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Teacher Perceptions of Relationship Building with Students: A Case Study of K-5 Schools in a  
Southern California School District

By

Anais Janoyan

Claremont Graduate University

2022



**Approval of the Dissertation Committee**

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Anais Janoyan as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education.

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**Abstract**

Teacher Perceptions of Relationship Building with Students: A Case Study of K-5 Schools in a  
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Anais Janoyan

Claremont Graduate University: 2022

This mixed methods case study of K-5 schools in a medium sized Southern California school district, investigated teachers' descriptions and perceptions of their teacher-student relationships and relationship building experiences with students. Teachers' views were analyzed at district, school site, and individual levels to uncover both common and unique patterns across these various contexts. Surveys and interviews were used to gather data. Surveys were quantitatively analyzed, and interviews underwent a qualitative thematic analysis but were also supported by quantitative data (e.g., code recurrence frequencies and percentages). Data results of teachers' descriptions and perceptions on teacher-student relationships provided teachers' overall views, in addition to their views on the role of teacher-student relationships on learning outcomes (e.g., academic, behavioral, social-emotional, psycho-social) and effective strategies for relationship building. Practice, policy, and research implications from the study were provided.

*Keywords:* K-5 education, teacher-student relationships, learning outcomes, relationship building strategies, mixed methods case study

**Dedication**

For Mom.

I am eternally grateful for my mother—the beautiful woman who raised and influenced me to be the woman I am. My mother always believed in me and provided boundless support and encouragement in my life. Her love, wisdom, strength, memories, and spirit live in me forever.

I love you Mommy.

I miss you.

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## **CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT**

### **Research Problem**

Education in the United States originated in 1635 with the establishment of the first American public school in Boston, Massachusetts but widespread publicly funded or “free” education was not offered until much later in the 1830s (Himanshu-Ojha, 2012; Kober & Rentner, 2020). Widely available, state funded education was advocated by a Massachusetts legislator and secretary of Massachusetts’ board of education, Horace Mann (Kober & Rentner, 2020). Mann said that while human differences and division exist among men, education is the “great equalizer” in society (Grove & Montgomery, 2003). Though this ideal would—in theory—give all children a chance at success regardless of their demographic background (Himanshu-Ojha, 2012), 200 years of history prove societal inequalities persist. Moreover, education in the US has failed to “equalize” society and a disproportionate amount of children—often from disadvantaged populations—continue to experience shortcomings in school that affect their academic trajectories, future careers, and quality of life (Kautz et al., 2014).

Bandura and Walters (1977) established that learning is a cognitive process that occurs within a social context—children learn through social interactions with their teachers and classroom peers in the school setting. Emotions and relationships affect how and what individuals learn (Durlak et al., 2011). The social-emotional climate of a classroom is determined by teacher-student relationships, and behaviors and interactions among students (Howes & Ritchie, 2002). Even with technological advancements and the incorporation of digital learning in classrooms, the traditional social learning practices of elementary education remain prevalent. Relationships are a strong determinant of children’s early schooling experiences, especially from kindergarten to fifth grade (K-5) where students spend most, if not

all, of the school day in a single classroom with the same peers and teacher (Rosenshine, 2015). In recognition of the importance of relationships, schools are increasingly using holistic approaches to educate children to support their non-cognitive development (e.g., psychological, social-emotional, and physical well-being) (Garcia & Weiss, 2016; *Whole Child Resources - Initiatives & Programs (CA Dept of Education)*, n.d.).

Educational research confirms that teacher-student relationships have implications for cognitive (e.g., academic) and non-cognitive (e.g., behavioral, social-emotional, psychosocial) outcomes (Baker, 1999; Pianta et al., 1997; Velasquez et al., 2013; Wentzel, 2012). Often these studies focus on kindergarten populations (Baker, 2006; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Buyse et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2014) and longitudinal research of children from kindergarten through grade 5 (Jerome et al., 2009; Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011), underscoring the importance of teacher-student relationships in early education.

### **Nature of the Research Problem**

The teacher's role in children's schooling experiences—especially during the formative years—is critical to their future academic achievement. Teachers, administrators, and school personnel facilitate educational experiences and outcomes for students and their families. But perhaps the most significant relationship is the one between a student and their teacher because they spend all day together. Teachers' daily interactions with students contribute to their cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009). Children develop academic competencies, beliefs of themselves as learners, and attitudes and motivational perspectives about schooling during elementary school (Baker, 2006). While the long-term impacts of teacher-student relationships have been established by previous research (Weinstein & DeHaan, 2014; Wu et al., 2010), the present study investigated the teacher-student

relationships themselves. This study uncovered findings about relationship building across different schools, teachers, and students in one school district and shed light on implications for practice, theory, and policy. Since most educational research on teacher-student relationships has been quantitative and targets the primary school years (e.g., pre-K-5) (Roorda et al., 2011), this mixed methods research study also provided a complementary qualitative snapshot of the key constructs in this area of research.

### ***Relationships Matter for Learning***

Early relationships have been found to be foundational for later relationships and subsequent schooling outcomes (Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Students' early elementary experiences with school, teachers, and peers often set foundational precedents for their schooling expectations and performance. Research confirms that "students who like school and those who dislike school have different social experiences with teachers early in their school careers" (Baker, 1999, p. 65). If a student has poor school satisfaction, they are unlikely to perform well. Basic needs for well-being (e.g., physical, emotional, social, psychological) must be met in order to create optimal conditions for student learning and development (McLeod, 2007). A growing compilation of research shows that relationships can positively impact students' schooling trajectories in terms of academics and well-being (Baker, 2006; Buyse et al., 2009; Silver et al., 2005; Wu et al., 2010).

The daily interactions that children experience with their teachers and other school staff are important to their learning. Gaining new knowledge about these dynamic and complex relationships could help teachers, administrators, and school staff improve students' schooling experiences and learning outcomes (both cognitive and non-cognitive). Healthy, positive teacher-student relationships in the classroom support all students, especially disadvantaged



students at-risk of poor development and learning outcomes (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities, low socioeconomic status, English language learners) (Baker, 1999).

### ***Student Ratings of Caring Adult Relationships***

Interpersonal relationships among students, peers, teachers, and school staff play a large part in healthy school environments. In 1997 the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (Cal-SCHLS) was created to help California school districts evaluate their school climates and address students' non-cognitive needs, such as their psychological and social-emotional health. Healthy school environments—including aspects of academic, social-emotional, mental, and physical health—have been a part of initiatives in California since the California Department of Education (CDE) created Cal-SCHLS. This annual survey collects data to improve academic and non-academic school environments for students.

The Cal-SCHLS Elementary Dashboard includes data related to teacher-student relationships. The Caring Adult Relationships Scale includes the following three questions: (1) “Do the teachers and other grown-ups at school care about you?” (2) “Do the teachers and other grown-ups at school listen when you have something to say?” and (3) “Do the teachers and other grown-ups at school make an effort to get to know you?” (*The California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (CalSCHLS) System - About*, n.d.). General data from 2015-17 show that 78.0% of California students in fifth grade reported either “yes,” “most of the time,” or “all of the time” to the Caring Adult Relationships Scale. Slight gender differences were revealed in this data with slightly more positive results for females (79.0%) compared to males (76.0%). Data from the current school district shows less positive reports overall with only 70.0% of students answering “yes,” “most of the time,” or “all of the time” and an even stronger gender disparity between females (74.0%) and males (67.0%) (*CalSchls*

*Dashboard\_Elementary\_2015-2018\_columns*, n.d.). Refer to Table 1 for a compilation of available California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) data which shows general improvement over time and reveals that male students generally report lower scores than female students (*The California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (CalSCHLS) System - Search LEA Reports*, n.d.). Disaggregated data by demographic group was unavailable.

Table 1

*State and District California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) Data of Elementary, Grade 5 Student Responses to “Caring Adults in School” Indicator (%) – 2009-2019*

Scale range**	2017-2019 State	2009-2010 District	2014-2015 District	2016-2017 District	2017-2018 District	2018-2019 District
Avg. “yes” or “most”	73	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	67
High	n/a	52	59	60	52	42
Moderate	n/a	41	37	37	44	50
Low	n/a	7	3	4	3	8
High - Female	n/a	n/a	61	64	51	66
High - Male	n/a	n/a	58	54	41	68

Notes: \*Indicator of “school climate and student well-being,” under “school engagement and supports.” Also described as “experiences of caring adult relationships.” \*\* “Respondents were categorized as being “High,” “Moderate,” and “Low” based on the averages of the questions that comprise each scale. The response options for the survey questions that make up each scale range from “No, never” (1), “Yes, some of the time” (2), “Yes, most of the time” (3), and “Yes, all of the time” (4). Students were classified as “High” if their average question response was greater than 3; “Moderate” if their average question response was greater than or equal to 2 and less than or equal to 3; and “Low” if their average question response was less than 2.” (The California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (CalSCHLS) System - Search LEA Reports, n.d.).

Despite California’s holistic initiative to assess school climate, academic outcomes have withstood the test of time and prevailed as the priority of education policy. For example, The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 and its subsequent high-stakes testing culture overshadowed the importance of social-emotional, mental, and physical health outcomes. Further, California’s adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the use of Smarter Balanced Assessment System in 2010 have kept schools focused on academic outcomes (*Common Core State Standards - Resources (CA Dept of Education)*, n.d.; *Smarter Balanced Assessment System - Testing (CA Dept of Education)*, n.d.). However, current educational trends, such as incorporating social-emotional learning (SEL) into curricula, have increased

awareness of non-cognitive outcomes such as academic behaviors and academic perseverance (Farrington et al., 2012; *Social and Emotional Learning - Initiatives & Programs (CA Dept of Education)*, n.d.).

### **Context of the Research Problem**

California public schools perform lower than average on standardized tests in national and international comparisons (*NAEP State Profiles*, n.d.; Schleicher, 2018). California's diverse population includes disadvantaged racial minorities and lower socioeconomic status groups. Significant achievement gaps in California schools exist between White and Asian versus Black and Latino students; affluent versus low-income students; and English language learner (ELL) versus non-ELL students (Loeb et al., 2018). Further, California kindergarten students in low-income districts perform below their national peers in reading and math upon school entry (Reardon et al., 2018). These groups of students often start school less prepared than their peers, lacking for example, the social-emotional skill set required for academic success (Blair, 2002).

While most research studies focus on academic schooling outcomes, psychosocial and social-emotional outcomes also need to be explored more, particularly for disadvantaged groups (Baker, 1999). Serving over one million students, a group of eight California school districts (Fresno, Garden Grove, Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Santa Ana)—called the CORE districts—has been working for several years to measure and improve SEL practices and outcomes (“PACE Reports & Findings,” n.d.). In addition to achievement gaps, CORE districts data show that disadvantaged groups also have SEL gaps (Hough et al., 2017; Marsh et al., 2018). A Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) report using student surveys of SEL and School Culture and Climate (CC) found that

Hispanic/Latino, African-American, and special education students reported the lowest SEL levels (Hough et al., 2017). Additionally, 25 percent of schools had low scores across four indicators (e.g., SEL reports and CC reports based on student, parent, and staff surveys), signifying that schools might have school culture and climate problems that could be negatively impacting students' SEL (Hough et al., 2017).

### ***Justifications for Selecting K-5 Target Population***

While schoolwide initiatives are implemented at the school level, the innerworkings and development of program objectives takes place in classrooms through social interactions between individuals in classrooms. Elementary school teachers typically work with the same group of children all day, in one classroom, covering all subject areas—which makes the classroom climate and interaction dynamics extremely important to daily instruction and schooling outcomes.

In Southern California, traditional K-5 public elementary classroom teachers share the most time—180 days, 50,400 minutes/year, 280 minutes/day, 4.67 hours/day—with their students compared to any other K-12 population (*Instructional Time Requirements - Principal Apportionment (CA Dept of Education)*, n.d.). Compared to grades 6-12, there are more opportunities for building closer, richer teacher-student relationships during the K-5 elementary years. For example, middle and high school teachers instruct more students each day but spend less time with them—hindering opportunities for developing deeper teacher-student relationships.

This robust amount of face time between elementary teachers and their students—as well as the low caseload ratio of students per teacher—provide K-5 teachers more opportunity for developing quality relationships with students. Considering the amount of time elementary

students spend with their teachers, alongside the research finding that adolescents' relationship orientations shift from adults to peers (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997), this study purposefully focused on K-5 students.

### ***Justifications for Selecting a Qualitative Research Design***

Most research studies on relationships between teachers and students has been conducted quantitatively. Since educational researchers typically examine teacher-student relationships from a quantitative lens, rarely is a robust qualitative perspective offered to bolster and ground the statistical findings of studies in this area of research (Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011). For example, Robert C. Pianta—a leader in the field of teacher-student relationship research—has collaborated with numerous colleagues on mostly quantitative studies. In one study of 490 participants, Stuhlman and Pianta (2004) studied correlations between teacher-student relationship quality and children's social and academic success. Researchers used several student performance and teacher rating measures and were able to provide informative and statistically significant findings supporting the idea that teacher-student relationships help students' gain the skills needed for being successful in school.

However, if a reader wanted to know more about the inner workings of what this process looked like, or the thoughts of the teachers who engaged in this process, they would not be able to find such insights in this study. While much knowledge about relationships and schooling outcomes has been garnered, few qualitative studies that describe the intricacies of teacher-student relationships are available (Roorda et al., 2011). There is a need to capture these wholesome perspectives through qualitative research practices such as those used in this current study. Qualitative research can contribute to knowledge about such relationships by confirming previous findings in a new light—through firsthand narrative accounts. Analysis of narratives in

this study provided practical implications and recommendations for classroom teachers, schools, and districts. Given the case study design, these narrative accounts also illustrated contextual differences and similarities within and across school sites.

### ***Justifications for Emphasizing Contexts***

Compared to the “hard” sciences (e.g., biology, chemistry, physics, etc.), the field of education is considered a “soft” science (e.g., psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc.). While scientists have studied the hard sciences long before, social scientists including educational researchers only started using systematic research methods and measurement tools to answer their social and behavioral questions since the twentieth century (Krathwohl, 2009). Educational psychologist David Berliner (2002) described the hard sciences as “easy-to-do,” and the soft sciences as “hard-to-do,” and went further to say that educational researchers have the “hardest-to-do science of them all!” (2002, p. 18). Berliner explained that unlike the hard sciences, soft science is done under conditions that create problems for generalizability and theory building. These conditions are also known as social and cultural contexts.

Broad theories and generalizations in education often fail to apply across school sites, as do school reforms (Berliner, 2002). For example, the Follow-Through study examined ten years (1967-1977) of data on over a dozen early childhood instructional models used in US schools, including their effects on student achievement (House et al., 1978). The study found larger variance in student achievement within programs than between programs (Berliner, 2002). No program could produce consistent effects across school sites; each local context required unique programs, teaching methods, personnel, leadership, community support, and budgeting (Berliner, 2002).

Further enriching local contexts are the social interactions that take place in them (Berliner, 2002). For example, a classroom teacher's behaviors interact with students' characteristics—such as their motivation, ability, and socioeconomic status. Meanwhile, a students' behaviors interact with the teacher's characteristics—such as their training, knowledge, and life satisfaction. Still, these teacher and student characteristics interact with additional factors—such as curriculum materials, socioeconomic status of the community, and peer effects. Ultimately, the directions and possible reciprocity of these interactions need to be determined; all of which make educational research quite a tall order (Berliner, 2002).

As such, this study aims to investigate contextual aspects of both schools and classrooms, as well as individual characteristics of students and teachers. “These huge context effects cause scientists great trouble in trying to understand school life. It is the reason that qualitative inquiry has become so important in educational research” (Berliner, 2002, p. 19). These ideas support the rationale for examining teacher-student relationships across contexts in a case study and implementing a mixed methods research design.

Of all the possible factors that influence children's schooling experiences and learning outcomes, *interpersonal relationships* and *learning contexts* were chosen as focal points for this study because they could be examined to address inequalities in education. The focus of *interpersonal relationships* was teacher-student relationships. And the focus of *learning contexts* was on teacher-student relationships as they existed in the *contexts* of individual teachers' classrooms and school sites within the case study school district.

### **Importance of the Research Problem**

All students have the educational right to learn in a physically and psychologically safe environment where they feel secure and free from problem behaviors that could distract them

from gaining academic and social competencies and from fulfilling their potential (Nelson et al., 2002). Despite schoolwide and classroom teacher efforts, disruptive behavior from select students could still interrupt learning environments. Perhaps more effortful and deliberate relationship building between teachers and students—together with other school staff—could help alleviate these behavior issues. Although elementary data from Cal-SCHLS show significant numbers of students reporting caring relationships in school, a portion of students do not. These differences are noticeable when comparing state and local district data as well as data between female and male students. This data alongside literature supporting the importance of teacher-student relationships in education and the shortage of qualitative studies on this topic justify the need to investigate this area of educational research.

Relationship building is a practical, modifiable aspect of schooling that is considerably under the control of the teacher. Arguably, relationship building does not require many resources besides a little extra attention and care. Thus, teachers could help children succeed in school by building stronger, more positive interpersonal relationships with them. The current research study includes teachers' valuable viewpoints through a mixed methods case study of a Southern California public school district. While both quantitative and qualitative approaches were helpful in capturing this information across different individual, classroom, and school contexts, the qualitative data shared by K-5 teachers describing personal stories of their teacher-student relationships contributes novel knowledge to this area of research.

### **Research Plan**

#### **Research Questions (RQs)**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do K-5 teachers in one school district describe their teacher-student relationships?



## TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

- a. What teacher-student relationship outcomes do teachers perceive?
  - b. What teacher-student relationship building strategies do teachers perceive effective?
2. How do these descriptions vary across different school contexts? For example, how do they vary across:
  - a. Traditional and non-traditional (e.g., magnet, themed, or special program) schools?
  - b. Schools' availability of resources?
  - c. School populations (socioeconomically disadvantaged; Hispanic/Latino; English learner)?
  - d. Political climate related to high-stakes testing?
  - e. School climate related to parent involvement?
3. How do these descriptions vary across demographics and characteristics of individual teachers, their classrooms, and their students? For example, how do they vary across:
  - a. Teacher profiles (years of experience; gender; race/ethnicity; pedagogical approach; classroom management/discipline style)?
  - b. Student grade levels (K-5)?
  - c. Students' gender, race/ethnicity, and social class?
  - d. Student profiles (based on academic, behavior, or social-emotional performance/needs)?

### **Statement of Objectives, Research Questions, and Hypotheses**

#### **Research Objectives**

The overall goal of this research was to design, implement, and write an original and contributory research study in the field of K-5 education. The details of this goal are described in the following statement of objectives: (1) to investigate K-5 teacher perceptions of

relationship building in one Southern California school district, (2) to learn about the similarities and differences in teacher perceptions across school contexts, (3) to learn about the similarities and differences in teacher perceptions across classrooms and individual teacher and student characteristics, (4) to provide a rich, narrative account of teacher perceptions that effectively illustrate research findings, and (5) to present a useful summary of practice, policy, and research implications for all stakeholders.

### **Research Question (RQ) Hypotheses**

The following section links research questions to hypotheses that the researcher has formulated based on her review of the literature.

#### ***RQ1 Hypothesis***

K-5 teachers will have unique descriptions of relationship building with students, but there will be commonalities across teachers' descriptions. Teachers will perceive a range of strategies, methods, and techniques as effective in relationship building; teacher perceptions will differ according to individual, classroom, and school contexts (Berliner, 2002).

#### ***RQ2 Hypotheses***

- a. Teacher perceptions of relationship building will have both similarities and differences across school types (e.g., traditional, and non-traditional). Traditional schools might share conventional common practices, whereas non-traditional schools might implement novel relationship building strategies that facilitate their school's vision and objectives.
- b. Teacher perceptions of relationship building will vary across schools' availability of resources. Teachers in schools with more resources might be inclined to invest more of their own resources in relationship building.

- c. Teacher perceptions of relationship building will vary across school populations. Some teachers serving disadvantaged populations might deliberately use relationship building to support their students' cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes.
- d. Teacher perceptions of relationship building will vary across political climate related to high-stakes testing. Teachers at schools where high-stakes testing has created a high-stress environment might deemphasize the importance of relationship building in their classrooms.
- e. Teacher perceptions of relationship building will vary across school climate related to parent involvement. Teachers at schools with higher levels of parent involvement might be more inclined to develop closer relationships with their students.

***RQ3 Hypotheses***

- a. Teacher perceptions of relationship building will vary across teacher profiles. More experienced teachers might emphasize the importance of teacher-student relationships more than less experienced teachers. Perceptions from female and male teachers might differ. Teachers with similar teaching philosophies and classroom management styles might have similar perceptions.
- b. Teacher perceptions of relationship building will have both similarities and differences across grade levels (K-5). There might be an incremental deemphasis on teacher-student relationships as students enter later grades; teachers in lower elementary (K-2) might emphasize student relationships more than upper elementary (3-5) teachers.
- c. Teacher perceptions of relationship building will vary across student gender, race/ethnicity, and social class. Teachers might have closer, more positive relationships with girls than boys. Some teachers might have closer, more positive relationships with

racial/ethnically matched students. Some teachers might observe the need for closer relationships with students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

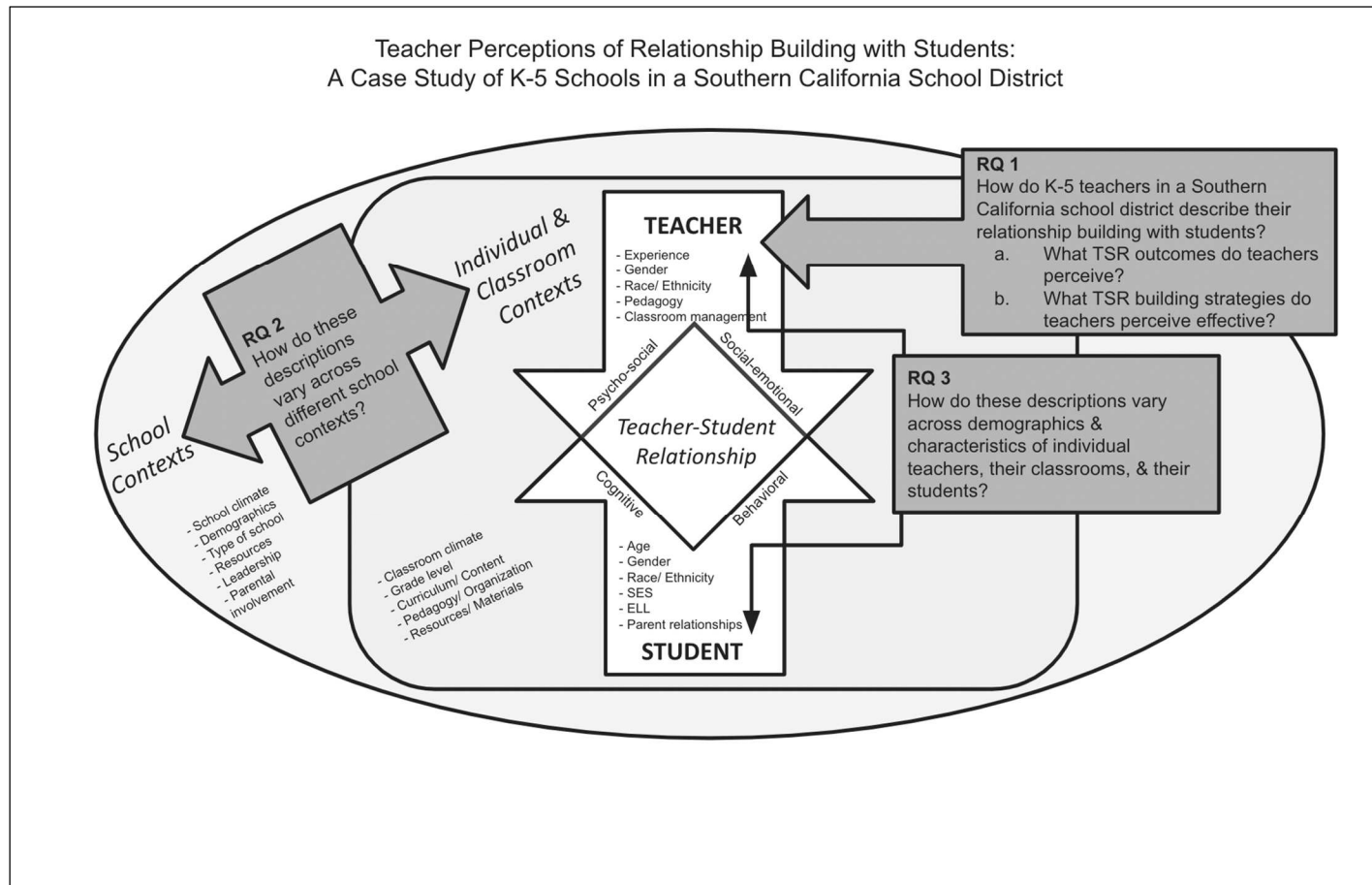
- d. Teacher perceptions of relationship building will vary across student profiles. Teachers might find it easier to form relationships with high achieving, academically behaved, and social-emotionally skilled students, whereas they might find relationship building more difficult with students struggling to succeed in school.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework and diagram were created by the researcher to illustrate the key actors, concepts, relationships, and research questions that guide the study. The primary actors in this study were teachers and students. The key relationship in this study was the teacher-student relationship. However, teacher-student relationships were embedded in contexts on various levels: the individual level (e.g., student and teacher characteristics); the classroom level (e.g., classroom climate); and the school level (e.g., school climate). Therefore, the relationships between contexts were an important feature to examine in this study. The researcher aimed to understand and explain teachers' perspectives on effective relationship building practices—and how these perceptions might vary across school and individual (teacher/student) contexts.

## Conceptual Diagram

**Figure 1:** Conceptual Diagram of the Research Study



The teacher-student relationship facilitates students' academic outcomes. Teacher-student relationships directly affect non-cognitive outcomes (e.g., psycho-social, social-emotional, behavioral), and cognitive outcomes are a byproduct of these non-cognitive outcomes. As such, the benefits of positive teacher-student relationships have effects on both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes. By the same token, research by Cadima and colleagues (2010) demonstrate a direct link between relationships and cognitive outcomes, finding that quality interactions were positively associated with academic performance.

### **Theories that Inform this Work**

Previous theories and research inform this conceptual framework. One literature review demonstrates the predominance of three conceptual frameworks for the topic of teacher-student relationships; the paper synthesized works by attachment theory, motivation theory, and sociocultural perspectives (Davis, 2003). Davis (2003) explains that each perspective offers a unique explanation for what constitutes a positive teacher-student relationship and who determines the quality of the relationship. Attachment theory and motivation theory are discussed below. However, it is important to mention other theories that contribute to a fuller understanding of this rich topic. These theories and viewpoints include Maslow's hierarchy of needs (McLeod, 2007); social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978); ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992); and gender, race, and class perspectives. Finally, relevant views from "care" ethics are also discussed.

#### ***Attachment Theory***

Researchers have readily used attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) to explain teacher-student relationships (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Such theorists posit that having positive teacher-student relationships—where conflict is low, and closeness is high—gives students security and allows them to rely on teacher support while they explore school environments. These high-quality teacher-student relationships can increase learning by creating supportive environments that motivate students to be actively engaged in classroom activities (McCormick & O'Connor, 2015).

Key concepts from parent-child attachment theory that are applied to teacher-student relationships include teacher-student *relatedness* and attachment types (e.g., *secure*, *avoidant*, and *resistant/ambivalent*) (Birch & Ladd, 1997). The widely used *Student-Teacher Relationship*

*Scale (STRS)* (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992) is a teacher-report instrument that was generated from attachment theory and research on teacher-student interactions; *STRS* questions target the following relationship features: *warmth/security*, *anger/dependence*, and *anxiety/insecurity* (Birch & Ladd, 1997; *Measures Developed by Robert C. Pianta, Ph.D.*, 2017). Later studies using *STRS* found *closeness*, *dependency*, and *conflict/anger* to be factors of teacher-student relationships (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Pianta et al., 1995). Today *STRS* is described as a measurement of a teacher's perceived conflict, closeness, and dependency for a specific child (*Measures Developed by Robert C. Pianta, Ph.D.*, 2017).

### ***Motivation Theory***

Another theoretical perspective common in the literature on teacher-student relationships is the social-motivational view, which includes self-determination or self-systems theories (Roorda et al., 2011). Self-determination theory posits that motivation occurs when the three basic psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy are met (Roorda et al., 2011). The teacher's role in facilitating these psychological needs is critical, especially given the subsequent student motivation and learning outcome gains. One literature review by Martin and Dowson (2009) highlights the role of relatedness and interpersonal relationships in achievement motivation theories. The authors explain that the more emotional and personal connectedness that exists in academic contexts, the higher the likelihood for increased academic motivation, engagement, and student success.

### ***"Care" Ethics and Pedagogy***

Research shows that high academic expectations, meaningful curriculum, and personalized learning environments that include caring relationships are conditions that support student success (Klem & Connell, 2004). Students need the caring support of and positive

interactions with teachers and school staff in order to meet high academic expectations and access more advanced curriculum (Klem & Connell, 2004). Students reported more school engagement when they perceived their teachers created caring, structured learning environments and set clear, high, and fair expectations (Klem & Connell, 2004). In a study of poor, urban, African American third through fifth graders, students expressed that their teacher cared for them by talking about their problems and providing emotional support (Baker, 1999). Students' school satisfaction was influenced by having a caring and "psychologically safe" classroom (Baker, 1999, p. 65).

"Education is largely a relational process occurring in context rather than abstraction and relation rather than isolation" (Velasquez et al., 2013, p. 164). Education involves interactions between the classroom teacher and students, and is always embedded in contexts. And more often than not, the role of the teacher and the interactions that take place are "caring" exchanges.

While notable care theorists including Kohlberg (1973) and Gilligan (1982) came before her, Noddings's (1984) work was most appropriate and useful for Velasquez and colleagues' (2013) distinctive literature review on caring and nurturing pedagogies and developing caring relationships in schools. The authors preferred Noddings's work because of her expansive work in care in education (e.g., descriptions of care, caring teaching, care in pedagogy). In her book *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Noddings centers her work on the notion of "natural caring" or the "caring motivated by love or inclination" rather than caring out of moral obligation or duty in the way that philosopher Immanuel Kant once described (2013, p. preface). For Kant's moral ethics, reason rather than emotion, is what needs to drive morally principled actions. Noddings argues that her idea of "natural caring" is what motivates or prompts "ethical caring." And each individual develops what Noddings calls an "ethical



ideal” based on memories of “caring and being cared for” (2013, p. preface). Educational philosopher John Dewey previously explained that individuals’ ideals are formed from the “real stuff” of life (e.g., life experiences); hence, childhood experiences are critical to the development of an ethical ideal, which is what individuals draw upon when they are faced with situations where they must make decisions to respond to others. It is important for example, that children learn to care about others, and the elementary classroom is an ideal context for learning and practicing care. Noddings notes that teachers can help students develop into caring persons by providing them with supervised practice in caring (Noddings, 2013). Classroom teachers can support children’s development of their ethical ideal by helping them practice honest reflections about caring behaviors (Noddings, 2013).

Defining “care” is difficult because it differs in the contexts of education compared with caregiving or public service; nor does it mean to simply be “careful” by paying attention to details. Caring acts in education sometimes may lead to unfavorable outcomes such as psychological harm to students by teachers who mean well. For this reason, caring needs to be understood beyond behaviors and instead as relations with others and caring for them by taking action on their behalf (Velasquez et al., 2013).

Noddings’s basic principles of care include: (1) engrossment, (2) motivational displacement, and (3) caring encounter and reciprocity. Engrossment means that one’s focus or attention is given to the other person by feeling what they are feeling. Motivational displacement refers to one’s regard for the other person’s well-being followed by an action. And the caring encounter involves reciprocity in that the cared-for at least accepts and acknowledges the caring act (even if they do not necessarily return the caring attitude or action) (Velasquez et al., 2013). Seen another way, “Caring is not a feeling or a single act, but a relation characterized by

receptivity, actions informed by motivational displacement and acknowledgement of caring acts” (Velasquez et al., 2013, p. 182). Noddings’s perspective on moral education, based on the ethics of care, is concerned with students’ needs rather than their behaviors (Velasquez et al., 2013). According to this view, teaching students what it means to be cared for is imperative and will eventually motivate them to be caring toward others (Velasquez et al., 2013).

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

The dissertation is organized in five chapters. Chapter One introduced the dissertation and problem statement. Chapter Two provides a review of previous literature relevant to the study. Chapter Three describes the methodology used to conduct the research study. Chapter Four shares both quantitative and descriptive study findings. And Chapter Five provides a summary, recommendations, and a conclusion.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**K-5** – grades kindergarten through grade five

**Teacher-student relationship** – interactions, exchanges, and relations between a student and a teacher in an educational setting

**Teacher perceptions** – a teacher’s personal thoughts, ideas, opinions, and beliefs based on their own knowledge and experience as an educator

**School climate** – consists of “[academic rigor and supports; respectful relationships and cultural sensitivity; the relevance of classroom lessons; student learning motivation and classroom involvement; discipline and enforcement of rules; [and] the quality of facilities maintenance]” (*The California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (CalSCHLS) System - About*, n.d.)

**Classroom climate** – consists of “[the physical environment of the classroom (e.g., its size, its location within the school); the social system (e.g., relationships and interactions between

students and relationships and interactions between students and their teachers); an orderly classroom environment (e.g., arrangement of the classroom, “cosiness,” functionality); [and] teacher expectations about student outcomes (e.g., positive expectations, feelings of self-efficacy, professional attitude)]” (Creemers & Reezigt, 1999)

**Cognitive outcomes** – academic performance, such as grades, formal/informal assessments

**Behavioral outcomes** – student classroom behaviors and engagement, such as participation, cooperation, and work habits

**Psycho-social outcomes** – student behaviors or thinking that has been influenced by social factors (Vizzotto et al., 2013), such as self-efficacy, motivation

**Social-emotional outcomes** – student’s ability to “[manage emotions; set and achieve goals; feel and show empathy for others; establish and maintain positive relationships; and make responsible decisions]” (*What Is SEL?*, n.d.)

**Social-emotional learning (SEL)** – “The process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively. The proximal goals of SEL programs are to foster the development of five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005)” as cited in (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 406), based on Elias and associates’ (1997).

**Closeness** – “the degree of warmth and open communication that exists between a teacher and child” (Birch & Ladd, 1997, p. 62)

**Conflict** – “conflictual [teacher-student] relationships are characterized by discordant interactions and a lack of rapport between the teacher and the child” (Birch & Ladd, 1997, p. 63)

## **CHAPTER TWO. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction and Gaps in the Literature**

Why and how are teacher-student relationships in education significant? Part of the answer can be found in research studies that reveal schooling outcomes directly related to teacher-student relationships. The following literature review attempts to answer this question—or at least begin to answer it—by formulating a response based on pertinent empirical data from prior studies in the field. It also aims to illustrate the significance of this topic, as well as reveal gaps in the literature that could be filled with this research and other future studies.

A review of the literature on teacher-student relationships in primary education revealed studies that discussed the following topics: relationship building; relationship related outcomes; defining features of relationships (e.g., relationship quality); and determinants of relationships (e.g., student and teacher characteristics; classroom and school contexts). The literature review begins with a general discussion of teacher-student relationships in education, then describes key features and determinants of teacher-student relationships, and concludes with a brief summary and discussion of gaps in the literature.

### **The Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships in Education**

Teacher-student relationships start forming the first day of school and continue to develop throughout the school year. These interpersonal relationships are critical for student exploration and learning in the classroom, therefore, teaching students how to navigate relations needs to be a priority for teachers (Howes, 2000). Researchers explain that once children are able to trust their teacher they can better utilize them in their learning; such as, by asking for help and sharing their discoveries (Howes, 2000). Social relationships children form in the school environment are important motivationally because they impact early impressions and attitudes

about school (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996). Relationships characterized by acceptance can motivate children to actively engage in classroom learning, whereas relationships with conflict and rejection can suppress student motivation (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996).

### **Relationship Building**

Learning a student's name and something unique about them can be the beginning of relationship building for teachers (Witmer, 2005). Likewise, students need to know about their teacher to connect with them, so it is essential that teachers share some information about themselves as well. Teacher-student relationships can flourish only when students feel physically and emotionally safe. Ways to build teacher-student relationships and foster mutual respect include: providing a nurturing environment that values academic risk taking; presenting interesting and enjoyable content activities that help students see the relevance of learning; enabling students to be successful; allowing student involvement in decision making and giving students a sense of responsibility in their own learning (Witmer, 2005).

One case study investigated how a teacher negotiated her relationship with a behaviorally challenging student and identified four phases of that process (Newberry, 2010). The phases are *appraisal*, *testing*, *agreement*, and *planning*. *Appraisal* is about parties getting to know one another and sorting out roles; *testing* is about exploration of limits and boundaries related to roles, personalities and authority (e.g., the student may test the limits of the teacher's authority); *agreement* involves the establishment of routines and interaction practices; and *planning* is aimed at progressing the relationship forward through reflection on past forms of communication and participation and planning on new ones (Newberry, 2010). According to this process, relationship building involves revisiting phases in various sequences, times, and intervals; but it also involves emotional work and ethical caring. Knowledge and mindfulness of these

relationship building phases and understanding that the process takes time can help alter the trajectory of relationship building with students, especially with the most challenging learners (Newberry, 2010).

In another article, a university instructor discussed how he held a 15 minute interview to intentionally build rapport with each of his students on the first day of class; after completing 300 interviews he found that students reported feeling more comfortable asking him questions in and outside of class (Starcher, 2011). The instructor also felt that these meetings improved student engagement, class discussions, and his knowledge about individual students' motivation and learning styles (Starcher, 2011). While this research took place at the higher education level, the concept could easily be modified and applied to primary school contexts.

### **Teacher-Student Relationships and Schooling Outcomes**

Numerous research studies have linked teacher-student relationships to academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and psychosocial outcomes (Baker, 1999; Davis, 2003; Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Pianta et al., 1995; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). While the significance of social interactions on children's social, emotional, and cognitive development has been established and continues to appear in educational literature, the most common outcomes reported are related to academic achievement.

### ***Impacts on Cognitive Outcomes***

Teacher-student relationships have been linked to achievement outcomes. For example, a study of Portuguese first grade students showed that the quality of teacher-student interactions and subsequent classroom organization were positively associated with students' academic performance including print concepts, number identification, and vocabulary performance

(Cadima et al., 2010). Students with lower math performance scores benefited greatly from positive, high quality teacher-student interactions (Cadima et al., 2010). This study shows that teacher-student relationships can play an important role in students' academic skill development as early as first grade (Cadima et al., 2010). Studies like this one show direct links to academic outcomes while other studies deny this link. For instance, Roorda and colleagues (2011) reviewed nearly one hundred studies on teacher-student relationships and concluded that despite relationships being important they were not enough to alter student learning behaviors because of the numerous other factors involved such as instructional quality. In fact, some studies find that teacher-student relationship quality is related more to psychosocial outcomes than achievement outcomes (Buyse et al., 2009). The significance of teacher-student relationships on nonacademic outcomes (e.g., behavioral, social-emotional, psychosocial) can indirectly impact academic outcomes, through emotions and motivation for example (Valiente et al., 2012).

### ***Impacts on Non-Cognitive Outcomes***

The role of the teacher is critical to child development because of the resources teachers can offer to children including emotional, social, and intellectual support and teachings (Davis, 2003). Prior research demonstrates that positive and close teacher-student relationships result in better academic performance and more developed social skills (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Research in the area of motivation and education reveals that students' relationships with teachers have an effect on both cognitive and social development because teachers influence student motivation for learning (Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011). These studies of teacher-student relationships stressed the benefits of both social and academic outcomes.

Other studies highlight social-emotional and psychosocial outcomes. Martin and Dowson's (2009) review of the literature identified several benefits of positive interpersonal



relationships including healthy human functioning; increased happiness and decreased stress; emotional support; help on tasks and challenges; and companionship during activities. Positive relationships are also important for social and emotional development, particularly during childhood and adolescence, as well as for academic motivation and engagement (Martin & Dowson, 2009). Teacher-student relationships at the very least contribute to children's self-concept and their expectations for academic performance (Pianta et al., 1995). Other examples of social-emotional outcomes related to teacher-student relationships include self-awareness and relationship skills, whereas examples of psychosocial outcomes include school satisfaction and school adjustment (Baker, 1999). Moreover, Rudasill and Rimm-Kaufman (2009) describe positive teacher-student relationships as "social resources" for students (2009, p. 108). Positive teacher-student relationships allow opportunities for students to develop social skills they can use to navigate and problem-solve in academic and social situations at school. Such relationships also serve as support systems, leading students to form more positive perceptions of school overall, increase their school liking, decrease feelings of loneliness, and expand their social and academic competence (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009).

### **Key Features of Teacher-Student Relationships**

Teacher-student relationships have been measured by researchers using key features (e.g., closeness, dependency, and conflict), in addition to various evaluations of teacher-student relationship quality. Teacher-student relationships have also been traced over time and development.

#### **Closeness, Dependency, and Conflict**

A seminal study by Birch & Ladd (1997) investigated the effect of three aspects of teacher-student relationships (closeness, dependency, conflict) on various facets of school

adjustment. Closeness refers to the level of warmth and open communication between the teacher and student that could support the student's success in school (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Dependency is described as an over-reliance or dependency on the teacher by the student, which could be detrimental to the student's exploration in school, including their peer relationships (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Lastly, conflict is reflective of friction in the interactions between teacher and student. Conflictual relationships may lead students to feel a lack of support, anxiety, anger, and even withdrawal or alienation from school (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Birch and Ladd (1997) found that dependency in relationships was linked to difficulties in school adjustment, such as low academic performance, negative attitudes, low engagement, and loneliness. Whereas closeness in relationships was associated with positive academic performance, liking of school, and self-directedness. Teacher ratings of relationship conflict were correlated with students' ratings of school liking, self-directedness, cooperative participation, and school avoidance (e.g., students with conflictual relationships had lower school liking and less cooperative participation).

By applying Birch and Ladd's (1997) concepts of closeness, dependency, and conflict, Rudasill and Rimm-Kaufman (2009) synthesized positive and negative teacher-student relationships for first graders. The researchers concluded that positive teacher-student relationships are characterized by care and respect; are sources of comfort and security for children; and are often rated high in closeness, and low in dependency and conflict by teachers. While positive relationships serve as a protective factor, negative relationships serve as a risk factor for academic and social development. Negative relationships rated low in closeness and high in dependency and conflict, fail to provide young children with the security they need (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009).

### **Relationship Quality**

Since research has confirmed that social and affective processes such as interpersonal relationships have an effect on children's school success, it is important to examine the quality of these relationships to learn how best to optimize these interactions (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). Earlier teacher-student relationship literature represents the teacher as the main determinant of relationship quality mainly due to the idea that teachers initiate the frequency and types of classroom interactions (Davis, 2003). However, literature trends shifted toward more examinations of social contexts, such as behaviors and beliefs of teachers and students, and how these relate to learning and motivation (Davis, 2003).

The quality of teacher-student interactions is significant for students' overall success in school (Cadima et al., 2010). The quality of teacher-student relationships has specifically been linked to school adjustment, academic achievement, engagement in learning, social functioning, and behavior problems (Roorda et al., 2011). One study demonstrated that improved teacher-student relationship quality resulted in better academic and behavior outcomes, as reported by K-5 elementary teachers (Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011). Moreover, teacher-student relationship quality has been found to predict academic outcomes, suggesting that positive teacher-student relationships can be used to increase achievement (Jerome et al., 2009).

Research demonstrates that students with supportive and caring relationships with teachers have more positive school attitudes, higher school satisfaction, and higher levels of academic engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004). Students have better school outcomes when classroom teachers are warm, attend to student needs, establish organized and predictable learning environments, provide student feedback on the learning process, and inspire student reasoning and analysis (Cadima et al., 2010). Furthermore, students with relationships

characterized by high levels of trust and warmth in early schooling have been linked to having positive academic achievement and school adjustment (Baker, 2006). Children with close teacher relationships may be better able to use teacher support and benefit from learning activities as a result; these students were also found to perceive school environments as supportive and developed more positive attitudes about school (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Close relationships can make children feel comfortable in seeking help, openly expressing concerns, and becoming more self-directed and responsible participants in class (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Conversely, conflictual relationships with teachers can create aversive rather than supportive environments, which may negatively affect student attitudes and lead children to dislike school (Birch & Ladd, 1997).

### **Relationships Over Time and Development**

Children often spend more time with teachers than parents during their primary school years, making the teacher highly important to children's early development (Pianta et al., 1995). Moreover, the school context where interactions between the teacher and the child take place shape the social and academic development of young students (Pianta et al., 1995).

Research has found that teacher-perceived conflict and closeness ratings are generally consistent across teachers over students' early childhood years (e.g., kindergarten through second grade); this means that students have stable relational tendencies in their relationships with others, including teacher-student relationships (Saft & Pianta, 2001). A seminal study by Pianta, Steinberg, and Rollins (1995) examining teacher-student relationships and children's school adjustment over the K-2 period found that students with positive (e.g., close, warm, communicative) relationships in kindergarten had better school adjustment and relationships in

second grade compared with peers having negative (e.g., dependent, angry) teacher-student relationships in kindergarten.

Lynch and Cicchetti's (1997) study of elementary and middle school students echoed prior research by finding that children's relationship orientation toward adults (e.g., parents and teachers) declines and shifts toward peer relationships once children move into adolescence. In other words, children's relatedness toward adults decreases while their relatedness toward peers increases. Contrary to previous research findings that teacher relationships are more influential in the early rather than adolescent and later years, a meta-analysis of teacher-student relationships, student engagement, and achievement revealed that relationships were just as—and sometimes more—influential for older students (Roorda et al., 2011).

One study examined teacher-student relationship quality over time (kindergarten to fifth grade) to determine the effects of early childhood characteristics (e.g., academic, behavioral, familial, demographic, and early-childcare) (Jerome et al., 2009). Teacher perceptions of teacher-student relationship closeness and conflict were used to determine relationship quality, initially in kindergarten and continuing over the elementary school years through fifth grade. Teacher ratings of student relationship conflict were more consistent than their ratings of relationship closeness for students over their elementary years. This may be because conflict is more dependent on student attributes (e.g., externalizing behavior), whereas closeness may fluctuate year to year depending on teachers and interactions (Jerome et al., 2009). Study results revealed that initial (kindergarten) conflict levels were higher in students who were male, Black, performed lower academically, demonstrated more externalizing behavior, and were in childcare longer. Students who had greater risk of increased conflict in their teacher relationships over time were Black students and students with less sensitive mothers. According to teachers, male

students with low academic scores and lower quality home environments had less closeness in their relationships (Jerome et al., 2009). Overall findings suggest children's characteristics and experiences upon school entry were more significant to their initial relationship conflict and closeness levels than on their relationship quality over the years (Jerome et al., 2009).

Surprisingly, Jerome and colleagues (2009) did not find support for the hypothesis that maternal attachment would predict their teacher-student relationship quality. They explained children's relationships and attachment patterns with multiple adults (e.g., caregiver, father, extended family) could be a better predictor than relying solely on maternal attachment.

Teacher-student relationships change over time since there are numerous internal (e.g., individual characteristics) and external factors (e.g., teachers, peers, academic levels, classroom settings) that affect relationship patterns (Jerome et al., 2009). For instance, Pianta and Stuhlman's (2004) study found that student levels of closeness and conflict in relationships decreased over the time from prekindergarten to first grade. Changes in teacher-student relationships also occur due to the altering role of the teacher. For instance, in the early years students rely on teachers to tell them how to behave, but as the student gets older and learns to self-monitor, the teacher will no longer serve that role but serve other functions (Jerome et al., 2009). Additionally, the transition from elementary to middle school includes a shift from having one teacher to having multiple teachers, which limits opportunities for adolescents to develop close relationships with their teachers during middle and high school (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997).

### **Determinants of Teacher-Student Relationships**

Teacher-student relationships are impacted by numerous factors, including individual student and teacher characteristics, and classroom and school contexts. Student characteristics

that affect their relationships with teachers include students' demographic background, school entry characteristics, engagement, and internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Teacher characteristics also include demographic background, as well as teacher experience, teaching style, and teacher stress level. School and classroom context determinants include school and class climate, school types, parent involvement, school resources, and social-emotional learning.

### **Individual Student Characteristics**

Student characteristics contribute to the teacher-student relationships that are developed in academic settings. The behaviors that students bring with them to school affect the nature of the relationships they form in educational settings (Ladd et al., 2002). In most cases antisocial and aggressive behaviors have been linked to negative relationship features, whereas prosocial and cooperative behaviors have been related to positive relationship qualities (Ladd et al., 2002). Children's individual characteristics such as their gender, temperament, and shyness, for example, also contribute to the quality of their teacher-student relationships (Rudasill, 2011). Shy students and aggressive students tend to have low levels of closeness and high levels of dependency in their relationships with teachers (Wubbels et al., 2014). The following sections will discuss some of the ways that student demographic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, social class, gender) and ELL status manifest in teacher-student relationships.

### ***Student Race/Ethnicity and Social Class***

The problem of achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students led one researcher to examine the effects of minority students having minority teachers (Dee, 2005). Research demonstrates that there are two explanations for why demographic matches between students and teachers could influence academic outcomes: passive and active teacher effects (Dee, 2005). Passive teacher effects occur due to the teacher's racial, ethnic, or gender identity

(and not any explicit behavior). Examples of passive teacher effects include “role model” effects and “stereotype threat.” Stereotype threat refers to situations where students might perceive a stereotype and subsequently “experience an apprehension that retards their academic identification and subsequent achievement” (Dee, 2005, p. 159). Active teacher effects is another explanation that supports racial matches between students and teachers; it refers to teachers’ unintended biases in their interactions and expectations of students with different demographics. The study determined that the race, ethnicity, and gender dynamics between teachers and students had large effects on teacher perceptions of student performance, but that the race and ethnicity effects mostly occurred in students with low socioeconomic status. Considering teacher perceptions influence classroom environments and student learning opportunities, this finding indicates that teacher-student interactions influence demographic achievement gaps (Dee, 2005).

Another study examined teacher-student relationships among adolescents (e.g., secondary school) and found that Hispanic American girls benefited most from positive relationships with teachers (Crosnoe et al., 2004). Researchers explain that Hispanic students from families with recent immigration and language difficulties could rely more on teachers for information about education. Compared to Hispanic American boys, Hispanic girls are more closely tied to their families. On the other hand, African American students might rely less on teachers because they have more experience with American education but might have mistrust for the system. These examples illustrate how students need feelings of comfort and belonging in the educational setting, and one way to potentially increase this is with racial-ethnic matching between students and teachers (Crosnoe et al., 2004).

### ***Student Gender***



From the perspective of the teacher, teachers often have gendered perceptions of boys and girls. Literature on teacher-student relationships shows a gender difference in which teachers report more negative relationships (e.g., more conflict) with boys than with girls (Baker, 2006). Boys are perceived as having more conflictual relationships and being less cooperative with teachers and their demands, whereas girls are perceived as having closer relationships with teachers (Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009).

From the perspective of the student, boys' and girls' perceptions of their teachers often differ. A study by Hayes and colleagues (1994) found that boys and girls valued teacher behaviors differently; boys valued teachers' classroom management behaviors, whereas girls valued teachers' poise and warmth (as cited in Velasquez et al., 2013). However, a meta-analysis of 99 studies focused on the influence of teacher-student relationships on student engagement and achievement found inconclusive results about whether relationships were more important for boys or girls (Roorda et al., 2011).

In another study, fifth through eighth grade students rated teacher levels of caring and results indicated gender differences in student responses; boys were more likely to perceive interpersonal behaviors as caring, whereas girls were more likely to perceive academic related behaviors as caring (Tosolt, 2010, as cited in Velasquez et al., 2013). Girls had closer relationships with their teachers in first and third grade according to a separate study; it was suggested that since the greater majority of early elementary teachers are female it is easier for them to establish rapport with female students (Rudasill, 2011).

### ***English Language Learner (ELL) Students***

Relationship must be forged between teachers and ELL students to create positive learning environments. Oftentimes relationship building is difficult because of language barriers

and cultural differences. A study examining the interactions between native-English speaking kindergarten teachers and their ELL and non-ELL students found that teachers had closer relationships with their non-ELL students (Sullivan et al., 2015). However, compared to teachers' relationships with their ELL students, relationships with non-ELL students were more likely to have conflict. The authors suggested the reason for less conflict and closeness with ELL students could be because cross-cultural relationships were lacking in the classroom (Sullivan et al., 2015). Relatedly, one study of native-Spanish speaking preschool children showed a positive relationship between students hearing Spanish in the classroom and teacher ratings of Spanish speaking students' task orientation, assertiveness, frustration tolerance, and peer social skills (Chang et al., 2007).

### ***Relationships as a Protective Factor for At-Risk Students***

Research studies generally show that positive teacher-student relationships are associated with beneficial academic, social, and behavioral outcomes; however, studies often examine the relationships as protective factors, particularly for at-risk students (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Various studies have demonstrated the protective effect of a close teacher-student relationship (Baker, 2006; Jerome et al., 2009; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Roorda et al., 2011; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). For example, students struggling academically or behaviorally benefited significantly from a close teacher relationship when compared to their similar peers deprived of a relationship (Baker, 2006). In another study, students with high levels of externalizing behaviors were shown to benefit from warm, supportive teacher-student relationships during elementary school (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

When students at-risk for poor schooling outcomes have a supportive teacher, the benefits from their close relationship can counter some of their predicted negative outcomes

(Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Research experts affirm that a caring adult can be the most important protective factor for a child living with multiple risks; oftentimes this adult is a teacher (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). One study showed that teacher-student relationships were most important to early and adolescent students at-risk of academic failure, particularly students with learning problems and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (Roorda et al., 2011). For instance, teacher-student relationships can promote positive behavior and social-emotional development for students with learning difficulties (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). In the case of students with severe academic difficulties, unable to make academic strides, the non-cognitive social and behavioral benefits from the relationship they have with their teacher can be as significant to them as any cognitive gain they might acquire (Baker, 2006).

Certain childrearing beliefs and practices such as discipline style can also put students at-risk for deleterious developmental outcomes (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). However, children's relationships with teachers can help alter these relational schema and safeguard students from further negative developmental outcomes (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Research shows that at-risk students predisposed to an insecure attachment are still able to form positive relationships with teachers and experience healthy social development (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). An emphasis on relationship quality in schools may be most beneficial to students entering school at a higher risk for poor relationships, as well as subsequent negative academic and social outcomes (Jerome et al., 2009).

### ***School Entry Characteristics***

Teacher-student relationships depend on numerous factors such as the context of the relationship and attributes of both the student and teacher, including their relational styles (Jerome et al., 2009). The characteristics that children bring with them to school such as

behavior, initial ability level, cognitive development, home environment, and early life experiences may influence their interactions with teachers and help explain differences among students' relationship quality trajectories (Jerome et al., 2009). Students who start school without readiness skills often also lack the behavioral, social-cognitive, and emotional competencies needed to benefit from structured learning activities (Baker et al., 1997).

Children's development of early competencies have also been linked to the quality of teacher-student relationships (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). For example, students having very poor relationships with teachers while in kindergarten, were later found to have high levels of behavior problems and low levels of behavior competence as second graders (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Kindergarten students with conflictual teacher relationships also showed declines in prosocial behaviors, increased conflicts with peers, less cooperative participation and less school liking (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004).

Children need emotional maturity to have a close relationship with the teacher. Research suggests that emotional and cognitive maturity were coexistent for kindergarten students; students able to meet academic tasks would also be able to develop close relationships and vice versa (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Teachers may find it easier to have close relationships with students who are independent and responsible (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Teachers could feel closer to students they perceive have more positive school attitudes since those students tend to enjoy learning activities and express their liking of school. By the same token, these students may perceive school as more supportive because of their positive teacher-student relationship, which encourages them to have more positive school attitudes (Birch & Ladd, 1997).

One study suggests that students' cognitive processes, motivation, effortful control, and classroom relationships all have a moderating role in the associations between their emotions and

academic achievement (Valiente et al., 2012). Researchers explain that students' emotional expressions are important determinants of achievement. For example, students prone to being easily angered will have difficulty establishing relationships with others, will have lower social competence, and unfortunately will underperform academically (Valiente et al., 2012).

### ***Early attachment styles***

The attachment style that is developed in relationships with caregivers during infancy provides children with ideas, beliefs, and expectations about what the world is like (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). Children with secure attachment relationships experienced sensitive and responsive caretaking whereas those with insecure attachment relationships experienced insensitive and unreliable care (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). Consequently, secure attachments lead to more positive outlooks, trust in others, feeling safe in the world, feeling worthy of love, and also having a readiness for exploring environments and learning (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). On the other hand, insecure attachments and maltreatment as infants leads to negative outlooks, lack of trust in others, feeling unworthy of love, overdependence on adults, lower motivation, lower cognitive maturity, and a lack of readiness for learning (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997).

The beliefs and expectations children gain from infancy become internalized and determine how they interact with their environments and the people in them (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). As such, early social and affective processes influence children's readiness for school learning. What is more, children's interpersonal relationships have a continual effect on their engagement in the learning environment and feelings of connectedness in school (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). Both teachers' and students' early attachment styles contribute to the quality of teacher-student relationships (Jerome et al., 2009).

### ***Early attachment styles and school adjustment***

Developmental research has established that early relationships with adults, such as those with parents and/or caretakers, are important to children's development and adjustment to school (Maldonado-Carreño & Votruba-Drzal, 2011). Lynch & Cicchetti (1997) posit that early interpersonal relationships are foundational to development throughout an individual's lifespan. One study measured both child-mother and child-teacher relationships to see how they would predict preschool and kindergarten schooling outcomes (Pianta et al., 1997). Researchers learned that the quality of child-mother relationships predicted children's social adjustment, as reported by teachers (Pianta et al., 1997). While both child-mother and child-teacher relationship quality were found to predict children's concept development, researchers determined that the child-mother relationship was more strongly related to child adjustment outcomes than the child-teacher relationship (Pianta et al., 1997). Still, teacher-student relationships matter for learning. Students with secure attachments to both teachers and classmates were found more likely to be ready to learn and have increased school success compared to peers with insecure attachments to others (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997).

### ***Student Engagement***

Children's entry to school is influenced by the characteristics they bring with them, including their attachment styles, but their school success is also weighted heavily on their academic engagement. Early research on school adjustment was mainly interpreted in terms of academic performance but studies later began to recognize the role of student engagement (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Student engagement is described as the student's quality of involvement in schooling, including the people, places, activities, and goals that comprise it (Roorda et al., 2011).

One study exploring teacher-student relationships, student engagement, and achievement, found that teacher support was highly associated with student engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004). Compared to disengaged students, engaged students are likely to receive more support from their teachers because they pay more attention, show more interest, and are willing to persist on challenging tasks (Klem & Connell, 2004). However, disengaged students might receive more attention from some teachers because they believe that it will increase their engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004). A different, but related study found that children with conflictual relationships with their teacher were less engaged in learning and were at a higher risk for academic failure (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004).

A meta-analysis examining the influence of teacher-student relationships on student engagement and achievement determined that associations between relationships and engagement were stronger than those between relationships and achievement (Roorda et al., 2011). This finding was expected for the researchers because teacher-student relationships can serve as a measure of social adjustment and are more linked to behavioral than academic outcomes (Roorda et al., 2011). Essentially, student engagement is a mediator between teacher-student relationships and student achievement (Roorda et al., 2011).

Student perceptions of teachers is also related to student engagement. Baker (1999) and Thompson (2002) studied school satisfaction of impoverished, urban, African American upper elementary students (grades 3-5) and teens respectively, and both discovered that students' ratings were influenced by their perceptions of a supportive, caring relationship with their teacher. Teachers were found to interact differently with students who expressed high or low levels of school satisfaction (Baker, 1999).

### ***Internalizing and Externalizing Behaviors***

Student behaviors play an important role in the development of teacher-student relationships. Teachers perceive students' academic performance as an essential part of the teacher-student relationship (Jerome et al., 2009). It is plausible that teachers are able to build close relationships with less difficulty when students act more responsibly and independently (Birch & Ladd, 1997). And teachers may view high performing students more positively and invest more in relationships with students who are engaged in learning (Jerome et al., 2009). One study confirmed that children with learning or behavior difficulties had inferior school outcomes and were less capable of benefiting from a close teacher relationship compared with their less struggling peers (Baker, 2006).

Student behaviors have been empirically classified as internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1978). "Internalizing problems are characterized by depressive, anxious-like symptoms and social withdrawal whereas externalizing problems are indicated by overactive, impulsive, or aggressive behaviors" (Baker et al., 2008, p. 3). These behavior classifications are readily used in the teacher-student relationship literature. For example, one study found that students with externalizing behaviors and positive, close relationships with teachers had better academic and behavioral outcomes when compared to students with externalizing behaviors and negative, conflictual relationships with teachers (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). Another study analyzed student trajectories for externalizing behaviors and found that compared to initial levels of externalizing behaviors and negative parenting, conflict in teacher-student relationships at school entry was a stronger determinate for externalizing behaviors from kindergarten through third grade (Silver et al., 2005). Researchers concluded that students with the highest levels of externalizing behaviors upon entering school had fewer of these behaviors if they experienced close relationships with their teachers (Silver et al., 2005).



Positive and close teacher-student relationships result in fewer externalizing behaviors by students (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

A positive teacher-student relationship has the potential to compensate for children's problem behaviors and subsequently positively impact their academics (Baker, 2006). This study's results indicated that children with behavior problems who had a close teacher relationship performed significantly better in reading compared with similar peers who had poor teacher relationships. Similarly, teacher-student relationships can compensate for children's internalizing problems; results from this study showed that children with internalizing problems and a high-quality teacher relationship performed at or above average in reading. Peers with similar internalizing problems were significantly disadvantaged when they lacked a high quality teacher relationship (Baker, 2006).

### **Individual Teacher Characteristics**

Just as student characteristics contribute to the development of teacher-student relationships, so too do teacher traits. Kesner's (2000) study of the significance of student and teacher characteristics on teacher-student relationships probed teachers about the quality of their relationships. The study concluded that preservice teachers' perceptions of their relationships with students were influenced by numerous factors including: teacher and student gender and ethnicity; teacher perceptions of relationships with their own parents; teacher years of experience; teacher personality; teacher relationship history; teacher (authentic) concern for others; and teachers' loving and positive attitudes about life (Kesner, 2000).

### ***Teacher Race/Ethnicity***

Saft and Pianta (2001) examined preschool and kindergarten teachers' perceptions of their relationships with students using a demographically (age, gender, ethnicity) diverse student

sample and found that teachers rated relationships more positively when their ethnicity matched their student's ethnicity. In a separate study, Kesner (2000) found significant, albeit small, ethnicity differences in preservice teachers' perceptions of their teacher-student relationships. Asian American and Hispanic teachers perceived their Asian American and Hispanic students as more independent, whereas African American students were perceived as more dependent and reliant on them for help. Whereas White teachers perceived White students as less dependent, and relationships with all minority students as more dependent. Overall, teacher-student relationships with minority students showed higher levels of dependence compared to White students.

### ***Teacher Gender***

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that 89.3% of California's elementary teachers were female and only 10.7% were male in 2015-16 (*Digest of Education Statistics, 2017*, n.d.). K-12 data is slightly more balanced with 73.0% female and 27.0% male teachers (*Diversifying the Teacher Workforce - Educator Excellence (CA Dept of Education)*, n.d.). One international study focused on Australian education policy highlighted the need for more male teachers in English speaking countries, arguing this would help "re-masculinize" schools to become more "boy friendly," provide needed male role models, and subsequently improve boys' success in school (Mills et al., 2004).

### ***Teacher Experience***

In an article titled "*The Mystery of Good Teaching*," Goldhaber (2002) discusses the influence that teachers have on student achievement and the teacher characteristics that lead to better achievement outcomes. Teacher education level, certification and years of experience are common and widely researched measures of teacher quality; however, empirical evidence

generally does not support an association between these characteristics and higher student achievement (Goldhaber, 2002). While the importance of good teaching is undeniable, what makes good teachers is unclear. Still, teachers' years of experience have been shown to be significant in teacher-student relationships. One study found that teachers had generally stable ideals of their teacher-student relationships over their careers, striving for high levels of teacher dominance and student cooperation (Brekelmans et al., 2002). Results show that on average, a teacher increased their dominance over the first decade of teaching, after which dominance stabilized, while student cooperativeness remained constant (Brekelmans et al., 2002). Multiple studies on student perceptions of teacher-student relationship quality found positive associations between teacher experience and perceptions of higher teacher agency and communion (Wubbels et al., 2014). Teacher agency refers to having power, control, and dominance, whereas teacher communion refers to being friendly, social, and showing love, union, and affiliation (Wubbels et al., 2014).

### ***Teacher Pedagogy and Classroom Management***

Kindergarten children reported higher conflict in their teacher-student relationships when instructional practices resembled: teacher-directed instruction; a focus on rote learning and teaching of isolated skills; teacher use of normative comparisons when evaluating students; less individualization; and less use of positive discipline strategies (Mantzicopoulos, 2005). Over a period of 15 years, graduate and undergraduate students across numerous institutions in one study were asked to describe qualities of the teachers who had most helped them learn and achieve success (Strong, 2011). Findings revealed both personal and teaching-related traits; teaching preparation and methods were mentioned, as were respect, compassion, and "cultivating a sense of belonging in the classroom" (Strong, 2011, p. 14). Relatedly, Wubbels and colleagues

(2014) found that teachers who had positive teacher-student relationships in a multicultural classroom knew the importance of establishing clear rules and correcting student behavior when necessary, but did so using intentional strategies so as to prevent any negative consequences on the teacher-student relationship.

### ***Teacher Stress and High-Stakes Testing***

Organizational research has established that moderate stress can lead to employees' increased performance and sense of accomplishment; however, a stress overload can lead to decreased learning and performance (Mathison & Freeman, 2006). Since the 2001 *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* Act, states have been required to report student achievement scores, and these high-stakes tests have been linked to increased teacher stress (Gonzalez et al., 2017). Needless to say, high-stakes testing also puts pressure on students and schools as a whole, such as meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP), administering Common Core Smarter Balanced Assessments starting in grade 3 and Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) Assessments in grade 5, and dealing with sanctions when falling short (*California Science Test - California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) System (CA Dept of Education)*, n.d.; *Smarter Balanced Assessment System - Testing (CA Dept of Education)*, n.d.; Kruger et al., 2007).

One study documented the changing roles of elementary teachers over the last two decades and found that teachers generally had additional tasks to complete, greater responsibility for work outside of the classroom requiring collaboration with colleagues and personnel, and increased responsibility for teaching and learning through student assessment data; ultimately, the teacher's changing role not only increased teacher stress, but it had affected teacher-student relationships (Valli & Buese, 2007). One teacher said she did not always know her students by face, but instead knew them by their data. Overall, teachers felt relationships suffered. "The

time taken away from instruction for testing purposes was not, from the perspective of most of the [elementary] teachers, worth the price of diminished relational roles with their students” (Valli & Buese, 2007, p. 548).

### **School and Classroom Contexts**

School and classroom environments are critical to teaching and learning, as well as relationships between individuals. Each school has its own context that distinguishes it from the next school, as does each classroom. It is important to discuss these contexts because teacher-student relationships are embedded in them.

### ***School Climate***

Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of schools as caring communities where relationships and responsibilities trump rules and rights, and practicing such an ethic of care can help meet students’ intellectual, social, and affective needs (Velasquez et al., 2013). School climate is one aspect of school context that refers to the “feel” of a school, and while there is no consensus on its components, school climate research often sites the importance of “caring” and “safety” (Tableman & Herron, 2004). One research brief defines school climate by four environmental features: (1) “A *physical environment* that is welcoming and conducive to learning,” (2) “A *social environment* that promotes communication and interaction,” (3) An *affective environment* that promotes a sense of belonging and self-esteem,” and (4) An *academic environment* that promotes learning and self-fulfillment” (Tableman & Herron, 2004, p. 3). Another article explains that school climate “refers to spheres of school life (e.g., safety, relationships, teaching and learning, the environment) as well as to larger organizational patterns (e.g., from fragmented to cohesive or “shared” vision, healthy or unhealthy, conscious or unrecognized)” (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 181). Previous studies confirm that school climate (e.g.,

instructional, organizational, and social practices) influences student engagement and achievement (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011).

### ***Classroom Climate***

It has also been shown that classroom contexts (e.g., quality of instruction; teacher-student relationships; social-emotional climate) are a significant predictor of academic achievement (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011). For instance, the social context of the classroom can make a student feel socially connected and supported, which can influence their participation in learning activities. Research that highlights the indirect effects of teacher-student relationships on academic performance consider participation in learning (e.g., academic engagement) as the mediator (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011).

As defined earlier in Key Terms, according to Creemers and Reezigt (1999, p. 34) classroom climate includes “the physical environment of the classroom; the social system (relationships and interactions between students and relationships and interactions between students and their teachers); an orderly classroom environment; [and] teacher expectations about student outcomes.” The even more specific concept of classroom social-emotional climate is described by Howes (2000) as “consisting of the level of aggression and other behavior problems in the group of children, the nature of child-teacher relationships, and the frequency and complexity of play with peers” (2000, p. 192). Prior research has also shown that measures of teacher personality and student interest in subject matter can predict the social-emotional climate of a classroom (Walberg & Anderson, 1968).

### ***Traditional and Non-Traditional Schools***

For the sake of distinction, traditional schools discussed here refer to schools without a theme or focus whereas non-traditional schools would include dual language immersion,

International Baccalaureate (IB), arts, or science/technology/engineering/math (STEM) schools, for example. In dual language classrooms teachers teach two languages and students learn in one language daily or weekly; the number of minority language and English native speakers are close in number (Palmer, 2007). However, dual language programs vary. Longitudinal research findings demonstrate the effectiveness of dual language education in achievement outcomes and completely closing the achievement gap for the second language (Collier & Thomas, 2004).

### ***Parent Involvement in School***

Parent involvement in children's learning is related to positive student outcomes (Desimone, 1999). However, research also illustrates racial and income/socioeconomic status discrepancies in parental involvement. For example, one study found that parents of higher socioeconomic status were more aware of and involved in their child's school activities (Herman & Yeh, 1983). A study of low-income, ethnically diverse K-5 students demonstrated that increased family involvement in school lead to improved teacher-student relationships, which subsequently led to improvements in students' school attitudes and their perceptions of competency in mathematics and literacy (Dearing et al., 2008).

### ***School Resources***

A meta-analysis established that the effect of school resources on student achievement is sizeable and educationally important (Greenwald et al., 1996). Researchers emphasized the strong relationship of two types of resources: (1) smaller schools and classes, and (2) teacher quality (e.g., teacher education, ability, experience). Relatedly, a book titled *Equal Resources, Equal Outcomes? The Distribution of School Resources and Student Achievement in California* found that schools with a higher economically disadvantaged student population had less teaching resources (e.g., teacher education/credentials/experience, and advanced placement

course offerings) (Betts et al., 2000). This research also explained that much of the variance in student academic achievement was due to socioeconomic status.

### ***Impact of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs in Schools***

A seminal study in the field of social-emotional learning by Durlak and colleagues (2011) revealed the positive impact of participation in SEL programs used universally in schools and implemented by their staff (K-12). Researchers found that these SEL participants' social and emotional skills, behaviors, attitudes, and achievement all increased when compared to non-participants ("controls") (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL programs helped in both developmental and preventative ways. Participants had increased prosocial behaviors and learned social-emotional competencies such as recognition of emotions, stress-management, empathy, problem-solving, and decision-making skills. By the same token, participants had decreased negative behaviors and improved attitudes about school and themselves. Developmental research has established that acquisition of social-emotional competencies is strongly linked to academic performance and well-being outcomes, while lacking such skills can lead to stumbling blocks academically, socially, and personally (Durlak et al., 2011). Several longitudinal and correlational studies have also established that social-emotional variables are related to academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011).

### **Summary and Gaps in the Literature**

This review of the research on teacher-student relationships in education has demonstrated that a high volume of empirical studies have already been conducted, elucidating the significance of this topic. Furthermore, the literature review revealed that teacher-student relationships are important to both cognitive and non-cognitive student outcomes. It also illustrates the multitude and complexity of factors that influence teacher-student relationships;



these factors include individual student and teacher characteristics ranging from demographics to student school entry characteristics and teacher experience and teaching style. Research also demonstrated that factors within school and classroom contexts also contribute to teacher-student relationships; these factors included school and classroom climates and implementation of SEL instruction and programs. Additionally, this review of the literature established that most study designs are either quantitative or theoretical. It is rare to find qualitative research studies on the topic of teacher-student relationships, and this is one gap in the literature that this dissertation aimed to address. The qualitative emphasis of this mixed methods research study revealed context specific details and relationship building strategies that a solely quantitative approach typically cannot provide. Research studies on teacher perspectives of relationships based on gender, race, and social class within the elementary setting are similarly limited, further increasing the need for the current research study. Given these literature gaps this case study of a Southern California school district across its diverse K-5 elementary schools makes a novel contribution to this set of literature.

## **CHAPTER THREE. METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This dissertation on relationship building between K-5 teachers and students in a Southern California school district was designed as a mixed methods case study. Both a quantitative survey questionnaire and a qualitative interview protocol were utilized. The survey was used to gather general teacher demographic and perception data. However, the main source of data was collected through the interview process. Quantitative and qualitative data were essential to the study because quantitative data provided quantifiable measures of teacher perceptions and allowed for comparisons across individuals and schools; whereas qualitative data presented an exploratory narrative of the importance of relationships and the contextual factors in which relationships were embedded. The case study design facilitated analyses of teacher perceptions from the lenses of teachers as individuals; teachers at respective school sites; and teachers within a school district. Additionally, the design allowed for an analysis of school sites, revealing their unique contexts. The case study design furthermore presented relationship building as a “generic problem,” allowing study findings to be generalizable to the study population—in this case, the school district (Krathwohl, 2009).

Since the research objective of this study was to investigate teachers’ perceptions of their relationship building with students, one practical approach to meet this objective was to ask teachers themselves about their perceptions. The process for each participant involved completion of an initial online survey, followed by an optional phone or video call interview. The survey was required as a part of the research design because: (1) it was a practical method for collecting data from individuals at multiple school sites throughout the district, (2) it provided informative background data on teacher demographics and perceptions, (3) it provided

contextual school site data on teachers and their students, classrooms, and schools, and (4) it determined whether or not teachers wished to participate in a follow-up interview.

### Methods

The following methods section describes the study population, study sample, study sites, sampling methods, data collection instruments, and data collection procedures.

### Population

The population selected for this case study was a public school district located in Southern California. This mid-sized school district comprised of 13 elementary schools (Pre-K/K-5), one K-8 school, four middle schools (6-8), two 6-12 schools, two high schools (9-12), and one alternative school (6-12) (*Largest & Smallest Public School Districts - CalEdFacts (CA Dept of Education)*, 2019). California Department of Education (CDE) 2020-2021 student data records for the district indicated an enrollment of approximately 16,800 students; an English Language Learner population of 15.1%; and 55.5% of students qualifying for Free or Reduced Lunch (*District Profile: District (CA Dept of Education)*, 2021; *Enrollment by English Language Acquisition Status (ELAS) and Grade*, 2021; *Free and Reduced Price Meals (CA Department of Education)*, 2021). The district's ELL and Free/Reduced lunch populations were still smaller when compared to county and state data. Refer to Table 2.

Table 2

*District, County, and State Data on English Language Learner & Free or Reduced Lunch (%) from the California Department of Education (CDE) – 2020-2021*

	School District	Los Angeles County	California State
English Language Learner	15.1	16.9	17.7
Free or Reduced Lunch	55.5	68.7	58.9

CDE student enrollment data by ethnicity revealed the following statistics: 11.1% African American; 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native; 5.4% Asian; 1.9% Filipino; 57.8% Hispanic

or Latino; 0.2% Pacific Islander; 19.1% White; 3.7% two or more races; and 0.5% not reported. Comparatively, enrollment by ethnicity at the county level showed fewer African American students (7.1%); more Asian students (7.9%); more Hispanic/Latino students (65.7%); and fewer White students (13.4%). Similarly, California Statewide data revealed even fewer African American students (5.2%); even more Asian students (9.5%); fewer Hispanic/Latino students (55.3%); and more White students (21.7%). Refer to Table 3 for the student enrollment by ethnicity data comparison discussed (*Enrollment by Ethnicity - District (CA Dept of Education)*, 2021).

Table 3

*District, County, and State K-12 Student Enrollment Data by Ethnicity (%) from the CDE – 2020-2021*

	District	County	State
African American	11.1	7.1	5.2
Alaska Native	0.2	0.2	0.5
Asian	5.4	7.9	9.5
Filipino	1.9	2.2	2.4
Hispanic or Latino	57.8	65.7	55.3
Pacific Islander	0.2	0.3	0.4
White	19.1	13.4	21.7
Two or More Races	3.7	2.7	4.1
Not Reported	0.5	0.6	0.9

Refer to Table 4 for city (of district), county, and state US Census Bureau data on race and Hispanic origin. Since this data includes Hispanic/Latino populations in any race category, the percentage sums are over 100. Additionally, the Census suggests that estimates across city, state, county, and state are not comparable. Despite these limitations, data in Table 4 shows that the White alone population for the district city is roughly 20 percent less than county and state populations. Additionally, district city data reveals that there is only a 1.0% difference in the size of Hispanic/Latino (34.9%) and White alone, not Hispanic/Latino (35.9%) populations, whereas county and state data is nowhere near this equal.

Table 4

*City (of District), County, and State Population Data by Race & Hispanic Origin (%) from the United States Census Bureau – July 1, 2019*

	City (of District)	County	State
White alone	50.8*	70.7*	71.9*
Black or African American alone	8.8*	9.0*	6.5*
American Indian and Alaska Native alone	0.3*	1.4*	1.6*
Asian alone	17.2*	15.4*	15.5*
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone	0.2*	0.4*	0.5*
Two or More Races	4.9*	3.1*	4.0*
Hispanic or Latino**	34.9*	48.6*	39.4*
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino	35.9*	26.1*	36.5*

Notes: \* Estimates are not comparable to other geographic levels due to methodology differences that may exist between different data sources. \*\*Hispanics may be of any race, so also are included in applicable race categories.

Although demographic statistics (race/ethnicity and SES) of district students versus US Census population data at the city, county, and state level are not directly comparable, Census data show that the case study city population generally has both a higher median household income and per capita income when compared to county and state population statistics (*U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts*, n.d.). However, Census data also shows the city has a higher number of people in poverty when compared to county and state populations. This SES data could represent the discrepancies among the “rich and poor.” Refer to Table 5 (*U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts*, 2019). The percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students in the district is 61.1%, whereas only 15.7% of the city’s population fall under the poverty category. While free and reduced lunch and poverty line are two grossly different measures, these are the closest comparisons the researcher could gather.

Table 5

*District, County, and State Income (US dollars) & Poverty (%) Data from the United States Census Bureau – July 1, 2019*

	City (of District)	County	State
Median household income**	\$83,068	\$68,044	\$75,235
Per capita income in past 12 months**	\$47,863	\$34,156	\$36,955

Persons in poverty*	14.5%	13.4%	11.8%
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Notes. \* Estimates are not comparable to other geographic levels due to methodology differences that may exist between different data sources. \*\* In 2019 US dollars, 2015-2019.

Since the school district is contiguous with the city—meaning that there are no parts of the city that are not in the district and there are no schools in the district that are outside of the city—an examination of city data comparisons could be informative to this study. For instance, upon inquiry the researcher learned that city had a whopping 48 private schools compared to the district’s mere 23 public schools (*Private Schools - School Identification (CA Dept of Education)*, 2021; *School Directory Search Results (CA Dept of Education)*, 2021). In all, there were roughly double the number of private schools, quadruple the amount of private high schools, and twelve K-12 private schools compared no public K-12 schools. Refer to Table 6.

Table 6

*Number of Public & Private Schools in District City Data from the California Department of Education – 2020-2021*

	Kindergarten (Pre-K/K)	Elementary (Pre-K/K-5)	Middle (6-8)	K-8	6-12	High (9-12)	K-12	Total
Public Schools	0	13	4	1	3	2	0	23
Private Schools	3	24	0	0	0	9	12	48

The study was designed to investigate student and school contexts, as well as teacher and classroom contexts—all of which provided more complete details of district teachers’ perceptions of their relationships with students. Taken together with the earlier discussion of racial/class divisions within the city, this evidence of comparable divisions throughout the case study school sites echoes that social/class divisions exist throughout the city and its public school district.

### Sampling Methods

The case study research design for this research did not allow for the use of the gold standard in sampling methods—random sampling—but instead reverted to a convenience sample

(Creswell, 2014). Sampling techniques used included purposive and chain referral sampling. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research and was similarly appropriate for this case study (Krathwohl, 2009). Purposive sampling was necessary because the study investigated K-5 teacher perceptions within the said district and only this particular sample could provide the information sought (Krathwohl, 2009). All eligible K-5 district teachers were accessible to the researcher, therefore single stage sampling—as opposed to cluster sampling—was utilized (Creswell, 2014). After initial contact with all K-5 district teachers and the onset of interviews, numerous additional participants were recruited through chain-referral (referential or “snowball”) sampling (Krathwohl, 2009). The sampling choice was methodical so that the sample was both representative of the population and generalizable (Krathwohl, 2009).

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher developed two original research instruments for this study: (1) Teacher Survey (see Appendix A), and (2) Teacher Interview Protocol (see Appendix B). The survey was constructed and used to gather quantitative demographic data about the sample. The interview protocol was created and implemented to collect qualitative descriptive data participants shared of their perceptions on relationships and relationship building with their students. The instruments were research-based, focusing on academic literature in the areas of teacher-student relationships and relationship building, as well as early childhood education, school and classroom contexts, and individual demographic and personal characteristics of teachers and students. The instruments were inspired and informed by the widely used Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (*Measures Developed by Robert C. Pianta, Ph.D.*, 2017).

### ***Teacher Survey***

The Teacher Survey contained a total of 38 questions. Seven of the questions established participant eligibility and contact information and included both multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank style questions. The remaining 31 questions were Likert scale questions that addressed the following study topics: teacher demographics and teaching background (8 questions); importance of teachers' skills, experience, and relationships (8 questions); feasibility of relationship-building strategies (5 questions); classroom and school contexts and climate (4 questions); and individual student characteristics (6 questions). See Appendix A.

### ***Teacher Interview Protocol***

The Teacher Interview Protocol was a structured interview protocol containing 20 open-ended questions. A structured interview protocol was used to support an efficient data collection process and yield the most consistent data set for this mixed methods study. Open-ended questions were used in order to “elicit views and opinions from the participants” that would reflect their perceptions (Creswell, 2014, p. 190). Despite being a structured interview protocol, probes were prepared if needed for clarification. The interview questions addressed the following topics: teacher background (2 questions); teacher-student relationships and relationship building (3 questions); school context (4 questions); teacher characteristics (1 question); student characteristics (8 questions); and closing questions (2 questions). See Appendix B.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

#### ***Recruitment***

The researcher applied for and was granted approval from the school district to conduct her study. Approval was obtained on March 13, 2020 and would expire March 12, 2021. The



researcher then submitted her application for Claremont Graduate University's (CGU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) and gained approval on June 11, 2020.

Upon acquiring both district and university approval the researcher reached out to the district again to initiate the process for distributing the survey and recruiting interview participants. A human resources (HR) administrative assistant connected the researcher to the study population by sending an email on her behalf to all K-5 elementary teachers inviting them to participate in the study. The researcher's email message included an introduction of herself, the research study, participation guidelines, an electronic link to the Qualtrics online survey, and attached files of both the study Recruitment Letter (see Appendix D) and the participation Consent Form (see Appendix E). The Recruitment Letter contained the following information: (1) introduction, (2) study purpose, (3) steps for participation, (4) participant rights and protection, and (5) contact information for questions or comments. On the other hand, the Consent Form—or agreement to participate in the study—included the following information: (1) overview of the study, (2) researcher, supervisor, and university background, (3) purpose, (4) eligibility, (5) participation, (6) risks and benefits of participation, (7) compensation, (8) voluntary participation, (9) confidentiality, (10) researcher, supervisor, and university IRB contact information, and (11) consent.

The original email invitation sent to all K-5 elementary teachers was delivered on a Friday afternoon approximately one hour after the end of the teacher workday. While some teachers responded promptly and others took longer to respond, most teachers did not respond at all. Consequently, two weeks later, the researcher asked the HR assistant to resend the email on a specific day where teachers had prep time and would likely access their email to see the study invitation. This adjustment helped recruit more participants for the study.

Additional efforts were made to recruit participants through chain-referral sampling. At the end of each interview the researcher asked the interviewee for names of any teacher friends or colleagues they would recommend as study participants. If the interviewee verbally agreed to include their name as the referring party, the researcher individually invited these teachers by email. The researcher also sent a follow-up email to each interviewee thanking them for the interview and to ask them if they could forward the survey link to others. Both chain-referral efforts proved successful in securing additional participants.

The researcher made a final attempt to recruit participants and boost the sample size. The researcher emailed each school site principal to introduce herself and the district approved study; share the number of teachers from their school who had already participated; and encourage principals to get more of their teachers to participate and represent their school in the study. This recruitment effort yielded a few more participants from some schools. After approximately 9 weeks of data collection and multiple stages of recruitment efforts, the researcher, with the approval of her dissertation chairperson, decided to cease data collection. By this point the researcher exhausted all recruitment efforts but also reached data saturation (Creswell, 2014). After consulting with her chairperson, the researcher learned that graduate students in general were having difficulty meeting their sample targets due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (*Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)* | CDC, n.d.). In March of 2020 the pandemic caused schools across state and nation to close and transition from in-person to online learning. Teachers were met with numerous challenges during these abrupt and drastic changes in education. Students—even young kindergartners—were expected to login to online virtual class meeting sessions. Schools sent students home with laptops, chargers, and Wi-Fi hotspots, while teachers learned to setup online video conferencing, create online curriculum

using learning management systems (LMS), and teach in a completely novel and unfamiliar context.

### ***Participation Rate***

The original recruitment email invitation was sent to the entire study population of 280 district K-5 elementary teachers. Participation rates and data collection were incremental and relative to the stages of recruitment efforts that took place. In total there were 76 responses recorded in Qualtrics, but only 41 were included. Reasons for excluding recorded responses included incompleteness (n = 25), ineligibility (n = 8), and omission (n = 2). Of the survey respondents, 27 also participated in a follow up interview; however, two of the recorded interviews were later omitted after being determined outliers due to the participants' teaching assignments as single-subject and/or part-time teachers (e.g., a full-time K-5 science teacher, a part-time K-5 art teacher). The final sample sizes and participation rates were: 41 teachers (14.6%) for partial participation (e.g., survey only), and 25 teachers (8.9%) for full participation (e.g., survey and interview). In total, 61.0% of teachers included in the study (25 of 41) participated fully (e.g., survey and interview).

### ***Data Collection***

#### **Survey**

The Teacher Survey, (Appendix A mentioned earlier), was administered through the Qualtrics online survey platform and was accessed by teachers through the electronic link contained in the recruitment/introductory email. The online survey began with the Recruitment Letter (Appendix D mentioned earlier) followed by the Consent Form (Appendix E mentioned earlier), which was how participants provided electronic consent to partake in the study. Thereafter the Teacher Survey questions would be launched, and the survey concluded with

participant contact information questions, including whether they could participate in an interview. Average survey completion time was 7 minutes and 38 seconds.

Survey participants who wished to also be interviewed included their availability (e.g., days/times) and preferences for communication (e.g., phone or email) and interview format (e.g., phone or video call). The researcher used this information to promptly contact each participant by phone or email to schedule the interview. The researcher suggested an appointment within the participant's availability and if there were any conflicts another appointment was mutually arranged. The researcher sent participants phone or email confirmation reminders and video call meeting links as needed to arrange interviews.

### **Interview**

Mandated safety precautions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic required all interviews to be conducted by phone or virtually through video call. Six participants preferred interviewing over the phone and 19 agreed to having a video call. All but one ( $n = 18$ ) of the video calls were done over the Cisco WebEx platform, while the other participant preferred to use the Google Meet platform. Interviews were voice recorded and automatically transcribed using a speech-to-text transcription application called Otter.ai. Aside from the computer program recording, the researcher also used two handheld voice recording devices as backup recordings should they be needed. Each interview transcription was carefully reviewed for typing errors and edited—or “cleaned up”—by the researcher. Interview completion time averaged 42 minutes and 43 seconds.

The researcher began each interview with a short introduction that included the following: a message of gratitude for the participant's time; an overview of the study topic; a reminder of voluntary participation and confidentiality; a notification that the interview would be

voice recorded, and that the participant had the option to request a copy of the transcript to review it for accuracy—a form of member checking—to ensure the participant’s voice was portrayed accurately; and lastly, an opportunity for the participant to ask any questions prior to the start of the interview (Krathwohl, 2009).

The researcher was intentional about sticking to the structured interview protocol so that the data collection process could be both efficient and consistent. The researcher was also very careful to limit her personal comments during the interview to avoid the possibility of introducing any researcher or interview bias that might influence or jeopardize the integrity of participant voices (Patton, 2002). Very minimal prompting was needed during the interviews; however, when necessary, the researcher relied on scripted follow-up questions from the Teacher Interview Protocol. The researcher kept handwritten notes of participant responses for each interview question as an additional backup of data and an organizational tool for later analysis.

### **Data**

The data collected for this case study was thoroughly analyzed using mixed methods. To accomplish this the researcher identified: (1) key variables informed by the research questions and literature review, and (2) analytical methods appropriate for use with quantitative survey and qualitative interview data. Quantitative data provided numeric summations and representations of data that could be clearly understood and presented in tables, as well as support qualitative data discussions. Qualitative data—in the form of a final case study narrative—presented a “descriptive picture” of the research objective of this study (e.g., to uncover the school districts’ K-5 teachers’ perceptions of their relationship building with students) (Patton, 2002). The “case story” is told thematically and includes detailed information—such as contexts—in order to portray a holistic “[understanding of] the case in all its uniqueness” (Patton, 2002, p. 450).

### **Key variables**

The key variables in this study were derived from the study instruments, which were informed by a review of the literature. These variables linked the important individuals, relationships, and outcomes of the study. The independent variables (IVs) were suspected to have an association with the dependent variables (DVs). Examples of independent variables included teachers' and students' gender, race/ethnicity, and social class (refer to Table 7). Dependent variables were the measurable outcomes resulting from the various independent variables. The main dependent variable in this study was the teacher-student relationship. The "quality" of the teacher-student relationship was important because it determined the success or failure of the relationship and subsequent outcomes (e.g., schooling outcomes). Close and conflictual teacher-student relationships were additional dependent variables that were studied. The remaining dependent variables were schooling outcomes: cognitive, behavioral, psycho-social, and social-emotional outcomes.

Variables mapped across research questions as follows: RQ1 (How do K-5 teachers in one school district describe their teacher-student relationships? (a.) What teacher-student relationship outcomes do teachers perceive? (b.) What teacher-student relationship building strategies do teachers perceive effective?) was addressed through asking teachers about their perceptions of the importance and feasibility of certain IVs that were thought to promote positive teacher-student relationships. RQ2 (How do these descriptions vary across different school contexts?) and RQ3 (How do these descriptions vary across demographics and characteristics of individual teachers, their classrooms, and their students?) were similarly addressed. For RQ2 it was determined whether teacher perceptions were due to any school contexts and for RQ3 it was

## TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

determined whether teacher perceptions were due to any individual classroom, teacher and/or student demographic/s and/or characteristic/s.

Table 7

### *Independent and Dependent Variables from Survey and Interview Instruments*

<b>Independent Variables - Survey</b>	
School site	Teacher care and sensitivity
Teacher age	Teacher providing individualized attention
Teacher grade level/s	Teacher balancing of academic teaching demands and relationship building
Teacher years of experience	Parent involvement in student education
Teacher years at school site	Severity of school challenges
Teacher pedagogical approaches and subject matter knowledge	Students' academic performance level (school site)
Teacher classroom management and discipline	Students' behavior and citizenship overall (school site)
Teacher awareness and sensitivity to individual needs of students	Student academic performance
Teacher fostering of classroom community	Student behavior
Teaching social-emotional skills	Student social-emotional skills and needs
<b>Independent Variables - Interview</b>	
Teacher reason for becoming a teacher	School hinderance of relationship building with students
Teacher teaching style/philosophy	Student with high achievement overall
Teacher relationship building strategies	Student with low achievement and poor work habits
Student population (school site)	Teacher-student interactions in close teacher-student relationships
Teacher provided student support (e.g., academic, non-academic)	Teacher-student interactions in conflictual teacher-student relationships
Teacher balancing of academic and social-emotional demands	Student with poor behavior/social-emotional skills
School support of relationship building with students	
<b>Independent Variables – Survey &amp; Interview</b>	
Teacher gender	Student gender
Teacher race/ethnicity	Student race/ethnicity
Teacher (upbringing) social class	Student social class
<b>Dependent Variables – Interview</b>	
Teacher-student relationship (“quality”)	Conflictual teacher-student relationship
Close teacher-student relationship	
<b>Outcome Variables – Interview</b>	
Cognitive outcomes (e.g., grades, formal/informal assessments)	Psycho-social outcomes (e.g., self-efficacy, motivation)
Behavioral outcomes (e.g., engagement, participation, cooperation, work habits)	Social-emotional outcomes (e.g., emotion regulation; maintaining positive relationships)

## Analytic Methods

Data analysis included use of both quantitative and qualitative analytic methods. The analytic methods used with quantitative data were descriptive statistics including means and

proportions. Refer to Table 8 for the quantitative analytic methods used to address each research question. The analytic method used with qualitative data was thematic coding; since this was a process-oriented methodology, the steps taken during the coding process were described further in the qualitative analytical methods section below.

*Table 8*

*Research Questions and Quantitative Analytic Approaches*

Research Question	Quantitative Analytic Approaches
1. How do K-5 teachers in one school district describe their teacher-student relationships? (a.) What teacher-student relationship outcomes do teachers perceive? (b.) What teacher-student relationship building strategies do teachers perceive effective?	Descriptive statistics - percentages - proportions - frequencies and frequency distributions - measures of central tendency: mode, median, mean - variability: range, variance, standard deviation
2. How do these descriptions vary across different school contexts? For example, how do they vary across:	see sub-questions (a. b. c. d. e.)
a. Traditional and non-traditional (e.g., magnet, themed, or special program) schools?	Descriptive statistics - percentages - proportions - frequencies and frequency distributions
b. Schools' availability of resources?	Descriptive statistics - percentages - proportions
c. School populations (socioeconomically disadvantaged; Hispanic/Latino; English learner)?	- frequencies and frequency distributions - measures of central tendency: mode, median, mean
d. Political climate related to high-stakes testing?	- variability: range, variance, standard deviation
e. School climate related to parent involvement?	
3. How do these descriptions vary across demographics and characteristics of individual teachers, their classrooms, and their students?	see sub-questions (a. b. c. d.)
a. How does this vary across teacher profiles (years of experience; gender; race/ethnicity; pedagogical approach; classroom management /discipline style)?	Descriptive statistics - percentages - proportions - frequencies and frequency distributions - measures of central tendency: mode, median, mean
b. How does this vary across student grade levels (K-5)?	- variability: range, variance, standard deviation



Research Question	Quantitative Analytic Approaches
c. How does this vary across students' gender?	
d. How does this vary across student profiles (based on academic, behavior, or social-emotional performance/needs)?	

### ***Quantitative Analytical Methods***

Quantitative data analysis involved basic descriptive statistics including statistics such as *means, frequencies, percentages, and frequency distributions* (Healey, 2014). Examples of survey data analyses included mean teacher age and years of experience; teacher and student racial/ethnic composition by percent; and frequency distribution tables of teacher responses to Likert-scale questions. Qualitative data was also quantified during the thematic coding process (e.g., code consolidation and prioritization), and code frequencies/percentages were reported throughout the Results chapter (e.g., when discussing each code, the researcher began by stating the number ( $n = x$ ) and percent (%) of teachers who shared that perspective). This study did not require complex multivariate statistical models because qualitative interview data best informed and met the aims of the study. The researcher executed much of the quantitative data analysis using a “default” created report from Qualtrics which allowed for basic descriptive statistical analysis; this information was used to describe the sample and report Likert scale teacher perception responses from survey data.

### ***Qualitative Analytical Methods***

The qualitative analytical methods were more involved and detailed. “The challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of massive amounts of data” (Patton, 2002, p. 432). For this reason, it was necessary to establish a thorough plan for organizing and coding data. Qualitative data analysis entailed the most basic form of analysis—called “*coding*”—as described by Krathwohl (2009). The researcher used Krathwohl’s (2009) fourteen “*Steps in*

*Coding and Analysis*” from his manual, *Methods of Educational and Social Science Research* as an example to guide her qualitative data analysis. The steps include reviewing transcripts for common phrases and patterns; preparing *categories* and *codes* to “code” raw data, then cross-checking *code titles* with coded material to ensure consistency; recoding at an interpretive level; and developing the report. The following steps summarize the steps in the researcher’s analysis:

1. **Initial coding cycle:** The researcher’s initial coding cycle entailed a review of her handwritten interview notes and notation of patterns and prominent ideas observed.
2. **Second coding cycle:** After importing all written transcripts and respective voice recordings into the data analysis software program MaxQDA Analytics Pro 2020, the researcher began the second coding cycle by creating a descriptive word or phrase “code” for each segment (“*units of notes*”) of each transcript—each time the researcher came across a similar “*unit of notes*” she identified it with the same “code” and so on—until every transcript was thoroughly coded. The researcher’s code collection grew as she coded all transcripts. The researcher decided which data to code based on the data’s importance or relevance to the research questions and purpose of the study. After this second coding cycle all codes were reviewed by the researcher and combined, renamed, and hierarchically reorganized. The researcher engaged in an ongoing data analysis process that included “*coding*,” “*code consolidation*,” and “*interpretation*” of data (Krathwohl, 2009).
3. **Third coding cycle:** The researcher performed a third cycle of coding which was more intentional and included: coding data by variables not yet coded; coding data specific to interview questions; and coding data that specifically answered research questions.

4. **Fourth coding cycle:** A fourth coding cycle was completed by re-listening to each interview with the objective of summarizing key points and noting top stories and quotes shared by interviewees.
5. **Data retrieval phase:** The researcher utilized the MaxQDA software program to facilitate the data analysis phase of her study. The software program helped her manage the large quantity of data and allowed for data to be easily accessible through searches and retrievals.
6. **Outlining phase:** The researcher retrieved participant responses by research question to begin composing the Results chapter in an outline form organized by research questions. Coded data (as *codes*) and corresponding code frequencies were included in this initial outline. Although *codes* were already organized into general *categories* during the coding phase, *categories*, *themes*, and *sub-themes* were refined further in the outlining phase. Frequencies and percentages of *categories*, *codes*, and *sub-codes* were later used as quantitative data to complement qualitative findings throughout the Results chapter.
7. **Pre-writing phase:** The researcher pulled block quotes from interview transcripts by copying and pasting them into the outline to prepare for later writing. This process involved going through the outline content level by level and using MaxQDA to gather data by code. The researcher also cleaned up all data to correct for typing errors and punctuation so that transcripts matched interviewee voices. The researcher included all applicable data to ensure every data option was readily available for writing, and that the most representative, highest quality, and widest range of narratives could potentially be used in the data report. Another pre-writing step the researcher completed was creating frequency tables for each *category* and its *themes* and *sub-themes* throughout the outline;

this provided quantitative backing to support the qualitative data presented in the Results chapter. These frequency tables were later embedded into prose and included mainly in the introductory paragraphs for each written category or theme section.

8. **Writing phase:** As the researcher began writing, she further reviewed and organized the data and quotes in a way that would provide a natural flow to the written report, in addition to finding commonalities and differences to discuss. This process of re-organizing raw data helped further develop *categories*, *themes*, and *sub-themes* that the researcher began to clarify and refine as the major points to be made in the reporting of data. About a third of the way into writing the researcher consulted with her dissertation chair about the writing process and was given direction that helped her be more efficient and effective in her writing approach; this included eliminating data and quotes that did not add new insights, being more selective in quote usage, and strategies for summarizing findings—all of which also helped improve the conceptual organization of data to prepare for writing. Since the researcher had excessive data and needed to use less of it, she began to ration and keep track of pages per section and participant quotes in tables to help with concision and ensure equity of participant voices. Throughout the writing process *categories*, *themes*, and *sub-themes* were created, removed, consolidated, and moved around. When it came to actual writing, this process involved: (1) sorting through data, (2) figuring out *themes*, (3) writing introductory paragraphs and topic sentences including quantitative data, and (4) writing up sections by paraphrasing and using direct and block quotes as evidence.

### **Matrix of Mapping Questions**

A matrix of research questions, research instruments (survey and interview questions), and analytical methods was created to ensure that the proposed research plan would properly address and answer the research questions. Refer to Appendix C for this mapping matrix.

### **Pilot Study**

The researcher piloted both the teacher survey and the teacher interview protocol to test the research instruments and make any possible changes to them. In preparation for the pilot study, the researcher sent the survey to two graduate school colleagues for review and they provided minor but helpful suggestions. The researcher also made her own slight changes to improve the accuracy, clarity, formatting, and organization of the survey while she built the electronic version in Qualtrics. The online survey was then shared with and completed by the researcher's teacher colleague for the sole purpose of determining its clarity and understandability. Once finalized, the survey was sent to the two pilot study participants—a pre-K teacher and an instructional coach—both of whom were school site colleagues of the researcher. The pilot participants were handpicked because they were elementary classroom teachers (at the time or in prior years) but did not meet the formal eligibility requirements to participate in the full study; this meant that their participation would not have exhausted any potential participants for the actual study.

The researcher asked the pilot participants for feedback on both the survey and the interview questions, and considered this input when revising the instruments (Creswell, 2014). The specific feedback the researcher sought was confirmation of the clarity and understandability of the questions, and to hear any suggestions that could improve the research instruments. Pilot participants provided positive feedback for the survey; hence no further changes were needed, and the survey was ready for distribution. On the other hand, the pilot revealed that some

interview questions could be improved to reduce repetition and increase clarity. The researcher paid attention to participant responses and her own reactions to the effectiveness of the protocol questions during interviews and wrote these down. Afterwards, the researcher met individually with both interviewees to hear their feedback on question clarity and discussed options for rephrasing some questions. Furthermore, the researcher reviewed interview responses to determine their content validity (Kathwohl, 2009). Finally, the researcher discussed all protocol edits with both graduate school colleagues, and they confirmed the changes. All in all, only select interview questions were altered by shortening or rewording them.

Due to the limited scope of the research study, testing the reliability—or “evidence of consistency of measurement”—was not anticipated nor performed by the researcher (Kathwohl, 2009, p. 401). The instruments were designed by the researcher—who had a knowledge base of research evidence in the area of teacher-student relationships, including Pianta’s widely used Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) (*Measures Developed by Robert C. Pianta, Ph.D.*, 2017). And numerous instrument questions were inspired by the STRS, which prior study analyses show, meets general validity and reliability standards (Gregoriadis & Tsigilis, 2008; Koomen et al., 2012; Ogelman & Seven, 2014).

Aside from improving research instrument language and formatting, executing the pilot study provided some additional practical benefits including designing the survey in a user friendly and effective online platform; estimating participant completion times for both the survey and interview; testing the virtual video-chat platform and recording devices; and practice conducting interviews.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

The researcher followed the proper IRB protocols for conducting the study. Study participants were protected throughout the research process via comprehensive observance of all CGU IRB rules and regulations. All data gathering procedures executed by the researcher—including contact and communication with participants—were IRB approved. An IRB formatted Consent Form (Appendix E) outlining the nature of the study and important participant information was provided to participants to sign at the start of the online survey. The researcher also verbally reviewed the consent form information prior to each interview and answered any participant questions. Interviewees were reminded that their participation remained voluntary, and they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study completely at any time without it being held against them. Interviewees were also reminded that all the information they shared would remain confidential and all files would be kept safely secured and password protected. Participant responses (e.g., audio recordings, transcripts, written records) were kept confidential using assigned pseudonyms. Interviewees were further informed that interviews would be recorded for research purposes, and that they could request a copy of the interview transcript to review it for accuracy. Finally, video-chat participants were asked to kindly turn off their video recordings to prevent any internet connectivity issues and optimize quality audio recordings.

### **Researcher Positionality Statement**

A statement of researcher positionality is important to academic research because it provides transparency, especially in cases where the research being conducted is closely tied to the researcher as a practitioner or professional. In this case, the researcher's passion for this research topic stems from her experiences as a K-12 educator, and the current study was done at the school district where the researcher has worked for the past 15 years. The researcher's

reflexivity, or reflection of how one's background and role "may shape the direction of the study" is important to consider in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014, p. 186). The following sections provide a first-person account of the researcher's positionality.

### **My Background**

I started my teaching career as a middle and high school physical education teacher. Beginning this teaching assignment was extremely challenging, especially because of my young age, inexperience, unstructured classroom environment (e.g., expansive outdoor facilities), and very large class sizes. Over the years, however, my teaching transformed, and I became more effective in my role as teacher and department chair. I dedicated the first seven years of my teaching career to improving this school's physical education department and program, and I am proud to say my efforts led to positive outcomes. At this point in my career I decided to work toward getting back into the traditional classroom and fulfilling my original passion to be an elementary school teacher—which was what I originally trained for during my teaching credential program. Eight years in—teaching both third and second grade—I find myself becoming a better teacher, especially through my awareness of how I relate with students when I am teaching them.

### **My Perspectives**

During my time as a physical education teacher, the process of building a reputation and relating with the middle and high school students took years to develop. I realized that *trust* and *relationships* with students were foundational to my effectiveness as a teacher because these led to student cooperation and "buy in." However, building strong interpersonal relationships with every student was unfeasible due to the number of students I taught each semester/year (average caseloads were about 300 students). Still, it seemed that no matter how large the student-to-



teacher ratio was, I felt that each student needed some degree of *relatedness* or *connection* with me as their teacher.

One of the main differences I have found between teaching elementary, and middle and high school, is that there is more opportunity for developing close relationships with students in the primary years. My discovery inspired me to research this fascinating yet overlooked aspect of primary education—which I believe could be potentially beneficial to students’ schooling experiences, learning outcomes, and future trajectories. Teacher-student relationships are more prominent in daily schooling at the elementary level because their teachers work with the same group of students, completing endless objectives together all day long. And unlike having 300 physical education students in classes each day for instance, a lower elementary (K-2) teacher routinely has about 25 students in their class. The structure of a typical self-contained elementary classroom naturally creates more opportunities and time for relationship building between students and their teacher.

No matter what level—elementary, middle, or high school—what I have discovered is that all K-12 students require a teacher who teaches more than academics. Students demand a sense of connection with their teachers, peers, classes, and schools. Oftentimes, students genuinely and desperately need their teacher’s emotional support and social guidance so much more than academic instruction. I have found that building strong, positive relationships with students is an essential part of fulfilling the role of being an effective and impactful teacher. I also believe that when teachers offer their wholesome support (e.g., beyond academic instruction) and relate with children on a human level, that this is when teachers become most effective and valuable as both teachers and real-life role models.

### **My Positionality**

Philosophically, I hold a constructivist (social constructivist) worldview, which contributes to my positionality. “Social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). Individuals who hold this view develop subjective meanings to their experiences, which are varied, multiple, and complex (Creswell, 2014). Subsequently, constructivist researchers seek to understand the complex views of participants and take into consideration the specific contexts they live or work in, as well as the historical and cultural contexts that influence their lives (Creswell, 2014). I recognize that my personal, cultural, and historical background and experiences influence my interpretation of the world, but it is my job to interpret others’ meanings about the world and develop patterns (and later theory) about that meaning using an inductive approach (Creswell, 2014).

Some of my personal and cultural background traits include being female; bicultural (Armenian-American); a first-generation college graduate; an English second language learner; a 1.5 generation immigrant; an ethnic minority (Armenian); racially White; ethnically and nationally Middle Eastern; bilingual (Armenian and English); a dual citizen (Lebanese and American); and being raised in a working-class household.

My positionality may have influenced my data collection, analysis, and interpretation of study results since I came into the research with prior personal and professional experiences and perspectives. However, I took steps to prevent this from happening as much as possible. Some of the considerations that need to be mentioned are: (1) every K-5 school in the district was included and each had its own ecological contexts, (2) I used a formal interview protocol and limited any probing questions that could have introduced bias, (3) data analysis and the interpretation of results were influenced by me, the researcher, since I labeled and organized the

narrative data into a coding system—although this is inevitable since when employing this methodological approach only the researcher can decide such organization. To help address this researcher bias, I used my knowledge of the literature and previous researchers' works to inform my categories, codes, and sub-codes. I also used a data analysis software program (MaxQDA) to streamline data collection and organization, which may have helped decrease misinterpretation during data analysis. Like most research, this study was driven by the researcher's personal interest and passion for the topic being studied. As the primary researcher I did my best to abide by all proper research guidelines and limited my personal bias as much as I could to produce the highest quality of academic research possible.

## CHAPTER FOUR. RESULTS

### Description of the Data

#### Sample

The sample was comprised of K-5 classroom teachers who taught in the case study school district. Forty-one teachers participated in the survey portion of the study. Twenty-five of these 41 initial participants additionally completed the interview portion of the study.

#### Teachers

The sample included 41 K-5 teachers in the district, representing 12 of the 14 school sites invited to participate in the study. Most teachers in this study fell in the category of ages 36-65 (85.3%,  $n = 35$ ); were female (87.8%,  $n = 36$ ); were White (59.5%,  $n = 25$ ) or Hispanic/Latino (23.8%,  $n = 10$ ); and were raised in a middle class (53.7%,  $n = 22$ ) or working class (41.5%,  $n = 17$ ) household. Teachers in this sample taught across grades K-5 but there were roughly double the number of teachers who taught first, second, fourth, and fifth grade, as opposed to those who taught kindergarten, third, or a split/combo grade class. Most teachers had at least 15 years of teaching experience (82.9%,  $n = 34$ ). And a large chunk of teachers (61.0%,  $n = 25$ ) had either three or fewer years (36.6%,  $n = 15$ ) or 15 or more years (24.4%,  $n = 10$ ) of teaching experience at their current school site. Part of the reason for 61% of teachers having three or fewer years at their school site could be because there were three elementary school closures in recent years, which led to reassignment of teachers to other school sites. Refer to Table 9 for teacher demographics.

Table 9

#### *Demographic Information of 41 Study Participants*

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent	Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
	Age			Grade(s) currently taught	
25 or younger	1	2.4	K	4	9.8

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Characteristic	Frequency	Percent	Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
26-35	3	7.3	1	7	17.1
36-45	8	19.5	2	7	17.1
46-55	16	39.0	3	4	9.8
56-65	11	26.8	4	7	17.1
66 or older	1	2.4	5	8	19.5
Prefer not to say	1	2.4	Split class (combo) or other	4	9.8
Gender			Years of teaching experience		
Male	5	12.2	2 years or less	2	4.9
Female	36	87.8	3-6 years	1	2.4
Prefer to self-describe	0	0.0	7-10 years	1	2.4
Prefer not to say	0	0.0	11-14 years	3	7.3
Race/ethnicity (check all that apply)			15-18 years	8	19.5
Black or African American	2	4.8	19-22 years	10	24.4
White	25	59.5	23 or more years	16	39.0
Hispanic or Latino	10	23.8	Years of teaching at current school site		
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	7.1	3 years or less	15	36.6
American Native or Alaska Native	0	0.0	4-6 years	6	14.6
Other	1	2.4	7-9 years	4	9.8
Prefer not to say	1	2.4	10-12 years	2	4.9
Socioeconomic status of household raised in			13-15 years	4	9.8
Upper Class	2	4.9	16 or more years	10	24.4
Middle Class	22	53.7			
Working Class	17	41.5			
Prefer not to say	0	0.0			

Interview participants were generally representative of the sample described above. More than half of the sample (61.0%; n = 25) participated in the interview and 11 of 14 schools (78.6%) were represented in the sample by at least one interview participant. Only two of the 25 interviewees were male (8.0%); the majority were female (92.0%). Twenty of 25 interviewees (80.0%) were 46 years of age or older; the rest were 45 or younger (20.0%, n = 5). Ten of 25 interviewees (40.0%) grew up in working class households (about the same as the overall sample). Seventeen of 25 interviewees were White (68.0%), which meant that this group had

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about ten percent more participation through interviews while other ethnic groups were less represented in the interviews than they were in survey participation. Refer to Table 9 and Table 10.

Table 10

## *Demographic Information of 25 Interview Participants*

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race Ethnicity	SES Social Class	Current Grade(s) Taught	Years of Experience	Years at Current School Site	School Site
Loretta	36-45	Female	White	Middle Class	4	15-18	10-12	A
Gracie	56-65	Female	White	Working Class	K	23 or more	3 or less	A
Savanna	46-55	Female	White	Middle Class	2	15-18	7-9	A
Beth	46-55	Female	White	Middle Class	K	23 or more	13-15	A
Lynn	36-45	Female	White	Middle Class	5	19-22	16 or more	A
Sarina	56-65	Female	African American	Working Class	3	19-22	4-6	B
Michael	26-35	Male	Hispanic or Latino	Working Class	4/5	3-6	3 or less	B
Maryanne	46-55	Female	Hispanic or Latino	Working Class	2	23 or more	3 or less	B
Alice-Ann	46-55	Female	White	Upper Class	1	23 or more	4-6	B
Kira	56-65	Female	White	Working Class	1	23 or more	3 or less	B
Giada	46-55	Female	White	Middle Class	1	11-14	3 or less	C
Clarisse	46-55	Female	White	Middle Class	5	19-22	13-15	C
Charlie	56-65	Male	Hispanic or Latino	Working Class	4	19-22	3 or less	D
Marylou	56-65	Female	White	Working Class	3/4	7-10	3 or less	D
Sophia	46-55	Female	White	Working Class	3	15-18	3 or less	E
Kyla	36-45	Female	White	Middle Class	5	19-22	3 or less	E
Diana	46-55	Female	Hispanic or Latino	Working Class	1/2	19-22	4-6	F
Scarlett	56-65	Female	White	Middle Class	2	23 or more	10-12	G
Kendra	46-55	Female	White	Middle Class	3	23 or more	3 or less	G
Amanda	56-65	Female	White	Middle Class	4	23 or more	16 or more	H

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Participant Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race Ethnicity	SES Social Class	Current Grade(s) Taught	Years of Experience	Years at Current School Site	School Site
Marissa	46-55	Female	White	Middle Class	3	23 or more	3 or less	H
Denisse	46-55	Female	Prefer not to say	Working Class	1	23 or more	13-15	I
Isabella	56-65	Female	White	Middle Class	4	19-22	4-6	I
Wendy	25 or younger	Female	Asian / Pacific Islander	Middle Class	K	2 or less	3 or less	J
Mikayla	46-55	Female	Asian / Pacific Islander	Middle Class	5	23 or more	16 or more	K

### *School Sites*

School statistics of race/ethnicity, free and reduced lunch, and English language learner populations showed that school sites in this sample were demographically diverse from one another, but also shared some similarities (*District Profile (CA Dept of Education)*, n.d.). For example, 12 of 14 schools had majority (50.0% or higher) populations of low-SES students; 12 of 14 schools had majority Latino/Hispanic student populations; and 7 of 14 schools had 25.0% or higher students who were English language learners. When this data was disaggregated further it revealed how some schools had unique contexts, such as one school with only a 24.4% Latino/Hispanic student population and five schools with less than 50.0% low socioeconomic status populations (refer to Appendix F). School contexts also differed by the type or focus of the school. For example, nine of the 14 schools had a school focus or offered a program, such as Dual Language Immersion; Science–Technology–Engineering–Math (STEM); Arts; or International Baccalaureate (IB) (refer to Appendix F). Overall, district data reflected a demographically diverse study population that was unique across school sites.

School site enrollment by ethnicity data showed mixed populations overall, but also revealed select schools had unique student populations. For example, School sites A and G both

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had almost half White populations, 49.6% and 47.2% respectively. Meanwhile, School site B had an almost all Hispanic/Latino population (91.8%). Another standout was School site J, which had a half Asian population (50.7%). Refer to Table 11.

Table 11

*District School Site Enrollment by Ethnicity Data from California Department of Education – 2020-2021*

School Site	Total	African American	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Filipino	Hispanic or Latino	Pacific Islander	White	Two or More Races	Not Reported
	n	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
A	627	3.3	0.2	8.9	1.3	28.2	0.2	49.6	7.3	1.0
B	488	5.3	0.0	1.0	0.4	91.8	0.0	1.4	0.0	0.0
C	471	11.5	0.0	5.7	3.4	43.3	0.0	27.8	7.0	1.3
D	469	19.2	0.2	0.9	1.5	51.0	0.0	19.0	6.2	2.1
E	535	7.3	0.0	13.5	3.7	43.2	0.4	25.0	6.4	0.6
F	662	9.4	0.5	0.5	1.5	66.5	0.2	16.8	4.4	0.5
G*	935	17.6	0.3	6.0	2.6	60.6	0.1	10.1	2.0	0.6
H	339	6.2	0.6	2.9	0.9	38.9	0.0	47.2	2.1	1.2
I	577	8.7	0.7	4.2	1.6	65.0	0.0	14.7	4.7	0.5
J	450	2.9	0.0	50.7	3.8	13.6	0.2	7.8	20.2	0.9
K	634	11.0	0.2	0.9	2.2	78.1	0.2	5.2	1.6	0.6
L**	445	9.9	0.0	0.0	1.8	85.6	0.0	2.2	0.2	0.2
M**	346	18.8	0.3	0.6	2.6	59.8	0.3	12.7	4.3	0.6
N**	400	4.3	0.3	3.5	0.8	73.3	0.0	15.0	2.8	0.3

Notes: \* K-8, elementary and middle school. \*\* schools with no interview participants

School site participation was overall highest from School sites A and B—two of the three schools mentioned above as having unique student populations (e.g., School site A being majority White (49.6%) and School site B being majority Hispanic/Latino (91.7%)). Two of the three schools also happened to be the only two schools without Title I categorizations—School sites A and J (again, School site A being majority White (49.6%) and School site J being majority Asian (50.7%)). Refer to Table 12 for additional socioeconomic disparities and trends related to student race/ethnicity.

Table 12

*School Site Participation & Information Data from Various Sources\**



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School Site	School Type	Title I (yes/no)	Survey participants	Interview participants	Free or Reduced Price Meals (2020-2021)	Socioeconomically disadvantaged population (2020)	English Learner population (2020)
			n	n	%	%	%
A	Traditional	No	10	5	30.5	25.0	1.4
B	Traditional	Yes	6	5	90.4	96.0	47.5
C	Traditional	Yes	6	2	53.1	50.0	8.5
D	Arts Magnet & French Dual Language Immersion Program (DLIP)	Yes	3	2	63.5	68.3	10.3
E	Math / Science / Technology Academy	Yes	2	2	53.8	51.0	13.2
F	Traditional	Yes	1	1	63.1	63.0	16.7
G	Traditional	Yes	2	2	76.1	71.7	13.8
H	Traditional	Yes	2	2	64.9	64.7	12.5
I	International Baccalaureate (IB) School		2	2	64.5	74.0	23.0
J	Mandarin Dual Language Immersion Program (DLIP)	No	1	1	28.2	27.8	4.3
K	Traditional	Yes	1	1	83.8	87.0	25.3
L	Science, Technology, engineering, Math (STEM) Magnet	Yes	5	0	86.3	88.6	29.4
M	Traditional	Yes	0	0	68.5	68.0	17.0
N	Spanish Dual Language Immersion Program (DLIP)	Yes	0	0	39.3	35.6	6.9
Source*: District website			Total: 41	Total: 25	Source*: Cde.ca.gov	Source*: CA School Dashboard	Source*: CA School Dashboard

Overall teachers described their schools' student populations as having acceptable to very acceptable academic performance and behavior and work habits. Only about 20-25% of teachers reported either unacceptable academic or behavior performance. Refer to Table 13.

Table 13

*Frequency Distribution of Teachers' Perceptions of Schoolwide Student Academic and Behavioral Performance from Survey Data\**

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	Very Unacceptable	Unacceptable	Acceptable	Very Acceptable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Academic performance	0 (0.0%)	10 (25.0%)	25 (62.5%)	5 (12.5%)	2.88	0.60
Behavior and work habits	1 (2.4%)	8 (19.5%)	29 (70.7%)	3 (7.3%)	2.83	0.58

*Note.* \*Survey question: “Which best describes the students at your school overall, according to...”

Overall, teachers described their schools as having some degree of challenges, while about a third (31.7%) reported their schools not having severe challenges. Refer to Table 14.

*Table 14*

### *Frequency Distribution of Teachers’ Perceptions of Schoolwide Challenges from Survey Data*

	Very Severe	Severe	Somewhat Severe	Not Severe	Mean	Standard Deviation
	5 (12.2%)	8 (19.5%)	15 (36.6%)	13 (31.7%)	2.88	0.99

Teachers reported mixed but balanced views on students’ parent involvement. No teacher reported “none,” 31.7% reported “some,” “half,” or “most,” respectively, while 2 teachers reported that “all” parents at their school were involved in their children’s education. Refer to Table 15.

*Table 15*

### *Frequency Distribution of Teachers’ Perceptions of Schoolwide Parent Involvement from Survey Data*

	None	Some	Half	Most	All	Mean	Standard Deviation
	0 (0.0%)	13 (31.7%)	13 (31.7%)	13 (31.7%)	2 (4.9%)	3.10	0.91

*Note.* Survey question: “Approximately how many parents in your school (classroom) are actively involved in their child’s education?”

## ***District***

Dashboard data showed that the case study district had an enrollment of nearly 16,000 students; 67.8% of which were socioeconomically disadvantaged; 14.4% who were English Learners; and 1.6% who were foster youth (*District Summary | California School Dashboard (CA Dept of Education)*, 2020).

### **Overall Findings**

#### **Quantitative Data**

Analysis and reporting of quantitative survey and interview data involved basic descriptive statistics. Survey data that applied to specific research questions were analyzed and included in corresponding sections of Chapter 4. Whereas interview data from MaxQDA was extrapolated to quantify and triangulate qualitative category, theme, and sub-theme findings.

In summary, RQ1 quantitative data revealed that teachers perceived that their skills, knowledge, and practices were important for relationship building with students. The highest-ranking practice was having an awareness and sensitivity to students' individual needs. Also, teachers' perceptions of the feasibility of attaining and utilizing such practices was generally very feasible.

In summary, RQ2 quantitative data showed that most school sites had diverse populations and were Title I schools, except for three schools that had racially/ethnically unique populations (e.g., one majority White (also, non-Title I school); one majority Asian (also, non-Title I school); one majority Hispanic/Latino). Additionally, teachers had positive perceptions of both their schools' students' academic and behavioral performance, and their schools' parent involvement. Teachers described having some degree of challenges at their school sites; however, nearly a third stated having no challenges.

In summary, RQ3 quantitative data showed that teachers perceived that the influence of students' demographic differences on student-teacher relationships were less significant, whereas their academic, behavioral, and social-emotional performance differences were a more significant factor in teacher-student relationships.

### **Qualitative Data**

Analysis and reporting of qualitative interview data was directed and organized by the research questions guiding this study. Table 16 below encapsulates the subsequent qualitative data findings in the form of categories, themes, and sub-themes. The following summaries below provide a brief overview of the data categories (refer to Table 16 and the remainder of Chapter 4 for themes and sub-themes).

In summary, RQ1 results showed that teachers described their teacher-student relationships as important; built upon trust, safety, value, care, and respect; varied in quality; and were attainable even in a virtual learning context. RQ1(a.) results showed that teachers perceived positive teacher-student relationships had beneficial social-emotional and psycho-social outcomes for students, which improved their behavior and ultimately their academic (e.g., cognitive) performance as well. RQ1(b.) results revealed common teacher-student relationship building strategies teachers perceived were most effective. Strategies included mutually learning about each other; teachers supporting students in ways that “built them up”; establishing an encouraging classroom climate and an inclusive classroom community; and extra relationship building with students beyond the classroom.

In summary, RQ2 revealed school site differences (and similarities) teachers shared in their descriptions and how, according to teachers, these possibly affected teacher-student relationships. The ways teachers described schools included how each was unique, such as the

school offered special programs and what the student population was like; the type of school climate and school culture they had; the school's availability of resources; and the level and types of parent involvement there was at the school.

In summary, RQ3 revealed all the individual differences (and similarities) among teachers, their classrooms, and their students, and how these characteristics and demographics, according to teachers, possibly affected teacher-student relationships. Refer to Table 16 for details. Two additional discussions included in this portion of findings include teacher and student personality matches and mismatches; and teacher-student relationships by grade level (e.g., lower and upper elementary).

Table 16

*Qualitative Data Findings: Categories, Themes, & Sub-Themes from Interviews*

Categories	Themes & Sub-Themes
<b>RQ1 Teachers' descriptions of their teacher-student relationships</b>	
Importance of relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationships are foundational to learning</li> <li>Relationships are the number one factor in the classroom</li> </ul>
Foundations of relationships: trust, safety, being valued, cared for, & respected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trusting the teacher &amp; feeling safe</li> <li>Feeling valued, cared for, &amp; respected</li> </ul>
Relationship quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers have a relatively high percentage of positive teacher-student relationships</li> <li>A small fraction of students are challenging to connect with</li> </ul>
Relationship building in the context of a pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relationship building in a virtual setting is challenging but doable</li> </ul>
<b>RQ1(a.) Teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationship outcomes</b>	
Relationship outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positive relationships increased students' social-emotional &amp; psycho-social outcomes, leading them to improved behavior &amp; better chances for cognitive outcomes</li> </ul>
<b>RQ1(b.) Teachers' perceptions of effective teacher-student relationship building strategies</b>	
Teachers & students get to know each other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers &amp; students learn about each other's personal interests               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers show students their "human" side</li> <li>Teachers bond with students in whole class activities</li> </ul> </li> <li>Teachers shows a genuine interest in students</li> <li>Teachers learn about students' individual needs</li> </ul>
Teachers build students up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers believe in students</li> <li>Teachers engage &amp; motivate students               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers motivate students to want to come to school</li> </ul> </li> <li>Teachers make students feel successful through praise &amp; encouragement</li> <li>Teachers build students' confidence</li> </ul>

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Categories	Themes & Sub-Themes
Teachers establish class climate and build class community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers establish a safe &amp; secure classroom environment</li> <li>Teachers build classroom community                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers foster relationships between students</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Teachers further develop relationships with students outside of the classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recess and lunch time relationship building</li> <li>Teachers support students before and after school</li> </ul>
<b>RQ2 Teachers' descriptions &amp; perceptions of relationship building across different school contexts</b>	
School programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School programs: teachers describe what makes their schools notable</li> </ul>
Student populations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School populations: diverse and homogeneous student populations                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teaching populations with diverse abilities &amp; needs is more difficult</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
School climate & culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Principal's leadership: principals' trust &amp; support of teachers promotes teacher-student relationship building</li> <li>Supportive teacher colleagues, school staff, and programs – working as a team to meet students' needs</li> <li>A sense of school community – schoolwide events &amp; celebrations build school community &amp; fosters relationships</li> </ul>
School resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School resources: schools with an abundance &amp; schools with a deficit</li> </ul>
Working with parents & families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicating and building relationships with parents to support their children</li> <li>Parent involvement – all parents care about their children's education                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Different profile students and different styles of parent involvement</li> </ul> </li> <li>Teacher-parent relationships impact teacher-student relationships</li> </ul>
<b>RQ3 Teachers' descriptions &amp; perceptions of relationship building across demographics &amp; characteristics of individual teachers, their classrooms, and their students</b>	
Role of teacher demographics on teacher-student relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers used their racial/ethnic backgrounds to relate with students</li> <li>Teachers' gendered experiences mattered</li> </ul>
Teacher-student relationships & teacher profiles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teaching philosophies &amp; classroom management styles                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teaching children is fun</li> <li>Student-driven teaching</li> <li>Treating students fairly &amp; equitably</li> <li>The teacher's role is to do everything</li> <li>Implementing SEL organically &amp; through SEL curriculum</li> <li>Balancing academics &amp; SEL</li> <li>Dealing with the pressures of testing</li> <li>Classroom management styles</li> </ul> </li> <li>Teachers' personality traits &amp; character                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being caring &amp; nurturing</li> </ul> </li> <li>Teachers' awareness                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers' self-awareness</li> <li>Teachers' awareness of students</li> </ul> </li> <li>Teaching experience – relationships get better with experience</li> </ul>
Role of student demographics on teacher-student relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers either acknowledged student race/ethnicity or focused on fairness</li> <li>Teachers either acknowledged student gender &amp; their own gender biases, or focused on equality, saying "All Kids Are Kids"</li> </ul>
Teacher-student relationships & student profiles	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High academic achievers needed to be given challenges and some attention</li> <li>Low academic achievers needed more attention, support, &amp; scaffolds</li> <li>Students struggling behaviorally or social-emotionally needed structure &amp; more non-cognitive support</li> </ol>

Categories	Themes & Sub-Themes
Teacher-student personality matches & mismatches	4. Relationships were more connected when teacher & student had matching personalities or character traits
Students' personality traits & character	5. Empathy & understanding
Relationships across grade levels – lower (K-2) versus upper (3-5) elementary	6. Relationships across grade levels: upper grades (3-5) get challenging

### Findings by Research Question

#### RQ1

How do K-5 teachers in one school district describe their teacher-student relationships?

- (a.) What teacher-student relationship outcomes do teachers perceive?
- (b.) What teacher-student relationship building strategies do teachers perceive effective?

#### RQ1 Quantitative Data: Teachers' Descriptions of Teacher-Student Relationships

The following quantitative data addresses the overarching RQ1. Quantitative survey data revealed that apart from one or two teachers, all perceived their skills, knowledge, and practices as important or very important to their relationships with students (refer to Table 17). Of the skills, knowledge, and practices listed, “teacher’s awareness and sensitivity to individual needs of students” had the highest rating of importance (82.5%, n = 33), whereas “teacher experience” was ranked least important (22.5%, n = 9). When asked about the feasibility of utilizing corresponding relationship building skills, knowledge, and practices, except for a few teachers, most reported it was either feasible or very feasible, and not a single teacher reported any one practice as being very unfeasible (refer Table 17).

Table 17

*Frequency Distribution of Teachers' Perceptions of the Importance of Teacher Skills, Knowledge, and Practices for Teacher-Student Relationships from Survey Data*

	Very Unimportant	Unimportant	Important	Very Important	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
Teacher's pedagogical approaches & subject matter knowledge	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	15 (37.5%)	23 (57.5%)	3.50	.67

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Classroom management & student discipline	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	9 (22.5%)	30 (75.0%)	3.70	.60
Teaching experience	2 (5.0%)	2 (5.0%)	27 (67.5%)	9 (22.5%)	3.08	.69
Teacher's awareness & sensitivity to individual needs of students	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (15.0%)	33 (82.5%)	3.77	.57
Fostering classroom community	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (17.5%)	32 (80.0%)	3.75	.58
Teaching students social-emotional skills	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	13 (32.5%)	26 (65.0%)	3.60	.62
Teacher's care & sensitivity toward students	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (17.5%)	32 (80.0%)	3.75	.58
Providing individualized attention to students	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	11 (27.5%)	28 (70.0%)	3.65	.61

*Note.* N = 41; frequencies and percentages reported.

Teachers reported positive perceptions of feasibility for executing practices that could help with teacher-student relationship building. Not a single teacher reported that any of the suggested practices were “very unfeasible,” and only ten times did teachers say that a certain practice was “unfeasible.” Most teachers agreed that they could feasibly use their teaching skills and knowledge to help foster positive teacher-student relationships. Refer to Table 18.

Table 18

*Frequency Distribution of Teachers' Perceptions of the Feasibility of Using Teacher Skills, Knowledge, and Practices for Teacher-Student Relationships from Survey Data*

	Very unfeasible	Unfeasible	Feasible	Very feasible	Mean	Standard Deviation
Fostering classroom community	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	16 (40.0%)	24 (60.0%)	3.60	0.49
Teaching students social-emotional skills	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	23 (57.5%)	16 (40.0%)	3.38	0.53
Being a caring and sensitive teacher	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	8 (20.0%)	32 (80.0%)	3.80	0.40
Providing individualized attention to students	0 (0.0%)	5 (12.5%)	27 (67.5%)	8 (20.0%)	3.08	0.57
Balancing academic teaching demands with relationship building	0 (0.0%)	4 (10.0%)	28 (70.0%)	8 (20.0%)	3.10	0.54

*Note.* N = 41; frequencies and percentages reported



### **RQ1 Qualitative Data: Teachers' Descriptions of Relationship Building**

This section will address the overarching RQ1 which focuses on teachers' descriptions of relationship building. Categories, themes, and select sub-themes from the data will be discussed. Data answering RQ1(a.) and RQ1(b.) will follow with the same data reporting format. The focus of RQ1(a.) is on teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationship outcomes. And the focus of RQ1(b.) is on teachers' perceptions of effective relationship building strategies.

Teachers' descriptions of teacher-student relationships included the following four categories: (1) importance of relationships, (2) foundations of relationships: trust, safety, love, care, and respect, (3) relationship quality, and (4) relationship building in the context of a pandemic.

#### ***Importance of Relationships***

The outstanding narrative from 22 teachers in this study (88.0%) was that teacher-student relationships and relationship building were highly important to teaching and learning in the classroom. Loretta, a fourth grade teacher with over 15 years of experience, called teacher-student relationships "the guiding force of [her] teaching." Among the reasons behind relationships and relationship building being important, two themes emerged: (1) teacher-student relationships are foundational to learning, and (2) teacher-student relationships are the number one factor in the classroom.

**Relationships are Foundational to Learning.** Eighty-four percent of teachers (n = 21) expressed teacher-student relationships were foundational to learning. There was repeated mention by teachers of the "human" aspects of relating to and caring for students. Often it was encapsulated in a teacher's dedicated and constant effort to assist students in ways that went beyond teaching academics. And often, this approach was grounded in the basic interpersonal

relationship between teacher and student. When teachers discussed the importance of teacher-student relationships they commonly prioritized it as either more important than, or as a prerequisite to, curricular learning.

Time after time, teachers reiterated their efforts to relate to students in a caring and personal manner. Beth, a teacher of over 23 years, was steadfast in ensuring students felt supported in the learning environment. She said, “I don’t want any child to feel like they’re stupid, and I don’t want any child to say I don’t [get it]. If they say I don’t get it, then I’m going to explain it in a different way and I’m going to keep explaining it.” Michael described his thoughts on a teacher’s role, which emphasized the social and human aspects of working with students:

... not only in academics... but also when it comes to behavior... when it comes to, you know, if they’re just feeling sad, for some reason... it’s your job to help them feel better, because that’s what school is about. School is about that sense of community.

Alice-Ann similarly spoke on building positive relationships by making “... children feel comfortable, welcoming them, making them feel that this is like their home away from home. Because in reality these kids spend most of their daily time with you, they’re spending it with you.” She explained that putting children at ease in the classroom helps give them feelings of importance and being respected. Marylou was also aligned with Michael and Alice-Ann’s views saying “I think it’s very, very important to address the student, to make them feel like you are here for them, no matter what. And you are here to encourage them, no matter what.”

A common narrative shared by teachers was that interpersonal relationships must first be established before learning could take place. Savanna, a teacher with over 15 years of teaching experience, shared a story about a time when her principal asked her to teach a special education

inclusion class and new grade level and her response was “I don’t really know special ed. Curriculum” and “I don’t really know second grade curriculum, so I don’t know how successful I’d be at that.” And her principal told her, “We can teach you all that, what you bring to teaching Savanna we can’t teach you.” In her own words, what Savanna brought to teaching was: “I care about the kid, and the relationship and I do think that it’s the most important thing.”

Mikayla shared that “the role of students’ and teachers’ relationships... [is] first and foremost... because if you don’t have a positive relationship with the students you can’t get past that.” Mikayla went on to explain that some students will learn regardless of a relationship with the teacher, but for marginalized populations, which is who her school serves, having that interpersonal connection is critical and “... is *the* [*emphasis*] most important part of teaching.”

Strong interpersonal relationships were often evidenced by stories of teachers being close with students for years to come. Lynn, who has taught at her current school for over 16 years and describes her school as a “very small knit, tight knit little community,” talked about her longstanding relationships with students, their siblings, and families. She believes that as teachers they are naturally in a position to build relationships with their students, but it is up to teachers whether they allow themselves to or not. And when you do take the initiative to personally connect with students it leads them to see you as a human being in addition to seeing you as their teacher. Lynn described reconnecting with students years later:

...once kids leave. It’s really funny you know they’ll come on Facebook and ... asked to be my friend or whatever and I just make sure that they’ve gone all the way through school, they’ve graduated, they’re out of the district, and I enjoy ... still seeing their lives progressed and whatnot. And you know I wouldn’t be able to have that if I didn’t have a good relationship with them when they were ten.

Amanda, a veteran teacher of over 23 years, also expressed this degree of longstanding relationships: “I’ve really had positive relationships across the board... I’m now teaching children of the children that I taught, and they still remember me, and I remember them and it’s really a long-term relationship.”

**Relationships are the Number One Factor in the Classroom.**

Within the narrative that relationships were important, when teachers were asked to describe the role student-teacher relationships played in their classroom, over a third ( $n = 9$ ; 36.0%) stated that relationships were the most important factor in their classroom. For example, Kyla said, “I almost think that the relationship between the teacher and the child is more important than anything else,” and Alice-Ann expressed, “I think [relationships are] huge. That’s huge. I think it’s the number one thing really, that relationship, that compassion and understanding, it’s, it’s a big thing.” Additional examples from Michael and Loretta further depict how relationships were of utmost importance:

I would say [relationships] play the biggest role. Um, if I don’t have a relationship with my student, it’s difficult for them, you know, to trust me and for them to learn information from me. I think it’s the most important thing. In fact, ... we saw a TED Ed video the other day that talked about how birds learn to chirp best from their parents or from a bird that they recognize. They tend to filter out, you know, people or sounds, chirps from other birds that they don’t know. And so, we can apply that, you know, for our students. If they don’t know who I am, if we don’t have a relationship, then they’re going to filter out what I’m teaching and we don’t want that—we want them to learn, and to be the best that they can be, and so, a personal relationship is very important—you know, making an effort to talk to all of my students... So, for me, I think it’s, it’s the

most important thing in the classroom, is that personal relationship, you know, otherwise, you could just put a robot in there and have them do my job instead, right?

Michael's end statement illuminates the social and human aspects of his role as a facilitator of learning. Facilitating student learning is more effective when the social aspect of transmitting that learning involves positive relationships between the teacher and students.

Loretta's following statement illustrates this viewpoint in terms of getting students through the classroom door, feeling liked, safe, and motivated to cooperate in the learning process:

I think [relationships are] probably the number one factor ... for students to be successful. Um, again, I think that relationships is [sic] what gets kids in the door at school, you know. If the students think the teacher hates them, or if the student hates a teacher, you know, they're not going to want to go to school. Or when they're in the classroom, they're going to be so focused on, "Ugh, I hate that teacher," or "Ugh, that teacher hates me," you know, there's going to be no learning involved. So again, I think it's the number one thing to have kids be open. "Oh, yeah. This is a safe spot." "Okay, what does that teacher want to tell me, I know that they're going to give me, you know, they're going to lead me to the right spot." So again, it's getting kids in the door.

***Foundations of Relationships: Trust, Safety, Being Valued, Cared For, & Respected***

Eighty eight percent of teachers (n = 22) discussed one or more of the five foundational pillars to teacher-student relationships: trust, safety, being valued, cared for, and respected.

These relationship features were mentioned so frequently in this study that they clearly represented the foundational base upon which teacher-student relationships thrived. Moreover, whenever teachers discussed any one of the relationship pillars, oftentimes they also mentioned a

second or third pillar in their same discussion. Study data revealed how closely related and interwoven these foundational pillars were for relationships.

### **Trusting the Teacher & Feeling Safe.**

Teachers commonly emphasized the importance of trust (68.0%,  $n = 17$ ) and feelings of safety (52.0%,  $n = 13$ ) in their relationships with students. The themes of trusting the teacher and feeling safe were voiced by 76.0% of teachers ( $n = 19$ ). The following section includes teachers' descriptions of trust and safety as both independent and codependent pillars of teacher-student relationships.

Sixty-eight percent of teachers ( $n = 17$ ) mentioned trust was an important factor in teacher-student relationships. Teachers said that when students trusted them it facilitated not only their relationship, but also the learning process and achievement outcomes (academic and social-emotional). Clarisse said, "I think it's important that there's a good relationship, that they feel they can trust you. I think that's the important part." Teachers expressed that successful relationships required trust—a feature of relationships that supported students in both academic and social-emotional arenas. Teachers expressed that only when students trusted their teacher would they be able to learn or open up to share how they were feeling. Kendra said, "I keep going back to building trust because if they trust me, they're going to be willing to tell me, you know, what's wrong."

Kyla emphasized the educational impacts saying, "I think that's probably the most important is you have to have that relationship with each student before you can even get into the learning. Creating that—their trust in you—is what will help them learn the most." Giada's statement aligned with Kyla's, who noted "Well, I want them to be able to trust me. I don't think they're going to learn from me unless they trust me, number one." Diana shared that trust

facilitates the learning process, she stated “I like to get to know them. And I think that once you trust each other, it’s a lot easier to, to get along and to learn—um, to teach. It’s a lot makes it a lot easier.” Sophia also expressed how trusting relationships benefit student learning by encouraging risk-taking, question asking, and effort toward learning:

And one of the biggest things that I say in my classroom is mistakes are beautiful, we all make mistakes, we learn from our mistakes. So, I really try to reach the kids socially-emotionally because I believe that once the kids know that you care and that they feel they can trust you, they’re willing to take risks and say “Hey, I don’t get this,” or “I want to try hard because I know it’s important to my teacher.”

Alongside trust, the feature of safety in relationships emerged throughout teachers’ narratives. Fifty-two percent of teachers (n =13) discussed some aspect of student safety—whether it was feeling safe or having safe environments or safe spaces—how this feeling of safety was grounded in the relationship students had with their teachers. Teachers worked to ensure students felt safe in their presence. Sarina built open, trusting relationships with students to show she was there for them, especially if they lacked a trusting and safe relationship elsewhere:

I think it’s important, because a lot of students, their safe place is really at school ... where they feel that they can come to you and they won’t be judged—and they feel that if no one else, like particularly like their family members or extended family, that they don’t feel that that person is really protective over them, and that person is going to judge them or that person is not going to hear them—I like to make sure that I’m that person for the student, where they feel that if they’re upset about something, or even if they’re like

really happy about something or excited, I want to put myself in the position where they can share those things with me, you know, like disappointments and celebrations.

Beth's example illustrates how safety and trust often go hand in hand:

Well, I try really hard to make each child feel like they can ask me anything, that I'm there for them, I try and make a personal connection with them every single day, which has been a little challenging online. But it's really important to me that they trust me—I know it's horrible to say but I like them to like me. And I want them to know that I'm safe, that they can come to me with any problem, that I am like their advocate. To me it's very important that we have that relationship.

Here Beth describes how for a student to feel they can ask the teacher anything requires a teacher-student relationship where the student trusts the teacher, hopefully likes the teacher, knows that the teacher is safe and is an advocate on their side. Clarisse also discussed trust and safety saying, "I think that it's important that they feel loved, like a family almost; feel safe, that they can, you know, tell me things that they're feeling."

### **Feeling Valued, Cared for, & Respected.**

Sixty-eight percent of teachers ( $n = 17$ ) said making students feel valued, cared for, and respected was a cornerstone of their teacher-student relationships. Teachers often described how they included students to make them feel like an important individual within the classroom community, or how they took time to listen to a child. Giada's perspective on teacher-student relationships exemplifies the idea of valuing children as unique individuals who matter:

I remember when I first started out ... I always wanted my kids to learn ... But more important than that, I wanted them to feel seen [*pause*], and heard [*pause*], and loved [*pause*]. And I wanted to make sure that if they didn't learn anything [*emphasis*] in my



class, they needed to leave with feeling important and feeling like they had something to add to the world. ... I always want to have good relationships with my students, I always have been that way. You know, whether it's giving them nicknames or knowing exactly what they like, or learning about, you know all about them and what makes them tick, and what they like and what they don't like, and who their friends are, and having something to be able to relate to with them and talk to them, not just as a teacher, and as a student, but you know to have conversations about who they are and what they like.

Marissa spoke about making students feel respected by acknowledging their daily feelings and emotions:

I have high expectations of the kids, and I want them to feel respected and part of something. So, I do try to make sure that every day, I have like a chart on the board ... so kids can just like move their little picture that they create, doesn't say their name on it, ... to how they're feeling. And so, sometimes, the kids come in and they'll put they're feeling really bad. And so then at some time where it's quiet during the day or there's a break, I can go and address to the students like, "What's going on?" ... I remember specifically one kid was like "My grandma died this weekend," and they just started bursting out crying. So, um, I want the kids to know that I'm part of their life, and I care about them. So, to me it's really important that the kids feel valued and feel like they have a voice.

Teachers like Michael also mentioned valuing the backgrounds students bring with them, including their native languages. Speaking a second language can sometimes be challenging for students and even seen or felt as a deficit. However, Michael's approach is to celebrate these students:

[Students] have to feel appreciated for knowing a second language, they also have to feel like they're valued. And it's a great thing that they know more than one language—we have to appreciate that at school because that native language ...because it's a part of their identity, it's a part of who they are. And the kids have to ... feel appreciated ... like, "I'm a part of this class. This class appreciates who I am as an individual." It's very important [kids feel] they're wanted in the classroom, like, "... We don't want you to think that your native language is a second-class language—'cause it's not—you're not—your parents are not—it's a valued part of our society and we definitely cherish it, as we cherish you."

### ***Relationship Quality***

Ninety-six percent of teachers (n = 24) described the quality of their relationships, most of which depicted relationships in a generally positive or negative light. Sometimes teachers described positive relationships as more neutral in that comparatively they did not feel as close with the students—this often occurred with self-sufficient students who worked well independently and did not require as much personal attention (this particular profile student will be discussed in RQ3). The next section includes teacher descriptions of positive and negative relationships followed by their respective themes. Two major themes were: (1) teachers had a relatively high percentage of positive, close relationships with their students, and (2) teachers usually had one or two (sometimes more, depending on the year) extremely challenging students with whom often it was nearly impossible to get close to, and the relationship was negative or conflictual.

### **Teachers have a Relatively High Percentage of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships.**

Ninety-two percent of teachers (n = 23) described positive teacher-student relationships, oftentimes mentioning affectionate exchanges including hugs and high-fives, praise, and expressions of love and caring. The following section begins with descriptions of these warm, close, positive relationships and follows with the theme that teachers reported having predominantly positive relationships with their students.

Giada described warm, close, positive relationships as students feeling comfortable being physically close to her and emotionally comfortable to share about their personal lives. She said, “[Students] usually don’t have any problem being close to me, or, coming to me when they feel sad, or telling me about something they’re excited about because they know I’ll listen to them.” Giada said she gave students high fives, pats on the back, or “a hug if they were wanting to give me a hug.” She also described trying to maximize the number of positive interactions she had with students and let them know anytime she was proud of them.

Sophia and Maryanne both similarly shared how their positive teacher-student relationships involved expressions of affection such as hugging and exchanging words of love and care. In Sophia’s words:

... some of the kids see me out in the yard and stuff, they’ll run up to me “Ms. Sophia!” and they give me hugs. They tell me that they love me. I tell my kiddos that I love them. They do small, little things with me, “Oh, Ms. Sophia, I made you this picture,” “I wrote you this letter.” The kids that I am very close to, they’re very affectionate.

Instead of hugs Maryanne used thoughtful, caring language in her positive interactions telling students, “... I care for them, I love them, I’m there for them.” She felt talking with them like that made them feel more welcome in the classroom. While students have always liked hugging her, now in the virtual setting students have resorted to sending her chat messages.

Aside from hugs, and verbal and written expressions of care and love, teachers also mentioned empathy and expressing genuine emotions. Alice-Ann shared:

... when you have warmth, empathy, understanding, just having conversations, you know, laughter, even crying—there have been times, like, I literally cried because of something that happened to or something that child was sharing with me. Just that empathy factor, I think it's huge. ... I think those relationships that don't develop or suffer, are the ones that there is nothing—like the teacher has no empathy, shows no compassion, no understanding—and [what] I mean by empathy [is] ... really, really understanding their situation.

When teachers were asked to describe the number of positive versus negative student-teacher relationships in a typical classroom, 92.0% (n =23) said that the majority of their relationships were positive. Teachers frequently replied with a percentage of 90.0% or 95.0% positive relationships. However, teachers often added that there were always one or two students with whom it was impossible to establish a positive relationship. Mikayla said, “I would say like 90.0% positive and 10.0% not. There are some kids that you just can't, you know, you try.”

#### **A Small Fraction of Students Are Challenging to Connect With.**

Seventy-two percent of participants (n = 18) discussed conflictual, negative relationships, often sharing the difficulties of relating to and working with this smaller proportion of students in their class. This section includes teachers' descriptions of negative relationships where teachers often felt it was nearly impossible to establish a close relationship. Two underlying reasons for these troubled teacher-student relationships were the threat of behavioral issues on the rest of the class, and clashes between personalities of the teacher and student.

Teachers shared numerous stories about instances where one student's extreme behaviors absorbed their attention, compromising the class learning environment. Kira shared about one of these situations, "You know, one-on-one we did fine, but it was [*exhales*], it was so difficult for me to handle the classroom dynamics, because [that's] when they start sabotaging [the learning environment]." Lynn described how this type of situation felt:

... navigating through that's difficult. And then the frustration that comes with trying to navigate that behavior, and not punish the rest of the class because you know one or two kids can really throw your behavior into a negative area and energy and so that's hard.

Despite the obstacles, Lynn stayed cognizant of her interactions and offered students praise to keep their school experience as positive as possible. Unfortunately, in the case of Kira, sometimes no positive change was seen all year long. She explained, "... because there's some children I feel, just were very hard for me to relate to, and some with some behavioral challenges that just sort of carried through the year." Diana's excerpt shares a more optimistic perspective about how she eventually found connections with some of these hard-to-reach kids:

I think the majority of them, I do find a positive relationship with, even some of the loud, really loud boys that ... are impulsive and have a really hard time—we get to a place where we can understand each other and, you know, so that it's not so horrible. I think most of them we do break through and have something good.

Diana's gender and personality differences may at first have presented a challenge in relating with some of her students, but she later succeeded in finding a connection with them. Other teachers like Beth and Savanna also reported character differences, specifically when students "rubbed them the wrong way" for some reason or another. Beth said, "... there's

always that one child that drives me insane—you know you can't get along with everybody. Sometimes their personality just rubs me the wrong way.”

Lastly, sometimes teachers simply could not reach a student no matter how hard they tried. Scarlett shared her frustrations about these conflictual relationships but still expressed optimism for the future:

And I think it has a lot to do with home life. They are just so hurt, so deeply hurt—but it does take a time for those students. ... sometimes I just can't reach them even though I try on a daily basis to reach out to them—and sometimes I can crack a little chink in their armor. But more often than not, I find that that armor completely falls away after we're no longer in the classroom together.

### ***Relationship Building in the Context of a Pandemic***

It is imperative to mention that data collection for this research study took place over four months (August–November 2020) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher purposefully did not address the pandemic because it was not prevalent to the original research objective; however, being aware of the pandemic she allowed it to emerge organically through the open-ended interview questions. In essence, the researcher gave participants the option to answer questions with a frame of mind of either teaching during the pandemic or teaching normally as they had “pre-pandemic.” Participants sometimes answered interview questions based on pandemic teaching; however, it is undetermined how much survey responses were influenced by the context of the pandemic. The following data comes from 18 teachers (72.0%) who addressed relationship building specifically within the context of the pandemic (e.g., teachers named or referenced the pandemic or virtual/online learning in their responses).

### **Relationship Building in a Virtual Setting is Challenging but Doable.**

The 72.0% of teachers (n = 18) who addressed the pandemic in some of their responses shared the common narrative that while relationship building in a virtual setting was challenging, it was still doable. Amanda for example expressed her own surprise at how well she was able to build connections with students in the virtual learning setting, especially compared to the prior school year where she knew her students in person through March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019—the last day at school before the switch to virtual learning. She stated, “... online learning is, it’s been very difficult, but I am able to build connections with the students. ... And so, I find that to be a really bright star in this whole situation.” Savanna also expressed that while it was more challenging to establish relationships with students online, she still felt like she had “a pretty good relationship with them.”

Loretta discussed how she became more intentional about relationship building during the pandemic:

... even though we are remote, I still been working on that relationship building. And in fact, I’ve kind of been working on it a little bit more because we’re remote, because it isn’t just something that kind of naturally happens as it does in the classroom, you know, like, giving a hug or high five or kind of making those personal connections. So, I really tried hard in this remote setting to have one-on-one time with each student, and then kind of getting to know them with different activities where they’re filling out surveys.

Text message through the online Learning Management System (LMS) called Canvas, was another way of connecting online that Loretta shared. One of her students sent her the message, “I’m so happy that I get to be in your classroom, you really made me feel welcome.” Emails were also used as a form of virtual communication that perhaps replaced what might have been tangible notes written on scrap paper.

Among other teachers, Michael, Kyla, and Lynn talked specifically about bonding with students through conversations at the beginning of virtual class meetings or during breaks, and even in one-on-one sessions. Michael described his students' enthusiasm to be with him and have informal time to converse before the beginning of class:

Let's take our current class as an example, the kids they love getting online. In fact, they'll get online, I'll open up our meeting room, or virtual waiting room, 10 minutes early and they'll hop on, and, you know, they'll start to talk in the chat. And they'll talk with each other, and then they'll also always talk with me, and they'll say, "Good morning, Mr. Michael. How are you doing?" And it'll be a great interaction during those break times—I make it a point to interact with them and talk with them about what's going on with them. I'll do music requests, you know, "Give me your favorite song and I'll play it in the background for us while we're doing this break online." And it's just been great. It's been great to, you know, interact with them—from afar—during this time. It's been great to hear the enthusiasm on there and, you know, excited [*sic*] to come to school, you know, and see their teacher.

Michael's description of his virtual classroom is one of a positive climate and lively student engagement. Kyla's students were similarly excited to be with her in their virtual classroom, "I have a close relationship with my kids, I think even now in distance learning," she said. "Um, my kids even during their breaks, they don't want to leave they want to stay on and start talking to me about, you know, random things." Lynn found meeting with students online individually was effective in building a relationship:

... it's not during class time, they're not being singled out. I had a lot of success with that last year as well, where I would, a certain student was starting to fall behind during



virtual learning and grabbing them right after our weekly check-in ... just having that check in with her and seeing, “Okay, what do you need to get done this week?” You know, “What are you still behind on? What can we, what can we do?” And showing that interest in her personally, I think that it really did increase her participation...

Lynn reflected on how virtually meeting with students one-on-one (e.g., using a private “break-out room”) enhanced some relationships through this opportunity for teacher-student interaction:

But I do like the feeling that we are focusing on the child as an individual, as opposed to how many standards can you cram down their throat. So, you know, if that takes this kind of a pandemic to do that, that shift, then I guess that’s, you know, it’ll be beneficial as well.

However, not all teachers found success in virtual relationship building. Teachers including Mikayla, Lynn, and Clarisse shared their struggles and shortcomings connecting with children. For instance, Mikayla shared the difficulties of not always being able to see students:

... I’m figuring out their voices—‘cause, you know a lot of times their cameras aren’t working—... and I’m trying to remember things about them. But I’m a visual person so it’s hard for me to make those connections with them if I can’t see them.

Clarisse expressed how the in-person setting provided more opportunity for social interaction with more students: “...right now I feel like it’s a time, probably more of a time crunch, just not having enough time to spend with all of them, because I feel like in school I could try and talk to them here and there.” She also discussed the impediments of being behind the screen:

But the virtual learning is a little challenging because I can’t see what’s going on the other side of the screen. And what’s going on, and why aren’t they completing their

work, or if they're listening, if their camera's off, I don't know if they're on video games [laughs]—I feel less in control now than when we're in [emphasis] the classroom, I can say, you know, “make sure you're not,” you know, or “sit up straight,” or just little things like that. I can see more, like, I can reach over their shoulder and see what they're doing on their screen, so now it's a little harder, I don't know what's going on totally with the social-emotional, if they're, you know, just not wanting to do the work, or they're feeling depressed or what's going on, unless I talk to the parents. If I can't see their faces, you know, if they don't have their cameras on.

### **RQ1(a.) Teachers' Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationship Outcomes**

This section covers RQ1(a.) and describes teachers' perceptions of teacher-student relationship outcomes.

#### ***Relationship Outcomes***

More than half of the teachers (60.0%,  $n = 15$ ) in this study discussed outcomes of teacher-student relationships such as academic, behavioral, or social-emotional outcomes. Findings revealed that positive teacher-student relationships supported students in social-emotional (e.g., feeling safe) and psychosocial (e.g., motivation) ways, which made them better prepared for learning and achievement.

In general, teachers believed that positive relationships resulted in positive learning outcomes. For instance, Wendy perceived that in stronger, more established teacher-student relationships, students were more engaged and receptive to learning and were more perseverant toward challenging, even uninteresting, learning tasks. On the other hand, negative teacher-student relationships led to worse academic and social-emotional outcomes, including diminished motivation, inadequate feelings of acceptance, and unfavorable school experiences.

Kyla reported that students with strong teacher relationships showed more growth in the areas of academics, behavior, and social-emotional development, whereas students who lacked that closeness with their teacher often struggled in these learning outcomes. Kyla saw this trend in both her own and other teachers' experiences:

It doesn't help them behaviorally—those are the kids that fight against you. Emotionally, those are the kids that withdraw within themselves. So, as a teacher, it's very important to pull those out so that you can deal with those issues.

She explained how a relationship where the teacher fosters the social-emotional well-being of a child positively reinforces their behavior, and when behavior and social-emotional issues are resolved this opens up more opportunity for academic learning. Kyla suggested that the responsibility of cultivating relationships with students fell on the teacher because they decided how much time and effort to expend on a relationship with any given student.

### **Positive Relationships Increased Students' Social-Emotional & Psycho-Social Outcomes, Leading them to Improved Behavior & Preparation for Cognitive Outcomes**

More than half of teachers (56.0%,  $n = 14$ ) shared that having positive teacher-student relationships proved beneficial, especially in the form of student learning outcomes. Among these benefits teachers mentioned academic engagement, student motivation, school liking, and ultimately, academic outcomes. The following section addresses behavioral and social-emotional outcomes (e.g., engagement, school liking) and the section thereafter discusses academic outcomes.

Relationships play a huge role in the classroom by facilitating academic engagement, student motivation, and school liking. Alice-Ann described herself as “a relationship-based person” and stated that teacher-student relationships always facilitate “whatever it is that you

want to do.” She felt having a rapport with students was necessary for their academic engagement and motivation.

Similar to Kyla and others, Lynn believed that teacher-student relationships affected learning outcomes (e.g., academic, behavioral, social-emotional). Lynn shared an example:

I’ve had kids that I know are completely capable, but if we’re butting heads in school, in class, they’re just not going to try their hardest. And so, you know, showing them that you do care and that even if you do go to their parents and you call a parent meeting—whatever it is—trying to show them that you’re on their side... And once they really feel that, no you’re there for them ... it greatly affects their performance in a positive way.

Lynn’s perspective underscored how some students required more personal attention and acknowledgement before they engaged and invested in learning with the teacher. The social-emotional need to trust their teacher, and know they cared about and supported them, motivated the students to try harder and affected their ability to perform.

Student motivation in learning was driven by teacher-student interactions within the classroom environment. The following excerpt from Mikayla illustrated what a positive teacher-student relationship might look like in the classroom and how it could motivate a student to persist on a learning task, in this case, writing:

Student teacher relationships, like I said, they’re first and foremost as far as reaching students academically. But when you have positive student teacher relationships with the kids... anybody can just be a witness in a classroom [and see] a teacher who gets along well with a student, that the student has positive emotions right, and when that elicits positive emotions, students feel invested in their study. They want to go sit back down, you know, they feel great, “oh their teacher really liked what they wrote” and they want

to go back down to their seat and do the revisions their teacher asked them to do and come back and see how they did and get that feedback, you know. So, as far as from a motivational standpoint, [positive teacher-student relationships are] critical ...

Mikayla's student was highly engaged in the writing task through the repetitious process of receiving feedback from her teacher and working independently on her writing. Teacher-student collaboration inspired and motivated her to persist on her task. This example, as well as another success story from Michael about his math student, both demonstrated how subject matter can be a powerful intermediary for developing teacher-student relationships, especially when teachers can inspire students with their passion for content areas and engage them in learning.

The teacher-student relationship can be profound, particularly for disadvantaged populations where academic motivation does not always spur from parents or the home. In these instances, teacher-student relationships were even more critical to setting the tone for students' academic motivation. Alice-Ann said, "We all remember ... that amazing teacher, we all remember it, and we all remember that horrible teacher, right. So, whatever relationship—it may be positive or negative—it will have an impact on students." She went on to describe how children's early experiences with teachers—whether positive or negative—imprints their minds about their expectations of future teachers. Alice-Ann concluded, "So I think in that way, it's really crucial in moving students along to, to want to go to school, to want to learn."

Teachers explained that the relationships they have with their students positively impact student learning by making them feel comfortable and supported in the learning environment, as well as encouraged and made them willing to take more educational risks. For example, Kendra emphasized how important feeling comfortable in the classroom is for students' learning:

I feel like if children come to school kind of fearful, and they don't trust the teacher, that can be a negative for the child and they won't perform as well. So, I feel like if a child feels confident and comfortable in the classroom, and they feel like the teacher is understanding and supportive, that they'll be more successful in learning.

Maryanne similarly explained this process but stressed the role of the teacher-student relationship. Maryanne explained that learning improves because teacher-student relationships help students feel comfortable, respected, and appreciated rather than worried, insecure, unsafe, or hesitant in the classroom:

I feel that if we have that relationship as a student and teacher in the classroom, um, students feel respected, students feel appreciated, and at the same time, comfortable. So, I think that if students feel comfortable in the classroom, they will learn better than being, "What's gonna happen now?" or being worried about their day, if they don't feel safe in the classroom. So, I feel that students need to feel comfortable in order to feel successful in a classroom.

Teacher reports of students having positive feelings such as support and comfort in a teacher-student relationship were indicative of better academic outcomes. Marylou further discussed how teacher-student relationships influenced students' schooling experiences and learning outcomes through motivation:

Yeah [relationships influence students' experiences and outcomes] because that gives them the confidence, then they gonna try, they gonna take a risk, they gonna take chances. Something that maybe was not interesting, you know, you [*emphasis*] give them the interest and the motivation, and they open—they open their mind, they open their skills, and they want [*emphasis*] to do it [sic]. So that is very important.

The benefits of positive student-teacher relationships were discussed in this section as learning outcomes—whether academic, behavioral, or social-emotional. Relationships were shown to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills children require for their development and school success. Isabella also underscored the importance of teacher-student relationships. She stated that the stronger the connection she has with her students and the class, the better they performed and the easier it was for her to execute her teaching duties.

### **RQ1(b.) Teachers' Perceptions of Effective Teacher-Student Relationship Building Strategies**

The following section covers RQ1(b.) which addresses teachers' perceptions of effective teacher-student relationship building strategies. This section will discuss categories, themes, and some sub-themes from the data with the same organization as the previous section on RQ1(a.).

Teachers' perceptions of effective relationship building strategies included the following five categories: (1) teachers and students get to know each other, (2) teachers engage students, (3) teachers build students up, (4) teachers build classroom climate and trust, and (5) teachers further develop relationships with students outside of the classroom.

#### ***Teachers & Students Get to Know Each other***

Ninety-six percent of teachers ( $n = 24$ ) shared that getting to know each other is one of the most effective strategies for teacher-student relationship building. Under this category teachers commonly mentioned the following themes: sharing and learning about each other's personal interests (92.0%,  $n = 23$ ); and learning about students' individual needs (80.0%,  $n = 20$ ).

#### **Teachers & Students Learn About Each Other's Personal Interests.**

One of the strategies teachers described for teachers and students getting to know each other was sharing and learning about each other's interests. Ninety-two percent of teachers (n = 23) indicated the practice of not only getting to know what students liked and were interested in, but many also mentioned sharing a little bit about themselves. Teachers especially used this practice to show their "real" or "personal," even "human" side, and to relate to students through interests and preferences they had in common.

Amanda shared how powerful the practice of sharing about herself was with her students because they got to see her beyond her role as a teacher. Students were excited to learn about their teacher's likes and interests, it engaged them, and it strengthened their relationship:

Well, I think we kind of feel like we know each other ... they get a glimpse into who I am as a person. My likes and what things I'm interested in, like my dog, and art, and writing, and all the things that make me excited. And then they get excited as well. And so, they really appreciate getting to know me as a teacher, not just, you know, Ms.

Amanda who stands in front of the class, but me as a human being. And I think that really makes a difference in them being able to connect with me and have a closer relationship.

Giada implemented writing activities to help her and her students get to know one another and foster relationships through discovering common interests or similar experiences:

I like them to write about themselves at the beginning of the year, so I get to know them. And usually when I write my stories ... I always tell them stories about myself. And usually we can relate to one another, if somebody has broken an arm, or if somebody, you know, has got a baby sister or has a pet, or has gone somewhere specific. I try to find something that we can have in common.



Kyla explained that building positive relationships was about getting to know students by finding out about them and what they are interested in—directly or indirectly through their families or previous teachers—and using that information to facilitate their learning.

***Teachers Show Students their “Human” Side.***

One practice numerous teachers emphasized was showing students they were still “real people” or “human,” which helped children learn to relate to and understand their teachers, as well as cultivate their shared relationship. Charlie, Scarlett, and Mikayla all expressed examples of this viewpoint. Charlie expressed the importance of knowing his students and simultaneously allowing them to get to know him in order to relate with each other and build connections:

And at the same time [as establishing myself as the teacher], I have to be conscious of where [students are] coming from, I try to be aware of what situation is a kid in [*sic*] so I can see if I have that knowledge I can help and more. I still try to be human; I still try to tell them about my life and some of the things that we’re [*sic*] going through—that I’m not infallible—I have to let him know that ... I’m a person, as well. ... I’m human and I have problems, [that I] have a headache today... I’m not feeling well, and so on.

Scarlett also shared about connecting on a personal level with students:

It’s like when, when you go outside, when you go out of the classroom and they see you on the street or in the store or something, it’s like, “Oh, she’s a real person.” I think they need to have that interconnection. ... so I bring in a lot of my personal background as well—I tell them that I grew up on a farm, I raised sheep, and those kinds of things. I think they feel that I am real that way. And that I have life experiences.

Similarly, Mikayla described how she speaks with students openly whenever she herself is feeling sick or not having a good day:

I tell ‘em, “Hey you know what, today is not my day, it didn’t start out right. I know you guys have had those days too. Just be patient with me and I’m gonna be patient with you, and we’re gonna get through this. And maybe after recess I’ll feel better.” And they appreciate that you keep it real. I think that’s the most important thing—you have to keep it real with them.

Very often teachers described their interactions and relationship building process as one of relating to children in open, understanding, and respectful ways that are reflective of a true human connection. Gracie expressed this sentiment saying, “I think that if I do not get to know my students as people—and not just students—I don’t do my students justice, or service.”

Marylou also talked about the “human touch” when she described the genuine attention, caring, and listening she demonstrates with her students to validate their importance and concerns, and how these practices also strengthen their teacher-student relationship:

I listen to them and I ask them questions about their life, about their birthday, what they do, so I show them that I care. That’s what I do. And they’re encouraged, and they come to me, and they want to tell me their stories and I listen. Listening is a big part. I don’t make them feel like “Oh, no, I’m too busy right now, hold on, hold on,” because maybe they want to say something now, at that moment. In class I say “Okay, let’s do this question, and then Tom, you’re gonna tell me [what you’d like to share].” But you have to make them feel you are here for them, so there is no bad time. During lunch sometimes some student [*sic*] want to come to talk to you. So, I mean, [*pause*] you have to be flexible and to be a nurturing person. You have to adapt. Yeah. It doesn’t mean every single lunch time you gonna be [*sic*] with your class full of kids. No. But you feel it, maybe that day this person needs to talk to you, he needs something—so you give him

your time. That's why being a teacher requires not only what you know, you know in the books [*laughs*], you need some human, the human touch.

***Teachers Bond with Students in Whole Class Activities.***

A handful of teachers including Diana and Kendra described how they used “morning circle” or “morning meeting” time to build teacher-student relationships. Diana’s “morning circle” included lots of question-and-answer type classroom building activities where both teacher and peers learn more about each other. She emphasized the importance of mutually learning about one another as a class community, respecting each other, and especially showing that she is “... interested in them as a person, and everybody else [sees and hears] that as well.” Kendra also described “morning meeting” as a forum for building personal bonds with students:

I like to get to know [my students] on a personal level, and I like to develop that bond—which we do with morning meeting—and how to interact with them. And find out, you know, what they are interested in, and what their needs are, and know that they can depend on me, and not see me as like, kind of like a disciplinarian or that kind of thing. ... in morning meetings, [I try to] just kind of make it playful, to get to know them. And knowing when to back off if they don't feel comfortable talking to me. But just letting them know that, hopefully that, they can always reach out to me, and talk to me, and have that trust—so I try to build trust that way, like in the morning meeting, just trying to get to know them, and being there for them.

***Teacher Shows a Genuine Interest in Students.***

One strategy 84.0% of teachers (n = 21) described using in their teacher-student relationships was demonstrating a genuine or personal interest in students. This theme was also

articulated by teachers as being invested in students. The way Sarina implemented this strategy in her teaching was being genuinely interested in students' lives and what they talked about:

... [positive relationships] start with like a level of respect. ... once my students ... realize, "Oh, Ms. Sarina really cares ... wants me to learn ... is really looking out for my future" ... I think that they appreciate it. And I'm not like big into hugging and all that [*laughs*], but I think just paying attention to whatever they come to school talking about, whatever they did over the weekend—I think it's important, and what's worked for me. I just act like it's the most exciting thing in the world, "Oh my gosh, that must have been really exciting. Oh, I bet you had so much fun! Now who was there?" And asking them what they did, who they went with, what they ate, how they liked it. I think that that builds a closeness because the student knows that the teacher is really interested in them and what they do.

Likewise, Marylou stated:

I have to be there for them ... to talk about, oh, they bring something to school [*sic*], they talk about what they did last weekend, you know, [and I] show interest [*emphasis*]. And you have to be natural, it doesn't have to be like false. I'm a part of their life for right now, for these years, so I want to be an active [*emphasis*] part of their life.

Marylou's genuine interest to be there for her students as more than an academic instructor comes through in her words.

### **Teachers Learn About Students' Individual Needs.**

Eighty percent of teachers (n = 20) mentioned that learning about students individually involves becoming aware of their individual needs. Gaining an awareness of student needs helped teachers establish relationships with students and support them in their learning.

Oftentimes this involved more than academics; it required gaining an understanding of students' social-emotional and behavioral needs.

Loretta's story about a boy she taught for two consecutive years after looping with the class for third and fourth grade, illustrates how her awareness of his interests and needs helped her to guide his success. This example also illustrates the long-term impact teachers could have on children:

I had a student who was ... a model student ... And in third grade, the student was very high achieving but was shy, and ... he was new to our school, he came from a very small private school of like, I think, 12 kids in the class, to now a public school, we had 28, I think that year. And so I remember his mom being really concerned, and ... I worked with him to open his shell. Well come fourth grade, he opened, and like, this kid was kind of a complete opposite of the kid I had the year before. And actually, it became a bit of like, a little bit of a struggle. It was like, this isn't appropriate. And so we had to put him on a behavior contract. And he was obsessed with elevators. So I said, you know, "If you can do X, Y and Z, I'll take you for a ride on the school elevator." Well, that was like motivating, you know, and it was something very little, and something super easy, but it was like that worked for the kid. Well, jump ahead five years later, this kid's now an 8<sup>th</sup> grader getting ready to go to high school. And I needed a letter of rec for something I was applying for, from a student. So, I reached out to his mom, 'cause I had maintained a connection with mom, and I said, "Do you mind having Johnny write me this letter?" And she goes, "Yeah, sure, no problem." So typical 8<sup>th</sup> grade boy was very, you know, simple, cut and dry. But he focused on this elevator story. And I was like, holy crap, I didn't even remember that, you know, it was such a [sic] easy thing. But

again, it was finding what works for him. So, finding what was motivating for him, getting to know him. ... But I was able to find what motivated him. And I think that's, again, that developing the relationship.

Loretta's strategy of finding a personalized, but simple incentive for her student proved to be effective in helping him meet her expectations. She credited her success in this situation to relationship building; by knowing what interested him she was able to successfully motivate him.

Maryanne also talked about being aware of her students' needs. She explained that the population her school served had additional student needs that she was pleased to provide. She said, "This a special school that I want to be in because I think that I'm making a difference." Maryanne is conscious of her students' individual needs and provides them with "extra" supports such as social-emotional support and basic nutritional and health related resources:

By being in that classroom and being able to support the students that may have some issues that day—but I'm there to support them and I say, "Okay no worries, we'll talk about it later." Or sometimes, um, they come in, they're hungry so I provide snacks for them. Sometimes, you know, they come in, they're feeling sick, so I'm there for them. So, I tell them, "Okay take a drink of water. Take maybe five minutes of rest time, and if you don't feel that you're okay then [I'll send you] to the nurse's office." So, I feel that [School B] has a community of students that they're capable of learning, but they just need that extra [*emphasis*] support.

Like Maryanne, Denisse also discussed the social-emotional and basic nutritional or health needs students have and emphasized the importance of allowing students' needs to dictate the pace of classroom instruction:

You can't have one without the other [e.g., academic learning, social-emotional learning]. If your child is not socially-emotionally stable ... your academics are not going to be there. Just like if they're not well fed, if they're hungry, they're tired, they're not going to learn. ... so, if I see my kids in a class, not getting something—it's like "Okay, let's switch gears. Let's get up. Let's exercise. Let's go. Let's go do art." Because, I mean, it's like you're pounding a square peg in a round hole when they're just out of it. I mean this time, I'll never forget, I had a student-teacher who is now one of my colleagues—she sat there and she's like, she looked at me she's like, "They're all dead." I go, "I know." She [*sic*] just like, "What is going on?" It was like 8:30 in the morning, she looked at me like, you know they were just exhausted, they just, they were not there, emotionally, physically and I [said], "Okay, we're just gonna stop this lesson and forget it." And ... we're gonna do something else, "We're gonna go outside, let's go outside, let's go play." 'Cause like I wanted their energy to change. I mean, that's how bad it was. So, it's like, again, you know, I'm an older teacher, and I do have support with my supervisor, but even when I wasn't. I'm [from] the East Coast, very strong personality, that I'm like, I don't care what the administrator says, I'm doing what's best for my children, because what's the point of trying to slam something into them when it's useless—because they're not gonna learn. So that's how I operate [*laughs*].

Denisse's excerpt demonstrates how sometimes the teacher simply must respond to the needs of their students. Of course, every teacher has their own style and practices to work with their students, but this example highlights the importance of knowing students' behavioral and social-emotional needs and working around that to reach academic teaching and learning objectives.

### ***Teachers Build Students Up***

Every single teacher (n = 25) discussed some aspect of “building students up” as a relationship building strategy, whether it was believing in students (84.0%, n= 21), engaging and motivating students (64.0%, n = 16), encouraging and praising students (68.0%, n = 17), making students feel valued (60.0%, n = 15), or building students’ confidence (40.0%, n = 10). The following quote from Beth represents the overarching idea of this section:

I think that, um, that if you build them up and they believe in themselves, and then school is a positive experience for them. And I think the more positive it is for them, the more willing they are to learn.

Beth’s perspective highlights the importance of making school a positive experience for individual students as well as how this supports them in their learning. Relationship building plays a pivotal role in the making of positive experiences and the ensuing sections will illustrate more of what this process looks like how it unfolds.

### **Teachers Believe in Students.**

Eighty-four percent of teachers (n = 21) spoke about believing in students by expressing statements such as “not allowing students to fail,” “not giving up on students,” and “pushing students to succeed.” Beth, quoted above, also expressed the importance of a solid relationship where students trust and believe in their teacher and have a sense that they are there to build them up and be their advocate. Her response exemplifies both the category of “building students up” and theme of “believing in students.” Beth shared the following:

I think that my relationships with the kids, was to, you know, try and build them up. And I think that the more I believed in them, the more they believed in themselves—and I think that helps kids. Kids need to have someone believe in them, and someone think that they can do it. If ... their teacher doesn’t believe in them or doesn’t believe that



they're capable of anything—that's exactly where they're going to go—and they're going to meet that teacher's expectations. So, I try and raise my expectations higher, but I try and make them achievable. And I think that if a teacher believes in them and builds them up, and is their cheerleader, that child will feel better about themselves and if they feel better about themselves, they're more likely to do better academically, and be a more rounded person. They need to have someone believe in them!

Teachers like Kendra noted that believing in students was particularly effective for those who struggled academically, had low self-confidence, or were unmotivated. Kendra described the positive turnaround some of her struggling students experienced through her support. For example, she shared how students who at first had such low self-esteem and were unwilling to learn showed improvement after receiving her consistent help and encouragement. Building trust and helping students to not feel like "...failure is their thing, but it's just part of the process of how we learn," Kendra said were also important for student growth.

Beth similarly discussed how some students might feel that the teacher is "out to get them" but "they need to know that you're not going to do that, you're actually there to build them up." She stated, "I don't believe in like trying to destroy the child to bring them back up. Um, I don't believe in that." Michael reflected on his own schooling and spoke about teachers being on your side and how now as a teacher his goal is to give his students a similar experience:

... when I was in school, as a kid, I had, I was just blessed with great teachers. And I think that's the biggest reason that made a difference in my academic life is just knowing that the teachers cared and that they were there with you, ... they're on your [*emphasis*] side—and I had that growing up as a kid. And now [as a teacher] ... what I would like to do for my class, do my best, is to make the kids feel that way ... I think that for me, that

was the most important thing growing up. And now in my teaching practice, I think, it is the most important thing.

**Teachers Engage & Motivate Students.**

Eighty-eight percent of teachers ( $n = 22$ ) discussed how both engaging and motivating students were effective practices for student learning and also contributed to teachers' relationships with students. Sixty-four percent of teachers ( $n = 16$ ) discussed student engagement, whereas 76.0% of teachers ( $n = 19$ ) discussed student motivation.

One example from Michael showed how making children feel like they belong in the classroom helps motivate and engage them in academics:

Well, unless the kids are feeling welcomed and appreciated ... then learning is really hard. ... if [kids] feel like it's an environment where they want to be in, teaching is so much easier ...

Teachers, including Michael, also expressed that making learning and school fun is one of the strategies they find effective for teaching and working with students. Michael discussed his use of humor to engage students by making learning more fun. He said "... that's one of the reasons why I inject humor into my lesson so much, because it keeps the kids engaged and motivated to keep listening to the academics." Relatedly, Kendra shared that her graduate school thesis was on the importance of play and after more than 23 years of teaching this concept remains a cornerstone of her practice:

I always feel like I want learning to be fun for students—and interesting—and also challenging. And I want it to be child centered where it's like what is interesting to them. So, I'm always looking in ways to get them engaged, or motivated, and just to make it fun so they have good memories of learning. Because I know from my own experience

... [what] I remember the most [were] the times that were fun in school, or there was some big interest related to it. ... my philosophy—is to not feel like kids are pressured to learn, but more in a playful, fun way [that helps] keep ‘em motivated.

Teachers also mentioned using intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation as teaching strategies and a method for strengthening relationships. For example, Charlie, like many other teachers, used externally motivated rewards such as raffle prizes or pizza parties as a behavior management strategy:

I have had students come to me like when they’re in high school and then they remember things I did in class, you know, “Oh, we used to have pizza parties when we behaved,” and I said “Wow, you remember that?” “You know we used to do this,” I used to give prizes, I’d go to the toy district and I would buy prizes and I’d have like raffles—you know all teachers do of course—but they remember that, they remember all that. And, you know, just try to find ways to motivate them I guess—I know it’s kind of what I have to do, part of the job.

Isabella on the other hand, preferred a teaching philosophy focused more on intrinsic rewards:

... the best education for students is to be intrinsically motivated and find a joy in learning. And that’s really, very, very important to me. Of course, memorizing things and content knowledge is very important, but more [*emphasis*] important is that they are connected to what they’re learning and that it leads them to go other places to learn more. And so, I really try to structure our learning like that ...

***Motivate Students to Want to Come to School.***

Numerous teachers, including Kira, Marylou, and Amanda, underscored motivating students specifically to want to come to school. Kira expressed it directly when she said, “I think

that if a child goes to school and they dread going to school because they don't have a good relationship with their teachers, you know, I just think that may be building a destructive pattern there.” Kira explained further, saying:

Whether you know, if I'm too busy, or impatient, or sarcastic, or just kind of ignore them, or don't listen to them when they need me to hear them—they're not going to want to come to school. They're going to have [*emphasis*] to go to school, but they're not going to like being there. And I just think they're either going to respond by closing down or acting out. Or taking it out on other kids.

Marylou and Amanda's perspectives on student motivation similarly revolved around teacher-student relationships. Marylou explained that most relationships were very positive where both she and her students were happy. As a former high school teacher Marylou commented on the student age factor saying, “And it works very well in elementary ... elementary, kids are happy to come and see their teacher. And they feel “Oh, my teacher is there for me.” Amanda shared a success story of some of her students who at first were struggling:

... [these students] ended up really enjoying school and they really enjoyed the teacher, and they just had a really great time, you know. And I think that's what it's all about and they come out with the attitude that they, they like school. And it may be difficult, you know, they may not be doing, you know, getting super grades or all that, but they're enjoying it, they're enjoying coming to school every day.

The impact of the teacher-student relationship stands out in Amanda's quote by her describing where these students were before and how much their motivation increased, all through the social-emotional benefits of the learning experience and relationship she built with them.

**Teachers Make Students Feel Successful through Praise & Encouragement.**

Sixty-eight percent of teachers ( $n = 17$ ) discussed encouraging and praising students, oftentimes emphasizing the value of making students feel successful. Sophia described encouraging her students, saying “I want to create that loving space and celebrate their successes.” Sarina also mentioned praise, especially acknowledging the successes of struggling students:

When students who are struggling—and when you uplift them, and give them [encouragement], [and praise them like] everything they do is just so amazing—any gains that they make is [*sic*] so important. And you show the other students what they’ve done—it makes such a difference, because they’re like “Ms. Sarina is proud of me.” “Ms. Sarina showed my [*emphasis*] assignment.” “Ms. Sarina showed my [*emphasis*] sentence.” And it encourages that student to always continue to strive to do better—because they know that if they have maybe less mistakes, or they write more, that Ms. Sarina is going to make a big [*emphasis*] deal out of it. Whatever that child’s gains are, no matter how small, I always want to recognize an improvement ... because it’s really important and those need to be celebrated.

Giada discussed how her strategies for working closely with academically struggling students also involved plenty of encouragement to help them find success:

[I do] a lot more hand holding, a lot more encouraging, “You can do this.” I might break down the assignment or the work into smaller pieces so that they can conquer one part before they conquered the other part. ... I try really hard with the kids who are struggling ‘cause I really want them to feel successful. I know that they’re not necessarily always going to catch up to their, their classmates who are doing a lot better. But, you know, if

[sighs], if I am patient, and I spend a lot of time with them, and I'm encouraging, I think they're more likely to be successful.

### **Teachers Build Students' Confidence.**

Forty percent of teachers (n = 10) thought that building students' confidence was an important part of working with children and helping them succeed in school. Loretta said she witnessed the biggest successes in her teacher-student relationships through "working on the confidence of students." Other noteworthy examples of boosting confidence in students came from Alice-Ann and Denisse. When asked about strategies she has found successful in building positive relationships with her students Alice-Ann replied both "being welcoming" and "building confidence." She specifically said:

Building confidence in kids—and not false confidence—but building on their positive things on, on what they can do on their little accomplishments. I mean, we all have struggling students, but even building on their achievements, with whatever shape or form they may be. I think that's something that's really crucial.

Alice-Ann's statement also mimics earlier excerpts under the "praise and encouragement" theme that specifically benefits struggling students. When Denisse described her teaching philosophy, she described understanding students' achievement levels and getting them higher, making sure they really like school, and also underscored building confidence in her students.

### ***Teachers Establish Class Climate & Build Class Community***

Nearly every teacher (96.0%, n = 24) discussed establishing classroom climate and building classroom community as a strategy for relationship building, often mentioning the importance of facilitating relationships among students (40.0%, n = 10). Classroom climate was often discussed by teachers (68.0%, n = 17) in terms of providing students with a sense of

security through a safe environment that met students' social-emotional and academic learning needs. Whereas nearly half of teachers (48.0%,  $n = 12$ ) described that classroom community entailed building a positive climate where students shared mutual respect and responsibility for the “family” like community.

**Teachers Establish a Safe & Secure Classroom Environment.**

Sixty-eight percent of teachers ( $n = 17$ ) commonly described safe and secure classroom climates as a space where students felt comfortable to either take academic risks or receive social-emotional support. Diana and Sophia both mentioned a good relationship meant students knew their teacher cared about them and students felt they were in a safe learning space. Diana shared that when teachers make students feel important it gives them confidence and the “sense of security” they need to learn: “This is a [safe] place where I can try things. This is a place where I can mess up or I can get the answer wrong. And I’m still going to be okay... I’m still going to be successful.” Sophia similarly explained students were “willing to work harder” when they knew their teacher cared and they felt comfortable taking academic risks:

They’re willing to make themselves more vulnerable and ask questions, and creating a safe environment where mistakes are okay allows them to experiment more, and question more, which will correlate into them acquiring more local knowledge and learning more.

According to teachers a safe and secure climate also meant being able to successfully address students' social-emotional needs in the classroom space. Sophia illustrated that sometimes students have social-emotional concerns that need to be addressed before they are ready to learn:

... what I believe is—if I, if I can’t understand where my kids are coming from and meeting their social-emotional needs, how can I have them learn academically? An

example is, you know, a child coming from a background where parents are going through divorce and they're really upset because they have all this turmoil, and I need to understand that it's not just about them being able to run numbers, it's about they're real sad because their parents are being divorced, or their grandpa died, or someone's real sick in their family, or ... I've had families whose kids their parents are being deported—and I need to understand that because that's going to come before the academics. So, if I give a child a safe space to deal with their emotions—we deal with that—and then they move on to the academics.

Sophia explained that addressing children's social-emotional needs led to less behavioral issues and optimized her academic instructional time. Savanna also spoke about instructional time and how difficult it was to teach all subjects and cover the curriculum. Despite the academic pressure, Savanna still felt it was crucial to address social-emotional learning in the classroom. One example she provided was, “taking time to create a community in your classroom.”

Scarlett's excerpt culminates the theme of establishing a safe and secure classroom and emphasizes the role of the teacher-student relationships:

Um, it's really important that I make good connections [e.g., relationships] with them and I want their classroom and I want my students to feel safe at all times. And just to be there for them, to help them, learning in all kinds of aspects, whatever they need, whether it's social-emotional or just academics, or maybe they're just having a bad day. I think that's really important that you make that connection so they feel safe.

**Teachers Build Classroom Community.**



Nearly half of teachers (48.0%,  $n = 12$ ) described building classroom communities either as fun and positive environments; as communities run collectively by students holding class jobs; or as classrooms where students respect and protect each other like a family. For example, Amanda described her fun, positive classroom environment:

... we think about positive things that are going on and happy thoughts, and it's just, create really kind of a [*sic*] upbeat, fun environment, and ... I'm not a real stickler ... I kind of run a kind of a loose classroom where everybody doesn't have to be like little sergeants sitting in their seat. ... we kind of have a relaxed environment, and they can get up and they teach me things, and I teach them things, and it's really a positive situation.

Amanda further described how students played active roles in and contributed to the classroom community:

I think of the classroom as a community, and uh, the kids, we all run it together. So, I give them a part in the management of the classroom with jobs, like we've office manager, public relations manager, librarian, all kinds of fun stuff for the kids, telephone operator. So ... I get them involved in participating. And I do a lot of work where they work together with students, so they get to learn social skills, and we're all one big family, basically. ... I want to teach them the skills to get along with others, and to understand people's differences, and to be kind and caring and, you know, just get along in this world.

Teachers also emphasized the togetherness of a classroom community, often referring to it as a "family" or "team." Sarina shared how she builds community "like a little extended family," she tells her students, "Okay, once this door closes, we're, we're all here together ...

and we are all to look out for each other within our classroom first.” While she takes responsibility for her students in the class, she encourages her students “to take responsibility over the other students when they’re not in the class where [*she*] [*emphasis*] can protect them.” Sarina promotes the “team mentality” or “team family” and tells her students, “... we look out for each other, and we’re brothers and sisters.”

“Morning meeting,” discussed earlier as a strategy to get to know students was also mentioned as an approach for building community in the classroom. Teachers like Maryanne used prompts such as:

What is your favorite food? What is your favorite color? If you [could be any] animal, which [would] you be? In answering these questions community is [built] as the class discovers that more than one student prefers a particular color or animal for example.

A fundamental value taught and emphasized by teachers while building classroom community was respect. Wendy described the following:

...building a community in the classroom that is based more on respect and compassion for one another, because everyone in the classroom is going to be working together with a community of learners rather than just individual kids trying to learn.

Maryanne uses the story of Martin Luther King Jr. to teach her students to treat each other with respect. She tells her students, “No matter your color or ethnicity, we’re all the same in the classroom,” and Dr. King “... wanted all children to be in one classroom,” and that’s what she believes, “I think that we should all be in the same classroom and here we are, we are learning—therefore we should be treated with respect.”

Just as teachers commented that it takes a long time to cultivate teacher-student relationships, teachers also felt the same way about building classroom community. Sarina said

she noticed the difference in children's maturity after Thanksgiving break when children perhaps missed their friends and began to treat each other better and respect her more.

***Teachers Foster Relationships Between Students.***

In their discussions of building classroom community, often teachers (40.0%, n = 10) discussed fostering relationships between students. For example, Loretta mentioned spending lots of time developing relationships not only between her and each individual student, but also between her and the class as a whole and between students. Teachers shared some strategies for strengthening relationships between students including Kagan strategies and other class community building activities. Kagan cooperative structures are strategies that get students to interact with each other and promotes student cooperation, communication, and active engagement. Classroom community building activities were generally described as whole class activities designed to teach students to work together constructively and positively. One beneficial outcome of community building between students was their social skills development.

Loretta described Kagan cooperative learning as the number one relationship building strategy that she has used for relationship building:

So, for example, we do a lot, at the very beginning, every day, I do a class building activity, something that gets the students up and talking. And they always think of them as games, but really, they're ways of students interacting with each other different, you know, they're meeting with different people in the class. Then we do team building where they're working with a smaller group, it's not like a whole class thing. And it's through those [activities] that the students are getting to know each other, and that I'm kind of slipping in and kind of building up.

Loretta said that Kagan cooperative learning strategies have been:

“... life changing ... it’s all about understanding the way the brain thinks, and what are the best ways students learn—and in doing that it’s also building those relationships because I’m understanding the way that kids work better.

Marissa expressed that “... kids are very compassionate towards each other,” and that she tries to create an environment where kids encourage each other. One way she fosters such an environment of peer support and student relationships was through an activity where students choose a classmate to write something positive about that person and share with them that note. The activity was done the last ten minutes each Monday and students would eventually have to address each person in the classroom because they were not permitted to choose the same peer again in any future week. Marissa commented that this activity is “... forcing them to look at people’s strengths and realizing that we all have different things that we bring to the table,” which helps teach acceptance and respect for others.

Teachers also mentioned social skill development that occurs with classroom community building. Wendy’s description of her teaching style provides such an example:

... there’s definitely an intellectual aspect of like, “Let’s learn the material,” but also the aspect of it, “We need to also take time to get to know each other, spend time together, get to know one another, and build community there and help each other out.” When it comes to like group learning or working with one another, knowing how to conflict manage and helping them build those interpersonal skills with one another.

Sophia relatedly shared:

The biggest thing that I tell my kids is that we’re all in this together, that we are here to support each other. And I just describe myself in adult terms as a facilitator so I’m facilitating their learning. And I think the hardest thing during now [pandemic] is it’s so

much me time, but I really try to put it onto the kids, like the kids learning from each other, the kids teaching each other.

***Teachers Further Develop Relationships with Students Outside of the Classroom***

Sixty-eight percent of teachers (n = 17) discussed how relationships were further developed outside of class time, including during recess and lunch (24.0%; n = 6), and before or after school (28.0%; n = 7).

**Recess & Lunch Time Relationship Building.**

Some teachers (24.0%; n = 6) mentioned intentional or unplanned interactions with students during recess and lunch times that facilitated bonding and relationship development. For instance, Kendra described talking with students on an individual basis during recess or joining a game with them during “free time,” as ways to get to know her students. Gracie shared how students would run up to her all the time and hug her out on the playground, even her former students who are now older would still ran over and talk with her. Kyla described one of her students and “her little friend” who instead of playing at recess loved to follow her around and talk with her.

Some teachers allowed students in their classrooms during lunch time and sometimes used this as a reward for students. For example, Clarisse explained that while she used “treasure box” prizes as a reward system while teaching K-3 students, as a fourth and fifth grade teacher she said, “... you’d be surprised, they still want to hang out with the teacher—like have like a lunch date with a friend and the teacher.” She explained the importance of students maintaining a level of respect for their teacher but also feeling like they can talk with them. Clarisse also described her difficulties with one particular student and after learning she liked to help, she

offered her the incentive to stuff folders during lunchtime, which really worked to motivate her at school.

Loretta once used lunch time to resolve a recess conflict between some students:

Yeah, and, you know, again, that safety—I remember I had a student who had a little like, conflict at recess, she got in a fight with a friend, and she was really upset with it, so I just invited her and her friend to have lunch with me in the classroom. And you know, I kind of just let them talk, and sort of helped them. And I remember her just feeling—her mom came up to me actually and said, “Oh, my God, I could never have done that as a parent because I’m mom, and they won’t listen to me. But that was exactly what I wanted them to do. So, thank you for facilitating it.” And they realize I’m not just there to help with academic needs, I can help them with whatever they need.

### **Teachers Support Students Before School & After School.**

Numerous teachers mentioned providing additional support to students outside of instructional time, which contributed positively to their teacher-student relationships. Teachers described helping students before and after school with whatever they might need, including offering them tutoring. Teachers also provided extra academic support to individuals or small groups.

Teachers including Kendra, Charlie, and Maryanne made themselves available before school and after school to help with academics or any specific need students had. Kendra offered tutoring specifically to students who struggled academically but also felt she needed to support them emotionally as well. During the pandemic Charlie and Maryanne provided all kinds of supports including reteaching directions for accessing online programs and even printing assignments and homework for students to pick up. Charlie said that some teachers did

not believe this extra support was expected of them but that he did not mind. He said, "... [it's] what I signed up for. It's like being a priest, you know [*laughs*], you have to be there when you're needed."

Teachers frequently spoke about offering tutoring to their students before and after school. Isabella expressed that the free afterschool tutoring she offered helped her bond more closely with her students. She described how if her students participated in an afterschool program, she would sometimes pull them to her classroom to simply hangout, and if they were struggling students, she spent more time supporting them academically.

## **RQ2**

How do these descriptions vary across different school contexts? For example, how do they vary across:

- a. Traditional and non-traditional (e.g., magnet, themed, or special program) schools?
- b. Schools' availability of resources?
- c. School populations (socioeconomically disadvantaged; Hispanic/Latino; English learner)?
- d. Political climate related to high-stakes testing?
- e. School climate related to parent involvement?

## **RQ2 Quantitative Data: Teachers' Descriptions & Perceptions Across School Contexts**

Quantitative survey data addressing RQ2 showed schools generally had demographically diverse student populations, but also had some unique differences. For example, 12 of 14 school sites had over 50.0% or higher low-SES student populations and 50.0% or higher Latino/Hispanic student populations, respectively. By the same token, three schools stood out from the rest by having the following student populations: half White (School A); over 90.0%

Hispanic/Latino (School B); and half Asian (School J), respectively. Relatedly, Schools A and J were the only two elementary schools in the district without Title I categorizations.

About 75.0% to 80.0% of teachers perceived that their schools' student populations had acceptable to very acceptable academic performance, behavior, and work habits, whereas about 20.0% to 25.0% reported either unacceptable academic performance or behavior. Less than a third of teachers (31.7%) reported that their schools did not have severe challenges, while the remaining teachers described that their schools faced some degree of challenges. Lastly, 31.7% of teachers rated respectively, "some," "half," or "most," parents at their school site as being involved in their children's education.

## **RQ2 Qualitative Data: Teachers' Descriptions & Perceptions Across School Contexts**

This section will cover RQ2 which addresses teachers' descriptions and perceptions of relationship building across school contexts. The discussion includes the following five categories: (1) school programs, (2) school student populations, (3) school climate and culture, (4) school resources, and (5) working with parents and families.

### ***School Programs: Teachers Describe What Makes Their Schools Notable***

Ninety-two percent of teachers (n = 23) described what made their schools unique. Part of these discussions included notable programs schools offered. Nearly half of the school sites (43.0%, n = 6) were named after the programs they offered, including dual language immersion (DLIP; Spanish, French, Mandarin), International Baccalaureate (IB), Science-Technology-Engineering-Math (STEM), or arts—some of these schools were called magnet schools or academies. For the purposes of this study, the remaining schools were referred to as traditional schools. Teacher descriptions revealed that traditional schools also offered programs such as



Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI), and more.

All five teachers (Laura, Gracie, Savanna, Lynn, Beth) interviewed from School A discussed the same aspects about their school, including having a strong arts program, high parent involvement, and being a special education inclusion school. Laura and others called it a neighborhood school:

... we are located in a very small town—even though we are part of [the school district]—about 50.0% of our students come from the town ... everyone's each other's neighbor, they all play sports together—it's really like a small community. We all know everyone's business, teachers included [*laughs*] ...

Gracie added, "... the neighborhood is primarily middle class or upper middle class. ... [and] parents have the ability to be really, really involved—and that's both with their time and their finances." Gracie described high parent involvement—including Parent Teacher Association (PTA) activity—and parents in constant contact with her about their child, which made her feel they were working together and were on the same page. This togetherness she says has been a tradition and strength of their school as it has helped her "be connected to the students and support them and their families."

Teachers shared about the arts learning opportunities at School A—including visual and performing arts, such as music, drama, and dance—and the significant role parents played in helping make those offerings available. Arts were "... one of the things that [parents and the school] make sure that all kids get," Laura shared. Gracie, new to the school, said "... my understanding is they are paid for through parent fundraising," and veteran teachers Beth and Loretta confirmed it:

... we have money set aside just so we can have music lessons, and we have money set aside so we get dance lessons, and we get art lessons. So, it's really, it's nice because a lot of schools don't emphasize the fine arts, and I think that's an important way for a child to express themselves and to, to be able to say "Oh look at this, I can create something beautiful. I am smart."

Loretta commented, "... we have a very involved parent community that helps make [the arts opportunities] possible," and added, "... the parents hold teachers accountable—and you know, they expect the best [*emphasis*], and they really expect us to work hard for it."

Lastly, teachers at School A emphasized that their school was an "inclusion school," where special needs students were placed in classrooms at every grade level for most of the day but also got pulled out for Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI) and other programs.

Loretta, who previously taught at School B described it as the opposite of School A. "Oh, I loved [School B]," she said, but commented it was so challenging to switch schools because the needs were entirely different. In Sarina's words, School B was:

... like a like ground zero for newcomer families. And I think that's very unique, because it's the type of place—where I'm sure wherever they're coming from, like a lot of our kids, they come from Latin America ... they're trying to figure out where should they go? Where's the landing point in California? [School B] and our community has a reputation of being a place where people can start, where they can begin their new lives in the United States.

Diana described School F as "gigantic" in that it was not only a STEM school, but also a dual language school. Some teachers taught in the dual language program and the rest taught in the English program. The STEM school included a science teacher and science lab with students

attending science once a week; a garden and garden teacher; and cooking class. Diana also shared STEM was incorporated across the curriculum. For example, in their current unit studying living things, plants and animals were the focal topics in reading, writing, and math instruction.

Schools G, I, and J were also described by their respective teachers. School G was unlike the others because it was a K-8, and as Scarlett explained it was like having two schools in one since they had both an elementary and a middle school. Kendra added their school was also considered an arts school and were really known for promoting the Writer's Workshop model. Denisse and Isabella both described School I as an IB school where its program was "completely ingrained in the school." Lastly, Wendy said being a dual immersion school, School J was unique in that she taught kindergarten and most of her instruction was given in the non-English language. She shared that the student population was mixed racially/ethnically but they collectively were learning a second language.

***School Student Populations: Diverse & Homogenous Student Populations – Teaching Populations with Diverse Abilities & Needs is More Difficult***

While school demographic data provided an overview of student populations at each school site, teachers' perspectives added valuable insights about individual schools. Teachers (96.0%, n = 24) mentioned race/ethnicity, culture, or class/SES in discussions of their schools' student populations. Additionally, teachers (20.0%, n = 5) emphasized how having students of varying academic levels was more difficult than teaching to a homogeneous group of students.

Some teachers described their schools as lacking diversity. Alice-Ann described her school (School B) population:

Within the district ... we're the highest ... English language learning elementary school ... also in terms of demographics, we are 99.9% almost all disadvantaged [economically]. ...

[and] it's mostly the Latinx population. So, what's unique about that is that we're not really a diverse school ... Our population is a community population, most kids walk to school, most know each other, they live within the same radius, one mile radius, basically. So, within the district it's ... one of the least diverse schools that we have.

She went on to describe the disadvantages or “deficits” students came to school with including lack of access and exposure to certain background knowledge and vocabulary. She explained it was “... not because of lack of want, but it's just, you know, most parents have dual jobs. And that's the community we serve.”

Three other teachers described their schools as homogenous in terms of race or class/SES. Mikayla similarly described School K as “... majority Latino, a small portion of African American, and then like one percent other, you know, like White or, I think I have an Indian boy in my class this [year], or sometimes you get an Armenian kid.” She also described a recent influx of Korean students from the nearby Korean missionary church down the street from the school. Diana described School F as a low socioeconomic school where “One hundred percent of students receive a free lunch.” And Wendy, in her first years as a dual language teacher at School J, said she did not notice any differences in her relationships with students of varying racial/ethnic, or social class backgrounds because she said, “Generally, the students I have worked with, they are a little bit more—it's not as varied, so a little bit more homogenous in the sense.”

At least five schools were described by teachers as diverse by culture and race/ethnicity, and sometimes also by class/SES. Giada and Clarisse both discussed the multicultural diversity at School C. Giada compared working there versus previous schools in the district:

It's more, um—so in my classes at School B, and when I was at School F, and when I was at [School D], the majority of my students were Hispanic, and then there were, you know, a couple of different other nationalities, as well. But in this group, I have White kids, I have Black kids, I have Hispanic kids, I have Asian kids, I have Armenian kids, I mean I just have like, I have a kid from Saudi Arabia—I have the whole spectrum—which yeah, so it's really multicultural—more than any other class I've ever taught at in the district.

Schools G, H, and I were similarly described as being culturally diverse. Scarlett and Kendra described the population at School G as being very diverse, with multiple languages and students from "... all over the planet—we have kids from Asia and South America and Africa." Marissa said, "My school (School H) is mostly, it's a high population of Armenian, and a little bit Hispanic, a little bit White, um, hardly any African American." Amanda added about School H:

My school is unique. I love it because it's very diverse. I mean, we have children from all different countries, all different backgrounds. And I find that so enriching, it's enriching for the other students, it's enriching for the teachers, and it's just a wonderful environment.

Isabella shared on the diversity of her school (School I):

... we have enough children in need that we do count as a Title I school. It's pretty diverse, it's more diverse than your typical [named district city] school in that we have African American students in significant numbers, and Latino, and Asian, and White, and Armenian also."

Teachers from School E also mentioned the social class/SES differences of their diverse populations. Kyla tried to explain:

Um, the student population it is, it's hard to explain—we have basically all different races, all different economic status. We are a Title I school. We get students from all over the district—a lot of them are on permit. So, it is a very diverse community at our school.

Sophia's description further clarified what made School E unique:

I feel so lucky to work at School E—it's the most diverse school that I've ever worked at racially and socioeconomically. And that is one of the hugest things that makes School E so special is the kids who go there and their families, because they're all so different.

Um, you know we have homeless kids, and then we have parents who are, you know, multi-multi-millionaires, which is very interesting.

A common theme among teachers' descriptions of school populations was the significance of academic performance levels. Gracie's (School A) excerpt illustrates the differences she saw in teaching at schools with diverse versus homogenous student ability levels:

[Now I have] a more even classroom, even academic level of students. ... What I'm seeing ... is they're coming more from a similar background or educational background, so that is making it a little bit easier. ... when I was at both [School Y and School Z, both previous schools in the district that were shut down due to low enrollment], I would have kids coming in with absolutely no educational background at that point, and I would have kids who had been in a Montessori school or something—so I saw kids very, very different as far as where they were, so it could be difficult teaching, because you had such a wide range to try to teach to, even when you were doing the small groups.

Sarina (School B) also talked about small group instruction, saying the responsibility of pulling students with similar abilities "... can be tricky, because you could potentially, and I have before,

I've had six, seven, reading groups within my classroom.” Clarisse (School C) also spoke about the trials of teaching a class of students with a wide range of ability levels:

I think our school is very diverse too, not only culturally but also academically we have very high gifted students and then we have relatively low [performing English] language learners. Sometimes it's challenging trying to, you know, enrich the higher learners and also help the little like fifth graders who can't hardly read or are just learning English, so that can be challenging. But I think we're expected yeah, to pull groups and try to close the gap there in their learning, or to also challenge them.

### ***School Climate & Culture***

Nearly every teacher (96.0%; n = 24) held some common perceptions about their school climate and school culture, particularly as it related to their principal's leadership (80.0%; n = 20); supportive teacher colleagues, school staff, and programs (84.0%, n = 21); and school community (68.0%, n = 17).

#### **Principals' Leadership: Trust & Support of Teachers Promotes Teacher-Student Relationship Building.**

Eighty percent of teachers (n = 20) discussed their principal's leadership and most did so in a positive light. Teachers felt their principals trusted them to fulfil their teaching duties as well as build relationships with students. Teachers also shared that their principals were supportive and helped them find solutions and resources to facilitate them in their teaching. Additionally, teachers were pleased to report that their principals were not hypercritical of them, and when push came to shove—especially when students' parents were involved—principals backed their teachers.

Teachers expressed that having their principal's trust helped promote their relationship building with students. In Diana's (School F) words, "...I think it really starts with the principal. And she lets you teach, she's not in our classroom all the time. ...I think she trusts who she chooses as educators [at her school]."

Maryanne (School B) illustrated how her principal provides teacher support:

The principal is always open, like if you have any questions or you need any support. I like that about our principal, that she's always willing to help us. And at times she has said "If I don't have the solution, I will help you find a solution to whatever, whatever the need is."

Isabella from School I similarly stated how her principal ensured resources were available for teachers to fill any instructional material needs.

Marylou (School D) and Sophia (School I) both felt happy with their principals because they were supportive, understanding, and far from judgmental—which contributed to a more pleasant work environment. Marylou compared her current principal to a previous principal she had, saying:

... before ... I didn't get the support—the administration was weak—they didn't really care—they were just judging teachers—so it was not pleasant going to work. But this school is pleasant, I'm happy.

Relatedly, Sophia shared how her "amazing principal" set a "great tone of acceptance and understanding," and the work environment "really [was] a place for [teachers] also to try out new things and make mistakes, and not be judged for it."

Teachers shared that over their careers they at some point worked with unsupportive school leaders. Scarlett (School G) expressed, "... sometimes administration doesn't always support the teachers, especially when the parents get involved [*laughs*]. Um, because we're



trying to help the students and the parents don't like to hear the negative.” Whereas Denisse (School I) who worked with several principals in her career said, “it's nice to have a supportive administrator,” like her current principal about whom she shared, “[our boss] will back [*emphasis*] us to no end.”

**Supportive Teacher Colleagues, School Staff, & Programs – Working as a Team to Meet Students' Needs.**

Eighty-four percent of teachers (n = 21) discussed the positive impacts of teacher collaboration, and supportive school staff and programs on their work with students. Teachers from most schools expressed that: (1) teacher colleagues were extremely supportive, hard-working team players who collaborated on academic planning or providing social-emotional support to each other's students as needed; these teachers very often compared colleagues to those at past schools at which they worked, and (2) other school staff and programs were readily available to bridge gaps where support was needed; staff included but were not limited to: specialists, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and occupational therapists.

Teachers spoke highly of their peers and could count on them for academic or social-emotional support, as well as helping with their students as needed. Clarisse (School C) said, “I think actually my biggest ally are actually my colleagues ... we bounce ideas off of each other and help each other. That's probably actually the biggest, biggest help.”

Clarisse specified the ways her colleagues mutually supported one another:

But I think a lot with my colleagues just having a [*sic*] outlet, somebody to talk to, like, well, you know, not only “How are you and doing the scope and sequence, oh what lesson are you on?” But also like, “Today was a rough day,” or “Today was a good day,” sharing those, you know, the victories and the defeats.

Alice-Ann also described how having supportive collegial relationships can support teachers. She described such a peer as, "...someone who can listen to you without judgment, ... [who can] guide you, give you support, and help you."

Teachers from some schools commented how the staff was close knit and felt like family. In Denisse's (School I) words, "Man I've worked at multiple schools—this is my fourth school I been at—and the staff is phenomenal—we get along so well." Isabella, also from School I similarly said, "I have to say I've never seen so [*emphasis*] many hard-working teachers. I've worked at quite a few ... different schools—and the teachers [here] are remarkably hard-working teachers."

Michael (School B) said that unlike previous schools he worked at, this one is a true community where teachers help all children. He shared the following example:

If it's a student in the hallway that's having a tantrum—on so many occasions, I've had other teachers step in, other staff members step in, to help calm down the student, help redirect the student, help the student with whatever issues that student may be having.

When teachers needed assistance from outside staff or programs, they usually knew how to access that support. Teachers talked about handling day to day minor behaviors within the classroom but with extreme behaviors teachers found additional support from behavioral aides, social workers, counselors, psychologists, and various interns. Academic support was also available through RSP (Resource Specialist Program), speech therapists, and occupational therapists.

Beth (School A) emphasized the importance of meeting students' needs, which was facilitated through outside resources:

... I feel like I have the resources at my school that if I don't know how to do something I can go to the K-1 special ed teacher ... the OT (occupational therapist) ... the speech teacher and ... ask for help. ... I might not know how to do something [but] I like that I have the resources to find the answer to my questions.

Amanda and Marissa (School H) and Denisse (School I) each talked about the benefits of having counseling services through on-site programs at their schools. Denisse also shared how she depended on her staff and co-workers with student relationships to ensure they were happy and emotionally stable, and thus ready to learn:

... we're not going to connect with every child, it's just not highly possible. I mean we try, but there's some kids, that just for whatever reason ... they don't see me as a person that they can connect with. So, if I can find somebody that they'll talk to—that could be even the secretaries ... if a kid from a fifth grade class is having trouble but they know I was their teacher and I got along really well with them, they'll send them to me ... if they had that connection with me. It's just like, if I know, somebody else connects well with another [kid], I'm like, "Go talk to this teacher."

Denisse "tapped into" anybody she could "to unlock the key to help [each particular] child learn." For example, for students who were new to the country Denisse sought out help from the community support liaison who could provide ideas for supporting students with language to get them to begin to speak and participate in class.

### **A Sense of School Community – Schoolwide Events & Celebrations Build School Community & Fosters Relationships.**

Sixty-eight percent of teachers (n = 17) described a sense of community at their school. Sarina (School B) thought her school's support of relationship building was demonstrated in a

very “pro community” climate where interpersonal connections were encouraged. School community was promoted through school spirit days and school wide events where parents were also invited. Another way school community was promoted was through school wide assemblies and recognition awards. Lastly, teachers described how their staff’s shared commitment to caring for all students was reflected in a sense of school community.

Teachers shared about school wide events such as spirit days, assemblies, and fundraisers that brought students, teachers, staff, and sometimes families, together. Sarina (School B) said, “I think [school spirit days] broadens [sic] the community environment and it kind of creates like a larger spectrum where all the students are kind of doing the same thing.” She added that not only does it built school community, but it helps further class community as well. Loretta (School A) also talked about spirit days as well as after school activities that teachers are encouraged to attend “... to kind of show the fun side of teachers [and show that teachers are not] just about the academics.” She continued to say that in these “... informal settings, the kids kind of become more comfortable with the teachers. And again, that builds that relationship.” Isabella (School I) added that her school puts on fairs, movie, and restaurant nights where teachers can bond with families.

Another source of promoting school community were school assemblies and student recognition practices. Lynn’s excerpt illustrates School A’s approach:

We have these monthly spotlight assemblies where, not only do we have a grade level that performs, but we also have monthly awards. And they’re called Spotlight Awards, and by fifth grade they realize that everybody does get one [*laughs*]. It gives the teacher that chance to highlight that kid in a way that doesn’t have to be academic based. And I feel like that’s definitely a way to connect with them on a personal level, to show them that “Yes, I can see

that you're a great musician," or "You're really awesome with coding online," like things that maybe they wouldn't necessarily be recognized for at another time. It gives them that chance to feel special about what they are good at.

Lynn also commented that these school wide practices strongly encourage relationship building.

Sense of community was also cultivated simply by having a caring community where everyone contributed to help students. Amanda (School H) described her school's collective effort saying, "everybody's working towards the common good for the children," and that every person on campus contributes to children's success.

Alice-Ann (School B) similarly described her school community:

We have a good school community ... and a caring community. [For example, the cafeteria staff], they know the kids, and they feel a part, they feel like they have a stake in this, and that their support is important too. Every single person I know, regardless of whether or not they're a teacher, or the nurse, or whatever, they care about the kids. It is a caring community of educators and supporters.

### ***School Resources: Schools with an Abundance and Schools with a Deficit***

Almost a third of teachers (32.0%, n = 8) mentioned having or lacking school resources; resources included special programs, school facilities, and parent involvement. Charlie and Marylou, teachers at School D, an arts magnet, both talked about all the arts resources their school had including an actual theater and an art studio, "I mean I [*sic*] never seen a school like that," Charlie commented. Marylou shared, "This school is really big on art—so the student [*sic*] do art, student [*sic*] do music, what else, dance. So, I think the art program have the student to expressing themselves [*sic*]." Savanna and Beth, both teachers at School A—an inclusion and traditional school—also described the bounty of resources available at their school. Savanna

shared that her school has been working on building a diverse school library to have representation for all students. Whereas Savanna described all the professional and in-service trainings staff get at their school, such as special education inclusion training. Isabella expressed School I had an abundance of resources, to the extent where she said, “If there was anything I wanted to do—um, I could do a book club after school if I wanted to—so you know [the school doesn’t] discourage me from doing things that I wanted to do.”

Maryanne, however, felt differently about School B’s resources, particularly as they pertained to instructional materials and curriculum:

... [the curriculum is] not set in stone, it’s basically as teachers it’s just promote what we have in the classroom. ... I feel that it’s kind of limited—they only give us like so much to do—so it’s on us to find the resources. If this doesn’t work. We have to try something else. So, I feel that I’m always Googling things, “Okay, what can I do?” You know, “What can I try?” Or finding other resources from my colleagues. Or when we meet, when we have our meetings, we discuss different issues.

### ***Working with Parents & Families***

Ninety-six percent of teachers (n = 23) discussed some aspect of working with parents and families, including how parent communication supported their teacher-student relationships (60.0%, n = 15). In their discussions 68.0% of teachers (n = 17) talked about parent involvement and 40.0% of teachers (n = 10) expressed how the interactions and relationships they had with their students’ parents often impacted their teacher-student relationships.

### **Communicating & Building Relationships with Parents to Support their Children.**

Sixty percent of teachers (n = 15) shared about their efforts to communicate with parents, often citing how this partnership facilitated their teacher-student relationships. Teachers reported

the importance of establishing trust and credibility with their students' parents and families.

Teachers also frequently shared how their relationships with parents helped them get to know their children, especially very younger students who had limited communication skills and self-expression abilities. Another noteworthy finding was that different profile students (e.g., demographic or achievement based) had different types of parent involvement.

Teachers shared how they worked with parents to support students. For example, Charlie communicated to parents he was there to help, making himself available by phone in the evenings. In doing this he said, "So I think that gets communicated to the students and it helps them know that, you know, that we care. And that affects their outcomes and progress."

Maryanne shared how she brings parents on board, sharing how their child is doing, perhaps what they might be struggling with in class and asks parents questions like, "Tell me, so what do you do at home when this happens?"

Gracie took a more personal approach establishing connections with students and their families. She explained, "I talked to their parents and got to know their families, um, and their little brothers and sisters." She even shared that she loved to hold baby brothers and sisters mothers brought with them after school when picking up their children. She said, "... we just became connected just because we talked." However, Gracie's principal was critical to her approach to relating to the children:

And some people saw that as, I hate to put it this way, like my principal one time came in, and she was like, "You spend a lot" —I know, she was saying waste—but she didn't say that word— "You spend an awful lot of time talking to these kids." And I'm like, "Yes, but a lot of them are Spanish speakers and [the aim of English Language Development (ELD) and] ELA [English Language Arts] is to get them to learn how to

...speak English, speak in complete sentences, to use descriptive words like adjectives or, you know, color, size, whatever.” And I said “So through these conversations we’re building connections, yet we are also developing our ELA skills. So, it’s, you know, hitting to two topics, two areas at one time.”

Gracie knew her practice was appropriate for her teaching purposes and interpersonal relationship building with not only students but their parents as well.

Like other teachers, Gracie highlighted the importance of establishing a positive rapport and credibility with parents, especially if she needed help or there was a difficult issue to address concerning their child. Gracie explained that because parents knew how connected she was to their children and vice versa, they were more responsive and less defensive if for instance she had to share that their child was say misbehaving. Like Maryanne, Gracie approached parents with questions like, “So, okay, do you see this at home? What do you do to try to solve that? Maybe I can incorporate that in the classroom.”

Some teachers, including Kyla, mentioned that having positive relationships with parents by gaining their trust and making connections with them was also an important aspect of teaching. Numerous teachers talked about getting parents on their side. Marissa described how she did this regularly with families by contacting parents at the beginning of the school year to provide some general positive feedback about their child, and if a specific discipline or behavioral concern needed to be raised, then a follow up conversation would be much easier to have, and parents would be more willing to come in to collaborate on ways to help support the child. Marissa said, “So I think as long as the parent feels that you have their child’s best interests at heart, that they’re willing to work with you.” She also said that establishing the parent relationship is important for the child to see and know:



And once the child sees that you're on the same page with the parent, um, most of the time I don't have behavior issues after that—because the kid realizes that if I did call home then mom is not going to be on his side anymore, like she has in the past.

Teachers discussed the ways they worked with their students' parents to learn about their children. This relationship building helped interpersonal relations and student learning outcomes. Teachers got to know parents and their children through various methods of communication including in-person and virtual parent-teacher conferences, phone contact, and paper communication (e.g., parent letters, questionnaires etc.). Sophia, for example, met with all her students' parents online through virtual conferences by the end of the first week of school, which helped her really get to know her students. Additionally, she sent families a questionnaire asking them what they felt she needed to know about their children. Giada similarly employs this method, having parents complete a questionnaire at the start of the school year asking, "What are a couple things you want me to know about your child?" and "What are they good at?" for example. Since she taught first grade, she explained that very young students cannot always articulate very well, but also that she "...[likes] to hear from parents too, just to see, you know, if there's something [she's] may be missing." For Denisse, working with parents was a strategy she found helpful in building positive student relationships because in some cases she is able to get parents' perspectives on what is bothering their child and find ways to service those needs.

### **Parent Involvement – All Parents Care About Their Children's Education.**

Although parent involvement varied across schools, what came through in most teachers' narratives (68.0%,  $n = 17$ ) was that all parents cared about their children's education. Sophia expressed how this was true having worked at "two very, very, very different schools," and

added “I think sometimes as teachers we have to go beyond our own biases and to see that caring because maybe they don’t care the way that we care.” To illustrate this point, some teachers conveyed parent involvement was very high at their school whereas others described how parents felt the need to establish trust with their child’s teacher. One sub-theme that emerged was similar patterns of parent involvement among students of various demographics or achievement-based profiles.

Teachers like Kyla, Clarisse, and Giada, from Schools E and C, said their school sites had high parent involvement including a strong PTA that was very supportive of teachers; was community based where everyone—teachers and parents alike—helped; and parents were supportive in teaching art lessons or helping bring in science docents to the school. Giada described the active role parents held at her school:

This school—more than any of the other ones I’ve ever worked at, at the district—has, um, their parents are really involved. The parents really want to be on top of everything, they want to know what to do when, what’s going on, what can they do. They’re also, you know, pretty helpful.

### ***Different Profile Students and Different Styles of Parent Involvement.***

Occasionally teachers noticed differences in the ways parents worked with them, participated, or were involved in their children’s education. In Lynn’s experience, parents of low achieving students were more willing to work with her and appreciative of her efforts, whereas parents of students with behavior or social-emotional difficulties showed less support. Clarisse shared her observation that minority families were not qualifying and receiving Student Success Team (SST) support as fast as Caucasian and Asian students because their parents were not as active advocating for their children.

On the other hand, Diana described to her surprise how the Spanish speaking parent of one of her students advocated for her daughter despite her language barrier:

Currently, I have a student who, mom only speaks Spanish, and yet she doesn't let that be a hindrance to her communicating with me. So, we are on Class Dojo [a classroom management application that allows parents to text message the teacher] and we're talking, and she writes in Spanish and then it's translated to me—and sometimes it's not absolutely clear. But she is—she totally advocates for her daughter, not just, um—sometimes I would see parents that just speak Spanish—and I think she's a very young single mom—sometimes I would see parents that just speak Spanish kind of send their kids to school and they don't know everything that's going on inside the classroom, and they're [like], “Just let them go and have the magic happen.” But [this parent is] super aware, and super participative, and advocating for her daughter.

Michael, who previously worked at other schools throughout the district where the English language learner population was much smaller, described his school's densely populated ELL population and spoke specifically about working with the parents of ELL's:

There's a lot of students whose parents weren't born in the United States. And the parents are great. They're hardworking people. They really care about their child's success, but they don't exactly know how, you know, the ins and outs, the how-to on how to coach their child up on different things in regard to math ... science ... literature, any of those things. And so, that population presents different challenges ... nevertheless—I love the parents, you know, working with them. Because they mean well for their child.

**Teacher-Parent Relationships Impact Teacher-Student Relationships.**

Numerous teachers (40.0%,  $n = 10$ ) reported that their interactions and relationships with students' parents had an influence on their teacher-student relationship. Teachers like Marylou and Lynn shared how communicating with the family and establishing a relationship with the parent really influenced their relationships with the students. Lynn described how highlighting a student's positives—no matter how small—for a parent who was accustomed to hearing only negative feedback proved encouraging and impactful for that parent, the student, and the teacher-student relationship. Lynn said, "... any tiny little positive that I can grasp onto I did. And slowly I saw more of those positives, you know, come out, and that, that made a difference."

Comparatively, Denisse and Beth shed light on how negative parent-teacher interactions and relationships can have a destructive effect on teacher-student relationships. Denisse shared her perspective but abruptly concluded her thoughts with some uneasiness:

Uh, sometimes the conflict comes from the parent—if the parent and I do battle sometimes it can affect my relationship with a child cause I'm kind of hesitant, or I'm not sure, like, you know, okay, how do I, how do I go about teaching or getting this ... I don't know how to, I don't know how to say this, to tell you the truth.

Beth illustrated what it was like working with an unsupportive parent and how this negatively influenced her teacher-student relationship. Specifically, she spoke about male students who in some ethnic groups are put on a pedestal, and in a situation where for example she tells the parents their son was hitting another child the parent will not believe her and say "Well, not my child! It's your, it's your fault." Beth explained:

So that does happen occasionally, and that does interfere with my relationship with the child because, you know, after a while you just sort of, I don't know—you don't ignore them, but you kind of just give them their space, and you don't have the same

relationship with them as you as you do with the other kids because the parent has distanced them already and isn't supporting you. So, if you don't have the parental support that really interferes with, you know, your relationship with the child and that I think, that's very hard. So, I mean, you kind of have to have the parent buy-in too.

### **RQ3**

How do these descriptions vary across demographics and characteristics of individual teachers, their classrooms, and their students?

- a. How does this vary across teacher profiles (years of experience; gender; race/ethnicity; pedagogical approach; classroom management/discipline style)?
- b. How does this vary across student grade levels (K-5)?
- c. How does this vary across students' gender, race/ethnicity, and social class?
- d. How does this vary across student profiles (based on academic, behavior, or social-emotional performance/needs)?

### **RQ3 Quantitative Data: Teachers' Descriptions & Perceptions Across Individual & Classroom Contexts**

Survey data showed that teachers perceived a stronger influence on teacher-student relationships by student profiles than by student demographics. In other words, about half of teachers reported no differences in teacher-student relationships based on students' individual gender, race/ethnicity, or social class background (while about 10.0% to 15.0% of teachers reported a moderate difference based on any of these three demographics). On the other hand, teachers perceived individual student differences based on performance (e.g., academic, behavior, and social-emotional) made a stronger difference in student-teacher relationships.

Academic differences were rated lower (mean = 1.98), whereas behavior (mean = 2.56) and social-emotional skills (mean = 2.49) were rated higher.

Table 19

*Frequency Distribution of Teachers' Perceptions of Relationship Building Differences Based on Student Characteristics from Survey Data*

	No Difference	Slight Difference	Moderate Difference	Strong Difference	Mean	Standard Deviation
Male and female students	19 (47.5%)	15 (37.5%)	5 (12.5%)	1 (2.5%)	1.70	0.78
Students of different races/ethnicities	21 (51.2%)	14 (34.2%)	6 (14.6%)	0 (0.0%)	1.63	0.72
Students of different social class backgrounds	23 (57.5%)	11 (27.5%)	6 (15.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1.57	0.74
Students of varying academic performance	14 (34.2%)	16 (39.0%)	9 (22.0%)	2 (4.9%)	1.98	0.87
Students of varying behavior	5 (12.2%)	15 (36.6%)	14 (34.2%)	7 (17.1%)	2.56	0.91
Students of varying social- emotional skills and needs	8 (19.5%)	12 (29.3%)	14 (34.2%)	7 (17.1%)	2.49	0.99

*Note.* n = 41; frequencies and percentages reported.

### **RQ3 Qualitative Data: Teachers' Descriptions & Perceptions Across Individual & Classroom Contexts**

This section will cover RQ3 which addresses teachers' descriptions and perceptions of relationship building across individual (teacher/student) and classroom contexts. The following six categories will be included: (1) teacher demographics, (2) teacher profiles, (3) student demographics, (4) student profiles, (5) teacher and student personalities/character traits, and (6) relationships across grade levels.

#### ***Role of Teacher Demographics on Teacher-Student Relationships***

During interviews most teachers addressed race/ethnicity (88.0%, n = 22) and gender (84.0%, n = 21). The next two sections describe how teachers felt their race/ethnicity and gender impacted their relationships with students. First, teachers' (20.0%, n = 5) used their

race/ethnicity to help relate to students. Second, teachers (52.0%,  $n = 13$ ) thought gendered experiences—such as being “motherly” or a sports enthusiast—played a significant role in their interactions and relationships with students. Study data determined that teachers’ personal social class/SES did not have any considerable importance in their relationships with students.

**Teachers used their Racial/Ethnic Backgrounds to Relate with Students.**

Teachers (20.0%,  $n = 5$ ) often used their racial/ethnic backgrounds to help them relate with their students. Like Charlie, a Latino teacher put it, “Most of the kids that I teach, they’re Latino and African American so I think I can relate to that, I think they relate to me in that way, they see me, and I think it makes a difference.” Diana said, “I think it’s comforting to some of the [students] that I look like them, those people with Hispanic last names.” Sarina, an African American teacher shared:

Being like, basically, for the longest time, being the only African American teacher on staff. And ... I guess the persona of African American women being very firm, I think some of the parents who have more rambunctious kids, I think that that’s really the reason that they may be asking for me, and they want their child in my class because they feel that “Oh, well, Ms. Sarina is going to be able to get that student on track. “She’s going to be firm, but she’s going to be fair.” So, I think ... because I’m African American ... the parents, they look at me also as an example ... “Look, Ms. Sarina ... she’s a teacher, she’s gone to school—you can do it, too. She’s Black. She did it. You need to get it together.” So, I mean, it’s a bit of a, a little bit of a burden [*laughs*], but I’m pretty used to it. And I would always be like really surprised, I’m like, “They’re asking for the Black teacher who doesn’t speak Spanish?” And the principal would say, “Oh,

you were asked for.” And I’m like, “Oh, boy. That means I have a tough customer”  
[laughs].

Mikayla’s excerpt provides another example of the role that the teacher’s race/ethnicity and culture can play in relationships between teacher and student:

I think my situation is a little bit different, yeah, so I would say yes because you know they walk in, and they see I am one hundred percent Japanese. They see a one hundred percent Japanese lady, and they’re like, “Oh shit” [*whispers*], you know. And then I speak Spanish fluently, so I talk to their parents in Spanish, you know. And then you see that they begin to like warm up now—because I don’t talk—I didn’t learn Spanish in school, I learned it like on TV—and so, my Spanish is a little bit more like a familiar Spanish, you know. And, um, so that makes them also feel that I’m less, you know, above them, right. And them knowing that—my African American kids, for them—knowing that my background, my family’s Black, you know. And it’s just like, somehow, I’m a piece of everybody in the classroom. And so, I think yeah my, I think my, my cultural identity and who I am, I think it plays a big part in terms of how it allows me to be able to understand and view the world somewhat from their lenses, you know.

### **Teacher’s Gendered Experiences Mattered.**

Teachers (52.0%, n = 13) expressed that their gendered experiences—such as being “motherly” or a sports enthusiast—made a difference in their relationships with students. A few teachers, including Alice-Ann and Diana, also stated whenever they had the option to assign students to a male teacher for the following school year, they felt that was a great benefit because they thought some students would benefit more from having a male teacher. Alice-Ann underscored the importance of keeping students’ past histories in mind, “... we have to be



conscious of that. And some kids respond to you differently because of your gender, also—depending on the kind of interpersonal relationships they’ve had with people of that gender.”

Over a third of female teachers (35.0%,  $n = 8$ ) mentioned being “motherly” or “mother figures” to their students when they agreed that their gender impacted their relationships with students. Giada, Sophia, and Kendra all shared that they had been called “mom” by students. Sophia added, said, “They look at me as a second mom ...” Kendra said, “... females are known for being more nurturing and understanding and caring in general. ... sometimes [students] see me as a mother figure ... probably because I’m so involved, ‘cause I see them all day long ...”

Michael—one of only two male teachers interviewed (8.0%)—thought his gender mattered in his relationships with students:

Uh, me being a male—I think it certainly does make a difference. ... I feel like I can offer different things to the students. Now that’s not to say that, you know, a female teacher wouldn’t offer that—it’s just I might be able to say I go through an experience different from a female teacher ... I love sports—so that’s one of the things that, you know, that will always come up in the classroom. And students may not normally get that from a female teacher—I’m not saying that any female teacher doesn’t play sports or appreciate ‘em, but, but normally it’s males more that tend to gravitate more toward that type of that type of thing.

Michael also talked about one drawback example of being a male teacher. When he taught fifth grade and the issue of menstruation came up, he felt he could not offer any knowledge on the topic and had to refer students to the nurse. He concluded, “But that’s okay, you know, we can work around that.”

### ***Teacher-Student Relationships & Teacher Profiles***

The following section is about how teachers of different profiles establish their teacher-student relationships. More specifically, this section discusses how teachers might relate or differ in this process of teacher-student relationship building based on their teaching philosophies and classroom management styles (100.0%, n = 25); their personality traits and character (92.0%, n = 23); their awareness of self and students (92.0%, n = 23); and their teaching experience (83.0%, n = 34).

### **Teaching Philosophies & Classroom Management Styles.**

Every teacher (100.0%, n = 25) discussed their teaching style or teaching philosophies, which included their strategies, ideals, and beliefs. Over half the teachers (56.0%, n = 14) described their teaching as “fun,” nearly a third of teachers (32.0%, n = 8) incorporated the “whole child” teaching philosophy, and 32.0% of teachers (n = 8) emphasized fairness and equity in teaching students. Two sub-themes that emerged within classroom management were teachers’ beliefs that: (1) regardless of their exhibited behaviors students want to be successful, and (2) to run a smooth classroom it is important to respond to students’ behavioral and social-emotional needs and go off those cues rather than use prescriptions. Forty percent of teachers (n = 10) defined the teacher’s role as encompassing “having to do everything,” including providing academic, behavioral, social-emotional and additional support. The social-emotional aspect of teaching was underscored by most teachers (88.0%, n = 22), whereas 68.0% of teachers (n = 17) described the balancing act of teaching both academic and social-emotional lessons. Lastly, 92.0% (n = 23) shared about their classroom management.

### ***Teaching Children is Fun.***

Over half of teachers (56.0%, n = 14) depicted teaching as fun. Teachers expressed their love for working with kids, oftentimes discovering early on that they enjoyed working with

children through volunteer or work experiences. Teachers shared that they liked helping children learn new things and it was fun to work with them. Kendra shared the following example:

Um, I think always as a kid I just, I liked helping other kids trying to understand material and trying to learn. I know I would tutor my brother and I just, I always thought I wanted to help kids learn in a fun way. So that's kind of what led me into teaching.

***Student-Driven Teaching.***

Most teachers described some “student driven” aspect of their teaching style, which Marylou summarized saying:

My teaching philosophy is that everybody can learn, yeah. If you give them the right environment, and I mean I would say right tools—but even, I don't think there is a right tool or there's a right way to approach them and motivate the student to learn. ... my style is depending on the student. So, I cannot really say I have this style or this one because some of them require one-on-one, and some are more independent ... So, it depends, I think I'm very flexible. And I try to see, to assess what can they do, what do they need? How can I bring them to that lecture or to that skill?

Teachers described “student driven” teaching practices including “meeting students where they're at”—meaning meeting their individual needs and helping them improve from there; utilizing students' interests to help guide instruction and keep students engaged; and to make school a pleasant experience for students. Denisse summarized some of these perspectives:

I teach to the whole child. ... I'm really big into the social-emotional. ... I mean, I believe [taking students] from where they are and I'll get them higher—they may be on grade level, they may not, they may be above grade level—but the importance for me is

for the child to really like school ... build confidence, self-confidence ... be well rounded and understand that they can't be good at everything.

Sarina also spoke about how she tailored learning material to meet individual needs in a way that kept students feeling good about themselves and learning. She described herself as a “facilitator of the curriculum” who is responsible for making sure students acquire the material to the best of their ability. Sarina said that students needed just the right amount of challenge:

... my goal is to allow the kids to be successful. Because I feel a lot of times with the curriculum, and sometimes the pacing, I think that it's too far above a lot of their capacity. And I feel that yes, the student needs to be challenged, but everything they try, they should not always be met with, with failure, or having things to be like so difficult, that they're becoming anxious and having anxiety over learning.

***Treating Students Fairly & Equitably.***

In their discussions of teaching philosophies and practices numerous teachers (32.0%, n = 8) mentioned teaching in fair and equitable ways. Maryanne shared her philosophy:

I believe in being equal, treating everyone equal, and [having] the same expectations in the classroom. I believe that they're all learners in the classroom, so therefore I have that expectation and I train the students to meet their expectations. So again, my philosophy is to treat others fair and with respect and vice versa ... So, I see myself as being a model basically in the classroom.

Clarisse shared a similar view: “I think, just being fair, no matter what, whether, you know, gender or race ... I think overall I try to treat every child the same, every student the same, no matter what.”

Isabella shared a deeper philosophy when she spoke about education as a great equalizer in society:

... I felt [teaching] was really an important job to do not only because of course education is important and I like children, but also in a democracy, you know, we have to have an educated population and it needs to be everybody's right. And I wanted to be the best teacher I could be no matter where I taught or who I taught because that's really one of the great equalizers.

***The Teacher's Role is To Do Everything.***

Forty percent of teachers (n = 10) expressed the teacher's role was "to do everything"—meaning teachers were expected to provide academic, behavioral, and social-emotional support, plus address any other student needs. In Giada's words:

I guess you could say I am the expert in the class for them, and I am the role model of ... how to do everything basically, how to write, how to read, how to follow directions, how to be kind, how to share.

And as Denisse put it, "you have to be the jack of all trades, maybe the master of none. But, as a teacher you have to, you have to be everything."

Diana similarly expressed how teachers "in good conscience ... should address a lot of the child and not just, not just like, "Did you learn math?" Or "Did you learn science today?" ... but being a good person." Diana also discussed students' health and wellness needs such as dealing with stomachaches and students needing glasses. "I think there's a lot of things that you have to do beyond just in the classroom," Diana shared. Some teachers shared stories about talking with students to understand and support them emotionally. Other teachers like Marissa also did things like bring students shoes because she noticed they hadn't had a new pair in a long

time. Marissa commented she did anything students needed to “help them feel better about themselves.” Sarina’s perspective summarized these views:

Well, I think being available with that listening ear and developing the trust factor, I think, that’s the main thing. And also, being aware, if you see a change in the student’s behavior, or if you see that the student is coming to school, maybe they’re suddenly hungry when they weren’t before, or their clothing has not been clean ... So, it’s really, it’s a big part of the job to not only teach them, but also to watch over them.

***Implementing SEL Organically and through SEL Curriculum.***

Aside from teachers’ main responsibility of delivering academic instruction, teachers collectively also emphasized the social and emotional support they provided students. Most teachers (88.0%, n = 22) discussed the importance of social-emotional learning and described how they implemented SEL instruction. Often teachers spoke about how they have always addressed SEL in their teaching, perhaps informally or organically, or even intentionally embedding it throughout the day or across lessons in various content areas. Alongside teaching academics, Clarisse placed importance on teaching her students how to be good citizens and has done so—in her words—even before SEL became “a thing.” She explained:

... just teaching them about kindness, and if we had class elections, you know, being a good sport and things like that. Just following the rules, just being kind to one another, and you need to do what’s right even if no one’s watching ...

However, the main trend teachers shared with SEL instruction was that it was being integrated more formally in recent years through newly adopted SEL curriculum, pilot programs, and at some school sites, through visiting instructors.

Overall, SEL implementation varied across school sites (e.g., scheduled schoolwide SEL teaching times/activities or site specific SEL curricula/pilot programs). For instance, Savanna's school (School A) had a specific schedule for implementing SEL activities for each day of the week, while Charlie and Marylou shared their school (School D) had a special instructor who came in weekly to teach SEL lessons to their classes. Whereas other teachers reported teaching weekly SEL lessons using a schoolwide SEL curriculum. Common SEL teaching activities teachers mentioned included yoga, meditation, mindfulness, breathing, calming time, music, and daily emotional check-ins (e.g., asking students "how are you feeling?" or simply talking about their feelings).

### ***Balancing Academics & SEL.***

Meanwhile, 68.0% of teachers (n = 17) shared how they dealt with balancing the academic and social-emotional aspects of teaching. Amanda's perspective was that the social-emotional demands of teaching K-5 outweighed academics:

I would say, teaching is probably about seventy percent social-emotional. And just trying to get through the kids and, and all the issues that they carry with them into the classroom. And what they experience in school, with the friendships and all of that. And so, it's difficult, it's difficult trying to get the academics going as much as you want it to, but I really think it's important that you need the social-emotional and the academics too, but I don't I don't know, it's just that if they're not feeling good and they're not with it, then how are they going to learn in the first place? So, you really have to adjust the environment to that.

Savanna and others expressed that balancing academic and social-emotional teaching was difficult. Marissa's excerpt provided such an example:

... sometimes you have to stop teaching to address like a serious emotional situation that's happening at school. So, you have to be flexible. And you have to be able to realize that [each] day is not something that you can predict. So, I think you just go in with doing the best that you can. And knowing that you can't solve every issue. ... So, it's, it's just taking every day, one day at a time, and doing what you can in the classroom and do what you can with the kid.

One approach used by teachers to meet these two-fold demands was to incorporate SEL into the academic material they taught. Giada said:

I just sort of try to weave in the social-emotional stuff throughout the day and throughout everything. Like not usually math but, you know, I try to find a way to relate social studies to our feelings and how we're doing and how we cope with things. In science ... we're talking about animals and how they protect their babies and how they protect themselves, and I can weave that in.

Alice-Ann expressed the necessity for addressing students' personal social-emotional needs in the classroom where academic learning takes place:

... it has to be integrated, right. You can't teach a kid what you need to teach and the standards ... if they're thinking about being hungry, or their dad who's abusive, you know, it just doesn't happen. You can't concentrate ... you as an adult, when you have your own at home issues you have a difficult time concentrating and the same is for these kids. And sometimes [school] is where their only safe haven is too. So, um, I think it's just both ... they have to work together, like one has to be in place for the other to work.

One specific strategy for balancing academics and SEL teachers practiced was handpicking academic reading material that doubled to teach an SEL or "life lesson." This was



true for Giada, Loretta, and others. For example, Giada read plenty of books to her students on life skills topics such as feelings, communication, kindness, and moods to teach appropriate behaviors. Loretta said she does a lot of SEL with the reading material she chooses; for example, when teaching an ELA concept she picks a book that also has a “little life lesson to go along with it.” She explained, “So I kind of try and take care of everything together.”

Teachers also emphasized being watchful and aware of students’ emotional well-being while teaching because they explained social-emotional well-being and academics were connected. Kendra commented, “Like, if they’re not performing well, it’s probably because they’re not feeling well, or vice versa. So, I have to be aware of it all day ...”

***Dealing with the Pressures of Testing.***

Only 20.0% of teachers (n = 5) mentioned feeling academic or testing pressure, and when they did it came from the school district or the state, but sometimes it was brought on by the principal. For example, Sophia said her current principal had a lot of trust in her and knew that she addressed both academic and social-emotional learning in her classroom. However, she said, “with other principals I felt more pressure, it was more about the final outcome, test scores or the rigor of a lesson. And being viewed very critically, how I’m addressing the academic curriculum.” Sophia explained that the pressures of testing limited the social-emotional teaching time she needed with her students:

But I do feel with all the assessments that we’re given by the state and by the district, that that takes away learning time. And there’s a lot of pressure, where at times there’s not the time that I want to deal with whatever the kids have going on. Or, you know how sometimes you have this beautiful lesson plan, and something happens. It turns into something completely different. And that completely different thing is really important

and it's really rich, but it might not be something that somebody who's coming through to observe with a checklist is approving on. I might not be hitting on that standard that I'm supposed to be hitting on. And that's where I feel really limited.

Charlie on the other hand, thought the curriculum was too overwhelming for students. Whereas he wants to teach students essential skills, he said "the principal or the district is asking us to you know, we have to teach them this, or we have to teach him this concept now, and cover all these subjects." Charlie said this could become harmful in that sometimes it makes children "turn off" from learning, and so he emphasized how teachers need to be "a little bit [rebellious]" and say, "No, I'm not gonna ask [my students] to do all this," and be okay with that.

Charlie also described how earlier in his career there was a lot more of the arts and "more fun with the kids" in general with hands on projects. But he explained that went away after the 2000s with No Child Left Behind and having "a lot of pressure on scores and being on the state list." Charlie expressed, "It was like a lot of pressure on the kids, and on us! And all the fun stuff kind of went out the window." However, he likes that at his current school (School D), an arts magnet, the arts are integrated throughout the curriculum.

Kyla explained how at previous schools she has worked at there has been more of a focus on academics than the actual relationships between student and teacher and said that teachers who put a focus on relationships get better outcomes (academic, behavioral, and social-emotional). Kyla also thought teacher-student relationships and social-emotional development were severely overlooked:

I think that schools in general, and districts in general, look at grades, look at test scores—I think there's so much emphasis on a test score. Rather than looking at the growth of a student, you know, students grow at different rates, and students have

different areas to grow in, and a lot of it is the social-emotional growth that they need. And if they don't have that, then they have to find someone to give it to them. And I don't think that's necessarily seen as or put, ugh [*pause*] [*frustration*]. I don't think schools and districts put enough emphasis on that. I think they look more like I said at test scores rather than what do these children actually really need. I think they talk about it in theory, but I think, In reality, they're not really looking at that."

### ***Classroom Management Styles.***

Most teachers (92.0%, n = 23) shared some of their classroom management styles and techniques. Two common beliefs that teachers repeated were that: (1) despite their behaviors, children have a desire to do the right thing, and (2) teachers need to sometimes allow children to dictate the flow of the classroom and the interactions that take place.

Savanna shared a feedback technique to give five positive compliments to students—or to “put five pennies in one pocket”—before addressing a student who is doing something wrong with a negative or corrective comment such as, “Tommy, you’re not supposed to be doing that, come on over here.” Savanna explained:

Because what happens is that kids want [*emphasis*] to do the right thing—everybody wants to be successful and get attention for doing well. And so, as soon as you start doing that kids all start like, “Oh, that’s [*emphasis*] what she wants. Okay” [*Laughs*]. Sometimes they’re not [*attentive*], they’re just off in their own world, they’re not really thinking about doing something that they’re not supposed to be doing. Um, so like, I’ll have you know like kids coming to the rug and then I’ll say, “Oh, look at you! She got to the rug first—wow—she is so fast.” So then of course everybody wants to be the person who I just spoke to, so they all get to the rug really quickly, um, things like that.

Isabella shared that for her sometimes when a student was struggling or had done something wrong could be used as an opportunity to develop a positive relationship with that student. For example, by talking things through or working on empathy. Even if students are reprimanded for behaviors, Isabella said "... students normally just like to be understood and they want you to be on their side, you know, kids don't want to be bad."

Giada and Diana on the other hand shared examples of how their classroom management styles were student-centered in terms of allowing children's behaviors and needs to guide the direction of classroom interactions. Giada described her style as "more casual than a lot of teachers" and not being "a strict disciplinarian," she likes her classes to have plenty of social interaction through use of partner activities and small group discussions rather than students working independently and quietly all day long. She described the flexibility in her management saying, "And sometimes, you know I improvise—if I start a lesson but something happens in the classroom, or a child brings something up that is super interesting sometimes we go on tangents and the lesson takes a turn." Diana described how in certain situations with behavior it "need not be addressed" and she simply must "let it go" or allow the student to for example, "sit near the back if they want to be busy and touching everything."

### **Teachers' Personality Traits & Character**

Ninety-two percent of teachers ( $n = 23$ ) discussed how teachers' personality traits and character made a difference in their relationships with students. The most common personality traits teachers discussed were being caring or nurturing (84.0%,  $n = 21$ ).

Alice-Ann described how a teacher's traits and characteristics impact relationships:

On a personal level, it depends how a child responds to you, and how you can also adapt yourself as an adult and be flexible enough to help them by, minimizing, let's say, if

someone is soft-spoken and they can't tolerate someone loud, then you have to make sure [around them] you're going to be definitely soft spoken so that they don't have anxiety about it—those kinds of little things—characteristics, your gender, economics, where you come from, whether you are compassionate, and you can empathize, having empathy, that's huge.

Another teacher, Michael, described how he shared parts of his personality in his teaching. He described how he connected his passion for sports with the academic content he taught and how this simultaneously supported building student relationships and classroom community. For example, he tied in professional sports teams' cities and point scoring systems to teach math concepts and geography lessons.

***Being Caring & Nurturing.***

Most teachers (84.0%, n = 21) mentioned being a caring or nurturing teacher. Beth—a teacher of 28 years—who has “tried everything out there” in terms of classroom management strategies, said instead of relying on any particular strategy she believed in being very nurturing in the classroom. She also described herself as being “warm and fuzzy” and shared that these qualities helped her foster relationships with her students.

Kyla made it a point to show she cared for students, even when they got in trouble:

I always go over and talk to them, which, if I put them in timeout I let them have their timeout, but before they leave I always go over and I explain, like I make sure they understand why [they were in the timeout]. And then also let them know that I care about them, and if I didn't care about them, then I would let them do whatever they want.

Scarlett showed she even cared for students outside of her classroom. She would notice their body language for instance and knew they were having “a really crappy day” and take time to

ask them, “What’s going on?” or “Do you need some help?” and students would relax and open up to her. Scarlett also shared that her students would seek her out to proudly share about their achievements or the good grades they earned.

Marissa talked about the tea party she organizes for her students each year as a way to give them a unique experience and help them “realize there’s more to life than what they’re maybe brought up in.” Marissa described the details:

So, we have China, you know with real China plates and like scones, and teas, and we watch how a property tea is done, and we have tablecloths. I mean, they have to come dressed up at school and it’s really cute. And it’s just hilarious to see all these kids who probably have never even heard of tea, like in a tea party. So, they’re trying whatever tea they want, and they have all these little cookies and little sandwiches and it’s just very, like posh kind of thing that they get to experience, and they love it—best memory—good memory.

### **Teachers’ Awareness.**

Most teachers (92.0%,  $n = 23$ ) addressed awareness as important component of teacher-student relationships, including having both self-awareness (64.0%,  $n = 16$ ) and an awareness of their students (88.0%,  $n = 22$ ). Teachers’ self-awareness involved paying attention to one’s emotions and being mindful of how those daily moods could affect their behaviors and interactions with students. Teachers’ awareness of their students involved being cognizant of race and individual backgrounds, being cautious about what colleagues might say about students, and being aware of how teachers’ actions could have powerful lasting effects on students.

***Teachers' Self-Awareness.***

More than half of teachers (64.0%,  $n = 16$ ) shared descriptions of their self-awareness including mention of their behaviors and interactions, emotions, moods, and their “good” and “bad” days. Several teachers commented that students were keen observers of their teachers’ behaviors and moods.

Alice-Ann acknowledged that at times her frustrations made her less understanding with students, which contributed to some conflictual teacher-student interactions and relationships:

... it’s a personal thing, okay, and I do realize that I’m evolved enough in terms of knowing myself to know that it’s a personal thing—when at times that I’ve had a difficult time, let’s say, or I didn’t have patience, or I didn’t have empathy ... my expectations were skewed. ... when you get frustrated ... you’re not clear headed enough to know how to interact in order to get things done smoothly. And we’ve all been there with kids who throw things ... if they’re screaming or if they’re throwing a tantrum. And we all have our good, bad days ...

Alice-Ann said she felt the least successful in her teacher-student relationships whenever she had the least patience, had shown the least empathy, or had been reactive. Savanna likewise said that if she had a bad day or her patience was running thin, these were the times when she was likely to have conflictual interactions with her students. She described one incident:

I had a math group down on the floor and they were not like opening their books, they weren’t like getting on task and I was getting frustrated and talking like that, and I had one little kid who looked at me and he goes, “You’re having a bad day.” He’s like, “I know.” I’m like, “Oh my god you’re so mature [*laughs*]. You’re only seven or eight years old” [*laughs*].

Relatedly, Mikayla stated that in a traditional (in-person) classroom setting, the “only obstacle” in her relations with students would be herself. “Teachers are human, for sure, right—we have our days,” she explained. But when you enter the classroom:

... you have to leave all your shit outside the door. ... And you got to know you’re going on stage. You are on stage, and they are watching your every move, and they are feeling your vibe, and they are jiving with you, you know.

Mikayla described how she has had bad days where she tried to hide her personal problems, but her students still noticed and asked her, “Are you okay? You have a tough morning?” She said the students, “they can see it ... they can feel it, they can hear it in your tone.”

Sophia helped diffuse situations for herself and her students with a joke whenever she got in a “grumpy” mood:

... sometimes I’m like, “Ms. Sophia is really upset right now, and she needs to take a timeout, so I need everyone quiet and give me 10 seconds,” and they’re like, “Oh, Ms. Sophia is really upset.” And I have a joke—probably about 12 years ago one of my students was like, “Oh, Ms. Sophia, you’re grumpy Sophia.” So now when I’m real frustrated, I’m like, “Better watch out Grumpy Sophia is gonna come out. Oh, she’s ugly!”

Mikayla underscored self-awareness as it related specifically to teaching social-emotional intelligence, which teachers do daily through their teacher-student interactions and relationships:

Social-emotional intelligence is not just teaching the way they want us to teach it, like out of a book. ... the first step in social-emotional intelligence is to be aware of self and others. And you have to be aware of who you are. In order for you to be able to read



other people's emotions. You know, if you don't know yourself, how can you try to figure out someone else?

***Teachers' Awareness of Students.***

Most teachers (88.0%, n = 22) maintained an awareness of their students by being attentive to their individual backgrounds and needs, as well as sensitive to any inequitable or deleterious effects their decisions or actions could have on a child. While some teachers held steadfast to the idea that students' demographic backgrounds did not matter in their teacher-student relationships, other teachers did acknowledge the significance of race, gender, and class. Kyla's quote represents teachers who downplayed the role of race and instead emphasized students' personalities and individual needs:

I mean my relationship with each student is individual. Because what works for one student is not going to work for another. Where one student struggles, another one will be different. And you can't look at race as, "Oh this worked with this race, so it should work every single time." It's not going to. The same with gender—[being] affectionate with one student maybe you have to be strict [with another student of the same gender]. ... It's like you have, you literally have to look at each individual—not whether it's race, ethnicity, gender—you have to look at them as a person and say, what is their need, because their need is going to be different from the person next to them. And it doesn't matter whether they are the same race, whether they are the same gender or not. And maybe somebody will need the same thing they do that's completely opposite race, gender or ethnicity, or economic level.

On the other hand, Sophia and others expressed the importance of knowing that race, gender, and class influence students and their learning:

[I] need to be very aware of the fact that I am a White woman, and I have many different children of color in my classroom from Latinx to Black to um, Indian, Korean, Malaysian, I have all different types of Asian students. I need to be very aware of my Whiteness and their color and how, you know, our education system is very whitewashed. And I make sure that I have very diverse books in my classroom, and we talk a lot about social issues during social studies—we look at, “Oh, well look, all of our presidents have been men and we’ve only had one Black president. And look at the supreme court, look at these things.” And acknowledging that I am a White woman, and I am teaching kids with different experiences, from different backgrounds than myself—I think it’s very important.

Savanna was similarly cognizant and intentional with the curriculum and teaching materials she used with her students:

... especially now in the last like, I swear, five years, I’ve been even more conscious of, “Am I representing all students? Is somebody feeling like they’re not represented in my class?” Like in the books that I read, in the holidays that I celebrate ... I try to stay conscious of that as a teacher, because it’s easy to just not pay attention to that. You really have to bring yourself, you know, out of what you just do and think about it.

Marissa acknowledged differences she had with her students in terms of background and upbringing specifically as they related to social class and trauma. In her words, “I grew up in a very middle-class White environment at private schools, and a Christian environment, so I was really kind of sheltered. Um, so I feel like I, I don’t relate to any type of trauma.” Knowing that her students have had experiences different than her own, Marissa was ultra-sensitive and understanding to her students who were undergoing trauma in their young lives.

Teachers demonstrated cautiousness when it came to colleagues' talking about students they were going to have in their upcoming classes. For example, Clarisse shared:

... a teacher has told me from the previous year, "Oh that child is horrible," and try not to take that in, you know, to try to give them the benefit of the doubt and a fresh start. I think that's important, but sometimes that is a challenge though—somebody will say "Oh that child," you know, and then I'll say "Oh they, they weren't so bad" [*laughs*].

Clarisse commented that she had to aware and careful not to hold these types of biases.

Lastly, teachers knew that their behaviors and interactions with students could have potentially damaging effects and kept aware of this in their relationships with students. Isabella shared:

... just about everybody I know who remembers that teacher that made them feel terrible and made them feel small. I know people who've been put off entire subjects because of the way a teacher behaves. ... There's such a fine balance between, making them feel good and important but not coddling them.

### **Relationships Get Better with Increased Teaching Experience.**

As mentioned earlier when describing the study sample, 83.0% of teachers ( $n = 34$ ) had been educators for 15 or more years. During interviews only 20.0% of teachers ( $n = 5$ ) spoke directly about how their teaching experience played a role in their teacher-student relationships, mainly reporting that their relationships improved with experience. Michael shared, "I would say, in my earlier days, I didn't have the best relationship with my classes as I do now."

Although he had less than 6 years of experience, he still noticed that his "relationship with the kids has gotten better and better each year," and said it had a lot to do with the experiences that

he had learned from, as well as the extra time he had after completing his teaching induction program during his first years of teaching.

Maryanne, a veteran teacher of more than 23 years, shared how her years of experience have improved her overall teaching:

I think, when I started teaching, I wasn't thinking the way I'm thinking right now. So, I think my background, my experience is, yeah it plays a big role in the way I treat the students or treat others. I think that the more we experience, the better we, we get, you know, we become better teachers, and that's the goal. Like, let's say if I experience an issue with a student or something happened with a student, of course I'm going to try to make it better, and I will find strategies to keep that student be engaged. So, the next year I will know, "Oh this worked, this doesn't work." Um, to me yeah, it's all about experience and trying new things—not to be afraid.

### ***Role of Student Demographics on Teacher-Student Relationships***

This section is about how teachers described students' race/ethnicity and gender, and their perceptions of how they impacted their teacher-student relationships. During the interviews most teachers addressed race/ethnicity (88.0%, n = 22) and gender (84.0%, n = 21). Teachers either acknowledged (68.0%, n = 17) or dismissed (44.0%, n = 11) students' race/ethnicity as an important factor in their relationships with them. Many teachers (32.0%, n = 8) who recognized that students' gender was significant in their teacher-student relationships admitted they had gender biases. Refer to Table 20. While the demographic of social class/SES was included in the research study only some teachers (36.0%, n = 9) addressed it but no significant themes emerged.

Table 20

*Teacher Reports of Whether Students' Race/Ethnicity or Gender Mattered in their Teacher-Student Relationships from Interview Data*

	Mattered		Did Not Matter	
Race/Ethnicity	17	68.0%	11	44.0%
Gender	10	40.0%	5	20.0%

*Note:* In some cases, teachers reported positive and negative views; this is why the percentages do not necessarily sum up to 100.

**Teachers Either Acknowledged Student Race/Ethnicity or Emphasized Fairness.**

Teachers who perceived that students' race/ethnicity mattered in their teacher-student relationships (68.0%,  $n = 17$ ) shared how important awareness and sensitivity to race/ethnicity was, and often focused on African American and Latino groups. These discussions also including some nuanced teacher observations about specific subgroups such as African American boys and Latina immigrant girls.

Alice-Ann described how being aware of different races/ethnicities and cultures facilitated her interactions and relationships with students and their families:

I'm really conscious—let's say if I'm working with African American kids, okay—that population and the Latinx population—they're two very different populations, and, um, their cultures are different. So, I'm very cognizant of it. But it doesn't make me be [pause] more or less compassionate, or more or less caring. It just makes me aware that with certain groups of people, you need to, uh, do things a little differently. ... You know, I'm cognizant of it, but I'm hoping that it's not based on a bias. More like it's based on being aware. And knowing that situations demand different approaches.

Clarisse described how her perceptions and awareness of the role of race/ethnicity—as well as language and inequitable access issues—have changed over her teaching career:

I didn't used to think so, but I think in the last few years I guess my eyes are being opened a little bit more ... I feel like I don't always see the, the race, like I feel like I

don't see it ... even just in our society and culture, everything happening right now [Black Lives Matter Movement], I feel like I'm more aware of it now, that there are some differences. And even with English language learners that they might not have, you know, as much benefits as maybe some of the other kids at our school who might have more resources.

Teachers who expressed that students' race/ethnicity did not matter (44.0%, n = 11) in their teacher-student relationships sometimes downplayed its role and instead emphasized equal treatment of students (20.0%, n = 5). These teachers—like Charlie, who had students from all racial backgrounds—understated the race/ethnicity of his students:

... I don't really notice anything. I mean, they're kids—they're pretty much the same.

Um, I, there's just not a whole lot of difference, no. Maybe I try not to make a big deal that they're different, I just try to treat them the same ...

Scarlett's preference was to almost ignore race/ethnicity. In her words, "I try not to see color, especially coming, number one from a very White background and I grew up in Maine, and it just wasn't [sic] a lot of diversity. Um, so I try not to see color."

Some teachers put less emphasis on race/ethnicity by saying relationships are more so about student interests or personalities. For example, Giada shared:

I would like to think that I don't treat anyone different based on their race. Hmm, I might show interest in something that that they've, you know, shared with me about it, but I don't think I exclusively treat anyone differently.

Beth, who grew up in the school district city and went to the "hippie school" where students from different nationalities attended, said she "... doesn't look at race as one way or another ..."

Beth shared,

I try and treat everyone fairly, but you know you do have that child that just drives you insane. And that, that has nothing to do with, with anything other than that child and their personality. ... it's how they interact with other kids—but it has nothing to do with race, it has nothing to do with whether or not it's a boy or girl, it has nothing to do with whether or not, or you know what background they're coming from, ethnicity. Uh, it's just, there might be a child I just don't get along with.

### **Teachers Either Acknowledged Student Gender (& Their Own Gender Biases) or Emphasized Equality**

Teachers' discussions of whether students' gender made a difference in their shared relationships were mixed. Twenty percent of teachers ( $n = 5$ ) stated that gender did not matter. For example, Amanda and Charlie both felt kids were simply kids, suggesting their demographic backgrounds did not set them apart; both stated, "all kids are kids." Marylou said student differences were due to personality, not gender: "...sometimes we say, "oh, all boys are really bad, and girls are not like that," but actually, no, I see the opposite many times. I cannot make a stereotype..." And Maryanne said gender has not affected her because she tries to treat everyone equally by holding the same expectations and consequences for girls and boys. Other teachers (40.0%,  $n = 10$ ) acknowledged how students' genders affected their relationships, admitting gender biases (28.0%,  $n = 7$ ), and in some cases differential expectations and treatment for boys and girls. The following section includes these examples.

Wendy reflected on gender saying, "... there may be times where I am, um, perhaps addressing the students a little differently. Perhaps, yeah maybe a little bit more subconsciously than not."

Clarisse and Isabella both felt they were harder on boys. Clarisse explained:

I feel like, sometimes I might be a little harder on the boys—I don't try to be, but I think they tend to act out more than the girls, in my opinion, in my experience. ... I've had girls who [were] caddy or girl things, but mostly it's the boys [who were] physical or getting into fights more.

Isabella felt similarly and admitted she had to work on her biases:

I would say that I call out boys more than girls, I kind of noticed that, that my eye wanders to the [virtual learning] screens that are boys. And I think that I'm more intolerant of girls misbehaving than boys, which is a real [*emphasis*] gender bias that, you know, we all grow up with. So, I really have to work on that. So, let's say that's, that's probably the most obvious thing that I do. And you know, I was born in 1960, so I really had to get, get over a lot of, you know, systematic stereotypes and biases.

Gracie, on the other hand, said she let boys get away with more than girls. She explained:

... I sometimes give boys a pass for a while that I don't, I don't think I typically give to girls. And that's not fair because girls can be officially or unofficially ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) or ADD (attention deficit disorder). But I see myself calling girls out more quickly, I think. And sometimes I think that has to do with, 'cause, okay, I have a son who, in theory who has ADHD, so therefore, I see [my son] in those boys. So, I seem to give them a little more leeway initially. ... I'm thinking, well I know it's harder on them, and that's not fair ... So, I think my personal experience has affected how I treat the different genders in ... that specific instance.

Occasionally a teacher shared a gender preference or stated that they had an aversion to a gender who acted a certain way. This was true for Sarina, who shared that unlike most teachers who wanted more girls than boys in their classes, she enjoyed having more male students



because many of them were involved in sports and were used to having a coach, “So they already know who’s in charge on the field,” and this translated well into the classroom. Sarina concluded, “So I think athletics—sidebar—I think it’s very important for all kids, to be honest.” Kira and Sophia shared they did not like when certain students, usually boys, interacted inappropriately toward peers. Kira shared the following:

I would say probably, I have a pattern with finding it more difficult to get along with little boys of whatever race who tend to bully, or manipulate other kids, or just be attention getting all [*emphasis*] the time. If I have a pattern, it’s probably a struggle with those guys. And girls can certainly bully and manipulate. But there’s just a certain [*laughing*], there’s just a certain category that I’m thinking of that has been a struggle for me over the years.

Sophia shared some of the difficulties she has had with particular male students:

Um, [*pause*] I find myself a little frustrated with the more entitled boys who talk over other kids. And I have to remember that, you know, I have a bias towards them, and I need to check that myself. And then I also need to remind them in the most polite conversation that it’s not always about them. You know I tell the kids when we’re in class, “You know, everything that runs through your head doesn’t need to come out of your mouth. And we have to wait our turn because there are, you know, there’s one of you, and there’s 23 other kids, and those 23 other kids are just as important to me as you are.” But sometimes inside I’m like “Oh my god I’m just gonna scream [*exaggerates*].”

### ***Teacher-Student Relationships & Student Profiles***

The following section is about how teachers build relationships with students differently based on students’ academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. Nearly all teachers

(96.0%,  $n = 24$ ) addressed how they built relationships with students of varying student achievement profiles (e.g., academic, behavioral, social-emotional). Eighty-four percent of teachers ( $n = 21$ ) discussed their interactions and relationship building with academically high performing students. Sixty-eight percent of teachers ( $n = 17$ ) talked about working with academically low performing students. And 92.0% of teachers ( $n = 23$ ) included discussions about students who were struggling behaviorally or had social-emotional skill deficits. Overall, teachers revealed that they had common approaches for relationship building and working with students of various performance profiles, which are discussed in the following sections.

As reported earlier however, the quality of relationships teachers had with their students were depicted overall as positive relationships. In their discussions of relationships with different performance profiles a few teachers stated that a student's performance was irrelevant to the quality of that relationship. Alice-Ann described it by saying, "... building interpersonal relationship it's a given to me, like that doesn't matter whether you're a low performing student or a high achieving student." Michael explained that even if a student displayed frequent misbehavior, he would still assume the student wanted to do well and was not deliberately being defiant. He described that his high achieving student's best effort was going to look different than his low achieving student's best effort, but that both students would still be trying their best. He explained:

So, the way I see it is we have to treat them, you know, our relationship has to be of a similar nature, as long as this student is doing what he's supposed to be doing. Um, you know, he's trying his best, you know, he's making a [*sic*] effort. It's not like, he's, you know, he's trying to misbehave, as long as he's doing his best, you know, our relationship is, it's in good standing.

Like Alice-Ann and Michael, other teachers similarly elucidated their efforts to be “fair” in their treatment of all students, including their interactions and relationships. On the same token, teachers needed to be equitable, not necessarily equal. Kyla’s illustrated this point, saying, “[The teacher-student relationship] is not the same for every child, like it’s different. You really have to find what works best for them, and how they learn and how they adapt to people and connect to people.” The sections below address how teachers worked with students of differing performance profiles. How teachers worked with students of various personality traits and character will be addressed in the subsequent section.

### **High Academic Achievers Needed to be Given Challenges & Some Attention.**

Teachers generally reported their relationships with academically high achieving students were positive or very positive. Mikayla described how she worked with high achieving students:

[Teaching and the relationship look like] more of me guiding academic instruction as opposed to giving the direct instruction. Allowing more freedom [with] what they want to study because I can, I can be confident that I know that they’re going to always give their one hundred percent best and they’re going to pursue excellence, without me having to provide that motivational piece.

Teachers largely shared that working with high achievers was “easy” because students were academically engaged, but that they did need to be given challenges. Teachers often provided academic enrichment and leadership opportunities for these students so that they were neither bored nor disengaged or uninspired. Maryanne said, “... you wanna keep building that enthusiasm for learning ... you don’t want to shut their learning down. ... I just try to keep them engaged.” Diana expressed, “I think it’s finding ways to let them shine and finding ways to let them still be curious.” Amanda’s approach was to tap into students’ interests and give them the

flexibility to focus their study on subjects or topics they preferred. Sarina's excerpt describes her approach to teaching and relating to motivated high achievers:

... now it's about finding new interests for that student and by bringing information and different topics and more unique books, things they have not thought of, I think that cultivates a higher interest. And the student, they appreciate and they're happy that I'm showing them something that they really, really didn't know about—and when you're in the third grade there's plenty of material that they didn't know about. And then I try to keep it very interesting and so that, that cultivates, it cultivates more interest. ... let's say we're talking about [animal] habitat[s], so now we're looking at deep sea life and those students they really enjoy seeing that I am learning something at the same time as they're learning something. And I think that that builds the closeness. And then also when they go home, they may seek out some other information and then they come to school and they're like, "Ms. Sarina, did you know this?" "I like the deep-sea video," and we talked about the different animals. "But did you know about this animal?" "Did you know that this animal was discovered two years ago?" And it's very exciting to them, and it's very exciting to me. And I think that cultivates that relationship also because the students, they want to know that they're not the only one who's [sic] learning but the teacher is learning too.

Teachers also made sure not to neglect high achievers because they did not want to stunt their eagerness to learn. Teachers expressed they were aware that their attention was regularly occupied by more academically, behaviorally, or social-emotionally "needy" students, and felt this was unfair to high achieving students. Isabella said:

I think sometimes I give more attention—this is just honest—that I pay more attention to the kids who have, are more needy. And, um, the kids who can function on their own, especially if they're enriched, I don't always give them the kind of attention I should, you know, and so I have to always work on that, you know, make sure that I'm equitable that way.

Alice-Ann shared her perspective:

I would hope that I don't [*laughs*] treat them [high achieving and well-rounded students] any differently than I would anyone else. However, having said that, and having three kids [of my own], every individual child brings, demands, something different from you, as a teacher, as a caretaker, right. So, with students like that my concern, actually, my major concern is that I'm afraid that I would be, [*pause*] I have to watch not to neglect them. And not to neglect their need for being challenged, that's the area that I always think about when dealing with a student that's all around great, you know, wonderful, academically high, popular, well-behaved child. I'm always thinking, "Okay, am I neglecting [them]?"

An outlying finding from select teachers was that high achievers were sometimes difficult to work with because they saw themselves as "better" or "higher" than others or "above" the learning material. Two teachers from School A felt this way. In Lynn's words:

Most high achieving students sometimes will give off like an energy level of I am better than all of this, I don't need it. So, I feel like those students are sometimes hard to reach ... So, it can be a difficult situation, but I still feel like you can have a good relationship with those kids—because you may not be teaching them anything brand new, but you are

still, you know, exposing them to experiences that they otherwise would not have if they weren't with you.

Similarly, Beth shared how she works with these students, saying "I first have to make sure they know, yes they're smart, but that doesn't mean that they're better than anyone else." Since these students are so academically focused, she also emphasizes teaching these children more social-emotional skills such as how to be empathetic, be a good friend, and become more well-rounded.

**Low Academic Achievers Needed More Attention, Support, & Scaffolds.**

Sixty-eight percent of teachers ( $n = 17$ ) discussed how they worked with low academic achievers and the majority described these relationships as positive or neutral. Numerous teachers expressed that these were the students that needed them the most. The common practices teachers shared in working with low academic achievers were: (1) providing more attention, instructional time, encouragement, and support, (2) simplifying tasks and assignments, and (3) assigning peer support.

Beth's description depicted some of these findings:

Yeah, they just need a little extra attention. In my opinion if they're low, you need to be their cheerleader and try and build them up—because they're probably already aware that they're low, and that they're not getting it. And so, it's my job to break it down for them into smaller portions, and we just work on the little parts, one at a time. And so, they might not be doing what the rest of us are doing, or I might modify their assignments into more manageable tasks for them to do. And that seems to help ...

Kendra similarly said she needed to give low academic achievers "a lot [*emphasis*] more time," figure out their strengths and weaknesses, and work with them individually. Her academically

struggling students would also be paired with peer support, such as a with a leader or high achiever.

Like other teachers, Kendra also communicated a lot with parents and families. Lynn described the parents of students struggling academically and how she worked with the students:

I find a lot of those students, the parents are more willing to work with you and are more appreciative of whatever you do, do for them. ... going the extra mile, being caring, showing [students] that you know that it's difficult and trying to work with them as much as you can. And getting the supports that they need to be as successful as they can be.

And [getting them] to see that they are still going to be a good student ...

Teachers repeatedly talked about the extra attention and positive encouragement they gave students who were struggling academically. Scarlett shared:

I try to, again, get [them] out of their shell, build their self-esteem, make them feel worthy. Make them understand that it's okay to make mistakes, that's how we learn.

And just work with them a little more. And I think I have a pretty good relationship with them.

While teachers generally shared optimistic perspectives about working with low performing students, Wendy—a beginning teacher—said sometimes relationships with these students may not be as positive because they are “a little less motivated to do their work and ... [are a] little bit more resistant [to me] helping them learn.” Wendy concluded that relationships with these students can go both ways.

**Students Struggling Behaviorally or Social-Emotionally Needed Structure & More Non-Cognitive Support.**

Almost all teachers (92.0%,  $n = 23$ ) discussed how they worked with and related to students struggling with behavior and social-emotional skills. Teachers shared numerous stories and examples of “challenging” children who, as Lynn described, “drained you,” and occasionally “completely interrupt[ed] the teaching for the rest of the students.” Lynn said, as most teachers do in this situation, “you try every single trick in the book to reach that child” and try to get them to see that “as much as they drive you nuts—you don’t hate them” and you are simply trying to help them succeed. Kira’s said her approach with these challenging students was to be:

... always reaching and searching and looking for that, that positive thing [*emphasis*] to hang on to. You know ‘cause I don’t want to, I just don’t want to give up on a child or say I’m not gonna deal with this child. So, it’s just, it’s just searching for that link, that link of a relationship—what, what could carry us through this?

Two common approaches teachers shared in working with behaviorally and social-emotionally struggling students were to: (1) prioritize behavioral and social-emotional needs over academics, and (2) provide structure by setting clear boundaries, expectations, and holding students accountable for their actions.

Academics became secondary when students had larger behavior or social-emotional troubles. Teachers including Alice-Ann and Mikayla voiced prioritizing social-emotional support over academics. Mikayla’s excerpt explains her approach with this profile student:

I’m not really trying to get them to academically settle in. Because I know that right there that’s a cognitively overloading task to ask them to them do, because they can’t even sit still, they can’t even behave, you know, they can’t even get their emotions straight. So, I’m just trying to get them to sit and regulate themselves. So, we work on behavior plans, we work on, “Okay what are some goals for you for the next 30



minutes?” “What are some goals for you until recess?” And “Could you do one page of work?” And “Let’s focus on sitting still” ... trying to help the child to recognize when their behavior’s off task, because most of the time they don’t even realize they’re off task.

Numerous teachers including Beth, Wendy, and Isabella all mentioned intentionally providing structure and accountability for students struggling with behavior or social-emotional difficulties. Beth expressed at times she got frustrated with these students because she thought “they just don’t care.” However, she would try to figure out why these students acted out—whether it was home problems and they could benefit from counseling, for example. But she stated the importance of holding students accountable for their actions, using behavior contracts, or implementing modifications to support students through their difficulties and to help them feel more successful. Beth explained, “So the more success they have, the better they’ll feel about themselves, and if they feel better about themselves, their interactions with other people will be more positive.” Like Beth, Wendy also shared the same practices of both setting firm boundaries and consequences, as well as reaching out to school counselors or other support staff.

Isabella similarly expressed that with students who have behavior issues it is often about their needs, and oftentimes “what they need is structure, or what they need is accountability, or limits.” She said it was helpful to find something that the student was good at and to celebrate their successes. Isabella also shared the importance of teaching empathy. “I’m really big on them understanding the impact of their behavior on the class, on me, on a particular student.”

### **Students’ Personality Traits & Character**

Few teachers (28.0%, n = 7) specifically named personality traits or character styles of students. Denisse described the way that her relationships with students were formed, saying,

“it’s usually the individual child and the energy that’s coming from that child.” Denisse discussed how each student requires her to address them a specific way, depending on their personality traits or character:

... you might be stern with this child because that’s what they need is a stern strong tone, whereas this other child ... my little one that had problems, I’d whisper—I talked to them in a different voice. So that’s where you got to figure out, okay what makes this kid tick? So, it’s like, how do I communicate this with this child? Or how do they understand me? Do they want that stern voice? Like, don’t go there? Or do they want me going, “Hey, what’s going on?” And can they joke around with me? Can they understand sarcasm? If they come from a sarcastic family. And so, things like that, you do notice.

***Empathy & Understanding.***

Four of the seven teachers who talked about students’ character traits commented specifically on their empathy and understanding. Kira’s excerpt provides an example:

Like last year, I had this little boy, Eric. And actually, it was my second year with him because I had a combo, a one-two combo, last year. He had been one of my first graders the year before. And I just loved my relationship with Eric because you know he could push his luck a little. But I would just have to give him a search and look, and he knew, he knew when I’d had it. So, he would just sort of look down, glance away, and say “Sorry, Ms. Kira.” But he was also that kid who could get to at sort of an adult level. You know it’s when you have those kids that are just sort of mature in a certain way. And they either, they either get your humor, or are empathetic, you know, because developmentally a whole lot of first graders are not, you know, it’s totally normal. But when you have those little empaths or the kids who you just have this really deep

connection with, there's nothing like it. Like I said there's, there's always the ones you're trying to reach out to who just don't connect quite the same way.

***Matching Personalities & Character Traits Facilitate Teacher-Student Relationships***

Over a third of teachers (36.0%, n = 9) discussed whether their personality traits or character meshed with their students' and how this impacted their teacher-student relationships. Kendra felt connecting with students was "a personality thing more than gender or ethnicity or race." She said, "I have more of a connection with a kid who kind of likes to be easy going and funny, you know, I kind of connect more with that kind of student than the kid who's very serious and doesn't really care to learn." Amanda likewise believed that her personal traits and character—mainly being empathetic—were what made a difference in her relationships with students, not her demographics. She described being able to relate to students because she was both bullied and had difficulty in school when she was young. Relatedly, Lynn commented on the impact having similar personalities had on their shared teacher-student relationship:

I personally being a very outgoing person, had teachers in the past that were not, and I remember getting into conflicts with them, because I was the person I am, and they were the teacher they were. So, I feel like being a teacher who is outgoing, I do have students that are more reserved, or more outgoing, and trying to find that common ground is giant [*emphasis*].

***Relationships Across Grade Levels: Relationship Building in Upper Grades (3-5) Becomes Challenging***

As discussed earlier with relationship quality, both K-2 (48.0%, n = 12) and 3-5 (52.0%, n = 13) teachers in this study generally had positive relationships with their students. An examination of teacher perspectives of relationship building across grade levels revealed that

while teachers used similar relationship building strategies, teachers currently or previously teaching upper grades expressed that it sometimes was more challenging with the upper elementary students in grades 3-5. Kyla remarked how relationship building was easier with K-2 students:

This is my first year teaching fifth grade, I've always taught younger, mainly kindergarten, so I don't think they're as jaded back then, you know, at that age where it's not hard to build those relationships as long as you take the time—I think they're more open to it.

Another perspective from Marylou—who previously taught at the high school level where students' developmental stages, and occasionally their rebelliousness, can pose challenges to teacher-student relationships—said she had no problems with elementary age students:

I'm happy to be there with them, and they're happy to be here, to come to school. ... elementary kids are happy to come and see their teacher. And they feel that “Oh, my teacher is there for me.” Sometimes they get more [*emphasis*] attention from the teacher than from, you know, the family because they're busy and there's other [siblings].

Giada and Mikayla talked specifically about the challenges of working with fifth graders.

Giada shared:

... when I taught fifth grade it was just much harder with the older kids because they ... wanted to do things like play games on their Chromebooks and ... I had one kid go on YouTube when he was supposed to be doing something else, and I don't think he liked me [*emphasis*] when I busted him for it. I had to call his mom to show her what he was watching because it was super [*emphasis*] inappropriate.

Mikayla emphasized how to successfully work with this specific grade level:

And so, you have to find a way to connect with them, to make learning meaningful, you know, otherwise they don't buy in. They could care less— especially, I teach fifth grade, they've already been through school a while, and they know when to tune teachers out, when to not tune them out. And so, it's really important to be engaging with them, to know what's going on in their lives, to know what's going on in their pop culture, to know what's going on in their communities—so that you can pull that into your teaching.

She went on to describe an example:

... our school ... as of last year it was like 85.0% Hispanic, and then the rest African American and like one White kid per grade level. And so, I would always start the school year reading them a story called Esperanza Rising about a Mexican girl having to come here and start again, so with that there's a lot of life lessons that they can learn, but also the Latino community in my classroom can make connections too.

## **CHAPTER FIVE. CONCLUSION**

### **Summary of Results**

The following sections present a discussion of the results by research question—similar to the organization of the preceding chapter. This discussion involves summaries and interpretation of the results, and assertions for the significance of the data.

#### **RQ1: How Teachers Described Relationship Building with Students**

##### ***Quantitative Results***

Survey data showed that teachers ranked their teaching skills, knowledge, and practices as important to relationship building with students. Of the itemized skills, knowledge, and practices included in the survey, teachers valued “awareness and sensitivity to students’ individual needs” the highest and valued “teaching experience” the lowest. Teachers generally perceived the feasibility of using these skills, knowledge, and practices in their teaching as “very feasible.” In essence, teachers perceived certain practices conducive to student-teacher relationship building and felt these practices were relatively very feasible to incorporate in their daily teaching.

##### ***Qualitative Results***

Numerous themes emerged from teachers’ descriptions of their relationship building with students. First, most teachers stressed the importance of teacher-student relationships in the classroom and for student success. In fact, some teachers commonly shared that relationships were the number one factor in the classroom. Second, teachers described specific aspects of teacher-student relationships that were foundational; these relationship “pillars” included students needing to trust their teacher, feel safe around them, and believe they cared for and respected them—all of which made students feel valued. Third, teachers’ descriptions of

teacher-student relationships concentrated on relationship quality; teachers reported that most of their relationships with students were positive, but it was common to have a very small fraction of students with whom building connections was difficult. Fourth, teachers mentioned numerous benefits of positive teacher-student relationships, including social-emotional and psycho-social outcomes—such as feelings of safety and motivation—which often influenced student behavior and increased their readiness for academic learning (behavioral and cognitive outcomes). Study results confirmed both the importance of trust in teacher-student relationships (Howes, 2000) and the benefits of an accepting relationship on student motivation (Juvonen & Wentzel, 1996).

Lastly, most teachers brought attention to the pandemic and what a difference relationship building looked like in the context of a virtual classroom. Although teachers varied in these descriptions, trends were that despite the new obstacles they faced teachers still felt they could be successful at relationship building through a computer screen. Teachers' descriptions of relationship building with students revealed results that were both reflected in, and novel to, previous literature. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teacher-student relationships was an outlying finding that will require future research; this unexplored area of educational research will be needed particularly due to increases in virtual education. While only scratching the surface, this study suggested although online relationship building was at first challenging and adjustments were necessary, there was still promise for connecting with children in virtual settings.

### **RQ1 (a.) Teachers' Perceptions of Teacher-Student Relationship Outcomes**

Teachers' acknowledgement of the importance of teacher-student relationships, and their commonly reported foundational “pillars” to successful relationships, were both significant because literature also demonstrates how relationships are critical to various student outcomes

and whenever students are experiencing these benefits, they are more likely to find success in school. For example, research shows that when students trust their teacher and feel comfortable with them, they are better able to seek help from and share discoveries with their teacher (Howes, 2000; Starcher, 2011). Numerous quantitative studies also confirm the social-emotional (Baker, 1999; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009), psycho-social (Baker, 1999; Cadima et al., 2010; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009), behavioral (Valiente et al., 2012), and cognitive (Buyse et al., 2009) benefits of teacher-student relationships. Although these studies confirm all of the beneficial outcomes of teacher-student relationships, few if any offer firsthand qualitative stories or examples of what this looks like in a real-life classroom.

The qualitative emphasis of this mixed methods study fills the aforementioned research gap by providing a deep examination of teacher experiences and perspectives. One reason why teachers' views should be examined is because teachers are the main determinant of relationship quality (Davis, 2003). As such, a lot could be learned from teachers. The current study adds to the literature on the importance of teacher-student relationships by illustrating research findings through teachers' narrative examples from their teaching experiences. Teacher narratives allow readers to apply research concepts to practical examples, which could be beneficial to audiences such as practitioners and teachers in training. Moreover, there is value in the teacher examples because they are representative of present-day education.

Research finds students who have a caring and supportive relationship with their teacher have better academic engagement, school satisfaction, behavior, social functioning, and positive school attitudes (Klem & Connell, 2004; Roorda et al., 2011). Aside from confirming these findings, the current study also adds unique perceptions from teachers serving dissimilar student populations and needs. These perspectives provide readers with a variety of realistic contexts of



what students require to, for example, be academically engaged or attain positive school attitudes.

### **RQ1 (b.) Strategies Teachers Perceived as Effective in Relationship Building with Students**

Teachers shared their wealth of knowledge and experiences of relationship building with their students, and how they optimized these teacher-student interactions. Teachers' perceptions of effective relationship building strategies included teachers and students getting to know each other; teachers intentionally "building students up"; establishing positive class climate and community; and continuing to develop relationships with students outside of class time.

Almost every teacher emphasized how important it was to learn about students' needs and interests, as well as to share some of their own personal interests with students. Teachers expressed that when they revealed personal information about themselves to their students, students got to see them as "real people." Teachers often used the whole class setting with dedicated time and activities for this purpose and shared that they were most effective at connecting with students when they approached getting to know students in a genuine manner.

Teachers additionally discussed in length the various ways they "built students up"—including believing in students; engaging and motivating students (e.g., to want to come to school); praising and encouraging students to make them feel successful; and boosting students' confidence. Teachers also focused on establishing a safe and secure classroom environment, and a sense of classroom community that included fostering relationships among students. Lastly, teachers discussed additional efforts they made to continue to develop relationships with their students outside of class time, such as at recess, lunch, before school or after school.

Literature on teacher-student relationships generally does not address relationship building strategies; therefore, this study has a lot of value for both academic research and

educational practice. Select strategies resemble classroom management practices found in teacher education textbooks (Marzano & Marzano, 2003)—however, what makes this study’s results distinctive is their relevance specifically to teachers’ development of effective teacher-student relationships. This compilation of teacher recommended relationship building strategies could be useful to both new and experienced teachers wanting to cultivate successful teacher-student relationships.

### **RQ2 Teachers’ Descriptions & Perceptions of Relationship Building with Students Across Different School Contexts**

#### ***Quantitative Results***

Survey data showed that school sites generally had diverse student populations and most (12 of 14) were Title I schools. However, three schools were different. Two schools were not Title I schools (Schools A and J), and coincidentally had unique diverse student populations—School A’s population was half White and School J’s population was half Asian. And the third school (School B) had a homogeneous student population with over 90.0% of students being Hispanic/Latino. Teachers’ perceptions of their school’s overall student performance (e.g., academic, behavior, work habits) indicated generally positive perceptions. Teachers also had generally positive perceptions of their school’s parent involvement. Teacher reports of their school sites facing challenges ranged but was steady in percentage across three rankings (e.g., “very severe,” “severe,” and “somewhat severe”), while a third of teachers reported their schools had “no challenges.” Study results shed light on the differences between schools within a school district, suggesting that the contexts of individual school sites should be considered to evaluate and support needs and ensure equity across schools.

#### ***Qualitative Results***

Results revealed that teachers' descriptions and perceptions of relationship building had both similarities and differences across school contexts. Teachers described what they thought made their schools unique, which focused mainly on the programs their schools offered, or the student populations that attended the school. And, while data was limited due to the small number of interviewees from each school site, a notable finding was that all five teachers from School A mentioned the same exact things about their school. This consistency could suggest that school leaders were able to articulate a strong shared vision of the school's mission.

Teachers' discussions of their schools' student populations centered around the finding that most schools in the district had very diverse populations in terms of demographics and student performance, while a few schools had more homogeneous populations. Teachers expressed that diversity in student populations—by race/ethnicity, cultures, languages, and social class/SES—was enriching to everyone; however, teaching to a diverse population with varying needs and performance levels was very difficult to do, even with small group instruction.

Teachers described school climate and school culture by highlighting the roles of their school principals; colleagues, staff, and school programs; and having a sense of school community. Strong leadership, trust and support from the school principal allowed teachers to feel better able to cultivate relationships with students. Supportive teacher colleagues and school staff—from nurses, cafeteria staff, and custodians, to secretaries, psychologists, and social workers—were instrumental in working together to meet the social and affective needs of students through relationship building, especially when the teacher needed the extra help or felt other staff could connect better with a student. School community was fostered through schoolwide events and celebrations, and served as opportunities for building rapport between students, teachers, and staff. These descriptions addressed two of the four environmental

features of school climate—social and affective environments—as defined by Tableman & Herron (2004) discussed in Chapter 2 (the other two features are physical and academic environments). School climate literature generally approaches the topic from the perspective of the most ideal contexts for the student; data results from the current study on the other hand, provide valuable perspectives from teachers which underscores the importance of the roles of all adults at the school site working together to create the best school climate for children.

Teachers discussed both having and lacking school resources at their schools. But teachers categorized resources in terms of programs (e.g., curriculum, materials, instructors), as opposed to how research has described resources (e.g., small class sizes and schools, and teacher quality)—in terms of its effect on student achievement (Greenwald et al., 1996). When teachers shared about their schools' arts or STEM programs, for example, they often described resource after resource. However, one teacher shared that she had to develop and find teaching materials and resources because the curriculum provided by the school and district were insufficient in serving the complete needs of her students. This teacher taught at School B, the only school that had a student population with nearly all students (over 90.0%) being both economically disadvantaged and racially/ethnically Latino/Hispanic. Current study findings confirm prior research by Betts and colleagues (2000) that found that schools with larger populations of economically disadvantaged students had fewer school resources.

Teachers' descriptions of working with parents and families included the finding that teacher-parent relationships often impacted teacher-student relationships. In these discussions, teachers also considered parent communication and involvement. Teachers mentioned being in contact with families and building relationships with parents to help support their children in schools. Teachers repeatedly shared that their relationships with parents were influential to their

relationships with their children. Teachers depicted different styles of parent involvement, often differing by demographic group. However, the common finding across the board was that all parents cared for and were concerned about their children's education and school success. The current study confirms previous research that has shown that parent involvement differs by race and socioeconomic status (Herman & Yeh, 1983). A novel addition to the literature from the current study is that teachers perceived different styles of parent involvement based on their children's academic, behavioral, or social-emotional performance. The present study also confirmed the research finding that increased parent involvement leads to better teacher-student relationships and yields improved student psycho-social outcomes (e.g., school attitudes) (Dearing et al., 2008).

### **RQ3 Teachers' Descriptions & Perceptions of Relationship Building with Students Across Characteristics & Demographics of Individual Teachers, their Classrooms, and Students**

#### ***Quantitative Results***

Survey data showed that teachers' perceptions of students' demographics were less significant in teacher-student relationships compared to students' individual profiles (e.g., personality traits and character, academic performance, behavior patterns, social-emotional skills).

#### ***Qualitative Results***

Teachers described how their personal demographics, teaching philosophies and styles, personality traits, awareness, and teaching experience, all made a difference in their teacher-student relationships. Previous research concluded that teachers' perceptions of their teacher-student relationships were influenced by teachers' gender, ethnicity, personality, and years of experience (Kesner, 2000). Teachers in the current study often used their personal racial/ethnic

backgrounds to relate to their students. Research similarly has shown that teachers rated teacher-student relationships more positively whenever their ethnicities matched their students' (Saft & Pianta, 2001).

Teachers in this study also expressed that their gendered experiences—such as being “motherly” or sports fans—made an impact on their interpersonal relations with students. Previous research by Rudasill (2011) revealed that girls in first and third grade had closer relationships with their teachers and suggested this may have been because lower elementary teachers generally are female and this made it easier for them to build connections with girls. The present study contradicted the finding that lower elementary girls have closer relationships with their teachers; teacher in the present study never expressed that their relationships were closer with any one gender. However, a couple of female teachers did state they sometimes had conflicts specifically with their male students, which confirms prior research by Baker (2006) that teachers report more negative relationships with boys than girls.

Teachers spoke about their teaching styles, teaching philosophies, beliefs about their roles as teachers, and how these perceptions had a bearing on their teacher-student relationships. A common belief they shared about teaching children was that it was fun. And a common teaching philosophy teachers held was to provide student-driven instruction. Another teaching belief held by teachers was the practice of fair and equitable treatment of students. Teachers either acknowledged or denied the role of students' demographic differences on relationships; teachers who denied these differences expressed strong opinions about equity among students. This new finding demonstrates that teachers currently have dissimilar understandings and feelings about how to discuss, acknowledge, and address diversity.

Teachers frequently described their role as having to do everything—from teaching academic content to ensuring students are fed. SEL instruction was widely discussed both as a responsibility teachers had, and how SEL implementation had become less organic, and more curriculum guided. Seminal research by Durlak and colleagues (2011) has established that SEL programs universally implemented in schools have numerous beneficial outcomes (e.g., SEL skills, behaviors, attitudes, achievement) for students. Teachers reported sometimes finding it challenging to balance the academic and social-emotional demands of teaching; however, teachers also shared strategies for striking that balance—for example careful selection of literary texts that simultaneously addressed SEL and a core academic subject. A handful of teachers mentioned the pressures of testing—usually brought on by the district and state—and mentioned how it took time away from addressing important social-emotional or behavioral issues in the classroom that could have been used as non-cognitive learning opportunities for students. This finding confirms prior research that found teachers’ increased stress due to testing affected their relationships with students (Valli & Buese, 2007). The current study adds to the literature detailed descriptions of the abundance and complexity of responsibilities—academic, social-emotional, and beyond—that the present-day elementary teacher upholds.

Furthermore, data on individual teachers revealed that most were caring and nurturing in character, and most had a strong sense of awareness for both themselves and their students. What this study adds to the literature is the finding that the majority of teachers emphasized the importance of having self-awareness and an awareness of their students; teachers were highly in tune with their own emotions, behaviors, and aware of how these feelings and actions impacted their interactions with their students. Lastly, the few teachers that mentioned the significance of teaching experience noted that the more experience they gained, the more skilled and effective

they became at working and building relationships with their students. Relatedly, previous research on students' perceptions of teacher-student relationship quality showed a positive association between teacher experience and teachers' communion—or expressions of love, union, and affiliation (Wubbels et al., 2014). This research finding was confirmed by the study sample whom the majority were well experienced and expressed positive feelings about teaching and working closely with students.

Teacher perceptions of their relationships with students were also affected by individual student differences, including students' demographics, character traits, and performance levels (e.g., academic, behavior, and social-emotional). Findings showed that teachers were fixed on their perceptions of whether demographics mattered. For example, teachers either acknowledged that students' race and ethnicity mattered, or teachers tended to dismiss it and instead focus on seeing children the same and treating them fairly. Teachers had the same type of rigid response for gender, either acknowledging gender-based student differences—and even admitting these gender biases—or, again, downplaying gender differences and commenting with equality driven statements such as, “all kids are kids,” or “boy or girl, I have the same expectations for all kids.” The current study confirms prior research that finds that children's individual characteristics, including their gender, contribute to the quality of their teacher-student relationships (Rudasill, 2011). However, this study adds the unique finding that teachers who denied the relevance of elementary children's demographics on their teacher-student relationships adamantly stated that they saw all children the same and backed these opinions in the name of equity.

Stereotypes and bias were also found in teachers' responses related to students' race/ethnicity and gender. Some teachers mentioned gendered biased practices that favored boys or girls. Examples included “giving boys a pass,” “calling on boys more,” “being more



intolerant of girls misbehaving,” and “being harder on boys.” Additionally, some teachers admitted to having bias toward “boys who bully or manipulate,” “entitled boys who talk over other kids,” and “alpha males who bully.” Such biases, attitudes, and behaviors toward students could be very detrimental to and hinder the development of positive student-teacher relationships. Preconceived thoughts about certain “types” of students could create an inequitable climate and disadvantage students even further.

Some teachers revealed racial/ethnic biased and stereotyped views that also present problems for building optimal student-teacher relationships with all students. Among these views, half were about African American populations. For instance, one teacher noticed “African American boys have a harder time sitting still.” Numerous teachers discussed cultural differences and parental involvement among racial/ethnic groups. Comments teachers made included comparisons to African American and Armenian cultures, saying “Hispanic families are very supportive of teachers,” and “Caucasian and Asian parents are very involved [in their children’s education].” These views could be unfavorable to teacher-parent relationships and also be damaging to teacher-student relationships. The transparent descriptions of teachers’ own gender and racial/ethnic biases presented in this study add authentic, concrete examples to the literature that could be used in future works aimed at addressing the problem of teacher biases in education.

When asked how teachers worked with various “profile” students—based on academic, behavioral, and social-emotional performance—teachers collectively had unique practices for each of these student profiles. Teachers reported that students with high academic achievement always needed to be given learning challenges or enrichment activities, but they were usually easy to work with, often describing these relationships as very positive and close. The danger

with high achievers was that they could easily be forgotten since they were such independent and self-sufficient students; teachers mentioned having to be careful not to neglect these high performers. In rare cases, mostly at School A, teachers found working with this profile student was difficult because students held overconfident, opinionated views that the learning material was too easy for them. This outlying finding underscores the importance of considering school contexts when examining educational topics.

On the other hand, students with low academic performance needed more attention and support, as well as simplification of learning tasks. Teachers reported that these students required more of their time and hand holding. Students who struggled with behavior or had social-emotional deficits required more structure and accountability. Teachers tended to prioritize non-cognitive supports for these students. Relationships with lower performing students generally required more teacher attention but could have been either positive or negative relationships.

The current research confirms prior research on the role of demographic differences on teacher-student relationships, but also adds new findings with the discussed data on teachers' distinct relationship building approaches for students with common performance profiles. Another valuable addition to the literature was the perception of select teachers' that children's academic, behavioral, social-emotional, or psycho-social performance did not—and should not—affect the quality of their teacher-student relationship.

While personality traits were not discussed at length by teachers, they did often underscore children's empathy and their compassion for peers. Some teachers stated students' personalities mattered more than their gender or race/ethnicity and that they felt more connected with students if their personalities matched, or they shared common character traits. A

compelling finding from the current study is the consistency of the only character traits that emerged in the data for teachers and students; being caring and nurturing, and being empathetic and understanding, respectively. This finding could suggest teachers were successful in demonstrating and teaching how to be empathetic, while their students were equally successful in learning and emulating such traits.

As research suggests, this study also found that relationships were not the same across grade levels. Teachers reported that teacher-student relationships got challenging in the upper elementary grades, whereas they were more positive and attainable in the lower elementary years. Researchers Lynch and Cicchetti (1997) explained how children's attention and relatedness begin to shift from adults (e.g., parents, teachers) to peers once they enter adolescence. Even still, meta-analysis research has countered this finding, revealing that relationships remained influential for older students in terms of student engagement and achievement (Roorda et al., 2011). The current study confirms prior findings that relationships are more feasible the younger children are.

### **Implications**

#### **Practice Implications**

This research study has practice implications for stakeholders in K-12 education. Teachers, administrators, and school staff, along with parents and families, need to know that positive teacher-student relationships can help students' meet school demands, while negative relationships can hinder students' efforts to find success in school (Roorda et al., 2011). It is essential that all stakeholders understand the significance of social interactions that take place in schools. For example, Saft and Pianta (2001) suggest examination of students' social and emotional processes through teacher-student interactions and teacher perceptions could help

school psychologists understand students' academic outcomes. This research study found that when teachers worked with students lacking social-emotional skills they focused more on that area of development before they could assign these students more cognitive laden tasks.

In their book *A Matter of Trust* authors Howes and Ritchie (2002) explain that harmonious classroom interactions can take place only when teachers move beyond presenting rules and expectations, and into understanding children's development of their internalized dispositions toward compliance and mutual relationships. The current research supports this study's suggestion and provides evidence of the importance teachers placed on approaches to relating to children based on their individual academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. Prior research also suggests that harmonious interactions can be achieved through nurturing teacher-student relationships in caring environments characterized by smaller classes, more dialogue, and curriculum that accommodates students' interests and needs (Noddings, 2013; Velasquez et al., 2013). One teacher in the current research study similarly stated that large class sizes can decrease opportunities for teacher-student relationship building. Relatedly, numerous teachers in this study described their classroom management styles as less strict, allowing for more student movement and discussion. And nearly all teachers in this study commented on the importance of addressing students' needs and interests, usually using this information in their curricular decision making and planning.

Prior research also finds that teachers who are emotionally responsive to students tend to have better relationships with them (S Yoon, 2002). The current research study found evidence of teachers' awareness of themselves and their students and showed how this awareness was vital in their teacher-student relationships. Observational evidence from prior research concludes that teachers tend to be reactive and engage in maladaptive interactions when having to deal with

students who demonstrate difficult behaviors (Howes & Ritchie, 2002). Some teachers in the current study admitted that select students were very challenging to connect with because of their behavior; most of the time teachers had resilient and steadfast approaches to working with this needy population. However, in some cases teachers also demonstrated stereotypes and bias in their perceptions of student gender or race/ethnicity. Teachers' biased gender views were mostly self-acknowledged, but teachers were less aware of their racial/ethnic biases. Since these views could be detrimental to developing healthy teacher-student relationships, one recommendation is for teachers to undergo training to help address their biases.

Research shows that teacher-student connections improve academic engagement and performance, as well as student behavior; therefore, implementing relationship building strategies is a worthwhile undertaking (Gonser, n.d.). The findings of this research study provided the following best practices for teacher-student relationship building:

1. Teachers and students get to know each other (e.g., personal interests).
  - a) Teachers show a genuine interest in students.
  - b) Teachers learn about students' individual needs.
2. Teachers "build students up" by encouraging and supporting them in positive ways.
  - a) Teachers believe in students.
  - b) Teachers engage and motivate students.
  - c) Teachers make students feel successful through praise and encouragement.
  - d) Teachers build students' confidence.
3. Teachers establish classroom climate and build classroom community.
  - a) Teachers establish a safe and secure classroom environment.
  - b) Teachers build a classroom community.

4. Teachers further develop relationships with students outside of the classroom.

- a) Teachers connect with students at recess and lunch time.
- b) Teachers support students before and after school.

The current study also has implications for teacher training in SEL. Teacher-student relationships go hand in hand with developing children's social-emotional skills. By learning how to better foster these relationships teachers will exemplify some of the important social-emotional skills students need to acquire in school. This study demonstrates the importance of SEL in teaching, suggesting that all teachers—teachers in training and practicing teachers—need to be well trained in SEL instruction. The study revealed that school-wide implementation use of formal SEL specific curricula were most effective, as was the leadership of school principals in ensuring uniform implementation of SEL in all classrooms. A successful strategy one school site utilized was the practice of daily SEL practices (e.g., five minutes of yoga every Monday; five minutes of mindfulness every Tuesday, etc.).

### **Policy Implications**

California's recent accountability platform, the California School Dashboard, contains data on how schools and local educational agencies (LEAs) are performing to meet the needs of California's diverse student population (*California School Dashboard and System of Support - Accountability (CA Dept of Education)*, n.d.). Alongside academic engagement and performance data, broader measures of school quality are also captured on the Dashboard. Conditions and climate data include summaries of local climate surveys (*California Healthy Kids Survey*), which depict student perceptions of school safety and connectedness (*Conditions and Climate | California School Dashboard (CA Dept of Education)*, n.d.). As discussed earlier, the *Healthy Kids Survey* includes a question about caring adult relationships, which is a core area of the

State's initiative for Social and Emotional Learning (*Social and Emotional Learning - Initiatives & Programs (CA Dept of Education)*, n.d.). Considering the increased relevance of broader school quality measures and the importance of SEL from the state policy level, this research study contributes new knowledge and insights to these efforts, including the following strategies for balancing the academic and social-emotional demands of teaching:

1. Hand picking reading material for an academic subject that also contains a social-emotional lesson.
2. Being flexible in day-to-day teaching and stopping teaching to address serious social-emotional matters.
3. Addressing the personal social-emotional needs of students (e.g., health, safety, etc.).
4. Being watchful and supportive of students' daily social-emotional well-being.

### **Research Implications**

This study has numerous implications for future research—including the value of the case study and mixed methods design—in uncovering school site-based differences and similarities across teachers' relationship building perceptions and practices. An emerging theme was a district wide emphasis on SEL instruction and schoolwide routines that strengthened both school and class climate. The knowledge gained from this research study could help inform both practitioners and researchers on successful relationship building techniques for today's public schools (refer to best practices list above). The research design provided qualitative narrative teacher accounts supported by quantitative data which could possibly have generalizability as well as opportunities for future study replication in additional California public school districts. Since the scope of the current research only allowed for teachers' perspectives of teacher-student relationships, future research studies ought to also capture the perspectives of students. Future

related research also ought to cover middle school (e.g., grades 6-8) and high school (e.g., grades 9-12) grade spans because these developmental contexts are also worthy of exploration.

Previous research suggestions were considered in the design and execution of this research. For example, Roorda and colleagues (2011) suggested more research on teacher-student relationships among students with behavior problems and learning difficulties was needed since very few studies specified this distinction in their study populations. This study uncovered the intentional, unique strategies teachers implemented in working with students struggling behaviorally and social-emotionally. This study found that teachers were most successful using the following strategies when working with behaviorally struggling students:

1. Address and prioritize behavioral concerns over academics.
2. Give more attention and provide more support (e.g., academic, emotional).
3. Provide more scaffolds (e.g., simplify tasks, assignments).
4. Assign peer support.

This study also found the following strategies worked best with students struggling social-emotionally:

1. Address and prioritize social-emotional needs over academics.
2. Provide structure (e.g., set clear boundaries, expectations, accountability).

Research from the perspective of “care” theory by Velasquez et al. (2013) suggested the need to investigate: (1) how care develops in students and practicing teachers, (2) the school as a caring community, and (3) caring in unique contexts (e.g., technology based classroom). The current study revealed the significance of “care” as a foundational pillar of teacher-student relationships, how schools had intentional school wide celebrations and practices that fostered



relationship building, and how caring interpersonal relationships could still be developed in a virtual setting.

Overall, this study makes the following contributions to educational research:

1. An original mixed methods case study of a mid-sized Southern California public school district investigating teachers' perceptions of their relationships with students.
2. Teacher-student relationship research that provides rich, descriptive qualitative data.
3. Teacher-student relationship research that addresses more than cognitive outcomes (e.g., behavioral, social-emotional, and psychosocial outcomes).
4. Case study research on teacher-student relationships that examines school site level contexts and discusses their differences and similarities.
5. Case study research on teacher-student relationship that examines individual teacher/classroom and student level contexts and discusses their differences and similarities.
6. Teachers' descriptions and perceptions of successful relationship building strategies, including:
  - a) Strategies specific to student personality/character and achievement profiles (e.g., achievement, behavior, social-emotional).
  - b) Perceptions of students based on demographic differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender).
7. Numerous relationship building strategies for practitioners, along with robust narrative examples from teachers.

### **Limitations**

This research study has some possible limitations. First, since this research was designed as a case study of one school district, any generalizing of its findings to other school districts ought to be done with caution. Second, the overall participation rate of 14.6% might be considered low; however, the interviewee participation rate (among survey respondents alone) of 61.0% is sizeable. Third, the use of participants' self-reported data is generally viewed as a limitation. For example, not all individuals are equally perceptive or articulate (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, use of self-reported data might run the risk of inaccurate participants responses, such as selectivity or exaggeration in the information they disclose to protect their image or avoid possible criticism. Fourth, bias could be a concern because the researcher conducted research at the school district for which she is employed as a teacher. Interview responses also could have been biased due to the researcher's presence and the lack of a natural field setting (Creswell, 2014).

A final possible limitation of this study was that interviewees represented a subset of the population who were experienced, optimistic about teaching, and "loved" children. These participating teachers volunteered to openly share their experiences and perceptions; whereas, if a more "representative" group of teachers were to be interviewed study results might have looked different. Perhaps some negative or challenging perspectives might have been captured, or views from more complacent teachers may have been documented, and arguably could have been beneficial for presenting a more realistic data set or more practical implications.

### **Conclusion**

Relationships between teachers and their students play a critical role in children's early schooling experiences, which can produce a strong effect on young children's learning outcomes and long term educational and career trajectories. Since research demonstrates learning involves

social and affective processes—such as interpersonal relationships—that impact children’s school success (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997), it is imperative to assess relationship quality and learn ways to improve teacher-student interactions. The current study has emphasized the complexity and significance of interpersonal relationships between teachers and their students. Prior research has recorded the importance of this topic mainly from a quantitative lens. Not only does the current research confirm many of these findings using a mixed methods approach, but it also adds a descriptive set of qualitative data to illustrate these research findings in rich context filled with accessible examples that pertain to the present-day public school student, teacher, classroom, school, and school district. While the traditional objective of K-12 education has been to transfer academic knowledge and skills to students, education encapsulates additional non-cognitive abilities and experiences, such as SEL. This case study provides a model for what teacher-student relationship building entails across different individuals and schools in a school district. Ultimately, the aim of this research was to provide a practical study that teachers and educational stakeholders could access to facilitate teacher-student relationship building and improve schooling experiences for all students.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Teacher Survey

#### K-5 teacher perceptions of relationship building with students

#### Teacher Background & Demographics

1. Select the school you work at:
  - a. School D
  - b. School C
  - c. School J
  - d. School E
  - e. School F
  - f. School K
  - g. School B
  - h. School G
  - i. School L
  - j. School M
  - k. School A
  - l. School N
  - m. School H
  - n. School I
2. What is your age?
  - a. 25 or younger
  - b. 26-35
  - c. 36-45
  - d. 46-55
  - e. 56-65
  - f. 66 or older
  - g. Prefer not to say
3. Select your gender:
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Prefer to self-describe \_\_\_\_\_ (*fill in the blank*)
  - d. Prefer not to say
4. Select your race/ethnicity (check all that apply):
  - a. Black or African American

## TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

- b. White
  - c. Hispanic or Latino
  - d. Asian/Pacific Islander
  - e. American Native or Alaska Native
  - f. Other \_\_\_\_\_ (*fill in the blank*)
  - g. Prefer not to say
5. Which best describes the social class of the household you were raised in?
- a. Upper
  - b. Middle
  - c. Lower
  - d. Prefer not to say
6. Select the grade(s) you currently teach:
- a. K
  - b. 1
  - c. 2
  - d. 3
  - e. 4
  - f. 5
  - g. Split or other \_\_\_\_\_ (*please specify*)
7. How many years have you been a teacher?
- a. 2 years or less
  - b. 3-6 years
  - c. 7-10 years
  - d. 11-14 years
  - e. 15-18 years
  - f. 19-22 years
  - g. 23 or more years
8. How many years have you taught at this school?
- a. 3 years or less
  - b. 4-6 years
  - c. 7-9 years
  - d. 10-12 years
  - e. 13- 15 years
  - f. 16 or more years

## Importance of Teacher Skills, Experience, & Relationships

## TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

### *Directions:*

Rate the following items according to how important each is to you for building relationships with students.

9. Teacher's pedagogical approaches & subject matter knowledge
  - a. Very unimportant
  - b. Unimportant
  - c. Important
  - d. Very important
10. Classroom management & discipline
  - a. Very unimportant
  - b. Unimportant
  - c. Important
  - d. Very important
11. Teaching experience
  - a. Very unimportant
  - b. Unimportant
  - c. Important
  - d. Very important
12. Teacher's awareness and sensitivity to individual needs of students
  - a. Very unimportant
  - b. Unimportant
  - c. Important
  - d. Very important

### **Strategies for Relationship Building**

### *Directions:*

Rate the following items according to how important each is in building relationships with students.

13. Fostering classroom community
  - a. Very unimportant
  - b. Unimportant
  - c. Important
  - d. Very important
14. Teaching students social-emotional skills

## TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

- a. Very unimportant
- b. Unimportant
- c. Important
- d. Very important

### 15. Teacher's care and sensitivity toward students

- a. Very unimportant
- b. Unimportant
- c. Important
- d. Very important

### 16. Providing individualized attention to students

- a. Very unimportant
- b. Unimportant
- c. Important
- d. Very important

### *Directions:*

Rate the following items according to how feasible each is to you as a classroom teacher.

### 17. Fostering classroom community

- a. Very unfeasible
- b. Unfeasible
- c. Feasible
- d. Very feasible

### 18. Teaching students social-emotional skills

- a. Very unfeasible
- b. Unfeasible
- c. Feasible
- d. Very feasible

### 19. Being a caring and sensitive teacher

- a. Very unfeasible
- b. Unfeasible
- c. Feasible
- d. Very feasible

### 20. Providing individualized attention to students

- a. Very unfeasible
- b. Unfeasible

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- c. Feasible
  - d. Very feasible
21. Balancing academic teaching demands with relationship building
- a. Very unfeasible
  - b. Unfeasible
  - c. Feasible
  - d. Very feasible

## School Contexts & Climate

22. Approximately how many parents in your school (classroom) are actively involved in their child's education?
- a. None
  - b. Some
  - c. Half
  - d. Most
  - e. All
23. Which best describes the severity of challenges your school faces?
- a. Very severe
  - b. Severe
  - c. Somewhat severe
  - d. Not severe
24. Which best describes the students at your school overall, according to academic performance?
- a. Very unacceptable
  - b. Unacceptable
  - c. Acceptable
  - d. Very acceptable
25. Which best describes the students at your school overall, according to behavior and work habits?
- a. Very unacceptable
  - b. Unacceptable
  - c. Acceptable
  - d. Very acceptable

## Student Characteristics



## TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

### *Directions:*

Rate the following items according to how your relationship building might differ based on student characteristics.

26. Male and female students

- a. No difference
- b. Slight difference
- c. Moderate difference
- d. Strong difference

27. Students of different races/ethnicities

- a. No difference
- b. Slight difference
- c. Moderate difference
- d. Strong difference

28. Students of different social class backgrounds

- a. No difference
- b. Slight difference
- c. Moderate difference
- d. Strong difference

29. Students of varying academic performance

- a. No difference
- b. Slight difference
- c. Moderate difference
- d. Strong difference

30. Students of varying behavior

- a. No difference
- b. Slight difference
- c. Moderate difference
- d. Strong difference

31. Students of varying social-emotional skills and needs

- a. No difference
- b. Slight difference
- c. Moderate difference
- d. Strong difference

### **Closing**

## TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

*The personal information you provide will remain confidential.*

32. Could you participate in a 30- to 60-minute phone call or video-chat call interview to share more about your perspectives on relationship building?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Maybe \_\_\_\_\_ (*please specify*)
33. What is your name? \_\_\_\_\_ (*fill in the blank*)
34. What is your contact info?
- a. Phone \_\_\_\_\_ (*fill in the blank*)
  - b. Email \_\_\_\_\_ (*fill in the blank*)
35. Which interview format do you prefer?
- a. Phone call
  - b. Video-chat call (e.g., Apple FaceTime, Google Voice, Skype, Zoom, or Cisco WebEx)
  - c. No preference
36. What days/times do you prefer for the interview appointment?
- a. Monday through Thursday \_\_\_\_\_ (*please specify a time*)
  - b. Friday to Sunday \_\_\_\_\_ (*please specify a time*)
  - c. Additional requests \_\_\_\_\_ (*please specify*)

## **Appendix B: Teacher Interview Protocol**

### K-5 teacher perceptions/attitudes of relationship building with students

#### **Teacher Background**

1. Talk to me about what led you into the teaching profession.
2. How would you describe your teaching style or teaching philosophy?

#### **Teacher-student Relationships and Relationship Building**

3. Describe the role teacher-student relationships play in your classroom.
4. What strategies have you found successful in building positive relationships with your students?
5. Describe how you think teacher-student relationships influence students' experiences and outcomes.

*Clarification: academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes*

#### **School Context**

6. What makes your school unique?

*Follow-up: Tell me about your student population or school culture*

7. What types of support are you expected to provide your students?

*Clarification: academic, behavioral, and social-emotional support*

8. How do you balance the academic and social-emotional demands of teaching students?

*Follow-up: Is it more difficult to attend to relationships because of all the pressure of tests, or other changes in school climate or context? Have you seen this change over time? How so?*

9. How does the school promote your ability to build relationships with your students?

*Follow-up: Discuss any challenges the school might impose on your ability to build relationships with your students*

### **Teacher Characteristics**

10. Do you notice your personal characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, class) making a difference in your relationships with students?

*Follow-up: gender; race/ethnicity; social class of the household in which you grew up – demographic or personality trait*

### **Student Characteristics**

11. Describe the interactions with your students where you have a close, affectionate, and warm relationship (Pianta, STRS, Q1)
12. On the opposite end, describe the interactions with your students where you might have some conflict in the relationship. (Pianta, STRS, Q2)
13. Over your years of teaching, in a typical classroom, how much of your class would you say you have positive relationships with, versus not?

*Questions 14-16 each depict a certain student profile; you may respond generally or specifically about a student/s.*

14. Think about a high achieving, well rounded student. Describe your relationship with this student and how you might work with them.
15. Think about a student with low academic achievement and poor work habits. Describe your relationship with this student and how you might work with them.
16. Think about a student with poor behavior or social-emotional skills. Describe your relationship with this student and how you might work with them.
17. Have you noticed any patterns in your relationships with students of different characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, class)? Please explain.
18. Talk about a time when a struggling student benefited from a close, caring teacher relationship.

### **Closing**

## TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

19. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

20. Is there anyone you would recommend for this portion of the study?

**Appendix C: Mapping Research Questions to Survey & Interview**

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Survey Questions</b>	<b>Quantitative Analytical Technique</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>	<b>Qualitative Analytical Technique</b>
<p>1. How do K-5 teachers in one school district describe their teacher-student relationships? (a.) What teacher-student relationship outcomes do teachers perceive? (b.) What teacher-student relationship building strategies do teachers perceive effective?</p>	<p>Rate the following items according to how important each is to building relationships with students.</p> <p><b>9.</b> Pedagogical approaches &amp; subject matter knowledge</p> <p><b>10.</b> Classroom management &amp; discipline</p> <p><b>11.</b> Experience</p> <p><b>12.</b> Being aware and sensitive to individual needs of students</p> <p>Rate the following items according to how important each is in building relationships with students.</p> <p><b>13.</b> Fostering classroom community</p> <p><b>14.</b> Teaching social-emotional skills</p> <p><b>15.</b> Teacher care and sensitivity</p> <p><b>16.</b> Providing individualized attention</p> <p>Rate the following items according to how manageable each is.</p> <p><b>17.</b> Fostering classroom community</p> <p><b>18.</b> Teaching students social-emotional skills</p> <p><b>19.</b> Being a caring and sensitive teacher</p> <p><b>20.</b> Providing students individualized attention</p>	<p><b>Descriptive statistics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- percentages</li> <li>- proportions</li> <li>- frequencies and frequency distributions</li> <li>- <i>measures of central tendency:</i> mode, median, mean</li> <li>- <i>variability:</i> range, variance, standard deviation</li> </ul>	<p><b>3.</b> Describe the role interpersonal relationships play in your classroom.</p> <p><b>4.</b> From your perspective, how do relationships influence students' experiences and outcomes?</p> <p><b>5.</b> What strategies do you use to build relationships with your students?</p> <p><b>6.</b> What have you found to be successful for establishing strong, caring, positive relationships with your students?</p> <p><b>19.</b> Can you think of a student who was struggling in school and benefited from a close, caring teacher relationship? Please describe what happened.</p>	<p><b>Thematic Coding</b></p>
<p><b>2. How do these descriptions</b></p>	<p>Data retrieved from district website</p> <p><b>23.</b> Which best describes</p>	<p><b>Descriptive statistics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- percentages</li> </ul>	<p><b>7.</b> How would you describe your school and the student population?</p>	<p><b>Thematic Coding</b></p>

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Research Questions	Survey Questions	Quantitative Analytical Technique	Interview Questions	Qualitative Analytical Technique
<b>vary across different school context and climate?</b>	the severity of <u>challenges</u> your school faces? <b>24.</b> Which best describes the overall <u>academic performance</u> level of students at your school? <b>25.</b> Which best describes the overall <u>behavior and citizenship</u> levels of students at your school?	- proportions - frequencies and frequency distributions - <i>measures of central tendency:</i> mode, median, mean - <i>variability:</i> range, variance, standard deviation <u>Hypothesis testing:</u> - t-tests - ANOVAs	<b>8.</b> What types of support are you expected to provide your students? <b>9.</b> How do you balance the academic and social-emotional demands of teaching students? <b>10.</b> How does the school support or hinder relationship-building with students?	
How does this vary across traditional and non-traditional (e.g., magnet, themed, or special program) schools?	Data retrieved from district website	<b>Descriptive statistics</b> - percentages - proportions - frequencies and frequency distributions		<b>Thematic Coding</b>
How does this vary across schools' availability of resources?	Data retrieved from <a href="http://www.ed-data.org/">http://www.ed-data.org/</a>	<b>Descriptive statistics</b> - percentages - proportions - frequencies and frequency distributions - <i>measures of central tendency:</i> mode, median, mean - <i>variability:</i> range, variance, standard deviation		<b>Thematic Coding</b>
How does this vary across school	Data retrieved from <a href="http://www.sarconline.org/Home">http://www.sarconline.org/Home</a>	<b>Descriptive statistics</b> - percentages	<b>18.</b> Have you noticed any patterns in your relationships with	<b>Thematic Coding</b>

# TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Research Questions	Survey Questions	Quantitative Analytical Technique	Interview Questions	Qualitative Analytical Technique
populations (socioeconomically disadvantaged; Hispanic/Latino; English learner)?	Rate the following items according to how your relationship building might differ based on student characteristics. <b>27.</b> Students of different races/ethnicities <b>28.</b> Students of different social class backgrounds	- proportions - frequencies and frequency distributions - <i>measures of central tendency:</i> mode, median, mean - <i>variability:</i> range, variance, standard deviation	students of different characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, class)? Please explain.	
How does this vary across political climate related to high-stakes testing?	Rate the following items according to how feasible each is. <b>21.</b> Balancing academic teaching demands with relationship building	<b>Descriptive statistics</b> - percentages - proportions - frequencies and frequency distributions - <i>measures of central tendency:</i> mode, median, mean - <i>variability:</i> range, variance, standard deviation	<b>9.</b> How do you balance the academic and social-emotional demands of teaching students?	<b>Thematic Coding</b>
How does this vary across school climate related to parent involvement?	<b>22.</b> Approximately how many parents are actively involved in their child's education?	<b>Descriptive statistics</b> - percentages - proportions - frequencies and frequency distributions - <i>measures of central tendency:</i> mode, median, mean - <i>variability:</i> range, variance, standard deviation		<b>Thematic Coding</b>
<b>3. How do these descriptions</b>	(Addressed in sub-questions)		<b>13.</b> If you have close, affectionate, and warm relationships with some	<b>Thematic Coding</b>



# TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Research Questions	Survey Questions	Quantitative Analytical Technique	Interview Questions	Qualitative Analytical Technique
vary across teachers and individual students?			of your students, describe examples of your interactions with them. (Pianta, STRS, Q1) <b>14.</b> If you have conflict in relationships with some of your students, describe examples of your interactions with them. (Pianta, STRS, Q2)	
How does this vary across teacher profiles (years of experience; gender; race/ethnicity; pedagogical approach; discipline style)?	<b>1.</b> Select the school you work at: <b>2.</b> What is your age? _____ ( <i>fill in the blank</i> ) <b>3.</b> Select your gender: <b>4.</b> Select your race/ethnicity: <b>5.</b> Which best describes the social class of the household you were raised in? <b>6.</b> Select the grade you currently teach: <b>7.</b> How many years have you been a teacher? <b>8.</b> How many years have you taught at this school?	<b>Descriptive statistics</b> - percentages - proportions - frequencies and frequency distributions - <i>measures of central tendency:</i> mode, median, mean - <i>variability:</i> range, variance, standard deviation	<b>1.</b> Tell me about your background and what led you into the teaching profession. <b>2.</b> How would you describe your teaching style or teaching philosophy? <b>11.</b> Do you notice your personal characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, class) making a difference in your relationships with students?	<b>Thematic Coding</b>
How does this vary across student grade levels (K-5)?	<b>6.</b> Select the grade you currently teach:	<b>Descriptive statistics</b> - percentages - proportions - frequencies and frequency distributions - <i>measures of central tendency:</i> mode, median, mean - <i>variability:</i> range, variance, standard deviation		

# TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Research Questions	Survey Questions	Quantitative Analytical Technique	Interview Questions	Qualitative Analytical Technique
How does this vary across students' gender?	Rate the following items according to how your relationship building might differ based on student characteristics. <b>26.</b> Male and female students	<b>Descriptive statistics</b> - percentages - proportions - frequencies and frequency distributions - <i>measures of central tendency</i> : mode, median, mean - <i>variability</i> : range, variance, standard deviation	<b>18.</b> Have you noticed any patterns in your relationships with students of different characteristics (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, class)? Please explain.	<b>Thematic Coding</b>
How does this vary across student profiles (based on academic, behavior, or social-emotional performance/needs)?	Rate the following items according to how your relationship building might differ based on student characteristics. <b>29.</b> Students of varying academic performance <b>30.</b> Students of varying behavior <b>31.</b> Students of varying social-emotional skills	<b>Descriptive statistics</b> - percentages - proportions - frequencies and frequency distributions - <i>measures of central tendency</i> : mode, median, mean - <i>variability</i> : range, variance, standard deviation	<b>15.</b> Think about a high achieving, well rounded student. Describe your relationship with this student and how you work with them. <b>16.</b> Think about a student with low academic achievement and poor work habits. Describe your relationship with this student and how you work with them. <b>17.</b> Think about a student with poor behavior or social-emotional skills. Describe your relationship with this student and how you work with them.	<b>Thematic Coding</b>

### **Appendix D: Recruitment Letter**

Dear Fellow Teacher,

My name is Anais Janoyan and I have been a teacher in this district for over 12 years. In recent years, I have also been pursuing higher education in the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University. I am writing to ask for your participation in a research project I am conducting.

The research study is titled “*K-5 Teacher Perceptions of Relationship Building with Students: A Case Study of One Southern California School District.*” The purpose of this study is to: (1) learn about teacher-student relationships from the perspectives of teachers, (2) learn about how teachers’ views could differ across individual, classroom, and school contexts, and ultimately (3) help schools and teachers with information on relationship building with students.

Participation includes completing a brief online survey with multiple-choice questions. You will have access to this survey through a link sent to your district email. If you would like to participate further, you will be invited to be interviewed by phone or video-chat. This interview will be scheduled at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will be audio recorded, transcribed, and you will have an opportunity to view the transcriptions and make any modifications to your answers if you like.

Once you agree to participate you will follow these steps:

1. Read and sign the online voluntary consent form. The consent form provides information about the study, your rights as a participant, and contact information for any questions or concerns you might have.

2. Complete the online survey. The survey will take 10 to 15 minutes to complete and includes questions about demographic background, teacher-student relationships, and scheduling preferences for interview *IF* you decide to participate further.
3. *OPTIONAL:* Participate in an interview by phone or video-chat. The interview will take 30 to 45 minutes to complete and includes questions about your perceptions of teacher-student relationships.

Participation in the study is voluntary, but you are strongly encouraged to participate. Your participation can help inform policy and benefit educational stakeholders including teachers, parents, families, and students. Very few studies include, let alone highlight, the views of teachers. Please let your voice be heard by giving an hour or less of your time to participate.

Please be assured that all of your information and responses will remain confidential, and files kept secured – more information on this is provided in the online voluntary consent form.

Please contact me by phone (818) 850-1737 or email [janoyan.anais@“district x”](mailto:janoyan.anais@districtx.org) or [anais.janoyan@cgu.edu](mailto:anais.janoyan@cgu.edu) with any questions or comments.

With gratitude,  
Anais Janoyan, PhD Candidate,  
Claremont Graduate University

Appendix E: Consent Form



**AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN *K-5 TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING***

***WITH STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY OF ONE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SCHOOL DISTRICT***

You are invited to complete a survey (online) and be interviewed (via phone or video-chat) for a research project. While volunteering will probably not benefit you directly, you will be helping to develop useful information and strategies for teachers. If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to complete the survey and participate in an interview which would require about a total of one-and-a-half hours of your time. Volunteering for this study does not involve risk beyond what a typical person would experience on an ordinary day. Since your involvement is entirely voluntary, you may withdraw at any time for any reason. Please continue reading for more information about the study.

**STUDY LEADERSHIP:** This research project is led by Anais Janoyan, a doctoral student of education at Claremont Graduate University and supervised by Dr. Thomas Luschei, a professor of education at Claremont Graduate University.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to learn more about K-5 teacher perceptions of relationship building with students across different schools in one district.

**ELIGIBILITY:** To be in this study, you must be a K-5 general education teacher working at a K-5, TK-5, Pre-K-5, or K-8 school in the “Case Study” Unified School District.

**PARTICIPATION:** During the study, you will be asked to complete a brief online survey that will take about 10 to 15 minutes to answer. You will be asked to provide demographic background information, answer multiple choice questions about teacher-student relationships, and provide your availability for the interview if you choose to participate further. The interview will take about 30 to 45 minutes and will be administered by phone or by video-chat using a platform such as Apple FaceTime, Google Meet, Skype, or Zoom. You will be asked questions such as “*From your perspective, how do relationships influence students’ experiences and outcomes?*” After the interview you will have the option to review the interview transcript to make any changes; if you choose this option the researcher will follow-up with you accordingly.

**RISKS OF PARTICIPATION:** The risks that you run by taking part in this study are minimal. The risks include loss of personal time (about one-and-a-half hours) and possible discomfort when answering questions.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION:** We **do not** expect the study to benefit you personally. This study will benefit the researcher(s) by helping me complete my graduate education and possibly publish study results in a scientific journal. This study will benefit the school district by

providing results and any recommendations. This study will also benefit the field of education by advancing knowledge about teacher-student relationships.

**COMPENSATION:** You will be directly compensated with an Amazon e-gift card for participating in this study. The e-gift card amount will be either \$5 for completing the survey, or \$15 for completing both the survey and interview. You will receive this gift by email.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may stop or withdraw from the study at any time. You may refuse to answer any particular question for any reason without it being held against you. Your decision whether or not to participate will have no effect on your current or future connection with anyone at CGU or the school district.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Your individual privacy will be protected in all papers, books, talks, posts, or stories resulting from this study. I may share the data I collect for future research or with other researchers, but I will not reveal your identity with it. In order to protect the confidentiality of your responses, I will secure data files with password protection and use pseudonyms. Audio/video recordings will be used to create type-written transcripts of the responses. After the recordings have been transcribed, coded, and summarized, they will be erased in order to protect participant privacy.

**FURTHER INFORMATION:** If you have any questions or would like additional information about this study, please contact Anais Janoyan by phone at (818) 850-1737 or by email at either [anais.janoyan@cgu.edu](mailto:anais.janoyan@cgu.edu) or [janoyan.anais@\"district x.\"](mailto:janoyan.anais@\) You may also contact Thomas Luschei at [thomas.luschei@cgu.edu](mailto:thomas.luschei@cgu.edu). The CGU Institutional Review Board has certified this project as exempt. *\"School District x\"* has approved this project. If you have any ethical concerns about this project or about your rights as a human subject in research, you may contact the CGU IRB at (909) 607-9406 or at [irb@cgu.edu](mailto:irb@cgu.edu). You may print and keep a copy of this consent form.

**CONSENT:** Your online checkbox signal below means that you understand the information on this form, that someone has answered any and all questions you may have about this study, and you voluntarily agree to participate in it.

# TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

## Appendix F: School Sites – School Profiles, Demographics, & Trends

School  School Programs	Student Population  Teacher Population  Grade Levels  Title I	Student Race/Ethnicity Demographics (percent of total enrollment)	Student SES and EL Demographics (percent of total enrollment)
<b>School D</b>  Arts Magnet  French Dual Language Immersion  College and Career-Bound Culture	275 students  ~ 15 teachers  PreK-5  Title I - yes	Black or African American 27.5% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.0% Asian 0.0% Filipino 0.4% Hispanic or Latino 58.3% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 0.0% White 10.5% Two or More Races 3.2% Other 0.1%  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - yes</i>	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 71.7% English Learners 18.2%       <i>Majority low SES - yes 25.0% or more ELs - no</i>
<b>School C</b>  Traditional	~595 students  ~ 18 teachers  K-5  Title I - yes	Black or African American 11.3% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.3% Asian 3.9% Filipino 3.2% Hispanic or Latino 40.8% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 0.2% White 33.4 % Two or More Races 6.4% Other 0.5%  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - no</i>	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 38.3% English Learners 7.1%       <i>Majority low SES - no 25.0% or more ELs - no</i>
<b>School J</b>  Mandarin Dual Language Immersion  STEAM enrichment instruction	500 students  ~ 23 teachers  PreK-5  Title I - no	Black or African American 7.8% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.0% Asian 41.1% Filipino 2.1% Hispanic or Latino 16.8% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 0.6% White 12.4% Two or More Races 18.7% Other 0.5%  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - no</i>	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 22.0% English Learners 5.7%       <i>Majority low SES - no 25.0% or more ELs - no</i>
<b>School E</b>  Math / Science / Technology Academy	~592 students  ~ 27 teachers  K-5  Title I – yes	Black or African American 10.1% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.7% Asian 12.8% Filipino 4.4% Hispanic or Latino 41.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 0.3% White 25.5% Two or More Races 4.9% Other 0.1%  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - no</i>	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 44.6% English Learners 8.6%       <i>Majority low SES – no 25.0% or more ELs - no</i>
<b>School F</b>  Spanish Dual Language Immersion  Science, Technology,	630 students  ~ 28 teachers  PreK-5  Title I - yes	Black or African American 11.9% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.3% Asian 0.9% Filipino 1.2% Hispanic or Latino 70.6% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 0.2% White 13.3% Two or More Races 1.4%	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 70.9% English Learners 26.4%

# TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Engineering, Mathematics		Other 0.2%  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - yes</i>	<i>Majority low SES - yes</i> <i>25.0% or more ELs - yes</i>
<b>School K</b>  Traditional	515 students  ~ 18 teachers  Pre-K; TK -5  Title I - yes	Black or African American 16.8% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.2% Asian 1.0% Filipino 2.9% Hispanic or Latino 67.4% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 0.0% White 8.8% Two or More Races 2.0% Other 0.9%  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - yes</i>	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 80.3% English Learners 26.4%          <i>Majority low SES - yes</i> <i>25.0% or more ELs - yes</i>
<b>School B</b>  Traditional  AVID – college going culture	450 students  ~ 19 teachers  PreK, TK, K-5  Title I - yes	Black or African American 4.5% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.0% Asian 0.2% Filipino 1.3% Hispanic or Latino 92.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 0.0% White 1.8% Two or More Races% Other 0.0%  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - yes</i>	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 90.4% English Learners 48.3%          <i>Majority low SES - yes</i> <i>25.0% or more ELs - yes</i>
<b>School G</b>  Traditional	~ 700 students K-6  ~ 12 teachers  <i>K-8 school</i>  Title I - yes	Black or African American 17.0% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.4% Asian 10.0% Filipino 3.1% Hispanic or Latino 52.4% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 0.0% White 13.7% Two or More Races 2.4% Other 1.0%  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - yes</i>	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 65.3% English Learners 15.7%          <i>Majority low SES - yes</i> <i>25.0% or more ELs - no</i>
<b>School L*</b>  Traditional	~ 415 students  ~ 14 teachers  K-5  Title I - yes	Black or African American 22.5% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.2% Asian 2.7% Filipino 2.7% Hispanic or Latino 52.8% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 0.0% White 13.8% Two or More Races 4.8% Other 0.5%  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - yes</i>	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 66.1% English Learners 18.2%          <i>Majority low SES - yes</i> <i>25.0% or more ELs – no</i>
<b>School M*</b>  Spanish Dual Language Immersion	~ 449  ~ 17 teachers  Pre-K -5  Title I – yes	Black or African American 6.0% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.2% Asian 2.9 % Filipino 1.1% Hispanic or Latino 64.6% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 0.0% White 23.2% Two or More Races 1.6% Other 0.4%  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - yes</i>	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 33.0% English Learners 7.1%          <i>Majority low SES – no</i> <i>25.0% or more ELs - no</i>
<b>School A</b>  Traditional	694 students  ~ 27 teachers  Pre-K - 5	Black or African American 4.3% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.0% Asian 7.9% Filipino 1.3% Hispanic or Latino 24.4% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 0.1% White 58.5%	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 19.6% English Learners 4.6%



# TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

	Title I - No	Two or More Races 2.8% Other 0.7%  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - no</i>	<i>Majority low SES - no</i> <i>25.0% or more ELs - no</i>
<b>School N*</b>  Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) Magnet	620 students  ~ 18 teachers  PreK, TK-5  Title I - yes	Black or African American 11.2% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.0% Asian 0.4% Filipino 1.4% Hispanic or Latino 85.5% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 0.0% White 0.8% Two or More Races 0.8% Other 0.1%  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - yes</i>	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 87.2% English Learners 35.8%          <i>Majority low SES - yes</i> <i>25.0% or more ELs - yes</i>
<b>School H</b>  Traditional	~ 395 students  ~ 13 teachers  K-5  Title I - yes	Black or African American 6.8% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.8% Asian 2.0 % Filipino 1.5% Hispanic or Latino 38.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 2.3% White 45.8% Two or More Races 1.3% Other 1.3% Student Group (Other)  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - no</i>	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 64.8% English Learners 15.9%          <i>Majority low SES - yes</i> <i>25.0% or more ELs - no</i>
<b>School I</b>  International Baccalaureate (IB)	689 students  ~ 26 teachers  Pre-K, TK -5  Title I - yes	Black or African American 7.5% American Indian or Alaska Native 0.3% Asian 4.8 % Filipino 2.0% Hispanic or Latino 69.8% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander% White 12.3 % Two or More Races 3.0% Other 0.3%  <i>Majority Hispanic/Latino - yes</i>	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged 68.1% English Learners 22.7%          <i>Majority low SES - yes</i> <i>25.0% or more ELs - no</i>

*Note:* \* School did not have any interview participants.

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transition=yes&:display\_static\_image=no&:display\_spinner=no&:display\_overlay=yes&  
:display\_count=yes&:loadOrderID=0

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