

**The Lived Experience of the Influence of Positive Student-Teacher Connections from  
Students' Perspectives as Reported by High School Graduates**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to identify the importance of Student-Teacher Connections (STC), as defined by the student, through direct interviews to gain better insight and understanding of the benefits obtained from these positive student teacher connections (STCs). Current literature mostly explores these connections from the perspective of the adults: teachers, administrators, and researchers, rather than through direct engagement with students and seeking their perspectives on their relationships with their teachers (Ibrahim and Zaatari, 2020). Insights from the students, gathered in this research, can be used to inform how these relationships can be fostered and how to best grow and care for them.

Much of what teachers offer academically has been analyzed in educational research (Wentzel, 2012). Many high school teachers believe they do much more than teach subject matter to their students; most believe they are instrumental in their students' adolescent development, and this has an impact on students' senses of school belonging (Allen et. al, 2018). This Dissertation in Practice (DiP) explores the lived experience of high school students, their positive connections with their teachers, and their perception of the impact these experiences had on their educations.

## **Acknowledgements**

This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory to my sister,

Kelly Kerr,

a fierce advocate of education for everyone.

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## Table of Contents

Copyright	2
Abstract	3
Acknowledgements	4
Section One: Introduction to Dissertation	8
Background	8
Statement of Inquiry	14
<i>The Opportunity</i>	14
<i>Potential Contributions to Practice and Scholarship</i>	17
Purpose of the Study	18
Research Question	22
Design of the Research Study	22
<i>Setting</i>	22
<i>Participants</i>	23
<i>Data Collection Tools</i>	25
<i>Data Analysis</i>	27
Assumptions and Delimitations	29
Definition of Key Terms	32
Significance of the Inquiry	33
<i>Scholarship</i>	33
<i>Practice</i>	36
Summary of the Inquiry	38
Section Two: Practitioner Setting for the Study	40
Introduction.	40
History of the Organization	41
Organizational Analysis (OA)	41
Leadership Analysis	46
Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting	48
Summary of Practitioner Setting	49
Section Three: Scholarly Review of the Study	50
Introduction	50
Conceptual/Theoretical Framework	50
<i>Theoretical Framework of Participatory Advocacy</i>	50
<i>Conceptual Framework of Attachment Theories</i>	51

<i>Review of Current Literature</i>	52
<i>Student-Teacher Connections from the Students Perspective</i>	52
<i>Innovative Application of Student Voices Regarding STC</i>	54
<i>Students' Sense of School Belonging and Attachment Theory</i>	55
<i>Student Perceptions of School Belonging</i>	55
<i>Teacher Role in Students' Sense of School Belonging</i>	56
<i>Schools Responsibilities and Shortcomings</i>	59
<i>Influencing Dropout Rates Through Student-Teacher Connections</i>	60
<i>Opportunity in Battling Dropout Rates Through Student-Teacher Connections</i>	61
Summary of Scholarly Review	63
Section Four: Contribution to Practice	65
Results/Findings of the Research Study	66
Developing Assertions in IPA	89
Section Five: Contribution to Practice	91
Introduction	91
<i>Vulnerability.</i>	92
Practitioner Contribution	93
<i>Students' Sense of School Belonging</i>	93
<i>STC Definition</i>	95
<i>Teacher Listening</i>	95
<i>Storytelling</i>	99
<i>Don't Smile Until November</i>	99
<i>Narrative Examples to use in leading conversations.</i>	101
Plan for Dissemination	104
Section Six: Practitioner Reflection	105
Summary of the Inquiry	105
Personal Learning, Shifts, and Transformations	106
<i>Practice Related</i>	106
<i>Teacher Leader Related</i>	107
<i>Scholar Leader Related</i>	108
Implications for the Future	111
References	114
Appendix A	133
Appendix B	135

The Lived Experience of the Influence of Positive Student-Teacher Connections from Students' Perspective	7
List of Tables	137
List of Figures	138



## **Section One: Introduction to Dissertation**

### **Background**

This study explores and elaborates on lived experiences of the Student-Teacher Connection (STC) and what this relationship means to the students themselves. A second purpose was to develop a working definition of what the term STC means to the students themselves. This entire study is based on the students, their perceptions and their stories gathered through interviews about their lives in high school. These students are all former high school students who have since graduated. The interview questions were designed to specifically address the research question with regards to the lived experience of students' perception of their connections to their teachers (see Appendix A for Participant Invitation Letter and Informed Consent Form and Appendix B for List of Interview Questions).

This dissertation was initiated with the reality of a pandemic disrupting and altering nearly all lived experiences. COVID-19 caused the "classroom experience" to transform almost unrecognizably. Students and their teacher who are the focus of this study, like many throughout this country, met in Zoom, an online remote learning platform which allows multiple people to be on one screen together, interacting as a virtual classroom. In Zoom, students were quiet, conversing was essentially non-existent, and the faces of the students were often completely missing.

A multitude of reasons lead to students keeping their cameras off and not actively participating. The hypothesized reasons students kept their cameras off involved students' apprehension about who else, other than their fellow students, was lurking in the Zoom classroom background. For example, I witnessed many occasions when a parent leaned over

their student and wave or give a thumbs up to some comment I made. Students did not want to embarrass themselves, so they opted to simply listen, with their cameras off.

Another perceived reason students remained quiet might have involved a Zoom imposed creation. In Zoom the participants sit in class and look at themselves. Zoom has a presentation mode feature that allows the presenter to share their screen. Even in presenter mode there is a live action video of that individual along with the content being shared. I personally found it disconcerting to see myself all throughout my own presentations. My students told me that it was challenging enough for them to present to their peers and teachers when in-person, but it was even more disconcerting to present to all these people online, through Zoom, while looking at yourself throughout your entire presentation. This disconcerting situation of observing oneself while presenting seems applicable to both students and teachers.

When I first started teaching fully remote in mid-March 2020, I was confident in my classroom community building abilities and thought it would be easy to recreate community in Zoom with students because I had already had my students in class, in person, for a quarter of a semester. I was wrong. In person, the students and I had active two-way rapport and engaged freely in learning conversations. Not so in Zoom. Thus, I desperately began looking for ways to re-engage my students in the back and forth we had cultivated in our in-person classroom. My students were completing their assignments, for the most part. Still, the sense of community that I experienced as a result of the active dialogue and discussion, which I had so effortlessly cultivated while teaching in-person, was dwindling fast. I became concerned that the sense of community was about to be extinguished as well. I found that asking students about things unrelated to school helped. They enjoyed posting in our shared blog-like space about how they spent their time in non-school related ways during the quarantine and freely commented on one

another's contributions. I managed to just barely keep our Zoom classroom community on life support through the end of that semester.

When the following semester began, we started in an environment that was fully remote, teaching a whole semester of high school science this way was a daunting prospect. I needed to create community online in Zoom without knowing most of my current students. I became a student of community building. I spent extensive time researching, watching, observing, and inquiring after what worked and what did not with my previous students. After a month of being fully remote with my new students, they were allowed to come back into the building to in-person learning one day a week. I was shocked when, as my students initially entered to join me in our physical classroom space, they clearly showed me that they felt a sense of connection with me. This sense of connection Gillespie, (2005) describes as a

genuine bond formed between two people wherein each person feels seen, heard, known, and a mutual trust and respect. The student-teacher connection is envisioned as having a value beyond these tangible outcomes creating a transformative space in which students are affirmed, gain insight into their potential, and grow toward fulfilling personal and professional capacities (p. 215).

My students were inquiring about my farm animals by name or how some COVID-19 related faculty conversation had turned out. Somehow without my even noticing, and I was seriously observing, they felt it, this Student-Teacher Connection (STC). How was it they felt connected to me and I didn't feel connected to them? As my students recalled a story, I had told them in Zoom, I learned from them that they were quietly connecting back. With their cameras off tacitly sitting during our Zooms, they were feeling a sense of connection with me, and they wanted to tell me about it. Perhaps students are more used to connecting electronically than we educators

are? My casual conversations and fun, creative observations had not gone unnoticed.

Uncommented on, yes, but not unnoticed by them. From their behaviors and interactions with me, I came to recognize that I was making connections; I would even say, building community, even in COVID-19 times. This was fascinating. My personal observations ignited my curiosity as to the students' perspectives and how they perceived their connections with me. I began to wonder about what it was that I was doing that offered these connections and was building the sense of community my students seemed to hold onto. What was my influence, as a teacher, here?

This study involves interviews only with former students who have recently graduated from high school. The connections these specific students are interviewed about are referred to here, and throughout this paper, as former Student Teacher Connections (fSTC). The terms former Student Teacher Connections (fSTC) and Student Teacher Connections (STC) are used somewhat interchangeably. The use of fSTC is to remind the reader that the students interviewed were recently graduated high schoolers and fSTC will be used only when that distinction is relevant, for example when the study results are being discussed. Otherwise, STC will be used which refers to Student-Teacher Connections with the Student identified first here, rather than Teacher-Student Connection, and the Teacher is identified second to emphasize that this study's atmosphere is oriented around the student's perspective and not that of the teachers or researchers, as has so often been the case in the past (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020). These former students will be interviewed through Zoom using a semi-structured qualitative interview protocol (Smith & Osborn, 2008) with the emphasis placed on the student's voice and how the student perceives the impact of this positive relationship with their teacher(s).

As a research-practitioner who taught in this studied school system, I am curious about how students perceive their connections with their teachers and how those connections add to their sense of self as a student and their sense of school belonging. School belonging is the “extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993b, p. 80). Qin & Wan, 2015 (p. 830) write that students’ sense of school belonging is their “perceptions of being involved, recognized and supported” in the school context. How and why was the students’ sense of school belonging being nurtured by this connection with me, their teacher? What was the importance of this fSTC to the students and their learning, from their perspective?

It was the aim and focus of this study to discover, through the students' own voices, insights into how *they* perceive the benefits of these positive teacher relationships on their academics as well as social emotional lives. The literature review reveals the advantages students gain from having such STC. This student driven input now provides the opportunity to teach all students and teachers how to begin accessing this type of relationship. The focus should be on the benefits and means to develop and to entice others to want to engage more deeply in these all-too-important-to-continue-going-unrecognized, student-teacher connections.

It is easy to imagine professional development opportunities geared toward teachers learning more overtly about STCs. Arguments are easily made for their necessity (Pianta, 2011). Also, of great importance to this researcher, is teaching students themselves about accessing such connections and, notably, the benefits rewarded from the perspective and understanding of other students who have obtained such a connection.

Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis method (IPA) (Smith, 2009) to explore student-teacher connections allowed this researcher the ability to bracket experiences

both as a teacher involved in former Student Teacher Connections (fSTCs) and a student of the influences of Student-Teacher Connections (STC) on students (my own students and students of other teachers). As a former high school teacher with over 30 years of experience and now a teacher coach who continues to work with a younger group of students, I have an awareness of the importance of these STCs. I have observed that students work harder when I show a genuine interest in who they are. For example, when I inquire after a student's ailing parent or ask about how a new job is going, I do believe this act of showing care and concern builds a connection between myself and my student that has the potential to benefit both of us in future interactions as a connection, a STC, is being built here on care.

This study was analyzed through the lens of Attachment Theory which is described in greater detail in Section Three's literature review. However, a brief acknowledgement of other theories clarifies the depth and potential of this study. For example, Bronfenbrenner's Devel ecology Theory (Shelton, 2018) as identified in his Ecological Systems Theory looks at both environmental and developmental influences to see the bigger picture of influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, pp. 57–58). The microsystem is identified as the setting in which the individual lives, either the home or school setting. These contexts include the person's family, peers, school, and neighborhood. In this study the classroom acted as a microcosm of a larger setting, the school itself. The culture and policies of the school have an impact on the student. The classroom environment plays a critical role in teenage development as does the genetic and biological influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's Devel ecology Theory (Shelton, 2018) presents both environment and development as having equal but different influences and takes both into consideration in his somewhat complex theory. This study was contained within

the first level, the microsystem, and so Bronfrenbrenner's theory has limited scope here but is still well worth understanding for this study's effectiveness.

## **Statement of Inquiry**

### ***The Opportunity***

According to Sarah Sparks (2019), students spend more than 1,000 hours in a typical school year with any of their teachers. Sparks asserts “that’s enough time to build a relationship that could ignite a student’s love of learning for a lifetime—and it’s enough time for the dynamic to go totally off the rails” (Sparks, 2019). Through her work, Sparks offers that:

A Review of Educational Research analysis of 46 studies found that strong teacher-student relationships were associated in both the short-and long-term with improvements on practically every measure schools care about: higher student academic engagement, attendance, grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower school dropout rates. Those effects were strong even after controlling for differences in students’ individual, family, and school backgrounds (Sparks, 2019).

The current research makes a very strong argument for positive identity development amongst youth when there is a strong STC (Ibrahim and Zaatari, 2020). This study’s outcome is based on narratives from the students themselves and how they perceive the positive influences from fSTCs that helped shape their identities. Students are typically the passive subjects of research, rather than active participants. There is currently a gap in the literature as the students’ own voices, also known as student voice, from their perspective, about their lived experiences around the connections formed between students and their teachers, are mostly missing. There are many other areas where students have been interviewed but not regarding relationships with their teachers (Ibrahim and Zaatari, 2020). The research of Alison Cook-Sather (2011) invites student

voice as well as student participation, but these students speak to their involvement in the learning processes as they collaborate in teaching and on the desired teaching outcomes. Cook-Sather writes of a project wherein the higher education students become consultants to the faculty as “dialogue partners, as co-conceptualizers and co-constructors of educational experience and revision” (2011, p. 44). What is missing is how students perceive the importance of their connections to their teachers, also known as student voice. Hadfield and Haw (2001) believe that:

young people are best placed to speak to the experiences of the young; that they can tell professionals about their experiences in ways that are meaningful and constructive; that professionals may not be well positioned to even be able to meet and hear from them. (p. 488).

In the United Kingdom and in a number of other international jurisdictions, citizenship education has become an essential element in the education of children and young people where they are expected to ‘own,’ in part, the problems, and challenges of their education (Cruddas, 2007).

A bigger issue in practice was not the lack of expertise of the young people but the unwillingness of professionals to listen to them, particularly when they were being critical. This is a particularly crucial consideration for a research approach committed to inclusiveness and working ‘with’ and not ‘on.’ It raises questions about how we work with young people who are often the targets of research around pupil outcomes, achievement, and performance (Hadfield & Haw, 2001, p. 489).

Cruddas cites that the current policy position in England makes it a requirement for principals, governors, and local authorities to “give children and young people a say” (2007). This policy



acknowledges that authentic bridges need to be built in encounters between adults and children and young people and how difficult this is (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2014).

In Michael Fielding's (2007) tribute to her extraordinary contributions, he notes that the late Jean Rudduck claimed that children and young people have a right to be consulted and heard in relation to educational experiences with which they have been engaged. The relationship between teachers and their students are undoubtedly complex and can greatly vary from one context to another, but Rudduck and her colleagues, contended that, from a young person's perspective, it was essential that the conditions for learning within these relationships needed to satisfy six principles: respect, fairness, autonomy, intellectual challenge, social support, and security (Fielding, 2007).

Rudduck and Flutter (2004) surmise that when the student voice is attended to, learning comes to be seen as a more holistic process with broad aims rather than a progression through a sequence of narrowly focused performance targets and Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) agree that "Knowledge is not some sort of portable self-contained *thing* that may be transmitted by technically controlled conduits, but is socially constructed and located in socio-historical space." Rudduck and Flutter (2004) firmly believe that students have a right to be heard and listened to. She follows the position advocated by Lawrence Stenhouse with his stance that "the first claim of the school is that of its pupils for whose welfare the school exists" (Stenhouse, 1983).

This study acknowledged the need for building bridges or "connections" between student and teacher and to gather students' perceptions about the connections students have with teachers to provide educators, administrators, policy makers, and other stakeholders with evidence that is relevant and displays the importance of STC as witnessed by the students' themselves. This evidence could include affect, power relations, and reciprocal interactions between teachers and students. This study's outcome will hopefully support the need to provide teachers with the time warranted to develop their connections

with students and care for students' academic and developmental needs. It was further hoped that there would be other rewards for both teachers and students.

The rewards for teachers could include a deeper sense of job satisfaction. A teacher's relationship with students was the best predictor of how much the teacher experienced joy versus anxiety in class (Sparks, 2019). Simply by having participated in a positive STC, the rewards for the students could include acquisition of skills to negotiate relationships and a sense of self they can be satisfied with as they obtain skills to help them better adjust developmentally and academically (Åkerlind, 2017). Educational systems all over the world could benefit from intentionally attending to these STCs.

### ***Potential Contributions to Practice and Scholarship***

Ibrahim and Zaatari (2020) wrote about how student voice is limited in the literature. They mention that adolescents' views of their school experiences have received very little attention. There are numerous studies focusing on school belonging for primary age students but there is little research highlighting adolescent students' perspective on belonging. Clearly there is not just a need for more research but a call for evidence to support the findings which clearly indicate the critical importance of the fSTC from the adolescent's perspective. There are studies on the need for fSTC in the formative years that lead students to identities strong in both academic and social success, but not a substantial quantity from students' voices (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

In literature addressing student belonging, researchers remark often on the gravity of STC in student success and, in the literature, it is most often the researchers who make assertions about their classroom observations on student belonging (Sabol & Pianta, p. 215). Occasionally the teachers are interviewed, and they make assertions about student belonging. Students

speaking about their own sense of school belonging, from their perspective, is not prominently found in the literature. To strengthen and produce more of this data, interviewing students themselves and discovering the insights and information they hold about the fSTC adds to the body of knowledge that will help all involved better understand how to successfully create STCs.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The focus of this study is to attempt to define the Student-Teacher Connection (STC) from the student's perspective, using the students' own voices, thoughts, and insights. This study focused on unearthing whether students themselves feel the importance and benefits of STC on their adolescent development. Thus, recent graduates of high school age, as they transition away from adolescence, were the subjects here. The study is a Dissertation in Practice (DiP) and although the practitioner is no longer working within the school environment, the findings are connected to and intended to benefit the school environment. The school was intentionally selected as it was the Teacher-Researcher's workplace. The school is small, possessing a direct relationship within a larger educational system, acting as the microsystem of a macrocosm. The school offers a home base from which to study the impact on students' senses of school belonging through their connections with their teachers.

Climate surveys and Healthy Kids surveys are other examples of data collection which offer the students' perspectives on the caring relationship they experience with their teachers (Whitlock, 2006). The majority of research related to STC relies heavily on the researcher and the teacher perspectives. Students are polled about their experiences through surveys but are rarely interviewed directly about their connections to teachers and the influence these connections have had on their education and adolescent development (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020). The research from this study is intended to provide a different forum to explore students' sense of

school belonging as it is looking at fSTC from the students' own voices through direct interviews.

Adolescents are described by the World Health Organization, as individuals who are between the ages of 10 and 19 years (Onis et al., 2007).

It is understood that students' need for belonging increases as students reach the sensitive adolescent stage. In adolescence, human beings are exploring and assuming their adult identities. Teachers are critical in this development impacting adolescents' sense of school belonging and behavioral, psychological, and academic development (Miller & Desberg, 2009, p124).

STCs that support positive development are built on trust, respect, affect, openness, and cooperation and can foster student achievement, identity development, and school belonging (Nodding, 2015). In one study, youth who reported attachment-like relationships with their teachers were less likely to use drugs and alcohol, attempt suicide, engage in violence, or become sexually active at an early age (Resnick et al., 1997). An imbalance in any and all of the key elements of the Bronfenbrenner's (1998) Ecological Systems Theory can exacerbate an imbalance in the student-teacher connection and lead to detrimental effects in students' senses of school belonging, and their lives (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020).

Starting with students' strengths—instead of their problems and deficits—enlists their intrinsic motivation, their positive momentum, and keeps them in a hopeful frame-of-mind to learn and to work on any concerns (Benard, 1997). Maslow theorizes that for resiliency to be present in any individual—children, youth, and adults—basic needs must be met. These include, but are not limited to the needs for safety, love, belonging, meaning, and accomplishment (Maslow, 1943). According to Sara Truebridge, (2014):

[r]esilience research consistently finds that three interrelated protective factors (also known as developmental supports and opportunities) together in any single environment—home, school, community, or peer group—play a role in whether these needs are met. The three protective factors are as follows: (1) developing caring relationships, (2) maintaining high expectations, and (3) providing meaningful opportunities for participation and contribution. Once again, when all three developmental supports are found in any one environment—home, school, community, or peer group—the climate in that environment becomes one that is optimal for nurturing the resilience of a child, youth, or any individual (p. 30).

Benard's theory of resilience states that all three protective factors need to be together and found in just one of the four environments (school, family, community, and peer group) to maximize the tapping and fostering of resilience and to buffer and mitigate the negative effects of trauma, adversity, or stress. These developmental supports contribute to the healthy and successful development of the individual.

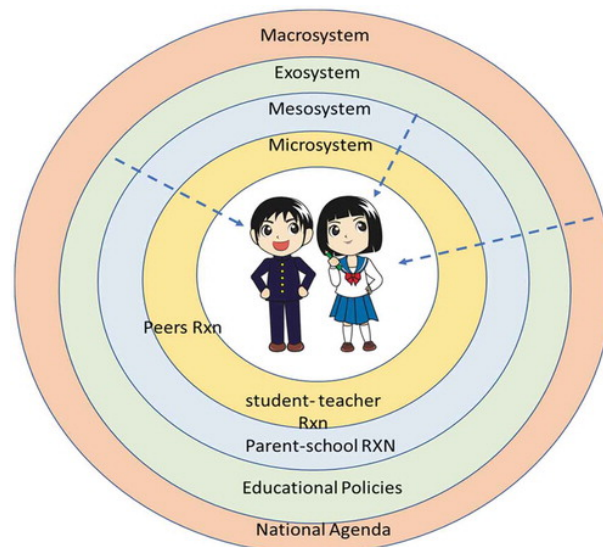
Ibrahim & Zaatari, (2020) used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to study affect, power, and reciprocal dimensions of the student-teacher relationship at the school level. The microsystem is identified as the setting in which the individual lives. This study focused on the school setting, the macrocosm and, more specifically, the microcosm or classroom setting. In Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory the contexts of the microcosm typically include the person's family, peers, school, and neighborhood.

Woolley and Bowen (2007) stress the importance of significant others (parents, people from school) to stimulate feelings of school belonging among adolescents. It is within the microsystem (Figure 1) that the most direct interactions with social agents (i.e. parents, peers,

and teachers) take place. The individual is not a passive recipient of experiences in these settings, but rather someone who helps in the creation of meaning derived in these settings. Adolescents are agents in the construction of their own environment both inside, in terms of identity, and outside, in terms of physical environment. They have a vested interest in its creation and should be primary contributing members in its formation. As one teacher in the Ibrahim and Zaatari (2020) study put it “they are teenagers, they want to talk about what happens in their lives.”

### Figure 1

*Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological System Theory*



Bronfenbrenner identified three characteristics of relationships: *affect*, one's feelings towards the other; *power*, the influence or control one has over the other; and *reciprocity*, the coordination of activities in relation to the other (1979, pp. 57–58). School belonging depends on what kind of relationships students engage in, which depends in turn on differences in affect, power, and reciprocity. Affect is a continuum that runs from negative to neutral to positive. Power is held in different degrees by the

teacher or student or shared. Finally, reciprocity is from complete to none (Shelton, 2019, pp. 34–35). Moreover, “the developmental impact of a dyad increases as a direct function of the level of reciprocity, mutuality of positive feeling, and a gradual shift of balance of power in favour of the developing person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 59). In Figure 2 on p. 31, from Ibrahim & Zaatari (2020), the teacher offers positive affect towards the student, shares power, and provides opportunities for reciprocity. In turn, student engagement in the relationship deepens, resulting in student positive development.

### **Research Question**

The study's desired outcome is to generate interest in and a basic understanding of how students' voices can, in the future, help teach others about both the benefits of and how one can create a STC. This study's research questions are ontological in nature: What is the lived experience of recent high school graduates in how they perceive the influence of their positive student-teacher connections? Ontological questions address the nature of participants' realities, so aligned research questions began with: What are the lived experiences? (Saldaña, 2016, p. 70). The study explores and elaborates on lived experiences while also developing a working definition of what the term STC means to the students themselves. The interview questions were designed to specifically address the research question with regards to the lived experience of students' perception of their fSTC (see Appendix B for List of Interview Questions).

### **Design of the Research Study**

#### ***Setting***

According to Creswell (2012) “purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research . . . [where] the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 156). One

school was purposely selected as the setting for this research. The study looked back upon the last academic year when the Technical Center had a student population of 120. The area the school is set in has recently, in the last 20 years, experienced a significant increase in drug use. The population in the area is also more transient in the last 20 years than previously and a large percentage, over 60 %, of the students are from low-income homes as revealed by the free lunch program based on the Vermont state free and reduced lunch status (Taylor et al., 2020). The school tracks student data on post-graduation workforce, military, and college placement. As mentioned before, a direct relationship exists between this school and a larger regional high school.

### ***Participants***

The participants for this study included eight former high school students who graduated within the last eight years from the school's Biomedical Pathway, a curriculum taught in three years. The first group of students participated in three of the four course curricula as the fourth course was not yet offered by the academic setting. The second group of students were able to participate in the full program, still over three years. This second cohort, at the beginning of their pathway, began fully physically present in the classroom prior to COVID-19. Part-way through, they were faced with the reality of COVID-19 and went to fully remote learning. At the end of the pathway, they graduated in a hybrid learning environment—learning remotely three days a week and physically present two days. They did graduate before being able to fully return to in-person learning. This cohort was a tight knit group of students who enjoyed the coursework, instructors, and fellow students and who indicated a proclivity toward helping with this study as it was being birthed, despite not understanding its scope or desired outcome, just a genuine willingness to help one instructor achieve a terminal degree.



Throughout this paper fSTC and STC are used somewhat interchangeably. The use of fSTC is to remind the reader that the students being interviewed are recently graduated high schoolers and fSTC will be used only when that distinction is relevant, for example when the study results are being discussed. Otherwise, STC will be used which refers to Student-Teacher Connections with the Student identified first here, rather than Teacher-Student Connection, and the Teacher is identified second to emphasize that this study's atmosphere is oriented around the students' perspective and not that of the teachers' or researchers', as has so often been the case in the past (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020).

Participants who volunteered for this study were selected for their willingness to sit for interviews and share their experiences. The participants self-identified as individuals who felt a strong sense of school belonging and of a fSTC. This study is only looking at recent high school graduates who felt a strong sense of connection. Participants were 18 - 26 years of age and selected based upon expressed desire to ensure continued fostering and development of these connections in the future. Girls comprised more than 50% of the subsample as the biomedical pathways curriculum typically attracts many more girls than boys. Students were emailed invitations to participate in these interviews and provided the opportunity to respond with any clarifying questions. Participants were informed about the study's purpose; to better understand STC, and their participation was voluntary. They were made aware of their right to withdraw at any time. Before, during and after interviews, the participants were able to ask questions and/or voice concerns. Permissions were obtained to Zoom-record the interview and confidentiality and anonymity were assured. All participants were assigned pseudonyms in the process of transcription. This information was kept secure electronically through password protection. The information gathered for this study will be destroyed after publication of the results.

### ***Data Collection Tools***

This research followed a qualitative research design with IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) as the methodology. Understanding people's lived experiences, and the meanings they attach to their experiences, is the central focus of IPA. The IPA origins stem from fields of inquiry that include phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. These fields hold that, according to Brocki (2006), human beings are not passive perceivers of an objective reality, but rather that they come to interpret and understand their world by formulating their own biographical stories into a form that makes sense to them.

Whilst the researcher attempts to access "the participant's personal world" insofar as this is feasible, IPA acknowledges that access depends on and is complicated by the researcher's own conceptions . . . required in order to make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity (Smith, et. al., 1999).

IPA studies can be conducted with a very small number of participants, granting more freedom for participants to express their thoughts and engage each other in taking what is expressed deeper. As eight participants participated in this study, it fell within the recommendations of Clark (2010) that between three and six participants is a reasonable sample size as IPA studies usually benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases (Smith et al., 2009 p. 51).

Semi-structured student interviews appear to be the best tool in unearthing the lived experiences of the role fSTC plays in the lives of recently graduated students, as seen from their perspective. The focus of IPA is on the exploration of participants' experience, understandings, perceptions, and views (Reid et al., 2005). The aim of IPA is to explore, in detail, the processes through which participants make sense of their own experiences, by looking at the respondent's

account of the processes they have been through and seeking to utilize an assumed existing universal inclination towards self-reflection (Chapman & Smith, 2002; Smith et al., 1997). In IPA, therefore, the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The meanings the students attach to their experiences in this study are interpreted through the researcher's lens. Adults are typically the participants in IPA research. However, this study looked only at the students' perception and, through interviews, ask the graduates themselves about their lived experiences and of the positive connections they have with their teachers. Interpreting the answers to the research question is at the heart of any IPA study. The researcher needed to be careful in interpreting the responses and keep in mind that the student perspective is of the utmost importance and is central to this study.

Interview questions were designed to specifically address students' perception of their fSTC (see Appendix B for List of Interview Questions). The interview questions were adapted from Ibrahim and Zaatari's 2020 study, *The teacher-student relationship and adolescents' sense of school belonging*. The interviews, lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, were recorded through the Zoom app and an iPad for backup, and later transcribed by hand and by Otter.ai - Otter Voice Meeting Notes into Word files.

Participants' background information was gathered in the first few questions of the interviews in keeping with Creswell's (2013) observation that asking for background information in the first few questions sets the interviewees at ease. Weiss (1999) suggests gathering demographic information at the end to not interrupt flow.

As society continues to grapple with COVID-19 and as these recently graduated students were no longer local, it was unreasonable to physically bring together a circle of recently

graduated students. Zoom was an effective venue for interviewing. Data collection and thematic analysis of these Zoom interviews was used to produce detailed results and investigate the issue “in depth” (Smith & Osborn, 2008) compared to quantitative questionnaire-based research which still dominates the field (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013).

A semi-structured qualitative interview protocol (Smith & Osborn, 2008) was used in Zoom. This interviewing technique included eleven questions. In accordance with interviewees' responses there was flexibility to change the order and type of questions in the interviews (Kvale, 2007). The interview questions, located in Table 1 of the Appendix B, were open-ended and general while they focused on the former Student-Teacher Connections (fSTC) and the positive influence on the adolescents' senses of school belonging.

Often discussed is the topic of second, or follow up, interviews to seek clarification. No further interviewing beyond the first round was warranted as researcher clarification was not necessary. No concerns arose in the conducting and recording of the interviews. There are advantages and disadvantages to follow up or second round interviews. The disadvantages here might have included the “halo effect” referred to by Callary (2015) where the interviewee, having been previously interviewed by the same person, is naturally inclined to give responses they assume the interviewer is looking for.

### ***Data Analysis***

The in vivo coding method was most useful for narrative work and keeping the student words literal (Anh & Davis, 2020). In first level coding the researcher goes through and identifies verbatim phrases and categorizes them according to who said them; teacher, or former student. Coding the qualitative data made, as Yi says, “the messy scripts quantifiable” (2018).

Codes are the smallest unit of text that conveys the same meaning and codes, in qualitative research, are as important as numbers in a quantitative study. In a nutshell, coding is the data analysis process that breaks the text down into the smallest units and reorganizes these units into relatable stories (Yi, 2018, p. 63).

These *in vivo* codes were then arranged for initial analysis. Codes were created during the first reading of each transcript. Basic filters were applied to build a scaffolding on which future coding methods were built. *In vivo* coding focuses intently on the participants' own wording which were then identified as codes. This method is good for beginners and particularly useful in educational ethnographies with youth (Saldaña, 2016).

*In vivo* coding is an elemental method of coding and to ensure rater reliability.

*In vivo* coding is used in studies to honor participants' voices and the method looks for impacting nouns, action-oriented verbs, evocative vocabulary, clever or ironic phrases, similar metaphors, etc. The same words, phrases, or variations thereof that are used often by the participant (Saldaña, 2016, p. 107).

Based on data analysis, codes were categorized into themes. Themes can tell the same story from different perspectives, or several different stories that connect with each other (Yi, 2018). Thematic analysis promises greater objectivity than a questionnaire-based research approach (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This process involved both electronic and manual transcription of the interviews to become familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In second level coding, themes were identified. Putting codes into themes refers to the researcher asking whether there are underlying meanings among a group of codes. Codes featuring similar contents were grouped together, yielding themes that specifically describe the fSTC.

Coding is a cyclical act. Rarely is the first cycle of coding data perfectly attempted. The second cycle (and possibly the third and fourth, etc.) of re-coding further manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes, and concepts, grasping meaning, and/or building theory (Saldana, 2016, p. 107).

As themes emerged, other coding methods that may better reveal the desired findings were then utilized. Two such examples included values coding and emotion coding (Saldaña, 2016).

Values coding, which is useful in interpersonal interactions, deals with labeling the values, attitudes and belief systems that are expressed by participants. For example, the participants worldviews reflect their values so a participant might say “I believe” or “I feel” which could code as the participants values (Clark-Parsons, 2021). Emotion coding labels the emotion recalled, experienced, or a reaction described (Davidson, 2006).

The second level involved reviewing and refining the main themes and identifying subthemes. The data was analyzed, and themes and subthemes were extracted from transcriptions until no further themes could be extracted. Decisions were made about the themes significance and those that met the final criteria became the final themes.

### **Assumptions and Delimitations**

A challenge, for IPA research, is to avoid driving the research from the perspective of the researcher rather than that of the research participant (McCormack, 2018). Interpretation without recognizing one's predisposed opinions is dangerous and is an aspect of which the researcher needed to be mindful (Smith et al., 2009). There are ways, however, to try to maintain objectivity and avoid bias with qualitative data analysis (Shaw & Satakar, 2018). One means of maintaining objectivity could include the use of multiple people in coding the

data. This helps ensure the codes are more reflective of the desired outcome and not of researcher bias.

This is a qualitative study and the sampled size for this study is limiting. The number of students targeted here was ten. All responded and were interested in being interviewed. Two participants were not available until a much later time and so eight students were interviewed. Qualitative studies, in general, and IPA, more specifically, are often small. Meaning that this study is not generalizable to all schools. The study shed light on a much-needed area of education: the student's own view on fSTC. The sample size is small and because of the interpretive analysis nature of IPA, the results did need to be interpreted carefully and thoroughly using the coding methods previously described. Refining themes through constant comparison was utilized to achieve theoretical saturation of the topic of interest (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). When these methods were exhausted, and no further themes were emergent the study concluded. A delimitation here is the omission of follow-up interviews. This does mean that the study's outcomes were not discussed with the student participants prior to the study's completion. Participants did have an opportunity for member checking. The participants reviewed the transcripts to see that they represented clearly what they said and/or meant to say. Not conducting a second round of interviews could be a missed opportunity in developing a deeper understanding of the interpretation of the interviewees, but the member checking seemed to suffice.

They say "hindsight is 20-20" meaning that after we've learned about something we think it was obvious all along. Many believe that psychology is just common sense, that the basics of the field are logical and therefore we all know about them (Frank, 2022, p. 36).

The students interviewed in this study were interviewed as former high school students. This raises questions about memory issues. Granted, they were high school students recently, within the last three to eight years, but they were looking back on their high school education experience. A limitation here is, as students look back, perhaps their memories are not as fresh as they might be if they were in high school classes currently.

In previous student-teacher connection (STC) studies at the primary levels (Kiefer et al., 2015), there has been a gender specific observation showing females tended to be more responsive in their STCs. It is possible that the gender of both students and teachers influenced their perceptivity. Gender influence was not an area of focus for this study and although comments were written about the gender identities of the participants, no conclusive interpretations were made. One final note, the findings are limited to mostly Caucasian high school students, in a public rural locale and are not generalizable to public, private, primary level students or schools mainly due to the sample size limitation. Further study with a larger, more diverse sampling would be an area for future exploration.

The positive potential of students' position on former student-teacher connection (fSTCs) has impactful potential on educational systems despite these identified limitations. The purpose of this study was to look for evidence that students appreciate both the interpersonal and academic aspects and students' interviews that suggested a transformative learning relationship can only be established if students and teachers mutually respect one another. All interviewee questions purposefully oriented the conversation to the fSTCs and only former students were interviewed. The intent of this study was to solely focus on fSTCs as seen through the students' standpoint.



## **Definition of Key Terms**

Attachment Theory: Attachment is a deep and enduring affectionate bond that connects one person to another across time and space (Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969). Usually children are attached to family (e.g., mother, father, and siblings), but they may also be attached to nonfamily (e.g., teachers or childcare providers).

Former Student-Teacher Connections (*f*STCs): The small *f* refers to former high school age students. “Student” is placed first in this term (as opposed to TSC where the “teacher” is placed first), highlighting that the students’ perspective is the lens utilized here instead of the teachers’ perspective. The term teacher-child relationships, which has the term child in it, seems more appropriate for younger students through to, and including, middle school age. There is a bonding that happens between the high school student and teacher such that the relationship seems deeper, thus the term relationship is replaced by the term connection to highlight this deeper, more mature bond. Although the two terms appear interchangeable, they are not. The STC places emphasis on the student’s perspective first and TSC puts the teacher’s perspective first.

School belonging: Sometimes also referred to in the literature as school bonding (Allen et al., 2017). School belonging refers to a sense of belonging at school and having a network of relationships with peers and teachers. School bonding is akin to attachment in that it can make children feel secure and valued, which can liberate them to take on intellectual and social challenges and explore new ideas (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 156).

Student Teacher Connections: These special relationships, between high school students and teachers, where a deep relationship—sometimes described as a bond or connection—will be referred to as student-teacher connections or STC. Defining the term STC, from the perspective

of the students, is the focus of this study. Listing student first in this term, STC as opposed to TSC, emphasizes this significance.

Teacher Student Connections: Although this term is not used often in this paper, it is included to emphasize the difference once again between STC and TSC. Teacher is placed first in this term to highlight the teachers' perspective and the lens utilized.

### **Significance of the Inquiry**

#### ***Scholarship***

There is less research on attachment-like relationships with teachers as compared to attachment-like relationships with primary caregivers (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 141). Typically, teacher-child relationship studies use observed interactions, questionnaires, and surveys. Teachers' perceptions of relationships and children's perceptions of relationships are queried through questionnaires and surveys (Sabol & Pianta, 2012, p. 215). A gap in the scholarly literature around student voices exists because studies that interview children directly about their connections with their teachers are rare (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020). When interviews are used in a teacher-child relationships study, they are almost exclusively only given to the adult caregivers (Sabol & Pianta, 2012, p. 215). Questionnaires, such as the Emotional Quality Scale of Relatedness Questionnaire (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997), the Quality of Student Teacher Relationship Scale or STRS (Pianta, 2001), and the network of relationships inventory (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985; Meehan, Hughes & Cavell, 2003) are the instruments used in the field of teacher-child relationships.

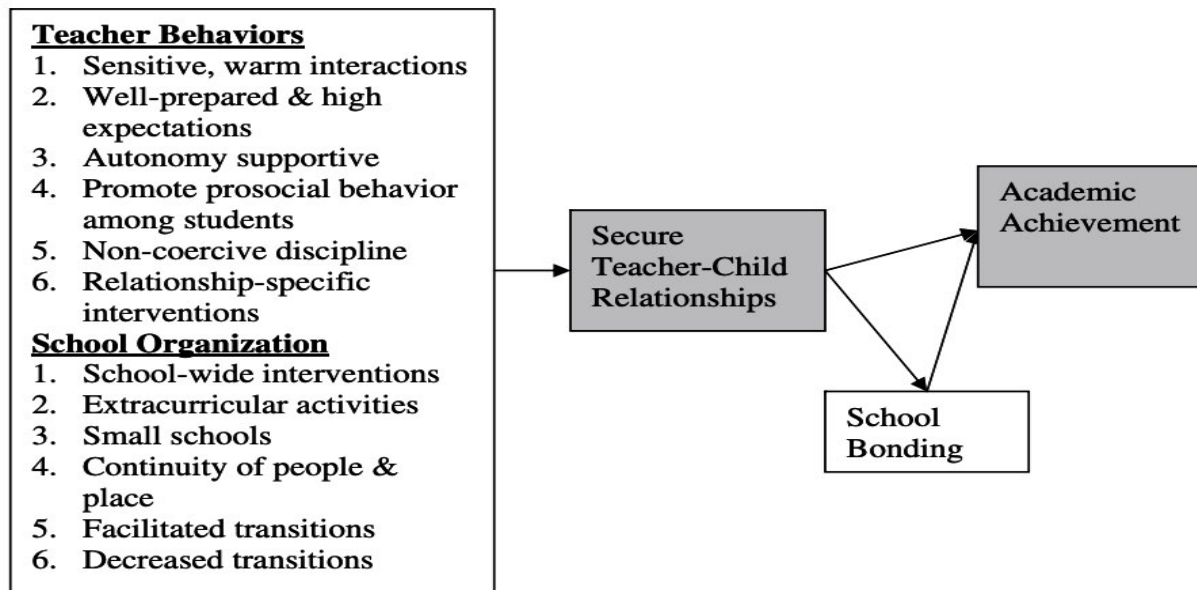
Attachment serves at least two functions in the classroom. First, attachment provides security, so a child can explore freely (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). All children seek to explore their environment, and attachment helps them explore with a sense of security. Attachment also serves

in the classroom as it forms the basis for socializing children (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). When children and adults interact harmoniously, they model socialization. Children will adopt the modeling of adults' behavior and values (Bandura, 2009). Attachment is important across childhood, not just in toddlerhood. Bretherton and Munholland (1999) suggest that older children separate from their attachment figure (AF) and explore more widely because of the proximity of their AFs. For adolescence, AFs' availability remains important. AFs' presence, openness to communicate, responsiveness to the child's requests for help, and awareness of the adolescence's needs are all important in establishing autonomy and some independence from the family. Some people mistakenly assume that attachment must wane during adolescence because many adolescents seem to push parents away in an effort to create/establish more independence. Instead, self-reliance and independence are the result of feeling secure attachments (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

All children attach to the adults who take care of them, but the quality of attachment varies (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Attachment relationships are characterized by specific behaviors in children. The attachment figure (AF) acts as a secure base for the child while the child is out exploring their world. If distressed, they seek to be soothed by the AF and quickly return to explore freely once they feel safe. They also show delight toward the AF (Ainsworth, 1979). Attachment behaviors in adults can include responses such as looking toward the child, attending to the child's needs, and responding to the child's signals. Figure 2 from Ibrahim & Zaatari, (2020) shows attachment behaviors of teachers.

## **Figure 2**

*Model of How Teacher Behavior and School Organization Might Contribute to Attachment and Affect Academic Achievement*



With teens, AFs engage in high-quality communication that is open, direct, coherent, and fluent in attachment-related situations. AF relationships help teens, who feel secure enough, engage in productive problem-solving, but these teens also seek autonomy during disagreements with the AF (Allen & Land 1999; Allen et al., 2003). AFs who create secure relationships with children are less controlling, use less corporal punishment, and use warm, positive statements to direct their students (Stevenson-Hinde & Verschueren, 2002). There is evidence that shows students who feel secure in their teacher-student relationships may be more protected from antisocial behavior like aggression, drug and alcohol use, violence, and early sexual activity (Howes & Ritchie 1999; Howes et al., 1988; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002; Pianta et al., 1997).

The behaviors exhibited by sensitive AFs and secure students are sometimes referred to as attunement, mutuality, synchrony, or insightfulness, and they respond to one another much as you would expect in a well synchronized dance (Koren-Karie et al., 2002).

### ***Practice***

It may be easier for teachers in primary classrooms to establish attachment settings, rather than for teachers in secondary schools (Beishuizen et al., 2001). Teachers spend more time with students and tend to a broader range of their needs in the primary grades. The literature shows that most of the research on teacher-student attachment has occurred in early childhood settings, rather than in secondary schools (Beishuizen et al., 2001).

Children's socioemotional wellbeing is critical to school success, and attachment is the foundation of socioemotional wellbeing (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005). Supporting early childhood social-emotional wellbeing: The building blocks for early learning and school success. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 33(3), 145-150.). Educators—from preschool to high school—can be more effective if they understand how attachment influences their students (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 141). For the practitioner in the classroom, the gains that could be achieved with better STCs are numerous and multidimensional. Children who have closer caring relationships with their teachers tend to have higher academic performance, lower externalizing behaviors, and better social skills (Crosnoe et al., 2004; Ladd & Burgess, 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). Understanding the role of attachment in the classroom will help educators be more effective, particularly with challenging students (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 141).

This secure attachment, once created, is linked to academic achievement from preschool through high school. Bergin and Bergin (2009) offer that:

[t]his link may be the result of attachment's effect on many dimensions of children's functioning—such as ability to take on academically challenging tasks, work independently, pay attention, tolerate frustration, be happy, contain aggression, be liked by

peers, and have high-quality friendships—each of which, in turn, is linked to academic achievement. (p. 163)

Since secondary students spend less time with a single teacher, perhaps it is more challenging to develop secure student-teacher connections in secondary schools. Yet, many adults tell stories of secondary teachers who's caring profoundly affected them and their career choice. Bergin (2008) wrote about a high school teacher whom students continued visiting many years after leaving high school who was instrumental in students' career choices and life-long hobbies (Bergin, 2008). In secondary schools, how "students feel about school and their coursework is in large measure determined by the quality of the relationship they have with their teachers in specific classes" (Osterman 2000, p. 344). Good teachers establish trusting, close relationships with students regardless of their age.

Whether students' bond to a school depends on whether the structure of the school presents opportunities for meeting attachment needs (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 157-8). Higher quality education is the result of healthy relationships from preschool to high school. Promoting attachment-like student-teacher connections and school bonding should be given priority because it promotes children's wellbeing (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 163). A student's sense of school belonging is dependent upon many factors; two important factors include teacher-student relationships and extracurricular activities. Therefore, understanding teacher-student relationships is an important factor in school belonging (McNeely et al., 2002).

Nel Noddings (2015) argues that the first job of schools is to care for children. Noddings goes on to say that it is morally and practically wrong to assert that schools should only concentrate on academic goals; children do not learn academically if they are not cared for. All students want to learn, although not necessarily the content they are asked to learn in school.

Caring for children prepares them to be receptive to learning such content (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 161). In Nel Noddings' words "it is obvious that children will work harder and do things--even odd things like adding fractions--for people they love and trust" (2005, p. 4) and she also stated that caring teachers "strive first to establish and maintain caring relations, and these relations exhibit an integrity that provides a foundation for everything teacher and student do together" (2005, p. 4).

To feel securely connected to others is a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, Maslow, 1943). Eccles et al. (1993) found teacher-student relationships at the secondary level are less personal and positive. Children see teachers as less friendly and teachers see children as less trustworthy, compared with the same children's relationships with their elementary teachers (Eccles et al., 1993). International comparisons of 11-to 15-year-olds find that U.S. secondary students feel markedly less bonded and dislike school more than in some other countries (Juvonen, 2007). Clearly there is room for improvement and promoting attachment-like relationships in schools (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 158) and the purpose of this study is to help gain a better understanding of fSTC to do just that. To date, attachment relationships studies, at the high school level, are already underrepresented (Bergin & Bergin, 2009, p. 141; Beishuizen et al., 2001) and adding student voice research seems important and necessary to shed light here to gain a better understanding of this under-represented area within teacher-student relationship research.

### **Summary of the Inquiry**

This IPA qualitative study examined the lived experiences of recent high school graduates' connections to their teachers and their sense of school belonging. The study was designed to draw from the perspective of students. Student voices are often neglected in

scholarship, and this is an area where their outlook can shed light on the importance and creation of these connections. The focus of this study is to provide information on and an understanding of how students form these connections. It is the hope of this study that, by highlighting these fSTCs, a better means of creating fSTCs more consistently will become evident, such that both teachers and students alike, can benefit from them. It is hoped that the knowledge gained from this study will add to furthering the research and dialogue on the importance of these connections. Student voices are essentially missing in the literature in terms of how students perceive their relationships with teachers and the importance of these solicitous relationships to students and to their academic achievement. This researcher hopes to empower students to advocate for more positive student-teacher connections.



## Section Two: Practitioner Setting for the Study

### Introduction.

The Technical Center's future is not secure. There is much that can help from what this study has shown. Allowing students the opportunity to use their voices and tell their stories, out in the community as ambassadors of the Technical Center, could prove to be profitable—both literally, as more students enroll funding increases, and figuratively, as these opportunities provide for building self-esteem whenever student voices are given the chance to be heard.

Over the years I have wondered about when it is that many students begin to hate school so much and why so early? Back when I was first a student, I didn't go to school for my love of learning, instead I went for my friends, the Fisher Price toy farm, and the jungle gyms that represented sports in kindergarten. My love of learning as my driving force to further my education would come later, much later, long after having graduated high school. I never did hate school. I rather enjoyed it but did not invest myself heavily in academics. I remember returning to get high school transcripts so I could transfer colleges and I was pleasantly surprised to find my grades to be mostly A's and B's. I had remembered myself as being academically dissociated but, even back then, I do think learning fascinated me.

Now I am fascinated by how others learn, what motivates students to become lifelong learners and what is it that through COVID-19 made students come to the realization that they actually wanted to be in school. I know, from talking to students, it had a lot to do with the loss of being in school as almost every student spent at least a semester learning remotely from home. I do think there was more to this newly found fondness for school though and I hope to capitalize on the *we-like-school-now* wave.

As any good science teacher of more than 25 years would do, I formulated a hypothesis and am now looking to experiment with it. I do think my hypothesis is colored by my love of learning. I do think and hope that this study helps uncover the love of learning we all have the potential for. If high school students feel secure enough with their fSTCs to explore this topic with me, as researcher, through interviews, we will at least begin the conversation around how to get more student voices into the teacher-child relationship field. Asking students about their experiences while looking to the future and seeking their input on how to best teach other students how to establish fSTCs could provide new information in a field that is lacking student voice. I believe that this study will contribute to the training of teachers who create a classroom experience that offers security to students at the high school level. With that security, students will have the will to go off and both play and learn as high schoolers with their AF close at hand for support.

### **History of the Organization**

This Technical Center, where the students from this study have attended, was built in 1950 and the student population since then remains predominantly white. This technical school serves many area districts which in turn each serve several Vermont towns. Students come from a lot of varied backgrounds to attend this school. There has been a lack of community support in the form of public funding over the past few years contributing to the technology and machinery at the school becoming outdated. The physical buildings are in good repair and need only general maintenance.

### **Organizational Analysis (OA)**

OA can be a powerful and insightful tool. OA helps the researcher see the organization in new and different ways. OA helps expose some things that might otherwise go unnoticed. Much

like the study proposed here: to get student voices into the teacher-child relationship field, the goal of which is to both understand more deeply fSTCs and to potentially identify innovative and creative solutions to helping more future students' access fSTCs. There exists a deep connection between the OA and the study proposed here which should become more evident at the end of this OA.

In doing an OA and looking for places the organization needs to change is one very real benefit. Another benefit of organizational analysis is that it enhances the chances of more creative and innovative solutions, while simultaneously helping create a deeper understanding of the organization.

Organizational analysis is the process of appraising the growth, personnel, operations, and work environment of an entity. Undertaking an organizational analysis is beneficial, as it enables management to identify areas of weakness and then find approaches for eliminating the problems. (Odongo et. al, 2019, p. 18)

Organizational analysis can help identify strengths. Having strengths to refer to and remind readers of what is working well helps make change more palatable. Perhaps the strengths also remind stakeholders that the organization is strong and will come out on the other side healthier and happier and more prosperous, which after all is the goal of any good study (Hargreaves, 2021). Morgan (1986) points out that looking at the organization from different angles, using different lenses, will help change be conceptualized and embraced. Examining how this organization exemplifies the metaphor selected sheds light on both the changes needed and strengths to highlight positive aspects that support the need for change.

Bolman and Deal (2008) along with Morgan (1986) are the founding authors of Organizational analysis technique. One of their methods, is the use of a metaphor. The metaphor

is selected to represent the organization and then observations are made of the organization through the chosen metaphorical lens. The metaphor chosen in this study, to better understand the Technical Center, is the organism model. The organism model looks at how the organism's parts all relate to the whole. The various parts of the Technical Center, career pathway options for example, could be compared to the body systems in a living organism. This model seems most appropriate for a Biomedical Pathways producing organization as it represents an illustration of where function meets form.

Essentially Bolman and Deal (2008) identify four areas or frames to look through to see the organization in new ways to reveal its strengths and weaknesses. There are insights that could be ignored if the researcher only used one or two of the selected lenses to analyze the organization. The four-frames model of Bolman & Deal (2008) includes these frames: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. In this study the four-frames model of Bolman and Deal represent four ways to look at the school and focus on aspects that might otherwise be challenging to discern. For example, the structural frame can look at the physical layout of the building as a factory or machine. The parts could be physical but do not need to be. These parts could be classes and departments, locations of the lunchroom and administrators' offices. This information sheds light on the way the organization is laid out and it is not just visual information. The structural framework, used in this way, can uncover details about the social architecture (Bolman & Deal, 2008) and the environment simultaneously. Attention here is paid to rules, roles, and goals.

The school is broken up into career path departments. Most of the more physically labor-intensive departments are located in a separate building that is in a single story. Here the equipment and ease of entrance is a major factor in the usefulness of the space. Large garage

doors provide access for autos or lumber. The administrative offices are in a separate building from this part of the Technical Center. Also separated, along with the administrative offices, are the health and hospitality related departments. These departments are physically located a few hundred feet away in a shared space at one end of what would be considered a traditional high school building—with departments consisting of academic classes like math and science. A benefit here is that the traditional high schoolers are exposed more to these career pathway departments located in the traditional high school and they opt to take more of these courses than those offered in the “other” detached building. The hospitality program helps itself and the health-related programs by offering good smells and good food to hungry high schoolers. Some of the Biomedical Pathway courses are taught right in the main body of the traditional high school. This proximal exposure helps the Technical Center recruit students for these career pathways but again, the pathways separated from the traditional high school are not as fortunate in displaying and recruiting.

Technical Center teachers typically spend more time with their students in longer class periods than traditional high schools, including those traditional high schools with block scheduling. As well, that instructor is often the only area expert for the particular career path. Technical students will, thus, take multiple courses with the same technical teacher. These dynamics allow for ample opportunity to connect with the career pathway instructor.

The Technical Center faculty come together for meetings often and there is a sense of camaraderie amongst this group that is not as obvious amongst the much larger traditional high school faculty as observed by this researcher. The organism that the Technical Center seems most like is an octopus. The octopus's arms, represented by the different departments, do not seem disjointed in terms of faculty cohesion but do seem disjointed in terms of traditional

student awareness of all the possible technical school offerings. This seems like a manageable fix if proximity or innovation were to be taken advantage of more by the less proximal departments. Perhaps a tractor parade displaying a logging demonstration, or a hot rod worked on by the automotive department, would be enticing to high schoolers outside for lunch.

Looking through the less visible but very political frame lens, this Technical Center is sensitive to the needs of students in today's gender complex society. This is witnessed by the installation of gender-neutral bathrooms throughout the different Technical Center buildings. The political frame looks at the school and pays close attention to advocacy and justice issues while observing power, conflict, and confrontation concerns which can then be addressed by the human resource framework.

The human resource frame might ask, "Who needs caring for and who does the caretaking?" The human resource frame can be represented as families of different octopuses. The faculty as a cohesive family or the actual families of the students themselves, or the students and their teacher of the individual departments are like families. All heartily support the Technical Center's (octopus) plight and along with the technical students' tentacles themselves who get out in the community to represent their school well to secure funding for future technical students. This is all good within the human resource related framework. As mentioned previously, the more labor-intensive arms of the career pathways, like plumbing and electrical, located in the separate building, do not attract as many high school students. Human resources needs to be a part of the solution(s) to help ensure the future of the Technical Center. For example, getting students out into the community as good ambassadors of the Technical Center provides an ideal means for the good work of the Technical Center to be observed and envied by community stakeholders.

Granted disparities exist around alignment of the organization's needs and the funding allocation, but fluidity from year to year and the camaraderie amongst the faculty family helps keep begrudging feelings minimal. The political and human resource frames work well together here to keep things status quo but more needs to happen to make the career center more viable. Every year the technical school seems to continue to exist, but funding is always a concern, and the security of the technical school's future is always at stake.

The last frame is the symbolic frame. Culture and ceremony and stories are of importance in the symbolic frame and the challenges are in creating faith and meaning. The Technical Center does not seem very invested in this area. Having students return to tell their career stories and how the Technical Center provided the path that was best suited for them should be an annual school year opening celebration activity. This would be an opportunity to spark curiosity and encourage having guest lecturers of past students offering highlights of their careers in the midst of the school year which could also garner support for programs and funding.

### **Leadership Analysis**

As mentioned earlier, the organism that the Technical Center seems most like is an octopus. The octopus has many arms representing the many varied career pathways available. These career pathways range from automotive to biomedical health careers, from hospitality to early childhood education. There is also a forestry and machine shop program and a new nursing program.

The head of the school, represented as the head of the octopus, oversees all the departments (career pathways) represented here as the arms of the octopus. The Technical Center's leadership is traditional in that there is a head of school responsible for all the hiring of staff and disciplining of students. The head of school is supported by an administrative assistant of

more than 30 years, and a career counselor. Both the head of school's support personnel help the head keep the octopus' water ripple-free by working with students, staff, and the administrator in helping minimize personal behavioral issues while lending a tentacle or two in helping with the daily operations as well as other fiscal oversight. An important area of responsibility, for the head of school, is in embracing the students and their instructors.

The students and their teachers co-construct the classroom environment at the Technical Center. Utilizing this co-constructivism in this study is resourceful and who better than the nervous system of the Octopus could symbolize this co-construction. Allowing the participants to advocate for themselves in this study, with their teachers listening and incorporating their input embraces Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Here the input students reveal could be utilized to enhance the effectiveness of their instructor and while working alongside each other, mutual respect is fostered when students teach the teacher while the teacher is teaching the students.

One amazing fact I have personally witnessed is that an octopus in the wild changes color, shape, and texture. The Technical Center has had to do this in the recent past. Funding for technical education is always at risk. Finding career pathways that will present well enough to the public to bring in funding and grants is of major importance. This line of thought is more in line with the politics frame of Bolman and Deal's four frames. The Technical Center octopus has tentacles reaching out to the community looking for placement for its students so they can gain valuable hands-on experience. The students themselves act as the tentacles, as representatives politically connecting the school and community as a lifeline for the technical school.

Here is where the octopus model breaks down a little. The structural frame as applied to the physical layout of the school reveals interesting divisions. In the octopus the physical



appearance of the octopus changes readily whereas the technical school's outer appearance, which is mostly brick, is weather beaten but mostly unchanged. This has pros and cons. The pros are that the structure is solid, well built for New England weather and easy to maintain with minimal budgeting cost. The cons come into play as society changes and cyberspace becomes more of a reality. Making room for new wiring and expensive computer equipment is a bit more challenging in an older building. The internet is strong and well supported by a well-educated technical support person who not only has helped acquire 3D printing but also state of the art metal fabricating equipment. This technical equipment runs much like a combine in the corn field; once programmed the operator sits back in the air conditioning to watch the results appear. The Technical Center consistently overcomes the challenges it faces.

### **Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting**

One of the four frames in Bolman and Deal's (2008) OA is missing. Stories of student voices are needed for the Technical Center to create the missing symbolic frame. Symbolism gives an organization its culture, faith, and meaning. These are extremely important in any organization; they point directly to the need for this study. Innovatively seeking student voice through interviews and looking to the future to help more students experience STCs through the perspectives of the students themselves is what is needed to help the Technical Center regain its missing symbolic frame. Student voice, innovatively used, will help education everywhere gain more insight and new means to reach more students. This study proposes to do this using information the students themselves provide in order to help more students access their teachers better and gain all the benefits that come as a result of fSTC. This win-win is for everyone in education.

### **Summary of Practitioner Setting**

The structural layout of the technical school has some benefits in recruiting high school students for career pathways. The political and human resource frames already work well together and can provide more support for the Technical Center. The symbolic frame is a place where greatest change lies, to make possible a more secure future for the Technical Center, is within the symbolic frame.

Stories pass down history and culture. Personal stories are powerful, and persuasive (Spiller, 2018). There is a tradition where the Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) club has been the reigning state champions for the past several years. That is something the school is very proud of and rightfully so. Beautifully framed pictures tell stories of big FBLA wins and of past students in firefighting gear, while attending school or riding a unicycle in circus class. These stories grace the halls as do numerous other award and recognition ceremony pictures. Updating these pictures annually could be an expense well worth the investment for the return: pride. Students seeing themselves or their friends on the wall in a way that celebrates them and their courage to explore new possibilities builds pride and, I believe, an environment that is invitational to all students to try on new pathways for themselves.

There is much the Technical Center can do to try and secure its future. Giving current and former students the opportunity to use their voices and tell their stories could prove to be profitable—both literally, as more students enroll funding increases, and figuratively, as these opportunities can provide fertile ground for building self-esteem whenever student voices are given the chance to be heard.

### **Section Three: Scholarly Review of the Study**

#### **Introduction**

A student's sense of school belonging is integral in developing students' identities and behaviors. Student-Teacher relationship is the most important relationship in the school context, and its nature should be highly effective, democratic, and supportive (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020). Teachers do so much more in the classroom than teach their subject area. The work of a teacher involves developing young minds and identities, fostering curiosity and intellect, and students' sense of wellbeing, and happiness. Chhuon and Wallace (2014) see the student-teacher relationship as vital for developing students' positive identities.

#### **Conceptual/Theoretical Framework**

##### ***Theoretical Framework of Participatory Advocacy***

This study's theoretical framework came through a participatory advocacy lens, as the researcher is advocating for hearing and promoting the student's perspective on fSTC which is largely missing from the literature. It is the aim of this study, through student voice, to find information that will further enhance the fSTC for all involved, both teachers and students alike. This sheds light on a process everyone can benefit from. Allowing the participants to advocate for themselves embraces the social constructivist Vygotsky's theory (Vygotsky, 1978) where knowledge is co-constructed, and the individuals learn from one another, and the learner is a critical and necessary part of the process. In the process exemplified by Bakhtin (1984), "truth is not to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (p. 110). This is restated differently by Sara Truebridge (2021, personal communication) as "magic happens in the spaces." The dyad's outcome, or the "truth" will be a socially constructed and agreed upon

understanding resulting from "co-participation in cultural practices" (Cobb, & Yackel, 1996, p. 37).

Another framework of interest here was one of a social entrepreneur. In Roger Martin's *Opposable Mind* (Martin, 2007) there is a lot of information regarding positive mindset and how society benefits from social entrepreneurs who are typically oriented for the best actions for society and not about making money as the simple term entrepreneur so often connotes. This is needed, and necessary to see social change happen through innovative means.

### ***Conceptual Framework of Attachment Theories***

There are many different conceptual frameworks used in the field of teacher-child relationships. In the attachment framework, child-adult relationships are central to children's development. This is largely derived from the evidence that attachment between child and parent heavily influences children's development (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Sroufe, 1983). These same constructs, used to define children's attachment quality, have helped to identify the mechanisms and key components needed to form high quality relationships between child and teacher (Pianta et al., 2003). The attachment framework provides the understanding that children form attachments based on their early experiences modeled with relationships to parents and other adult caregivers (Sabol & Pianta, 2012, p. 214).

A different framework used in the field of teacher-child relationships includes the developmental systems theory (DST). According to developmental systems theory, also referred to as an ecologically oriented systems theory, children are immersed in organized and dynamic systems that include both proximal and distal levels of influence. At the most proximal level of influence, individual teacher and child relationships reciprocally influence one another (Pianta et al., 2003). At the distal level of influence, it is believed that children's previous relational models

with adult caregivers are the basis of their interactions with teachers. However, a sensitive teacher may reshape children's relational models, and subsequent behavior and relationship, further broadening this multi-level system where each level, including individual, family, classroom, community attributes, has a dynamic bidirectional influence on relational processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

For older children, conceptual models that have been used to describe teacher-student interactions and relationships include both attachment theory and developmental systems theory, and social-motivational, socialization, interpersonal theory, and social support models (Pianta & Allen, 2008). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) ecologically oriented children's relational model in which individual characteristics, as well as context, are both influential in children's development. The ecological environment is scaled up from the microsystem level to the mesosystem level to the exosystem level and finally to the all-encompassing macrosystem and the individual's development happens throughout all of these.

### ***Review of Current Literature***

#### ***Student-Teacher Connections from the Students Perspective***

The focus of this study was to understand how students themselves perceive positive STC and what creates the opportunity and foundation for positive STC to form. Another question this study asked is about whether students feel this connection to be important in their learning. Rather than having teachers define this relationship, students are defining what STC means to them and what that connection is like, to them.

This study also hoped to show the need for the students to assert their own voices with regards to STC. A review of the literature indicated that students themselves are rarely interviewed about their relationships with their teachers. Instead, data was collected about

students through interviews with teachers and researchers, not the students. Interviews which do involve students do not adequately represent their connections to teachers.

Being innovative and using the research outcomes from the student's viewpoint on STC that this study aimed to uncover could be influential in many ways. This study has found that students do see these relationships as important. There is a need for further study on accessing student voice, and a need to better understand how to achieve more positive STCs. Showing students and teachers both how to achieve STC is another area for future research.

Understanding how students perceive this connection is a step in that direction and, because of the power of positive STCs, this information could be instrumental in unlocking the stalled dropout rate which has seemed to hover around 10% since the early 1980's (Stavros et al., 2008). The future possibilities here are encouraging. Having more students able to access positive STC will only enhance the community of any educational environment. Getting in front of and working toward positive STC's is a dropout prevention tool that could be implemented well before the need for intervention intensifies. Knowing one can hold all possibilities in hand at once and that the solution is out there, waiting to be uncovered, Martin (2007) might describe this as a "Both-And" in that the solution might be a concoction from both sides; the teacher and researcher perspective in conjunction with the student's own perspective.

The inspiration provided by discovering the opportunity feeds the fortitude needed to see the entire process through. Creativity helps provide solutions to make the path more accessible. It is not just the arrival that drives the entrepreneur, it is "Both-And", the journey and the arrival both drive the entrepreneur to success. Failure just isn't an option. (Martin, 2007, p 114)

***Innovative Application of Student Voices Regarding STC***

There are four key stages for innovative social entrepreneurship application: understanding the world, envisioning a better future, building a model for change, and scaling the solution (Martin & Osberg, 2007). With both depth and nuance, Martin and Osberg (2007) offer rich examples and stories and share lessons and tools applicable to everyone who aspires to drive positive change, whatever the context. Innovators and social entrepreneurs look for solutions where everyone wins. Duke University Professor Greg Dees describes social entrepreneurship as having “mission-related impact” for social benefit (Dees, 1998). In *Getting Beyond Better*, Martin, Osberg, and Huffington, (2015) offer a bold new framework demonstrating how and why meaningful change happens in the world.

Victoria Hale and her not-for-profit pharmaceutical organization, The Institute for One World Health, in San Francisco, California, is a favorite exemplar in Martin's *Opposable Mind* (2007). In this particularly brilliant “Both-And” scenario “there are solutions that satisfy both” (Martin, 2007, p. 114). Hale envisioned working with already discovered drugs and repurposing them for the disorders they were not meant for. Somehow, somewhere someone must have kept track of not just the negative side effects but also of the benefits of taking these test drugs. Using those drugs that do not make it for what they were medically meant to treat is a remarkable feat of forward thinking (Martin, 2007, p. 115). This was a great example of holding all the possibilities of the multiple working hypotheses and refusing to settle for a modified version of one or the other of the two possible options but instead to “Not choose now” and to “think harder” (Martin, 2007, p. 72).

### ***Students' Sense of School Belonging and Attachment Theory***

School belonging is strongly correlated to social and emotional wellbeing and self-esteem (Farrelly, 2013), respecting school rules (Dehuff, 2013), less violence (Aliyev & Tunc, 2015), and decreased dropout (Goodenow, 1993b). School belonging comes with a multitude of benefits, some of which include students' ability to maintain emotional stability, enjoy their learning experiences, develop optimistic attitudes towards learning, and attach to peers who share a similar stable and positive spirit. They are happier and more satisfied, and subsequently their academic achievement and motivation might increase (Fong Lam et al., 2015; Sánchez et al., 2005). Students who do not develop a sense of school belonging lose out as their sense of school belonging can be substituted by feeling rejected, unsupported, helpless, and fatigued (Ford, 2021). Their level of acquaintance with teachers and peers can decrease, which may in turn lower their personal agency, contributing to a decline in student engagement and academic achievement (Fong Lam et al., 2015).

### ***Student Perceptions of School Belonging***

This study was about high school students, their voice, and their sense of school belonging. In terms of school belonging, it became evident quickly that there is not a lot written in the literature from the student's stance on how students perceive themselves, especially from the adolescent perspective (Scott, et.al, 2021).

Wallace et al. (2012) found in their research that when students think teachers are there only to teach mechanically, without connecting to students' needs and interests, they participate less in classroom activities. For students who do somehow get left behind, they become alienated, disengaged, and lose sight of their aims (Goodenow, 1993b).



Coughlin et al., (2005) showed that students feel pressure to fulfill academic requirements and sacrifice their involvement in extracurricular activities, which impacts their time to socialize with peers, teachers, administrators, and coaches. This is seen as yet another loss in opportunity and time to build on the students' sense of school belonging.

### ***Teacher Role in Students' Sense of School Belonging***

It is a psychological feeling of attachment that makes students want to go to school every day. (Hayes et al, 2017). Students who “feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993b, p. 80) are likely to perform better in school (e.g. academic achievement). Another benefit of fSTC occurs when the feeling of being supported and encouraged by significant others (Baumeister & Leary 1995; Goodenow 1993b), such as teachers and peers, seems to stimulate students' self-esteem. A sense of school belonging is influenced by many factors, student-teacher relationships being foremost amongst those factors (Uslu & Gizir, 2017). Teachers are the most important school features for the development of adolescents' identity and self-concept, which in turn can promote positive development and positive future behaviors and choices (Smith, 2015). Teachers need to be proactive and pursue constructive interaction by showing interest in knowing about their students' lives and future plans, instead of only attending to teaching per se (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020).

The importance of maintaining ‘at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships’ (Baumeister & Leary 1995, p. 497) in school is visibly expressed in our results by the pattern of positive associations across a broad range of student outcomes. Although the associations are small to

moderate in size, the central role sense of school belonging appears to play in school settings is striking. (Korpershoek et al., 2020, p. 26)

Resilience researcher Sara Truebridge (2014) points out that caring relationships are the number one protective factor. Hayes et al. (2017, p. 44) acknowledge that a powerful and positive relationship may have the power to overcome the impacts of even the most damaging environment, and even a positive environment may be insufficient to support positive development in the absence of warm and loving relationships. Shelton, (2018, p. 29) further supports this by noting the student-teacher relationship is constructed by their respective actions and can be altered by change in either party's behavior.

Establishing a relation between individuals creates a dyad, and the dyad between teacher and student is crucial for child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 56). The Student-Teacher (S-T) dyad has the developmental impact of increasing as a direct function of the level of reciprocity, mutuality of positive feeling, and a gradual shift of balance of power in favor of the developing person (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 59). As the teacher has a positive affect towards the student, shares power, and provides reciprocity, student engagement in the relationship and hence student development occurs (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020).

The American Psychological Association (2002) indicated that teachers can enhance moral development and reasoning in adolescents by selecting teaching methods that incorporate democratic conversation, encourage experimentation, stimulate students to express themselves, and persuade them to face problems and resolve conflicts, in a friendly, supportive environment. Cooper (2014) added that teachers need to choose activities that empower students to think about connecting their ideas and beliefs to their classroom experiences and in doing so they themselves connect more deeply with their teacher through these experiences.

Sometimes teachers cannot find the means to connect with their students. For example, a teacher who was quoted by Ibrahim (2020) stated;

you do not have to involve them in decision making . . . because the students will decide to do nothing, ultimately. They will usually choose the least challenging, and that is a problem. You want them to be independent and to be a part of the learning-teaching process, but they do not know what they want. It is because we thought they know what they want [that] we lost a lot. (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020, p 382)

Ritt (2016) recognizes that teachers can become overwhelmed by the task of “teaching to the indicators” and neglect their core business: fostering learning, getting to know their students, and forming relationships with them. Some other teacher challenges, as identified by students, include:

rigid classroom atmosphere, hurried pace of teaching to the exam, pressure to ‘finish the curriculum’ A heavy teaching load resulting in ‘many students not getting the needed attention for their development and success,’ ‘their aim [for us] is just to be prepared for the tests, and to score well’. (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020, p 385)

Again, this quote is also another good example of how to contradict many of the elements identified so far that make for STC. And yet these are real challenges faced by teachers in today's classrooms (Ibrahim & Zaatari, 2020).

Students seem to genuinely desire this fSTC as is expressed by this student quoted by Ibrahim and Zaatari, (2020, p 392) “I want teachers to be closer to us, understand us, support us, and try to help us in solving our problems.” Sometimes teaching environments can nurture negativity and fragmentation, as teachers adopt negative attitudes towards their jobs and feel dispirited and demoralized (Bradford & Braaten, 2018). When teachers are given training and

support to assist with their daily teaching expectations, they are more likely to experience job satisfaction and stay at their positions (Curry & O'Brien, 2012).

### ***Schools Responsibilities and Shortcomings***

Schools are overextended in all they hope to accomplish (Mahn, 2021). Nowadays, schools are increasingly driven by achievement and standardized assessments rather than learning per se, and by external accountability rather than internal responsibility (Sahlberg, 2010). Ibrahim and Zaatari (2020) spotlight, from a teacher's own words, some of their challenges which hamper the teacher-student relationship. "We have a lot of work, we are always under stress, we have to teach, write exams, correct exams, make tours around class, supervise particular classes, design activities, and others." Another teacher they interviewed adds to this developing picture with "teachers here always face stress, and this kind of environment is demotivating to us." They do find some much needed common ground when they observe that teachers and students agree that the school system, which has a major focus on instruction and exams, does not support the creation of a caring and trustful relationship. Rich and Schachter (2012) support this further by stating that "teacher caring, teachers as role models and school programs need to cultivate the whole student rather than just focusing solely on academic learning." In terms of schools' sense of responsibility in this area of students' sense of belonging, Johnson (2009) argues vocally for more awareness of school belonging, also referred to as school relatedness, by stating that schools that concentrate on academic achievement more than adolescent students' developmental needs and social relations inhibit students' school relatedness. Yang et al. (2016, p. 14) echoes this stance with further recommendations to schools in their statement that schools must focus more on improving the social relationship at school.

### ***Influencing Dropout Rates Through Student-Teacher Connections***

This study has the potential to provide an innovative application of a topic that is potentially of such great benefit to all involved, including potential dropout candidates. A lack of school belonging has been shown to be negatively associated with absence and dropout rates (Sánchez et al., 2008). Those who do not feel attached to their school are more likely to skip classes or even become early school-leavers (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010; Lee & Burkam 2003; Ream & Rumberger 2008). Helping students develop a stronger sense of school belonging may prevent students from dropping out of school, as was suggested by Finn (1989). The student's sense of belonging enhances both student engagement and the student's commitment to schooling.

Positive STC could have an influence on student retention and graduation success. In looking at school dropout data there are variables that can alter a students' dropping out path (Thompson et al., 2004). Senge (2001) writes that the solution needs to be around helping students get access to and a vision of their future. School completion essentially ensures a more secure income whereas dropout essentially ensures the opposite. Having a positive STC gives potential dropout students hope for an academic future. Many dropout students feel a lack of belonging or connection and do not have positive relationships with teachers or other students or both (Juvonen, 2007).

These students are at risk of falling out of school (Willms, 2003). Intentionally discussing a sense of school belonging instead of discussing a sense of loss or a sense of disconnect, raises awareness of a more positive mindset of school completion opportunities (Darling-Hammond, & Cook-Harvey, 2018). The dropout rate has decreased to as low as 10%. But it has stalled and stayed here at 10%, over the past 30 years (Stavros et al., 2008).

***Opportunity in Battling Dropout Rates Through Student-Teacher Connections***

Many dropout students share a lack of connection, a lost sense of belonging, a disengagement and disinterest in school and the students just fall away (Finn, 1989; Finn & Pannozzo, 1995). Some students may be building trust with another person for the first time. Students who work to understand their lived experience through their own eyes in the interview process benefit from some of these realizations and will hopefully, altruistically, want to pass them on for others to benefit from as well. Soon, schools could show and support students in how to create good STCs for themselves. Imagine the benefits if more and more students felt connected to their classroom teachers. Ultimately this could increase the overall sense of school belonging for everyone. Discipline issues might just ease up and possibly subside if every student felt a sense of school belonging. Imagine the student retention rates increasing as students' school satisfaction goes up. The chance of budging that 10% dropout rate is a real possibility now in this imagined future or as might be stated through Otto Scharmer's (2009) book on *Theory U* we could, as the title suggests, be "Learning from the Future as it Emerges."

In Otto Scharmer's Theory U (2007, p 99) "The experiences you accumulate are the products of your stance and tools." In other words, set your mindset and bring to your experiences your desire. Bring to you what you set your mind to. Be very intentional and create the future you want (Scharmer, 2009).

Getting a little better every day, through intentionality in observing the positive STC it is possible to "build upon what has already been learned from experience into a better, more informed next model, which continues to become slightly more skilled each time." (Martin, 2007, p. 189). With the Both-And mindset (Martin, 2007) one can co-create what wants to emerge from the future. A person's stance and tools produce their experiences in the form of a

feedback loop. By refining the desired product through talking to the students about their STC the feedback loops create salience (more features considered) which loops back all the way to (creative) resolution via non-linear causality and architecture (continued visualizing of the whole while the parts are being enhanced). Non-linear causality of the innovator replaces the narrow and simplistic straight-line causal relationship of the conventional thinker. (Martin, 2007, p 45).

Connections. Belonging. How do students themselves define these terms? The focus of this study was not to understand what makes the group/dyad functional but more about how does the dyad benefit from these relationships. STC is a lot like Schrödinger's Quantum Entanglement Theory (Schrödinger, 1926) which loosely states that 2 subatomic particles, once in contact, will forever be connected. Once a student and teacher (ST) meet and connect (C), they are both influenced for life. Einstein famously referred to this phenomenon as "spooky action at a distance (Markoff, 2015)." The focus here is more on trying to make sense of why, students who self-identify as having positive STCs, are in the position they are in. How does one get connected to their teacher? What are the perceived benefits of this connection? If this study can elucidate the benefits students see here, from their connections to their teachers, the potential could be enormous, and timely especially given the influences which are now only just beginning to be visible in this COVID-19 pandemic. To begin the conversation around what these possible benefits are for students, for teachers, for schools, for society, seems incredibly important and that is what this study has initiated. The future possibilities for the application of this STC information revealed in the study could be used to build on all that has been learned here to benefit education of the future as it emerges. The chance to influence the emerging future in this very real way is not only emergent but is exciting and educationally exhilarating. "Oh, the places we shall go!" (Seuss, 1990).

## Summary of Scholarly Review

Davis (2006) found that middle school students and teachers who perceived their relationships as supportive and positive reported enhanced motivation, more facilitative classroom settings, and higher grades. Similarly, Birch and Ladd (1997) found that supportive teacher–student relationships play an important role in developing school adjustment competencies including attention, motivation, problem-solving, and self-esteem. fSTC's are a powerful mechanism to help ensure students' identities develop in the best possible ways and having intentional conversations with students about their formation and their benefits will help inform others, both students and teachers, who don't know how to create them. One of those previously identified benefits include the formation of trust between the student and teacher. Having felt really heard and listened to, bonding between the participants is then experienced as a worthwhile activity that fosters the necessary trust to move forward (Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2013).

When students do open up, look at, speak about, understand, and appreciate their STC their whole world has the real possibility to shift toward a better future through having had a caring adult connection with someone they see on a daily basis during their most impressionable and formative years (Evans & Davies, 1997). If positive fSTC became the norm in more classrooms maybe students would want to continue to and look forward to returning to school even after COVID-19 becomes history.

Asking students to ferret out what helped them create and maintain this STC is the beginning of a shift in school sapience that could possibly open so many doors. Schools, with students and teachers working together as teammates rather than adversaries, appreciating and intentionally working on their shared experiences, really could have that kind of impact.





## Section Four: Contribution to Practice

### Introduction

In the literature, high school students are rarely directly interviewed about their perceived Student-Teacher Connections (STCs) and although the participants in this study were not current high school students, they did graduate within the past three to eight years. The group consisted of eight participants, all former high school students of the researcher. These former students self-identified as having felt numerous STCs. Participants uniformly agreed that high school was the time when they felt most connected to *their* teacher. A few participants agreed to having been connected to teachers in middle school and in college but their most memorable connections to *their* teachers were during their high school years.

It is important for teachers to have good connections with so many stakeholders in the educational system and good connections with students is one area that can make a difference for both the student and the teacher (Milatz, 2015). The focus of this study was on the students—their perspective of STCs and the benefits they gained from them. Students and teachers alike benefit from understanding, from the student perspective, how these STCs form. Participants in this study had another unified agreement: they all spoke about how they worked harder for the teachers with whom they felt a connection. This meant that one of the possible benefits from their STCs was a more thorough and deeper understanding of the subject matter because they dove deeper into it, for *their* teachers, which in turn benefitted the students. This finding pointed toward the cyclical nature of this relationship. Why did these students work harder for these teachers?

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the chosen methodology for this study. It allowed the researcher to interpret, from the students' point of view, what the students'

reasons were for connecting to *their* teachers and how they connected with *their* teachers. Here, the students' own words were used to “interpret” or elucidate what the students saw as their reasons for connecting and how these connections came to be.

### **Results/Findings of the Research Study**

The research question that laid the foundation for this study was: What is the lived experience of recent high school graduates in how they perceive the influence of their positive student-teacher connections? This study was designed to shed light on how students understood the benefits of STCs and how the STCs were created. The study also intended to explore and possibly develop a working definition of what the term STC means to the students themselves. The interview questions were designed to specifically address the research question with regards to the lived experience of students' perception of their STCs. See Appendix B for List of Interview Questions.

All eight former students who were invited to participate, did participate and as one of the participants put it

“this is a prime example of, when you connect to someone, you're willing to do this [interview] without hesitation. You want to give back. I want to be able to do something like this for you. So, it was a no brainer and of course we would participate!”

Upon agreeing to be a participant in this study, each participant filled out a consent form, completed a demographic survey, and was interviewed. The survey questions were simple demographic information collected to help streamline the interviewing process. Participants returned the demographic survey with their consent forms prior to being interviewed. The surveys came back with these findings: The participants were former students of the researcher and all self-identified as having benefited not only from STCs with the researcher but also with

other teachers. Table 1 shows these former students ranged from having graduated high school three to eight years ago. Interviews of these former students were conducted to collect information about their many and varied positive STCs.

**Table 1**

*Years Since Graduating from High School*

Years from Graduation:	3	4	5	6	7	8
Number of Students	1	3	2	0	0	2

Former students were interviewed utilizing the Zoom online conferencing platform to conduct the interviews. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed using Otter. All interviews and surveys were secured on the researcher's password protected laptop. Next, the transcribed interviews were inspected for accuracy by comparing the transcripts to the audio recordings. The transcripts were reorganized and combined by question, meaning that under each question were all the participants' responses to that question. Clean copies of the reorganized transcripts were analyzed using three different coding methods which included the In Vivo, descriptive, and process coding methods. The In Vivo coding method was the first coding method applied. In presenting phenomenological results, Van Manen (2016) suggests being mindful of and consider the "nature of the phenomenon" (p. 173) investigated. The In Vivo coding method is critical in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to keep the researcher focused on the participants words and not on the researcher's own biases (Saldana, 2016).

In In Vivo coding the actual, literal words of the participants, found significant or interesting to the researcher, were initially highlighted. Second and third passes were made through the transcripts in search of patterns that would begin to elucidate the initial categories.

Short notations observed by the researcher, about possible categorizations, accompanied each highlighted quote. Table 2 displays a sample of these steps for question one. These steps include the interview question, students' responses, and researcher notes.

**Table 2**

*Sample of In Vivo coding by researcher for question one.*

1. What got you through the school doors in the morning?
<p>KS <i>"I never wanted to miss stuff. I liked learning."</i></p> <p>MR <i>"I really enjoyed the routine of school, friends, and to get to play sports at the end of the day."</i></p> <p>AE <i>"Really strong community, seeing all of the music kids piled up in the hallway right outside the band room, before school started was always something to look forward to in the morning."</i></p>
<u>Researcher notation: Socializing, sports and good teacher are all possible themes</u>

In Vivo coding was followed by the descriptive coding method (Saldana, 2016). This was the second coding method employed to further analyze the transcripts. In descriptive coding short phrases and nouns, that are key to the sentence from which they were derived, are identified. Here, in descriptive coding, the researcher interprets and describes what the participants seem to be thinking. As with In Vivo coding these descriptive codes were also analyzed multiple times for alignment with emerging categories. In Vivo and descriptive coding are foundational to IPA as In Vivo focuses on the participants' verbatim responses and the descriptive coding involves interpreting the participants' responses. Most of the categories had become evident upon completing both the In Vivo and descriptive coding methods.

The final coding method for this study involved the process coding method (Saldana, 2016). In process coding verbs and gerunds, words ending in “ing,” were analyzed and placed into the categories previously recognized. All the newly found categories were then transformed into themes. Numerous themes emerged initially. Soon the need for streamlining their numbers became evident and themes that could be combined were combined.

During all this coding, analysis revealed stories in the data, which contributed to a thorough exploration and deeper understanding of the students' lived experiences. An interesting example of the researcher's process included the finding that all eight participants agreed that they felt most connected to teachers when they were in high school. This finding came to light because of the follow up question asked of all participants to keep consistency amongst interviews. This follow up question, “In general, who were the teachers you were most connected to; elementary, middle school, high school, college teachers?” came in response to interview question #4 which asked participants about describing when they felt a positive teacher connection. This flexibility in using the semi-structured interview process was crucial in uncovering this finding.

The study's findings, or themes, are organized in Table 3. The findings were broken down into two overall umbrella themes: foundational findings (FF) and lesser findings (LF). The FF were identified and referred to by every study participant whereas the LF were mentioned by a few participants but not referred to by every participant. The FF were themes of the utmost importance, according to the students' interview data. These FF also appeared in the transcripts much more frequently than the LF appeared in the transcripts in Table 3. The students themselves, through being interviewed, identified these FF as crucial in creating the STC. The LF were contributors to the STCs but were secondary contributors unlike the primary FF. All

former students identified feeling respected and treated as an equal by *their* teachers as critical in forming a STC. Because all students made note of this finding, it was categorized as a FF. The participants all also identified the good listening skills of *their* teachers as another vital contributor in forming these STCs. Again, all participants spoke about this in the interview process and so the good listening skills of *their* teachers was categorized as a FF. The data shows the necessity for both in creating STC.

The FF lay the foundation upon which the STC is to be built. The three FF are also identified in order of importance in Table 3. The students identified the need for feeling respected and treated as an equal by *their* teachers a little more frequently in the transcripts which earned this theme the top FF spot of FF-1. The need for teachers to exhibit good listening skills was placed second and designated as FF-2. Interestingly, students reported “not feeling the need to be understood by *their* teachers, they just wanted to be genuinely seen.” In response, they “work harder for their teacher to reinforce the connection” and to “continue being seen” by *their* teacher. They “didn’t want to fall off the teachers’ radar.” The third FF, FF-3, was a characteristic found within the students themselves. Students all often spoke about their desire to please *their* teachers and so this “Pleaser” category morphed into a “Motivated to Please” theme and was rich with insight needing interpretation by the researcher.

Table 3 incorporates the lesser findings (LF). The data, according to both the student interviews and the number of times the codes appeared in the interview transcripts, were less important than the FF (foundational findings). These lesser findings are applicable but are not as significant as the important or foundational findings of feelings of respect, equality, and being listened to by teachers. These lesser findings enhance the STC and are mentioned to inform the study findings.

**Table 3**

*All Findings listed in order of importance and frequency of mentions in transcripts.*

The Finding	Frequency in Transcripts	Description of Finding	Mentioned by all? Yes or No
High School felt most connected	8	High School was the time students felt most connected to their teachers	Yes
FF-1 Respect & Equality	23	Felt Respect and Equal treatment from their teacher	Yes
FF-2 Good Listening Skills	18	Their teacher had Good Listening Skills and students felt listened to.	Yes
FF-3 Worked Hard for Teacher	17	Students worked harder for their teacher as they felt motivated to Please	Yes
LT-4 Learning together		Learning together, teacher with students	No
LT-5 Shared Goals		Shared Goals, subject matter related, teacher and students	No
LT-6 Sense of Humor		Sense of Humor. Students can joke with teacher and vice versa	No
LT-7 Not perfect made mistakes		Not perfect. It's ok to make and learn from mistakes	No
LT-8 Motivation & Success		Teachers motivate or otherwise help students be successful	No
LT-9 Supported, encourage, safe		Students felt safe, supported, encouraged in teacher's classroom	No

All the interview questions that framed the inquiry are listed in Appendix B. Table 4 contains some of these questions with some of the participants' responses (italicized) and description of the finding. Together this information gives a glimpse into the study's bigger



picture where the study's questions, participants' responses, and researcher's interpretations all merged.

**Table 4**

*Sample participant responses to interview questions correlated to study findings.*

<p>Finding: High School was the time students felt most connected to their teachers:</p> <p>AE <i>"It's harder to make these kinds of positive connections in college. I feel like was a lot closer with my teachers in high school. They saw me."</i></p> <p>MR <i>"I was closest to high school teachers, my favorite high school teachers more than college or anything else."</i></p> <p>LM <i>"High school [SV1] was definitely the period of school I connected with my teachers most."</i></p> <p>KS <i>"My favorite teachers were my high school English teachers. A lot of those developmental skills translated throughout the rest of my life, and I've used all of those skills a lot."</i></p>
<p>Finding FF-1: Felt respect and equal treatment from their teacher. Teacher seemed <i>real</i>,</p> <p>KS <i>"They treated you as a grown up. Teachers treated you like an adult."</i></p> <p>LM <i>"Short presentation at the beginning of the semester, 'Hey, this is what I do for fun'. That small connection, something extremely small, can really make all the difference for someone like me."</i></p> <p>KS <i>Having those positive connections made school more enjoyable. You looked forward to seeing those teachers that you really liked. Being recognized by them was always just something that made school more enjoyable.</i></p> <p>AE <i>"That felt special because it was like I was talking to him on the same level."</i></p>

Finding FF-2: Their teacher had good listening skills and students felt listened to:

LM *"Not only did they listen to you, but they actually reached out so they could get a better understanding, which is something that I found was very effective. Really awesome."*

KS *"He was very calm. Nothing fazes him, and he's just one of those people that always listened to you and took the time and was actively hearing what you said when you talked to him."*

KS *"He would make a lot of eye contact. He would repeat what you were saying to make sure that he understood it. When he addressed you, he used your name a lot."*

Finding FF-3: Students worked harder for their teacher as they felt motivated to please them:

AE *"I will spend a lot more time thinking about the subject material or reading the textbook because it makes me happy to know the material well, more so than if I'm just drifting through another class, with a teacher I don't really connect with."*

LM *"A connection often leads to me, being more invested in paying attention during class, or being invested in actually doing a thorough job"*

### ***Diagram for Formation of STC***

Once the coding was complete and the themes had fully emerged, two questions that needed to be asked were "Why did these connected students work harder for their teachers?" and "How are these three FF interrelated in creating STCs?"

The interpretation to these questions led to the creation of the Diagram for Formation of STC. The Diagram for Formation of STC (referred to as *the Diagram* from here forward) was created to better understand how the three emergent FF themes interacted together to create the STC. Although the Diagram includes both FF and LF, the FF are vital to STC, the LF act simply

to augment the STC.

The fundamentals to creating STCs start with the teacher *risking* being seen by the student and ends with how the student benefits. Here is how it works. The teacher must be willing to model appropriate vulnerability—in risk taking. This means the teacher must be willing to be vulnerable to be seen by the students and the teacher must also be willing to reach out and invite students to connect with them. When risking vulnerability, the teacher, and students both need to feel safe enough in doing so. This modeling of risk taking, and invitation can lead students to want to connect back and, to do so, they please the teacher with good academic achievement accepting the teacher's invitation to connect. There are means, other than academic achievement, to please the teacher but in the interviews, students focused on working harder.

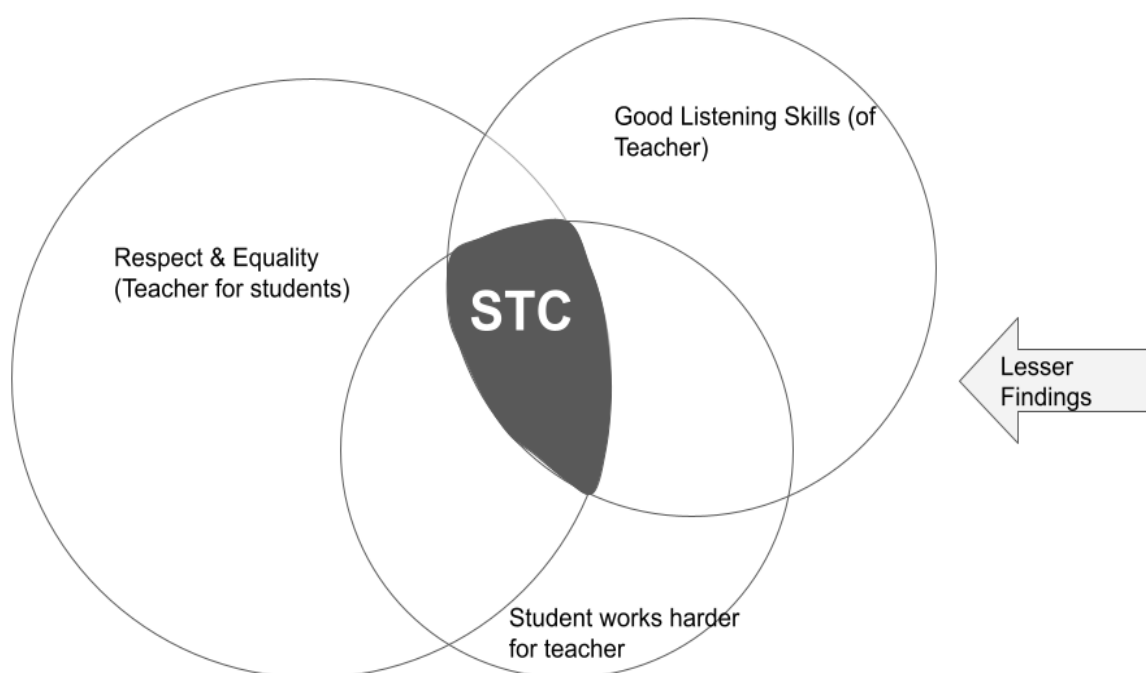
This “pleasing” that students refer to in the interviews pays the teacher back for their willingness to show or model vulnerability in inviting their connection. One former student, MR, saw a teacher's “edgy” behavior as modeling vulnerability. MR said “edgy” teachers were intriguing and she liked connecting with them. “What makes a good teacher is creativity or something a little bit edgy that keeps you interested and does something that would make you pay attention.” She further explained that “edgy” teachers were those who shared a little about what was happening in their lives outside of school. Referring to the teacher as “edgy” connotes a sense of being on the edge of acceptable. Another former student recognized an invitation for student-teacher interaction, at the semester's start, in a Professor's short presentation on who the Professor was outside of academics. Both examples were recognized as teachers modeling vulnerability as they opened the pathway for Student-Teacher interactions integral in laying the STC foundation.

After initially identifying the need for teachers to model vulnerability in both risking being seen as *real* and in inviting student connections, the door opened to how these STCs form. The students' need for their teachers to be seen as *real* was satiated when their teachers shared some personal story or engaged in conversation about their life outside of academics or found some other means of allowing students to see them as *real* people. When Brene Brown (2010) speaks about vulnerability, she offers an invitation and a promise-that when we dare to drop the armor that protects us from feeling vulnerable, we open ourselves to the experiences that bring purpose and meaning to our lives.

The interview data showed that teachers had to initiate the STC by taking risks. One risk was being seen as *real*, a vulnerable action, and another risk was by the actual reaching out to connect with students, another vulnerable action. The data from the student interviews began to reveal how key this concept of teachers modeling vulnerability was to how students see STCs initially forming.

### **Figure 3**

*Diagram for formation of STC*



In the next step, the Diagram for Formation of STC was created. The task was to incorporate all three Foundational Findings (FF) from this study and somehow shed light on how they interact together to create the foundation for STCs. The synthesis of this information was then incorporated into what is now referred to as the Diagram for Formation of STC, abbreviated as the “Diagram” from here forward. This bears repeating; this attempt to explain how STCs work is from the student’s perspective. The STC is not stagnant and, like any relationship, needs nurturing and constant care (Noddings, 2015). It is a relationship that feeds on reinforcement, is reciprocal, and is cyclical. This is a first attempt at understanding the STCs lifecycle diagrammatically.

***Explanation of the Diagram for Formation of STC:***

The first two steps in creating a STC involve the teacher modeling relationship building for the students. To do this the teacher must model appropriate vulnerability. These first two steps to creating STCs incorporate the first two FFs. FF-1: The students need their teachers to

treat them with respect and equality and FF-2: The students need their teachers to possess good listening skills.

***Step 1.***

The teacher risks being seen as *real* by the student. This involves modeling appropriate vulnerability. The teacher shows the students how they are *real* by sharing a personal story or as one former student shared, their college Professor had a short presentation at the start of the course. The presentation was about who their Professor is outside of class. This former student said, "This was huge for me." Another former student talked about teachers sharing about their difficult mornings or weekends and this made them, in the former student's opinion, "edgy" and she found she connected to teachers who shared about their life challenges or successes, and, as she'd say, "I like 'em edgy."

***Step 2.***

The teacher reaches out to students inviting students to connect, modeling vulnerability. The teacher is willing to see the students, reach out to them, and invite them to connect. The students desire to be connected to their teachers is great, as is evident in the interview transcripts and the studies' robust participation.

***Step 3.***

This third step involves FF-3: The students work harder for *their* teacher (Edmonds, 1992). In this final step the student reaches back to connect. Former students, who felt seen by *their* teacher, spoke about feeling respected, treated as an equal, and listened to by *their* teacher (FF-1 and FF-2). This lays the groundwork for what the students say they need from their teacher to feel safe and to connect back. Students who want to connect do so within the context of the classroom by working harder to please the teacher and to connect. The students reach back

through interacting in real conversations and by working harder for *their* teacher. Students do this so the teacher will keep seeing the student, which is extremely desirable to the student, and by working harder and pleasing the teacher, the students will now have reason to interact more with the teacher. This Diagram speaks to the reinforcing, reciprocal, and cyclical nature of the STC.

The STC is reciprocal and cyclical and grows stronger as the student and teacher interact more throughout their time together, reinforcing the new bond and making it stronger. In the Diagram the Lesser Findings (LF) are represented by the arrow feeding into the circles. These lesser findings, which were not discussed by all participants, work to strengthen the STC. They are not foundational to the Diagram. The STC is represented by the overlapping area of the three circles. Each circle represents a different FF. The largest circle represents FF-1 which is the teacher's respect and equal treatment of the students. The middle circle represents FF-2 the teachers good listening skills. The smallest circle represents FF-3 the students working hard to please *their* teachers.

The area of overlap by all three FF circles represents the STC. These three FF are vital in building STCs as all the study participants noted in their interviews. This finding ties it all together. The students in this study talked about FF of being treated with respect and as equals by the teacher they felt connected to, for example. They also spoke about the LF which included themes like teachers having a sense of humor or sharing academic goals or teacher and students learning together. Although this finding of feeling most connected to high school teachers is not a FF, it is a significant finding from this study that revealed another uniformity; each participant agreed that high school was the time period when they felt most connected to. Some participants observed feeling connections in middle school and some in college, but students reported that

they felt STCs the most, by far, when they were in high school.

Teachers are taught/judged on appropriate and inappropriate sharing. This fear keeps teachers from sharing about their partners, life struggles, kids, etc. Teachers feel vulnerable when they share life stories or show who they are as people with students (Redman, 2005). When a teacher does show they are *real*, like the skin horse in the *Velveteen Rabbit* story (Williams, 1922), students feel that the teacher might be someone who gets what they are going through, and students are more willing to share as the teacher has modeled building relationship sharing for them (Edmonds, 1992). Students are very sensitive about being judged and don't want to share with one who does not "get them." Showing who you are as a teacher is risky and sometimes the fear of perceived inappropriateness prevents most teachers from the desire to show themselves (Redman, 2005) and be *real* with their students.

The results from this study show that kids want to be seen and listened to desperately. Students see teachers as professional and see themselves as receivers of services. Students don't want to be receivers of services all school day long. Being in the classroom day after day, not being seen, only enhances this desire for them. When an opportunity to practice relationship building skills presents itself, students are ready and willing to do what it takes to appease this desire to connect to another. One student said "I was most always connected to a teacher when I felt almost like an equal with them. We were learning from each other bouncing things off each other. And it was a cool growth experience." This need is strong as the former students in this study have attested to through their candid interviews.

This study has shown, through the data interpretation here from the students themselves, what a STC is, how to create and even sustain one. It is the beginning of a conversation and the introduction of a diagram to help explain what the students in this study are trying to tell us about



the teachers they claim to be *their* teachers for life (Tarte, 2021).

### **Target Journal and Rationale**

Educational Leadership (EL) from ASCD is a journal for educators written by educational leaders—principals, teachers, and administrators at every level and in every subject area. The articles published in EL are not academic in style, instead they are friendly, conversational, and relaxed. Their most widely read topics include social-emotional learning, engagement, equity, school culture, and instructional strategies. Examples of articles EL publishes include specific problems of practice in a school community and proposed or attempted solutions, best practice pieces on instructional strategies that offer immediate takeaways for readers, and articles highlighting ideas and approaches to change and impact.

Submission ready article layout requirements include double spacing with one-inch margins on all sides, no running headers or footers, no page numbers. Major headings are required and need to be centered on the page and tables and figures used must be included in the text and single spaced. The reference section should be alphabetical, laid out flush left, single spaced, and have a hard return between each reference and formatted to APA-7 guidelines. Research Manuscripts are limited to no more than 8,000 words.

### **Journal Submission-Ready Article**

#### ***Submission Ready Article***

High School is Where Students Connected Most to Their Teachers.  
An interview with Eight Former Students

In this study eight former students were interviewed about what a Student Teacher Connection or STC is and how to create and even sustain one. This entire study is from the student's perspective. The study used the students' own words to "interpret" or elucidate what the

students themselves saw as the benefits of these STC. This study is a rather rare undertaking, as high school students are rarely directly interviewed in the literature. The students might be surveyed, they might be observed by researchers, their teachers might be interviewed and the researchers in the field might be interviewed, but students are rarely directly interviewed.

It is important for teachers to have good connections with so many stakeholders in the educational system and good connection with students is one area that can make a difference for both the student and the teacher. The focus of this study is on the student's; on their perspective and on the benefits gained by the students from these STCs. Students and teachers alike can benefit from understanding, from the student perspective, how these STCs form.

Participants in this study had another unified agreement, they all spoke about how they worked harder for the teachers with whom they felt this connection (Saldana, 2016). This meant that one of the benefits from their STCs was a more thorough and deeper understanding of the subject matter because they dove deeper into it, for their teachers, which in turn benefitted the students. This finding pointed toward the cyclical nature of this relationship. Why did these students work harder for these teachers?

The study also interpreted what students saw as their reasons for connecting to their teachers and how these connections came to be. As research interviewing students directly about their connections to their teachers is rare, the data interpretation here is the beginning of a conversation as is the introduction here of a diagram to help explain what the students in this study are trying to tell us about the teachers they claim, through this special connection, to be *their* teachers for life. Tarte (2021) acknowledges that "Teachers who put relationships first don't just have students for one year; they have students who view them as *their* teacher for life." The use of *their* teacher is used, from here forward in this writing, to also emphasizes this special

STC.

Table 1 shows the participants in this study graduated high school from three to eight years ago. Participation in this qualitative Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study was robust in that all eight of the former students who were invited to participate did participate and as one of the participants put it “this is a prime example of, when you connect to someone, you're willing to do this [interview] without hesitation. You want to give back. I want to be able to do something like this for you. So, it was a no brainer and of course we would participate!” The participants were former students and all self-identified as having benefited from STCs with me but also with other teachers.

**Table 1** *Years Since Graduating from High School*

Years from Graduation:	3	4	5	6	7	8
Number of Students	1	3	2	0	0	2

Another interesting finding was the participants uniformly agreed that high school was the time in their young lives when they felt most connected to teachers. A few participants agreed to having been connected to teachers in MS and in college but by far their most connected teachers were from their high school years.

A diagram was created for this study, to help fellow educators understand, more easily, what I have learned from my former students here. First, let me explain why I chose Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis or IPA methodology for this study. I wanted to understand my former student's reasoning for why they themselves thought they connected with *their* teachers and in IPA the researcher interprets the data. So, I set out, using the students' own words, to “interpret” or elucidate what the interviews told me were the students' reasons for connecting and how these connections to *their* teachers came to be.

I combed through the transcribed interviews looking for themes using qualitative coding methods (Saldana, 2016). Once I had the list of themes emergent from the data, I noticed the study's findings were broken down into two overall umbrella themes: foundational findings (FF) and lesser findings (LF). The FF were identified and referred to by every study participant whereas the LF were mentioned by a few participants but not referred to by every participant. The FF were themes of the utmost importance, according to the student interviews. These FF also appeared in the transcripts much more frequently than the LF appeared in the transcripts. These FF were crucial in creating the STC as identified by the students themselves through being interviewed. The LF were contributors to the STCs but were secondary contributors unlike the primary FF. All former students identified feeling respected and treated as an equal by *their* teachers as critical in forming a STC. Because all students made note of this finding it was categorized as a FF. The participants all also identified the good listening skills of *their* teachers as another vital contributor in forming these STCs. Again, all participants spoke about this in the interview process and so the good listening skill of *their* teachers was categorized as a FF. The data interpretation showed the necessity for both in creating STC.

The FF lay the foundation upon which the STC is to be built. The three FF are identified in order of importance in Table 2. The students identified the need for feeling respected and treated as an equal by *their* teachers a little more frequently in the transcripts which earned this theme the top FF spot. Students identified the need for teachers to exhibit good listening skills was placed second in FF. The third FF was a characteristic found within the students themselves. Students all often spoke about their desire to please *their* teachers and so this "Pleaser" category morphed into a "Motivated to Please" theme and was rich with insight needing interpretation. Thus, the Diagram for Formation of STC was born.

**Table 2 All Findings listed in order of importance and numbers of mentions in transcripts.**

The Finding	Frequency in Transcripts	Description of Finding	Mentioned by all? Yes or No
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FF-1 Respect & Equality	23	Felt Respect & Equal treatment from their teacher	Yes
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LT-4 Learning together		Learning together, teacher with students	No
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LT-9 Supported, encouraged, safe		Students felt safe, supported, encouraged in teacher's classroom	No

### Intro to the Diagram for Formation of STC

Two questions that needed to be asked of the data were “why did these connected students work harder for *their* teachers?” and ‘how are these three FF interrelated in creating STCs?’. Interpretation of these questions led to the creation of the Diagram for Formation of STC. The Diagram for Formation of STC, referred to as Diagram here forward, was created to

better understand how the three emergent FF themes interacted together to create STCs.

Although the Diagram includes both FF and LF, the FF are vital to STCs the LF act simply to enhance the STC.

The fundamentals to creating STCs start with the teacher risking being seen by the student and ends with how the student benefits. Here is how it works. The teacher must be willing to model appropriate vulnerability. This means the teacher must be willing to be vulnerable to be seen by the students and the teacher must also be willing to reach out and invite students to connect with them. In risking vulnerability, the teacher, and the students both need to feel safe enough to do so. This modeling of risk taking, and invitation leads to the students wanting to connect back and, to do so, they please the teacher with good academic achievement accepting the teacher's invitation to connect.

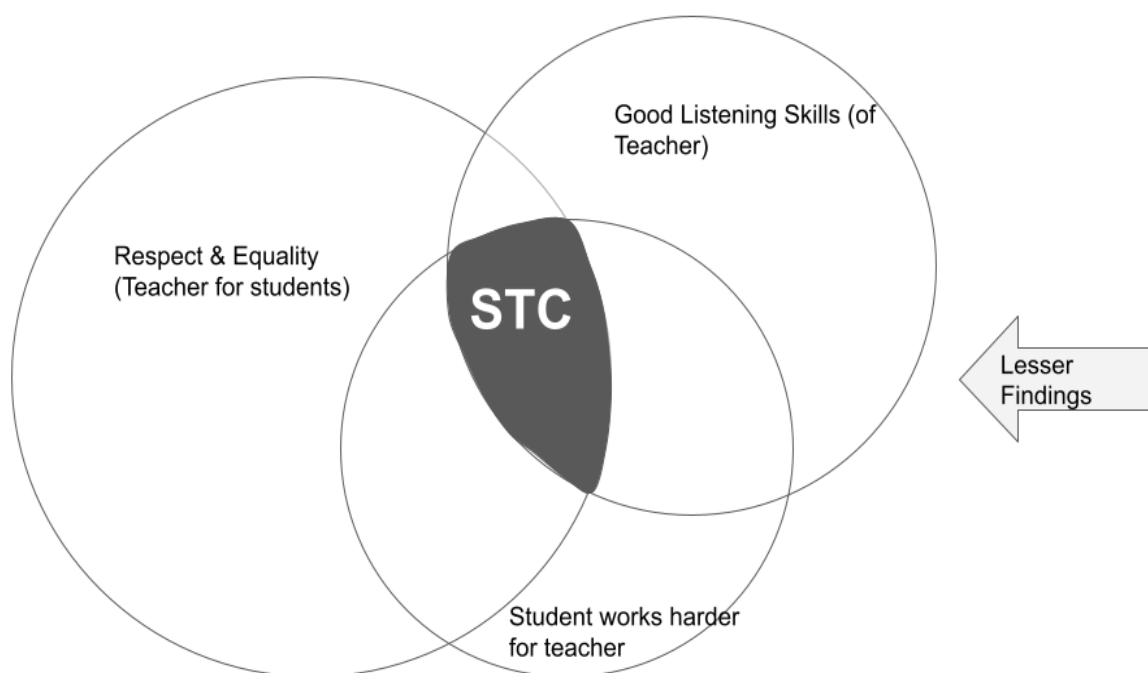
This "pleasing" that students refer to in the interviews pays the teacher back for their willingness to show or model vulnerability in inviting their connection. One former student, MR, saw a teacher's "edgy" behavior as modeling vulnerability. MR said "edgy" teachers were intriguing and she liked connecting with them. *"What makes a good teacher is creativity or something a little bit edgy that keeps you interested and does something that would make you pay attention"*. She further explained that "edgy" teachers were those who shared a little about what was happening in their lives outside of school. Their referring to the teacher as "edgy" connotes a sense of being on the edge of acceptable. Another former student recognized an invitation for ST interaction, at the semester's start, in a Professor's short presentation on who the Professor was outside of academics. Both examples were recognized as teachers modeling vulnerability as they opened the pathway for Student-Teacher interactions integral in laying the STC foundation.

After initially identifying the need for teachers to model vulnerability in both risking

being seen as *real* and in inviting student connections, the door opened to how these STCs form. The students' need for their teachers to be seen as *real* was satiated when their teachers shared some personal story or engaged in conversation about their life outside of academics or found some other means of allowing students to see them as *real* people. When Dr. Brown speaks about vulnerability, she offers an invitation and a promise—that when we dare to drop the armor that protects us from feeling vulnerable, we open ourselves to the experiences that bring purpose and meaning to our lives (Brown, 2010).

The interview data showed that teachers had to initiate the STC by risking being seen as *real*, a vulnerable action, and by reaching out to connect with students, another vulnerable action. The data from the student interviews began to reveal how key this concept of teachers modeling vulnerability was to how students see STCs initially forming.

**Figure 1 Diagram for Formation of STC**



In the next step, the Diagram for Formation of STC was created. The task was to

incorporate all three FF from this study and somehow shed light on how they interact together to create the foundation for STCs. The synthesis of this information was then incorporated into what is now referred to as the Diagram for Formation of STC, abbreviated as the “Diagram” from here forward. This bears repeating; this attempt to explain how STCs work is from the student’s perspective. The STC is not stagnant and, like any relationship, needs nurturing and constant care. It is a relationship that feeds on reinforcement, is reciprocal, and is cyclical. This is a first attempt at understanding the STCs lifecycle diagrammatically.

### **Explanation of the Diagram for Formation of STC**

The first two steps in creating a STC involve the teacher modeling relationship building for the students. To do this the teacher must model appropriate vulnerability. These first two steps to creating STCs incorporate the first two FFs.

FF-1: The students need their teachers to treat them with respect and equality

FF-2: The students need their teachers to possess good listening skills.

Step 1. The teacher risks being seen as *real* by the student. This involves modeling appropriate vulnerability. The teacher shows the students how they are *real* by sharing a personal story or as one former student shared, their college Professor had a short presentation at the start of the course. The presentation was about who their Professor is outside of class. This former student said, “This was huge for me.” Another former student talked about teachers sharing about their difficult mornings or weekends and this made them, in the former student’s opinion, “edgy” and she found she connected to teachers who shared about their life challenges or successes, and, as she’d say, “I like ‘em edgy”.

Step 2. The teacher reaches out to students inviting students to connect, modeling vulnerability. The teacher is willing to see the students, reach out to them, and invite them to



connect. To reach out, a high school teacher could ask students about themselves outside of the classroom. For example, you could ask about if they have a job or how they blow off stress. You could ask for their opinion or have them share a story that is reflective of who they are. This need not only happen at the start of the school term but could come in the middle or even toward the end of the term. Here you, as their high school teacher, are inviting them to connect to you. The students desire to be connected to their teachers is great, as is evident in the interview transcripts and the studies' robust participation. For the seasoned Teacher-Connector, this risk is typically minimal, and their invitations are well received by the students.

FF-3: The students work harder for their teacher.

Step 3. This third step involves FF-3 where the students work harder for *their* teacher, the teacher with whom they feel a connection. In this final step the student reaches back to connect. Former students, who felt seen by *their* teacher, spoke about feeling respected, treated as an equal, and listened to by *their* teacher (FF-1 and FF-2). This lays the groundwork for what the students say they need from *their* teacher to feel safe and to connect back. Students who want to connect do so within the context of the classroom by working harder to please the teacher and to connect. The students reach back through interacting in real conversations and by working harder for the teacher. Students do this so the teacher will keep seeing the student, which is extremely desirable to the student, and by working harder and pleasing the teacher, the students will now have reason to interact more with the teacher. This diagram speaks to the reinforcing, reciprocal, and cyclical nature of the STC.

The STC is reciprocal and cyclical and grows stronger as the student and teacher interact more throughout the term, reinforcing the new bond and making it stronger. In the Diagram the LF are represented by the arrow feeding into the circles. These lesser findings, which were not

discussed by all participants, work to strengthen the STC. They are not foundational to the Diagram. The STC is represented by the overlapping area of the three circles. Each circle represents a different FF. The largest circle represents FF-1 which is the teacher's respect and equal treatment of the students. The middle circle represents FF-2 the teachers good listening skills. The smallest circle represents FF-3 the students working hard to please *their* teachers.

The area of overlap by all three FF circles represents the STC. These three FF are vital in building STCs as all the study participants noted in their interviews. The FF work together to create the STC and the LF add to the STC but are not vital to it.

### **Developing Assertions in IPA**

Teachers are taught, or more aptly, judged on appropriate and inappropriate sharing. Teachers fear appropriate sharing might be misinterpreted as inappropriate sharing. This fear keeps teachers from sharing about their life struggles, kids, partners, etc. Teachers feel vulnerable when they share life stories or show who they are as *real* people with their students. Students see teachers as professional and see themselves as receivers of these services. Students don't want to be receivers of services all school day long. When a teacher does show they are *real*, like the skin horse in the Velveteen Rabbit story (Williams, 1922), students feel that the teacher might be someone who gets what they are going through, and students are more willing to share as the teacher has modeled building relationships for them.

Students too, are very sensitive about being judged and don't want to share with someone who doesn't get them. Unfortunately for teachers, sharing who you are is risky and sometimes the fear of misperceived inappropriateness prevents many teachers from the desire to show themselves and be real with their students.

Students want to be seen and listened to. High school students long to be treated as the

young adults they are near to becoming. They referred to this in the interviews as being treated with respect and as equals (FF 1). They also yearn to be listened to (FF 2). Being in a classroom day after day, where they are not being treated with respect or as an equal and are not being listened to, only enhances this desire. When an opportunity to practice relationship building skills presents itself, students are ready and willing to do what it takes to appease this desire to connect to another. This need is strong, as the former students in this study have attested to, through their candid interviews.

The finding that students are the most connected to *their* teachers in high school was interesting and a little unexpected. It does tie all the themes identified and the participants together nicely. I personally would have expected students to claim their elementary teachers as their most connected time and Ts. Students also spoke about the LF which feeds the STC Lifecycle but are not foundational. Some LF included teachers having a sense of humor or sharing academic goals for teachers and students learning together. Interestingly, this one finding, where, in high school, students felt the most connected to *their* teachers.

In short, for high school teachers to create a STC they must be willing to show vulnerability in who they are outside of school and in inviting their students to connect with them. The participants in this study referred to *their* teachers as being *real*. How is this *real* status achieved? This is the first step. High school teacher can share stories or just talk a little about who they are outside of school. In the next step, to invite students to connect with you, the high school teacher, ask them about them and then genuinely listen. For example, you could ask them to share a personal story about who they are outside of your classroom, or you could ask them about what they do for work or for fun outside of school. Showing interest in students' lives leads students to realize teachers do care about them and are curious about who *their*

students are. The final step is up to the students. When invited, students can choose to tell their story and, when they do, your invite was well received. You are now well on your way to forming a STC. A few more rounds with this strategy will solidify and sustain the STC.

These are just a few strategies, from the research that, in the students' opinions, can help high school teacher form STCs with their students. In conclusion this study has shown, through interviews with eight of my former students, what a STC is, how to create and even sustain one. This is the beginning of a conversation and the introduction of a diagram to help explain the story students in this study are trying to tell about the teachers they claim to be *their* teachers for life.

## **Section Five: Contribution to Practice**

### **Introduction**

The school district in which this study was conducted, and this researcher works, holds an opening meeting to kick off each school year. Educators gather from all over the district in one place to hear three or four seasoned colleagues address them and offer inspiration. This is the target audience to disseminate these practitioner findings from this study. This Section Five: Contribution to Practice, will serve as a good resource opportunity for disseminating what has been learned in this study at the district opening meeting. At this meeting, the researcher will present five areas touched upon in this section. These areas will include:

- Students' Sense of School Belonging
- Teacher Listening
- Storytelling
- Don't Smile until November
- Personal Narratives

The presentation will give educators access to instructional strategies and immediate takeaways, highlighting ideas and approaches to change that have long lasting impact for all classroom stakeholders. This will all be presented in an inspirational manner geared toward revitalizing the profession and addressing students' sense of school belonging. This presentation will open a conversation where, if the researcher is to speak personally about Student-Teacher Connections (STCs), she will need to be vulnerable.

The presenter will be modeling vulnerability and STC building through sharing personal stories about connections to former students. The conversation with the audience will include the drawbacks of “Don’t smile until November!” and what some of the STC perks for students and teachers are. This will be the beginning of a conversation of what has been found so far.

### ***Vulnerability.***

The definition of vulnerability is “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. But vulnerability is not weakness; it's our most accurate measure of courage” (Brown, 2018). Dr. Brene Brown is out in the world trying to change our cultural beliefs about vulnerability. Her work would benefit district teachers as teachers are taught not to share personal life stories and, in essence, not to risk being vulnerable—to remain distant and disconnected from the students. In her book *Dare to Lead*, Dr. Brene Brown refers to this as “armoring up” to protect yourself from the judgment of others. “Don’t Smile until November” is an adage most teachers know well. Significant research has opposed this school of thought (Redman, 2005), yet the practical implication of this research is slow to reach teachers so that they can change their mindset.

Presenting the findings would begin this mindset change as a conversation at the district level. Conversations are fundamental to change (Cooperrider, 2008). This “Don’t Smile until November” is a bigger problem that teachers alone cannot solve (Redman, 2005). A school wide

cultural shift needs to happen for teachers to feel safe enough in their own classrooms to not have to close the door when they want to be vulnerable and work toward creating STCs (Student-Teacher Connections). Mastering the art of creating STCs could make life as a teacher easier and make engagement in the classroom more desirable for students. One former student spoke about how engagement for both students and teachers was enhanced through the STC. She said,

Seeing students with the passions that they have, and how their connected teacher found ways to help them incorporate their passions into the material in different ways. They would meet each student, where they're at, and actually saw what they needed to be engaged and excited. This goes for both parties. It's important, for both.

Change is slow and begins with awareness. Awareness comes from conversation and from conversation, mindsets can change (Dweck, 2016).

## **Practitioner Contribution**

### ***Students' Sense of School Belonging***

Teachers are still being taught to have rigid boundaries with students, but today's students need more demonstration of vulnerability and relationality to connect and make school valued in their life. Without connections in school, school really holds little value to our students today. They also need care and to know their teachers do care, otherwise, why bother to attend (Willingham, 2021). One study participant noted "I think also the caring was important and I enjoy learning stuff, so, it's nice when teachers are actually there to teach you stuff, not just do the job. I have a lot of memories in school of being extra curious about something that we were doing. It was always my favorite teachers who'd go out of their way a little bit to help. They saw that it was something I really liked, 'oh, well let's go there'. Or, if another student was into the teaching part of it, the teacher would care about that and putting energy there." Teachers feel

more personally rewarded by the teaching experience (Milatz et al., 2015). It is no wonder that teachers who have discovered the power of positive affect start the school year with a smile. From kindergarten through college, the communication of warmth and friendliness by a teacher results in higher student satisfaction, better teacher-student relationships, and higher student evaluations of teaching effectiveness (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Teachers are an integral part of their students' development and this, in turn, has an impact on their students' academic and social development, namely their sense of school belonging. Few in our society would discount the importance of caring, concern, love, or other strong positive feelings. Yet feeling these emotions is not enough, communicating them is essential. Communication researchers have discovered that, to have positive impact on others, one's caring must be communicated (Teven, 2007). As one interviewee reported "not only did they listen to you, but they actually reached out so they could get a better understanding of how to connect, which is something that I found was very effective. Really awesome." These former students noticed when their connected teachers reached out inviting their students to connect with them.

Students in this study are trying to tell us about the teachers they claim to be *their* teachers for life. "Teachers who put relationships first don't just have students for one year; they have students who view them as *their* teacher for life" (Tarte, 2021). The term *their teacher* is used throughout this writing to emphasize this declaration. An obvious classroom benefit that occurs when teachers communicate a positive affect to their students is that students like it. Interestingly, the research indicates greater student liking not only for the teacher but also for both the subject matter taught by the teacher and for school in general (Niess, 2005). Also, when teachers communicate positive affect, students are more likely to become lifelong learners, eager

for continued positive learning experiences with similar content (Jivanjee et al., 2015). When asked STCs benefits, one former student responded with “I never wanted to miss stuff. I liked learning.” And another added:

I will spend a lot more time thinking about the subject material or reading the textbook because it makes me happy to know the material well, more so than if I'm just drifting through another class, with a teacher I don't really connect with.

Teachers have greater influence with their students and their students learn more from these teachers.

When asked about their sense of school belonging, one former student responded “having those positive connections made school more enjoyable. You looked forward to seeing those teachers that you really liked. Being recognized by them was always just something that made school more enjoyable.” Another added “for me a big part of it was the social aspect that I loved. I had friends and connections with teachers and peers and whatnot. And that was always a driving force for me.” Clearly former students in this study articulated a need for a caring connection to have a sense of school belonging.

One of the study's goals was to attempt a definition of what a STC is. Here is a definition, from the student perspective, as defined from this study, that is a work in progress:

### ***STC Definition***

*A reciprocally caring relationship (connection) between student and teacher which include respect and equality, good listening skills, and active engagement.*

### ***Teacher Listening***

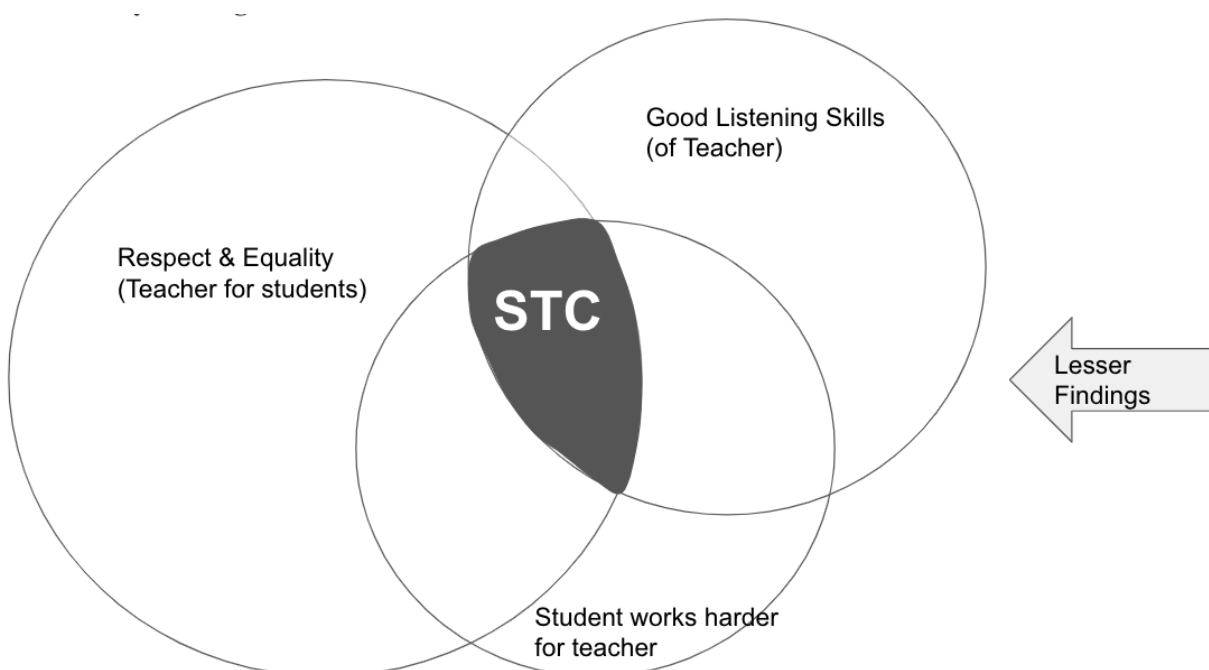
Interviewees spoke about the teachers they felt connected to and how these teachers interacted with and listened to them. One student acknowledged:



He was very calm. Nothing fazes him, and he's just one of those people that always listened to you and took the time and was actively hearing what you said when you talked to him. He would make a lot of eye contact. He would repeat what you were saying to make sure that he understood it. When he addressed you, he used your name a lot.

**Figure 3**

*Diagram for formation of STC*



From the students' perspective, the foundational elements to build a positive student teacher connection includes these; respect and equality offered from the teacher to the students, good listening skills offered by the teacher to the students, and active student engagement where the students work harder for the teachers they are connected to than they would for teachers who they are not positively connected to. Figure 3 reproduced above for convenience.

This connection is reciprocal. For example, students also offer good listening skills, along with respect and equality, to *their* teacher. Both teacher and students honor who one another is and what each brings to the classroom.

The identified teacher listening skills are summarized in Table 3. Some advice to teachers from students in this study, for developing caring relationships that lead to STCs, includes asking them about who they are outside of class. Listening to them. Deeply listening. Speak back some of what was heard, use good eye contact, and use their name. Remember how important it is that students see teachers as someone who knows who they are. One interviewee spoke about how meaningful it was to him that his college Professor, halfway through the year, in a very large lecture class, knew who he was. This was the impetus he needed to work harder for that educator and for himself. Relationship building needs to be a priority from day one. This could include smiling, laughing, and having fun enjoying one's own jokes. Students will want to reciprocate what teachers put out there for them.

**Table 3**

*Identified Teacher Listening Skills*

Teacher Listening Skills (Identified by the former student study participants)
Paying attention
Using the student's name
Repeating back what the student says
Using good eye contact.
Deferring judgment

For a student teacher connection to form, Figure 4, there must be freedom of vulnerability for both partners. There are three participant requirements here as well and like the three

foundational elements, the teacher is primarily responsible for the first two and the student assumes the last requirement. According to the former students in this study, the teacher has to risk being seen as *real*, and does this by risking sharing a bit more about themselves outside of the classroom. Then the teacher must risk reaching out to the students, inviting them to connect. Lastly, the students reach out by accepting the invitation and working harder for *their* teacher. In both the foundational elements and the formation of STC, the teacher engages in  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the risk taking effort to create this connection. The students engage in  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the risk.

**Figure 4**

*Participant Requirements for STC Formation*



### ***Storytelling***

Storytelling has a purpose and essential place in the learning environment for students (Van Gils, 2005). Study participants noted *their* teachers showing up as *real* through storytelling. Modeling vulnerability in risk of being seen as *real* in sharing who teachers are outside of academics is something the researcher will need to model for the district presentation with effective use of storytelling. Three personal narrative examples to use in leading conversations are summarized in the next section.

Students from this study repeatedly referred to stories shared by *their* teachers showing who they are outside of their academic area or asking about areas of interest these students enjoyed. It was the teachers who shared their passions and dared to show a little about themselves were inspiring and those interviewed in this study confirmed it. One former student referred to a connected teacher as being “extremely passionate about what they're teaching.” *Their* teachers had chatted with them about their soccer games, or about what they did over the weekend. They noted the validation they felt when their feelings were acknowledged and interest in them was shown. They spoke about this in relation to *their* teacher's actively listening as previously discussed. For them, this built an atmosphere of trust especially as their classroom teachers became *real* through storytelling. This is when students would reach back, connect, and work harder academically, enjoying subject matter, and school even more. One interviewee discovered “a connection often leads to me being more invested in paying attention during class or being invested in actually doing a thorough job.”

### ***Don't Smile Until November***

“Don't smile at the students until November!” Abbott - Seced (2007). This statement represents how teachers were, and perhaps still are, taught to not show who they are or their

personality. This message warns teachers to not connect with their students. In teaching, teacher-student connections were frowned upon subliminally and overtly but according to the research, this should no longer be (Hawkins, 2017).

According to James Berger “Don't smile at the students until November,” is usually dispensed from some experienced teachers to new teachers. It connotes those teachers, by acting mean in the beginning of the school year, will create “nice” docile students who can be easily controlled (2018). Almost thirty years prior, Andersen and Andersen's research (1987):

investigated those who advise a stern, non-smiling classroom demeanor would argue that they are not suggesting a non-caring attitude. Yet our research demonstrates that this is exactly what is perceived in the absence of warm, caring communication. Liking and caring *must be communicated* if they're powerful, emotional, and motivational forces are to be experienced. (p 57)

Andersen (1987) had taught thousands of teachers to improve their instructional effectiveness using effective communication principles and they found those most critically resistant to communicating care were the ones reporting the most positive changes.

Human communication is largely a reciprocal act; we communicate the emotions, and moods to others that we feel they communicate to us. (Zeelenloerg & Pieters, 2013). Messages that signal warmth, support, friendship, and acceptance are powerful appeals for the same from others. “Nice” teachers create a classroom environment which increases the probability of “nice” student responses. (Parsonson, 2012). Such mutually rewarding classrooms are the best prevention against teacher fatigue and burnout (Campbell, 2022).

Classroom communication is so much more than just spoken words and it is not limited to teachers; students are as much a part of it. Classroom communication includes gestures, body

language, good eye contact (Andersen, 1987), teachers modeling vulnerability, teachers reaching out, students reaching back and working harder for *their* teachers. Much of this has already been touched upon in Section 4 but it is important in setting the tone.

***Narrative Examples to use in leading conversations.***

***Narrative Example 1.***

Comments of the former students caused reflection for this researcher on an aspect of student-teacher relationship during an early instructional experience in a private school setting. It was noted, all those years ago, that the longer the researcher coached students in their athletic pursuits, the better they performed in the classroom environment. This is one of the earliest educational observations this researcher holds connecting to this study. At that point in this researcher's career, the adage "money in the bank" was uttered many times as there was an academic benefit to coaching students who were present in the classroom. Another reflection emerged relating to the academic setting of this study where this researcher also refereed basketball, soccer, and lacrosse. Whenever present for games, students would energetically jump into debriefing in the classroom the next day, they would intently receive feedback and banter back and forth with observations of what happened during the event. Soon, after this researcher began participating in sporting-events, an uptick in academic achievement from student-athletes was observed in the classroom, thus the adage "money in the bank." These observations were confirmed in the interviews with former students. In their mentioning it, they noted it as a shared experience, outside of the classroom, that brought them closer to the researcher. They also noted that it made the researcher seem more real to them. The

students could plainly see a life and interests outside of the classroom for this researcher. These sporting events were tangible examples of a shared experience.

In the STC, shared personal stories often were what brought the students closer to the researcher as teacher. Despite the classroom experience ending, the STC bond remains strong. Former students try to reconnect whenever there is a crossing of paths. They proudly share their current education and vocational efforts. It was expressed to the researcher in the interviews that when they were asked to participate in this study and assist this researcher towards a new level of educational attainment, they were intrigued and overjoyed. As one interviewee put it, “it’s a no brainer that we would want to give back, when the opportunity arises for students to give back to their teacher who was always there for us.”

### ***Narrative Example 2.***

I remember first learning that my teachers were real. Some neighborhood buddies and I, on a bike trip, stumbled upon Mrs. Pope at her home. She was our elementary school teacher then. Mrs. Pope invited us in, and we met her dog and husband, and she suddenly became a real person. Although we now knew where she lived, we never did bother her again at home. We respected her privacy, but it did make her more memorable to me than the other two teachers who shared our upper primary school learning that year. Knowing something outside of the classroom gave me something intangible. I felt as though I had a different, deeper relationship with her after that visit. The visit had somehow made me feel I knew her better and I did. I had met her dog and her husband after all. That day she became *real* for me.

### ***Narrative Example 3.***

Mr. Limongello was my middle school teacher who had taught my sister previously. He told me the story of how he had pulled my sister's hair when he caught her talking in class. She turned around and pulled his really short hair back and he laughed. He was impressed by her spunk. He also let our classmate Lisa, who was on the track team, run home if she promised to run all the way there and back. Lisa was terrified after her realization that maybe she'd forgotten to shut the iron off. He was well respected by his students for being *real*. He listened to us and was willing to help us, beyond academics, when we needed him to. He was unusual in this way, and he too is memorable for me, for being real and for being caring and genuinely interested in who I was. My other teachers just didn't seem interested or curious about who we were as people or students. This does not mean that they were not interested or curious, it just was not communicated to us by them. From that day, Mr Limongello earned my respect because he treated us as equals.

Reflecting on my own education in elementary through high school, it was rare, the teacher who listened to us. Even rarer were those who told stories about their lives outside of school. I had a few teachers who listened, and they remain memorable to this day, or I should say they remain 'my teachers' to this day. They have earned the distinguishing honor of being referred to by me as my teachers for life. They impacted my life, helped me to love learning and to become a passionate lifelong learner. Nothing in life gives me greater satisfaction than learning something new and for that I am forever grateful to these few unique and brave teachers who reached out and gave me such a gift.



PF is a college Professor who understands instinctively that her students need to see teachers as *real*. She even has insights into why. In her teachings she intersperses anecdotal information, from her life experiences, to gain academic capital with her students. In her reasoning behind sharing a quick presentation with students she spoke about her frame of reference and who she is. She wasn't thinking about STC. She wanted the students to have confidence in where her knowledge and subject area expertise came from. Throughout her courses she would often talk strategy with her students on how to implement this new knowledge. She was modeling *real*, her real-life application of her subject matter for them to use and gain confidence in who she was as a capable instructor. She was working both trust and vulnerability as she reached out to her students unwittingly. In the interviews a former student noted a "short presentation at the beginning of the semester, 'Hey, this is what I do for fun.' That small connection, something extremely small, can really make all the difference for someone like me." These former students noticed when *their* teachers were *real* and when they reached out to connect with their students.

### **Plan for Dissemination**

The ideal practitioner would get out there and lead by example. In their interview responses, these former students reflected to the researcher that when a personal story was about to be told, the door to their classroom was instinctively closed. The physical closing of the door was a consistent, conscious decision without an awareness of why. Why? Is the impetus and motivation for this study and dissertation. To these students, the closed door signaled to them that they should pay attention as a good story was forthcoming.

In disseminating what has been learned in this study at the district opening meeting the presenter will be modeling vulnerability and STC building through sharing personal stories about

connections to former students. This chapter will serve as a good resource for that presentation. The conversation with the audience will include the drawbacks of “Don’t smile until November!” and what some of the STC perks for students and teachers are. This will be the beginning of a conversation of what has been found so far. Bringing a few former students, who are still in the area, to the presentation and having them speak about what this study’s outcome meant for them, from their perspective, could prove interesting. Who better to address and convince this audience of teachers preparing for their next school year about this study’s findings, than former students, who are connected to some of these very teachers in the district.

A few former students who have “their connected teachers” in this district, have recently accepted positions to teach in our district. It would be very powerful for them to be a part of the opening school year presentation. As well, other former students could Zoom into this meeting from afar. All these former students could tell their stories of what the impact of STC has meant for them.

This dissemination has the potential of having concentric circles of influence. Starting with the researcher’s school, to district level, then submit a proposal to the Vermont state educational conferences, and possibly out to the Educational Leadership forum and the New England group ASCD. National Conference or across the border and into the New Hampshire’s NEA (National Education Association) Professional Development circuit.

## **Section Six: Practitioner Reflection**

### **Summary of the Inquiry**

My vision of the concentric circles of Student-Teacher Connection (STC) influence is growing. I didn’t consciously realize the STC benefits for the students or myself. Perhaps I did a little. I noticed when students called me “Coach,” they did work harder for me in the classroom,

and they will for other teachers who are willing. Coding methods of the student interview transcripts revealed an initial understanding of how STCs form. A teacher looking to master the art of creating STCs, will need to be willing to be vulnerable and share stories, will need to be vulnerable and invite students to connect. A teacher will also need to be ready to transform themselves and some of their students into STCs that have some amazing implications. Providing opportunities for students to learn to be passionate lifelong learners and giving oneself the opportunity to revitalize teaching are but a few of the benefits. This is the beginning of a conversation that has potential and far-reaching rewards for students and teachers.

### **Personal Learning, Shifts, and Transformations**

#### ***Practice Related***

Teaching in middle school for the first time this last year has given me a few insights about STCs. I understand more why the STC is so strong in high school. Remarks from three of my interviewees are included in Table 4.

**Table 4**

#### ***High School Provided the Best STC Opportunities***

“It's harder to make these kinds of positive connections in college. I feel like I was a lot closer with my teachers in high school. They saw me.”
“High school was definitely the period of school I connected with my teachers most.”
“I was closest to high school teachers. My favorites were my high school teachers, more than college or anything else.”

From my personal experience, developmentally, middle school students seem to not be in a place where adult relationships are sought after the same way as they are in high school. In middle school there is a tenuous relationship that builds between teachers and their students.

Middle school students are much quicker to forgive and move on, but the breadth and depth are unequaled in the high school aged Student-Teacher Connections (STCs). I cannot say much more about this as I am just finishing my first year outside of high school and I am still learning the social emotional ropes of the age groups below that of high schoolers. Although there is a completely different understanding about relationships between the teacher and sub-high school age student, that topic needs a lot more exploration. Since this research focused on high school students, perhaps this is an area for future research.

Upon reflecting on why some teachers are so memorable, I wondered about my own teachers, those teachers I felt most strongly connected to and whom I still refer to as “my teachers.” I wondered about how they impacted my learning and about what they taught me that continues to stay with me. Their ultimate gift was, them modeling for me, how to be a passionate lifelong learner.

### ***Teacher Leader Related***

My former students gave back to me by participating in this study. Every invitation I extended to have my former students participate in this study was returned with all happily agreeing to be interviewed. Yet they gave back so much more than just an interview. They worked hard intellectually and emotionally to answer all my questions in their brave, personal, and insightful ways and as they encouraged me in the work that lay ahead.

Throughout all this research I reflected on myself as both teacher and student. I, as student, was learning from me, the teacher, and from my former students. I chose to use Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) so I could interpret my students' interpretation of their reasoning of how STCs form. This is metacognitive and is the reason I chose IPA. I am sharing my thinking about my findings related to my former students' thinking. My thinking and

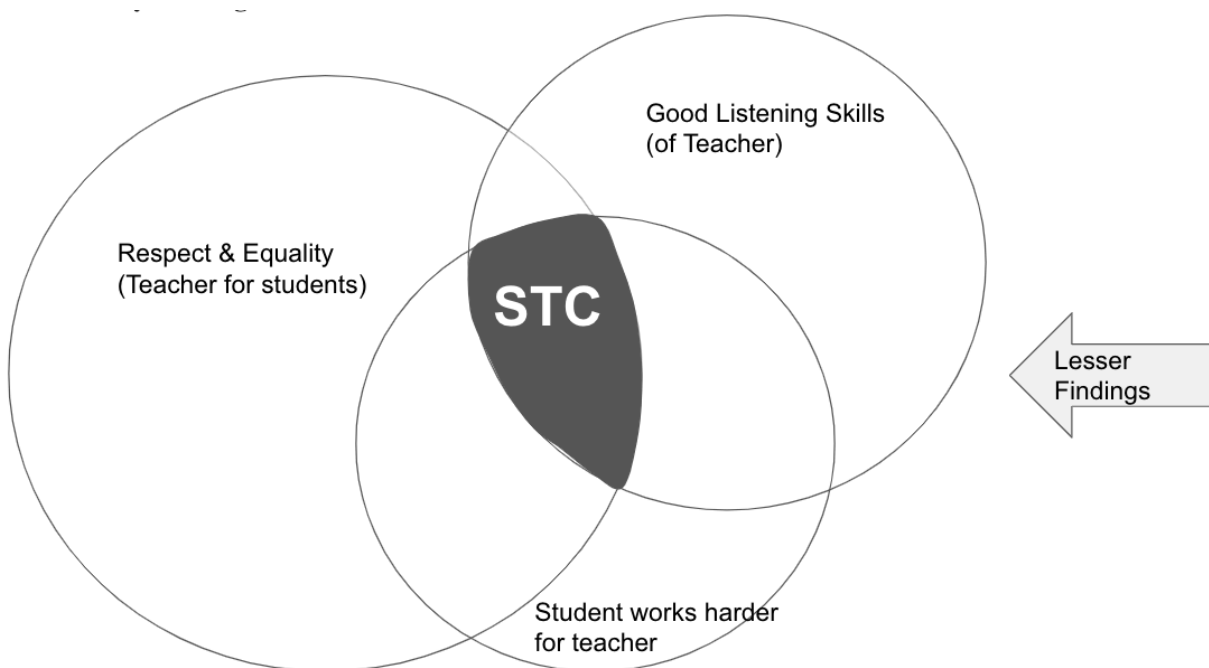
reasoning are drawn from my experience with my students. The student in me is learning from the experiences I have had as a teacher with “my students.”

What an interesting perspective I have on all of this. My experience is vast and useful here in my IPA work. As a college chemistry Professor, I can also speak to why my former students referred to high school being where STCs were strongest. I did not feel the same need or urgency from my college students in creating STCs as I did from my high schoolers. I have also taught a graduate level course on teaching physics. This is perhaps where all this research comes full circle for me. Many of the new physics teachers are new to teaching. They do not have experience in creating applicable physics lessons for their students. In the beginning, I help them overcome their fear of physics by helping them see physics in everyday realities. Creating this foundation allows them to overcome their fear and relate to what their students will be feeling as they step into the physics classroom. Next, these new teachers and I design lessons that evoke passion for physics. This fear and passion experienced by these new teachers provides them with personal experiences they can then share with their future students to create STCs. Helping new teachers relate to what their new students will be experiencing provides STC opportunities should these new teachers opt to vulnerably share their personal learning stories.

### ***Scholar Leader Related***

### **Figure 3**

*Diagram for Formation of STC*



I sincerely hope others benefit as much as I have from unearthing how STCs form.

Figure 3 was designed to help others understand how STCs form. The teacher is vulnerable in both being seen as *real* by the students and in reaching out to the students, inviting them to connect back. Teacher vulnerability came up in the interviews, but I did not see it clearly until coding was complete. This is where my lack of faith in coding was transformed.

Prior to undertaking my doctoral research, I failed to see the significance of coding. Having this study and engaging in all the coding, transformed my doubt around coding; my doubt turned into a profound appreciation. Coding really did show a much deeper insight into the student interview responses that listening alone and not interacting with the transcripts would have missed. Without coding, almost all the themes that emerged in this study would have been missed. Without the themes the building blocks to creating these STCs would remain an elusive gap in the literature today. The conversation toward understanding STCs has begun, thanks to the coding methods, and the students.

Although I feel pretty good about my ability to create STCs, I was unaware of how I participated in their creation and wanted to actively understand them. These relationships were mostly built intuitively, and it was fascinating to uncover their construction through my doctoral work. I am certain I would not have been able to complete my understanding without the input from my former students and their perspectives. This included working with the transcripts of their interviews and with the coding methods applied. Simply interviewing my former students would not have revealed much. Listening to those interviews afterwards did not shed much more insight either. When the scholar in me began applying coding methods to the transcripts, in search of patterns, things began to get interesting. I doubted myself, something I had not expected. There were several moments when I had breakthroughs that left me uncertain about my interpretation of my students' perspective. For example, when I first started to realize teachers needed to show themselves as *real*, outside of their classrooms and how this took vulnerability on their part, I was unsure that I had made this interpretation from the student's perspective. I questioned whether my interpretation represented my thoughts and understanding and not that of my students. I did understand that, when I share stories about my farm animals, a special bond is created between teacher and student. I was unsure that my students understood that teachers needed to be vulnerable in sharing with them in this way. "Don't smile until November" is about and between teachers. Teachers know there is an educational cultural risk when sharing their stories and so, in response, teachers may shut their classroom door. I did not know that students knew teachers were taking risks to reach out to them. Yet they showed their understanding of *their* teachers taking risks as they spoke about teachers being "edgy" and "interesting" and when they spoke about knowing teachers reach out to them.

I began putting the STC Diagram together, and realized teachers needed to show vulnerability, a second time, in their inviting students to connect. It started to become clear that my students, who did connect back and participated in these interviews with me—their connected teacher—knew and understood the risk I had taken on our behalf. They reflected this understanding when, in the interview, one student remarked about it with “You want to give back. I want to be able to do something like this for you. So, it was a no brainer and of course we would participate!” They were honored to be invited and embraced and wanted to reciprocate as a means of thanks. I too had wanted to recognize “my teachers” who gave me the gift of lifelong learning and a passion for learning. I wanted to acknowledge my teachers, those whom I connected to, so of course my connected students would want to acknowledge me also. Without the structure of research methods, none of this passionate learning could have taken place.

When signing off from our interview time, some of my former students mentioned my bravery in attempting to uncover and understand the gap in the literature I had discovered where students were rarely interviewed about their perspective on STCs. What I think they were really acknowledging was my continued efforts and support of students everywhere, to be able to connect and benefit from these special connections. Teachers benefit too. With an enormous amount of thanks and gratitude to my former students for their participation, I have a deeper, more tangible, understanding of how. The learning never ends.

### **Implications for the Future**

STCs have been researched and found to be life changing for both students and teachers (Teven, (2007). We know this from the research on teachers' perspectives and my study now confirms it from the students' perspective. Change is slow and begins with awareness. Awareness comes from conversation and from conversation, mindsets can change (Dweck,



2016). The conversation has begun but it might move faster if there was an understanding of why this change is slow. An interesting area for further research might include reasoning behind why teachers are slow to change regarding “don’t smile until November.”

Another area for future research includes vulnerability. There is a completely different understanding about vulnerability between the teacher and sub-high school age student that needs a lot more exploration. Students often see teachers as professional and see themselves as receivers of their services. Students don’t want to be receivers of services all school day long. Teachers feel vulnerable when they share stories or show how they are *real* with students. When a teacher does show they are *real*, like the skin horse in the Velveteen Rabbit (Williams, 1922) story, students feel that the teacher might be someone who gets what they are going through, and students are more willing to connect because the teacher has modeled relationship building for them. Students are sensitive about being judged and do not want to share, or be vulnerable, with someone who does not get them. Showing who you are as a teacher is risky and sometimes the fear of perceived inappropriateness, in sharing personal stories, prevents most teachers from the desire to show themselves and be *real* with their students.

Something this study touched on but will need more focused attention is the caring part of this STC. As mentioned, this is a caring connection between student and teacher that is reciprocal. The teacher models caring initially and later the students reciprocate. This caring identified in the STC definition by these former students is far too broad a subject that is beyond the scope of this study. It is mentioned here as an area for future research.

In closing, I believe that it will be a better world when STCs are a topic of robust conversations throughout education. A final quote, and in it, a former student captures what we all could build in our classrooms once the art of mastering STC formation is complete. The

former student spoke about his music teacher. The music teacher was someone referred to often throughout the interviews by other former students as well. The music teacher was readily identified as a STC music man who was credited with creating a “really strong community, seeing all of the music kids piled up in the hallway right outside the band room, before school started was always something to look forward to in the morning.”

Findings from this study showed that students want to be seen and listened to desperately. Being in the classroom day after day, not being seen, only enhances their desire to be seen, to be listened to, and to connect. When an opportunity to practice relationship building presents itself, these students are willing. This need is strong as the former students in this study have attested to through their candid interviews. The data interpretation here is from what the students themselves understand a STC to be, how to create and even sustain one. This is the beginning of a conversation along with the introduction of a diagram to help explain what the students in this study are trying to tell us about the teachers they claim to be *their* teachers for life. “Teachers who put relationships first don’t just have students for one year; they have students who view them as *their* teacher for life” (Tarte, 2021). The term *their teacher* is used throughout this writing to emphasize this declaration. The learning never ends. STCs open the door to passionate lifelong learning!

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## **Appendix A**

### **Participant Invitation Letter and Informed Consent Form**

\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/ 2022

Southern New Hampshire University Institutional Review Board

Informed Consent Form for The Lived Experience of the Influence of Positive Student-Teacher Connections from Students' Perspective as Reported by High School Graduates.

You are being invited to participate in a research project conducted by Sue Vincent, who is a doctoral candidate at Southern New Hampshire University.

You are invited to participate in a research study about the Influence of Positive Student-Teacher Connections from Students' Perspective.

You will be asked to participate in an interview that will take about 60 minutes of your time. The interview will take place several weeks from now on an electronic platform such as Zoom at a time convenient to the participant.

We expect the project to benefit you in these ways: possible improvements to the educational environment. You will receive no reimbursement as compensation for your participation.

If you have decided to participate in this project, please understand that your participation is voluntary and that you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at

any time with no penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason with no penalty.

In addition, your individual privacy will be maintained in all publications or presentations resulting from this study. Names will be changed in the final submission to protect identity and interview data will be kept on the researcher's private account. Interviews recorded on Zoom will be stored on the hard drive of the researcher's private computer and destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

If you have any questions regarding this project, you may contact the researcher at sue.vincent@snhu.edu. If you have questions regarding your rights as research participant or any concerns regarding this project, you may report them – confidentially, if you wish – to the UC Institutional Review Board Chairperson at IRB@snhu.edu or the COCE Institutional Review Board Chairperson at COCEIRB@snhu.edu.

A copy of this consent form will be provided to you.

I understand the above information and voluntarily consent to participate in the research.

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

IRB Approval Number: \_\_\_\_\_ IRB Expiration Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions**

The interviewing questions listed below were modified from Raufelder's 2016 study, Students' perception of "good" and "bad" teachers, which involved adolescents. The interview questions focus on the students' perceptions of their STC (Student-Teacher Connections) and how these positive relationships influenced their education. The interviews will be semi structured in that not all questions will be asked, and their order will not be strictly adhered to. Semi-structured interviewing leaves room to follow up on the respondents' answers with questions not written to elucidate information more spontaneously. The interviews will be conducted using Zoom, an online platform that became very popular and useful during this COVID-19 Era. The interview questions that look to inform this research are:

1. What was your role at the Windham Regional Career Center (WRCC)?
2. How long had you attended?
3. When did you graduate?
4. What are you doing now, post-graduation?
5. What is your age?
6. Where are you from?
7. What is your gender?
8. What got you through the school doors in the morning?
9. What makes a good teacher?
10. How would you describe your connections to your teachers?
11. Can you describe a time when you had a positive connection to a teacher at WRCC?

What did that look like?



12. Can you describe what teachers did or said that made you feel positively connected to them?
13. Gillespie (2005) tells us that “teacher-student connection is envisioned as having a value beyond tangible outcomes – a value that arises from the essence of connection itself.” In your own words, how would you describe the value student–teacher connection affords your academics and development socially and emotionally?
14. Why are these STC so important to you that you identified yourself as a student who has benefitted from STC enough to agree to be interviewed here today?
15. Describe your interactions with the WRCC teachers you are most positively connected with.
16. Think about someone in the WRCC building that listened to you -or that you felt/believed listened to you. Can you describe that person?
17. What did they do that indicated to you that they were listening to you?
18. What are some benefits from your interactions with the WRCC teachers you are most positively connected with?
19. What did WRCC teachers do to support you when you were having difficulties/troubles?
20. Did the pandemic change your connections to teachers? If so, how?
21. Did your interactions with the teachers you were most positively connected with changed during the pandemic?
22. Is there anything else you would like to add?

**List of Tables**

Table	Page Number
Table 1 - <i>Years Since Graduating from High School</i>	63
Table 2 - <i>Sample of In Vivo coding by researcher for question one</i>	64
Table 3 - <i>Identified Teacher Listening Skills</i>	93
Table 4 - <i>High School Provided the Best STC Opportunities</i>	102

**List of Figures**

Figure	Page Number
Figure 1 - <i>Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological System Theory</i>	17
Figure 2 - <i>Model of How Teacher Behavior and School Organization Might Contribute to Attachment and Affect Academic Achievement</i>	31
Figure 3 - <i>Diagram for Formation of STC</i>	72
Figure 4 - <i>Participant Requirements for STC Formation</i>	94