Teachers Make a Difference: The Long-Term Influence of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

By

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Teachers Make a Difference: The Long-Term Influence of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

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Abstract

Effective teachers are defined and evaluated based on their instructional practices and student achievement outcomes, but what is undeniably missing from these evaluations is the teacher's ability to connect and form strong, positive relationships with students. This, along with their instructional practices, is what truly makes them an effective teacher, not only resulting in academic achievement, but long-term outcomes for a student's life. Growing research supports the notion that social and emotional learning, including positive connections, has its rightful place in the classroom and the importance of it can no longer be ignored.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the long-term impacts of a strong, positive teacher-student relationship. The study was informed through former students who credit a teacher with positively affecting long-term outcomes in their lives that goes beyond academic performance and school experience. The study analyzed the specific qualities of the teacher that had lasting impacts on students, the attributes of that strong, positive connection, the sustained benefits of that relationship, and how that relationship and ultimately the teacher, impacted the student's life long-term.

This study sought to shed light on the influence of a positive teacher-student relationship on a student's life *beyond* school using former students' memories and the critical implications these strong, positive relationships can have for a student long-term. This study also sought to critique how current school systems and administrators evaluate teachers and provide evidence that might shed light on alternative ways to measure teacher effectiveness by incorporating positive teacher-student relationships into comprehensive teacher evaluations through student surveys and relationship rating scales. This study also has the potential to inform policy makers, administrators, and college preparatory programs on the importance of not only emphasizing

social and emotional learning, but also in training teachers *how* to form strong, positive relationships with students, *why* they are so critical for a student's social, emotional, and academic development, and just how far-reaching and impactful that relationship can be in the life of the student long-term.

By examining the personal narratives of former students, the study revealed that there is a relational progression of a positive teacher-student relationship that ultimately leads to long-term impacts well beyond their school years. This study was able to uncover the type of teacher it takes to form strong connections with students, the type of relationship that is developed and maintained, and the benefits students experience from having that positive relationship; all of which ultimately leads to impactful and long-term influences in their adult lives. Relationships do matter and do have the ability to influence a student's college, career, personal well-being, self-actualization, and life-long skills.

This study portrayed a natural progression in a chain of events that began with a specific type of teacher who established a strong, positive influential relationship with a student that produced positive outcomes personally and academically, which led to long term outcomes with lasting impacts for the student. The results of this study reveal that positive teacher-student relationships have not only short-term benefits for students while they are in school, but arguably more important, long-term advantages that impact students well into their adult lives resulting in being happier, healthier, and more contributing members of society.

Acknowledgements and Dedication

I sit here today in awe of how I ever ended up here. This has been my dream and now that it is so close to becoming a reality, I am completely overwhelmed with gratitude and emotion. I have always wanted to be an educator and school has always been my passion. As a little girl, I would sit in my room, line up my stuffed animals, and play school for hours, dreaming of the day when I would have my own classroom. When that became a reality, I knew I had found my purpose and calling in life. But as I taught, new dreams began to grow inside of me. Dreams to be a leader in education and to help inspire change. It was those dreams that led me to KU and to this specific doctoral program.

First of all, I want to thank my Lord and Savior. My faith is my foundation. There have been countless times during this process that were only made possible because they were orchestrated by him. When my hope was failing, when I didn't think I could do anymore, or when I needed divine intervention, I would pray, and God would answer. He always showed up and has blessed this journey from beginning to end. When I miscarried and we lost our baby last fall, I was overwhelmed with school and drowning at work; the darkness was all-consuming. I had to wake up every morning and choose to pray, choose to worship and choose to believe that light and love always wins and it will never be extinguished.

Second of all, I want to thank my family. My parents have made countless sacrifices and have worked so hard on my behalf. They are the only reason that I have the opportunities that I have today. They are why I am who I am. My doctorate is a result of them challenging and pushing me to pursue this dream. They believed in me, when I did not even believe in myself.

I would also not be where I am today without my incredible husband, Brendan. He has been my rock, my comforter, my encourager, my biggest fan and I am forever grateful for him. My dreams were his dreams and he never once let me give up on them and did everything in his power to make them come true. To my boys, Brooks and Beau, I hope that you know how much your mommy loves you. Sometimes the guilt I felt as a mother for not being able to spend time with you because I was working on my schoolwork or writing this dissertation has often consumed me. But I hope that I was able to model the importance of hard work and never giving up on your dreams. I will do everything in my power to make your dreams a reality, just as my parents and your daddy have done for me.

Finally, I would like to thank my professors, mentors, and classmates. I am incredibly grateful for my advisor, Dr. DeLuca. His support was indescribable. He went above and beyond and was fully invested in my completion and success in this program. This dissertation is a product of his incredible support, guidance, and feedback. Thank you to my other professors for challenging my thinking and being a part of my growth, both personally and professionally. Thank you to my fellow classmates, for the connections I've made and the friendships that I know will last long after this journey is over. They were my tribe; the ones who fully understood what I was going through and encouraged me to keep fighting!

There was no way that I could have ever done this on my own. So, when I walk across the stage and am hooded as, Dr. Kristen Leaming, I want to make it abundantly clear that, *I* did not do this...***WE*** did this! Thank you from the bottom of my heart to the countless people who made this moment and dream a reality! I am humbled, grateful, and blessed for the ones who made it all possible! Thank you is not enough!

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Chapter One

Introduction

On one of his blog posts, successful entrepreneur and leading philanthropist, Bill Gates, credited Mrs. Caffiere, his librarian and teacher for guiding him to become the person he is today. "I should give some credit to the dedicated librarian and teacher who helped me find my strengths at nine years old. It's remarkable how much power one good person can have in shaping the life of a child" (Gates, 2016). Oprah Winfrey shared that her life was turned around the moment her fourth grade teacher believed in her and ignited a love of learning. "I always, because of you, felt I could take on the world. You did exactly what teachers are supposed to do, they create a spark for learning that lives with you from then on," Oprah declared to her teacher, Mrs. Duncan, when she was a surprise honored guest on her show. "It's why I have a talk show today," Oprah stated as she publicly thanked her beloved teacher on national television in 1989 ("The Teachers Who Changed Oprah's Life," 1989). Actor, Antwone Fisher, spent his childhood in and out of foster homes and finally found his first trusting relationship in his elementary school teacher. "Brenda Profitt was my elementary school teacher. She was the first adult I ever trusted. I think that being with her for three years made all the difference." He claims that she instilled trust and confidence in him and her impact was so meaningful that she made him who he is today ("Who Mentored Antwone Fisher?," 2018).

Research Context and Questions

While these examples come from well-known people, they are not the only adults who can identify a specific teacher who changed their life and they credit that teacher for who they are today. People around the world, regardless of background, can recall the impact an individual teacher had on their lives and frequently attribute positive outcomes to a teacher with whom they had a positive, caring, and reciprocal relationship. Whether they are male, female or

non-binary, black or white, rich or poor, many can fondly recall a teacher who believed in them, cared for them, respected them and challenged them to become more than they ever thought they could be. This study was designed to explore these relationships and guided by four research questions:

1) *What kind of teacher is likely to make a lasting impact?*

2) *What attributes are related to a strong positive teacher-student relationship?*

3) *What are the sustained benefits of a strong positive teacher-student relationship?*

4) *What are the long-term, sustained impacts of a positive teacher-student relationship?*

Intent of this Study

This qualitative study was designed to interview adults who identified a positive teacher relationship impacted their life and who attributed selected positive outcomes in their lives back to their influential teacher. The intent of the study was to explore how a caring teacher who establishes and maintains a positive, reciprocal relationship with students can have a profound and lifelong difference in the individual lives of those same students.

Overview of Research

For this study, I am defining a *positive teacher-student relationship* as a natural, caring relationship that is authentic, reciprocal, and established when students feel respected, valued, heard, and understood (Aultman, Williams-Johnson, & Schutz, 2009; Davis, 2003; Kohli, 1995; Newberry, 2010; Noddings, 1995). Multiple studies support the concept that positive teacher-student relationships are a central component in successful teaching and learning (Aultman et al., 2009) and have a tremendous impact on student engagement, motivation, achievement, academic performance, and success in other domains (Newberry, 2010; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). The evidence suggests that the more supportive teachers are in their relationships with students,

the more comfortable and engaged students are in the classroom environment (Reeve, 2006).

Growing research continues to support that teacher relationships make a unique contribution to children's social and cognitive development from childhood through adolescence (Davis, 2003). Establishing a positive teacher relationship at an early age is a long-term trajectory for a student's future academic and behavioral achievement (B. Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

Research Gap

While the literature describes various definitions, criteria, frameworks, and models for what constitutes an effective teacher, the commonality among most is that effective teachers are characterized by their instructional practices, teacher skill-base/knowledge, and classroom environment (Markley, 2004). In literature, effective teachers are defined as teachers whose students experience high academic growth (Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). This short-term student growth typically is being quantified through standardized testing and Value Added Measures (VAM), a recent term for what was previously described as achievement and accountability (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2011; Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2012; Marzano & Toth, 2013).

Aside from indirect references to positive classroom environment, minimal research links the characteristics of an effective teacher to positive teacher-student relationships, despite overwhelming literature on the powerful outcomes for students who have positive relationships with teachers (F. A. Korthagen, 2004; Markley, 2004; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011; Stronge et al., 2011). More alarming is the narrowing focus on the definition of effective teaching outcomes being primarily focused on test scores. Viewing teacher effectiveness through this isolated lens frequently leads school districts and policy makers to lose sight of the real difference a teacher can make through their ability to connect and establish positive relationships with their students. Even though positive relationships can be difficult to measure,

there are research-based measurement tools available that would make it possible for school districts to use and incorporate these measures into teacher evaluation systems as another source of data to identify effective teachers in a relational manner (La Paro, 2003; Pianta, 1993).

This present gap in literature raises many questions in the field of education, especially when identifying the characteristics of an effective teacher, as well as the teacher evaluation tools that only focus on students' academic outcomes (i.e., test scores). If student achievement is only measured during school, is the focus in education limited to only the short-term outcomes that an effective teacher can have on a student? Does the educational system understand and recognize the profound impact teacher relationships can have on students' lives beyond school? To what extent might a positive, caring relationship with students be considered a strong contributing factor to how and why a teacher is effective? Are these measures limiting the true effectiveness and influence of a teacher?

The Goal of this Study

The goal of this study was to shed light on the influence of a positive teacher-student relationship on a student's life *beyond* school using former students' memories of that relationship. Another goal of the study was to redefine what currently constitutes an effective teacher and explore alternative ways to measure teacher effectiveness. While logistically challenging, one potential outcome of this research is to provide insights for policy makers and school administrators regarding teacher evaluations, and possibly consider ways to incorporate long-term impacts into comprehensive teacher evaluations. Finally, this study sought to inform policy makers, school administrators, and college preparatory programs to include teacher training in social and emotional learning and the relational aspects of teaching practices.

Chapter Two will provide a review of the current knowledge in literature on positive teacher-student relationships and the conceptual framework of this study.

Chapter Two

Review of the Current Knowledge in the Literature

This chapter is organized around four sections that provide a framework for understanding the aspects of teacher-student relationships. The first section defines positive teacher-student relationships and their impact on student outcomes. Within this section, I describe how the benefits and differences of a positive teacher-student relationship can have within student subgroups such as gender, race, and low socioeconomic status. The second section explores the challenges of a teacher-student relationship and various boundaries necessary to maintain a professional relationship with students. It goes on further to describe the dilemmas teachers face in establishing and maintaining relationships with students such as self-disclosure, physical touch, social media, and favoritism. The third section provides a brief overview of literature regarding characteristics of effective teachers and the current criterion measures being used to evaluate a teacher. The fourth and final section describes this study's conceptual framework, which is based on Robert C. Pianta's *Affordance Value* grounded in the *Attachment Theory* (Pianta, 1999).

Defining Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

A positive teacher-student relationship (PTSR) is a natural, caring relationship that is authentic, reciprocal, and established when students feel respected, valued, heard, and understood (Aultman et al., 2009; Davis, 2003; Newberry, 2010). Research has identified that if a student has a strong, authentic relationship with a teacher in which they feel valued and engaged, they will in turn have positive outcomes in school (Newberry, 2010). The primary research question of this study was designed to explore positive outcomes for students *beyond* school, into adulthood, in order to understand the magnitude a positive relationship with a teacher might have in the life of a student. The additional research questions explored the type

of teacher that builds strong student relationships, the attributes of that relationship, the sustained benefits from having that relationship in both the context in school and *beyond* school.

How to Build and Maintain a Positive Teacher-Student Relationship

Positive teacher-student relationships do not just happen, they are intentionally and purposefully built and sustained by the teacher and the student. Teachers have to believe in the value of relationships in order to make authentic and lasting connections with their students. Therefore, caring for students in the form of a positive relationship involves teachers who are committed, intimate, and passionate in their teaching and with their students within their professional boundaries (Goldstein, 2002). Teachers must also find personal connections and be vulnerable (within appropriate contexts) to share their own lives with students. There is evolving research and associated literature suggesting that when teachers reveal personal aspects of their lives, beliefs, and history to students, this sharing can be very effective (Warnick, Bitters, Falk, & Kim, 2016). By doing so, it has the potential to break down walls with students, to inspire them, motivate them, and allow them to fully connect with their teacher (Warnick et al., 2016). For the sake of authenticity, teachers need to make it clear that they are interested in their students as individuals in order to create the possibility of a closer, more personal connection (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). Therefore, teachers should have an interpersonal knowledge of their students and be aware of the their backgrounds, family life, viewpoints, emotionality and personality in order to successfully navigate how to make and maintain connections with them (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008). Student engagement is associated with teacher connections and relationships (Lopez, 2014). To fully engage students, teachers can find ways to bring students in by drawing on their personal interests (Aultman et al., 2009).

Benefits of a Positive Teacher-Student Relationship

The benefits that a positive teacher relationship can have for a student are astounding in that they are the basis for which meaningful and powerful learning can take place. Positive teacher-student relationships are a central component in successful teaching and learning (Aultman et al., 2009) and have been shown to have a tremendous, positive impact on student achievement, academic performance, and success in other domains such as social and emotional well-being (Newberry, 2010). The more supportive teachers are in student relationships, the more comfortable and engaged students tend to be in the classroom (Reeve, 2006). Growing research continues to support the concept that teacher-student relationships make a unique contribution to children's social and cognitive development from childhood through adolescence (Davis, 2003). Positive teacher-student relationships are associated with positive student outcomes such as increase in participation, student satisfaction, dropout prevention, self-efficacy/mental health, positive motivation, social connection/skills, reduction in student behavior and increase in attendance (Cornelius-White & Cornelius-White, 2007). Positive teacher-student relationships are influential, not only in regards to student achievement, but also in creating the potential for positive, long-term impacts on a student's life beyond school into adulthood (F. A. J. Korthagen, Attema-Noordewier, & Zwart, 2014).

The Benefits of a Positive Teacher-Student Relationship for Subgroups

While a positive teacher-student relationship can benefit all students, these personal connections may be more impactful and beneficial for specific subgroups.

Gender. Gender can play a significant role in students' social relationships, especially with their teachers (Hughes & Chen, 2011). Research has shown that girls are more likely than boys to have positive, reciprocal relationships with teachers that are both high in support and low in conflict for many reasons (Hughes & Chen, 2011). The first reason may be that

schoolteachers are predominately female creating a gender imbalance amongst teachers and students. "The poorer relationship quality of boys with teachers is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a broader picture of a gender imbalance in schooling" (Spilt, Koomen, & Jak, 2012, p. 364). Concerns about this gender imbalance are rising as behaviorally challenging students (predominately male) tend to have poor relationships with teachers, exacerbating the risk of school failure for boys (Doumen, Koomen, Buyse, Wouters, & Verschueren, 2012; Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Spilt et al., 2012; Stipek & Miles, 2008). Thus, compared to girls, boys are believed to not only be more hindered by poor relationships with teachers, but also to profit the most from those positive and supportive teacher relationships (Spilt et al., 2012). With greater school success, girls report higher levels of perceived academic competence than boys and not only feel connected, but also successful (Marsh, 1989; Saunders, Davis, Williams, & Williams, 2004). Finally, girls have been found to place a higher value on social relationships than boys, creating more of a reciprocal relationship with teachers, with those relationships becoming a key factor in their school success (Crick, Ostrov, & Kawabata, 2007; Spilt et al., 2012).

Minority or Low Socioeconomic Status. Positive teacher-student relationships are particularly important for minority or low socioeconomic students. Growing evidence suggests that minority and low income students, as well as students with low readiness skills, may benefit more from quality, positive social relationships within a classroom, including that of a teacher (Baker, 2006; Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; B. K. Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Hughes & Chen, 2011; Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003). Typically, however, students with these characteristics are least likely to experience an elementary classroom with a positive social-emotional climate due to compounding factors that are prevalent in these challenging environments (Hughes & Chen, 2011; Pianta, Belsky, Houts, & Morrison, 2007). Therefore, students who have low socioeconomic status or low readiness skills that may also experience

conflict and negative interactions with teachers, are more likely to drop out of school, be retained, experience peer rejection, and increase externalizing behaviors resulting in school discipline (Hughes & Chen, 2011; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2005) demonstrating that a positive relationship with teachers is incredibly important.

Age. Although a positive teacher-student relationship is impactful for students of all ages and stages of emotional growth, positive relationships for children in their early elementary years are especially important for long-term adjustment and academic success (Hughes & Chen, 2011). The trajectory of academic and behavioral performance for older students is influenced by a young child's ability to form and maintain the skills and strategies necessary in order to successfully navigate social environments and establish positive relationships during their early school years (Entwisle & Hayduk, 1988; B. Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997; Pianta et al., 1995). Young children who are able to have successful and positive social interactions, especially with their teachers, not only have a more productive start to their school experience, but continue to benefit from their social knowledge and experiences, creating more behavioral and academic success as they progress throughout elementary and middle school (B. Hamre & Pianta, 2001). This early relationship with their teacher mimics a positive parent-child relationship, which in turn allows the student to feel safe, cared for, and valued in the school setting and the benefits of establishing that early relationship have long-term implications for the student throughout their school career (B. Hamre & Pianta, 2001). If students begin their school experience engaged in negative relationships, it can have lasting impacts on their academic outcomes, as well. In a seven-year longitudinal study, Hamre and Pianta (2001), found that negative teacher-student conflict or dependency in kindergarten was associated with negative behavioral and academic outcomes in school, seven years later (B. Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

Positive relationships with teachers have also been found to decrease as students get older and progress through school. According to the research findings of the *Gallup's State of America's Report*, student engagement starts off relatively high in elementary school but declines significantly as students progress throughout middle and high school (Lopez, 2014). Based on the survey results, this reduction in student engagement was also correlated to a reduction in the students' overall well-being (Lopez, 2014). The research suggests that the decrease in student engagement and well-being is correlated with the decrease in relational connections with teachers as they get older. However, according to researcher Shane Lopez, it is never too late for high school students to have a positive relationship with a teacher who can instill hope and be a turning point (Lopez, 2014). "Having one teacher who instills excitement about the future can buffer students from hopelessness" (Lopez, 2014). As a result, no matter the age, the more connected students are in the classroom with their teachers and peers, the more engaged and successful they will be.

The Challenge of Teacher-Student Relationships

Most educators who aspire to have a positive relationship with their students face difficult decisions about how to conduct and maintain these personal connections and draw the necessary boundaries in order to keep them professional (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). The lack of clear policies or guidelines regarding student relationships leave teachers ultimately responsible for interpreting what is appropriate (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). This causes teachers to struggle finding a positive balance and often creates varied perspectives in what is and is not acceptable. Through this continuous and ongoing process, teachers can become confused, emotionally taxed, or overwhelmed with how to navigate and maintain appropriate relationships with students (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). Many issues can arise when teacher-student relationships are established and maintained. How much personal information should a

teacher divulge to their students? Can a teacher appropriately touch a student (e.g. a hug, pat on

the shoulder, comfort)? Should a teacher befriend a student on social media? Does their close

relationship with a student appear to be favoritism to others or affect their ability to grade fairly?

The following sections explore some of these issues.

      Boundaries with Self-Disclosure. Having a personal connection with students allows

the students to feel valued, respected, and understood by a respected adult and through a

reciprocal relationship, where teachers also share parts of their lives with their students, creates a

closer connection and bond (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013; Warnick et al., 2016). However,

sharing too much personal information may be interpreted as crossing a professional boundary.

Students can find this information difficult to process and are sometimes neither interested nor

equipped to handle what a teacher shares with them (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). A teacher

revealing to his student he is getting a divorce because his wife cheated on him or a teacher

telling their student they cannot pay their bills are examples of crossing the line. The same goes

for when seeking information regarding the students' personal lives. Teachers should ask more

general questions, rather than invasive ones that could make students feel uncomfortable and

cause their motives to be questioned (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). For example, asking about

how they did in their baseball tournament over the weekend would be acceptable, but asking

them why they broke up with their boyfriend would be unacceptable. In other words, students

stated that they actually prefer their teachers to act like caring, professional adults, rather than

their friend (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013).

      Boundaries with Physical Touch. Touching such as a hug, high five, or pat on the back

can be used as a tool to create a warm, caring classroom environment where students feel

understood and cared for (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008). Teachers can come into physical

contact with students to comfort them, celebrate with them, or help them understand something.

Teachers who use physical touch with students appropriately would describe themselves as nurturing and comforting (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008). However, touching students in many teaching contexts is either implicitly discouraged or explicitly prohibited by school district policies because touch is often equated to affection and affection frequently is interpreted as inappropriate or sexual in nature (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008). Therefore, physical touch can be problematic. It can make students feel uncomfortable when they feel teachers have used physical touch in inappropriate ways. A hand that stays too long on a students' leg, an unsolicited hug from a teacher of the opposite sex, or rubbing a student's back while they work, are all examples of how a student could be uncomfortable or the teacher has crossed a boundary and is now entering sexual harassment or sexual abuse (Shakeshaft, 2013).

What makes physical touch even more difficult are the unclear instances of acceptable and unacceptable touch. Certain parameters such as gender, age, or activity deem touch to be completely acceptable and other instances where it is not appropriate at all. A female kindergarten teacher hugging a little boy in her classroom is more conventional than a female high school teacher hugging a male student in her class. Also, teachers can be private or become defensive about touching students due to the fact that it is often seen as off-limits in education (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008). There are typically no candid school-wide conversations about relationships or appropriate interactions with students, therefore, teachers fear what other colleagues, administrators, or parents will perceive about them if they fully disclosed why or how often they initiate or participate in physical contact with students (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013).

Boundaries with Social Media. Social media has brought teachers and students together in unparalleled ways. Teachers can post assignments, share links to resources, are readily available for online discussions or questions on assignments, and can even send

reminders on project due dates. It has created a new platform for teaching and reaching students in more personal ways. In some instances, it has been said that students can establish a connection with a teacher if they see from social media sites that they share the same interest in music, enjoy similar hobbies, or have read the same book. Also, through social networking, teachers are able to reconnect with past students. Former students can share personal information with the teachers and have the opportunity to share the impact that teacher had on them or the difference they made in their life. This can be a way that teachers find continued meaning in teaching, knowing that they have had lasting impacts on students' lives (Warnick et al., 2016). Nevertheless, social media can also be very challenging. These new communication modes created an influx of informal interactions among teachers and students that blur boundaries between what should be professional and private, what is formal and informal, and what is meant for home and school (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). Actions on social media could end up costing a teacher their job. This could occur when teachers: make statements that are taken to reflect badly on their professional judgment as teachers, reveal that they are participating in illegal or reckless activities, give uncomfortable or unwanted attention to students, or engage in activities that are not necessarily illegal, but go against the community norms that create the teacher to no longer be perceived as a positive example to students (Warnick et al., 2016). Teachers do not have the luxury of freely posting any and all activities, thoughts, opinions, or pictures as they are a representative of their school, community, and profession (Warnick et al., 2016).

Boundaries with Favoritism. Like all human relationships, teachers may connect on a deeper level with certain students. Students, such as those with disabilities, difficult home lives, or challenging behaviors may need more attention or deeper connections with a teacher than others (Newberry, 2010). Students also develop bonds with teachers on a more personal level

when they share similar interests or interact outside of the classroom during activities such as drama, music, sports, or debate (Warnick et al., 2016). Unknowingly, however, teachers can give more positive attention to cooperative students or students they favor (Newberry, 2010). Teachers' personal interpretations of student behavior influences the way they may interact, which results in altering their behaviors towards different students. Even if they do not intend to, teachers can interact and respond to students differently creating noticeable separations in student relationships (Newberry, 2010). Students desire their teachers to be fair to all students, even if they are closer to some students than others. Therefore, teachers must demonstrate an understanding that despite their personal feelings of fondness of specific students, others must see and feel that they are all treated with the same respect and fairness (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). Displaying favoritism also creates unwanted stress on students when they are being given extra attention. It can create negative responses from their peers for favored teacher behaviors towards them (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). Teachers must also be intentional and proactive (e.g., such as using a rubric or specific criteria to grade) in order to minimize the subjectivity of student relationships to influence the way they grade (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013).

Effective Teachers

The Evolution of an Effective Teacher. Teachers have always been accountable for student outcomes. The student outcomes themselves are what have changed over time (Tyack, 1982). At the inception of schooling during the Aristocracy of Character Era from1820-1890, the goal of education was to produce moral, patriotic citizens (Tyack, 1982). Therefore, teacher accountability was based upon the ability to produce students with strong character, manners, virtue and the ability to work hard and know their rightful place in society (Tyack, 1982). Once the educational system was established the "Schooling by Design in a Corporate Society, 1890-1954" Era shifted the focus into making the educational system more professional, credible,

structured, and business-like (Tyack, 1982). The educational system would now consist of

highly trained and skilled professionals (teachers and administrators) to ensure academic trust

(Tyack, 1982). States increased regulations on teacher education, licensing, and even school

curriculums. Education became a compulsory, tax-paying entity, and the public now had more

of a say in how it was being ran (Tyack, 1982). The Industrial Revolution brought an emphasis

on work skills and producing students to be more equipped for the work force. Teacher

accountability then shifted from producing moral citizens to hirable employees (Tyack, 1982).

Up until the 1960's school systems were under local control through their states and local

districts. However, with the sweep of the Civil Rights Era and rising momentum of other social

movements, there was a shift in institutional control over schooling (Tyack, 1982). The tug-of-

war between state and federal power and control over educational policies ignited and has never

stopped since (Mehta, 2013). The initial foothold for federal control came with the passing of

the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to improve the educational equity for all

students (Tyack, 1982). The inception of federal accountability began as districts and states that

received federal funding were required to prove they were working to meet the needs of the

students and provide a quality education for all (Mehta, 2013). Beyond this point, federal

government began to increase its role in shaping the policies, structures, and technical core of all

public schools through reforms and mandates tied to federal funding (Mehta, 2013).

The Accountability Era's spark ignited in 1983 when the National Commission of

Excellence in Education released, *A Nation at Risk,* highlighting the mediocracy of American

education and its economic and global implications (Mehta, 2015). The report raised national

awareness to the fact that American schools were underperforming and in dire need of reform.

According to (Mehta, 2015), *A Nation at Risk,* ignited "a crisis so far-reaching in its impact that

it still governs the way we think about public education 30 years later" (p. 20). The wave of past

and current state and federal accountability policies are all attributable to this one, single report arguing that schools, not society, should be more accountable for higher student performance and that performance should be measured by external testing (Mehta, 2015).

States were the first to take initiative to create systematic change regarding accountability and redefine teacher effectiveness. The Standards-Based Reform Movement in the 1980s and 1990s set cohesive standards for what students should be expected to do, established assessments to measure progress, and held schools and teachers accountable for progress towards these goals (Mehta, 2013). The Standards-Based Reform Movement became the very template the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 would use to dictate a level of accountability by requiring 100 percent proficiency for all schools and tied federal funding to those expectations (Mehta, 2013). NCLB shifted the political views and positions of many and created an impenetrable accountability political paradigm that continues to dominate educational expectations with every new policy and initiative enacted ever since (Mehta, 2013). The emphasis remains on effective teachers producing students with high academic achievement.

Effective Teacher Criteria. If positive teacher-student relationships have such strong correlations to student well-being and achievement, it might lead one to believe that this would be a strong characteristic in defining an "effective teacher." However, teacher-student relationships are surprisingly absent from effective teacher literature. Instead, literature reveals various definitions, criteria, frameworks, and models for what constitutes an effective teacher, with commonalities in their instructional practices, teacher skill-base/knowledge, and classroom environment (Markley, 2004). Teacher effectiveness is attributed to and emphasis is placed on academic outcomes (i.e., test scores) as effective teachers are defined as having students who experience high academic growth (Stronge et al., 2011). Effective teaching practices (e.g., instructional delivery, student assessment, positive learning environments, and personal qualities

of the teachers themselves) have a measurable impact on student achievement or standardized test scores (Stronge et al., 2011). Research goes so far as to attribute teacher effectiveness as being the single biggest contributor to student success, outweighing all other factors, such as class size, socioeconomic status, and gender (Sanders & Horn, 1994; Wenglinsky, 2004). However, outside of the reference to a positive learning environment, the explicitness and emphasis on the value of a positive teacher-student relationship is absent from research defining effective teacher characteristics, especially with all of the researched benefits of such a positive relationship.

Evaluation Measures of Effective Teachers. One possible explanation is that most literature focuses on the educational aspects of effective teaching and not the relational aspects. Consequently, effective teachers are being evaluated based on student achievement outcomes (e.g., test scores, academic growth, graduation rates, GPA). Even in newly innovative evaluation systems, teachers are still being measured through Value Added Measures (VAM) as a means to determine their overall effectiveness (Chetty et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2012; Marzano & Toth, 2013). While a Standards-Based System (i.e., measuring teacher effectiveness based on professional standards with clearly articulated measures) includes a variety of methods indicative of teacher effectiveness including evidence of student work and learning along with evidence of teacher practices derived from multiple observations, videotapes, artifacts, and even student surveys (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012), it is still defining and categorizing teacher effectiveness based on student achievement or academic outcomes. This evaluation system still does not consider the teacher's relationships or connections with students through other measures such as student surveys, questionnaires, or rating scales. If research clearly indicates the powerful impacts of a positive-teacher relationship (i.e., both in relation to short-term student

achievement and long-term life achievement) why are teacher connections with students not appraised when evaluating and determining if teachers are effective in their practices or not?

Conceptual Framework

Affordance Value. Developed in Pianta's Theoretical Framework, which is grounded in the Attachment and Systems Theory, this study will explore the association of a positive teacher-student relationship and its "Affordance Value." Robert C. Pianta (1999) previously described *Affordance Value* as the context and resources an adult brings to a working relationship that support a child's intellectual, social, and emotional development that would have been unavailable otherwise (Davis, 2003; Pianta, 1999). In other words, without being *afforded* the intervention of and positive interactions with a teacher, the child would not have the same development, experiences, or outcomes. It also associates that a positive teacher relationship fosters a development within a student that leads to an increased access to opportunities and positive choices leading to positive student outcomes (Pianta, 1999). Therefore, this study sought to expand upon this theory to correlate how these choices have the ability to generate long-term outcomes that would otherwise have not been afforded without that pivotal teacher connection. This study will build upon this existing theoretical framework and the literature connected to it, in order to contribute new longer-term findings related to a teacher's *Affordance Value* by looking at student outcomes in their adult lives and analyzing how that relationship's *Affordance Value* had long-term implications for that student (Maxwell, 2012). The data collected through qualitative interviews was analyzed through the lens of the *Affordance Value* so that the teacher-student relationships could be described in such a manner that draws upon their development, maintenance, and long-term impacts even after the student had graduated (Maxwell, 2012).

Chapter Three will describe the research design and methodology used in this study.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter will begin by describing the research design and provide the rationale for this study. It will go on to identify and outline the qualitative data collection methods used and describe the sample acquired to inform this study. Then it will discuss the data analysis and analytical process followed to research, evaluate, and understand the findings. Finally, it will end by describing the validity measures used for this study.

Research Design and Rationale

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential relationship between a positive teacher-student relationship and a student's long-term life goals and achievements. The research questions for this study included:

1) *What kind of teacher is likely to make a lasting impact?*

2) *What attributes are related to a strong positive teacher-student relationship?*

3) *What are the sustained benefits of a strong positive teacher-student relationship?*

4) *What are the long-term, sustained impacts of a positive teacher-student relationship?*

and were used to study the adult memories shared of former students who credit a teacher with positively affecting long-term outcomes that went beyond academic performance or school experiences.

While there is extensive research on the benefits of a positive teacher-student relationship for a student during school, there is very limited research specifically related to the long-term impacts of that relationship beyond school. This represents a gap in literature and provided a clear purpose for this study. The study aimed to gain a deeper understanding as to how positive teacher relationships may impact a student well beyond graduation and truly influence their lives

in a positive manner. This qualitative study was informed through interviews with adults who identified that an individual educator had a lasting influence and long-term impact on their life in order to support the importance of focusing on positive relationships among teachers and students during school years.

Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured 20-45-minute interviews with twelve adults ranging from 27 to 87 years old who identified an educator who made a lasting and profound impact on their life. The interview was designed to be an informal dialogue between researcher and participant guided by a set of pre-determined, yet flexible interview questions that allowed for the supplement of authentic follow-up questions, probes, and comments (Babbie, 2007; Maxwell, 2012). This allowed for the opportunity to collect open-ended data in order to explore and dive deeper into the personal thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that were shared by the participants during the interview (Babbie, 2007; Maxwell, 2012). Interviews took place in person or using a video-conferencing platform (Zoom) at a time and place that was convenient for the participant. Interviews were audio recorded and field notes were taken during the adult interactions and noted an abbreviated version of responses, informal observations such as nonverbal body language (e.g. a smile, a head nod, or tears), as well as capturing informal conversations that arose before or after the recording (Maxwell, 2012).

The six-question interview protocol was used to navigate the conversation so that each interview had similarities in the types of questions/responses in order to make connections or themes across multiple participants (Babbie, 2007; Maxwell, 2012). Participants were asked to walk through their life, share their school experiences, the specific grade level and teacher where they first developed or recognized that they had a positive relationship with a teacher, their concurrent or subsequent high school experience as well as their experiences after high school

(e.g. college, career, family, community involvements). Finally, they were asked to describe how these decisions were or could have been influenced or linked back to the educator. The interview began by asking the participant about their life: where they grew up, what was their childhood like, what was their school experience like, what were they involved in, and the type of student they were. The purpose of this first question was to ease into the interview, establish rapport, and learn more about the participant as a person to provide context into their relationship with the teacher. Having this background information allowed the opportunity for connections to the themes that emerged later in my analysis. During the interview, I asked them to describe a specific teacher who had a positive influence on their life and to describe the kind of relationship they had with them (e.g. how it developed, how it influenced them in school, how it was maintained, if it was short or long-term). I asked them to reflect back on their life so far and identify in what areas or in what ways the teacher influenced the choices they made and to identify in what ways their lives may be different had they never had this teacher relationship. Since I had previously researched this topic in a qualitative mini-study, I had already done a pilot-test of my interview questions and made revisions according to the experience of those interview sessions (Maxwell, 2012).

Sample

To find participants, I posted on multiple public social media sites using Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter and asked others to share in order to recruit participants outside of my social circle (e.g., age, gender, occupation, socioeconomic status). The social media post specified the purpose of the research study and invited participants to share their own personal stories. The social media post description read: *When you think back on your school experience, was there a specific teacher who made a positive difference in your life that continues today? Someone who inspired you, believed in you or encouraged you to pursue your dreams? And*

because of them, you pursued or achieved those dreams? Do you credit some of your life

outcomes to the influence of a specific teacher? In order to learn more about the lasting and

long-term impacts of a positive teacher-student relationship, I am looking for individuals who

can share personal accounts of how a specific teacher made a difference in their life. I am

especially interested in the influence that educators had in shaping your choices after

graduation. Please comment below, send a private message, or send an email to the following

email address (provided my email). I set-up a Facebook and Twitter account that was specific to

the study so that it was not affiliated with my personal account in order to allow for safe, private

contact with participants. A follow-up, private message was sent to individual participants who

responded, and the participant provided their email accounts in order to provide further

information of the study, arrange the interviews and provide a copy of the consent form

(Appendix B). I was also able to gain participants through word of mouth of others who had

heard of my study. It was more difficult to obtain volunteers than I had originally anticipated. I

did not have the response I thought I would from social media. Therefore, I was unable to be as

selective with my participants as originally planned. I had to make many posts, implore others to

keep sharing my posts, and searched specific teacher hashtags to find people to participate in my

study. The main criteria used in selecting a participant was for that adult to have had a positive

relationship with a teacher and they credit that teacher for outcomes in their life they would not

have otherwise had. I was able to obtain a purposeful selection and had a variety of age, gender,

and careers to account for a variety of experiences and backgrounds. However, despite my

efforts to post on several social media outlets and solicit the help from a Diversity and Inclusion

Coordinator, I was unable to obtain a sample of multiple races or ethnicities. Outside of race, I

was able to obtain a wide variety of participants in order to adequately capture teacher impact

across all heterogeneous populations (Maxwell, 2012).

Data Analysis and Analytical Process

Interviews were transcribed and sent back to the participant for a member check approval, with the exception of two women in an assisted living facility (Maxwell, 2012). Due to a medical state-wide shut down, I was unable to return to the closed facility to conduct the member check in person as we had originally agreed upon. During the initial step, I read through the interview transcripts and listened to each recorded interview several times to capture thoughts, language, or tone that may have been missed the first time through (Maxwell, 2012). I allowed for a time of open coding in order to take notes on the types of responses I discovered while reading through the transcripts or by listening to the recorded interviews to develop tentative ideas of what stood out in order to begin categories or relationships between participant responses (Maxwell, 2012). Each time I listened, I caught codings I did not pick up on previously. During the initial open coding phase, categories and themes began to emerge. I identified the four major themes as the teacher, the relationship, the benefits, and the long-term impacts and assigned each theme a specific highlighter color.

For the second step, I used the "Three-C's" coding process (i.e. code, categorize, and concepts) for a deeper analysis (Lichtman, 2012). Using constant comparative analysis, each transcribed interview was thoroughly read, and key words, phrases, or responses related to each theme were highlighted and color-coded. Using these coding methods and concepts drawn from the literature, key words/phrases were compiled into categories or similarities amongst the interviews and placed into larger categories within the overall concepts or major themes (Lichtman, 2012; Maxwell, 2012). Commonalities were ranked based upon each interview response (i.e., not just by the number of participants, but also by how many times the individual participants repeated or expressed value in something they shared throughout the interview). Finally, theoretical themes/categories were developed to answer the research questions in order

to illustrate how the teacher influenced the adults' lives beyond school, the affordance value that teacher had on the student in a long-term sense, and how that impacted their choices and decisions well into adulthood (Maxwell, 2012). The themes that I identified was shared with the participants in a follow-up email to ensure that the interpretation of the data was correct (Maxwell, 2012). Both the descriptive and theoretical themes that emerged will be presented in Chapter Four, along with supporting evidence of direct quotes from participants and further supporting research/literature (Maxwell, 2012).

Validity Characteristics

This study was approved by the University of Kansas IRB committee (Appendix A). A six question interview guide (Appendix B) was created in order to remain consistent across all interviews and types of questions asked during each session to allow for comparative analysis (Maxwell, 2012). The semi-structured interviews were thorough and intensive in order to produce rich data (Maxwell, 2012). Interviews were only conducted with participant consent (Appendix C) and were both audio recorded and transcribed for validity purposes (Maxwell, 2012). During the interview, clarifying or follow-up questions were asked conversationally throughout the interview. If there was an early connection or analysis made during an interview, assumptions were shared with participants and asked to be confirmed. If confirmed, the participant was then asked to expand on that connection to continue to describe with specific examples or further detail in order to solidify early assumptions or themes that emerged during the interview process (Maxwell, 2012). In order to make the research more valued, the transcripts and final findings with specific conclusions/themes was shared with the participants. They were asked to confirm those claims and answer any follow-up questions needed to further the analysis (Maxwell, 2012). All themes and subthemes were validated by specific participant

examples and quotes. An inter-rater reliability check was not conducted for this particular study

but would be something that would be considered in a larger study for publication.

Chapter Four will outline the results of this study and how it ties into literature.

Chapter Four

Results and Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the type of teacher who is effective in forming strong relationships with students, what attributes those relationships have that make them so impactful, the benefits students receive from having a positive relationship with their teacher and just how influential and far-reaching that relationship can be in the life of the student beyond school and into adulthood. This study was informed from the perspective of the former student (now adult) who benefited from having a strong, positive teacher relationship.

This chapter presents the findings for the following research questions:

1) *What kind of teacher is likely to make a lasting impact?*

2) *What attributes are related to a strong positive teacher-student relationship?*

3) *What are the sustained benefits of a strong positive teacher-student relationship?*

4) *What are the long-term, sustained impacts of a positive teacher-student relationship?*

All twelve participants in this study identified having a strong, positive teacher relationship that made a lasting impact in their lives. The twelve semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted during the months of January and February of 2020. When analyzing the results of each interview, several themes emerged within each research question identifying a linear progression from the kind of teacher that makes a lasting impact, to the types of relationships that were established, resulting in certain benefits student's experienced from those relationships and the impact those relationships had long-term in their lives. Not only did each participant describe how having a positive teacher relationship made a difference for them as a student, but they also described how that relationship changed the trajectory of their life,

recounting how those deep connections with effective teachers influenced their choices after graduating high school and ultimately shaping who they are today.

The findings in this chapter will be presented through the overarching themes and subsequent subthemes or categories that emerged from the interviews in order to answer each research question. The chapter will begin with a participant profile in order to provide a clear, complete picture of the participants' background and school experiences, a description of the teacher and the type of relationship they had, as well as how the teacher(s) made a difference in their life. The chapter will go on to describe the attributes or qualities of effective teachers who are likely to make a lasting impact on students' lives. Next, it will discuss the attributes of strong, positive teacher-student relationships followed by recounting the benefits those students, now adults, have experienced as a result of that positive teacher relationship. Finally, the findings will conclude by identifying the themes that emerged when participants described the long-term influences teachers had in their life and how different their lives would be today had they not encountered this positive teacher relationship at all.

Demographic Profile of the Participants

Each individual participant will be described below in order to gain a deep, relevant context to the participant, their background, school experiences, relationship with their influential teacher and the impacts that teacher had on their lives in order to understand the full scope of their strong, positive teacher-student relationship.

Participant 1. Participant 1 (hereinafter P1) is a 35-year-old stay-at-home mom and aspiring writer. She graduated college with a degree in school psychology. She has had previous jobs as a community-based case manager at a family service and guidance center and served as school psychologist in two different school districts. In those roles, she enjoyed working with the students who had a difficult home life, behavior problems or social skills

issues. She grew up in a rural farming community and went to a small school district. Up until

the third grade, she did not enjoy school. She was in the lower reading group, struggled

academically, and had low self-esteem. "I didn't feel great about school. I didn't feel that I

could do really anything very well." That was until her third-grade teacher made a strong

connection with her, something her previous teachers were unable to do. "My teachers, K

through second-grade were good. They were nice and everything, but I didn't feel I had a great

connection with them until third grade with Mrs. Black." Her third-grade teacher built up her

confidence by helping her overcome her reading challenges, discovering her passion to

creatively write, finding ways for her to be successful, and praising her for her achievements.

This one teacher completely shifted not only her perspective of school, but also of herself. She

finally felt good at something and finally enjoyed learning. She shared how her teacher chose

her work several times, once for a play she wrote that their class performed in front of parents

and another time when she wrote a book and read it to her class. These moments built her

confidence and gave her a sense of pride she had never had. This teacher planted the seed of

what was to become her lifelong passion. "And from then on, I can remember thinking, I'm

going to write children's books. That's what my job is going to be." Years later, her high school

English teacher immediately recognized her passion and potential in writing and became a strong

mentor for her. She was immediately drawn to him when he came to her aid in the hallway after

she was bullied by another girl and helped mediate the situation. "After that, I feel he just took

more of an interest in me. I don't know if he thought I was troubled, but yeah, I think he

probably made an effort on his part too." From that moment on, she knew she could trust him

and later grew to confide in him often when she experienced similar troubles. He became more

of a counselor for her as he'd listen and support her through the many challenges she faced in

high school. His passion for literature and writing solidified her desire to become a writer and he

became more of a mentor for her than a teacher; meeting with her often to review her writings, challenging her to be better, and expanding her talents. Through his influence, she went on to choose a writing major in college and even though she changed majors halfway through college and did not end up finishing her writing degree, she has ultimately come full circle, fulfilling her true purpose for writing yet again. "It's my passion. It just feeds my soul." She is currently working on her first book and shares that he continues to have an impact on her life to this day.

 Participant 2. Participant 2 (hereinafter P2) is a 52-year old stay-at-home mom who just stepped down from serving five years on a large suburban school district Board of Education, her last role as president. Prior to staying at home with her children, she was a pediatrician for ten years. She loved practicing medicine and working with children, but ultimately felt the calling to stay home with her own. Growing up, she had a mother that struggled with an unmedicated mental illness and her brother had many difficulties in school. He had ADD, struggled academically, and was often bullied. When she was little, her parents got divorced. Her brother went to live with their father and her mother relocated her and her sister to an apartment in a neighboring school district with a strong reputation for academics. Her mom pushed her in school and despite having good grades and being a strong student, her best was just never quite good enough leaving her feeling inadequate and defeated. Her mom did not go to college and felt like people looked down at her because of it. She didn't want that for her children. Participant 2 rather enjoyed school and was a very strong student. "I was always a good student. I'm a rule follower. I think I always worked really, really hard and pushed myself really hard." Despite being overly involved in high school and having a lot of friends, she never felt like she ever really had found her place. "I think I probably tended to like the adults more, which I think is why my teachers probably had such an impact on me, because I could talk with them." She identified two high school teachers who made the biggest impact on her life. One teacher taught

chemistry and the other taught higher-level math courses. She attributes her strong connection with both of them to the multiple years/classes she had with them and their infectious passion for the subjects they taught. She was able to develop a strong relationship because they knew her personally, fostered her interests and talents, and pushed her in ways she didn't think possible. She described them as tough, yet supportive; having high expectations, but providing the support you needed to get there; strict, but personal. They are the reason she chose to study medicine in college and eventually become a pediatrician. They also influenced her decision to serve her community on the school board. "I definitely think that my experience (in school) and how great it was made me want that for all the kids."

Participant 3. Participant 3 (hereinafter P3) is a 31-year old kindergarten teacher in an inner-city elementary school. She has been teaching for five years and is currently pursuing her master's in special education with hopes of one day achieving a doctorate. She loves working with at-risk students and is very passionate about special education. She described herself as a quiet, quirky kid. She got good grades, never complained and was "the student every teacher wanted." She grew up in poverty and attended an inner-city school herself. In fourth grade, her parents got divorced and there was a lot of "family drama." She identified two teachers that made a profound impact in her life; one being her fourth-grade elementary teacher and the other being her high school English teacher. Her fourth-grade teacher was instrumental in helping her deal with her parents' divorce, fostering her love of reading, and inspiring her to become a teacher. Their relationship grew deeper when her teacher reached back out to her in high school to check on her. She attended her graduation, stayed connected with her through college, and now serves as a valuable resource and teaching mentor. When it came to high school, Participant 3 had trouble fitting in and felt like the outcast. Her high school English teacher was crucial in helping her feel connected and provided a sense of belonging during an already

depressed state. She loved and appreciated her teacher's real-life assignments, one of those assignments changing the trajectory of her life. The teacher had the students apply to a college of their choice for practice. "At that time, I didn't know I was going to go to college because I just knew it cost some money and we came from no money." The teacher told her about financial aid and gave her the resources she'd need to not only apply, but to get into college. What was once impossible was made possible when her teacher provided the resources she would need to apply, get in, and navigate college successfully. "She is everything that I've gotten to where I am today."

Participant 4. Participant 4 (hereinafter P4) is a 33-year old sixth grade teacher in a large suburban school district in Kansas. She has been teaching for 12 years in the same grade, same school and is passionate about having an engaging classroom and strong connection with students. She described growing up in a middle-class upbringing, attending the same school feeder system K-12, and having the same core group of friends. In elementary school she was the teacher's pet. In middle school she began to become torn between wanting to be a good kid and wanting to be like the cool kids and not care about school. Then by high school she did stop caring, often skipping class and not applying herself. "I think I was just ready to move on to the next thing…I was done, not necessarily with school, but just wanted the next thing. I wanted to go to college." School had always come easy to her, but she admitted to becoming lazy. She struggled to make a strong connection with any of her high school teachers, part of her wondering if that's why she struggled more in high school. "I think maybe that was my problem with high school is I didn't make any connections with any teachers." Her fifth-grade year was different. Still very much a teacher's pet, striving to work hard and please, she fell in love with her teacher, Mrs. Jackson. She described her teacher as loud, boisterous, fun, and personal. She painted a picture of an engaging classroom full of animals and hands-on projects. Her teacher

had high expectations and she hated disappointing her. It was that year, when Participant 4 declared that she was going to be a teacher, a teacher just like Mrs. Jackson. She continued to remain in contact with her coming back to visit often and even attending the college teaching program she had recommended. Her teacher continues to influence her today as she strives to emulate her teaching style and desires to build those same strong connections with her own students. She attributes her college and career decisions to her fifth-grade teacher and believes that she is where she is today because of the experience she had in fifth grade. "She lit a fire in me to want to educate because I wanted to be like her. I honestly don't think I would have been a teacher or even if I was, I don't think I would do the things I do now."

 Participant 5. Participant 5 (hereinafter P5) is a 54-year old architect who co-owns his own architectural firm. He has been married for 28 years and has four kids ranging in age from 26-20. He got his degree in architecture, moved back home, worked for an architect firm for about five years and then became self-employed and started his own firm. He was first introduced to architecture when his ten-year older brother, whom he idolized, had gone to college to study architecture. Since he "worshiped the ground he floated over" he too wanted to explore it in high school and took an intro to drafting course, not knowing it would change his life. In school, he described himself as a good student who had to work hard. "I don't want to say that school was necessarily easy for me or wasn't overly challenging, but I worked hard, and I've always been kind of known as a hard worker." He identified himself as a "pretty slow reader" and more of a math and science type of guy. After an initial positive experience with not only the content of the intro to teaching course, but also the teacher, he started loading up on all courses that pertained to architecture taught by Mr. Smith. By his junior year, three out of his seven classes were in some sort of drafting or architecture and Mr. Smith became someone he spent almost half his day with. He described his teacher as extremely supportive, patient, and

encouraging. He challenged his students and helped them grow their knowledge by getting them involved in competitions and exploring careers in architecture. Participant 5 excelled in architecture going on to win several competitions for his drawings and designs. He and his teacher became close. He would come over to his house on a Saturday to help him with a school project and taught him the skills he needed to be successful as an architect. After graduating high school, participant 5 maintained a strong relationship with Mr. Smith. When he came back over breaks, he would visit with him and share his college projects. His teacher was the reason he could afford out of state tuition at his dream school as he signed a letter of credit, allowing the participant to sell books door to door for tuition money. One of participant 5's dear friends and Mr. Smith's former students was diagnosed with Leukemia. The teacher and group of guys rallied around him as he fought, but ultimately lost his battle with cancer. Mr. Smith attended his wedding and they have "maintained a reasonable relationship, even 35-40 years later" staying up to date on their personal lives and seeing each other every now and then. When asked how his life would be different had he not encountered his high school teacher, he said shared that there would be a strong possibility that he wouldn't have gotten into architecture, would not have even been able to afford his college tuition, and would not have the career or success he has had, if it were not for Mr. Smith.

 Participant 6. Participant 6 (hereinafter P6) is a 51-year old who works in the healthcare technology field. He grew up in a very small town in the Midwest and attended a rural school district, graduating with just 50 other students. Elementary school was hard for him. He had childhood epilepsy and diagnosed learning disabilities. In grade school, he was primarily in the special education classroom, but as he got older, he was mainstreamed for most of his day in general education. "It was hard because I struggled with kind of fitting in a little bit with the other students and then also handling the course load and my assignments and everything was

always a struggle."   He also struggled with anxiety, often becoming overwhelmed, upset, and unable to manage his emotions. He had the same special education teacher for five years (through junior high and high school) and was able to establish a very deep connection with her. She was paramount in helping him understand his emotions, giving him strategies and tools to overcome his anxiety, and learn how to be a successful student despite his learning disability. She understood his strengths and helped him focus on the things that he could do well when others only ever focused on his deficits. He continues to use the coping skills she taught him for his anxiety to this day and his self-confidence is a direct result of her belief in him. "She helped me not just with the school stuff I would say…more just life in general." She convinced him that he could go to college and that she would do whatever it took to help him get there. "She definitely guided me to push me further than I thought I was ever be able to, to get a college degree…I don't think I'd be working at a place like this right now without her confidence in me." And without her influence in his life, "my life would have been a lot different. I wouldn't have experienced everything I have for sure."

Participant 7. Participant 7 (hereinafter P7) is an 87-year old retired schoolteacher. She taught fifth grade for 40 years and was inducted into a teacher hall of fame. Growing up her family moved a lot because her father was in the USO (United Service Organization) serving military members and their families. Because of the constant relocation she was never in a school for very long. This left her feeling lonely, isolated, and always behind everyone else. She said she was not good at school nor a strong student. She did not enjoy it and was not applying herself. That was until she met her fifth-grade teacher, Sister Darla, a nun in a private Catholic school. "I moved so much. I was always the new girl, but she made me feel welcome." She took the time to help her get caught up on the things they had already started or learned and "she didn't make me feel stupid." She assigned another girl in class to be her buddy, allowing

her to make some connections with other girls in the classroom. Her teacher was supportive and had a sense of humor. She enjoyed her classroom because it was fun, and they did a lot of hands-on projects. "That's what I was waiting for, somebody to make learning fun. That's what I was put on this Earth for, to have fun." Her teacher made her try and with her support, began to take school more seriously. She only knew Sister Darla one year as her family moved yet again. Years later, when she became a fifth-grade teacher, she sought out the students just like her and did everything she could to make them feel connected the way Sister Darla had done for her, "I guess I felt for the lonely kids and the ones that felt alone." Even now, as an 87-year-old woman, she's never forgotten how her fifth-grade teacher has made her feel.

  Participant 8. Participant 8 (hereinafter P8) is a 74-year old who lives in an assisted living community with her husband of 50 years. She was a teacher for three years, but then went on to work for Continental Airlines as a reservationist. Her husband and her retired and passed on their shipping company to their son upon moving into the assisted living facility. She grew up in a small suburb and had a unique childhood. She has a twin sister and grew up during a time when multiple births were less common. "We grew up when multiple births were unusual…We were the only twins that I knew of, so we rode high on those coattails." Her father was a mortician and they lived in the funeral home. "I loved it. We were raised with the idea that the dead don't hurt you, it's the live." She attended a private Catholic school and did not have a great experience. With strict nuns that were hard to connect with and struggling to read, she hated school. Not knowing it back then, but she later discovered that her struggles in school were actually Dyslexia. Prior to fourth grade, she was being sent down to the lower grade levels for reading. It was "embarrassing to be pulled out of a class and taken down to the third grade to read." Her fourth-grade teacher finally stood up for her and refused to continue that practice. When her teacher said "We're having none of that. I don't believe in sending you out. She won

me right then!" From that moment on, she fell in love with her fourth-grade teacher. The teacher gave her the confidence she'd never had, and she began to actually enjoy school for the very first time. Participant 8 describes her teacher as being different than the other nuns. She was kinder, more fun, and way more personal. Years later, she found her passion in swimming and went on to swim in college. There, she discovered her talents in teaching swimming lessons and after taking the suggestions of others, become a teacher. She purposely chose to teach fourth grade because it was such a pivotal year for her. She wanted to be the same type of teacher and create the same type of experience she had. "The fourth grade appealed to me right away because I was dead set on making their fourth grade a nice year to remember too." Without her fourth-grade teacher, she said she would have continued to hate school, not gone on to college, and would not have become a teacher herself. More devastating, she would not have the confidence in herself and her abilities that she does today.

Participant 9. Participant 9 (hereinafter P9) is a 37-year old assistant director of nursing at an assisted living and memory care facility. She is currently finishing up her bachelor's in nursing degree this December after taking a significant break off of school to have her children. Now that they are older, she returned to finally finish her degree. She described herself as an overachiever student who was very hard on herself. "I wanted A's and was not satisfied if that's not what I got." It was her junior high biology teacher who pushed her to be in honors classes. "I wasn't sure that that's what I wanted to do. While I did like being a good student, I kind of liked being a good student when it was easy." With those honors courses in high school, by the time she graduated, she had already accumulated a good amount of college credits. It was the extra push she needed to learn how to navigate a challenging course load and to later be successful in college as an older adult. However, the most influential teacher was her third-grade teacher. She portrayed her as a very caring person who had a passion for the kids who

needed more help. While her teacher was supportive and encouraging, she also had high expectations and held her students accountable. She knew her students on a personal level and made an effort to find their strengths and passions. "She found your thing and she encouraged you to do your thing. Mine was writing." The creativity and passion she received from her "is what made me the student that I was." She also attributes her strong communication abilities that she now has as a nurse to the writing skills that were fostered so many years ago. Without these two teachers she would not have finished her degree or found her passion in nursing, specifically in elderly care. Her third-grade teacher taught her an important life lesson in finding a need and that has stuck with her and helped her find her purpose in life. "This is what I want to do because I see a need for people who want to do this…and I can still see her influence of finding a passion and giving it all you've got."

  Participant 10. Participant 10 (hereinafter P10) is a 27-year old nurse who works in an operating room for a company that focuses on teaching and training medical students and nurses. She attended a lab school attached to a local college. She described her school as cutting-edge, getting the latest curriculums and technology before anyone else. With a mentally ill mother taking out her aggressions on her and her older brother at home, school became a safe haven for her. "I actually remember more about school from my childhood than I do like being home, which is really interesting." She strived to get good grades and worked hard. Her fourth-grade teacher had a profound impact on her life and is the reason she is alive today. She described her teacher as personal, encouraging educator who allowed students to be the themselves. She individualized learning and allowed students to explore their own interests. She was invested in students' lives, going to their games, plays, and creating safe, trusting relationships with them. She immediately became someone Participant 10 could confide in. Even after her fourth-grade year, Participant 10 continued to remain extremely close to her teacher, going to her office to

work or read when she was having difficulties or needed someone to talk to. As she got into middle school, she became depressed. Participant 10 was having trouble seeing passed her difficulties and depression and so she was starving herself and engaging in self-harm behaviors. When she made an unusual comment in passing, her former teacher took action. The teacher went to the Dean and counselor of the school and reported her concerns. They called her parents and she was hospitalized that evening. Her teacher came to support her that night and stayed with her in the emergency room. "If it weren't for her decision to make that call, I don't know that I'd be here." Aside from saving her life, her teacher also taught her coping skills and alternatives to self-harm. The teacher introduced her to a friend that had a similar home life and that friend became an important part of her life as well. Her teacher also influenced her personal faith journey, her morals, and she even gave her stamp of approval when she met her future husband. Her teacher was later a part of her wedding day and they continue to remain close to this day, still exchanging phone calls, texts, emails and cards on a regular basis.

Participant 11. Participant 11 (hereinafter P11) is a 30-year old licensed therapist who owns her own counseling practice specializing in marriage and family counseling. She pursued this passion after having a strong connection with her high school teacher and falling in love with the psychology classes he taught. As a student, she struggled in school. She had a hard time staying focused which negatively impacted her learning and grades. She knew something was wrong but worked hard to mask it so that she would not stand out. "I was trying to kind of hide that something was going on and I was struggling." She often needed tutors and extra help throughout school. After really low test scores, despite all of her efforts and tutors, her parents finally had her tested at the age of 16 and discovered she had ADHD, inattentive type. She began medication and finally began to do well in school again. "I struggled there for a while as a student. But I found that once I got on medication and was actually able to focus, I actually

really enjoyed school." She described her high school psychology teacher as relaxed, down to earth, relatable, and funny. Her relationship with him began in a rather unconventional way. She, along with many other classmates, had acquired answers from another student in the previous hour and cheated on one of his tests. He asked the students that cheated to come forward and admit their guilt. "That's kind of where our relationship started, I had to admit I made a mistake, I've cheated." He was empathetic and understanding, but also taught her that her choices had consequences and still held her accountable. She received a zero on the test but was given the opportunity for extra credit so that she did not fail the class. Her positive experience with him and a growing curiosity in his lessons, sparked her interest in psychology. She went on to take several more psychology courses from the same teacher allowing their relationship to grow even deeper. She quickly realized this was the path she wanted to take for her college and career. He served as a strong mentor for her, guiding her on future goals and plans, pointing her in the direction she would need as far as resources and connections and always gave her great advice. "I don't know if he wouldn't have been my teacher, my career choice could have looked quite different." They have stayed in touch over the years. "He's just been, he was just the right teacher I guess to be in my life."

Participant 12. Participant 12 (hereinafter P12) is a 44-year old physician's assistant. Prior to that he was a corpsman in the Navy. He grew up in East Detroit and had a "pretty normal upbringing" with working class, blue collar parents who later divorced when he was 19. He was a great student in elementary school, but a "horrible student in middle school and high school" attributing a lot of that to the negative environment and having the wrong peer relationships. He had the capacity to be a strong student, he just stopped trying. If it weren't for a high school teacher who got him involved in the drama club his sophomore year, he wonders if he would have stayed in school. "That kind of helped me out and kind of kept me focused in

high school…I think she was pretty instrumental to kind of keep me in school until I figured out what the heck was going on." While that teacher kept him in school, it was his fourth-grade teacher (who he actually ended up having again in sixth grade) that made a lasting impact on his life after high school. He described his fourth-grade and sixth-grade teacher as very engaging and "had a way of piquing my interest in learning and being inquisitive." With a desire for more, she challenged him when he got bored and differentiated student learning. She was strict and had high expectations. What he remembers most were not necessarily the academics, but rather the study skills and life-long skills she instilled in him. She set the "the foundation for me for learning…even though I kind of went and got in with the wrong crowd for a while, once I got my act together, I remembered her and the way, what I am supposed to do as a student." He went on to become a strong student in the Navy as a corpsman and in college using the study skills she taught him such as organization, structure, staying on schedule, being task oriented, and staying focused. "I became a very, very strong student in the Navy and then in college…I think I owe that to her…she really did make an impact on me as far as how to be a student."

Findings: Executive Summary of Major Themes

This section presents the major findings based on the coding process used in this study. A categorical-content analysis was used to develop specific themes that emerged from the participant's responses in order to answer each research question. The "Three-C's" coding process (i.e. code, categorize, and concepts) was utilized during the analysis phase (Lichtman, 2012). As shown in Figure 1, four major themes emerged as they related to each of the four research questions (the teacher, the relationship, the benefits, the long-term impacts) and through data collection and analysis, additional subthemes and subsequent categories are described within each major theme. Research Question 1 had three major themes emerge in regards to the kind of teacher that is likely to make a lasting impact: teacher personality (the type of person

they are), learning environment (the type of environment they create), and teacher style (the type of teacher they are). Teachers that make a lasting impact have specific qualities or positive personality traits, create specific positive learning environments, and have specific teaching styles or instructional practices. Research question 2's findings indicated that there are three attributes related to a strong, positive teacher-student relationship: they were personal, intentional and reciprocal. The results of Research Question 3 revealed that there were three overarching benefits of a strong, positive teacher-student relationship: Students experienced self-improvements, health and well-being improvements, and/or school outcomes improvements. Finally, Research Question 4 discovered that positive relationships with teachers have the power to influence students in five major ways: with the college decisions they make, the careers they end up pursuing, their personal well-being, self-actualization, and the lifelong skills they use throughout life. Organized by a linear progression of each research question, the overall themes are outlined below (see Figure 1) containing further categories within each major concept. A theme summary is presented at the end of each section to support the findings with current research or to identify new contributions not found in literature.
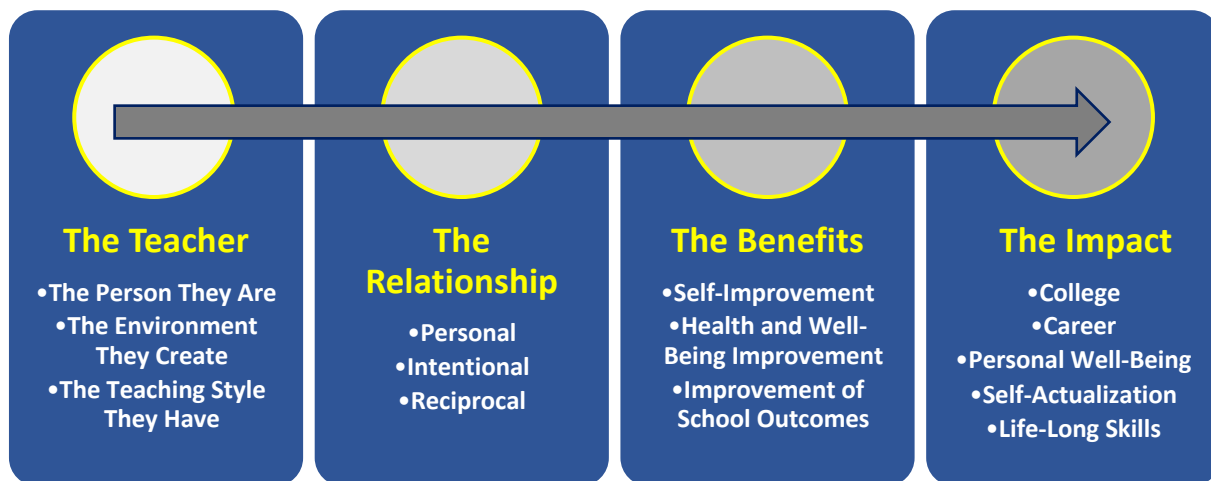
Figure 1

Figure 1. The Four Major Themes of This Study.

Research Question 1: The Type of Teacher Who Makes a Lasting Impact

There were three major themes that emerged when analyzing the participants' responses as they described the type of teacher that made a lasting impact on their lives. There were commonalities in the type of person they were and positive qualities they possessed, the type of learning environments they created, and the specific teaching styles or instructional practices they had.

Theme 1.1 – Teacher Personality/Qualities: The Type of Person They Are. As participants described the teachers who made a difference in their lives, they described attributes and shared stories depicting specific attributes that pertained to a specific type of person that they were. Qualities such as patient, kind, fun, supportive, understanding, were just a few of the many traits that were organized into six subthemes that described the teacher: a teacher who was authentic, a teacher who was passionate, a teacher who was altruistic, a teacher who was supportive and trustworthy, a teacher who genuinely cares, and a teacher who knew their students and let them be themselves.

A teacher who was authentic. As participants described the type of teacher that made a lasting impact in their lives, authenticity, in some form, was mentioned by everyone. One way teachers were authentic was to not be afraid to be themselves when working with the students. They did not leave their beliefs at the door, sharing all the many facets of what made them who they are in their classrooms. One participant described how her teacher shared her faith:

> She was never afraid to show people who she was…She was also like a very strong Catholic and I'm not Catholic, but, you know, seeing that relationship that she had with Christ was very impactful for my own religious faith journey…She gave me a journal and it had Bible verses in it and she was just saying, you know just want to let you know I pray for you every day and I hope that this journal helps you learn how to cope with some of the tough things in your life (P10).

They also shared their personal lives with students and talked about their own families. P5 described his teacher as "a devoted family guy." Another participant shared that her teacher had "twin boys and he would often talk about things his boys would be doing or his wife or incorporate some stories about his personal life" (P11). Likewise, P12 said his teacher "had an older son in high school…she would always use him as an example."

Some teachers had a great sense of humor. Participants would describe teachers as "loud and boisterous" (P4) or ones that liked to "joke around" (P1). P7 shared how her teacher "laughed when we laughed…she told jokes." One person even chuckled as she described her teacher as a little inappropriate. "He'd crack jokes. He was pretty relaxed. Every now and then there'd be a curse word here or there. Just kind of very down to earth, seemed relatable" (P11).

Some teachers kept it real by always being open and honest and telling it like it was. P2 described her high school teacher in this manner, "There was, for lack of better word, there was no bullshit with her. She told it like it was. This is what it was going to be, and you had to work hard to get what you wanted."

When teachers were authentic, they were relatable. As a result, students were immediately drawn to teachers who were similar or like them. For example, P3 commented:

> I knew immediately there was something about her. She was a quirky teacher. I could immediately tell that she was kind of the outcast teacher and I was an outcast in high school. I didn't have any friends and so I immediately was drawn to her…I saw myself in her (P3).

The teachers' authenticity allowed participants to have a genuine connection feeling like they knew their teacher on a deeper, more personal level. The used terms like, "She was just human. She laughed; she scolded us; she did everything that I thought you should do" (P7). "She was happy. Personality-wise, I enjoyed her" (P8).

A teacher who was passionate. Many participants shared that their teachers were passionate about teaching, passionate about kids, and passionate about the subjects they taught. This passion penetrated their classrooms and became transmittable to students. P1 described her teachers' passion for literature, "I remember taking a Shakespeare class and I didn't really understand it very well, but he was so passionate and just brought it to life. It made me love it." This participant also described how despite being a struggling reader, her teacher's passion for reading made her want to read more:

> "I just always felt like a poor reader. I was slow at it and everything. So I think the passion that he brought about all these books that he would bring up, not just in class, I didn't like some, but it just got me reading more and I think he was probably the most passionate teacher maybe I've ever had. You could just see that he loved it (P1).

> One participant's teacher was just as passionate about reading as she was. They continue to share book recommendations to this day:

> It was not uncommon for me to read a ton. But I always felt like she read more. And so it was not necessarily a competition to keep up with her, but now we'll send each other a message and be like, "Hey, I just read this book have you read it? Are you interested in it? Do you want it?" You know, that kind of thing (P10).

P9's teacher was passionate about writing. "She was very passionate about writing and I loved writing short stories." For that participant, her writing instilled creativity and drive and she later used that passion to become a successful communicator.

Teachers were not just passionate about the content they taught. Participants described some teachers that were passionate about helping others:

> (The teacher) had a passion for the kid who needed more help. Looking back, we didn't know the kids that didn't have enough food at home or that sort of stuff. We didn't know that. We just knew there was a kid that kind of smelled weird, but clearly their water had been shut off or something. As an adult, you realize that. She had a passion for those kids, and I think I kind of watched her passion for those kids. Like I said, it didn't apply to me necessarily, but knowing what she was doing, especially now as an adult, because I know her now (P9).

These teachers' passions were evident to their students and it was clear that their passions had the potential to strongly influence their students. As P12 said, "She was excited. She was just a good teacher and got us excited too" (P12).

A teacher who was altruistic. Caring, kind, loving, positive, patient, are just a few of the words that participants used to describe their influential teacher. For example, P1 recalled, "She was just very encouraging and very kind." For P5, "He was always a very patient person. I don't know that I ever saw him really get angry." And, P10 said, "She was just always very loving and very caring, and she wanted people to know that they were valued. She was very patient with people."

Participants portrayed their influential teachers as just overall good people. For example, P9 noted, "She's such a good person and one of those people that just kind of exudes that. You know when you just meet somebody and you're like, "Oh, you're good people."

These altruistic teachers had a tendency to seek out the students who struggled the most and who needed that adult connection more than anyone else, whether that was the participant themselves or the other students in their classroom. People noticed their caring words and actions:

> She was just a very caring person. I think she knew all of her students' backstories, and I think she also, while it didn't necessarily apply to me, kind of had a passion for the kid who needed more help (P9).

> I took notice that he put more of an effort in towards some of our students that had not a great home life. There was one, he was a friend of mine, he really didn't believe in himself and struggled a lot and he (the teacher) tried so hard to connect with him and build him up. That's stuck in my mind. So, I think that was partly why I like him too. You could see that it wasn't just you. He was impacting the other students (P1).

A teacher who was supportive and trustworthy. Along with being a good person, teachers were also commonly identified as supportive and trustworthy. For example, P2 recalled, "You felt like she was there for everything that you needed, as far as if you needed

extra help, if you needed to work through something, she was going to be there." P5 shared a similar memory, "I just always think about how supportive he was and just very encouraging." Participants 1 and 2 described how their teachers went above and beyond to show their support for them and made themselves available beyond school hours:

> I needed that support at that time. So, I feel that was huge. Not to say that my other teachers weren't supportive, but I think someone that went that extra mile to give me extra support and just really believe in me, was just really helpful (P1).

> He wanted you to be successful, so he was willing to do whatever was necessary, stay after school, do anything like that to help you. And if he saw you struggling, I think he was there to help you figure it out (P2).

> I think you always knew you could stay after school. You could work on stuff. It was probably those moments where you had some one-on-one time or small group time with her that you felt like she truly, truly, truly cared (P2).

Influential teachers showed their support to students in many different ways. One way was through providing a listening ear to the student who was upset or had a problem they were trying to work through. P1 described his teacher this way: "He would give me encouragement and talk me through the problem…more like a counselor in a sense…I don't feel he really gave me ever advice necessarily, just a listening ear." Participant 6 also described a teacher who would listen and support him:

> The best thing she did for me was just listen to me. I came in and would literally be breaking down because I couldn't complete an assignment and I couldn't even like concentrate for even a minute. I was so upset, and she had just a good ability, just to let me work through it. Listen to me. Talk to me about other things before we would focus on what I needed to do (P6).

Another way teachers showed their support was by letting students make mistakes. P8 shared that her teacher "didn't expect you to be perfect all the time. She expected things not to go well all the time with kids." When one student admitted she had cheated on an exam, the teacher empathized with her and gave her an opportunity for extra credit. P11 shared that, "It wasn't as it I was shamed for what I had done. He was empathetic to an extent."

Supportive teachers established trusting relationships with their students. As P10 noted, "She was just kind of a person that I gravitated toward I can't really pick out a specific moment when I knew that she was somebody I could trust or go to on a regular basis." Some of those students continued to trust and confide in their teacher years later. Participant 10 returned to her teacher after having a difficult transition in fifth grade "I would go to her office and get some homework done in there" also sharing her battle with depression and self-harm years later. One teacher even continues to support P3, serving as a teaching mentor as she goes through her own experiences with teaching. "She kind of just says, "Hey, it's going to be okay. Trust me, I've been there."

A teacher who genuinely cared. Another common theme was the lengths teachers would go to in order to show how much they truly cared for their students. One teacher helped P3 get through her parents' divorce by letting her know it was going to be okay and giving her an outlet to share her thoughts and feelings she was going through at the time:

> I was struggling with my parents' divorce. She was really concerned about me… She had us write daily journals, which I still have. And I would write to her about family drama that was going on at home and she would write back in the best way a teacher is allowed to, "It's going to be okay." And do little inspirational quotes and just keep your head up and that sort of thing. I had no idea that she was being more of a counselor for me, but looking back on it, she never let me get down on myself during that year at all (P3).

The length that one teacher went to show P10 that she cared actually ended up saving her student's life:

> Basically because of home life and stuff, I was having a really hard time coping and I was really depressed and at a point in my life where I was like, you know, I can't see past this hurdle. I can't see past my depression. I can't see that anybody actually cares for me. And she would check in with me pretty much every day. There was one day when I don't know why, but she had been in the hospital visiting some people that she really cared about. And she came back and she said, "Hey, I just want to let you know that I see what you're going through. And I don't know what it is, but I don't want to visit you in the hospital." And later that day, like I just, I wasn't eating. I was self-harming. There was just so much to it and I like almost passed out from not eating. She came up to me and

she was like, "Hey, hope to see you tomorrow." And I said, "Well, yeah, we'll see." So, she ended up taking that to the school counselor and the Dean and they called my parents. And that night I was actually sent to the hospital and they got me into a psychiatric hospital, so they got me some help. And she actually showed up that night in the emergency room and sat on the bed with me and hugged me. If it, if it weren't for her decision to make that call, I don't know that I would be here (P10).

Teachers showed up for their students and continued to show up for them years after they had left their classrooms as the following quote illustrates:

Three years later when she won a city writing contest, her third-grade teacher came to the ceremony. "It was really touching because she wasn't my teacher anymore. She didn't have a reason to be there. But she came just for me, and it was very sweet" (P9).

When teachers went above and beyond, those students never forgot the lengths their teachers would go to in order to show them how much they genuinely cared. Participants expressed a sincere gratitude, appreciation, and affection for their teachers who cared so deeply.

A teacher who knew their students and let them be themselves. Successful teacher-student relationships were established when the teacher took the time to truly get to know their students, their strengths and needs, their interests or passions, or their preferences in learning styles. P9 described how her teacher fostered her passion for writing:

She found your thing and she encouraged you to do your thing. Mine was writing, but she did it for everyone, and she just got involved. She got involved with every student, and it wasn't just on one thing, it was *their* thing (P9).

Many teachers knew not only their student's academic interests and needs in the classroom, but also their passions and talents outside of the classroom. They took interest in students' lives outside of their four walls, by inquiring about what students were involved in or even attending the events to show their support. P6 and P10 described teachers that attended student events outside of school:

She was always asking us about our practice and about the game and she would attend the game…and say, "I saw you play last night you had a good game." You know just taking interest in what other things we were doing you know, besides just the class work. And then also…when I got involved with the plays and I did a musical and all that she

was, you know, very instrumental in all that too just you know, giving me the encouragement, attending the events (P6).

She was very invested in students' lives too. Anytime that we would have theater. She would, you know, ask them about how that was going, the practices for them or she would go to the basketball games or even stuff outside of school. I think she went to…she went to one of the local churches and they would have plays there, so she would attend those as well (P10).

When students were known personally by their teachers, they felt valued and understood. Participant 2 struggled when she was labeled as the "apartment kid" in an affluent school district. "Because people don't know your whole story, they just assumed you can't afford a house and you're looked at as the apartment kids." But it was her teacher that made her feel adequate. "She just got me and where I was from" (P2). When asked what the teacher did to make a connection with P6, it was her interest in him, "I think it's just the interest she took in me. And I guess she saw my potential and took an interest in me. She showed she cared and went above and beyond."

Theme 1.2 – A Positive Learning Environment: The Type of Environment They Create. Teachers that established strong, positive relationships with lasting impacts created a positive learning environment for their students. The findings indicate that their classrooms were physically and emotionally safe for students, positive and uplifting, inclusive, and had high expectations and accountability for students.

A classroom that was physically and emotionally safe. Teachers that were effective in strong student relationships established a classroom environment that was physically and emotionally safe for all students. Teachers built safe classrooms by establishing trusting relationships with students. This allowed the students to confide in them and become a safe person to talk to and share their problems, concerns or fears. P6 described his teacher as a guidance counselor:

I could really talk to her about any of that and she was kind of like other than, you know, relying on your parents or whatever she was a good, she was almost like a guidance counselor in a sense and I think if you were to talk to like all the other kids that went in there at that time with her they had a similar relationship with her and that she was there for whatever you needed (P6).

Students confided in their teachers when their parents were going through a divorce (P3), when they were being bullied by other students (P1), when they were having difficulty managing their anxiety (P6), or when they were battling depression (P10).

Teachers also provided a sense of protection. One participant shared how her high school teacher protected her from bullying:

I was getting yelled at and I was afraid. She was threatening to hurt me. And him coming up and helping with that bullying situation I guess was a big part. I was so embarrassed, but he didn't make me feel bad about it. And I think that's why I say he's protective. Because after that it seemed he was, I don't know if maybe it opened his eyes to, Oh, maybe she needs some help (P1).

Another person told a story of how her teacher was a "mama bear" protecting her when another teacher got onto her, yelling at her, for something she did not do. "I just remember being like, *Oh, she just yelled at another teacher for me?...*She always stood up for us. So, there was always that mama bear protective thing" (P4).

Teachers' classrooms became a safe haven for some students. Escaping a mother with mental illness at home, school was actually the "safe place" for Participant 10 because of the loving, caring and patient fourth grade teacher she had. Likewise, Participant 6 would retreat to his special education teacher's classroom when his anxiety became too much. He shared how anxious he was to get up in front of his class and give a speech for the first time:

I happened to go into her class before I was going to go to my speech class, and I was freaking out…I told her I wasn't going to the class. There's no way I'm going to get up in front of everybody. I'm not ready (P6).

She helped him calm down, practice, and feel confident enough to follow-through with his speech, doing so well, that it actually sparked his interest in trying out for the school play, even performing in several plays thereafter.

Teachers that establish a safe fortress for students provide true opportunities for them to learn.

A classroom that was positive and uplifting. It was evident that effective teachers created classrooms that were positive and uplifting for their students. P1 recalled the difference her third grade teacher made by creating a classroom that was positive and helped her become more confident:

> I remember crying in my first and second grade classes, but I didn't have those moments in third grade. So, I don't know what exactly she did. Maybe it was just a different classroom environment that made me feel, I don't know, just more confident and less pressure. I don't recall having a bad moment with her, I think it was just all positive as far as I can remember (P1).

Teachers focused on the student's strengths and what they were successful at instead of focusing on their deficits. This promoted confidence and improved self-esteem. For example, P6 described a teacher that focused on his strengths to build him up:

> She focused on what I could do and helped me move past that brick wall when I couldn't do anything at all. I couldn't get past it, but she would say, "Well, yes you can. You are very good at this. You're very good at reading, you're very good at understanding and comprehension and all that stuff. It's just math and we'll work that out and you'll move past it (P6).

Teachers also recognized students for their efforts and achievements. P3 shared that her teacher "saw the individual successes in all of us…she would pull me aside and congratulate me on my successes…She did that to everybody and that's kind of what made me cling to her" (P3). Sometimes they sought out the students who needed encouraged and lifted up the most. A struggling reader finally felt successful in school when her teacher praised her for her writing. "Whenever we'd have a writing project, she would just praise me a lot about that." And when

they all wrote Halloween plays, hers was chosen to be performed. "She chose mine, which was just this big confidence boost for me." A simple act of recognizing student work made all the difference for one participant who struggled with fitting in and having confidence. P7's test "was chosen to hang on the board. I don't know if it was that neat, but she was giving me a lift anyway" (P7).

With a strong role model, teachers created a classroom environment where students were also positive and uplifting to one another. P10 shared a story of how a teacher had an intentional activity where students built up one another by writing kind things on every person's paper, making such a profound impact. The participant still has that project and reads the kind words her classmates wrote about her so long ago:

> We did an activity in fourth grade that I don't know a lot of teachers would have done. We took Pieces of paper and there was a classmates name on like the left side and we had to write one nice thing about every single student in our class and she ended up like putting those altogether and she gave us like the culmination of that so Yeah, just a few days ago, I was looking through some stuff and ended up finding mine. And it's kind of funny to go back through and read those. So, you know, just being intentional about being nice to people (P10).

A classroom that was inclusive. Through a practice of inclusiveness, the teachers gave students a true sense of belonging in their classrooms, allowing them to feel like they could be themselves and still be accepted. P10 described a teacher who individualized learning, "She was very focused on fostering that individuality…She did a good job of making us, from what I could tell, making everyone feel like they were their own person." P7 moved so much and was always the new girl. The only time she felt like she truly fit in was with her third-grade teacher. "I moved so much. I was always the new girl, but she made me feel welcome." She went on to share how her teacher assigned her a girl to be friends with to help her acclimate in the school and classroom. "She assigned some girl that would be friends with me. She brought me into the

group." When she felt like she finally fit in, she did better in school "I think I relaxed in school a little more. I started taking school a little more seriously" (P7).

Teachers also included students of all ability levels. Some participants with disabilities shared how the act of inclusiveness gave them confidence, self-worth, and an opportunity to remain in the classroom with the rest of the students. One participant with Dyslexia was being removed from the classroom to go down to the lower grade level for reading. It left her feeling embarrassed and ultimately hating school. Her fourth-grade teacher did not believe in sending her out any longer and fought to keep her in the classroom. It was that practice of inclusiveness that made all the difference for her. She felt more confident and finally grew to enjoy school and understand her true strengths as a person with Dyslexia:

> They took us out of one class and put us with the third graders, because we were slow reading. But my fourth-grade teacher, first day she said, "We're having none of that. I don't believe in sending you out." She won me right then. I mean it was, what do I want to say, embarrassing to be pulled out of a class and taken down to the third grade to read. She said, "I'm just not going to do that." I loved her for that (P8).

P6 had a learning disability and his special education teacher pushed for him to be more mainstreamed into general education courses. Transitioning from being predominately in special education to now being more in general education left him feeling anxious and overwhelmed at times. He shared that, "It was hard because I struggled with kind of fitting in a little bit with the other students and then also handling the course load and my assignments and everything was always a struggle." But it was his special education teacher that continued to advocate for him to be with the other students, while also providing the necessary tools he needed to be successful in general education academically, socially and emotionally.

Some teachers made a conscious effort to reach out to the students who may have struggled to fit in, who were struggling to really find their place, or figure out who they were. One participant noticed her teacher take interest in the students that needed it most:

There were other students in the school that you could always tell he was trying to connect with…There was one, he was a friend of mine. He really didn't believe in himself and struggled a lot and he tried so hard to connect with him and build him up…. We had one student who ended up being a lesbian, but she wasn't out. And I think he knew that. So, he would run laps with her after school. So, he really put in a lot of time for those kids that just needed it (P1).

Through the inclusion efforts of their teachers, students felt more respected, valued, and understood, resulting in an overall improvement of self, well-being, and achievement.

A classroom with high expectations that holds students accountable. One surprising attribute indicated by the results was that the teachers were described as having a strict learning environment. Teachers held students accountable and had very high expectations for them. P2 shared that her high school math teacher was tough. "I mean he was a hard, hard teacher. Everybody knew it. But he wanted you to be successful" (P2). Likewise, P4 described her teacher as "very, very strict, you were afraid of her walking into your classroom. But then, as the year progressed, she got looser and looser because she knew you could handle it…. She had very high expectations, very high standards." P12's teacher was also strict "but in a sense that everything was in line and staying on task" (P12). Whether they appreciated it then or later as an adult, the students benefited from and expressed their appreciation for having a teacher with high expectations that held them accountable.

Teachers would call students out and challenge them if they felt like they were capable of more. One teacher telling the student, "Hey, this right here, this is lazy work, you can do better" (P3). When students wanted to give up, their teachers would not let them. One example was when a student was experiencing high levels of anxiety when he had to give a speech in front of his class. "I told her I wasn't going into the class. I wasn't going to do it….and she said "Whoa, whoa, whoa, yes you are. We've been working on it" (P6). Another example was a student who wanted to give up on her writing project. "She just kept encouraging you and wouldn't let you

be like, *oh, this one's stupid. It sucks. I'm not going to* – "Nope! You're writing it. You're

finishing and you're going to read it in front of the class" (P9).

Teachers set a high bar because they believed in their students and were going to help

them get there. One participant experienced that with both her high school chemistry and

calculus teachers:

> They set a high bar and they wanted you to get to that high bar because they had faith
> that you could do it. So, they believed in you…I think they also recognized that it was
> hard. They both felt like they could push you and you could get there (P2).

That grit was what allowed her and her teachers to form a deep connection. "They were

the hardest classes I've probably took…That made me, I think, bond with them more, because I

knew I probably had to work the hardest I worked in high school in their classes" (P2). Teachers

might have held students accountable for their actions, but also showed them grace. When P12

cheated on a test and admitted to it, her teacher held her accountable and gave her a zero but was

also empathetic by letting her have an opportunity for extra credit so she would not fail the class.

"I feel like that was a very big mess up on my part and he was empathetic" (P12).

By having high expectations and holding students accountable, the participants expressed

that they would not have realized or reached their full potential or been as prepared for the future

without it. Participant 3 began to get emotional and could not even finish her statement because

she began to cry, "If I didn't have teachers like them to help me realize that potential…I don't

know." She went on to express her complete gratitude for where she is today because she had

teachers that believed in her and pushed her to get there.

Theme 1.3 – Teaching Styles/Instructional Practices: The Type of Teacher They

Are. Teachers that made a lasting impact on their students had commonalities in their teaching

styles or instructional practices. Teachers were knowledgeable in their content areas,

individualized and differentiated learning for students, were fun and engaging, provided real-life

application and they why behind learning, and taught more than just academics by also focusing on the whole child and teaching social, emotional or life skills.

A teacher who knows their content. Only two participants discussed their teachers' content knowledge and how smart they were. P2 described her teacher in this way: "She was incredibly smart, and you knew that she was somebody I think that everybody respected."

However, based on other comments or stories participants shared about their teacher, it was indirectly evident that the teachers were knowledgeable and had a way of drawing students in with their passion and expertise within their respective content areas, especially at the high school level (P3, P5, P11).

One thing remains clear, participants no matter how old they were, did not necessarily remember the specific content their teacher taught, but more about how they made them feel.

A teacher who individualizes learning. Individualized learning was portrayed in many different ways. Teachers provided differentiation for students who needed extra support, challenged others who desired more, provided student voice and choice in lessons and assignments, and carved out time to meet with students individually. Some participants struggled in school and needed the extra support from their teachers. They described teachers who were patient, supportive, and were able to help them understand in the specific ways they needed to learn. P1 described a patient teacher: "When I struggled with something, she just walked me through it, and she didn't make me feel stupid for not knowing it. She just helped me to understand in a different way." When P7 moved around so much, she always felt behind. "They just started cursive writing and I missed it. They started subtraction and I wasn't subtracting, but she didn't make me feel stupid." Instead her teacher worked with her and helped her get caught up. Teachers met with students before school, after school, and during other

times of the day in order for the student to get the extra support they needed. For example, P11

shared:

> I would go in during study hall or JAG time, whatever they call it and sat down with him
> a few times because I was needing extra help. He could tell that I needed extra help and
> he was always very accommodating and would schedule meetings with, because he had
> several people that would come in during that study hall. So, there was instances where
> he would block out 15 minutes with this student or, 20 minutes with this student however
> much they were needing. So, there was times that he would do that for me (P11).

Other students needed more of a challenge. Participant 12 recalled that his teacher

"would also challenge her students. So, if they were just blowing through material, she would

always augment and give us, you know, more challenging things kind of on the side" (P12). P3

also expressed gratitude for a teacher who challenged her. "I was not challenged in any way

until I encountered her, and I was like, *I like this teacher. Finally!* It was my senior year and

finally, I got her!"

P6 recognized the vast abilities in their classroom and how his teacher was able to meet

all of their needs:

> In the room there were kids with different abilities. Some of them were not going to
> class. They were just in her room getting what they needed because their abilities maybe
> weren't as high as mine or whatever. She was able to handle all that in the same
> classroom and got everybody to push themselves and get the most out of everybody I
> thought (P6).

Another way of individualizing learning was allowing student choice. Teachers gave

flexibility in assignments to allow for individuality and an opportunity for students to explore

their own interests. P10 described how her teacher individualized learning:

> She encouraged kids to write about and read things that they enjoyed. That was different
> because up until that point it was "Ok class we're going to read you know this book" or
> whatever and then we get into this area where she's like, "No, you guys are actually
> individuals and you have your own interests" and so she was very focused on fostering
> that individuality (P10).

P5 described how his learning was individualized when his teacher provided meaningful experiences beyond the four walls of their classroom. "I think he got myself and other people aware of other ways to continue our interest in architecture." P5 went on to describe being involved in Explorers (a branch of the Boy Scouts) that explores careers and actively participating in architecture competitions, winning first place for his drawings and designs. "He would offer other ways for us to kind of grow our knowledge and interest in architecture" (P5).

Based on their responses, results indicate that students' needs were met, they were more focused and engaged, and were more successful in school when they identified their teacher differentiating and individualizing their learning.

A teacher who is fun and engaging. It seemed that participants were able to recall what they had learned or the experiences they had in the classroom when it was fun and engaging. Even as old as 74, Participant 8, recalled in detail, a fun, hands-on geography project she had in fourth grade. For her, that was just one of many engaging activities they did which made it "just an all-around fun year" for her. P4 remembered how her teacher had several animals in their classroom including a therapy dog. "I think we had more animals than students." The participant said the students loved it. "We had a lot of fun. I mean there was a dog in our classroom for goodness sakes!" (P4).

Some students couldn't always recall everything they did in detail, but just remembered that their learning was fun and engaging. For example, P4 shared, "I just remember doing a lot of things. I couldn't give you specific examples of those necessarily, but it wasn't like when I was in fourth grade…sitting at my desk like doing worksheets." When asked if it was more hands-on and active learning she confirmed, "Yeah, all the time." Student engagement was paramount for student success and was a strong contributing factor into why the student's experiences in school became more positive and enjoyable. P7 shared that engagement made all

the difference for her. "That's why I was put on this Earth, to have fun." Finally, she enjoyed

school and began to apply herself when her teacher did just that. "That's what I was waiting for;

somebody to make learning fun" (P7).

   A teacher who provides real-life application and the why behind learning. Participants

recalled teachers who made learning relevant by providing the why behind the skills students

needed and provided opportunities for real-life application. For Participant 2's high school

chemistry and calculus teachers, "It wasn't necessarily all about the grades, even though it was

for us. It was really about making sure we understood what we were learning and why we were

learning it, which I think was really good" (P2). One teacher used his family as an example to

make the lessons more applicable and real-life "that would fit the lesson for that day" (P11).

When describing the attributes that made her teacher effective, Participant 3, felt it was the

application of her learning: "Well ultimately, it all came down to her assignments were real-life

assignments. The teacher kept saying, "This assignment is something that you're going to use in

college" (P3). One of these real-life assignments, to complete a practice application to college,

propelled her college pursuits thanks to the support and advocacy of her teacher.

   A teacher who taught more than academics. It was evident from some of the responses

of the participants that the teachers who made an impact in their lives, focused on the whole

child and taught them more than just academics. Teachers were invested in student's emotional

well-being and taught them strategies and skills in how to manage their emotions, deal with their

anxiety, or battle their depression and self-harm. For example, P6, shared: "I think her biggest

influence probably is she taught me how to deal with my anxiety…Her tools that she gave me

kinda like to deal with it, I still use today." Participant 10 described how her teacher taught her

coping skills for her depression and alternatives to her self-harm behaviors:

She did teach me really good coping skills…She showed me how it was okay to have feelings and express them. She taught me like you know, I don't know how to explain it, but like I would take a rubber band and put it on my wrist and snap that or hold a piece of ice or like take deep breaths, or just alternatives to what I could be doing (P10).

Other teachers taught social skills or helped students deal with peer interactions and difficulties:

I'd see him after school sometimes if I had trouble with the other girls in school, he would talk with me and stuff like that. So, I feel it went beyond the classroom, more like a counselor in a sense. We had a counselor, but I never talked to her. She didn't do anything with us except help us enroll in classes. So he was that person that helped me with some of my girl drama (P1).

Participant 5 was taught study skills, social skills and strategies he could use to help manage his anxiety and emotions. He said, "She helped me not with just the school stuff I would say too, more just life in general, dealing with the social aspects of high school and junior high." (P5). Students benefited personally and academically from a teacher who focused on the whole child, teaching them more than just academic content and more social, emotional and life skills, not only improving their well-being, but their performance as well.

Research Question 1: Summary

The findings of research question one indicates that all strong, positive teacher-student relationships begin with the teacher. It takes a specific type of teacher to build a strong connection with their students. The results strongly correlate with and confirm existing literature's definition of a positive teacher-student relationship (Aultman et al., 2009; Davis, 2003; Newberry, 2010). The findings of this study further demonstrate that when a teacher possesses specific personal qualities: authentic, passionate, altruistic, supportive, trustworthy, genuine care, understanding and acceptance of their students; they have the ability to establish and maintain a strong relationship with students that is natural, caring, authentic, and reciprocal (Aultman et al., 2009; Davis, 2003; Newberry, 2010). When teachers exhibited these specific

qualities, participants in the study directly or indirectly indicated that they felt respected, valued, and heard; also confirming the existing literature on how strong teacher-student relationships are built (Aultman et al., 2009; Davis, 2003; Newberry, 2010). Consequently, when participants had a teacher with these types of qualities, they experienced many positive outcomes in school (Newberry, 2010), but also, as this study demonstrates, participants experienced many positive outcomes beyond school as an adult. These positive outcomes will be explored further in research question four.

In addition to teacher attributes, this study also found that there was a specific type of environment teachers created that allowed students to feel safe, encouraged, supported, included, and accountable. These positive learning environments cultivated strong teacher-student relationships, resulting in short-term and long-term benefits for students. When teachers create environments for and around students' needs they develop positive, learner-centered classrooms that foster positive relationships with students (McCombs, 1997; Nichols & Zhang, 2011). The teacher is the critical individual responsible for creating this type of environment. The former teachers described in this study promoted student-teacher relationships and a more learner-centered classroom environment giving students ownership of their learning, promoting student engagement, and meeting their needs (Nichols & Zhang, 2011). Participants from this study flourished in these types of environments.

The teaching styles, or instructional practices, described by the participants was also indicative of current research. Positive classrooms and effective instructional practices consider students' academic, as well as social and personal needs, encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning, have and communicate high expectations for students, individualize instruction, promote hands-on learning among other practices, and teachers convey that they truly care about students (Stronge et al., 2011).

Literature describes and this study confirms, that a teacher who is most likely to make a lasting impact are teachers who have strong self-efficacy and personal qualities, establish positive learning environments, and create effective learning experiences. Students with these types of effective teachers have successful school outcomes and so did the participants in this study (Stronge et al., 2011). Additionally, this study can go on to further contribute that it is not just strong outcomes in school, but outcomes beyond academic achievement, that have real, lasting long-term influences as adults, leading to happier, healthier, and more fulfilled lives. These long-term influences will be described further in research question four and expanded upon in Chapter 5.

Research Question 2: The Attributes of a Strong Positive Teacher-Student Relationship

As participants recounted stories of their teachers and the types of relationships they had with them, several categories emerged from the attributes of that strong positive relationship. Participants described relationships that could be further organized into three major themes: strong positive teacher-student relationships are personal, intentional, and reciprocal.

Theme 2.1 – Personal. The teachers that established and maintained strong connections with students made their relationships personal. Relationships became more personal when teachers went beyond surface level interactions with students and got to know them on a deeper, more individual level and in turn, allowing the students to know them more personally as well. When teachers opened up, the participants saw them as real and relatable. "I guess it's like seeing them more instead of a teacher, but as another person. Because sometimes as kids, you think of teachers as like *Oh, they just live at school. That's all they do"* (P1). Class size, having the teacher multiple years/for multiple classes or teachers that crossed relational boundaries for the sake of a deeper connection, were also some of the categories that emerged within the theme of personal relationships.

Going beyond the surface. Teachers that were intentional in their pursuit of students got to know the students on a more personal level that went beyond a surface-level relationship. P10 said that her teacher "was very invested in students' lives." Participants directly or indirectly revealed that the influential teachers knew their learning styles and preferences, their deficits and strengths, their fears and dreams, and their personal lives and interests outside of school. P1 said, "I feel he just took more of an interest in me." P6 described a teacher interested in outside activities. "She was always asking us about our practice and about the game and she would attend the game" (P6). While P3 expressed her teacher supported her during her parents' divorce. "I would write to her about family drama that was going on at home and she would write back in the best way a teacher is allowed to" (P3). In turn, teachers also opened up and allowed students to have the opportunity to know them on a personal level. As previously stated, they were authentic and transparent as they shared aspects of their own personal lives including their families (P11, P12), their own passions and interests in school and outside of school (P1, P2, P5), their beliefs (P10), and their hobbies (P5, P10). As mentioned previously, findings suggest that when teachers were personal, they had the ability to push students and hold them accountable in ways that another teacher who may not have had a personal relationship would not have been able to.

Smaller class size or multiple years/classes with the same teacher. Many participants attributed their ability to establish a deeper connection with teachers to a smaller class size, having the teacher for multiple years, or taking multiple classes from them. They attributed their ability to get to know one another on a deeper, more personal level or build upon relationships to the fact that they had more time and more opportunities to cultivate that connection. Seven out of the twelve participants had a teacher for more than one year or more than one class. These personal connections made all the difference for them. P4 said, "I think

maybe only having 11 or 12 kids in the class made a huge difference because you're able to connect on a deeper level." P12 attributed his deep connection with his teacher to having her multiple years:

> I think it was a personal connection because again, I had had her for two years in elementary school. We were able to develop a stronger relationship especially from fourth grade and then going to sixth grade being a little bit older. I think that's probably the main reason it was a personal thing for sure (P12).

> Participant 2 attributed her strong teacher connection to a small class size and having her

multiple years:

> I do think the science research year with Miss Smith, having that smaller ratio for a long time and the fact that I was able to have her multiple years… I think that made a difference because you built on your relationship. You built on the trust (P2).

> Participant 5 described a similar experience:

> I think maybe it was just the fact that we spent so much time with him…You're in high school, you got a seven-hour day and three hours classroom wise are spent with that same person, they're going to make an impact (P5).

The longest a participant had a teacher was for five years and that relationship was one of the most personal relationships recounted. His junior high and high school special education teacher feeling more like family than a teacher:

> And I think that was part of it too, you know, just almost like extended family…You're invited to her wedding, that's kind of what it feels like you know, it's just like, here's this mentor that's an, oh, she's my teacher, but she feels like family (P6).

Crossing relational boundaries. Some of the relationships could have arguably been considered as "crossing the line" professionally, as participants talked about going over to teachers' houses and teachers coming over to theirs. Two people shared that they went over to their teacher's house for a class party. P4 said, "We had a pool party at her house at the end of the year. She was just that kind of teacher." Likewise, P1 shared, "He had a party once for our

whole class at his house. We all went over there and played games outside and stuff like that.

We didn't have very many teachers like that in our school."

Other teachers invited students over, or they went over to student's houses to help them

on assignments or projects outside of the school day. P1's teacher allowed students to come over

to his house to work on writing:

> And he would let any of the students, this might sound weird, but I think because it was such a small district, he would let any of us come over to his house. And he would critique our writing before we turned in papers. So, he was just really inviting to all of us. I would go over there sometimes and, yeah, talk to him about writing and everything (P1).

P5's teacher would come over to his house on the weekends to help him with class

Projects:

> He actually didn't live far from where I grew up and I was working on projects, both at school and at home. I built a model of a house that did well in those competitions and I'd have him come over on a Saturday because I wasn't going to bring my partially built model to school and kind of give me some tips and see how things are going and you know, he was not opposed to that. I suppose nowadays that'd probably be frowned upon, a teacher coming to a student's house or whatever, but you know my folks knew him and that kind of thing (P5).

P12's teacher found a unique way to reward students by taking them out for lunch. "If a

student did well that month, she would take a student out to lunch. Kind of on her own dime as a

reward, which is pretty cool."

Another professional boundary that was crossed was a teacher sharing her faith with her

student in a subtle way. P10 shared how her teacher's Catholic faith actually influenced her own

religious faith journey and showed she could also incorporate her faith at work and "to see that it

can happen without being overbearing." She went on to say:

> There was one point when she gave me a journal and it had Bible verses in it and she was saying, you know, "Just want to let you know I pray for you every day, and I hope that this journal helps you learn how to cope with some of the tough things in your life" (P10).

The teachers that crossed boundaries for their students, could have been reprimanded, but seemed to take those risks regardless. More fascinating was that those actions, in which arguably crossed professional lines, resulted in more positive experiences for the student and something the adults interviewed attributed to one of the reasons why they had such a strong connection with their teacher.

Theme 2.2 – Intentional. Deep connections with students were not just by chance. The participants described teachers who were intentional in making connections with students by getting to know them personally, going above and beyond to show them how much they cared, even after they were no longer their students or in their classrooms.

Going above and beyond. Many participants shared examples of how their teacher went above and beyond not just for them, but for other students as well. When students were going through a difficult time, the teachers were intentional in letting them know they were there for them. One participant described how her teacher helped her through her parents' divorce and would use a journal to communicate back and forth with her. She recalled that memory:

> She had us write daily journals, which I still have. And I would write to her about family drama that was going on at home and she would write back in the best way a teacher is allowed to. It's going to be okay and do little inspirational quotes and just keep your head up and that wort of thing. I had no idea that she was being more of a counselor for me, but looking back on it, she never let me get down on myself during that year at all (P3).

A simple act of sending their student a card or positive note was another way teachers made an intentional effort to have a positive relationship. P10 looked forward to all of the holiday cards her teacher would send, and still sends to her today:

> Well, yeah, she um she made it a habit to, like, I don't know how many people she does it too. But she'll send cards like on Valentine's Day and Halloween and like just random cards that you don't even think people would send. So, I actually still get cards from her and she keeps me updated on her family's lives and I love it. It's great (P10).

Teachers would make an intentional effort to inquire about their student's personal lives, their interests, and support the activities students were involved in outside of school. P10's teacher "would go to basketball games or even stuff outside of school." P6 shared a similar memory: "She would attend the game and say, "I saw you play last night. You had a good game.""

That intentionality allowed them to establish and maintain a deep, personal relationship and provided students with a trusting adult that they could confide in and relate to.

Made an effort even when they were no longer their student. Another reason that the relationships between the participants and their teachers appear to have been so strong was that their teachers continued to make an intentional effort with students even after they had transitioned to the next grade level or graduated high school. When one student struggled with her transition into fifth grade, her previous teacher made an effort to continue that supportive and caring relationship with her, allowing her to come back and spend time with her. "Once I had gone into fifth grade, I was kind of having a hard time transitioning and the teachers weren't very nice. And so, I would go to her office and get some homework done in there" (P10). This was also the same teacher that saved her life a year later by reporting her for suicidal watch after she made an unusual comment to her teacher about not seeing her the next day. When she was hospitalized, the teacher was by her side, even though she was no longer one of her students. "She actually showed up that night in the emergency room and sat on the bed with me and hugged me" (P10). That teacher has remained a huge part of the participant's life, almost becoming a type of surrogate mother for her.

After graduating high school, one student sold books door to door during his summers off to help pay for his out-of-state college tuition. When his parents refused to sign the letter of credit for him, his former teacher stepped up and vouched for him:

You had to get two people that would sign what was called a letter of credit for you and you know my folks are like, "Look, we're not going to tell you you can't do it, but we're not going to help you do this." So, I went back to (his teacher) and I said "Hey, would you sign this letter of credit?" And he did….basically saying he can vouch for me (P5).

Some teachers supported student's successes years later. P9 shared how touching it was when her former teacher showed up for a writing award she received. "It was really touching because she wasn't my teacher anymore. She didn't have a reason to be there. But she came just for me, and it was very sweet to still have her encouraging me three years later" (P9). Similarly, P1 shared that at their school, teachers got to choose a few students from each class to come back and read the books they wrote, and she was so honored when her former teacher chose her. "She chose me and loved my book and was really supportive of me. She told me, "You were so creative" (P1).

Theme 2.3 – Reciprocal. Many of the positive teacher-student relationships were reciprocal. Both the teacher and student exhibited a mutual care and respect for one another and made a conscious effort to maintain a strong connection. For several participants, they exhibited reciprocity by continuing to include their teacher in their lives well into adulthood, and for some, are still in a reciprocal relationship with their former teacher to this day.

Mutual care and respect. As participants described their former teachers and the strong relationships they had developed with them, one thing that was clear throughout their interviews was the deep level of care and respect participants had for their teachers. They smiled, laughed, and even cried as they told stories of how their teacher made an impact in their life, showing their deep care and appreciation for them. P3 boldly stated, "She is everything that I've gotten to where I am today." As students, they looked up to their teachers and wanted to be like them and now as adults, they have grown to appreciate them after knowing their true impact. P5 said, "I don't think I'd be working at place like this right now without her confidence in me." After

stealing candy from their classroom jar, Participant 4 describes the feeling of guilt that washed over her because she knew she had disappointed her teacher. "She just did the whole, I'm very disappointed in you line, and I think that stuck with me because I had just disappointed, at that time, my favorite person in the whole world" (P4).

Maintained relationship over time. Eight of the twelve participants had such a strong connection with their teachers that they maintained that relationship even though they were no longer a student in their class, some still in contact with their teachers decades later (P5, P10). Often times, students would go back and visit their former teacher(s). P2 shared that her two high school teachers "were the kind of teachers that you wanted to go back and visit. So, for years, I would come back when I was in town or whatever. I would go back and just check in or visit with them which was fun" (P2). P5 would return during college to spend time with his former drafting teacher and share his college projects with him. "It would not be uncommon at all for me to come back over spring breaks or whatever to work on a project during that time…It was the only teacher that I really maintained contact with" (P5).

Some students share that they currently stay in touch with their former teachers by exchanging Christmas cards (P5, P10), being Facebook friends (P6, P9), or even meeting up for lunch (P9) in order to stay up to date on each other's personal lives. P9 said that her and her teacher have "been to lunch, I don't know, a handful of times just to catch up…I have to watch what I post on Facebook, so I don't disappoint my third-grade teacher."

Future student reciprocity. It was not just the teacher who made a strong effort to maintain the student relationship over the years. Many participants shared how they also put forth an effort to continue that relationship with their teachers. P6 returned from college to visit his former teacher. "I think I came back the first week and went back to school and saw her and

told her how it was going" (P6). P11 also shared the same, "I've gone back a few times and I've kept in touch with him even using him for college assigned observations" (P11).

Teachers were invited to students' weddings and one teacher was even a part of the wedding (P5, P10). P10 shared, "She was actually in our wedding. So that was really special to us" (P10). Another participant making sure he supported his teacher when he retired. "When he retired, I actually was on a cruise and made sure I got back in time to go to his retirement party" (P5).

One student even sought out her teacher's approval of the boys she dated and ultimately the husband she chose to marry:

> She was always a person that I would go to and say, "Hey, this is the person I'm dating." And her opinion mattered. So, there was one person that I remember introducing to her and she kind of was like, "Oh, okay." And I was like, maybe not (P10).

Research Question 2: Summary

The results of this study indicate that strong, positive teacher-student relationships are personal, intentional and reciprocal. These three aspects of teacher-student relationships are confirmed in literature. Teachers that reveal personal aspects of their lives and are genuinely interested in their students as individuals, effectively create closer, more personal connections (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013; Warnick et al., 2016). Just as described by participants in this study, teachers that are intentional in getting to know students have the ability to get to know them on a deeper, more personal level in order to successfully navigate how to create and maintain deep connections that in turn, engage and motivate students (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008; Aultman et al., 2009). Research indicates that students who feel their teacher intentionally gets to know them on a personal level and who have teachers that are authentic and open, reciprocate the relationship as they feel fully connected with their teacher (Warnick et al., 2016).

The findings in this study confirm this notion, as all participants in this study reciprocated the relationships, many beyond the classroom, creating deeper, stronger, lasting connections.

In regards to personal, intentional and reciprocal relationships between teachers and students, this study can potentially contribute to new findings as trends in the narratives indicated that teachers crossed relational boundaries for the sake of a deeper connection with students, that having smaller class sizes or the teacher multiple years/classes resulted in a deeper connection, and that relationships with students were maintained long after students transitioned to the next grade level, graduated high school, or into adulthood. These findings offer new explorations for further research and will be explored deeper in Chapter 5.

Research Question 3: The Sustained Benefits of a Strong, Positive Teacher-Student Relationship

It was evident by the participant's responses that there were many sustained benefits from having a strong positive teacher-student relationship. Those benefits can be organized into three major themes of improvement for students: self-improvement, health and well-being improvement, and improvements in student outcomes.

Theme 3.1 – Self-Improvement. Several people expressed how the positive relationship with their teacher and the way their teacher interacted with them gave them the confidence they needed, helped them find their purpose and gave them a sense of identity and belonging.

Self-esteem and confidence. When participants were asked how their teacher influenced them, many portrayed a teacher that gave them the self-esteem and confidence needed to not only be successful in school, but also in life. By having a teacher that believed in them, supported them, and encouraged them, they were able to overcome personal and academic challenges to find a confidence in their abilities they never had before. P6 shared that even with his anxiety and learning disability, his teacher's reassurance gave him "the confidence that I can

pretty much do anything if I just focus and buckle down and do it, I can figure it out." This confidence and self-worth changed participants' perspective of school and was crucial to their future success. P8 stated, "I wouldn't have enjoyed school at all." P1 had a similar experience and shared:

> I could have seen me going through school hating it. I've always had low self-esteem, but I think it would have been even lower had I not had a teacher that believed in me, gave me support and helped me see that I can learn (P1).

Teachers also gave students the confidence to be resilient and take chances. For example, P10 said, "She kind of she taught me that a lot of things take hard work and you just need to go for it if you want to do it" (P10). P7 stated that, "I think I would've been more afraid to try."

Identity and acceptance. Teachers taught students to accept who they are and to not allow their diagnoses and disabilities to define them. Students were able to find their strengths and ultimately their identity and self-acceptance. P6 was a student with anxiety and a learning disability and realized his potential through the support of his teacher, teaching him to capitalize on his strengths and not his shortcomings and said, "She focused on what I could do" (P6). After struggling for years in reading, P1 finally found her talent in writing, now such an important part of her life. One woman's acceptance of Dyslexia began with her fourth-grade teacher. She explained, "There was a stigma at one time. *Oh my God, you got a reading problem.* But then I found out some really neat people had Dyslexia. So, I felt better about saying it to people" (P8).

Sense of belonging. Relationships with teachers also provided students with a sense of belonging. Some participants shared how they did not quite fit in with others and their teacher made them feel like they belonged. P3 found solace in the "quirky teacher." She shared that her teacher "was kind of the outcast teacher and I was an outcast in high school. I didn't have any friends and so I immediately was drawn to her" (P3). P2 never fully felt like she fit in, until she

found two high school teachers who helped her feel like she belonged. "I never felt like I found my place in a friend group…I think I probably tended to like the adults more, which is why my teachers probably had such an impact on me, because I could talk with them" (P2). That sense of belonging helped the former students feel valued and ultimately improved their view of self.

Theme 3.2 –Health and Well-Being Improvement. Having and maintaining strong relationships with teachers allowed students to benefit from having stronger social and emotional skills, as well as strategies to cope with their mental health, which resulted in the improvement of their overall health and well-being.

Social. Findings from the study indicate that students benefited socially by their relationship with their teacher in two ways. The teacher either provided social opportunities for the student or they provided them the necessary social skills to have more successful peer relationships and interactions, both of which enhancing their well-being. P6 sharing how his teacher helped him in "dealing with the social aspects of high school and middle school." One teacher helped the new girl make friends when she had trouble fitting in and she shared that "she brought me into the group" (P7). P10 also shared how her teacher introduced her to a friend that was more like her and ended up being a beneficial friendship for a long-time:

> When I was in sixth grade our teacher had introduced us to each other. And she had a very similar homelife to what I had. I think that she noticed that, and she thought maybe you guys would be friends. And so, um just that intentionality. You know, of putting us together. I don't, I don't know how much it helped her I would like to think that it did a little bit, but I know that her friendship really helped me along (P10).

Emotional. Another sustained benefit of having a positive relationship with their teachers was their emotional well-being. P3 described that her middle school experience would have been more challenging. **"**I probably would have been a much more depressed middle schooler because that was right in that transitional time and that was already rough as it is" (P3). P6 shared how bad he struggled with anxiety and how emotional he would get when he faced

those anxious moments "I just needed to learn how to handle my emotions more." His teacher

taught him how to deal with his anxiety and better manage those heightened emotions. "Her

tools that she gave me to deal with it, I still use today" (P6). Another teacher also helped P10

express her emotions in a healthy way as she battled depression. "She started with (the) journal

and showed me how to and that it was okay to, you know, have feelings and express them."

Mental Health. Along the same lines, teachers also helped students who struggled with

mental health. Their relationships taught students how to manage their anxiety or depression

(P3, P6, P10), alternatives to self-harm (P10), and how to ask or reach out for help (P10). One

teacher even saved her students life by reporting her for suicidal watch. P10 shared, "If it

weren't for her decision to make that call, I don't know if I'd be here." Her teacher also

provided her strategies to manage her depression and stop her self-harm temptations:

> She did teach me really good coping skills…She taught me like, I don't know how to
> explain it, but like I would take a rubber band and put it on my wrist and snap that or
> hold a piece of ice or like take deep breaths, or just alternatives to what I could be doing
> (P10).

Theme 3.3 – School Outcomes Improvement. The findings indicate that strong

teacher-student relationships resulted in some form of school improvement for all participants.

Students were able to overcome academic challenges and other aspects that were impeding their

learning. Positive relationships with teachers helped create a more positive school experience,

provided opportunities to become more involved, increased student engagement and motivation,

as well as challenged and held students accountable. These benefits resulted in all twelve

participants expressing that they performed better in school because of their relationships with

influential teachers.

Overcame challenges in school. Some of the participants struggled academically. They

gave credit to their teachers and positive relationships they had in helping them overcome some

of those academic struggles. One participant shared his personal journey with childhood epilepsy, a learning disability, and anxiety. His teacher helped him learn how to focus on his strengths to get through the academic challenges, especially in math, and also gave him strategies to manage his anxiety (P6). Learning her strengths and how to be successful with Dyslexia, began with Participant 8's fourth-grade teacher (P8). P1 was able to overcome her reading struggles and grew to love literature thanks to her third grade and high school English teacher. She shared, "I always felt like a poor reader. I was slow at it and everything. So, I think the passion he brought about all these books that he would bring up…just got me reading more" (P1).

Changed student perspective of school to a more positive learning experience. Some people shared how those strong, positive relationships with teachers completely changed their experiences in school and created a more positive perspective of not only themselves, but of school in general. They became confident in themselves and began to like school. That turning point created further success for participants, both academically and emotionally. For example, P7 shared, "I think I relaxed in school a little more. I started taking school a little more seriously. I was not good in math, but I was afraid to try. One thing is she made me try." P8 hated school until her fourth-grade teacher interceded on her behalf and refused to send her to the younger grade level for reading:

> I didn't like it at all because we were labeled slow people in school. So no, I hated school. But then after that, after she stopped doing it, sending us down, I don't remember not like school anymore. I just loved her (P8).

Another participant who also struggled in reading felt she would have continued to hate school and have low self-esteem if it were not for her teacher:

> I could have seen me going on through school hating it. I've always had low self-esteem, but I think it would have been even lower had I not had a teacher that believed in me and gave me support and helped me see that I can learn, I might need things explained

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differently. But I don't know, I needed that support at that time. So, I feel that was huge (P1).

Became involved. Some participants credit their teacher for getting them involved in activities that grew their knowledge and talents. Being involved with other activities was also beneficial to them, both personally and academically. One participant explained that with the help of his teacher he was able to overcome his learning disability, anxiety and being shy to perform in school plays, all because his teacher pushed him to take a speech class and helped him speak in front of others (P6). Another person shared that his teacher was instrumental in keeping him in school and had she not got him involved in drama, he may not have graduated high school at all. He explained, "That kind of helped me out and kind of kept me focused in high school. I think she's pretty instrumental to kind of keep me in school until I figured out what the heck was going on" (P12). It was competitions and opportunities outside of school that benefited Participant 5. He shared how his teacher got him and other students involved in a branch of the Boy Scouts, called Explorers, as well as participating in local and state architecture competitions. P5 shared that it was his teacher "that got us involved in that. So, he would offer ways for us to kind of grow our knowledge and interest in architecture."

More challenged. When students were challenged, they grew academically and reached a new level of potential they did not think was possible. The responses indicate that it was a positive relationship with their teacher that drew that out in them. P2 described teachers who challenged her. "They were the hardest classes I've probably took. So, I think that made me bond with them more because I knew I probably had to work the hardest I worked in high school in their classes" (P2). P3 was academically refreshed by the challenge. "I was not challenged in any way until I encountered her, and I was like, *I like this teacher. Finally!*" If it weren't for her junior high biology teacher pushing her to enroll in honors courses, P9 shared:

"I may have just stuck with like the bare minimum, which I guess would have been fine, but I would have been a lot more delayed in getting my degree…And honestly, I may not have pursued it all just because my life is so busy with kids and all of that." (P9).

Held accountable. The findings in the study suggest that students benefited from being held accountable. They may not have always appreciated it at the time, but all participants who mentioned accountability were grateful for the teacher holding them accountable and credit their experienced success from those moments. P1 was called out by her high school teacher when she began to show a pattern of truancy. He held her accountable to come in and make-up the work:

> I was almost truant my junior year of high school. I think having a teacher that cared if I was at school, and just noticed that I wasn't there and then helped me get back on track was helpful. He'd get after me like, "You missed a test today." And would make me come in on my free time, which I hated, to make up stuff and we'd talk (P1).

P3's teacher would not allow her to get away with doing the bare minimum. The teacher would tell her, "Hey, this right here, this is lazy work, you can do better" (P3). One teacher insisted the P9 finish what she started:

> She just kept encouraging you and wouldn't let you be like, "Oh, this one's stupid. It sucks. I'm not going to." (The teacher would say), "Nope! You're writing it. You're finishing and you're going to read it in front of the class (P9).

She later described how that accountability of not giving up stuck with her and she is now finishing up a degree after taking 17 years off of school:

> I found that drive again that I'm like okay, I got to finish this. I got to see this through. I can definitely still see that push, and now that I'm back in school, I'm still that same person. I still want the A's. And even though I work full time, I have four kids, I'm still like, "That's a B. That's not okay." And so, I still see that drive in me. She was right. That's just the person that I am. I need to excel. I still see that (P9).

P11 was given empathy when she cheated on a high school psychology exam but was also held accountable for her actions. When she came forward and admitted her guilt, her

teacher gave her a zero on the exam, but also provided an opportunity for extra credit so she

would not fail the class completely. She said:

> That's kind of where our relationship started, I had to admit I made a mistake, I've
> cheated… yes, there was a consequence, but it wasn't as if I was shamed for what I had
> done. He was empathetic to an extent (P11).

That stuck with her forever and when she had the opportunity or urge to cheat on future

exams, she never did:

> As weird as it is, like cheating, the urge to cheat on future tests, I always thought of him
> and that experience with him. And I thought to myself, okay these teachers are probably
> not going to be as empathetic as he was, I probably got lucky. So, take it as a lesson and
> don't do it again. So, whenever there was temptations, I always thought about that
> mistake" (P11).

Continued resource and mentor. Many strong, positive relationships with teachers

resulted in the participant having a long-term mentor. Some participants were able to repeatedly

use their former teacher as a continued resource when they moved on to other grade levels,

college, or even into their careers. A few participants used their former teacher to complete

college observations (P3, P4, P11). For example, P3 shared, "I used one of her classrooms as

one of my observations for my initial intro to teaching. It was just that pride of I want to go back

and share this with one teacher." P5 returned to his high school drafting classroom to show his

teacher the college projects he was working on. Other teachers provided college

recommendations (P4, P6, P11). One teacher even mentoring her former student, now a teacher

of her own, giving her advice and strategies (P3). P3 described, "When I taught fourth grade,

even fifth grade, I kind of recall that some of her strategies and the way she instructed." The

participant still currently seeks and values her teacher's advice. "You're like, hey, I have a

question about this because I know you were fourth grade for so long" (P3).

Research Question 3: Summary

The sustained benefits of a strong, positive teacher-student relationship that were found in this study align with current research. Results indicate that the teachers described by participants made a unique contribution to the their social and cognitive development having lasting impacts (Davis, 2003). These relationships, as described by the participants, also proved to be a central component in successful teaching and learning (Aultman et al., 2009) and narratives indicated they had a tremendous, positive impact on student achievement, academic performance, and success in other domains such as social and emotional well-being for participants (Newberry, 2010). Additionally, the participants also confirming current literature as they indicated feeling more comfortable and being more engaged, the more supportive their teachers were (Reeve, 2006).

Current research indicates that positive teacher-student relationships are associated with positive student outcomes such as increase in participation, student satisfaction, dropout prevention, self-efficacy/mental health, positive motivation, social connection/skills, reduction in student behavior and increase in attendance (Cornelius-White & Cornelius-White, 2007). The findings in this study confirmed all of these benefits, along with discovering additional benefits to having a positive teacher relationship, impacting not only student achievement, but also in creating long-term impacts on a student's life beyond school into adulthood (F. A. J. Korthagen et al., 2014). The additional benefits discovered will be explored further in Chapter 5.

Research Question 4: The Long-Term Sustained Impacts of a Positive Teacher-Student Relationship

One thing that was clear when interviewing participants was how every single person shared that having a strong, positive teacher relationship resulted in at least one, if not many, long-term impacts on their lives. Those long-term impacts could be categorized into five major

themes. Teachers impacted the long-term results of students' college, career, personal well-being, self-actualization, and generalized life skills.

Theme 4.1 - Career. Whether they have just begun their careers or have since retired, all twelve participants identified that their teacher was instrumental in the career path they chose. Participants shared that their former teacher influenced their occupational choices because they had advanced their individual talents/passions in a particular area of interest, provided the skills necessary for them to be successful in that specific field, or simply inspired them to serve others and make the kind of positive difference for others the way their teacher had.

Fostering their talents, interests, and passions. Teachers who had a strong impact in the lives of their students knew the participant's innate strengths and talents and had a way of drawing it out of them. Teachers who intentionally made time to connect with the student in order to know them on a deeper, more personal level had the uncanny ability to promote the students' individual passions and ignite a life-long love of learning in their particular areas of interest. These effective teachers challenged participants to explore their passions and helped them to build a strong foundation upon which their career could later grow and develop. One person from the study shared how her passion for writing began with her third-grade teacher and was further developed years later by her high school English teacher. She initially had gone into another career because she did not see any way of making money with writing, but that strong desire to write never left her. Now, years later, she is pursuing that passion once again and working on her first book while staying home with her children. She still credits both teachers for her writing passion and abilities; her elementary teacher for originally finding that passion and her high school English teacher for promoting it. P1 shared how, "Mr. Smith got me involved in different types of writing, more of fiction, which is now my passion. He expanded my interests and just really helped me develop as a writer."

Many participants also revealed they had the same passions and interests as their teacher, ultimately leading them to pursue a career path in a similar field their favorite teacher had taught. Some participants shared that the teacher's own individual passions were what initially drew them in and sparked their desire to pursue those similar passions on a daily basis through their occupation. For P11 it was psychology that led to counseling:

> So, because of him, then I ended up taking two or three more elective courses from him in the psychology realm. I think it was either Social Psychology that he taught and Child Psychology, I think. So, I took those classes from him and then kind of started down my path of.... Okay, this is what I want to do in college, I want my major to be in Psychology. So, I... That was my major and then I had a minor in business. I went on to get a master's in Counseling and then a few months after graduating I opened up a private practice. So, this actually upcoming October, I'll have my private practice for five years (P11).

For P2 it was science and math that led to becoming a pediatrician. She stated that, "Because I loved science and math so much, I ended up going into medicine…I do think that I chose my career path because I enjoyed the subjects that they taught" (P2).

Drafting courses led P5 to a career in architecture. If his teacher had not been so supportive and knowledgeable, he shared, "I definitely think there's a strong possibility that I wouldn't have gotten into architecture" (P5). For another four participants in the study, it was becoming a teacher themselves because their teacher was so passionate and teaching and learning (P3, P4, P7, P8).

Providing the necessary skills. Some people shared that they wouldn't have the skills necessary for their job if it were not for the teacher instilling those values, teaching those specific skills and providing the necessary tools needed to be successful in that specific career path. P2 stated:

> I ended up majoring in chemistry. Most people that went to medical school went into biology. I chose chemistry and I think it's because I had such a good foundation in chemistry with her that made me be successful in college and have faith in that…I do think that I chose my career path because I enjoyed the subjects they taught (P2).

Wanting to be like them. Many simply wanted to be like their teacher. Several

participants shared that they became a teacher because they wanted to emulate the same

experiences for other students that they were so fortunate to have (P3, P4, P7, P8). They desired

to seek out the lonely, outcast in their classroom and give them a sense of belonging. For

example, P7 shared how as a teacher, "I guess I felt for the lonely kids and the ones that felt

alone." P8 wanted to assure the child with a disability that it does not define them or limit what

they *can* do and as a teacher she wanted to "make their fourth-grade year as enjoyable as it was

for me" (P8). P4 had such a fun and engaging learning environment experience it made her want

to become a teacher:

> I don't think I would've become a teacher. Honestly, it wasn't something that I thought
> of before then. I don't know what I would be doing, but she made me really, she lit a fire
> in me to want to educate because I wanted to be like her. I honestly don't think I would
> have been a teacher. Or even if I was, I don't think I would do the things I do now (P4).

As P4 described herself as a teacher, she pointed out how she models her teaching style

after her former fifth-grade teacher. "I remember we had lots of discussions as a class. We

would talk about things, and I do that with my kids a lot. And just like the very strict

expectations" and when asked what she does to make it personal she again referred back to her

fifth-grade teacher and stated:

> I kind of do the same thing. I make a point to talk with every kid every day. Not just is
> your homework done, but like, what'd you do this weekend…I talk with them and build
> those relationships and make them feel like they matter to somebody (P4).

The findings in the study make it appear that teachers emulate the positive experiences

they had, perpetuating a cycle of positive relationships for the next generation of students. For

example, P3 shared she had a "desire to be a non-conformist teacher, to be that weird teacher."

She went on to say:

I hope she wouldn't be offended by that, but you know, to be that type of teacher that says, "I want real world experiences, I want to connect with my students." That sort of thing. That is the core of where I come from. Those two are the core of what keeps me thinking (referring to her two teachers that had the most impact on her life). I want at least one of those students to always look back and be like, "You are that teacher." At least one, I'd love to have more" (P3).

Some other participants who did not become teachers themselves, still desired to have a career that served others in order to have the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives the way their teacher had done for them. P9 described how her teacher still inspires her:

My third-grade teacher, even still, kind of encourages me to find a need and to come up with a solution for it, which I think really drives the career that I do. I honestly have a choice to kind of go wherever I want to go. If I want to go to the hospital or whatever. But I don't want to. This is what I want to do, because I see a need for people who want to do this because there's a kind of nursing for everyone and this is clearly my kind. These are my people; this is where I want to be (P9).

Continued mentorship. Some participants continued to use their teacher as a resource and mentor after graduating high school as they studied for their degrees or when they were beginning their careers, some still even using the teacher as mentor to this day, continuing to seek their advice and counsel in their field. P3 uses her former teacher as a teaching mentor:

When I taught fourth grade, even fifth grade, I kind of recall that some of her strategies and the way that she instructed and even relied on her in real time. You're like, "Hey, I have a question about this because I know you were fourth grade for so long."…She's more of an active real time mentor outside of the building, like that sort of thing. She kind of just says, "Hey, it's going to be okay. Trust me, I've been there" (P3).

Many participants questioned had they not had that particular teacher in that particular class, would they still have had such a strong passion and interest in their current career. For example, P5 shared:

Well, part of me wonders if (his high school) didn't have all these drafting courses, I don't know that I necessarily would have gone into architecture…I really liked it. I really like the teacher he's a good guy and I kind of think that if he wasn't real supportive and encouraging you know, who knows, maybe I would have gone into some sort of science or math career or something like that (P5).

P11 had a similar statement:

> I often wonder if he was not the psychology teacher, would I have pursued that field, just because he was such a great teacher and was so supportive and funny and inappropriate…I mean, I do think about that a lot. Would I have pursued and then stayed in the psychology field? I don't know. I really don't know. I feel like a good teacher, especially when it's in a class that you're interested in and wanting to potentially have it as a career. If you're in a class that the teacher is just horrible, I mean, that has to have some impact. So, I don't know if he wouldn't have been the teacher, my career choice could have looked quite different (P11).

Theme 4.2 - College. College was another major theme identified in the interview responses. Whether their teacher encouraged them to consider college, played a role in helping them get in, guided them to the specific college they attended, or influenced the specific degree they chose, every single participant gave some or all credit to their teacher for the influence they had on their post-secondary educations.

Planting a seed. As high school students, some participants did not think they would be able to afford to go to college or were even capable of even getting into college until their teacher saw true potential and helped them realize it was in fact possible. P6's teacher promoted his confidence and self-esteem so that what once was believed to be an unreachable possibility could actually become a true reality for him:

> I had not planned to attend college, just because I thought, there's no way. I can hardly make it through high school. But as soon as I got to my freshman year in high school, she said, "You're going to go to school, you're going to go to college because I know you can do this. This is our plan, this is what you're going to do, we're going to find the school that you can go to and we're going to find the school that offers what you want to do as far as your passions." She definitely guided me to push me further than I thought I was ever able to…to get a college degree…I don't think I would have went to college…my life would have been a lot different. I wouldn't have experienced everything I have for sure (P6).

Making it possible. Many people interviewed indicated that they were first generation college graduates and needed the guidance of their teacher to navigate the unchartered territories and hidden curriculums of college: to research what programs were out there in their field of

interest, look into the colleges they wanted to attend and the requirements they had to meet to get

in, to know how to apply for college, to understand and complete financial aid, and ultimately

deciding on the specific school or degree that would be best for them. P5 shared how his teacher

"would talk about the different colleges and different programs" back before the internet was

created when manual research had to be done. One teacher helped P6 find a college he could

attend that did not require a certain ACT score:

> I knew my ACT and stuff was not going to be good enough to get in. So, we worked on
> (it), we knew that they did not require it. So…that was our game plan…we're going to
> go ahead, we're going to take the ACT for whatever it is. We're not going to rely on it
> and we're going to go to where I can, wherever it works best for me to get in (P6).

> P4's former teacher gave her recommendations for strong teacher college programs.

"We really had no idea. My parents hadn't gone to college, we didn't know anything about what

would be a good teacher school" (P4). Participant 3 revealed that her teacher made college a

reality for her as a first-generation college student when she explained the financial and

application process and helped her complete them by the required deadlines. She shared how her

teacher:

> …took the time to say, "Just because you don't come from money doesn't mean you
> can't go to school." Because I had just resigned myself to having no degree because my
> mom didn't. My mom had no idea. She (her mom) just said, "I'm sorry you're not going
> to college. And this is that moment that she said (the teacher), "Enough is enough. Let's
> talk to the school counselor, we're going to get you pamphlets, we're going to do
> whatever."…She walked me through the community college application. So, she printed
> it off so that I can see what it would look like online. And then she walked me through
> the necessary resources that I would need for FAFSA, but she didn't actually apply for it
> for me. And she checked up. She followed up with me and told me deadlines and stuff
> like that…I can't guarantee that had that one moment not occurred, I may not have been
> achieving my master's and ultimately one day my doctorate (P3).

Pursued field of study/degree. Teachers also influenced the degree or field of study that

students pursued in college. All 12 participants graduated with college degrees and all but two

graduated with their original intended or teacher influenced degree. The two that switched

degrees were still influenced by their teachers in their other fields of study and ultimate careers, one actually returning to her original passion for writing years later. Four participants went to college to become teachers because of their positive experience and strong relationship they had with their influential teacher (P3, P4, P7, P8). P4 made the decision to be a teacher in elementary school. She said, "It was in fifth grade because of her that I decided I'm going to be a teacher, that's what I'm going to do" and all throughout her school experience, never wavering in her decision she made in the fifth grade (P4). P2 also shared how the two influential teachers she had in science and math led her the decision to study medicine. P11's progression of psychology courses and having such a strong relationship with her high school psychology teacher led her to study psychology and counseling:

> So, because of him, then I ended up taking two or three more elective courses from him in the psychology realm. I think it was either Social Psychology that he taught and Child Psychology, I think. So, I took those classes from him and then kind of started down my path of.... Okay, this is what I want to do in college, I want my major to be in Psychology. So, I... That was my major and then I had a minor in business. I went on to get a master's in Counseling (P11).

Providing the skills to be successful in college. Some participants shared that their teacher equipped them with the necessary skills to be successful in college such as study habits, applying themselves, or the academic foundation they needed to be successful in college. P5 felt prepared because of what his teacher had taught him and the experiences he gained from being in competitions that ultimately helped him study architecture. He noted that his teacher "was very patient and really taught us you know how to draw and how to present things" (P5). Some people did not use those skills until later in life when they went to college years after graduation or returned to finish their degrees. P12 attributed his success in college to his teachers' influence in shaping the strong student characteristics and study skills he had. "Deep down she played a

part, even though it was kind of later" (P12). P9 also shared her drive to finish college and

pursue the career of her dreams was realized because of what her teacher had taught her:

> I took a significant break…. I found that drive again that I'm like, "Okay, I got to finish this. I got to see this through." I can definitely still see that push (from her teacher), and now that I'm back in school, I'm still that same person. I still want the A's. And even though I work full time, I have four kids, I'm still like, "That's a B. That's not okay." And so, I still see that drive in me. She was right. That's just the person that I am. I need to accel. I still see that (P9).

Theme 4.3 - Personal Well-Being. By having experienced such a strong and powerful

positive teacher-student relationship, participants described several examples of long-term

influences to their overall well-being. It was through their influential teacher that they found

life-long mental and emotional health, a healthy and positive outlook/perspective on life, and had

or still have beneficial relationships with friends or spouses that also enhance their well-being.

Mental and emotional health. The importance of mental and emotional well-being has

never been more emphasized than it is today, not only for students, but for adults. It is a

necessity to lead a happier more fulfilled life. Stigmas associated with mental health are being

brought to the surface and more people are finding solace in breaking their silence on the battles

they face with mental and emotional health. A few participants opened up and shared their own

experiences with anxiety, depression, and self-harm. For some, their teachers are the reason that

they have the tools and strategies they still use to combat those emotional and mental challenges.

For example, P6 shared how his teacher provided him the tools to manage his anxiety:

> I think her biggest influence probably is she taught me how to deal with my anxiety. I mean I get a little bit here and there, but her tools that she gave me to deal with it, I still use today. I mean when I'm feeling a little anxious or nervous about something, work, or whatever, anything with the family, I always remember back now…she actually taught me a few little breathing exercises. I mean it may not seem like much back then but…those little things still come to mind (P6).

P10 would not be alive today if it were not for her teacher's intervention. When asked

how her life would be different today, she said:

Well, I don't know that I'd be here. Start with that one. Um, yeah. I don't think that I would have the coping mechanisms. I have now not that my life is as stressful as I once thought it was but it's, it's nice to know that you know, I have ways of dealing with stressful things (P10).

Healthy and positive outlook. The adults from the study who have healthy, optimistic perspectives attribute that to the influence of their teachers and the positive experiences they had in school because of them. Several participants expressed that had they not had that specific teacher in their lives they would have continued to hate school and struggle (P1, P6, P7, P8). Boosting their confidence, believing in them, and instilling hope switched the narrative for these students. When they became more connected in school, they became more successful, and as a result of that success, gave them not only a more positive outlook in school, but ultimately their life. P6's ability "to move forward when things aren't going well, just have a positive outlook on everything is a big influence" is from his former special education teacher.

Healthy relationships. Healthy relationships were either a direct result of a teacher's actions for students or sometimes were an indirect result of a teacher's influence later on in their adult lives. Teachers recognized when students needed strong peer relationships in their lives and orchestrated those connections. P10 found refuge in a friend that was experiencing the same things she was going through. Her former teacher was the one that brought them together and she shared that:

> I wouldn't have the relationships with people that I have. Obviously that friend that she introduced me to years ago. She was an important part of my life, all the way through high school…her friendship really helped me along (P10).

Another teacher focused on the relationship between twin sisters and helped redirect their natural inclination to constantly compare themselves to one another. P8 said:

> She always told my twin sister and I, "Don't worry about spelling. You're up one month, she's down. Then the next month, she said, "She'll be up, and you'll be down." So, she kind of gave us that we didn't have to compete with each other (P8).

P8 went on to describe how her and her sister did not compete with one another from that point on and continue to remain extremely close to this day, even getting matching half-heart tattoos on their 70th birthday.

Interestingly enough, healthy relationships were also an indirect result of a positive teacher influence. If one participant had not gone to college to study medicine, she would not have met her husband in medical school (P2). P10 also might not have married her husband if it were not for the approval of her former teacher. P10 stated that, "She was always a person that I would go to and say, hey, this is the person I'm dating, and her opinion mattered." So, when her teacher approved of her former husband, it mattered to her and influenced her decision to ultimately marry him. Her teacher actually even being a part of her wedding ceremony.

Theme 4.4 - Self-Actualization. Participants have been able to arrive at self-actualization finding their self-confidence and acceptance, their self-fulfillment and purpose, as well as their morals and beliefs through their teacher's influences.

Self-confidence and acceptance. Because teachers helped students to overcome personal and academic challenges and find a confidence in their abilities they never had before, they were able to carry that confidence and self-acceptance with them into adulthood influencing the decisions they make and the lives they live today. P6 shared that his teacher's reassurance gave him "the confidence that I can pretty much do anything if I just focus and buckle down and do it, I can figure it out" and that teacher's influence stuck with him more than even the many coaches he had growing up as an athlete over the years. He uses that confidence:

> to move forward when things aren't going well…. have a positive outlook on everything is a big influence from her. And I think that's what my teacher gave me was not being afraid to give it a shot, to try it. You never know (P6).

The confidence and self-worth participants found in school was crucial for their future success. P1 noted that:

I could have seen me going through school hating it. I've always had low self-esteem, but I think it would have been even lower had I not had a teacher that believed in me, gave me support and helped me see that I can learn (P1).

Teachers gave students the confidence to be resilient and take chances. For example, P10 said that her teacher "taught me that a lot of things take hard work and you just need to go for it if you want to do it." Participant 7 also shared the same, without the influence of her teacher she would have gone through life and "would've been more afraid to try." The things these participants would have missed out on if they were not willing to take that chance and continue to have the confidence to try no matter what, is hard to underestimate.

With the help and support of their teachers, some participants found acceptance of their disabilities and would not allow it to define who they are. For P8 it was Dyslexia:

The thing with dyslexic people, we have learned to compensate…it makes me try harder at some things. There was stigma at one time. *Oh my God, you got a reading problem.* But then I found out really some neat people had Dyslexia. So, I felt better about saying it to people (P8).

Other participants expressed that without the confidence their teacher gave them they may not have realized their full potential. P2 shared that, "I think I would have been a smart kid, but I don't know. If I didn't have teachers like them to help me realize that potential…I don't know…" the P2 could not finish her statement because she began to cry as she got emotional thinking about the lasting impact her teachers had on her life.

Self-fulfillment and purpose. Some teachers were instrumental in helping participants find their purpose in life and to feel more fulfilled. They have found fulfillment in the careers that they have, the passions they have pursued, or the ways that they give back. P1 described how writing gave her a sense of purpose and self-fulfillment. Had it not been for the relationship she had with her high school English teacher, she would not have that same sense of fulfillment as she went on to say:

It's my passion. It just feeds my soul. It makes me happy and I love being able to be creative…anytime I would go back to it, I just felt happier with life and whenever I would stop because I got too busy or was in grad school or whatever, you know how life is, I just never felt as fulfilled (P1).

P9 also found her purpose in life as she followed the advice of her third-grade teacher to find a need. She serves that need in elderly care as an assistant director of nursing and explained:

I see their influence still in my decision to go into nursing because I felt like I didn't have a purpose, and definitely that third grade teacher that told me to find a need…But I mean honestly most of my life as it is now being in this assistant director of nursing position, still pursuing more, it's a lot of those teachers that fostered that into me that I can do better. I should be better. I should find my passion, find that need, and that's probably exactly why I'm at professionally where I'm at right now (P9).

After her positive experiences in school and the influence of her fourth-grade teacher, P7 devoted her life to children and retired after 40 years of teaching, even being inducted into a teacher Hall of Fame for her 30 years of service in a district. She even talked about how teaching is a forever part of her. She still has dreams of teaching and still thinks of the lessons she could do with her students. It was snowing the day we had our interview and she shared, "I dreamt last night that I was teaching them…any time it snowed an inch, they would write a story about the first snow" (P7).

Morals and beliefs. Teachers also modeled and instilled certain values that ultimately ended up shaping their character, as well as the morals and beliefs that drive them today. P10 stated that, "I don't know that I would have had as good morals instilled, I guess if she wasn't in my life." P10 went on to share that her teacher's faith influenced her own religious journey and how she subtly shares her faith with others:

She was a very strong Catholic and I'm not Catholic, but, you know, seeing that relationship that she had with Christ was very impactful for my own religious faith journey. So, seeing that and then putting that into my own career practices was really helpful, you know, to see that it can happen without being overbearing and also treating really everybody with respect (P10).

P9 was inspired by her teacher's good character and aspires to be the same:

She's such a good person and one of those people that just like kind of exudes that. You know when you just meet somebody and you're like, "Oh, you're good people. And I definitely want to be that. I want to be one of those people that when people meet me they go, "Oh, she's one of the good ones… I want to be that person. And so, I definitely think I probably modeled myself after her and other people in my life, but definitely after her (P9).

Other teachers instilled character in students by teaching them life lessons. P11 shared how she not only never cheated again but had a new empathy for others who have made mistakes. She said, "I feel because that was such a big mess up on my part and he was empathetic. It's made me, I don't know, just a little bit softer towards people when I see them mess up" (P11).

Serving others and giving back. Some participants expressed their desire to serve others and to give back the way their teacher had done for them. P6 claimed that he volunteers and devotes extra time to help be a coach and mentor in youth sports because of watching his teacher do the same so long ago:

You always want to give back and help kids and do all that…Yeah, that was definitely from her because she put in a lot of extra time with her students you know, even beyond normal times…giving us the extra time to help us out and mentor us. I think that's definitely from her (P6).

P1 shared that she enjoyed working with kids that had severe emotional disorders when she was a community-based case manager. Those were her favorite kids to work with because they had a difficult home life and she wanted to help them, just like she had watched her teacher do with her and so many other students. She said, "I remember noticing the interest that he took and how hard he worked to try and help those kids. So yeah, he probably did impact me."

P2 desired to give back and serve on her local school board as president so that she could work to ensure other students got the same great educational experience she had, as well as to support the teachers in their important work with students. She shared:

> I definitely think my experience and how great it was made me want that for all kids. I think knowing how important it is to have somebody there that believes in you is huge...So, I do think that having such good role models for teachers made me, I think, want to give back in that whole education area and support the teachers (P2).

Theme 4.5 - Lifelong Skills. The final major theme that emerged when analyzing participant's responses was the reference to teaching, remembering, and applying lifelong skills. A few mentioned academic skills, but most participants benefited from the life skills their teacher taught them (i.e. executive functioning and growth mindset). By learning them and using them as an adult, they saw benefits within their college, career, well-being and self-actualization. Some examples the participants shared of the lifelong skills that were taught and modeled for them was having the grit to finish what you start (P9), being on time and organized (P12), value, respect, and be kind to others (P10), don't follow the crowd (P11), and you can accomplish anything you set your mind to (P6).

Research Question 4: Summary

The results of this study reveal that teachers have a long-term impact on the lives of their students. When they establish strong, positive teacher-student relationships they have the ability to influence students' lives well-beyond the four walls of their classrooms. Participants shared how their teachers influenced their careers, college, personal well-being, self-actualization, and other life-long skills. Research indicates that positive teacher-student relationships are influential, not only in regards to student achievement, but also in creating the potential for positive, long-term impacts on a student's life beyond school into adulthood (F. A. J. Korthagen et al., 2014). This study further contributing the types of long-term impacts that are not found in

literature and how they have the potential to create a chain of events that truly have no end. These long-term impacts will be explored further in Chapter 5.

Other Findings

All twelve participants indicated that this prominent teacher impacted their lives long-term and that relationship provided many benefits for them as a student and even now as an adult. The twelve participants described sixteen influential teachers (some participants sharing more than one teacher) who changed their life. Of those sixteen teachers, seven were elementary, one middle school, and eight high school, indicating that teachers K-12 can have a long-term impact on a student's life, but there was a lack of middle school teacher representation in the sample. There were four male teachers and twelve female teachers. In regards to gender matching, there were four unmatched gender relationships (male teacher with female student or female teacher with male student) with twelve of the other relationships having the same gender as their teacher, indicating the possibility that gender could be a factor in establishing and maintaining a positive teacher-student relationship, but does not necessarily always have to be the same gender. Seven of the participants had their influential teacher for more than one year or more than one class, possibly indicating that the ability to have a teacher more than once is beneficial in establishing and maintaining a strong, positive teacher-student relationship, but not necessary. The majority of teachers were thought to have taught five or more years and could be categorized as more of an experienced or veteran teacher. Based on what participants remembered, three were thought to be new teachers and the other thirteen were veteran teachers, possibly indicating that veteran teachers are more likely to establish stronger connections with students. There was also a vast representation of schools (i.e. lab school, private schools, public schools) and school districts (i.e. rural, suburban, urban), indicating that relationships can be formed in any type of school and in any district.

Chapter Summary

The findings from this study describe the narratives of people who had an influential teacher that changed their life. It depicts how the positive teacher-student relationships developed, the benefits those relationships had for the students, and the long-term impacts it had on their lives. As previously seen in Figure 1, the analysis of the interview transcriptions revealed four overarching themes: the teacher, the relationship, the benefits, and the long-term impact. Table 1 below provides a simplified overview of the major findings, while I describe the four themes and their subthemes in the following list:

The teacher. For research question one, when analyzing the results of what kind of teacher is likely to make a lasting impact, three major themes emerged: teacher personality, positive learning environment, and teaching style. Simply put, there was a specific type of teacher who created a specific type of environment with a specific type of teaching style that yielded a lasting impact for students.

1) There were specific aspects of a *teacher's personality* (the type of person they are) that can further be categorized by the types of positive qualities they possess. The teachers were authentic, passionate, altruistic, supportive and trustworthy, caring, and understood and accepted students.

2) There were also specific aspects of the *positive learning environments and practices* (the type of learning environments they create) that can further be divided into four categories: a) a classroom that was physically and emotionally safe, b) a classroom that was positive and uplifting, c) a classroom that was inclusive, and a d) classroom that had high expectations and accountability.

3) Relatedly, the *teaching styles and instructional practices* can be categorized into descriptions of a teacher who: a) a who knew their content, b) individualized learning, c) was fun and engaging, d) provided real-life application and the why behind learning, and e) taught more than just academics, focusing on the whole child and their social, emotional, and life skills.

The relationship. Research question two revealed that there were three major attributes that were related to a strong, positive teacher-student relationship. Relationships were personal, intentional, and reciprocal.

1) The *personal* relationships went beyond the surface, crossed relational boundaries and were smaller class sizes or the student had the teacher for multiple years or classes.

2) Teachers were *intentional* in their relationships with students by going above and beyond and making an effort even when they were no longer their student.

3) Relationships were *reciprocal* as there was mutual respect and care for one another, the relationship was maintained over time, and the student reciprocated the relationship.

The benefits: Research question three discovered three major themes for the sustained benefits of a strong, positive teacher-student relationship. These relationships influenced students' self-improvement, health and well-being improvement, and/or school outcomes improvements.

4) Three categories emerged under *self-improvement*: students found a higher self-esteem/confidence, their identity and self-acceptance, a sense of belonging.

5) Three categories also emerged under *health and well-being improvement:* students benefited from improvements in their social, emotional, and/or mental health.

6) There were also six categories that emerged under the *improvement of school outcomes*: students were able to overcome challenges in school, their perspective of school became more positive, they were more engaged and motivated, they were challenged, they were held accountable, and they had a continued resource/mentor in their teachers.

The long-term impact. Research question four indicated five major themes that emerged when analyzing the long-term impacts of a positive teacher-student relationship: career, college, personal well-being, self-actualization, and life-long skills.

1) In regard to *careers*, teachers fostered the talents, interests and passions of students, provided the necessary skills to be successful in that career, inspired students to choose a career to be like their teacher or provided continued mentorship for former students as they entered their careers.

2) In regard to *college*, teachers planted a seed for students to consider the possibility of going to college, helped make it possible for them to go, influenced the students' area of study or degree, or provided the necessary skills to be successful in college.

3) For *personal well-being*, teachers impacted a students' long-term mental and emotional health, helped them to develop a healthy and positive outlook and influenced their relationships.

4) In *self-actualization*, teachers gave students a long-term sense of self-confidence and acceptance, self-fulfillment and purpose, morals and beliefs to live by, and a desire to serve and give back to others.

5) Teachers also impacted *life-long skills* that the adults use on a daily basis such as executive functioning skills or growth mindset (i.e. staying organized, being on time, prioritizing).

Table 1	
Overview of Findings by Themes and Subthemes	
The Teacher	**Teacher Attributes**

Personality	A teacher who was:
	    Authentic
	    Passionate
	    Altruistic
	    Supportive/Trustworthy
	    Caring
	    Understands and Accepts Students

Learning Environment	Classroom that was:
	    Physically and emotionally safe
	    Positive and uplifting
	    Inclusive
	    Based on high expectations and accountability

Teaching Style	A teacher who:
	    Knew their content
	    Individualized learning
	    Was fun and engaging
	    Provided real-life application and the why behind learning
	    Taught more than academics (social, emotional, life skills)

The Relationship	**Relational Influences**
Personal	Went beyond the surface Smaller class size or multiple years/classes with teacher Crossed relational boundaries
Intentional	Went above and beyond Made effort even after they were no longer their student

Reciprocal	Mutual care and respect
	Maintained relationship over time
	Student reciprocity
The Benefits	**Benefits Gained**
Self-Improvement	Self-Esteem and confidence
	Identity and acceptance
	Sense of belonging
Health and Well-Being	Social
	Emotional
	Mental Health
School Outcomes	Overcoming challenges in school
	Changed student perspective
	Challenged
	Accountable
	Continued resource/mentor
The Long-Term Impacts	**Long-Term Influences**
Career	Fostered talents, interests, and passions
	Provided necessary skills
	Wanted to be like them
	Continued mentorship
College	Planted a seed
	Made it possible
	Influenced field of study/degree
	Provided the skills to be successful in college
Personal Well-Being	Mental and emotional health
	Healthy and positive outlook
	Healthy relationships
Self-Actualization	Self-confidence and acceptance
	Self-fulfillment and purpose
	Morals and beliefs
	Serving others and giving back
Life-Long Skills	Executive functioning
	Growth mindset

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings, the connections to the existing literature, and a discussion of the connections. The chapter ends with implications and suggestions for future research.

Chapter Five

Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the potential relationship between a strong, positive teacher-student relationship and a student's long-term life goals and achievements. It further explored how a caring teacher who establishes and maintains a positive, reciprocal relationship with students can have a profound and lifelong difference in the lives of those students. The study was informed through the participants' memories who credit a teacher with positively affecting long-term outcomes in their lives that goes beyond academic performance and school experience. The study analyzed the specific qualities of the teacher that had lasting impacts on students, the attributes of that strong, positive connection, the sustained benefits of that relationship, and how that relationship and ultimately the teacher impacted the student's life long-term.

This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings as related to the literature on positive teacher-student relationships and what implications may be valuable for aspiring educators, post-secondary teacher preparation programs, professional development for teachers, as well as school administrators and policy makers. The interpretation of the findings is from an adult (former student) perspective organized by common themes that emerged from the four research questions of this study. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and a brief summary of conclusion.

This study contains a discussion and future research possibilities to help answer the following four research questions:

1) *What kind of teacher is likely to make a lasting impact?*

2) *What attributes are related to a strong positive teacher-student relationship?*

3) *What are the sustained benefits of a strong positive teacher-student relationship?*

4) *What are the long-term, sustained impacts of a positive teacher-student relationship?*

Summary of the Findings and Connections to Literature

In an effort to investigate the long-term impacts of a strong, positive teacher-student relationship, this study explored the types of teachers that create strong relationships with students, the attributes of those relationships, the benefits student's experience from having those strong connections, and ultimately how those benefits led to long-term impacts as an adult. This study sought to shed light on the influence of a positive teacher-student relationship on a student's life *beyond* school using students' memories and recollections of that relationship and the critical implications the relationship had for students long-term. This study also sought to critique how current school systems and administrators evaluate teachers and provide evidence that might shed light on alternative ways to measure teacher effectiveness by incorporating positive teacher-student relationships into comprehensive teacher evaluations. This study also has the potential to inform policy makers, administrators, and college preparatory programs on the importance of not only emphasizing, but also in training teachers *how* to form strong, positive relationships with students, *why* they are so critical for a student's social, emotional, and academic development, and just how far-reaching and impactful that relationship can have on the life of the student long-term.

Results. By examining the personal narratives of former students, the study revealed that there is a relational progression of a positive teacher-student relationship that ultimately leads to long-term impacts for a student. This study was able to uncover the type of teacher it takes to form strong connections with students, the type of relationship that is developed and maintained, and the benefits students experience from having that positive relationship; all of which ultimately leads to impactful and long-term influences in their adult lives.

The teacher. The study revealed that all strong, positive teacher-student relationships begin with the teacher. It takes a specific type of teacher to build a strong connection with their students. The results strongly correlate with and confirm existing literature's definition of a positive teacher-student relationship (Aultman et al., 2009; Davis, 2003; Newberry, 2010). Participants described teachers that had a lasting impact as personal authentic, passionate, altruistic, supportive, trustworthy, caring, understanding and accepting of their students. The findings of this study further demonstrate that when a teacher possesses those specific personal qualities, they have the ability to establish and maintain a strong relationship with students that is natural, caring, authentic, and reciprocal (Aultman et al., 2009; Cornelius-White & Cornelius-White, 2007; Davis, 2003; Newberry, 2010). Likewise, when teachers exhibited these specific qualities, participants in the study directly or indirectly indicated that they felt respected, valued, and heard; also confirming the existing literature on how strong teacher-student relationships are built (Aultman et al., 2009; Cornelius-White & Cornelius-White, 2007; Davis, 2003; Newberry, 2010). Consequently, when participants had a teacher with these types of qualities, they experienced many positive outcomes in school (Newberry, 2010). Additionally, this study builds upon existing literature as the findings reveal, participants who had a teacher with these specific qualities, experienced many positive outcomes beyond school as an adult.

In addition to teacher attributes, this study also found that there was a specific type of classroom environment teachers created that leads to an influential relationship. Participants described learning environments that were physically and emotionally safe, positive and uplifting, inclusive, had high expectations and held students accountable. These positive learning environments cultivated strong teacher-student relationships, resulting in short-term and long-term benefits for students. Research confirms that when teachers create environments for and around students' needs, they develop positive, learner-centered classrooms that foster

positive relationships with students (McCombs, 1997; Nichols & Zhang, 2011). This study would like to emphasize that the teacher is the critical individual responsible for creating this type of environment. As they cultivate student relationships and a more learner-centered classroom environment they give students ownership of their learning, promote student engagement, and meet their individual needs (Nichols & Zhang, 2011). Participants from this study flourished in these types of environments resulting in many long-term impacts in their adult lives; a new consideration not currently present in existing literature.

The teaching styles, or instructional practices, described by the participants was also indicative of current research. Commonalities in the described teaching styles from the study confirm that positive classrooms and effective instructional practices consider students' academic, as well as social and personal needs, encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning, have and communicate high expectations for students, individualize instruction, promote hands-on learning among other practices, and teachers convey that they truly care about students (Stronge et al., 2011). What this study cautions is that teachers cannot change instructional practices or lose sight of the importance of social and emotional learning when pressured to produce academic outcomes. Instructional practices and learning cannot have one without the other.

Conclusively, this study confirms current research stating that a teacher who is most likely to make a lasting impact are teachers who have strong self-efficacy and personal qualities, establish positive learning environments, and create effective learning experiences (Stronge et al., 2011). Students with these types of effective teachers have successful school outcomes and so did the participants in this study (Stronge et al., 2011). Additionally, this study further contributes that these three elements of an effective teacher (qualities, environment, and practices) do not just accomplish short-term benefits and student achievement, but more

importantly, produce real, lasting, long-term impacts as adults, leading to happier, healthier, and more fulfilled lives.

The relationship. The results of this study indicate that strong, positive teacher-student relationships are personal, intentional and reciprocal. Teachers that reveal personal aspects of their lives and are genuinely interested in their students as individuals, effectively create closer, more personal connections (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013; Warnick et al., 2016). Just as described by participants in this study, teachers that are intentional in getting to know students have the ability to get to know them on a deeper, more personal level in order to successfully navigate how to create and maintain deep connections that in turn, engage and motivate students (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008; Aultman et al., 2009). Research indicates and this study confirms, that students who feel their teacher intentionally gets to know them on a personal level and who are authentic and open, reciprocate the relationship as they feel fully connected with their teacher (Warnick et al., 2016). The findings in this study confirm this notion, as all participants in this study reciprocated the relationships, many beyond the classroom, resulting in deeper, stronger, lasting connections. The teachers displayed intentional actions by going above and beyond to care for and support the student and pursuing their relationship with the participant even when they were no longer a student in their classroom, many that continue to this day. Future reciprocity indicated that many students continued to pursue a relationship with their teacher even after leaving their classrooms or graduating high school.

The benefits. The sustained benefits of a strong, positive teacher-student relationship found in this study align with current research. Results indicate that the teachers described by participants made a unique and lasting contribution to the their social, emotional, individual and cognitive development, expanding upon current research that only attributed teacher relationships to social and cognitive development (Davis, 2003). These relationships, as

described by the participants, also proved to be a central component in successful teaching and learning (Aultman et al., 2009) and narratives indicated they had a tremendous, positive impact on student achievement, academic performance, and success in other domains such as social and emotional well-being (Newberry, 2010). Additionally, the participants also confirming current literature as they indicated feeling more comfortable and being more engaged, the more supportive their teachers were (Reeve, 2006).

Current research shows that positive teacher-student relationships are associated with positive student outcomes such as increase in participation, student satisfaction, dropout prevention, self-efficacy/mental health, positive motivation, social connection/skills, reduction in student behavior and increase in attendance (Cornelius-White & Cornelius-White, 2007). The findings in this study also discovered additional benefits to having a positive teacher relationship, impacting not only student achievement, but also in creating long-term impacts on a student's life as an adult (F. A. J. Korthagen et al., 2014). This study expands upon the benefits of a teacher relationship to include further categories such as health and well-being and individual development such as self-acceptance and identity. Another unique finding is the benefit of mentorship and the transition a teacher makes from a teacher to a long-term mentor.

The long-term impacts. The results of this study reveal that teachers have a long-term impact on the lives of their students. When they establish strong, positive teacher-student relationships, they have the ability to influence students' lives well-beyond the four walls of their classrooms. Participants shared how their teachers influenced their careers, college, personal well-being, self-actualization, and other life-long skills. Research indicates that positive teacher-student relationships are influential, not only in regards to student achievement, but also in creating the potential for positive, long-term impacts (F. A. J. Korthagen et al., 2014). This

study further contributing new research on the types of long-term impacts found and how they have the potential to create a chain of events that truly have no end.

Discussion of the Results: A Teacher Never Knows Where Their Influence Ends

  The big picture and study's significance. This study portrayed a natural progression in a chain of events that began with a teacher who established a strong, positive influential relationship with a student that produced positive outcomes personally and academically which led to long term outcomes with lasting impacts for the student. The results of this study reveal that positive teacher-student relationships have not only short-term benefits for students while they are in school, but arguably more important, long-term advantages that impact students well into their adult lives resulting in being happier, healthier, and more contributing members of society.

  This study brings together the individual research of each aspect of this relational progression, portraying a bigger, more important picture for administrators and policy makers showing just how far reaching a positive teacher student relationship can become. An effective teacher is the foundation. This study illustrates how a life-changing relationship starts with the teacher, grows in the environment, and produces outcomes for students not only while in school, but for their entire lifespan. There is vast amounts of research supporting each facet of this study (an effective teacher, how teachers establish positive relationships, the benefits of positive teacher-student relationships), but they remain siloed in their own individual realms. This study ties it altogether to show the teacher progression necessary to produce long-term impacts in a student's life and the implications of such a strong teacher connection.

  Affordance value and long-term impacts. Developed in Pianta's Theoretical Framework which is grounded in the Attachment and Systems Theory, this study explored the association of a positive teacher-student relationship and its "Affordance Value" (Pianta, 1999).

Robert C. Pianta, previously described *Affordance Value* as the context and resources an adult brings to a working relationship that support a child's intellectual, social, and emotional development that would have been unavailable otherwise (Davis, 2003; Pianta, 1999). Children are shaped by the *Affordance Value* their primary caregivers provide, but teachers also have the same opportunity to mold a child's development (Pianta, 1999). Without being *afforded* the intervention of and positive interactions with a teacher, this study shows that the student would not have the same development, experiences, or outcomes. The concept of Pianta's *Affordance Value* can be applied in this study as it associates that a positive teacher relationship fosters a development within a student that leads to an increased access of benefits resulting in choices that lead to positive long-term student outcomes. Therefore, the results of this study build upon Pianta's existing theoretical framework as it demonstrates how a pivotal teacher connection has the ability to generate long-term outcomes that would otherwise have not been *afforded* to the student. Without that strong, positive teacher relationship, the absence of that *Affordance Value* leaves an uncertainty in the long-term outcomes of a student's life.

The data collected through the qualitative interviews was analyzed through the lens of the *Affordance Value*. The study revealed that teachers not only provide an *Affordance Value* to a student, but that value leads to significant long-term outcomes. Long-term outcomes of the participants from the study show teachers who instilled a sense of worth, identity, self-acceptance and confidence led students to have and believe in their ability to pursue their dreams (i.e. college, career), realize their talents, and achieve self-actualization. Teachers who provided support and strategies for students to learn how to cope with their anxiety, depression or suicidal ideations led students to be able to manage their emotional and mental health ultimately living happier, healthier, more fulfilled lives. Teachers who fostered students' strengths, talents, and passions led them to an ultimate career path they enjoy and excel at. Teachers who instilled

strong character and morals led students to volunteer, serve others, and find their own moral compass that guides their lives today.

Confirming Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, this study provides strong supporting evidence that students cannot learn and grow to their fullest potential without a strong relationship with teachers (Maslow, 1954). Teacher's connections with students provides them with a sense of love, acceptance and belonging allowing them to have self-confidence that ultimately leads to self-actualization. Participants in this study have found self-actualization as an adult and attribute the influential relationship they had with a teacher as a strong contributing factor in how that was achieved.

At the end of every interview, participants were asked to imagine what their life would be like had they not had the opportunity to an encounter such an influential teacher in their lives and participants unanimously indicated that they would simply not be who they are today without them. It was evident through the resounding responses that teachers have the ability to completely change the trajectory of a student's life simply by establishing a strong, positive relationship with them. Every participant of the study gave credit in who they are today to the influence of their teacher, some even getting emotional as they questioned how truly different their lives would be had they not encountered such a strong, influential relationship. This study provides strong supporting evidence that a positive teacher-student relationship and the *Affordance Value* it brings to the student has long-term implications that cannot be underestimated. A child's future might possibly depend upon the connections they make with teachers.

Strong teacher-relationship influences. Outside of exploring long-term impacts of teacher relationships, the study revealed a few findings that are worth exploring further in regard

to what other factors attributed to the ability to create such strong, impactful relationships. Trends in the participants' narratives indicated that teachers crossed relational boundaries for the sake of a deeper connection with students. Examples include teachers signing a line of credit for a student to help with college tuition fees or teachers having students over to their house to help with schoolwork or projects. Knowing and adhering to relationship boundaries can be problematic in teacher-student relationships. A study was conducted to determine teachers' perspectives of their relationships with students and their descriptions of relationship boundaries they set (Aultman et al., 2009). Eleven different categories of boundaries that were crossed either purposely or unconsciously were found: curricular boundaries, emotional boundaries, relationship boundaries, power boundaries, institutional boundaries, financial boundaries, communication boundaries, temporal boundaries, cultural boundaries, expertise boundaries, personal boundaries. Within this research, Aultman et al. (2009), found that, "the balance between demonstrating a caring teaching identity while maintaining a healthy, productive level of control in the classroom seemed to be a recurring theme with most of the boundaries" (p. 644). Teachers must find the boundary between remaining professional while building and maintaining a level of care and authenticity with their students. However, many teachers described in the study crossed several questionable and even reprimandable relational boundaries with students. A study solely focusing on the extent to which relational boundaries are crossed for the sake of a positive teacher-student relationship and the result of that would be enlightening and informative for educators. Other considerations in regards to relational boundaries from this study to keep in mind was how long ago it occurred (as clearer policies and guidelines have been established for teachers more recently), the geographic location (as rural communities might be more accepting or lenient in relational boundaries), and the age or gender of teachers and students (as gender matching or certain ages might be more accepting).

When reflecting on what made their relationships with teachers so personal, a few interesting results are worth noting. Seven participants attributed deep, personal connections with teachers to the fact that they had the teacher for multiple years or for multiple classes. Four participants alluded to a smaller teacher to student ratio as a contributing factor in their personal connections with teachers. The consensus among parents, teachers and school administrators is that smaller class sizes improve student achievement. However, most studies have actually found that a smaller teacher-student ratio is not as impactful as one would be led to believe. John Hattie's research found that reducing class size has a small increase on student achievement; however, when class size is reduced, teachers rarely change their practice resulting in the same outcomes despite a reduction in size (Hattie, 2012). The same could be said for having a teacher for multiple years or "looping" with a teacher. Research shows only relatively small improvements in student achievement when students have the same teacher for more than one year (Hill & Jones, 2018). To further inform this study, the better research question is not, does smaller teacher to student ratios or having a teacher for more than one year or one class lead to an increase in student achievement? But rather, do they attribute to a stronger teacher-student connection and would that connection attribute to stronger long-term benefits?

Techer effectiveness. Literature reveals various definitions, criteria, frameworks, and models for what constitutes an effective teacher, such as their instructional practices, teacher skill-base/knowledge, and classroom environment (Markley, 2004). Likewise, research shows an effective teacher is one who demonstrates knowledge of the curriculum, provides instruction in a variety of approaches to varied students, and measurably increases student achievement (Clark, 1993; Sullivan, 2001). This study seeks to expand the definition or criteria of an effective teacher and prove the importance of adding a fourth attribute of an effective teacher: one that establishes strong, positive relationships with students.

Currently, teacher effectiveness is attributed to and emphasis is placed on academic outcomes (i.e., test scores) as effective teachers are defined as having students who experience high academic growth (Stronge et al., 2011). Effective teaching practices (e.g., instructional delivery, student assessment, positive learning environments, and personal qualities of the teachers themselves) have a measurable impact on student achievement or standardized test scores (Stronge et al., 2011). Research goes so far as to attribute teacher effectiveness as being the single biggest contributor to student success, outweighing all other factors, such as class size, socioeconomic status, and gender (Sanders & Horn, 1994; Wenglinsky, 2004). This study challenges the narrow focus on only academic growth and considers student well-being and personal growth to be just as important in the criteria. Outside of the reference to a positive learning environment, the explicitness and emphasis on the value of a positive teacher-student relationship is absent from research defining effective teacher characteristics, especially with all of the researched benefits of a positive teacher-student relationship. Current literature focuses on the educational aspects of effective teaching while this study also warrants the consideration of the relational aspects.

The ripple effect of a teacher. This study portrays that positive teacher-student relationships create a ripple effect in the life of a student that could arguably have no end. It is hard to quantify but based on the participants' lives this study does provide evidence to show how a teacher's influence truly has no end not only the student's life, but in generations to come after them. One example from the study is the student found her passion and talents in the fields of math and science and because her chemistry and calculus teachers challenged her to realize her full potential and supported her emotionally, she went to college to study medicine. There she met her husband in medical school and she became a pediatrician. They had children and she now gives back and serves on her local school board to ensure other students have the same

educational experience and opportunities that she had. The ripple effect of those teachers is touching thousands of lives because of the impactful relationship they had with one student. See Figure 2 for a great visual of the ripple effect of a teacher (Miller, 2018).
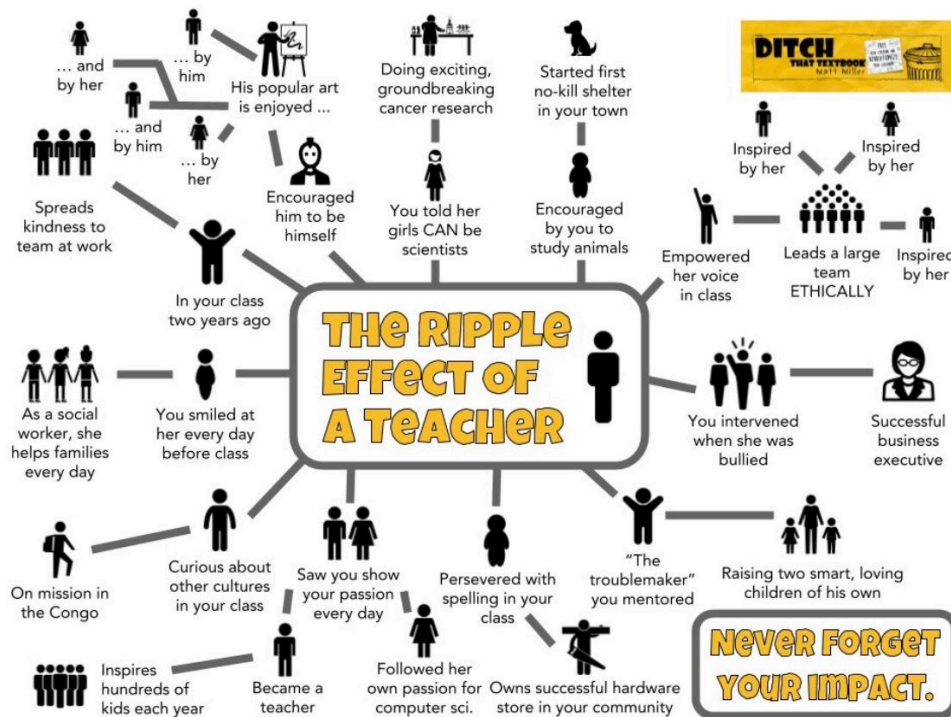
Figure 2.

Figure 2. The Ripple Effect of a Teacher. 2018, Retrieved from

https://ditchthattextbook.com/. Copyright 2019 by Ditch That Textbook by Matt Miller.

Implications for Policy or Practice

  Emphasis on establishing positive teacher-student relationships and social emotional learning. This study advocates the importance of educating the whole child. Teachers are responsible for not only a students' cognitive development, but also their social emotional development. Disregarding this could have long-term consequences. Research has found that many students lack social-emotional competencies and become less connected to school as they progress from elementary to middle to high school, and this lack of connection negatively affects

their academic performance, behavior, and health (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). With limited resources and increasing pressures to improve academic performance, schools face difficulties with teaching and emphasizing social emotional learning. Teachers must prioritize social and emotional learning despite the time constraints and competing demands to effectively implement evidence-based approaches that yield multiple benefits for the student with life-long impacts (Durlak et al., 2011). Despite knowing the positive effects of caring teacher-student relationships, educational systems, including teachers, can lose sight of this initiative when trying to produce academic results (Berger, Alcalay, Torretti, & Milicic, 2011). Focusing on academic achievement training and results comes as a detriment to social and emotional skills (Berger et al., 2011). Cornelius-White (2007), stated that everyone who is a part of an educational system (parents, students, teachers, administrators, policy makers, etc.) should "advocate for increasing the awareness and practice of positive learner-centered relationships" (p. 134). This study echoes this statement and also advocates for the practice of positive teacher-student relationships and an equal focus on social and emotional learning.

Professional development and teacher preparatory programs. This study also has the potential to inform policy makers, administrators, and college preparatory programs on the importance of not only emphasizing, but also training teachers *how* to form strong, positive relationships with students, *why* they are so crucial for a student's social, emotional, and academic development, and just how far-reaching and impactful that relationship can have on the life of the student long-term. Training and courses should focus on teacher's emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, social and emotional learning and relational boundaries. Research has shown that there can be a lack of training in all of these areas resulting in a detriment to student relationships (Aultman et al., 2009; Durlak et al., 2011; Nizielski, Hallum, Lopes, & Schutz, 2012).

Teacher evaluations. One potential outcome of this research would be to provide

insights for policy makers and school administrators regarding teacher evaluations and to

consider ways to incorporate a measurement of teacher-student relationships into comprehensive

teacher evaluations. This study has shown strong, positive relationships with students can be a

characteristic of an effective teacher, resulting in improved student achievement and well-being,

but also impactful for an adult long-term. Student surveys or rating scales such as the Student

Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) developed by Robert C. Pianta (Appendices D, E, F) might

serve as a way of measuring the teacher's ability to connect with students ("Measures developed

by Robert C. Pianta, PH.D - Student Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS),"). This study does

caution that while it is necessary to capture a teacher's ability to connect with students, it does

not recommend using surveys/rating scales as a standalone measure, but rather as a combination

method. This study does not ignore the fact that a teacher who is effective in building

relationships with students still needs to have knowledge of the curriculum and effective

instructional practices in order to increase student achievement. Research recommends that the

best evaluation model is a combination of observations and data analysis (Markley, 2004). In

addition to observing instructional practices, teacher-student interactions can also be observed.

Curry School's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) developed a tool

known as CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) to assess teacher student interactions

in PK-12 classrooms ("Measures developed by Robert C. Pianta, PH.D. -Classroom Assessment

Scoring System™ (CLASS),"). Survey, rating scales, and observation instruments that are able

to analyze a teacher's interactions with students and positive learning environments are critical

to ensure effective teachers are making strong and meaningful connections with students.

Therefore, this study recommends that the best means to measure teacher effectiveness is with an

evaluation system that combines observation, data-driven measures, and additional student

surveys/rating scales to capture all aspects of an effective teacher. If research clearly indicates and this study further confirms the powerful impacts of a positive-teacher relationship (i.e., both in relation to short-term student achievement and long-term life achievement) this study begs to ask, why are teacher's connections with students not appraised when evaluating and determining if teachers are effective in their practices or not?

Furthermore, this study also challenges the current educational definition of student achievement and would caution policy makers and administrators to also consider student well-being as a necessary component to evaluate in addition to student achievement outcomes.

Limitations

Although this study revealed critical information about the importance of positive teacher-student relationships and their long-term impacts on the life of a student, the findings in this study are limited to twelve individual adult perspectives. The study is only informed from the perspective of an adult who identified having a positive teacher relationship and what they remember. Although potentially insightful and a recommendation for future research, it did not consider the perspective of the teacher in order to connect or expand upon the former students' recount of the relationship. By only being informed by adults who had at least one positive teacher relationship, this study is limited by not considering individuals who never had a strong connection with any teacher or one who had a negative experience with a teacher. Multiple experiences and perspectives of teacher-student relationships would be valuable and is recommended for future research.

The sample used in this study also has a few limitations. The study aimed to have a purposeful sample of participants having representation from a variety of age, gender, race, and careers to account for a variety of experiences and backgrounds to adequately explore teacher impact across all heterogeneous populations. The purposeful sample achieved all of these except

race. Despite many efforts to get a diverse representation of participants, only white Caucasians volunteered to participate in the study. Future studies could explore teacher relationships strictly from a minority perspective to gain further insight. Although it was never an intended goal to make generalizations regarding a population sampled, the small sample size still raises issues with making generalizations in commonalities found in the study, simply by being limited by a small number of findings. With a larger and more diverse sample, the study could investigate trends and make stronger generalizations of the data.

Researcher bias is also a limitation. I am an educator myself, who advocates for and is passionate about the need for strong, positive teacher-student relationships in education today. I believe Social and Emotional Learning has its rightful place in the classroom for the sake of our kids and their future. Therefore, my perceptions and personal experiences might have indirectly influenced or limited my interpretations and analysis of the findings.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings or limitations of this study, there are several recommendations for further research that could continue to enhance the concept of a teacher's long-term impacts in the lives of students.

Multiple experiences/perspectives. Future research would benefit from hearing the viewpoint of the teacher. It would give a unique perspective and understanding in *how* teachers established strong relationships and *why* they did so. The findings would be further strengthened when both perspectives in the relationship are considered and used. Future research could also explore the opposite concept and interview adults who either, never had a positive teacher relationship or those who had a negative experience with a teacher and how those scenarios could also have repercussions in the life of a student long-term.

Positive adult relationships. It would also be interesting to research what other positive adult relationships the participants had, aside from the teacher, to analyze the level of impact a teacher can have in the presence or absence of those other relational influences and their *Affordance Value*. Did participants have a strong relationship with both of their parents, one parent, a grandparent, a pastor or other adult mentor? Did the teacher replace a parental absence? While impactful, not all outcomes in a student's life can solely be attributed to the influence of a teacher; therefore, it would be informative to consider how many adult influences the student had to consider the degree of impact from the teacher. It would also be interesting to explore the number of strong positive teacher relationships student has during their K-12 educational experience. If there are more relationships, are there more impacts or stronger impacts? Does a negative teacher relationship counteract or influence a positive one?

Contributing factors of long-term impacts. Participants in the study pointed out two interesting contributing factors or reasons for their strong connections with teachers that are recommended for further research. As previously stated, participants attributed their ability to have such an impactful and deep connection with a teacher to their class size or having the teacher for multiple years or multiple classes. They expressed that by having a smaller teacher to student ratio or by having the teacher for an extended amount of time, their relationship was able to grow at a deeper, more personal level leading to a possible stronger impact long-term. It would further teacher-student relationship research to see if there is a correlation to these claims.

Long-Term impacts of a positive teacher-student relationship for subgroups. Further research could expand upon existing literature pertaining to the benefits of a positive teacher-student relationship for specific subgroups (i.e. minority, low socioeconomic status, LGBTQ) and explore the long-term impacts in the life of a student *beyond* school. Are teachers

more influential for one or all subgroups long-term? Does the strong, positive relationship result in less outcomes or more outcomes in the life of a student from a specific subgroup?

Mentorship. Results of the study indicated that strong, positive teacher relationships occurred at all levels: elementary, middle, and high. However, teachers that remained in a close relationship with students after having them in their classrooms, well into high school and later adulthood, became more of a mentor in their lives. Further research could explore the outcomes of those relationships in a long-term manner as it relates to: the age the student was when the relationship began, if the relationship continued beyond that one year and for how long, and the transition of when and how the teacher became more of a mentor than a teacher.

Conclusions

At the end of every interview, participants were asked to imagine what their life would be like had they not encountered such an influential teacher in their lives. Participants unanimously indicated that they would simply not be who they are today without them. It was evident through the resounding responses that teachers have the ability to completely change the trajectory of a student's life simply by establishing a strong, positive relationship with them. As one person shared, "She is everything that I've gotten to where I am today" (P3).

Teachers sparked lifelong passions, recognized student strengths and fostered talents, instilled character and shaped their morals, inspired students, and literally even saved lives. Without them, potentials may not have been realized, challenges may not have been overcome, battles with mental health may not have been won, college may have never been an option, careers may never have come to fruition, and dreams may not have ever come true, had these former students not encountered this life-changing teacher with whom they had such a strong,

lasting connection with. Simply put, participants unanimously indicated, they could not fathom where they would be today without their teacher's influence.

Some participants even shared the repercussions of having a negative relationship or no connection at all with teachers. Despite having an amazing and life-changing relationship with her fifth-grade teacher, one participant was unable to make a strong connection with any high school teacher and began to decline, cut class, and stopped caring about school (P4). Another participant shared how she was unable to connect with any college professors and along with the added pressure from family members challenging her writing major because she would not make any money, gave up on her writing degree, a decision she later came to regret (P1). And had this study interviewed adults who had negative relationships with teachers, it would have likely yielded findings of negative associations in life.

Just one teacher, just one connection, just one year, made all the difference in these participants'' lives. The influence of that teacher and the benefits of that strong relationship truly has no end. One moment, one choice, one action awakened a chain of events that continued to ripple outcomes well into adulthood and old age. Even elderly participants, nearing the end of their lifetime, could easily recall the teacher who cared for them in a way no one else had before. Teachers who gave them a sense of belonging and confidence, who believed in them when no one else did, who finally made them feel smart and capable. These life-changing teachers are not always remembered for what they taught, but more for how they made their students feel, forever impacting and shaping their lives. Henry Adams described it best. "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."

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Appendices

Appendix A

IRB Approval

KU THE UNIVERSITY OF
KANSAS
Research

Date: December 2, 2019

TO: Kristen Leaming, (kgleaming@ku.edu)

FROM: Alyssa Haase, IRB Administrator (785-864-7385, irb@ku.edu)

RE: **Approval of Initial Study**

The IRB reviewed the submission referenced below on 12/2/2019. The IRB approved the protocol, effective 12/2/2019.

IRB Action: APPROVED	Effective date: 12/2/2019	Expiration Date : 12/1/2024
STUDY DETAILS		
Investigator:	Kristen Leaming	
IRB ID:	STUDY00144943	
Title of Study:	Teachers Make a Difference: The Long-Term Influence of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships	
Funding ID:	None	
REVIEW INFORMATION		
Review Type:	Initial Study	
Review Date:	12/2/2019	
Documents Reviewed:	• Adult Informed Consent Statement - Kristen Leaming, • Human Research Protocol - Kristen Leaming, • Interview Guide - Kristen Leaming, • Recruitment Ad - Kristen Leaming, • Recruitment Poster/Flyer-Kristen Leaming	
Exemption Determination:	• (2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk)	
Additional Information:		

KEY PROCEDURES AND GUIDELINES. Consult our website for additional information.

1. **Approved Consent Form:** You must use the final, watermarked version of the consent form, available under the "Documents" tab, "Final" column, in eCompliance. Participants must be given a copy of the form.

2. **Continuing Review and Study Closure:** You are required to provide a project update to HRPP before the above expiration date through the submission of a Continuing Review. Please close your study at completion.

3. **Modifications:** Modifications to the study may affect Exempt status and must be submitted for review and approval before implementing changes. For more information on the types of modifications that require IRB review and approval, visit our website.

4. **Add Study Team Member:** Complete a study team modification if you need to add investigators not named in original application. Note that new investigators must take the online tutorial prior to being approved to work on the project.

5. **Data Security**: University data security and handling requirements apply to your project.

6. **Submit a Report of New Information (RNI):** If a subject is injured in the course of the research procedure or there is a breach of participant information, an RNI must be submitted immediately. Potential non-compliance may also be reported through the RNI process.

7. **Consent Records:** When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity.

8. **Study Records** must be kept a minimum of three years after the completion of the research. Funding agencies may have retention requirements that exceed three years.

Human Research Protection Program
Youngberg Hall | 2385 Irving Hill Rd | Lawrence, KS 66045 | (785) 864-7429 | research.ku.edu/hrpp

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Appendix B

Interview Guide

1. Tell me a little bit about your background, where you grew up, went to school, experiences in school and the type of student you were.
   - General viewpoint of school through elementary, middle, and high
   - Identify any struggles or areas they had to overcome

2. Will you describe a specific teacher who had a positive influence in your life and describe the kind of relationship you had with them?
   - Identify/describe the specific teacher(s) who had a direct effect on their life
   - Teacher attributes that made them effective with this student
   - How was the relationship established and maintained?
   - How they viewed this relationship and are able to describe it

3. Reflect back on your experience with this teacher for just a moment. Can you tell me about a specific time when this teacher's words or actions really resonated with you and why?
   - Identify teacher characteristics that made an impact
   - Was there a turning point in their relationship where it went from personal to profound?
   - Did this moment lead to future choices/endeavor of the student?

4. In looking back on your life, in what areas or in what ways did this teacher influence the choices you made?
   - When they give an example, see if they are able to trace it back to the teacher, or ask follow-up questions
     - Overcoming a difficulty to be able to make a future choice
     - Encouraging or inspiring them in a way that led to future choices

5. Will you talk about your current life situation as much as you are comfortable sharing? Maybe direct and indirect ways this teacher may have played a role in where you are today?
   - College/Career
   - Family
   - Community Involvement
   - Personal Well-Being

6. Imagine if you had never had a relationship with this teacher, in what ways might you or your life be different?
   - They attribute a part of who they are or choice they made back to the teacher

Appendix C
Participant Consent and Authorization Form

Dear Potential Interview Candidate:

A positive relationship with a teacher can impact a student well beyond their school years. When you think back on your school experience is there a teacher who made a positive difference in your life? Someone who inspired you, believed in you, or encouraged you to pursue your dreams and because of them you did? Do you credit some of your life outcomes to the influence of an educator?

In order to learn more about the lasting and long-term impacts of a positive teacher student relationship, I am looking for individual participants who can share personal accounts of how an educator made a difference in their life. I am especially interested in the influence that educator had in shaping the choices you have made after graduation.

Would you be willing to share your personal accounts with me in an interview lasting approximately 45 minutes to one hour? Participation is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw from the study at any time. Involvement in the study should pose no risks as there are no right or wrong answers. I just want to hear about your thoughts and experiences you have had with an influential teacher.

With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. I will store all data collected during the study in a secure, password protected computer for up to one year or upon dissertation approval, in which all audio and related files will be destroyed. Responses shared during the interview will be treated in a confidential manner. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless a) it is required by law or university policy, or b) you give written permission.

Thank you in advance for your willingness to participate in this study. I plan to share my findings in my published dissertation after approval. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at (816) 718-4576 or kgleaming@ku.edu.

Sincerely,
Kristen Leaming

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding this study.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

_____   _____
Print Participant's Name   Date

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

Appendix D
Student-Teacher Relationship Scale

Student Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS)

Examines teachers' relationships with an individual child in their classroom (Pianta, 2001). The 15-item, 5-point scale yields scores on Conflict and Closeness and has excellent psychometric properties across multiple studies and samples (Pianta, 1992), including internal consistency from .86-.89 in the MTP sample, and predicts children's classroom behavior, school retention, and academic outcomes (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995).

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Response Scale

Please reflect on the degree to which each of the following statements currently applies to your relationship with this student.

1=Definitely does not apply
2=Not really
3=Neutral, not sure
4=Applies somewhat
5=Definitely applies

Items

1. I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child.
2. This child and I always seem to be struggling with each other.
3. If upset, this child will seek comfort from me.
4. This child is uncomfortable with physical affection or touch from me.
5. This child values his/her relationship with me.
6. When I praise this child, he/she beams with pride.
7. This child spontaneously shares information about himself/herself.
8. This child easily becomes angry at me.
9. It is easy to be in tune with what this student is feeling.
10. This child remains angry or is resistant after being disciplined.
11. Dealing with this child drains my energy.
12. When this child arrives in a bad mood, I know we're in for a long and difficult day.
13. This child's feelings toward me can be unpredictable or can change suddenly.
14. This child is sneaky or manipulative with me.
15. This child openly shares his/her feelings and experience with me.

Factors

Name	Items
Closeness	1, 3, 4R, 5, 6, 7, 9, 15
Conflict	2, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14

Scoring

Subscale scores are the mean of included items. Item 4 is reverse-scored.

★ STRS. Student-Teacher Relationship Scale™ Response Form

Teacher's name _____ Gender: M F Ethnicity _____ Date __ / __ / __

Child's name _____ Grade _____ Gender: M F Ethnicity _____ Age _____

Please reflect on the degree to which each of the following statements currently applies to your relationship with this child. Using the point scale below, CIRCLE the appropriate number for each item. If you need to change your answer, DO NOT ERASE! Make an X through the incorrect answer and circle the correct answer.

1	2	3	4	5
Definitely does not apply	Does not really apply	Neutral, not sure	Applies somewhat	Definitely applies

1. I share an affectionate, warm relationship with this child.	1	2	3	4	5
2. This child and I always seem to be struggling with each other.	1	2	3	4	5
3. If upset, this child will seek comfort from me.	1	2	3	4	5
4. This child is uncomfortable with physical affection or touch from me.	1	2	3	4	5
5. This child values his/her relationship with me.	1	2	3	4	5
6. This child appears hurt or embarrassed when I correct him/her.	1	2	3	4	5
7. When I praise this child, he/she beams with pride.	1	2	3	4	5
8. This child reacts strongly to separation from me.	1	2	3	4	5
9. This child spontaneously shares information about himself/herself.	1	2	3	4	5
10. This child is overly dependent on me.	1	2	3	4	5
11. This child easily becomes angry with me.	1	2	3	4	5
12. This child tries to please me.	1	2	3	4	5
13. This child feels that I treat him/her unfairly.	1	2	3	4	5
14. This child asks for my help when he/she really does not need help.	1	2	3	4	5
15. It is easy to be in tune with what this child is feeling.	1	2	3	4	5
16. This child sees me as a source of punishment and criticism.	1	2	3	4	5
17. This child expresses hurt or jealousy when I spend time with other children.	1	2	3	4	5
18. This child remains angry or is resistant after being disciplined.	1	2	3	4	5
19. When this child is misbehaving, he/she responds well to my look or tone of voice.	1	2	3	4	5
20. Dealing with this child drains my energy.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I've noticed this child copying my behavior or ways of doing things.	1	2	3	4	5
22. When this child is in a bad mood, I know we're in for a long and difficult day.	1	2	3	4	5
23. This child's feelings toward me can be unpredictable or can change suddenly.	1	2	3	4	5
24. Despite my best efforts, I'm uncomfortable with how this child and I get along.	1	2	3	4	5
25. This child whines or cries when he/she wants something from me.	1	2	3	4	5
26. This child is sneaky or manipulative with me.	1	2	3	4	5
27. This child openly shares his/her feelings and experiences with me.	1	2	3	4	5
28. My interactions with this child make me feel effective and confident.	1	2	3	4	5

★ STRS. Student-Teacher Relationship Scale™ Scoring and Profile Sheet

Teacher's name _____ Gender: M   F   Ethnicity _____ Date ___/___/___

Child's name _____ Grade_____ Gender: M   F   Ethnicity _____ Age_____

Scoring: For all items, transfer the circled item scores to the white box adjacent to the item. Sum the scores in each column and enter the sum in the box at the bottom of the column. In cases where there is no response, **a score of 0 should not be given.** Instructions for prorating subscale raw scores are provided in chapter 2 of the STRS Professional Manual. Use the STRS Total score formula at the bottom left to compute the STRS Total raw score. Transfer the Total and subscale raw scores to the spaces provided below the Profile Chart. Use the appropriate Appendix table in the STRS Professional Manual to obtain the corresponding percentile value for each raw score. **Profiling:** Plot the percentiles on the profile chart. Shaded areas indicate critical levels.

Profile Chart

%ile — Conflict, Closeness, Dependency, STRS Total (100, 75, 50, 25, 0)

Raw score _____

%ile _____

STRS Total score formula

$$(72 - \underline{\quad}) + \underline{\quad} + (30 - \underline{\quad}) = \underline{\quad}$$

Conflict raw score   Closeness raw score   Dependency raw score   Total raw score

Normative Comparison Group
(Appendix tables for each normative group are indicated in parentheses).

☐ Total Sample (A1)   ☐ Caucasians (C1)
☐ Boys (B1)   ☐ African Americans (C2)
☐ Girls (B2)   ☐ Hispanic Americans (C3)

Conflict   Closeness   Dependency

Item					
1.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	5	4	3	2	1
5.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	1	2	3	4	5
13.	1	2	3	4	5
14.	1	2	3	4	5
15.	1	2	3	4	5
16.	1	2	3	4	5
17.	1	2	3	4	5
18.	1	2	3	4	5
19.	5	4	3	2	1
20.	1	2	3	4	5
21.	1	2	3	4	5
22.	1	2	3	4	5
23.	1	2	3	4	5
24.	1	2	3	4	5
25.	1	2	3	4	5
26.	1	2	3	4	5
27.	1	2	3	4	5
28.	1	2	3	4	5

Subscale raw scores

Conflict   Closeness   Dependency