor of these types of interactions was a meaningful interaction without a traditional or expected educational outcome (i.e., though the interaction occurred at school or during a school event, the interaction did not surround the curricular topic). These types of interactions often elicited the greatest emotional response from the participants and contributed to the most detailed stories. In student descriptions of their non-educational interaction, the primary characteristic was how and what the teacher talked about with their students. Participants all described enjoying hearing about a teacher's personal life and sharing about the student's life experiences with the teacher. Participants felt a more positive connection with teachers who also attempted to bridge the age gap by referencing current youth culture (e.g., movies, shows, and music) and incorporating these things within their teaching. In one instance, an older teacher performed a Tik Tok style dance during afternoon car duty and many kids joined in and celebrated that they knew the dance. In the following days, students spoke more eagerly with the teacher and often requested their Tik Tok account name (which they had not created yet). A participant, who was very nervous in their first few weeks of sixth grade, recalled the moment their teacher referenced the musical, "Hamilton" and how that gave them the confidence to talk to the teacher for the first time. Charlie, who participates in many extracurricular activities, appreciates moving beyond the educational connection to a more familial or social connection with their teacher. They identified that this helps define their positive connections with teachers.



“The closer I am with a teacher, the more outside of the professional-ness of school and doing your work, if there's an afterschool activity and we are having conversations and talking, I'm able to joke around with them more as if they're more like a long-time friend like one I've known since elementary school”  
(Charlie, Reflective Journal #1, December 11).

Students described a lack of professional barrier between themselves and teachers with whom they share a positive connection. The concept of collegiality and a feeling of friendship versus professionalism was expressed often throughout data collection as “they treat us like humans.”

### **Named Characteristics**

Participants directly named individual characteristics such as loving (feeling like “they can always go to them” about anything), caring (when a teacher “makes sure we are fed, feeling alright, and mentally doing good” before they start working), kind (teachers who “understand what we are going through” and “help me when I’m struggling”), listening (teachers “who listen when you need to talk about anything”), and inclusive (a teacher who “doesn't care about what our race is, what we identify as, what our gender is, our sexuality, and opinions. They treat us all the same”) when asked to describe their teacher or their relationship with their teacher. Participants fluidly named characteristics to describe the teacher’s personality, the classroom environment, and their connection with the teacher with the same vocabulary. As discussed previously, this could be from the students’ close association between their teacher, the subject they teach, and their classroom environment. Whether asked to describe the relationship or the teacher, the



participants used similar descriptors throughout their journals and interviews. A common theme with all participants was an appreciation for a sense of humor or lightness between the teacher and student and an overwhelming sense of trust. A teacher's sense of humor included the use of sarcasm, telling jokes, self-deprecation, or observational humor in educational and non-educational interactions. Trust was a more difficult term for the students to completely describe. When asked how trust was developed or what trust looked like to the student, they explained a variety of situations and feelings associated with their trust, but the list of descriptors seemed like it could have extended far beyond the available time for any interview or journal.

“They were super understanding if anything happened. I could always go to them. I always trusted them. They just, they're always there for me. I know I can rely on them. If they ever need anything done by a student they can rely on me hopefully. It's mostly a sense of trust and understanding that they're going to help me with whatever I need. If they can see it on my face or the way that I'm acting and not being myself. They're going to come and see how they can help me in any way possible. I trust that teacher” (Alyssa, Group Interview, March 22).

“I can act more ‘out there’ basically. I can talk more and participate more if they are nice to me and I trust them. I usually have anxiety sometimes, like social anxiety, so whenever a teacher comforts me, I become more extroverted” (Jessica, Group Interview, March 22).



“I get more comfortable and have more positive relationships with them. I’m more extroverted and joke around a lot more and being more happy” (Ryuk, Group Interview, March 22).

When asked, student participants started to describe their relationship or connection with their teacher as similar to that of a parent or even a friend. During the member check, I questioned the idea of whether the participants viewed their teachers as their friends. The participants explained that they do not see their teachers as friends in the same way that they see their age-group as friends, but that the characteristics can be very similar. This concept is in line with Pianta’s Systems Theory with the similarity of influence from parents, peers, and teachers. These descriptions begin to shape the idea that the named characteristics of loving, trustworthy, funny, etc. can be interchanged fluidly between the different groups while maintaining the traditional roles of parents, peers, and teachers.

The following list of named characteristics of positive relationships is in no way exhaustive, but this research begins a necessary conversation about the vocabulary adolescents must describe their relationships and what those characteristics look like to the students experiencing them.



Characteristic	Description	Student Quote
Loving	Displaying acts of love like words of affirmation or acts of service regularly	“They are always there for me”
Caring	Checks in with students and provides resources beyond educational expectations	“Makes sure we are fed, feeling alright, and mentally doing good”
Kind	Shows compassion with students in every situation	“Understands what we are going through and helps me when I’m struggling”
Listening	Being open and available for students to express themselves in any situation	“They listen when you need to talk about anything”
Inclusive	Works with students equitably and supports conventionally disenfranchised students	“Doesn't care about what our race is, what we identify as, what our gender is, our sexuality, and opinions. They treat us all the same”
Funny	Uses humor appropriately in educational and non-educational instances to enhance connections	“Makes jokes with us about common interest we share, they like to tease a little, and joke around”
Creative	Develops activities, lessons, and opportunities that are beyond the expected scope of the subject	“Incorporates unique media, concepts, and other ideas in our work to help make it fun”
Trusting	The ability to feel supported and share without fear of judgement	“You can just click with a teacher. They were super understanding if anything happened. I could always go to them”
Friendly	Develops genuine connections with students that incorporate shared interest and a sense of equality	“Makes an impression on everyone. They talk about their interests and is kind and respectful to people they first meet”

**Figure 1.** Named Characteristics of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

### **Less-Than-Positive Interactions**

While the focus of this study was on the characteristics of positive relationships between teachers and students, participants struggled to only speak about positive influences. Less-than-positive interactions were part of every participants’ experiences in school. Discussion and a focus on less-than-positive interactions were a part of data as well. Participants described that they had at least four teachers or administrators with whom they felt a positive relationship and at least three teachers or administrators with



whom they felt a less-than-positive or neutral relationship. Less-than-positive interactions were primarily described as individual moments that did not significantly, or only slightly, affect the student's perception of the teacher or their relationship. Less-than-positive interactions were characterized by interactions that caused temporary discomfort or were startling to the student (e.g., being reprimanded for perceived bad behavior, seeing the teacher become angry, being ignored during times of struggle, perceived difficulties in teaching, or perceived restriction of student privileges). Melissa shared a less-than-positive experience she had with a teacher that did not affect her future relationship with their teacher. While the teacher perceived that a different student was misbehaving in their class, the teacher attempted to mitigate the behaviors and "the girl then walked out and the teacher said she was going to call the office and give them a referral and basically made a big scene" (Melissa, Reflective Journal #1). When asked if Melissa had a positive relationship with the teacher after this experience, Melissa said that they were not really affected by the event. According to Melissa, the interaction was startling, but she understood that these kinds of things happen at the school regularly. Most less-than-positive interactions seem to not cause lasting disruptions to positive teacher-student relationships because students are possibly desensitized to these kinds of interactions with teachers. While some less-than-positive interactions can cause lasting damage, many are part of the daily life of schools like redirecting students to follow rules or participate in the lesson. Students were not asked questions specifically about teachers with whom they share a less-than-positive relationship, other than identifying the number of teachers with whom they feel a less-than-positive or neutral relationship. Two



students described negative interactions which affected their interest in learning and led to less-than-positive relationships with the teachers involved. One participant, Ryuk, detailed a less-than-positive experience that greatly affected their relationship with the teacher. Ryuk said they attempted to help a student who required crutches, but could not get out of the way quickly while holding the door for them. They said one of their teachers approached them and appeared to blame them for “tripping the student.” Ryuk, a self-described “shy and quiet student,” struggled to process why their teacher was upset with them and spent most of the next period in tears because of the event. While they described that the event was isolated, they struggled to rebuild the connection with the teacher and the subject that teacher taught. Ryuk shared that they made a lasting connection between the less-than-positive experience and the teacher because they no longer felt comfortable with the teacher. They informed me that they never made the attempt to speak with the teacher about how this event made them feel, so there was not an opportunity for the relationship to be repaired. Ryuk shared that there was a lasting feeling of mistrust with the teacher because the teacher “did not give me a chance to explain.” This also caused a feeling of apprehension when moving to the next grade level with the same subject, but eventually made a positive connection with their seventh-grade teacher, which assisted in repairing their interest in the subject again.

A second student, Alyssa, described how her perceived less-than-positive experiences with a teacher affect how she interacts with the teacher.

“I have a teacher that specifically does not like me, like they have told me this and they’re rude to me. My next reaction, because I’m super hard-headed and



stubborn, I'm going to be rude back. I'm going to be respectful, but I'm not going to let them walk all over me. If you're going to treat me rudely, then I'm going to treat you rudely. Treat others how you want to be treated. If you're going to be polite and respectful, then I'm going to be the same way back, but if you're going to be rude to me and you specifically tell me that you do not like me, then clearly I'm not going to like you and I'm not going to respect you at all" (Alyssa, Reflective Journal #1).

During the interview, other participants shared in Alyssa's sentiment that though they are children in a compulsory school setting, they deserve to be treated with humanity and that the teacher is the driving force for this kind of treatment. Melissa describes interactions with teachers who they perceive do not provide enough space for students to get distracted or sidetracked, which they claim is a natural part of their day.

"When you turn around and you look and you get sidetracked and they you get in trouble with the teacher, which happens all the time. They don't care if you're doing your work. When you get sidetracked, they'll start yelling at you. That's something I don't really like because it is uncalled for. You don't have to do that. I do not deserve to be treated that way" (Melissa, Member Check, May 24).

Participants in the first group interview, Jessica, Amber, Ryuk, Charlie, and Sarah non-verbally confirmed (nodding and smiling) their agreement with Alyssa' and Melissa's comments surrounding their preferred treatment by teachers. There was an observable difference between how students spoke about their teachers with whom they share a positive relationship and those with whom they share a less-than-positive or



neutral relationship. Students describing their neutral or less-than-positive relationships would sit back in their chair and show disinterest on their face (neutral or frown without maintaining eye contact), while students describing their positive relationships would sit more forward in their chair and smile as they spoke.

### **Less-Than-Positive Interactions with Neutral Outcomes**

I developed a term, anti-negative interactions, as an original label for occurrences that involved less-than-positive interactions such as disciplining a group of students or yelling during which the participant felt disassociated with the negative activity, but it can be better understood as less-than-positive interactions with neutral outcomes. The interactions cannot be labeled as “positive” because the actual interaction was described as a negative event, but since the outcome of the event was neutral, “less-than-positive interactions with neutral outcomes” is the best phrase to summarize the students’ feelings. Students experiencing less-than-positive interactions with neutral outcomes with their teacher described a poor interaction that did not involve them or did not influence their interpersonal relationship. These types of interactions were portrayed as a teacher’s reaction to another student or to an event that did not involve the participant. Participants stated that the events “didn’t involve me,” or “because I’m a good kid, I wasn’t part of it.” Students disassociated with the event because the teacher’s comments or actions were not directed towards them. The students who self-identified as “good kids” shared that they did not usually get in trouble, though Ryuk and Alyssa stated that they had significant instances of discipline throughout their time in school. The state of being a “good kid” can be viewed as a sliding scale on which the students compare



themselves with those around them and identify certain characteristics and expectations of teachers that maintain the status quo or help them receive positive attention (See Extrinsic Rewards). Viewing oneself as a “good kid” can come from a level of bias that because they have always existed in a place of positive interactions with teachers and have received praise in the past, that they will perpetually be viewed as “good.” For the purposes of this research, students were not selected because I identified them as “good kids,” but rather because they expressed interest in the study throughout my time in the program and from sharing my interests during classes. Kendal described the moment her sixth grade teacher yelled at their class for misbehavior, but that she did not feel affected by the yelling because of her status as a “good kid.” Students disassociated themselves with these “negative interactions with neutral outcomes” events and quickly moved on to describing positive interactions within their journals and interviews.

Less-than-positive interactions with neutral outcomes can best be described as the innocent bystander in the room witnessing a negative interaction. Students who observe a negative interaction, such as a teacher yelling at a student during class, may begin to feel a sense of fear of that teacher, which could affect their relationship. This may be a positive, negative, or neutral shift in the student’s perception of their teacher. If a student feels emboldened by not bearing the brunt of being reprimanded, they may begin to appreciate the positive relationship they share with the teacher or they may start to fear any future discipline, creating a lack of safety or unease in the class. As I have identified throughout this study, relationships are highly individual and difficult to narrow to a formulaic structure, so less-than-positive interactions with neutral outcomes can have a



variety of effects on the future relationship between student and teacher. The act of disassociating with the negative interactions occurring around them may be an example of student resiliency, a form of coping mechanism taught from previous experiences being disciplined, or a student's way of processing information.

### **Extrinsic Rewards**

Extrinsic Rewards were discussed infrequently but were regarded as positive interactions with teachers. Only two extrinsic rewards were described. The first was "She had this treasure box in her classroom that was always full of Takis and sour straws and other good snacks. The way you would get the snacks was to earn tickets. Tickets can be earned by completing homework or being polite" (Kendal, Reflective Journal #1). The second was "I would always go hang out with her in the office where she worked, and she would give me candy. I helped her pass out papers to the other classrooms and helped her organize things" (Sarah, Reflective Journal #3). The students referred to these two interactions as factors contributing to their positive relationships with teachers, but these may have created a false sense of positivity from the quid pro quo of doing well or helping in school simply to receive a reward. Since many teachers utilize a rewards system to assist with classroom management and reinforce positive behaviors and work, extrinsic rewards needed to be included within the data set.

Extrinsic rewards in this form of quid pro quo can establish a competitive nature for students who often receive the rewards, especially if there is a limited number available. They may also establish a feeling of helplessness for students who do not feel they can achieve the goals necessary to receive the extrinsic rewards or who do not



regularly receive praise or feedback for their work. These extrinsic rewards can be useful within a classroom management plan, but implementation does not seem to affect the actual relationship between the teacher and student from the student perspective. Beyond external rewards such as food or privileges, students recall the time spent and individual interactions with teachers as a primary source for developing the relationship.

### **Self-Reflective Responses**

Participants were asked to share their understanding of the relationships with their teachers, but research suggests that student personalities, especially their own perspective of their personalities can affect how they view their interactions with teachers (Pianta & Nimetz, 1991; Pianta, 1999; Pianta, 2001). Though students were not directly asked to reflect on their own behaviors or personalities, multiple participants shared how their status as a student affected their connection to their teachers. Alyssa reflected that she “[has] always been a pretty good student, so all of my teachers have been fairly nice to me,” which suggests that being a good student or behaving in a specific way can enhance the relationship between teachers and students. During observations, the students who self-identified as “good students” or “likable kids” followed the traditional behavioral norms and expectations of the school and teachers were more cordial with these students. This does not represent a causation, but there is a visible correlation between students who behave within the standards and norms of the school system and the positive interactions that occur on a regular basis with teachers. Most surveys for teacher-student interpersonal relationship research provide feedback from the teacher’s perspective about how the student affects their relationships, like Pianta’s Student-Teacher Relationship



Scale survey (Pianta, 2001). Participants Ryuk, Alyssa, and Kendal identified themselves as “good kid(s)” or “good student(s)” and still shared that they shared negative or neutral relationships with teachers with a similar pattern to the rest of the participants. This leads me to believe that no matter how a student self-identifies, they will share a variety of relationships with their teachers. Since this study is purposefully studying the perceptions of the students, their teachers could experience a completely different understanding of their interactions.

## **Reflections on Question 2**

*Research Question 2:* How are teacher-student relationships developed and maintained?

In most conventional public-school settings, students receive minimal opportunities for self-selecting teachers, which sets up a system of contingency in which the distribution of students is based on the number of teachers available in any given subject at any given time of the day. This also creates a system in which the relationships created between students and teachers are at the mercy of the distribution of schedules. It is entirely possible that a student not enrolled in a teacher’s class can develop a positive relationship with that teacher, but the amount of allotted time during which the student and teacher can interact is limited. According to the systems theory of Pianta, the amount of time spent between the teacher and student has a direct correlation to the level of connection between the parties (Pianta, 1999). This suggests that students will have less chances to develop a significant relationship with teachers outside of their regular schedule. Interactions, as well as relationships, are also inherently contingent on many



variables. While the individuals engaging in the interaction have agency over their response to interactions in the moment, what leads up to these interactions and all the circumstances surrounding the interactions are contingent on every previous interaction and circumstance. While this may elicit nihilistic feelings about interpersonal relationships, it does not negate the importance of everyday interactions and their effect on the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Bowlby's attachment theory suggests that there is essential and understood value in relationships and that all people seek a loving connection with others around them. Participant Sarah described a connection between her and an elementary teacher who was going through chemotherapy while still teaching the class. There was no way for any of the people in this moment to predict what the teacher would share or how the students would react, but an overwhelming experience and outpouring of love in the moment was how Sarah remembers her connection with her teacher in elementary school.

“One time she had come into my class and gave us an entire speech of how we helped her get through all of her bad days. How we cheered her up and never failed to make her smile. Almost everyone in the class cried that day, especially me, bawling my eyes out while I hugged her” (Sarah, Reflective Journal #3).

It is entirely possible that Sarah's connection with her teacher could have occurred whether she was enrolled in the teacher's class or not, but it was within the circumstances (how Sarah came to be part of the class and that the teacher was



experiencing their hardships that year) that Sarah experienced a meaningful connection with her teacher.

While most teacher-student interactions are contingent on the distribution of student schedules, classes such as Fine Arts and electives allow for student choice, either for the subject or for the teacher themselves. With electives and Fine Arts classes, students are given more agency in selecting the subject they wish to take and/or teacher with whom they will take a class. Unlike conventionally tested subjects like math or reading, electives and Fine Arts classes often allow students to take classes with the same teacher over several years. This selected looping process differs from a traditional looping strategy where the teacher is assigned to move up with an entire class or grade-level. Student-selected looping gives the student a choice to continue their interactions with a specific teacher or to sever the connection and work with a different teacher or in a different subject area. This type of choice can represent a student's distaste for the subject being taught instead of the teacher, but participants Amber and Charlie shared in the group interview that disinterest in a subject is heavily influenced by the teacher.

"I think I'm more on the teacher side. The subjects are ok, there are some I don't really like, but in the subjects that I don't really like, the teacher makes it worse by trying to put all this work on you and they don't try to make it any fun. They just want you to get it done" (Amber, Group Interview, March 22).

"The teachers affect the way that the subject is put out and received. So, if you make the work just work and you don't give it any flexibility or any fun



whatsoever, then like nobody's going to want to do it" (Charlie, Group Interview, March 22).

Another student participant, Ryuk, described their experience with selecting a teacher, despite the critiques their peers shared about the teacher.

"I wanted to change my schedule after hearing about him and his class from my friends. They said he was "mean" and didn't enjoy his class sometimes. I never got the chance to change my schedule and I found out I had some friends in the same period with me, so I just stuck to his class. I found out quickly [the teacher] was nothing like I expected more like the complete opposite. I've chosen his class as my elective for the past three years now and I'm thankful I didn't switch out, because I would've missed meeting him and all the opportunities I got" (Ryuk, Reflective Journal #2).

Self-selecting a teacher or subject provides students with agency over their daily schedule. When given an opportunity to self-select their classes, students can build on relationships over an extended period. Time was a contributing factor that participants identified as a means of building positive relationships with their teachers. Participant Sarah expressed the more time spent with a teacher with whom they shared a positive relationship, the deeper the relationship was felt. The opposite was true for teachers with whom the students shared a less-than-positive relationship.

"I think it's easier to continue a relationship with a teacher, but it also depends on the teacher I'm continuing the relationship with because if I have more of a negative or neutral thing with them, it might be harder to make it positive with



them. If it's a positive one, I can grow even closer with them” (Sarah, Member Check, May 24).

Whether the teacher taught an elective class or a core subject, all student participants were able to identify at least one teacher with whom they developed a positive relationship. An assumption of mine for this study is that all students have access to at least one caring teacher at a conventional school. This assumption was confirmed by the participants and enhanced further with students reflecting on teachers and school staff members from previous years with whom they shared a close connection, suggesting that the relationships between the adults and students can extend well into the future, even if they are not interacting regularly anymore. These relationships may not manifest in daily interactions or even thoughts about the teacher(s), but students will often talk about their previous “favorite” teachers anecdotally and will make a point to visit teachers during extracurricular functions (visiting on Meet the Teacher Nights or coming to events hosted by the teacher at their previous school). This phenomenon of feeling a continued presence of a teacher well after the teacher is no longer interacting with the student can be observed in adults as well. In a presentation about positive teacher-student relationships at the beginning of the new school year, I asked the teachers in the room to reflect on a teacher with whom they shared a positive relationship and immediately, the room was full of smiling adults and active conversation about how a teacher greatly affected their life. This almost falls into the realm of nostalgia. Since the student is unable to interact with the teacher anymore, but ended their tenure with that teacher in a positive relationship, just the thought of the teacher brings back a feeling of



comfort and sense memory that can affect their mood in the present. Participants did not instinctively understand how their teacher-student relationships were maintained, but all students described moments that strengthened their relationships such as being able to “confide in them when I was struggling” and how they “create a classroom where I can be myself and take risks.” Though not an explicit definition of relationship maintenance, participants recognized these moments as positive experiences that made them care for the teacher more.

Some participants struggled to pinpoint the exact moment or interaction that began the relationship development with their teacher. For most participants, their positive relationship was developed through a series of positive interactions grounded in communication (listening and telling stories), humor, and developing trust. Some participants like Charlie and Ryuk, shared specific moments during which they felt an instantaneous connection with their teacher. Charlie bonded through an embarrassing situation where the teacher and they were able to laugh and break down the barrier Charlie felt with her teacher.

“One of the most memorable moments was in 6th grade. I was going to the talent show with my mom and was handing him the money to get in, but I was being dumb and counted two twenties as two dollars. He pointed it out to me and I’m pretty sure that started our first one on one conversation” (Charlie, Reflective Journal #1).

Ryuk’s relationship with one of their teachers was developed despite their friend’s comments about the teacher’s “strict” nature. The quick connection was developed after



Ryuk shared how they were nervous to start attending the teacher's class and their teacher made an intentional effort to make them comfortable.

Relationship maintenance was difficult for participants to describe. They had a firm grasp on the interactions that continued their relationships, but most of these were grounded in the amount of quality time spent between the teachers and them. Since student participants expressed that time was a major factor in developing relationships and that building on an already established relationship was easier than developing a new one or mending a negative or neutral relationship, quality time can be viewed as time students spend interacting positively with their teachers. This also suggests that time spent that the student feels lacks quality (less-than-positive interactions or disingenuous interactions) can contribute to a decline in a positive relationship or development of less-than-positive relationships. If this need for "quality time" with teachers to develop positive relationships holds true in all situations, this places a very difficult pressure on teachers to ensure that they are always "on" or engaged in a specific level of energy while teaching or interacting with students. The theoretical framework for this study (a combination of attachment theory, systems theory, and ethnomethodology) suggests that every interaction between students and teachers contributes to a relationship, whether positive, negative, or neutral. Since temporality and spatial distance are a primary factor for relationship development (Bowlby, 1971 & Pianta, 1999), the longer a student spends with a teacher, the greater the influence on the relationship. Most participants identified specific teachers with whom they were looped (continuing instructional time over a series of years), e.g., Fine Arts teachers or coaches, as their most significant, positive



relationships. Participants felt that their relationships were maintained through interpersonal interactions throughout the length of their relationship. No participant shared stories about relationships being severed or hurt and the process of rebuilding.

While the chance that students will interact with most of their teachers is contingent upon their schedule or extracurricular activities, the actual development and maintenance of the relationships formed requires consistent and intentional interaction. Intentional interactions include seeking out students to check on their well-being or when the student perceives a conscious effort on the teacher's part to engage with students in a positive manner. Ryuk explains, "When they listen to you, like actually take time to listen to you and stop everything and just focus on you for a minute or two" shows students that their teachers are interacting with intentionality.

Consistency is another factor in developing relationships between students and teachers. Students seek the development of trust with their teachers to establish a nurturing environment, but developing trust can require consistency in how teachers and students interact. Participant Sarah states in their member check interview, "we all have things that we have trouble sharing, like really deep thoughts and throughout the day, knowing that you have someone that is there for you is kind of reassuring." The consistency of knowing that someone is present with the student's emotional well-being at heart helps create that sense of trust, but it needs to be consistently present for the trust to continue. Charlie explains "For me trust with anybody really, from past experiences, I have a really hard time building trust with people" but that if the trust they share with a teacher is unbroken and "there's something wrong in the day, you're able to talk to them



and get out of that bad day” (Charlie, Member Check, May 24). Development and maintenance of positive relationships requires the expression of love, understanding, compassion, and many more characteristics described by the participants in this study. Trust and humor were the most important factors described by participants as factors for developing and maintaining positive relationships with their teachers. Alyssa describes her trust for a teacher with whom she shares a positive relationship during an impassioned explanation of how trust has helped her through difficult times.

“You can just click with a teacher and they're going to be good, and I feel like that happened with me and my teacher. They were super understanding if anything happened. I could always go to them. I always trusted them. They just, they're always there for me. I know I can rely on them” (Alyssa, Group Interview, March 22).

Most participants described humorous exchanges occurring during non-educational interactions, mostly with extracurricular activities, before/after school, or during lunch breaks. Ryuk shared a memorable moment between their theatre teacher and them where their lunch group secretly decorated a picture of Shakespeare on the teacher's desk.

“The whole time we decorated him I couldn't stop laughing at how funny he looked, and as it kept getting more ridiculous the more my laugh increased and soon, I was wheezing and crying from laughing so much. I just couldn't stop. The teacher ended up joking telling my friend that they broke me due to my uncontrollable laughter. We all ended up laughing together, not just at how



ridiculous Shakespeare looked but at how much I was giggling. I hadn't laughed that much in a long time, and had forgotten how much I actually missed it. I'm glad I got to experience a good laugh like that again with them" (Ryuk, Reflective Journal #4).

While some participants found it challenging to remember exact moments that led to the start of a positive relationship with their teacher, continuing the positive relationship was much simpler for them to pinpoint. Moments of compassion and love (teachers sharing stories about their lives and taking time to check in with students about their emotional well-being), unexpected exchanges (embarrassing moments at the talent show), sharing of common interests (teachers using pop culture to connect with students), and maintaining feelings of trust (teachers being present in difficult moments) meant the most to the students and helped them continue to feel a close, positive connection to their teachers.

### **Reflections on Question 3**

Research Question 3: What motivates students, in their own words, and what effect does the teacher-student relationship have, positive and/or negative?

Participants reflected on their motivations to attend, participate in, and behave in school for the third reflective journal. All participants stated that their primary motivation for attending, participating in, and behaving in school is to "see friends" and "please parents." Secondary and tertiary motivations included wanting to "get into a great college and get to work at my dream job," "because it is the law that I have to go to school," and for rewards from teachers and parents. Teacher relationships were not listed as a motivating factor for school attendance, but participants described that they were



more motivated to work in the classes in which they liked or enjoyed the teacher. Alyssa describes her comfort with teachers with whom she shares a positive relationship.

“When I have a teacher that I'm comfortable with and have a better relationship with, I respect them more because when I have a good relationship with them it's because you give respect to get respect. I give them respect and then they are respectful towards me about what kind of day I'm having. I'm more respectful towards them and I'm more willing to do work even if I don't like it as much because I have a good relationship with that teacher and I don't want to necessarily mess up the relationship. It would be the difference between doing work with a teacher and doing work with a friend. You'd rather do it with a friend because you can still get it done, but you get it done while you're enjoying it and not like with a teacher when it's awkward and not wanting to get it done at all” (Alyssa, Group Interview, March 22).

Contrary to this idea of motivation to work for a teacher with whom the student shares a positive relationship, participants also expressed a feeling of motivation to disrupt teachers with whom they share a less-than-positive relationship. Kendal reacted to her teacher's discipline method of yelling by intentionally displaying less respect to their teacher.

“There's this one teacher I have and she always yells at the class, but it's mostly towards me when she yells, but I'm a decent kid. She doesn't really like me. Whenever she's disrespectful towards me or yells at me I refuse to be respectful back to her because if she doesn't give me respect, I won't give her respect. If she



yells at me sometimes, I will yell back or I will glare at her because I do not deserve to be treated that way” (Kendal, Group Interview, March 22).

Kendal expressed that she was more motivated to become a disruption or find ways to actively not work (becoming intentionally distracted or engaging in non-academic activities during the class) when experiencing a less-than-positive relationship with her teacher.

My observations of participants revealed that their connection with their teacher enhanced or detracted from their motivation to actively engage in the subject being taught. Students identified multiple teachers with whom they share a positive relationship and throughout the day found reasons to stop by their classroom for a quick chat, a hug, or just to wave even if their classroom was out of the way. Participants who stated that their teacher and them shared a positive relationship would display an advanced level of focus during direct teach portions of the class, which was demonstrated by avoiding distractions from others around them, completing work quickly, and actively asking and answering questions throughout the class while their peers were more disengaged (Field Notes, December 2020). Students who expressed distaste for a specific teacher were reluctant to attend their class, participate in class activities, or attempt to actively learn the material being taught by engaging in non-academic activities and avoiding classwork. During my early observations, participants would slowly move to their class, often purposefully arriving late to be sent back to their previous class for a pass. Participants would also use class time for personal activities such as scrolling through Instagram or Snapchat while the teacher was leading a lesson and during



individual work time, participants would quickly fill out a worksheet before promptly asking to go to another class to help a different teacher. This was most prominent with seventh and eighth grade participants who have already established a rapport with other teachers throughout the school. Sixth grade participants would quickly complete work or ignore teacher instructions, but would become a distraction or behavior issue in these types of classes rather than asking to leave early (Field Notes, January 2021). All eighth-grade participants cited a specific course in which they felt uncomfortable interacting with the teacher. Participants identified that the teacher did not attempt to engage with them on a personal level, implemented strict rules that the students felt were not upheld for all students in the class (playing favorites or ignoring specific instances), and students felt that teachers acted aggressively during teaching by raising their voice or questioning students in a perceived aggressive manner. These students often delayed their attendance of class by creating extra work in previous class periods and requesting to be held in their other classes to avoid spending time with the teacher. Participants also shared their distaste for the subject itself, often saying they “hate” the class or are “bored” with the work. When asked if they liked the same subject in previous years, all participants stated that they used to like the subject, but did not enjoy it this year. When asked to explain further, participants identified that when they share a less-than-positive or neutral relationship with a teacher, they are less inclined to give their best effort.

## **Summary**

The primary purpose of my study was to understand the characteristics of positive teacher-student interpersonal relationships with a secondary purpose of developing



motivational factors for schooling from the student perspective. Data were collected through informal observations, reflective journals, and group interviews throughout the fall and early spring of the 2020-2021 school year. In Chapter five, I will discuss the results of this study, the implications of the results, and areas of future research.



## **V. DISCUSSION**

This chapter is divided into four sections: summary of study and reflections, conclusions, implications, and recommendation for future studies. The summary of the study and reflections provides a brief overview of the literature, research process, and general results. The conclusions include my interpretation of the data collected through the study. The implications section will include micro and macro implications of the survey and interview data for the local school level, the district, and potential for broader generalizations. Finally, the future studies section will include modifications to the current study for future researchers, as well as important areas of study that need to be explored to enhance the current study.

### **Research Summary**

The primary purpose of this study was to identify characteristics of positive teacher-student relationships at a middle school in rural Texas from the students' perspective. A secondary purpose was to identify motivational factors for students to attend, participate in the school setting. I used reflective journals, interviews, and participant observations to collect data surrounding the primary and secondary purposes of the study. Most data came from reflective journals and informal and formal interviews because of the rapidly changing school situation caused by COVID-19 protocols. Data collection occurred over a longer timeline than anticipated to facilitate student/teacher quarantines, changes in school schedule, and to reduce the stress on participants during the pandemic.



This study involved nine students, in sixth through eighth grade, attending a rural middle school in central Texas. Twelve students were initially selected and recruited to participate in the study, but one student moved to a new school and two elected to remove themselves from the study to focus on their courses. The remaining nine student participants engaged in reflective journals and interviews beginning in December of 2020 and continuing through March of 2021. The four reflective journals included a primary question with subsequent guiding questions to help give student participants more focus when answering questions. Interviews were performed with partners in a face-to-face format at the end of February to explore ideas from the reflective journals. Interviews were performed in pairs and one group of three at the request of the students who shared that they were more comfortable sharing with their peers in the room.

My theoretical framework for this study included Systems Theory (Pianta, 1999), Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1971), and Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel & Rawls, 2006) and viewed through the lens of connoisseurship (Eisner et al., 2017). The separate theories each explore an area of interpersonal relationships, with Systems Theory and Attachment Theory having been used in previous research surrounding teacher-student interpersonal relationships. Systems Theory suggests that all people are their own systems with spheres of influence that affect how they develop. The theory is predominantly used in early childhood education research, but can be applied to developing adolescents and even adults, as human growth and development does not have a common endpoint. Systems Theory (Pianta, 1999) suggests that children through their adolescent years are primarily influenced by their parents, teachers, and peers



(Pianta, 1999). Teachers are often included in the spheres of influence because of proximity and temporality regarding the child (Pianta, 1999). Attachment Theory, developed by Bowlby (1971), is a Freudian-adjacent theory which suggests that all people seek love and affection, though Bowlby suggests that people predominantly seek love and affection from their mother or mother-like figures (Bowlby, 1971).

Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel & Rawls, 2006) is not commonly used as a theoretical lens for teacher-student connections, but was developed by Garfinkel to help researchers understand all interactions. Ethnomethodology allows researchers to collect, categorize, and make sense of data from the common, or mundane interactions, and impart their interpretation of the interactions, the situation, the environment, and the rules, roles, and norms from the participants points of view, as well as the researcher's perspective (Garfinkel, 1967). Ethnomethodology also ties directly to connoisseurship, (Eisner et al., 2017), which suggests that researchers who are deeply ingrained in and with their research situation, environment, and participants can collect data which reflect more nuanced activities that an outsider could not easily understand (Eisner et al., 2017). This theoretical framework aided me in collecting and analyzing relevant data, which led me to my conclusions about teacher-student interpersonal relationships.

### **Theoretical Approach Discussion**

My theoretical framework combined ethnomethodology (Garfinkel & Rawls, 2006), Systems Theory (Pianta, 1999), and Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1971) to view teacher-student relationships through the student's lived experience. Attachment theory is one of the more predominant theories in educational relationship research because



there is an understood necessity for children to be loved and since, conventionally, children spend most of their day in a classroom setting, adult contact is primarily with the teacher. Students want to find others with whom they can express themselves, thus an overwhelming agreement from participants that peer interaction is their primary reason for wanting to attend school and that positive teacher interaction is an important reason for enjoying their time at school. Participants suggested that bonding with their teacher over shared interests enhanced their positive relationships. The finding that children expand their understanding of love through their interactions with the adults around them builds on the groundwork of the Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1971). Student participants expressed their need for deep connection, common interests, and opportunities to grow and learn. These could all be encompassed within the concept of “love,” but participants used the term “love” in combination with a variety of characteristics and interaction types, which suggests that finding what “love” means and how to express and receive love is an underlying purpose of developing relationships with teachers.

Systems Theory (Pianta, 1999) suggests that when viewing children as their own biological and behavioral system, there are surrounding layers of influence with varying levels of effect on the child. Pianta suggests there are at least three circles of influence, with the closest level including the parents or guardian, peers, and teacher because of their proximity to and the amount of time spent with the child. The theorized two circles beyond the first can include distant relatives, religious leaders, and community members, though every level of influence will include different combinations of people depending



on cultural or local norms. My study confirms the portion of Pianta's Systems Theory (1999) that suggests that children experience a high level of influence from parents, peers, and teachers when it comes to schooling. Participants suggested that their primary reasons for attending school, outside of legal requirements, are to socialize with their peers and to learn. Peer socialization is a form of learning through a hidden curriculum of cultural expression, discovery of likes and dislikes, development of personality traits through shared experiences with those around them, and beginning to differentiate norms and individuality through socialization. Participants also expressed that interacting with their teacher outside of the academic curriculum made them feel more comfortable in the school setting, which could have a large effect over time. Pianta's theory does not explore the lived experience of the child as they interact with their varying spheres of influence. My study begins the conversation of what children see and experience as they move through their school day and work with a variety of teachers. My study suggests that the amount and type of influence a teacher has is important in the immediate life of the child as it can directly influence the comfort level, active participation, and motivation in the school setting. Conventionally, children spend most of their lives from ages five to eighteen in a classroom environment, which makes the influence of teachers in the immediate lives of children very important.

Garfinkel's ethnomethodological approach to studying human interaction (Garfinkel & Rawls, 2006) helps structure the findings of my study. Ethnomethodology suggests that all interactions can be understood and analyzed, even the seemingly mundane and simple interactions. During my study, I assumed a non-indigenous insider



positionality (Chavez, 2008), meaning that I have assimilated into the norms and cultures of the school, district, and community and have been accepted as a member of the community without being a native. My interpretation of the data comes from six years of experience at the school and informal collection of data through student letters, testimonials, and my own lived experience. Ethnomethodology allows for sense-making of regular, everyday interactions, which, for this study were identified by participants as the primary basis for their positive relationships with their teachers. Most of these interactions were commonplace: words of affirmation, acts of service, use of humor, and other expressions of love. Some interactions were less common and had considerable influences of the creation and maintenance of positive relationships between participants and their teachers.

### **Teacher-Student Relationship Characteristics**

The primary purpose of this research was to identify common relationship characteristics that contribute to a positive relationship between teachers and students (Figure 1). These characteristics are deceptively simple and predictable, as most research surrounding relationships in a school setting (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Eineder & Bishop, 1997; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Jerome et al., 2009; Klem & Connell, 2004; Luckner & Pianta, 2011; Pianta et al., 2012), include references to the list, but these characteristics are conventionally identified from the adult's (either teacher or researcher) perspective. No new or significant characteristics were identified through this study, but the student-identified aspects of this study make for an important contribution.



Adolescent students seek to develop positive connections with their teachers primarily because, as Bowlby describes it, love and connections are innate human needs (Bowlby, 1971). As people grow through adolescence, they seek to develop their own personality through their interactions. Positive connections can lead to positive personality development (Meeus, 2019).

The most-referenced characteristics of positive relationships were friendliness, trust, and humor. Friendliness, or a sense of collegiality, was mentioned repeatedly throughout data collection. Pianta's (1999) System Theory suggests that personal development is affected equally by parents, peers, and teachers as they all share a similar amount of time with and physical proximity to the developing child (Pianta, 1999). Throughout the interviews, students referred to their teachers as "more of a friend than a teacher." While this could be controversial, as teachers are often told to maintain a distance and professionalism with their students, I believe that students use the term "friend" simply to represent a comfort level and closeness, as opposed to literally feeling that their teachers are their peers. Most participants shared that they talk to their teachers about similar topics as they do their peers. Those topics were focused on cultural connections and seeking advice in difficult situations, which falls under the "non-school based interactions" category in my data collection (Chapter 4, p. 77). The comfort level felt within this "friendly" space had a direct correlation to the participant's self-reflection of engagement in classroom activities and positivity towards the expected workload. Student participants expressed that they "were more willing to work" and "worked harder" in classes led by teachers with whom they shared a positive relationship. Beyond the reflective journals and interviews, there is an observable difference between how



students act with specific teachers. Body language, communication style, physical distance, and level of engagement were markers which were observed throughout the research period. During my observations of three participants with similar school schedules, I saw the students trying to get physically closer to their teachers, attempting to make jokes, and talking about more non-academic topics (mostly about popular music and shows they enjoyed). The students spent the entire passing period time out of their seats, visibly excited to be in the classroom and working with the teacher. Two classes later, the students were active in the hallways, continuing a conversation that I could not hear, but were immediately drained of visible energy as they arrived at the class, they self-reported that they “dreaded.” Students did not greet the teacher and sat silently as the bell rang, which almost felt as if they were different children in both classes.

Students who shared that they were close to specific teachers spent more time physically closer to the teacher (coming to the classroom throughout the day, purposefully sitting closer, and choosing to eat lunch with the teacher), actively engaging in the class period (asking and answering questions more freely, sitting attentively, and volunteering for special projects), and happily communicating with the teacher (participating in jokes and telling positive stories). While this can occur with teachers whom the students feel a less-than-positive or neutral relationship, students were more commonly interacting with their teachers with whom they viewed a positive relationship.

Students mentioned “trust” often. Trust is directly connected to a sense of safety, which is the base for Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which itself is often used as a reference for how to meet students’ needs in the school environment. The belief is that students need a sense of safety and comfort in a classroom to engage in learning.



Participants suggested that when they feel heightened levels of trust with their teacher, they can be their more authentic self, which in turn brings them more joy (Chapter 4, p. 69). Since school is not a laboratory setting where all variables can be controlled, there will be times when students cannot participate at their fullest potential. For example, when students have unexpected events in their lives, such as a loss in the family, natural disasters, or illness, their ability to give their full attention and effort in school may be hindered. When a student does not share trust with their teacher, this can lead to disruptive behavior or a complete shutdown of activity, but when students develop trust with their teacher, participants reflect that they are able to work through issues as they arise and give more effort in classroom work and activities.

Above all other characteristics, humor was referenced as the most important characteristic in positive teacher-student relationships. Humor creates a lightness or a freedom within the class by relieving tension and stress, encouraging students to share opinions, express themselves, and take a break from the rules and regulations of modern school systems. Participants shared stories of “being sassy” or “sarcastic” with their teacher, but the underlying theme was freedom of communication and learning appropriate communication skills. Students self-reported social anxiety factors that often caused them to communicate less and attempt to blend into the background of a class, but when teachers included purposeful and appropriate humor (culturally relevant jokes, content-specific jokes, excessively corny dad jokes, etc.), they felt more inclined to participate in conversations and activities. Humor also helped students cope with difficult moments in their lives, especially with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Participants made it clear that they can tell when a teacher is naturally able to incorporate humor into their teaching style and when it is forced or inappropriate. Students like teachers who create a sense of freedom in their classroom and use humor as part of that freedom, but do not enjoy having a teacher “who tries too hard” or makes the interactions feel unnatural.

### **Relationship Development and Maintenance**

The topic of relationship development and maintenance was a challenge for student participants, as it was difficult for them to pinpoint a moment that led to a positive connection with their teacher. For most, it was a combination of many moments. Many stories surrounded teachers making cultural connections or references, sharing stories with which the students could relate, or recognizing student individual needs.

Students do not always feel that their teacher “understands who they are” or feel that there is an attempt to connect with the current youth culture, but when they feel seen and heard by a teacher, students latch onto the teachers. Participants expressed and demonstrated an excitement for teachers referencing music, television, movies, artists, and cultural movements that are current and important to the students. Teachers with whom the students had positive relationships regularly spoke up for conventionally disenfranchised groups, such as students of color and of the LGBTQ+ community. During observations, participants were more open about their identification with the teacher and fellow students if the teacher either identified themselves as being an ally verbally, through their actions, or identifying markers such as an ally flag. The more comfortable teachers are with their students’ individualized needs and interests, the stronger the student-identified and observable connection between the two.



All participants shared that they grew closer to a teacher who regularly listened to their stories and told stories about their lives outside of school. The lives of teachers outside of school can be shrouded in mystery, with some conventions holding that teachers should share as little information as possible about their personal lives. Students want to know who we (teachers) are and what we do when we are not grading papers. There is a fine line between what can and should be shared with students, but children are consistently looking for common ground with their teachers.

I was once told by an administrator that students should not be aware of our lives outside of school, but this is the very essence of what children are seeking from their connections with adults. Students want to know how their school education will affect them outside of the building and since learning also includes a tacit or hidden curriculum of life skills and social-emotional development, greater exposure to a variety of life experiences will expand the students' learning. There is a fine line between effective storytelling and over-sharing, as students can be critical about the amount of information making the connection "awkward" or "uncomfortable." Participants expressed that when a teacher interjects stories or thoughts that do not fit with the situation or are controversial, it creates a barrier between the students and teacher that is difficult to overcome.

Participants also suggested that their connection with teachers they have for multiple years (looped or multi-level teachers such as Fine Arts and athletics) were easier to build and maintain than with new teachers. As a Fine Arts teacher, I am often told that students will behave better in my class and work harder in my class than many of my tested-subject counterparts because it is the "fun" class or because it is an elective, but



student participants identified that continuing their relationship with a teacher is easy and creates a deeper connection because of the amount of time spent with that teacher, regardless of the subject taught. Students stated that if given the option, they will remove themselves from classes with looped teachers by switching electives or extracurricular activities. My participants had not experienced having a teacher multiple years without self-selecting the teacher or subject, but it is possible that students are placed in a multi-year class or have a looped teacher with whom they share a less-than-positive relationship. More data are necessary to understand the effects of looping with a less-than-positive connection instead of positive. While looping is common with elective teachers in middle and high school, looping teachers is more broadly utilized in elementary and middle school to help maintain continuity of learning.

### **Motivations Through Relationships**

Before beginning this study, my students often shared that they only wanted to attend specific classes or would come to school for the “fun classes,” which led me to believe that student attendance and participation in school was guided solely by their enjoyment of specific teachers or subjects. Despite my initial theories, students expressed they attended school for a variety of reasons including the compulsory nature of school, to maintain the support of their parents or guardian, to spend time with peers, and to have a successful future. This continues to support the use of Pianta’s System’s Theory (Pianta, 1999) as part of the theoretical framework for this study. The child, as an independent, biological system is affected by spheres of influence. Pianta suggests that as the systems (people or groups) become both physically and emotionally distant from the child or spends less time with the child, the systems have decreasing levels of



influence on the child. Pianta includes parental figures, peers, and teachers as the most influential systems because of proximity and temporality. Though participants shared that teachers had little effect on their attendance at school, whether the relationship was positive, negative, or neutral, the student's connection with their teacher greatly influenced how they participated during class and the level of effort they exerted in after school activities such as homework or extracurricular activities.

Student participants expressed that they were more willing to work for a teacher with whom they shared a positive connection and would actively avoid the work of a teacher with whom they shared a neutral or less-than-positive connection. This was regardless of subject matter. Students suggested that they did not dislike a specific subject, even though many of their peers said how much they hate specific subjects, but rather dislike the teaching style or personality of a teacher teaching that subject. Students will often connect a teacher and subject as one concept, but when asked to reflect on their experiences, they will have school subjects which they prefer over others, but shared that a great teacher with whom they connect can enliven their enjoyment of any subject.

### **Implications**

The initial immediate result of this study is that the students participating in this study had their voices and opinions heard. Student voice research like in *Subtractive Schooling* (Valenzuela, 1999) is a growing field that allows opportunities for students to express themselves and share their experience in schools. Most research is from the perspective of the adult and researcher, which provides one perspective of the student experience, but nothing can substitute for qualitative data collected directly from students. This study did not reveal any new characteristics of positive teacher-student



relationships, but did reveal that trust and humor are the most important characteristics to students. The qualitative data collected from this study contribute to a necessary conversation about the student perspective of what makes school enjoyable. My participants suggested a correlation between positive relationships with their teachers and their willingness to work to their highest potential. Though positive relationships were not the only reason students said they worked in school, positive relationships contributed to a feeling of a safe environment that was more enjoyable than environments in which they felt a less-than-positive or neutral relationship with their teacher. It is possible to generalize that students beyond my nine participants share similar feelings about building positive relationships with their teachers and that those positive relationships can make the learning environment more enjoyable. Though more research is necessary to confirm this generalization, this study serves as a good foundation for future research in the student experience of school.

The primary implication for this study, beyond the participants, is school district recognition that “building a relationship” is not simply an action, but rather a process. School districts, especially after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, referred to relationship building as an educational need, at a similar level to teaching the curriculum, but have not invested in professional development or research on developing these relationships. Many districts in central Texas left the steps to the teachers with the broad instructions of connecting with students, in addition to all their other curricular and safety requirements. Many teachers in my district met this with one-off activities “getting to know” students and struggled to follow up beyond the initial activity because of the difficulties felt while teaching in a pandemic, which required most teachers to take on



additional responsibilities. No formal data were collected in years prior to the pandemic about the amount of time teachers spent using the relationship building activities to intentionally work towards stronger, positive relationships. While the sentiment of building relationships as an action step in classrooms is admirable, the data from this study suggest that students develop relationships over time and through a more natural process. This does not mean that teachers and administrators cannot take steps to help build relationships, but that relationship development and maintenance requires vulnerability and engagement with all students.

Another implication of this study is for teacher preparation programs, both collegiate and non-traditional pathways. Current university educator preparation programs provide a theoretical approach to children. Pre-service teachers rarely work with children in a real classroom environment until their student teaching experience. While development of content-knowledge is paramount for effective teaching, few classes are focused on building on favorable characteristics that will assist in relationship development. Since student participants identified through this study that they are more willing to work for teachers with whom they share a positive relationship, more development with pre-service teachers regarding developing positive connections and longer practicum experiences could help teachers reflect on their strengths and growth areas before entering the final phase of their preparation program.

The final implication is how teachers and administrators think about their students. The most glaring outcome of this research was that students felt as if some teachers do not recognize their humanity and individuality. Many classrooms are centered on strict rules and regulations to maintain order. While this can reflect good



classroom management, it overshadows the individuality of the student and creates a classroom environment focused on compliance instead of connection. Students want to be viewed as unique individuals who are seen, heard, and respected for their individuality. Students suggested that social-emotional connection in developing a relationship was a motivational factor for academic success and enjoyment of school. Viewing the school system through a human resources lens (Bolman & Deal, 2021; p. 113), there are many “stakeholders” in education. Conventionally, these are considered the school board, community members, teachers, parents, and students. As an organization, school focus predominantly surrounds teacher input and student output, but input versus output sets a binary standard for how schools function. A new interest in student social-emotional learning (SEL) has started in the United States, but there is still a desired output within many SEL curricula (Often manifesting in behavioral output). If students are viewed simply for their output ability, the school system loses many aspects of the students that cannot be measured with traditional assessment tools. In a “student-centered” model of learning, students should be the primary source of educational actions (leading academic conversations, developing assignment outputs, and guiding the trajectory of learning) and teachers should serve as facilitators of learning, but this again becomes a system of an input and output binary. If student as stakeholder in their education became more about addressing the individualized needs of the students through developing strong, positive relationships between teachers and students, there could be greater engagement from the students with their education.



## **Recommendations for Future Study**

To complement and further this study, further research is necessary in a few areas. Expanding the breadth of data collection for student-identified characteristics of positive interpersonal relationships with their teachers; understanding the connections of looped teachers at the middle and high school level; and implementation of relationship-driven pedagogy for pre-service and active teachers.

This study supports the need for greater investment in school-based interpersonal relationship research with actionable change in the future to help teachers and administrators, both pre-service and currently serving, develop skills necessary to help identify relational acts that contribute to positive interpersonal relationship building. Having students share their perspective of their school experience is the major contribution of this study. Often, educational research is built from an adult's perspective of the student experience, whether that is a teacher or an outside researcher. Educators and educational leaders can ultimately benefit from listening to and capturing the student experience as a portion of lesson development, building school culture, and enhancing the learner experience.

Another recommendation is for further study is with looping teachers at multiple grade-levels. A problem with looping, at least in the Texas teacher certification program, is that few subjects allow for teachers to legally teach specific grade-levels without obtaining a new certification. Fine Arts, electives, and athletics teachers are often certified from Early Childhood (EC) through twelfth grade, which gives greater freedom in looping, while many subject area certifications cover specific grade-levels with traditional content sequencing in mind. This limits the looping ability for tested-subject



teachers by placing the burden of obtaining additional certifications of the teacher. Until certifications are addressed, looping will continue to be a difficult process for the modern school system, even though it may benefit students.

Further research is also necessary to continue to develop a more comprehensive list of positive relationship characteristics, as well as seeking to understand the fluid use of named characteristics in descriptions of teachers, their classroom environment, and the teacher-student relationship.

Furthermore, future longitudinal research is necessary to understand if and how these relationship characteristics come to fruition in teacher-student relationships at later grade levels and if previously experienced relationships continue in years beyond current classroom engagement.

### **Discussion Summary**

Students value their relationships with teachers, seek connections with teachers through shared experiences, and are encouraged by positive relationships to engage in their learning. Participants identified characteristics and common experiences that lead to positive relationship development. While this list of characteristics and experiences is nowhere near exhaustive, it is a starting point for further research of the student lived experience in schooling. Identifying the listed characteristics in Figure 1 is a first step towards utilizing the preferred characteristics in building true connections between teachers and students, teacher preparation programs, identifying viable teacher candidates, and coaching struggling teachers.



## APPENDIX SECTION

### APPENDIX A: Theoretical Framework Composition

Score

# Relationship Theme and Variations

## Theoretical Framework Graphic

$\text{♩} = 90$

Soprano 1

Soprano 2

Alto

Tenor

Bass

6

S 1

S 2

A

T

B

©

The musical score is written for five voices: Soprano 1, Soprano 2, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. It is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 90. The score consists of two systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 5. In these measures, Soprano 1 and Soprano 2 have identical melodic lines, while the Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts are silent, indicated by whole rests. The second system begins at measure 6. In this system, Soprano 1 and Soprano 2 continue their melodic lines, while the Alto, Tenor, and Bass parts remain silent with whole rests. The Alto, Tenor, and Bass staves are marked with an '8' below the staff line, likely indicating an octave shift. A copyright symbol (©) is located at the bottom right of the page.



Relationship Theme and Variations

2  
12

S 1

S 2

A

T

B

This musical system contains measures 2 through 12 of the 'Relationship Theme and Variations'. It features five staves: Soprano 1 (S 1), Soprano 2 (S 2), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The key signature has one flat (B-flat). S 1 plays a melody of eighth and quarter notes. S 2 plays a more active line with eighth and sixteenth notes. A provides a steady accompaniment of eighth notes. T and B have rests for the first five measures, with T entering in measure 6 and B in measure 7.

18

S 1

S 2

A

T

B

This musical system contains measures 18 through 22. The instrumentation remains the same. S 1 continues the melodic line. S 2 has a more complex, rhythmic part. A continues with eighth notes. T and B have rests for the first measure, then enter with eighth notes in measure 19 and continue through measure 22.



## Relationship Theme and Variations

3

23

S 1

S 2

A

T

B

Measures 23-24. S1: Treble clef, key of B-flat. Measure 23: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. Measure 24: Rapid sixteenth-note runs. S2: Treble clef, key of B-flat. Measure 23: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. Measure 24: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. A: Treble clef, key of B-flat. Measure 23: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. Measure 24: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. T: Treble clef, key of B-flat. Measure 23: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. Measure 24: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. B: Bass clef, key of B-flat. Measure 23: G3, A3, Bb3, A3. Measure 24: G3, A3, Bb3, A3.

25

S 1

S 2

A

T

B

Measures 25-28. S1: Treble clef, key of B-flat. Measure 25: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. Measure 26: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. Measure 27: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. Measure 28: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. S2: Treble clef, key of B-flat. Measure 25: G#4, A#4, Bb4, A4. Measure 26: G#4, A#4, Bb4, A4. Measure 27: G#4, A#4, Bb4, A4. Measure 28: G#4, A#4, Bb4, A4. A: Treble clef, key of B-flat. Measure 25: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. Measure 26: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. Measure 27: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. Measure 28: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. T: Treble clef, key of B-flat. Measure 25: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. Measure 26: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. Measure 27: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. Measure 28: G4, A4, Bb4, A4. B: Bass clef, key of B-flat. Measure 25: G3, A3, Bb3, A3. Measure 26: G3, A3, Bb3, A3. Measure 27: G3, A3, Bb3, A3. Measure 28: G3, A3, Bb3, A3.



Relationship Theme and Variations

4  
29

S 1

S 2

A

T

B

33

S 1

S 2

A

T

B



Relationship Theme and Variations

5

37

S 1

S 2

A

T

B

43

S 1

S 2

A

T

B



6  
49

Relationship Theme and Variations

S 1

S 2

A

T

B

8



## APPENDIX B: Reflective Journal Questions

### Journal 1:

With as much detail as you would like to provide, please describe three teachers from previous years and 3 teachers from this year. In this description, you should think about...

1. How do/did they interact with you?
2. What were some memorable moments with them?
3. What were some positive experiences?
4. What were some negative experiences?
5. How do/did they work with you during distance learning (if applicable)?
6. Anything else you want to share with me

### Journal 2:

Thinking of 1-2 teachers with whom you share a connection, answer the following questions with as much detail as you care to provide

1. Describe the teacher(s) using 7-10 words or phrases
2. How was your connection with this/these formed?
3. How does the teacher interact with you during learning activities?
4. How does the teacher interact with you outside of regular learning activities?
5. Using the 7-10 words or phrases you used to describe your teacher(s) for this journal, describe how your teacher displays these qualities (What do they do to make you describe them this way?)

### Journal 3:

Please answer the following questions with as much detail as you care to share.

1. What motivates your attendance at school?
2. What motivates your work in school?
3. What motivates your behavior in school?
4. What influence do your adults (parents/guardians/grandparents/etc) have on your participation in school?
5. What influence do your teachers have on your participation in school?
6. Are there teachers who have more influence than others on your participation in school? If so, how/why?

### Journal 4:

Thinking of one to two teachers, answer the following questions

1. How do you show your teacher how you feel about your connection with them? (Examples: How do you behave in their class compared to others? What kinds of things do you talk to them about? How comfortable are you around them? How close do you feel to them?)
2. Has a close relationship with a teacher ever been damaged? How? What happened? Did the relationship get repaired? How? How has this affected your current relationship with them?
3. How do your teachers show you that they care?
4. How does a teacher's sense of humor affect your connection with them?



## APPENDIX C: Semi-Structured Interview and Member Check Questions

1. With how many adults in your school day do you feel that you share a positive relationship? How about neutral or negative?
2. Tell me about a teacher with whom you share a positive relationship
3. How does the leniency of a teacher affect how you feel about that teacher?
4. When you state that you are “dreading a class,” is that based on the subject, the teacher, or a combination?
5. How do you feel you act with a teacher with whom you share a positive relationship?
6. Is it easier to start a new relationship with a teacher or continue one over a period of time?
7. With teachers with whom you feel you share a “negative” or “neutral” relationship, how do you act in and out of class settings with them?
8. Do you talk about similar things with your peers or friends as you do with your teachers?
9. How does the teacher with whom you share a positive relationship act around you?
10. Think of a teacher with whom you share a positive relationship. How did that connection begin?
11. Can you think of a story you would like to share about a teacher?
12. What does it look like, from your perspective, when you trust a teacher? What do you experience? What do you feel? What do you see?
13. Why is trust important with a teacher?
14. How do you know you can trust a teacher?
15. When you use the phrase, “They’re not like a teacher, they’re like a friend,” what does that mean to you?
16. Do you view your teacher as your friend?
17. Do you feel that your teacher fills any other roles?
18. Why is it important that you can “open up” in a school setting?
19. In your perspective, is school more educational or social?
20. Why is it important that teacher shares humor?



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