

Student-Teacher Relationships

**Student-Teacher Relationships and their Perceived Impact on Learning and
Motivation**

By

Erin Valenzuela

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It is hard to believe that I have made it to this point of achievement in my academic journey. The decision to come back to pursue a higher education as a mature student was one that I toiled with for quite some time but was afraid to jump into given my responsibilities and fears. I have not been alone though through all the ups and downs encountered along the way. Making it to this point would not have been possible without those on this journey with me and their love and support pushing me every step of the way.

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This thesis is dedicated to:

Every mother who has lost themselves caring for their children and their families but found the strength to find themselves again and pursue new passions.

Every educator who makes the choice to foster student confidence through building positive relationships with each and every student that walks through their classroom door.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore student perceptions specifically connected to student views of their relationships with teachers and the impact these relationships have on student learning and motivation. There are many studies (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Clinton, 2013; Ostrosky & Jung, 2010) in the field of education that explore the presence of a positive student-teacher relationship as a contributor to success, but only a few (Baber & Noreen, 2018; Newberry, 2010) have taken an approach where student voice is the focal point of inquiry. Through the use of the social constructivist perspective on learning, where knowledge is constructed through our interactions with others, and focusing exclusively on student perspective, the aim of this research was to explore student perceptions about the student-teacher relationships. The research design followed a phenomenological approach in order to allow students' voices to be showcased as a valuable means for gaining new knowledge. Students selected for this study are currently enrolled in, or have just completed, Grades 4-8 in Ontario elementary schools. Students were first asked to complete a student demographic survey (see Appendix B) asking to define the term "relationship" and rate the importance of student-teacher relationships on their learning and motivation using a five-point Likert scale. Additionally, students engaged in a reflective timeline task (see Appendix C) recalling and describing their student-teacher relationships from Kindergarten to their current grade. Following this, students engaged in semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D for interview questions). Data was analyzed for commonalities and to specifically answer the three research questions proposed for exploration in the study. After careful reflection and inductive reasoning, it is apparent that students' learning and motivation are in fact impacted both positively and negatively by their student-teacher relationships.

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Chapter One: An Introduction to Student-Teacher Relationships

Close your eyes for a moment and think back to your early school experiences. Reflect on those first few years in elementary school where everything was new and relationships were being formed with your teacher and fellow peers. If you were asked to describe what you see or feel, which words would you choose?

I am standing beside my parents on a concrete wedge between grass and a large, oversized door. Although the door feels larger than life, it is painted a bright and welcoming orange, reminding me of the colour of summer during warm days spent playing at the park. I am scared and this causes me to look down at my feet. My parents squeeze my hands and a sense of reassurance comes over me. I look up and standing in front of me are the soft eyes of a teacher, inviting me to take her hand, welcoming me to join her so that I can see what waits for me behind the bright orange door. With one last squeeze from my parents, I set off, full of wonder. Now in the grasp of this new student-teacher relationship, I am safe to explore all that may lay ahead.

What still stands out the most for me from those early school experiences are the connections and trust I felt when interacting with my teachers. The relationships they established with me have followed me to the present day. By building my confidence and creating safe spaces for me to explore and grow, my teachers have empowered me to do the same when supporting children in my classroom work. The influences of my relationships with teachers were probably a driving force behind my decision to enter into the field of early childhood education and teaching. I was fortunate enough to experience the benefits of positive student-teacher interactions, and as such, feel entrusted to now build that relationship with others. I learned very early in my academic pursuits the value that a positive student-teacher interaction can have on a student's learning

outcomes. Being made to feel comfortable and supported in my own learning, free to take chances and make mistakes, is a gift that regardless of the level I teach, has built in me the conviction that all students are capable of anything they set out to achieve. Now, as a teacher, I see the value of building a positive student-teacher relationship even more.

Over the past 10 years, research in the field has focused on understanding the powerful impact the student-teacher relationship can have on both student development and outcomes. Outcome is a fairly new term in education and has only been really explored for the past century (Proitz, 2010). For the purpose of this study, the term *outcome* refers to what you are left with after engaging in a task (Eisner, 1979). Outcomes are produced in part by the teacher, the subject being explored, and the way in which students respond to both of the previous factors (Eisner, 1979). There has been an emphasis in the literature on child development and the early years (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Clinton, 2013; Ostrosky & Jung, 2010; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Shonkoff, 2009), drawing connections between how the brain grows and the development of relationships from early childhood to adulthood. Pianta (2001) made the connection that relationships between children and adults play a significant role in the development of students' academic success, and their social and emotional growth beginning in preschool and up to the elementary and middle-school years. Researchers (Myers & Pianta, 2008; Saidah, Vovet, & Pansu, 2019) have explored the student-teacher relationship from the perspective of the teacher at great length. Fewer studies, however, have focused on the impact of the student-teacher relationship from the student perspective (Baber & Noreen, 2018; Newberry, 2010; Valkov, & Lavrentsova, 2019). When exploring student learning on holistic development, student voice should be present in order to understand student perspectives related to the student-teacher relationship. A myriad of studies (Scales et al., 2020; Sointu et al., 2016; Thijs & Fleischmann,

2015; Zee & de Bree, 2017) have explored specific outcomes related to student learning such as academic achievement, engagement, and behavioural responses to learning which introduce the importance of student voice to educational research. In examining student voice exclusively, perhaps researchers can explore prospective changes that need to be made to both teacher pedagogy and practice.

1.0.1 Personal Connections to the Student-Teacher Experience

As both a parent and an educator, I spend countless hours speaking with children about their own experiences with their teachers. The decision to examine the student-teacher relationship from the student perspective stems from a story my son shared with me. Preparing for his first day of grade six was similar to how he prepared for his earlier school experiences. He was in good spirits, even feeling an increased sense of confidence in himself knowing he was now entering the upper junior years. He entered school that day with a smile on his face and his head held high but unfortunately, his exit that day was an entirely different story.

His demeanor at dismissal was sullen and withdrawn and seeing this change in a matter of hours broke my heart. When I asked him what had transpired during his school day, all he could share was his belief that his teacher hated him already. His disposition and statement both enraged and broke me all at once. After speaking with him further, he explained that within the first few minutes of the day, he had been given a personality test meant to help his teacher get to know the students. I struggled to understand why he had become so upset because I fully support the idea of teachers getting to know their students both in and out of the classroom. I kept these feelings to myself and let him continue to share when he felt ready.

As we continued our conversation, I realized he had felt vulnerable in the classroom and embarrassed. He explained that during the task, he put his head down on his desk. He needed the

time to gather his thoughts to be able to answer the questions on the ‘get to know you test’. My son has used this strategy throughout his school years to comfort himself when he felt overwhelmed. However, this time, instead of feeling supported for initiating a strategy he had always used successfully, the teacher approached him and in what he described as a sarcastic tone, told the rest of the class that he was not ready to join everyone in their learning for the day and that he was “closed for learning”. He interpreted this to mean she thought he was not a willing participant there and ready to learn alongside his peers creating a barrier in the development of a positive relationship with her. She followed this statement by then encouraging students in the classroom to make him a “closed sign” to place on his desk. Everyone in the room laughed when a student began to follow through on her suggestion. He explained that he had attempted to talk to her about the incident and she insisted that he not take it personally, commenting she was just being sarcastic. His voice had been lost in the classroom within a few hours of being there on the first day, not to return for the remainder of the school year.

Researchers, including Desrosiers, Japel, Singh, and Tetreault (2012) and Mitra, Serriere, and Stoicovy (2012), suggest more attention needs to be given to student voice as students move through the upper elementary school years because giving students the chance to have their thoughts and ideas heard within the classroom setting, can have a powerful impact on students’ school experiences. The experience my son shared with me that first day of grade six has stayed with me every day since and is exactly why I was driven to focus solely on student voice and perspective through this thesis work.

1.1 The Importance of Relationships for Student Learning

Within the field of early childhood development, Clinton (2013) highlights that the brain is essentially hardwired for relationships. Shonkoff (2009) agrees by noting that relationships,

although imperative for fostering brain development in young children, continue to have a significant impact well into adulthood. According to Marcus (2012), “relationships are often what keep us alive” and motivate us to continue to push forward. Marcus (2012) uses the principle that connections, such as the relationships that are formed between student and teacher, are what drive learning forward and it is this belief that forms the foundation of her relationship-inspired teacher education program *FuelEd*. In her research on attachment theory and relationships outside of the home, Marcus’ (2012) work aligns with Cozolino (2014) who reveals that the necessary connections between a student and teacher are what fuels optimal student growth. Cozolino (2014) explains that by fostering and building secure attachments, teachers are supporting children with the emotional stability required to build courage and confidence, which will result in positive learning outcomes. Regardless of age or grade level, fostering confidence in students is always beneficial because it builds a positive sense of self, intrinsic motivation, and reveals to students that they are capable and competent.

Along the pathway to learning, teachers frequently make decisions, both consciously and unconsciously, about their approaches to educating students throughout the day. Many of these decisions directly impact student outcomes including ongoing decisions about how teachers intend to address the curricular expectations. As Cozolino (2013) asserts though, “the best teachers teach from the heart, not from the book” (p. 17). Along with the establishment of trust and security, the ability to move fluidly to meet students’ instructional needs forms the foundation of a solid student-teacher relationship. Educators are not alone in the exploration of relationships. Principles of attachment, respect, trust, and reciprocity, all found at the core of relationship building, are being explored by sociologists and biologists as well (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van Ijzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010; Kobak & Sceeny, 1988;

Stein, Zitner, & Jensen, 2006; Vrticka & Vuilleumier, 2012). When an individual successfully establishes a close bond or connection with another human being, the relationship begins to serve as the basis for positive interactions and growth between them. When “teachers use their personalities, interpersonal skills, and teaching methods to create enriched physical, conceptual, and social environments, [they] stimulate neural plasticity, enhance brain development, and optimize learning” (Cozolino, 2013, p. 17). In summary, teachers help to create a space where there are possibilities for the development of student confidence, an increased sense of wonder, a deeper connection and desire to do well, and a place to feel like student potential is endless.

1.2 Student Voice in Ontario Classrooms

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education recently acknowledged that along with the evidence that relationships play a vital role in student success, so too does ensuring students have a voice in how their learning will take place. In 2013, the Ontario Ministry of Education published the Capacity Building Series *Student Voice: Transforming Relationships*. The monograph stresses the need for teachers to build strong relationships with their students in order to promote academic achievement and ultimately better inform their teaching practice. Strengthening relationships between educators and students promotes learning that is grounded in safe and respectful connections. The monograph, a research-based publication of the Ministry of Education, calls for a change between the student-teacher dynamic, revealing that building trusting and reciprocal relationships requires teacher-as-authority roles to shift in order to create more engaging and motivating spaces to learn (2013). When educators are in tune with their students, their voices can be heard and learning can occur.

The need for student agency in education research allows for the examination of student perspectives on ideas that are overwhelmingly presented from teachers’ point of view. There is

significant importance in recognizing that student voice is key to exploring and understanding the value of the student-teacher relationship and its impact on student learning and motivation. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* recognizes the importance and value of student agency in contexts such as the impact it has on their learning experiences. The *United Nations* (2005) highlights that “children have the right to give their opinions freely on issues that affect them. Adults should listen and take children seriously” (p. 5) which is particularly relevant when exploring student voice in the classroom setting. Students’ voices should be the focal point when examining the impact of the student-teacher relationship on student learning and motivation because students are active agents in their own experiences. Their experiences matter and are a valuable source of knowledge acquisition. Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* which states that children’s voices and views need to be heard and considered for the important role they play (United Nations, 2009), is particularly relevant to this thesis. Student perspectives play a significant role through which the impacts of the student-teacher relationship can be examined. By honouring student voice, the research builds on the understanding that listening to those directly impacted by an experience brings authenticity to the research process.

Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist theory purports that learning happens by doing and through interactions with others. Therefore, learning is a mutually developed experience that happens more readily when relationships are mutual, and experiences shared. Since “children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development” (Shonkoff, 2009, p. 1), it is important to explore how the student-teacher relationship impacts not only young children, but also junior-intermediate level students (grades 4-8). Ostrosky and Jung (2010) note that “teacher-child relationships play a

significant role in influencing young children’s social and emotional development” (p. 3) adding support to the idea that relationships matter, regardless of age or grade level.

Additionally, “relationships are our natural habitat and the drive to belong is a fundamental human motivation. From birth to death, each of us needs others to help us feel safe, seek us out, and show interest in discovering who we are” (Cozolino, 2014, p. 25). Cozolino (2013) asserts that students need to learn through emotional engagement and feeling connected to whatever and whoever they are learning from. The establishment of a positive relationship with a consistent adult, can provide the greatest conditions for optimal learning and development (Clinton, 2013; Cozolino, 2014; Desrosiers et al, 2012; Shonkoff, 2009; Spilt et al, 2012). Educators have a responsibility to spark curiosity in students and foster the ongoing growth of both learning and motivation.

1.3 Problem Statement

Literature on the impact of student-teacher relationships on student learning and motivation in the upper elementary grades from the student perspective has been somewhat limited. There are only a few studies with a focus on student voice and therefore for this thesis student perspectives were solicited to gain greater insights into student experiences with teachers in the middle and upper elementary years. According to Clinton (2013), connections are key to learning and “relationships are the active ingredient in healthy development, especially brain development” (p. 2). Clinton’s research is focused on early school opportunities; however, connections do not end in Kindergarten--they extend throughout a student’s entire school experience. Additionally, Saul (2015) suggests that, “positive teacher-student relations are integral to young people’s learning [and] the importance of the teacher-student relationship remains consistent no matter a student’s age” (p. 1). The relationship between teachers and

students as they move through their elementary school years plays an imperative role in student motivation and in a student's ability to meet success across the curriculum.

Initiatives in Ontario such as the development of *Growing Success* (2010) are intended to guide educators to assess more effectively and holistically. Its introduction highlights the need to shift student learning and assessment toward assessing learning on more than pencil and paper tasks. There is still, however, significant attention given to province-wide standardized testing in Ontario, such as the EQAO, which leads some teachers to focus primarily on preparing students for formal assessment during the school year and away from other areas of the curriculum such as creative problem solving through inquiry to showcase student capabilities and understanding of curriculum content. In their study of middle and high school teachers, Crocco and Costigan (2007) discovered that by focusing solely on the curriculum and teacher accountability, there was a detrimental impact on the relationships formed between students and teachers. Teachers from their study note that "their personal and professional identity [is] thwarted, creativity and autonomy undermined, and [their] ability to forge relationships with students is diminished" (Crocco & Costigan, 2007, p. 513) when 'narrowing of the curriculum' becomes the goal in measuring accountability. Schools are still far from adopting a student-centered approach, which ideally should have students directing their own learning to meet their individual needs (Pierson, 2013). Pierson (2013) notes that, "education policies are passed that don't make sense, and we teach them anyway" (6:52). Rather than follow a policy that narrowly defines student ability, it is important to foster a space where a student can explore their potential and feel recognized for all their efforts because feeling recognized leads a student toward success and helps to build and maintain motivation to learn.

Pierson (2013) challenges teachers to see beyond the influences of a student's past, particularly in the upper elementary grades, and to help students find motivation and internal strength. It is imperative that relationships between teachers and students are explored from both perspectives in order to discover, and subsequently foster, student well-being, motivation, and learning success. Since there already exists an abundance of literature from the teacher perspective, this research captures students' voices as reflect on their relationships with their teachers. In this research, students are honoured as active agents and determinants of their own learning whereby their important perspectives are documented by retrospectively encouraging them to reflect on the environments in which they learn. Through the theoretical framework of phenomenology and using student voice as a central focus for exploring case studies of students in their junior and intermediate years of elementary education, insights can be garnered on how the student-teacher relationship impacts students' motivation and learning. I chose to refrain from focusing specifically on academic achievement because the scope would have been too narrow. Instead, this study focuses on learning as a holistic construct and includes students' academic and social-emotional learning.

1.3.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to document student voice in relation to the student-teacher relationship and its impact on student learning and motivation. By exploring the student-teacher relationship through the student perspective, the following research questions were examined:

- How do students describe their past and current relationships with their teachers?
- What challenges do students perceive (if any) in building relationships with their teachers?

- What are student perceptions of the impact of the student-teacher relationship on motivation and learning?

Using a qualitative research design, this study documents students' voices and student perceptions are studied in order to draw connections between student-teacher relationships and the perceived impact these relationships have on student learning and motivation.

1.4 Organization of the Thesis

Chapter 1 presented an overview of the key concepts and definitions around the importance of relationships to students in the junior and intermediate (grades 4-8) years. The research problem and purpose were presented.

The rest of the thesis is organized in the following way:

Chapter 2 presents the literature review in the key areas of relationships established in early childhood, links between the Ontario curriculum and building relationships in Kindergarten, characteristics of the student-teacher relationship, theories in education supporting student learning and motivation including *Attachment Theory*, theories of learning supporting the development of student-teacher relationships both in and out of the classroom, and student perceptions about their relationships with their teachers including an exploration of the value of student voice in educational research.

Chapter 3 presents the study methodology. The research study design is explained along with how participants were recruited and selected to participate, and a description of the research tools developed and used for gathering data is highlighted.

Chapter 4 presents the results. Using graphs and figures to emphasize the data collected and analyzed, student voice is showcased as a means to answer the research questions set forth in chapter one.

Chapter 5 presents the key conclusions, recommendations, and a discussion of study limitations and directions for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

There are many complex factors which contribute to a student's learning and motivation including the learning environment, feeling safe and secure, and experiencing supportive relationships (Clinton, 2009; Marcus, 2012; Newberry, 2010). The following literature review examines the research on student-teacher relationships and their impact on student learning and motivation as students move through the junior and intermediate grades (4-8). For the purpose of this thesis, relationships are defined as positive connections among students, adults, and peers in the school setting that foster positive social interaction and establish a nurturing environment of trust and support (Blum, 2005). Historically, the role of the student-teacher relationship has been one in which the teacher is viewed as the keeper of knowledge (Alam, 2013). Students were presented with a top-down hierarchical method of knowledge dissemination and were viewed by some as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge by the adult authority figure (Alam, 2013). However, when Freire (1968) began exploring the theory he later titled the *Problem-Posing Model of Education*, a shift in pedagogical thinking took place with an emphasis on exploring the importance of the student-teacher relationship (Alam, 2013). The relationship between student and teacher needs to be further investigated in educational research to understand its significance and possible impact on student learning and motivation.

This review, situated within the larger body of the thesis entitled *Student-Teacher Relationships and their Perceived Impact on Student Learning and Motivation*, analyzes the available research pertaining to student perspectives on their relationships with teachers. An examination of the impact this relationship has on student learning and motivation, coupled with identifiable gaps in current research within the field of education will be shared. There is a growing body of literature which focuses on the importance of teachers building strong

relationships with their students (Clinton, 2013; Ostrosky & Jung, 2010; Saul, 2015; Shonkoff, 2009), however, only recently has literature been made available on the importance of the student-teacher relationship in the junior (4-6) and intermediate (7 and 8) grades (Longobardi et al., 2020; Scales et al., 2020; Sointu, 2016; Thijs & Fleischmann, 2015). The research undertaken for this master's thesis attempts to add to the current literature focusing on student voice and perspective.

The review also sheds light on the use of a transformative lens to bring attention to the importance of student voice in educational research. Using a social constructivist worldview, one which Vygotsky (1978) defines as collaboratively creating and learning from shared experiences, the literature review first explores attachment theory as a foundational underpinning of the student-teacher relationship. The chapter then proceeds to unpack learning theories and motivational theories in education. Next, the literature review includes an examination of the literature on early child development and how relationships are fostered during the early school years with ties to the *Ontario Kindergarten Program* (Ministry of Education, 2016). Last, an investigation of teacher characteristics, roles, and responsibilities are examined in order to examine the impact of these factors on student-teacher relationships and student learning and motivation.

2.1 Attachment Theory and its Applicability to Student-Teacher Relationships

The literature explored on student-teacher relationships reveals several references to Bowlby's *Attachment Theory* (1988) and principles. Bowlby's work on attachment draws connections between how relationships are formed and the impact these relationships have on individuals as they move throughout their lives. Cozolino (2013) explores attachment noting that relationships are formed between students and teachers through experiences of safety and

danger. Interactions such as bonding and creating safe physical and emotional spaces in the school community, create opportunities to build positive attachments within the student-teacher relationship. Attachment is defined by Bowlby (1988) as the relationship between two people (an adult and a child) in which the child desires proximity to the adult when stressed or scared and creates a deep bond between both parties establishing closeness and security with one another. He posits that by specifically examining a child's attachment to an adult caregiver, such as the relationships between students and teachers for example, the foundation is laid for an exploration into how the student-teacher relationship can support social, emotional, and academic development. Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory proposes that attachments are imperative to healthy relationship building and evolve as people move through life creating functional and purposeful relationships from birth to death. In order to understand that students need to feel secure and safe in their learning environment, attachment between students and teachers must be considered.

According to Riley (2009), "Attachment theory is in essence a theory of human relating and identity. It adopts a constructivist view of the world where a child learns about relationship processes through experience[s with] them" (p. 626). Bowlby's exploration into attachment is particularly important to consider within a classroom setting given that students spend approximately six hours a day in a school environment with opportunities to build relationships. Kesner (2000) notes attachments to teachers are imperative because "there is no other non-familial adult that is more significant in a child's life than his or her teacher" (p. 134). Early in his career, Bowlby (1969) coined the term attachment "in a conscious effort to move away from deficit terms such as 'dependency' and 'over dependency'" (Wilson-Ali et al., 2019, p. 216). The replacement of negative labels such as dependent, with terminology related to attachment, is

helpful when examining the student-teacher relationship because it showcases the importance of establishing positive and secure interactions between students and teachers.

Hamre and Pianta (2001) also explore attachment theory in their work with the aim to make connections between the early experiences of children and their subsequent early learning opportunities. They paid particular attention to the relationships formed between students and their teachers, noting that once a child enters school, relationships with non-parental adults, specifically student-teacher relationships, become increasingly important (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Cozolino (2014) also makes the connection between attachment theory and the interactions between students and teachers noting that “teachers, like their students, are unique individuals, and it is the nature, quality, and uniqueness of teacher-student relationship that creates possibilities for learning” (p. 5). The interactions and relationships between a student and teacher set the path for a student’s well-being and success going forward.

Attachment theory plays a larger role in multiple studies found within the literature focused on early learning (Clinton, 2013; Desrosiers et al., 2012; Hamre & Pianta, 2001, Ostrosky & Jung, 2010; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). In *Giants of Psychology* (Davidson, 2007), Bowlby’s (1988) attachment theory is further explored noting that attachment and relationships persist, and both positively and negatively influence a person over the entire lifespan. Bowlby (1988) emphasizes that early relationships lay the foundation for future relationships. Without fostering feelings of solid attachment from an early age, individuals are at a disadvantage to feel secure and valued in relationships they may experience in their future. Shonkoff (2009) explores a similar belief in his work, linking the presence of attachment back to the relationship between student and teacher. Since the goal of attachment is to create a safe haven between parties (Davidson, 2007), it is imperative that attachment be considered within the establishment of the

student-teacher relationship. Bowlby (1988) recognizes that attachment figures, such as teachers, need to be available to comfort and support their students so that students begin to see themselves as worthy of receiving attachment (Davidson, 2007). With the establishment of connection and attachment between students and teachers, students have the potential to experience new levels of learning and growth.

In his work, Pianta (2004) builds the connection between the principles of attachment theory and the importance of the student-teacher relationship. His work explores the constructs of closeness, conflict, and dependency and their connection to the student-teacher relationship. Closeness is comprised of,

a relationship, positive and supportive, with the teacher [through which] a strong and personal relationship with the teacher [is formed and is] marked by frequent and supportive communication rather than criticism, result[ing] in a child developing a relationship of trust, manifesting more engagement, presenting positive behaviours in class, and consequently higher academic achievement. (Desrosiers et al, 2012, p. 2)

Although there is mention of both conflict (created through opposing interests) (Tjosvold, 2006), and dependency (a form of conditioning making one component reliant on another for success) (Kvangraven, 2020), these negative connotations appear to carry less weight within the student-teacher relationship when compared to the positive outcomes the student-teacher relationship brings to the classroom (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Desrosiers et al., 2012; Pianta, 2004). Schwartz (2019) also highlights closeness as a contributing factor to student-teacher relationship success, noting that strong relationships can even prepare students to learn and form positive relationships with teachers, free of conflict or dependency, which leads to increased student learning and motivation.

2.2 Exploring Learning Theories in Education

In examining student outcomes related to learning and motivation, it is also necessary to explore the accompanying theories that help explain the value of relationships on student development. The following learning theories are presented in order to define what learning is and how it develops over time. The theories explored in this literature review are related to making deeper connections between relationships and student experiences and help build understanding about the intricacies of the student-teacher relationship. By focusing on theories grounded in relationships, the impact of the student-teacher relationship on student learning and motivation can be more fully understood. Theories provide a framework to ground understanding of concepts and meaning making so that we can describe, support, and extend student learning. Learning theories have been adapted in the classroom to bolster comprehension of the diverse student needs found in school environments today. Learning theories provide explanations about concepts such as motivation, factors impacting student learning, and how students' experiences in the classroom influence their overall school experiences. Five learning theories have been selected to contribute to the understanding of how learning unfolds. The theories selected highlight diverse concepts present in educational contexts that help unpack the nature of student-teacher relationships. For the purpose of this study, the research has been grounded in Vygotsky's *Social Constructivist Theory* because it is the theory that best fit with the construct of student-teacher relationships.

2.2.1 Freire's Theory of Education

In 1968, Paulo Freire, a theorist who is known for connecting education to the political process, also drew parallels between student-teacher interactions and learning when he proposed an examination of the traditional hierarchical model of education. Historically, the model of

education consisted of teachers standing at the front of the classroom presenting a lesson to students in the room (Alam, 2013). Freire (1968) refers to this approach to teaching as the *Banking Model of Education* and posits this educational system views the teachers in the classroom as holding all the power, resulting in the student-teacher relationship being one based primarily on a power imbalance. Freire's (1968) recognition of the banking model highlights the negative impact power imbalances can have on student outcomes, stressing that within this model, students are seen as passive learners waiting for their teachers to fill them with knowledge teachers judge as meaningful. In his later work, Freire (1970) proposes an alternative to the banking theory of education, which likens students to empty vessels waiting to be filled by their teacher's knowledge. Instead, he suggests a model that fosters joint learning and problem solving between teacher and student, which he refers to as *Problem-Posing Education*. By shifting thinking to allow for learning and problem solving to occur simultaneously and equally between teacher and student, a foundation of trust and respect is established, building positive student-teacher relationships (Alam, 2013). Making a shift in perception of the roles found within classrooms is transformational and demands work on the part of both teachers and students (Ministry of Education, 2013). The rewards, however, far outweigh the challenges for shifting practice and mindset because it allows students to see their value in the classroom and understand the role they play in building a love for learning. School is more than a space for knowledge acquisition and transfer--it is a place where potentiality for both teachers and students can grow.

2.2.2 Behaviourism

Behaviour Learning Theory, or behaviourism, is a learning theory grounded in the observations of human behaviour (Zhou & Brown, 2017). Originated by John Watson and B.F.

Skinner, they theorize that human behaviour is predictable, observable, and reactional when presented with a stimulus (Skinner, 1972). Behaviourists view behaviours as learned and therefore can also be unlearned and replaced with other, often more acceptable behaviours (Zhou & Brown, 2017). By building on the work of Pavlov, behaviourism expands on classical conditioning, the premise that positive results from stimuli are conditioned and negative or unsatisfying results are not (Skinner, 1972). Behaviourism is present in the classroom setting when teachers use tools such as behaviour rewards or classroom contracts. Behaviours are often viewed by teachers as being either positive or negative based on what school or society has determined is either appropriate or inappropriate (Zhou & Brown, 2017). When students present a negative or undesirable behaviour in the classroom, they may receive a consequence for their actions. Conversely, when students display positive or desirable behaviours, they may be given a reward for their efforts. Consequences could include the removal of a preferred activity from the schedule for the day or the addition of preferred tasks onto the schedule in the case of rewards. Behaviourism is an important theory to explore when discussing the student-teacher relationship because behaviours, both positive and negative, are always present within the classroom. Students learn how to respond in various learning situations and how a teacher reacts to student behaviours can influence how the students perceive their relationships with their teachers. Behavioural conditioning and the presence of rewards in the classroom, can also impact the student-teacher relationship and the students' overall learning and motivation.

2.2.3 Cognitive Theory

Based on John Piaget's four stages of development, *Cognitive Theory* conceptualizes learning as a process (Padgett, 2020). Within cognitive theory, Piaget posits that students are not limited to obtaining knowledge from their teachers, but rather, are active in the construction of

their own learning (Piaget, 1964). In understanding that students move through knowledge acquisition in stages, cognitive theory supports teachers' practice in offering opportunities within the classroom to have students of various levels of understanding working together to build and foster new learning experiences for everyone. Piaget's work reveals that at any given time, a student may display behaviours or characteristics from more than one stage of development (Piaget, 1964). When teachers can provide students with opportunities to explore their environment and foster a sense of security in their learning, students can take risks without fear of failure, create cognitive connections, and form stronger, more positive bonds with their teachers. By exploring cognitive theory as a learning theory, the opportunity to understand stages of development present within the classroom setting expands opening up new insights into where and how the student-teacher relationship can enrich student learning and motivation.

2.2.4 Social Cognitive Theory

Originated by Albert Bandura, *Social Cognitive Theory* explores the interactions among individuals, the environment, and their behaviour (Bandura, 1986). Social cognitive theory proposes that rather than people being shaped by the world or environment around them, people are instead active participants of the environments in which they find themselves (Bandura, 1986). The application of social cognitive theory to the classroom environment supports the view that students learn from observing and interacting with others, and that more connections can be made to the impact of social modeling as a meaningful mode of learning (Zhou & Brown, 2017). Bandura's work is sometimes referred to as observational learning because of the use of observable models used to support learning. The infamous Bobo Doll Experiment (1961) was created to observe how students responded to social behaviour both positively and negatively. In this experiment, children were shown video footage of others interacting aggressively with dolls

and then their own reactions to the dolls were assessed to see whether aggressive tendencies occurred. Bandura posits that “behaviour itself influences both the person and the environment, each of which, in turn, affects behaviour and each other” (Bandura, 1986). Expanding on the idea that students learn by observing others, focusing on exchanges present within student-teacher relationship, students may well be observing other students’ interactions with teachers which ultimately impacts their learning experiences. By understanding that students are constantly making observations of others around them, including how their teachers interact with peers as well as themselves, a connection can be made to the impact of student-teacher interactions and how the student-teacher relationship can both positively and negatively impact student learning and motivation.

2.2.5 Constructivist Theory

Developed by Lev Vygotsky (1978), *Constructivist Theory* explores the relationship between the social world and the cognitive world. Constructionists believe that knowledge is constructed and occurs when learners are engaged in learning with materials that are personally relevant and meaningful to them (Vygotsky, 1978). In the constructivist theory of learning, Vygotsky (1978) postulates that interpersonal interaction between students and teachers, as well as between students and other students, influences both learning and the environment in which learning takes place. According to constructivists, learning is a collaborative process and social interactions are fundamental for cognitive development (Padgett, 2020). By building constructivist theory into the classroom setting, where both student and teacher are fostering their relationship through shared interactions that are meaningful to them, more attention can be given to focusing specifically on the impact the student-teacher relationship has on student learning and motivation through the establishment of high-trust relationships (Padgett, 2020).

Constructivist theory aims to place students at the centre of their learning, giving them ownership over their learning and the environment including the building of student-teacher relationships. By empowering students, both in and out of the classroom, constructivist theory showcases that student voice plays a prominent role in exploring how students engage in learning. By fostering student-teacher relationships which are grounded in listening to all that students have to share about their learning experiences, the impact of student learning and motivation can be further understood.

2.3 Exploring Theories of Motivation in Education

Motivation is defined as the encouragement, desire, or mentality to engage and/or persist with a task (Schunk et al., 2014). For this thesis, this particular definition of motivation is selected among the myriad of definitions available in the literature because it highlights motivation as both taking place within the self, as well as being influenced from outside the self. In Shonkoff's (2009) work on relationships and their connection to the brain, he discovered that all humans are hardwired and motivated by their desires to make connections with others. The work of Souders (2020) reveals that "students' levels of motivation is reflected in their engagement and contribution to [their] learning environment" (para 12) and should also be explored when measuring student learning outcomes. Notably, motivation can be considered a multifaceted construct, especially within the context of education. There are numerous theories in education that are centred on motivation, some of which include: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; self-determination theory (SDT); and the Attention, Relevance, Confidence, Satisfaction (ARCS) Model. The following theories of motivation have been presented to help define what motivation is and the role it plays both in and out of the classroom setting. For the purpose of this research study, Deci and Ryan's *Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation Theory* has

been selected as a foundational theory because of its understanding of both internal and external forces of motivation that are often referenced within school settings.

2.3.1 Deci and Ryan's Theory of Motivation

The connection and influence of both internal and external factors on student learning outcomes places Deci and Ryan's (1985) theory of motivation as the best fit to explore student motivation and its influence within the student-teacher relationship. By differentiating between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, a closer look at motivational factors found within the student-teacher relationship can be examined. Additionally, by exploring intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, connections can be made between factors such as what is innately present within students and possible outside influences, and how each contribute to student motivation. In their work, Deci and Ryan (2000) define intrinsic motivation as activity done for its own sake and without the anticipation of external rewards, or work done solely for the satisfaction it provides. Edmunds and Edmunds (2010) add that intrinsic motivation is "behaviour that occurs as a result of internal factors such as a desire to learn" (p. 131). Perez-Lopez and Contero (2013) note that intrinsic motivation can support students to complete academic, challenging, and fun tasks, and add that academic achievement and intrinsic motivation share both positive and significant connections. Possible examples of intrinsic motivation include doing something because you think it will be fun where there is no other reward for participation, experiencing something new and not because it is required, and engaging in a task for enjoyment or a sense of purpose. Students often develop a strong intrinsic or internal motivation to push forward to succeed, however, this internal motivation is not always positive or healthy for student development and can be redirected by teachers toward more positive ways to meet goals (Wright, 2018). Student-

teacher relationships can support the development of healthy ways to motivate students to reach success.

Conversely, extrinsic motivation refers to students engaging in activities where they expect recognition, or something out of fear of punishment (Tohidi & Jabbari, 2012). Edmunds and Edmunds (2010) assert that extrinsic motivation is the “behaviour that occurs as a result of external factors such as rewards” (p. 131). Within the theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, Deci and Ryan (1985) posit there is a need for both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in supporting an individual to obtain a positive sense of self. Both types of motivation have their place in supporting student learning and success in the classroom. While intrinsic motivation can produce higher degrees of self-motivation, extrinsic motivation often provides an initial boost that encourages students to engage in an activity that can help sustain their motivation throughout the process of learning (Li & Lynch, 2016). Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation should be examined as factors connected to student learning. Student motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, are analyzed in this research study to further understand how the development of a positive student-teacher relationship impacts student motivation.

2.3.2 Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory

The exploration of the relationship between students and teachers and the impact this relationship has on student motivation also requires an examination of the environment in which the student-teacher relationship is formed. Within Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) *Ecological Theory*, a student’s development is connected to the environment in which the development takes place. Bronfenbrenner’s conceptualization of relationships proposes an examination of how changes made within the environment (to oneself and changes affecting others who are present), influence individual outcomes. Zolkiski (2019) suggests that “if you wish to understand the

relationship between the learner and some aspect of the environment, try to budge one and see what happens to the other” (p. 237). Bronfenbrenner (1976) posits that individuals are constantly influenced and motivated by many forces and, as a result, are impacted by a variety of factors present within society. Figure 1 represents Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) model, highlighting the connections and impacts each layer has on an individual as well as their environment and others around them.

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Theory (Penn, 2005)

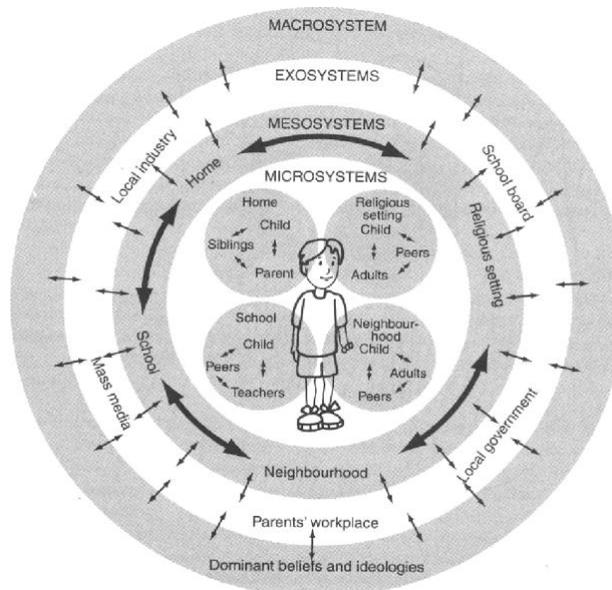


Figure 1 represents the reciprocal relationship of each of the factors present within life which Bronfenbrenner uses to emphasize the variety of layers impacting both students’ and teachers’ motivation on a daily basis. The connection can be made between this diagram and Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) approach and further understanding student motivation because it stresses the overlapping impact teachers and students face regularly. When focusing on one aspect, motivation for example, the effect it has on all other areas of life can be seen. The student-teacher relationship, when viewed through Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) ecological theory,

can foster a positive impact on student motivation by providing students with room to explore learning with more flexibility, ultimately leading to increases in overall motivation.

2.3.3 Theory of Human Motivation

Grounded in the principles of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the *Theory of Human Motivation* explores how to empower students to set goals and take actions towards reaching those goals (Maslow, 1970). Maslow (1970) adapts a holistic approach to understanding education and learning within the theory of human motivation. The theory posits that a student's learning, including their emotional, social, physical, and intellectual qualities, must be explored in order to identify and understand human motivation. It must be understood that before a student's cognitive needs can be met; especially, their physiological needs must first be addressed which means that before a student can take ownership over their learning, they must be provided with a safe environment where they can take risks and feel secure. "Students need to feel emotionally and physically safe and accepted within the classroom to progress and reach their full potential" (Zhou & Brown, 2017, p. 115). It is important to apply the theory of human motivation to the classroom because students must feel valued and teachers can support them by creating positive classroom environments (Zhou & Brown, 2017). Creating a space for students to have their needs understood and met, as is showcased within the theory of human motivation, can be fostered through the establishment of the student-teacher relationship.

2.3.4 Ford's Systems Motivational Theory

In 1992, Ford proposed the *Systems Motivational Theory* which explores human characteristics and how certain characteristics lead people to either stick with tasks or move on to other opportunities. Ford (1992) examines motivation through connections to a person's identity, which can often be in crisis as people work through understanding who they are and what they

need to reach their desired potential. When examining how to motivate humans (specifically students), Ford (1992) suggests that by helping students understand their identities and showing them that they are cared for and valued, teachers can help students learn and understand how to use motivation to meet their ongoing and unrealized goals. Split, Hughes, Wu, and Kwok (2012) posit that,

Poor relationships with teachers thwart children's basic need for relatedness and diminish children's feelings of belonging at school and [their] perceived academic competence.

[However,] children who perceive their teacher as caring and accepting are likely to internalize academic and pro-social goals valued by their teacher. (pp. 1180-1181)

How teachers approach their students matters, as evidenced in the work of Split et al. (2012).

Ford's (1992) findings also reveal that human characteristics, including respect and understanding, impact our motivation to learn and when these characteristics are present, they propel learning forward in a positive way. The impact of the student-teacher relationship on student motivation can be seen both within the classroom through increased participation and comfort, as well as beyond the context of the classroom by creating long-lasting relationships student can reflect upon as they move through life. The student-teacher relationship needs to be understood not only from the teacher perspective, but from the student perspective as well, in order to foster both student learning and motivation.

2.3.5 Understanding Reciprocity within the Student-Teacher Relationships

Attachment theory, learning, and motivation can be directly applied to the examination of student-teacher relationships and factors that contribute to student success within education. The presence of a positive student-teacher relationship has been found to promote increased student agency, well-being, learning, and motivation. Tranter, Carson, and Boland (2018) posit that to

understand the impact of the student-teacher relationship on student learning and motivation, one must understand “that students don’t act independently; rather, they act as a response to their relationships and context” (p. 23). If one action or interaction between student and teacher can influence a student either positively or negatively, then the cumulative power of those interactions can also impact students’ overall learning and motivation.

Myers and Pianta’s (2008) examine early predictors of student success and reveal that the need for positive student-teacher interactions is imperative in the early school years and should not diminish over time. By investigating the interactions between teachers and students, they draw connections to establishing and maintaining positive student-teacher relationships that begin in early childhood and extend throughout adulthood. When considering the deeper and long-lasting implications of student-teacher relationships, Saul (2015) notes, “positive teacher-student relationships are socially contagious” (p.1) and form the foundation of not only student-teacher relationships, but peer relationships as well. Cozolino (2014) also highlights the presence and intimate connection between social acceptance and student learning are connected to the student-teacher relationship. He posits that the way a teacher responds to a student is often internalized by the student and also judged by peers. Myers and Pianta (2008) finds that just as the positive presence of a student-teacher relationship can influence child perceptions and behaviours, so too can the child’s characteristics influence how teachers interact with their students. The power of influence and reaction is connected to attachment, is revealed in Bronfenbrenner’s (1976) ecological theory, and plays a significant role in student success because when the presence of one positive factor is available to students (such as a positive student-teacher relationship), the effect is felt across other factors as well (i.e., increases in student learning and motivation to reach further success).

There is a connection between a child's negative behaviour and receiving negative attention from the teacher (Desrosiers et al., 2012). When a student is given a negative label by the teacher, their brains internalize these perceptions and the cycle of negativity festers even further (Cozolino, 2014). Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory also reveals the positive and negative consequences of interactions between children and adults, often setting the foundation for future student-teacher interactions. Bowlby (1988) notes that a person's first attachments with other individuals, specifically adults in caregiving roles, often provides an example of how their subsequent relationships will form as a student moves through school. By investigating attachment theory along with learning and motivational theories, the factors, which influence relationships between students and teachers (both positive and negative), can be analyzed and understood.

2.4 Formation of Relationships in Early Childhood

Extensive research in the area of child development reveals the importance of establishing strong bonds between children and their educators (Clinton, 2013; Cozolino, 2013; Shonkoff, 2009). Rucinski, Brown, and Downer (2018), assert that educators need to improve their self-reflective skills and examine the impact that positive and reciprocal relationships can have on student achievement. Newberry (2010) suggests more time needs to be spent learning how to invest in the emotional work required to build and maintain positive student-teacher relationships. She also makes the claim that investing in the work required to build relationships should be introduced and explored as part of a larger curriculum of teacher education programs. Given that the school environment is where students spend a significant portion of their day, creating safe and welcoming spaces must be considered in tandem with ongoing academic growth and success. The establishment of positive relationships is imperative, particularly with

the migration to online learning during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Student-teacher relationships also develop in digital learning environments (Robin, 2008) and these relationships can either positively or negatively impact student learning as they would in a classroom.

Regardless of the space in which learning takes place, research on the impact of the student-teacher relationship is necessary because deeper understanding may provide insight into how the benefits of relationships can support student learning and motivation. By understanding the impact a relationship can have on students' overall success and well-being, additional training and the implementation of new strategies can be employed to support student achievement.

2.4.1 The Importance of Relationships to Early Child Development

Development is an ongoing process that begins in early childhood and continues throughout a person's lifespan (Davidson, 2007). Development is not a solitary endeavour that affects only one facet of life, but rather, it is an operation that encompasses continual movement across daily activity including how relationships are formed and maintained (Davidson, 2007). In his examination of the importance of relationships on the developing brain, Shonkoff (2009) reveals that, "young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development – intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioural, and moral" (p. 1). By understanding that early development of relationships stem from the parent-child bond, researchers such as Shonkoff (2009) and Clinton (2013) assert that the first few years of school are a crucial time for fostering relationship bonding with adults other than parents, suggesting that teachers are a great place to start. Clinton's (2013) work with the Ontario Ministry of Education helped to spearhead childcare and early learning policies recognizing that relationships in learning matter. She notes, "there is now an explosion of knowledge that tells us that healthy development cannot happen without good

relationships between children and the important people in their lives, both within the family and outside of it” (pp. 5-6). Effective educators continually reflect on their relationships with their students to help foster healthy development.

In their study on early childhood development and classroom settings, Ostrosky and Jung (2010) reveal that the development of a positive student-teacher relationship is essential not only for the development of the student, but for the dynamic of the classroom setting as well. They also draw connections to positive student-teacher relationships and how these relationships affect interactions among peers. In their article, Ostrosky and Jung (2010) note that when students experience positive interactions with their teachers, such as receiving smiles and feeling respected, students experience positive and competent peer relationships as well (Ostrosky & Jung, 2010). Clinton (2013) also reflects on the power of relationships, highlighting that “children’s relationships with others are what matter most” (p. 9). Since children spend approximately six hours a day in a classroom, for ten months of the year the relationships they build will have a significant impact on various aspects of their development (Desrosiers et al., 2012). The relationships that are developed in the classroom also influence student learning and motivation.

Fredriksen and Rhodes (2004) make the connection between student-teacher relationships and learning success and assert that the student-teacher relationship impacts not only success in student learning, but students’ social development as well. They examine how the student-teacher relationship can impact how students see themselves and how students view each other. They examine motivation and sociocultural models present in the student-teacher relationship and note there is a significant connection to teacher expectations and how teachers project their expectations onto students. The projections witnessed by students often influence how students

interact with one another (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004). They claim, “elementary school children appear to make judgements about their classmates based on perceptions of how the target child interacts with and is perceived by the teacher, which has implications for peer acceptance and rejection” (p. 46). The connections Fredriksen and Rhodes (2004) make to student learning and social success, reveals the impact the student-teacher relationship can have on student academic success. Additionally, their work reveals that relationships between teachers and students also influences many other aspects of students’ lives including student social and emotional health. Power imbalances, such as eliminating student voice from decisions made in classroom settings, are experienced by many students throughout their school years, thereby hindering overall learning and well-being in the long term (Marsh, 2012). Since fostering relationships between students and teachers has a positive impact on student well-being, learning, and motivation, the question needs to be asked, how can educators make relationship-building a priority well beyond the preschool and Kindergarten years?

2.5 Links between the Ontario Kindergarten Curriculum and Research on Relationships

In 2016, the Ontario government re-released the *Ontario Kindergarten Program* (2016) curriculum building on the 2010 program which advocates for the importance of fostering relationships between teachers and students as they begin their formal schooling years (Ministry of Education, 2016). Revisions to the Kindergarten curriculum in 2016 stemmed from the 2014 Ministry of Education publication *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario’s Pedagogy for the Early Years*, a publication that highlights “there is perhaps no relationship that holds greater responsibility or reward than the relationships we develop with children” (p. 4). Much work in early childhood settings has centered on the importance of creating connections between teachers and students in early school years (Clinton, 2013; Cozolino, 2013; Ostrosky & Jung, 2010;

Pianta, 2001; Shonkoff, 2009) and these works contributed to the updates now included in the *Ontario Kindergarten Program* (Ministry of Education, 2016). When educators analyze learning opportunities for their students, they examine what they do together every day and how deeply these interactions impact student outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2014). Interactions between teachers and students begin in early school experiences but extend throughout a student's academic journey. The fostering of relationships between students and teachers must therefore extend beyond Kindergarten because students of all ages need to know that learning flourishes when a positive student-teacher relationship exists. My study moves the research on student-teacher relationships beyond the Kindergarten years in order to show the importance of educators fostering relationship building with students that grows with students as they move through elementary school.

2.5.1 Extending Relationship Based Curriculum Beyond the Kindergarten Years

Pianta's (1994) research on early school relationships between teachers and students explores the value and impact positive student-teacher relationships have on Kindergarten and early elementary school students noting strong connections between relationships and child development (Desrosiers et al., 2012). Pianta (1994) developed a relationship "typology based on three dimensions – closeness, conflict, and dependency" (p. 2), each of which play a significant role individually, as well as part of the larger whole on a child's development. Saul (2015) extends Pianta's ideas, noting that,

teacher-student relationships matter regardless of grade level. Although it is often common practice for educators to assume that younger learners are more dependent on their teachers than older ones [for academic achievement,] research suggests that the

importance of teacher-student relationships remains consistent no matter a student's age.

(p. 1)

Findings by Fredriksen and Rhodes (2004) also suggest that, "teacher support can help to buffer some of the stress associated with middle school, offsetting the risk for adjustment difficulties" (p. 47). Challenges such as peer pressure and puberty are already known to impact student development as students move through school transitions and experience changes both in themselves and the school environment around them (Schaffhuser, Allemand, & Schwarz, 2017). An exploration of student perceptions of their relationships with teachers beyond the early years and the barriers which inhibit these relationships, can contribute to the literature on what students need in their relationships in order to stay motivated and learn.

2.6 Characteristics of the Student-Teacher Relationship

In order to explore the impact of the student-teacher relationship on learning and motivation in the pre- and early-adolescent years, it is necessary to examine what students feel is needed in their relationships with teachers and how the student-teacher relationship is perceived and valued from the student point of view. Newberry (2010) observes that there appear to be repeated qualities or characteristics that teachers demonstrate to help foster positive student-teacher interactions. These include: being attuned to children's needs, teacher relatedness, supportiveness, and when needed, using gentle discipline (Newberry, 2010). Ostrosky and Jung (2010) also highlight other key characteristics that teachers can employ which attribute to positive student-teacher relationships. These attributes include: engaging in one-on-one interactions with students; speaking to students on their level; reducing power imbalances between students and teachers by sharing roles with the classroom setting; using clear, calm, and simple language; providing warm and responsive contact; building on student's interests; helping

students understand expectations; redirecting challenging behaviours; encouraging students to listen to each other; and acknowledging all student efforts whether successful or not (Ostrosky & Jung, 2010). Although their work is conducted with a focus on student interactions in the first year of school, these strategies and teacher attributes are relevant regardless of the grade taught because they are grounded in the understanding of mutual respect.

2.6.1 Teacher Roles and Responsibilities

There are many expectations outlined in Ontario school policy and curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2010) including learning expectations educators are required to teach during the school year. What is less visible within these policy and curricular expectations, however, is guidance for how teachers can support students through their actions and the rapport they establish with students both in and out of the classroom. In his work on student-teacher relationships, Saul (2015) notes that being kind matters and that “learning is enhanced when teachers demonstrate a variety of behaviours associated with kindness such as: interpersonal warmth, care, empathy, support, safety, and intellectual encouragement” (p. 1). Saul (2015) also suggests that positive teacher behaviours can “increase the learner’s creativity, autonomy, and satisfaction” (p. 1). The characteristics Ostrosky and Jung (2010) note including teachers showing students they care by being warm, responsive, and encouraging, are further evidence of the importance of exploring the student-teacher relationship and its prospective impact on student learning and motivation.

Yu, Johnson, Deutsch, and Varga (2018) demonstrate that a connection is developed between students and teachers when the teacher expresses care, challenges student growth, provides support, shares power, and expands possibilities, connections, and opportunities for students. In their work, Yu et al. (2018) also ascertain that as part of every positive student-

teacher relationship, both parties must engage in four key interactions together in order for a connection to be established and a positive outcome to be obtained. These mutual exchanges include: bonding (such as feeling cared for), belonging (feeling close one another), trust, and respect (Yu et al., 2018). Throughout their study, connections were drawn among the four interactions to highlight their benefits to students' sense of well-being and the motivation for students to want to work hard knowing they have someone in their corner encouraging them to reach their full potential (Yu et al., 2018). Every child has the right to feel a sense of security in their learning because as Article 29 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* highlights, all children are entitled to the support they need to reach their fullest potential (United Nations, 2009). Feeling a sense of security helps to foster the mutual exchanges that Yu et al. (2018) posit are imperative to the development of positive student-teacher relationships.

Rita Pierson (2013), an international spokesperson on issues related to student-teacher relationships, expresses the importance of students feeling as though they have a champion rooting for them regardless of the situations in which they find themselves. She refers to this teacher-student relationship as championing, meaning that every student needs to feel like they are valued and worthy of the adult's attention who sees the best in them (Pierson, 2013). Additionally, Wilkins (2014) notes that when students are part of a "warm, close, [and] communicative" (p. 156) relationship with a teacher, feelings of alienation within the school community decrease. Feeling this sense of inclusion is particularly important to at-risk students because, as Saul (2015) asserts, "positive teacher-student relationships benefit vulnerable students most" (p. 1). What Saul (2015) shares is particularly relevant to this research because as Hattie (2009) points out in his meta-analysis of the factors related to student achievement, all students, especially hard to reach students, need to believe their teachers think they can succeed.

When teachers can see students as more than the behaviours they exhibit, students begin to see themselves as ‘more’ as well. For some challenging or hard to reach students, they may need a positive student-teacher relationship even more than close relationships with their peers.

In 2001, Pianta furthered his investigation into the connections between attachment and the student-teacher relationship. He created a tool referred to as *The Student-Teacher Relationship Survey* (2001) where he established a list of questions teachers could ask themselves about their relationships with students to better help them meet students’ needs. The creation of this tool allowed for a platform to begin reflecting on the dynamics of student-teacher relationships which, paved the way for further investigation by other researchers such as Hattie (2009) and Cozolino (2013). There is a section within the *Student-Teacher Relationship Survey* which emphasizes that students’ voices need to be heard where relationship construction is concerned. The student version of the scale addresses seven of the key factors that students have highlighted as principle requirements needed in student-teacher relationships (Pianta, 2001). These factors suggest teachers need to: provide academic and personal support, show an interest in student well-being, provide motivational strategies, treat students with respect, be compassionate, be accessible and understanding, and value students’ opinions and feelings (Wilkins, 2014). These factors are not requirements that stretch beyond academic attainment but rather are factors expected to be a part of any positive interaction found both in and out of the classroom. Despite the evidence that having teachers who show they care for their students leaves a lasting impact on them (Baker et al., 2016; Birch & Ladd, 1997), teachers are still often required to make academics a priority over building positive relationships with students because of “policy[,]...standardized testing[,] and teacher accountability” (Wilkins, 2014, p. 157). The recognition of changing priorities to focus on academics is particularly relevant as students move

out of the primary grades and into the junior and intermediate years. As work becomes more challenging, students need to know their teachers are there to support them and will continue to build relationships with them to support their learning and motivation to succeed.

2.7 Student Perceptions about their Relationships with Teachers

Research has shown that student-teacher relationships are made up of a dynamic and complex interplay of interactions, impacting both teachers and students alike (Baber & Noreen, 2018). Although several studies focus on teachers' perceptions of their relationships with students (namely how teachers perceive student behaviour in the classroom influences student success), only a handful of research studies focus on student perceptions (Longobardi, 2020; Thijs & Fleischmann, 2015). In their work, Baber and Noreen (2018) showcase a study with elementary students in grades five and six and share a correlation between how students perceive their relationship with their teacher and how they achieve academically. Their results reveal that the factors which contribute to a student's perception of positive student-teacher relationships were present when teachers were willing to be helpful, made an effort to establish a caring connection, and showed a sense of humour (Baber & Noreen, 2018). All of these factors, which are linked to the necessary characteristics found within student-teacher relationships (Baber & Noreen, 2018), highlight that establishing a secure relationship founded on trust and reciprocal respect, leads to positive student motivation, learning, and well-being.

Similar discoveries are noted in Desrosier, Japel, Singh, and Tetreault's (2012) publication of their longitudinal study illuminating both teacher and student perspectives related to factors which support student learning. Desrosier et al. (2012) explore Pianta's (1994) principles of closeness, conflict, and dependency from both teacher and student point of view and draw connections among closeness, conflict, and dependency as students moved through

their elementary school years. What is interesting to note in their research is the vast differences between teacher and student perceptions on shared relationships and how closeness, conflict, and dependency are felt by both teachers and students. Desrosier et al. (2012) highlight that “only 18-25% of teachers feel confident in their ability to make strong connections and relationships with their students” (p. 4) in grades one to four, whereas “75-90% of students between grades one and four admitted to liking their teachers and the relationships they had established” (p. 4). The contradiction between teacher and student perspectives merits further investigation because this differentiation presents great potential for change. Why is it that students view their relationships with their teachers differently from the way teachers view the same interactions?

2.7.1 Student Perceptions about Teacher Actions in the Classroom

The work by Fredriksen and Rhodes (2004) reveals links between individual student perceptions connected to the student-teacher relationships and peer responses related to the student-teacher relationship. In addition to the perceptions students have about their teachers, their work also made discoveries about how students perceive the way their teachers treat other students as a contributing factor to the development of relationships in the classroom (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004). Students in their study share comments that observing how their teachers interact with fellow students is a key predictor in determining how students will treat each other as well (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004). The cyclical nature of relationships in a classroom setting is important to understand because it provides another angle through which the impact of the student-teacher relationship can be examined. The give and take present within reciprocal relationships needs to be studied from both the teacher and student perspective because otherwise the risk of power imbalance remains.

Aarla, Maatta, and Uusiautti (2016) further examine the parallel nature of relationships in the classroom with students who were incarcerated after dropping out of school. The purpose of their work is to explore the impact student-teacher relationships have on the participants' school lives and how relationships might affect more than just teacher and student interactions. Their study looks at the perspectives of students to determine what types of characteristics teachers need to have in order to build positive relationships with students. Interestingly, they note students report they often emulate how they observe their teachers behaving towards peers and follow this behaviour pattern as well (Aarla et al., 2016). The mimicking behaviours reveals the cyclical nature of relationships, demonstrating how influential and impactful the student-teacher relationship is to student learning. Although the focus of their study is on students in their late teens, the discussion with participants leads the researchers to take a closer look at the characteristics or qualities the participants reference repeatedly. The participants' responses are synthesized into a list of ten qualities teachers should possess which included: being present, listening, acknowledging efforts, collaborating, teaching to everyone, visibly enjoying the day-to-day work, being able to forgive, being welcoming, daring to intervene, and paying attention to self-care since emotional strains impact everyone (Aarla et al., 2016). Participants feel these qualities are missing in educators with whom they have poor relationships, and therefore view their student-teacher relationships as more negative than positive.

Gasser, Grutter, Buholzer, and Wettstein (2017) include student perspectives from middle elementary grades in their work similar to Baber and Noreen (2018). Gasser et al. (2017) ask student participants to share their perceptions related to teacher care (compassion towards students), teacher justice (discipline), and their own individual academic disengagement. Their findings reveal that as students progress through grades five and six, their perceptions of the

level of care offered by their teachers decreases significantly (Gasser et al., 2017). Students attribute the decrease in level of care to a lack of emotional support offered by the teachers (Gasser et al., 2017). The lack of perceived emotional support which participants report reinforces the idea that as students progress through elementary school, the quality of the student-teacher relationship declines (Gasser et al., 2017). Saul's (2015) work highlights that in order for a student to achieve success and remain engaged, students must feel that their student-teacher relationship continues to matter regardless of their grade level. Students need to have their concerns heard because their opinions matter. Recognizing student voice can lead to the creation of student-teacher interactions that support student well-being (Marsh, 2012). Students need positive, caring relationships with their teachers to help them continue to feel successful even as they move through the higher grades and their academic tasks become increasingly more challenging. Rita Pierson (2013) champions that students of all grades and academic levels need to feel supported by their teachers and highlights that all students, regardless of age or ability, need to know someone cares and believes in them. Teacher knowledge and recognition, along with embracing connections, are the hallmarks of successful student-teacher relationships. When students perceive these elements to be in place, there is more opportunity for increased learning and motivation.

2.8 Impact of Student-Teacher Relationships on Student Learning and Their Sense of Self

The literature examined for this thesis reveals that there is limited research on student voice, particularly from students in the junior and intermediate (4-8) grades and also few studies soliciting student perspectives about how their relationships with teachers impact their learning and motivation. In their recent study, Scales et al. (2020) reported that students believe that their relationships with teachers support feelings of emotional connectedness, safety, academic

engagement, and an increase in students' efforts to do well. Similarly, Longobardi et al. (2020) reported that students link closeness with their teachers to prosocial behaviour and attitude towards school success. Additionally, Sointu et al. (2016) found that fostering emotional development within the student-teacher relationship supports students emotionally and academically as students progress through school. Aarela et al. (2016) add to these findings highlighting that student-teacher relationships impact not just the students, their learning, and well-being in the classroom, but can also impact their achievements throughout life. By including students who are incarcerated in their research, Aarela et al. (2016) emphasize how the effects of the student-teacher relationship can impact a student beyond the classroom setting. Their participants comment on the impact their teachers could have had on their lives, noting they may have had very different learning and motivational goals if they had teachers willing to make connections with them (Aarela et al., 2016). Clinton (2013) and Shonkoff (2009) also assert that by exploring the student-teacher relationship, further impacts related to student health and well-being can be seen in all areas of development and at many points throughout a student's lifespan (Shonkoff, 2009). Similarly, Baber and Noreen (2018) reveal that when students perceive that they have a strong and positive relationship with their teachers, students are more likely to achieve their social and academic goals with greater success. Baber and Noreen (2018) highlight the impact of the student-teacher relationship on a student's overall sense of self and how it increases with the presence of a positive student-teacher relationship. They add that relationships between students and teachers have the potential to move beyond the classroom and into students' lives outside of academic endeavours, making positive student-teacher experiences even more valuable.

2.8.1 The Importance of the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale to Student Learning

In their research on observing how relationships change between students and teachers over time, Hamre and Pianta (2001) use the *Student-Teacher Rating Scale* (STRS) to follow a group of students from Kindergarten through to grade 8. The aim of their study was to examine how relationships evolve and change from the perspective of classroom teachers. In their work, they document and analyze the impact of positive and negative student-teacher relationships on student achievement over time. Their results reveal a strong correlation between how teachers perceive their students from information received from colleagues, and how they treat their students in early elementary school, which is then carried through each year to Grade 8 (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). They categorize student-teacher relationships into those grounded in conflict and those grounded in positivity. Hamre and Pianta (2001) highlight that when students are part of classroom environments that foster positivity, students are more likely to see success all the way through their elementary school years. Conversely, when negativity or conflict is at the heart of student-teacher interactions, negative perspectives, especially with boys, stay with a student from Kindergarten through to grade 8 (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Their findings confirm pre-determined conflict follows a student from year to year once a student has been identified as troublesome and has a significant impact on future student-teacher relationships.

In their 2004 study, Pianta and Stuhlman also explore the binaries of closeness and conflict connected to positive and negative school achievement when they investigate the quality of student-teacher relationships in early elementary school. Of the 490 students followed, they note a stable and growing correlation between relationships grounded in quality positive interactions (closeness at a rate of .22), and successful outcomes for students compared to student-teacher interactions based on negativity (conflict at a rate of -.10). Their work reveals a

direct link between positive relationships and increased student academic outcomes. Split et al. (2012) also note that “continuous teacher support could counteract or neutralize risk factors, leading to lasting positive effects on children’s development” (p. 1180). Similarly, they suggest that there are barriers to students’ ongoing advancements directly tied to a teacher’s behaviours and actions (Split et al., 2012). Teachers need to be aware of their actions in order to begin taking the required steps needed to help students move forward successfully. Students need teachers to foster their growth and development and to show them how a positive attitude can impact their day-to-day experiences, including their relationships with others, their learning, and their motivation.

Pianta’s (2001) work on the conflict binaries that are present within student-teacher relationships, can be found in multiple studies that use the *Student-Teacher Relationships Scale* (STRS) (Desrosiers et al., 2012; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). In their 2004 study, Pianta and Stuhlman found a decreasing trend between closeness and conflict, suggesting the importance of the student-teacher relationship on student over time. Specifically, as teachers identified feelings of conflict decreasing through conflict avoidance between themselves and their students, the teachers also identified their feelings of closeness with students lessening due to the distance that was created by avoiding conflict at all costs (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004). There is a divide in the literature between early child development and exploring high school experiences that suggests there is not enough attention being given by the education system to support teachers in building and maintaining positive student-teacher relationships as students move through their elementary school years. Further longitudinal research could help predict the effect of relationships on longer-term student outcomes (Split et al., 2012) and what supports teachers need to foster healthy relationship building over time. Although positive student outcomes include “better

behaviour, increased attachment to school, higher academic achievement, improved attendance, and increased likelihood of completing school” (Wilkins, 2014, p. 156), there could be other positive outcomes which surface with larger scale studies.

In the study by Valkov and Lavrentsova (2019) with students in high school, researchers make connections among student-teacher relationships, academic success, and decreased dropout rates. Their research reveals there is a lower dropout rate for students who feel they have had positive relationships with their teachers, showing a direct connection to student achievement. Additionally, “consensus among educational researchers can be rare, yet here there is little dispute: positive teacher-student relations are integral to young people’s learning” (Saul, 2015, p. 1) and achievement. The benefits of establishing and maintaining positive student-teacher relationships throughout a student’s school career supports student confidence, well-being, growth, learning, and motivation.

2.9 Impact of Student-Teacher Relationships on Student Motivation

Theories related to student motivation have been explored throughout this thesis linking student-teacher relationships to student motivation. Various studies explore the impact the student-teacher relationship has on student motivation (Baber & Noreen, 2018; Grover, 2004; Li & Lynch, 2016; Pedditzi & Spigno, 2012; Pianta, 2001) but few embrace an exploration of motivation in the classroom from the student point of view (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004; Kitrell & Moore, 2013). In their work on student voice, Anderson and Graham (2016) discover that when students are motivated to share their ideas and experiences, their well-being also increases. Their findings make the connection between well-being and motivation visible which makes the importance of exploring the impact the student-teacher relationship has on student motivation all the more pressing. Students should be given

the chance to voice their needs in determining what motivates them to reach for success. Zee and de Bree (2016) also found that when teachers give students a chance to use their voice, it helps students to use self-regulation strategies which leads to the motivation to set goals, reach expectations, and build student metacognitive skills. Teachers also play a role in individual and classroom motivation and as such, the role of the teacher must be further explored to understand the layers of the student-teacher relationship and the impact this relationship has on student motivation.

2.9.1 The Role Teachers Play in Student Motivation

When considering motivation, and specifically the role the teacher plays in the support of extrinsic motivation, a construct which appears repeatedly in the literature is the notion of caring. Noddings (1992) explores the concept of caring, making the connection that when teachers are able to instil feelings of belonging and being cared for in their students, they are then able to foster a sense of accomplishment. The feeling of accomplishment supports both extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. Wentzel (1997) elaborates that caring plays a role in student motivation noting “the academic objectives of schools cannot be met unless teachers provide students with a caring and supportive classroom environment” (p. 411). The literature suggests that one way to encourage and support student learning outcomes is for teachers to engage and bolster student success through motivation (Birch & Ladd, 1996; Pianta, 1992; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Thijs and Fleischmann (2015) reveal that one way to build motivation in the classroom is to create classroom goals that nurture a sense of community and care with all students. Wetzel (1997) notes that “transitions from elementary to middle school often result in: heightened levels of mistrust between teachers and students, students’ perceptions that teachers no longer care about them, and a decrease in opportunities for students to establish meaningful relationships

with teachers” (p. 411). The teacher’s role in providing care to students ultimately fosters positive student-teacher relationships through which students are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to learn.

2.9.2 Motivational Strategies Teachers Can Employ to Support Student Motivation

In her research on motivation and care, Wentzel (1997) also highlights that to help motivate students, teachers should “model caring behaviour to their students, engage students in dialogue that leads to mutual understanding and perspective taking, and expect as well as encourage students to do the best they can given their abilities” (p. 412). These three suggestions help form the backbone of establishing positive student-teacher relationships through both care and motivation. By exemplifying characteristics such as enthusiasm, humour, suspense, and curiosity (Kittrell & Moore, 2013), teachers can use their externally visible passion to help motivate students to mimic this joy and success as well. Kittrell and Moore (2013) reveal that “motivational strategies help students generalize or apply the information given [to them] in [their] class” (p. 95) and suggest teachers build the motivations strategies found in Table 1 into their practice.

Table 1. *Motivational Strategies for Teachers to Employ*

Suggested Strategy to Employ	Motivational Reasoning
Get to know your students	If a teacher knows their students' background, they can then relate the lesson to their own background.
Encourage a feeling of need in students	Relating course materials to real life situations and uses helps students make their own connections between real life and lesson being explored.
Explain your expectations	Explain to students what they need to learn and do not engage in hide and seek where their learning is concerned.
Be enthusiastic	Class tone will be set by the teachers' enthusiasm and attitude. If the teachers are not enthusiastic about what they are teaching, they cannot expect students to be enthusiastic.
Use illustrations and personal examples	Relating materials to experiences and those of students as well draws connections between ideas and supports learning.
Use visuals, actual objects, and demonstrations	Students remember more of what they see and do versus what they only hear.
Use problem solving	Creating or locating problems to solve encourages higher level learning and keeps students thinking. It also supports an increased willingness to learn.
Involve students	Asking questions while teaching helps students stay alert in anticipation of being asked a question causing them to think.
Use curiosity and suspense	Leaving out key words or transparencies and asking students to help complete lessons can create great discussions and learning opportunities.
Provide positive reinforcement	Verbally rewarding students for a job well done can encourage continued hard work and stretching to reach goals.
Use humour	Telling the occasional joke or using humour related to the topic of study can lighten the atmosphere but still maintain students' thoughts on the topic.
Use a variety of techniques	Mixing up techniques and projects keeps learning interesting.

Note. Adapted from Kittrell and Moore (2013)

Each of the motivational suggestions offered by Kittrell and Moore (2013) can be tied directly to what students have identified as being helpful for teachers to embrace in their teaching practice to support student motivation (Aarela et al., 2016; Buskirk & Plant, 2019, Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Valkov & Lavrentsova, 2019). Preparing students to learn is a joint responsibility between

student and teacher. A teacher's responsibility lies not only in providing information, but also in helping learning to occur (Brown, 1981). Establishing a positive student-teacher relationship grounded in motivation will support students in building their knowledge and hopefully improve their learning outcomes

2.10 Conclusion

The literature explored in this review reveals the importance and impact of student-teacher relationships on student motivation and learning. Ministries of Education have spent time focusing on testing students to determine their academic achievement (Wilkins, 2014) but, as Clinton (2013) notes, educators and governments need to shift their perspectives and focus equally on how the interactions they are having with students will impact student learning and motivation. Learning can be examined as a wider construct to include more than simply academic achievement. Learning is also about well-being and increasing student efficacy, interests, and students' perceived value in themselves and their larger school communities (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004). Establishing positive student-teacher relationships that follow a student through the middle and upper elementary grades (4-8), helps in contributing to the student's success both in the classroom and in life.

Trends in education, including the recognition of the value of student voice in student learning and the move away from top-down teaching practices in favour of responsive instruction, bring with them the requirement to consider a shift in the power imbalances present in the classroom which impact student learning and motivation. An examination of the impact of the student-teacher relationship on all student outcomes is an area of research that is beyond the scope of this masters' thesis. The study that follows explores the quality of the interactions between teachers and students as reported by students in Grades 4 through 8. Theoretical

frameworks such as attachment theory, learning theories, and motivational theories within a social constructivist worldview reveal that there is significant value to exploring the impact of the student-teacher relationship on student learning and motivation. Students' voices are relevant and need to be included in research in order to understand their perceptions of their relationships with teachers and the impact of these relationships on their learning and motivation. Although the student-teacher relationship has typically been explored in research from the teachers' perspective, the review of the literature reveals that there is a gap in the research on student perspectives. It is necessary to unravel why the focus on fostering positive student-teacher relationships (that are documented as imperative in the early years), fades as students move through school. In building positive student-teacher relationships in the junior and intermediate grades (4-8), teachers can have significant impacts on student learning and motivation, ultimately contributing to the overall well-being of all students.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this study is to analyze the impact of the student-teacher relationship on student learning and motivation from the student perspective. My work further explores the assertions put forth by Clinton and colleagues in *Think, Feel, Act* (2013) which states that educators need to approach learning from the student perspective, fostering confidence and respectful connections between students and teachers. My thesis work expands upon Clinton's work to include school-aged children (Grades 4-8) and draws on Bowlby's (1988) *Theory of Attachment* examining how student-teacher relationships impact students' motivation and learning. Given my focus on the student perspective, student participants shared their experiences in the form of one-on-one interviews. Students were asked to share their understanding of the student-teacher relationships and describe their relationships from Kindergarten through to their most recent grade experience. Their descriptions and experiences helped generate a dialogue which addresses, from these students' point of view, how their student-teacher relationships impact their learning and motivation. By encouraging student participation, student voice was the focal point of the study and validated the knowledge gained as it came directly from the student participants themselves.

3.0.1 Research Questions

The questions explored within this study are as follows:

- How do students describe their relationship with their teachers?
- What challenges do students perceive (if any) in building relationships with their teachers?
- What are student perceptions of the impact of the student-teacher relationship on motivation and learning?

These questions were used to ground the research on student voice and student perceptions related to the student-teacher relationship and its impact on motivation and overall learning experiences in the upper elementary grades.

3.1 Research Design

The research design chosen for this study is qualitative in nature since this form of research allows both researcher and participant to engage in a rich and descriptive exploration of knowledge as it is gained through experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) note that in qualitative research, participants may be asked a series of open-ended questions through which the researcher is aiming to interpret common themes and understandings by exploring participants' lived experiences. A phenomenological design captures the lives of the participants and their lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), and supports this research study to further understand students' personal experiences with their teachers. Using a constructivist worldview, which places emphasis on knowledge being obtained through the construction of experiences and with the goal of relying "as much as possible on the participants' views" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8), this study was designed with the student voice in mind.

3.2 The Importance of Student Voice in Educational Research

It is important to foster student voice not only in educational research, but within the classroom as well, especially where learning is concerned (Clinton, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2018; Mitra et al., 2012; United Nations, 2009; Unicef, 2019) because students possess unique knowledge directly connected to their learning experiences. Landsdown (2001) asserts that, "it is imperative to ensure that the different experiences of children in widely different circumstances are visible" (p. 34). Anderson and Graham (2016) build on the understanding that student voice

is necessary noting “considerable potential exists for education systems to hear directly from students about their experience of school and the ways in which this might be improved” (p. 348). Kangas (2008) highlights that “there is increasing recognition of the importance of giving children an active role in contributing to learning conditions and involving them in the process of improving and designing learning environments” (p. 208). Researchers (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Bourke & MacDonald, 2018; Flynn, 2014; Grover, 2004, Lansdown, 2011; Marsh, 2012) acknowledge the important value of student voice in the research process. Voice as a tool, however, is not new. Article 12 of the *Convention of the Rights of Children* recognizes the value of student voice emphasizing it is “the right of every child to freely express her or his views, in all matters affecting her or him” (United Nations, 2009, p. 5). The design and implementation of the student-teacher relationship must also be considered as a powerful factor in enabling student voice. Student voice can act as a promoter for improved student learning and well-being. Hearing directly from students about their views on the student-teacher relationship plays a role in further understanding student learning and motivation.

3.2.1 Using Student Voice to Understand Student Learning and Motivation

Over the last decade, there has been an influx of documented research acknowledging that students need to become active participants in their learning and in educational research (Anderson & Graham, 2016; Baber & Noreen, 2018; Bourke & MacDonald, 2018). Simmons, Graham, and Thomas (2015) note that in hearing student voices in research, it has become increasingly evident that “children are less likely to be viewed merely as subjects or objects of inquiry, but [instead are beginning to be seen] as active participants in the research process” (p. 131). The value of representing student voice in education stems from the understanding that students’ experiences in education need to be taken seriously (Bourke & MacDonald, 2018).

There is added importance placed on “ensuring these ‘voices’ are understood, heard and acted on, in part [to] support the agenda for them to challenge a power base” (Bourke & MacDonald, 2018, p. 158) such as the hierarchical system present within the education system. These views support Freire’s (1968) opposition to the *Banking Model of Education* as previously discussed because they embrace the understanding that students enter classrooms daily with their own valuable voice which allows them to take a strong hold of their education. By using student voice as a model for change, teachers begin to redirect their historic understanding of learning to embrace the notion that “learning is mutual, collaborative and dialogical and [is also] where oppressive knowledge and relations are transformed” (Keddie, 2014, p. 228). In acknowledging student voice as a mode for moving collaboration between students and teachers forward, the impact of sharing learning opportunities within the student-teacher relationship are made visible and can be considered a catalysis for change. Thus, when student voice is explored, it is given the same value as exploring teacher perspective, which in turn leads to further discovery supporting progress in the field of education.

3.2.2 Student Voice as a Vehicle for Changing Student-Teacher Relationships within Education

Student voice has the power to influence a multitude of systems found within the classroom including layout and design, topics of interest, and assignment design, and therefore it becomes increasingly evident that student voice be recognized as a powerful means of drawing attention to necessary changes within the education system. Students’ experiences must also be taken seriously in education (Alexander, 2010), especially when exploring the power dynamic between the student and the teacher within the relationship. History has dictated that this relationship was subject to power imbalance where the teacher would hold all the power and

control. Bourke and MacDonald (2016) assert that “while the inclusion of voice does not necessarily mean understanding or listening to student views, it can become the catalyst for change and action” (p. 157).

The Ontario Ministry of Education developed the SPEAKUP (2018) program in order to advocate for the inclusion of student voice to support change. The program was developed for students in grades 7-12 with the objective to empower students to make schools a safe place where everyone feels welcome to: speak their mind, become involved in the school community, and to support students to become active citizens and leaders (Ministry of Education, 2018). Student participants were asked to share their suggestions for ways they could become involved in their learning such as working with community partners, mentoring other students, or raising awareness of their concerns through creative representation of voice. In educational research, the emphasis should be on moving away from formal learning (Kangas, 2010) and instead move toward acknowledging the value everyday experiences hold.

In 2010, the Ontario Ministry of Education published the document *Growing Success*, which focuses on assessing student achievement and outcomes, and embraces the understanding that learning in a more holistic manner is possible within today’s classroom setting. Although the overarching expectations connect back to standardized testing as a means of evaluation, this document begins the discussion about student agency and how students are concerned about their unique learning needs wanting a way to be recognized for all their learning efforts. A section of this document highlights how the “develop[ment of] students’ self-assessment skills to enable them to assess their own learning, set specific goals, and plan next steps for their learning” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 6) is to support learners in the twenty-first century. The establishment of this metacognitive skill gives rise to building students’ confidence in expressing

what they need to be successful. By recognizing a student's right to reflect on their learning needs, including what they need in a student-teacher relationship, student voice can be prioritized. Since phenomenological research is grounded in the idea that participant voice matters and has the power to reveal detailed understandings of lived experiences, it was the ideal approach for a study examining student-teacher relationships. By exploring student experiences, this study attempts to reveal their rich contributions and perspectives on how relationships with their teachers impact learning and motivation.

In addition to open-ended questioning, the implementation of a holistic approach to knowledge sharing was also employed to encourage participant voice and story sharing. By following a design in which student voice is not only encouraged but is the center of the researcher-participant interactions, the study is multi-dimensional and recognizes that student experiences matter. Ellis (2006), notes that one of the challenges when conducting qualitative research, especially with children, is that the goal "in interviewing[,] is to create conditions that enable a participant to recall significant experiences, analyze them, and reflect on their meaning" (p. 113). When working with children, getting to this level of understanding experiences is often additionally challenging given the power imbalance present between interviewer (adult) and interviewee (student). Ellis (2006) notes, "when an adult is interviewing a child, extra sensitivity about power relationships is required" (p. 118) in order to dismantle any possible role of authority imparted from the researcher to the participant. In later research conducted by Ellis, Hetherington, Lovell, McConaghy, and Viczko (2013), power imbalances and understanding the imbalance is further considered through the use of pre-interview drawing activities with children to help them better understand and identify ideas present within their experiences. In order to support student participants and create a level of comfort without the benefits of a face-to-face

interview, participants were asked to engage in a pre-interview task similar to the ones described by Ellis et al. (2013) in their work interviewing vulnerable populations. Given the age of the participants (9-14) and the time frame in which this study was conducted, a pre-interview personal timeline reflection task was conducted prior to semi-structured interviewing between researcher and participant. The aim was to alleviate some of the challenges faced with interviews and to help student participants better understand their experiences in order to draw conclusions without having their thinking influenced in any other way.

3.3 Participant Selection

Purposeful participant selection was implemented in the study to ensure participants were in the junior/intermediate grades or their first year of high school at the time research was conducted because this is a time when students experience significant personal change and growth. Given that in the 2020-2021 academic year distance learning practices continued due to the pandemic, student participants were recruited through personal relationships and community organizations such as local Girls Guides/Boy Scouts and community-based programs including local Martial Arts youth clubs. In total, 32 students were contacted about participating in the study – three from a connection with Girl Guides, six through a local Martial Arts youth club, ten through professional referral relationships, and the remaining 13 through personal relationships. All participants contacted reside and attend schools in Ontario. Each participant was given an overview of the intended research study and each had the opportunity to participate or withdraw at any point in time. Parents were given formal consent forms, and student participants were also given forms of assent to help them fully understand their participation and rights as well.

Using convenience sampling, the required number of participants that were available and willing to participate, moved the study forward (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I was able to

recruit 20 participants willing to share their perspectives about their student-teacher relationship from grades 4-8 (see Appendix A).

As researchers, we must look critically at the way research projects are constructed and developed, the way we engage with children, whether our research is conducted in keeping with the highest possible ethical standards, and whether it is carried out in an acceptable and appropriate manner both to the researcher and to the children involved.

(Parr, 2010, p. 452)

Maguire (2005) also notes that, “children have good social radar for assessing the situations and contexts in which they find themselves. Thus, children’s perspectives and voices are important signifiers of their conceptualizations of the situatedness of their learning, their interests, needs, and perceptions” (p. 3). Every effort was made to ensure student participants felt valued and respected during the study and they understood their right to withdraw at any given time.

3.4 Procedure

This research study consisted of multi-levelled and re-occurring contact between researcher and participants. The implemented timeframe of the work between researcher and participant is found in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Implemented Time Frame for Study Completion

Task	Time Frame
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants contacted through parents to confirm both consent and assent to participate in study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approximately 2 weeks for families and participants to confirm interest in study
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students completed demographic survey via email (parental email was used primarily as not all participants had their own personal email) to confirm participation in study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approximately 2 weeks was given for families and participants to sign consent forms and to complete the demographic survey. Upon receipt of the demographic survey, a mutually agreed upon date was determined
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interview time scheduled between researcher and participant 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zoom session between researcher and participant. Each session began with the student completing a timeline task (personal reflection task) and then continued with a semi-structured interview between researcher and participant through which the timeline task was further explored 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Zoom session itself took approximately one hour per participant (approximately 30 minutes for the reflection task and 30 minutes for the interview, however this varied from participant to participant)

Given the current physical distancing protocols, all interactions between the researcher and participant occurred through the use of zoom technology. In doing so, both participant and researcher did not have to worry about pandemic-related concerns of physical distancing.

The research collected for this study began with a survey given to participants via parent email after consent was received (see Appendix B). The demographic survey included information such as participant gender, age, grade level, and how long the participant has been in attendance at their current school. The survey also explored participants' understandings of the term relationship and how it applies to the classroom setting. Students were also asked to rate their views on the impact the student-teacher relationship on learning and motivation, laying the framework for the exploration of their own experiences with the student-teacher relationship

through their elementary school years. The data collected from the demographic survey, specifically looking at students' initial understanding of the student-teacher relationship, assisted in generating follow-up prompts to the semi-structured questions explored in the follow-up interviews with each participant (see Appendix D). Additionally, the results from the survey generated preliminary coding themes later used when reviewing participant reflection tasks and transcribing interviews. After completing the survey, students were asked to complete a reflective task which took place at the onset of their individual interview. Participants were asked to write (such as using descriptive language) about their student-teacher relationships, highlighting their best and most challenging experiences on a timeline from Kindergarten to whichever grade they are current enrolled in (see Appendix C). As Ellis et al. (2013) point out, by engaging in pre-interview creative tasks, participants will be more inclined to share their stories rather than feel limited to merely share their account of a general concept such as the student-teacher relationship. All participants elected to complete the timeline task using descriptive language and the terms they selected when recalling their experiences were then used to support coding the data that was generated from the interviews.

As Parr (2010) emphasizes, "ethical dilemmas often arise when researchers attempt to merge the interests of their research and the interests of their child participant" (p. 451). In order to avoid ethical dilemmas, the questions generated for the interviews remained semi-structured and focused on answering the research questions this study set out to explore. For the purpose of this study, in order to avoid undue harm to participants, participants received letters of assent and had the right to refuse any questions which made them feel uncomfortable (see Appendix A). Additionally, to help avoid this situation further, participants and researcher used the pre-interview reflection task as the starting point for further discussion and to establish a safe space

with mutual respect in place from the onset of the interaction. As Brenner (2006) highlights, “an interactional relationship in which both the participant and the interviewer are genuinely engaged in meaning making” (p. 357) needs to be established in order to explore more open-ended questioning. Furthermore, in order to avoid participants seeking cues from the interviewer about what was expected from them, the beginning of the individual interview was tailored to include comments from their individual timeline task to better aid in building researcher/participant rapport (Brenner, 2006). Engaging in the pre-interview timeline task set the stage for open and honest interactions during the individual interview, which established a place to showcase student voice and perspective.

In order to ensure experiences were interpreted and reflected upon accurately by the interviewer, participants were asked to confirm analyses of their comments regularly throughout their timeline task and interview. Participants were intentionally asked for their approval of interviewer interpretations throughout the interview process, making space for corrections and confirmations. In doing so, the information shared underwent active member-checking thereby increasing validity of the work being completed between researcher and participant.

3.5 Data Collection

Throughout the study, data was collected in several different ways. Initially, data was collected through the short demographic survey each participant was asked to complete (see Appendix B). The data acquired through this formal questionnaire, in which participants were asked to share their initial understandings of relationships as well as answer general questions about their experiences related to student-teacher relationships, was used as a starting point for understanding participant experiences. When coding the data from this preliminary tool, I was looking for a balance of demographic characteristics such as a similar number of male and

female participants coming from a variety of grade levels to add richness to the experiences shared which could then be used to formulate detailed themes. Additionally, demographic information was collected in order to ascertain any connections between participants and the research questions I set out to explore.

Second, data was shared and collected through means of the pre-interview visual reflection task titled, “Student-Teacher Relationship Timeline” (see Appendix C). In asking participants to recall and reflect upon how they interpret their individual relationships with their teachers from Kindergarten to their current grade, their reflections helped solidify as well as generate additional themes for further analysis. It was understood that what participants produced in their reflective visuals revealed both their positive and negative views of student-teacher relationships, which served as a springboard for further exploration during the interview. When coding the data from this reflective tool, I was looking for common terminology connected to both positive and negative experiences with the student-teacher relationship to use as preliminary themes. Moreover, I was looking for commonalities between descriptions of early school experiences and whether descriptions changed and became negative as students progressed through the grades. I coded the experiences shared by the participants and looked for both commonalities and differences within their student-teacher relationships to help me answer the research questions.

The final data collection activity for this study occurred when each participant met with me for individual interviews using zoom technology. Upon completion of the relationship timeline (see Appendix C), I asked participants the semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix D) which was the final method for collecting data to answer the research questions. In their work, Ellis et al. (2013) found that “participants appeared to discover and express their

insights about their experiences only after they explained their drawings to the researchers” (p. 504). Although participants created a timeline of their relationships instead of a rendering of a specific student-teacher relationship they experienced, they were asked to explain their timeline in greater detail before beginning their interview. The task was completed with me instead of independently to create a mutual understanding of the experiences shared and to create a safe space between researcher and participant moving into the interview itself. Data collected from individual interviews enabled student voice and perspectives to be highlighted ensuring each of the research questions had a place within the study to be explored and analyzed.

After reviewing the participant consent forms, interviews were video recorded through Zoom for transcribing and punctuating purposes and detailed notes were taken for reference during the coding process. Following Lakehead University and the Tri-Council’s expectations and requirements for the storage of research data, upon completion of this study, all data collected, both digitally and in hard copy, will be stored for the specified number of years and then destroyed using File Shred.

3.6 Analysis

Data collected from the online survey (see Appendix B), timeline reflection task (see Appendix C), and individual interviews (see interview questions in Appendix D) were analyzed and coded following Tesch’s *Eight Steps in the Coding Process* (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These steps were used to ensure accuracy with data coding to best fit the study results as well as provide transparency validating the results found. Tesch’s *Eight Steps of the Coding Process* include:

- 1) Get a sense of the whole document.
- 2) Pick one document.
- 3) When you have completed this task, make a list of all topics.
- 4) Take this list and go back to your data.

- 5) Find the most descriptive wording for your topic and turn them into categories.
- 6) Make a final decision on the abbreviation for each category and alphabetize these codes.
- 7) Assemble the data material belonging to each category in one place and perform a preliminary analysis.
- 8) If necessary, recode your existing data. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)

Before beginning to analyze the data, everything collected was re-read to obtain a general sense of the whole framework of the study. Comments and notes were made on the surveys submitted, in the transcription margins, and throughout the detailed interview notes which helped with the coding process. Manual coding was used to view the data as a whole and in smaller chunks. Similar terms emerged and were clustered together in order to answer the three research questions. The frequency of each term's occurrence was reviewed and student experiences were documented to produce findings from the data analysis. During the data analysis, all manual coding related back to the research questions:

- How do students describe their relationship with their teachers?
- What challenges do students perceive (if any) in building relationships with their teachers?
- What are student perceptions of the impact of the student-teacher relationship on motivation and learning?

Table 3 shows which data collection activities answered each research question.

Table 3. Research Questions and Corresponding Tool n=20

<i>Research Questions</i>	Survey	Timeline Reflection Task	Interview
1)How do students describe their relationships with their teachers?	✓	✓	✓
2)What challenges do students perceive (if any) in building relationships with their teachers?		✓	✓
3)What are student perceptions of the impact of the student-teacher relationship on motivation and learning	✓		✓

All data was analyzed while ensuring student voice remained central to the inquiry. Keeping student perceptions at the forefront of the analysis was accomplished by removing incorrect interpretations of participant comments after they were confirmed during member-checking. Additionally, exact verbiage from participants was used instead of terms which may have been more suited to dialogue at this level of academic study. Moreover, to confirm the attention of the study remained on student voice and student perceptions of the student-teacher relationship, participatory research methods were employed. Seale (2010) highlights that:

student (or learner) voice is reasonably well under-stood, being defined as: listening to and valuing the views that students express regarding their learning experiences; communicating student views to people who are in a position to influence change; and treating students as equal partners in the evaluation of teaching and learning, thus empowering them to take a more active role in shaping or changing their education. (p. 995)

In order to ensure transparency and to keep the data organized, manual coding was used throughout the data analysis process. Manual coding was used primarily to assist in analyzing the qualitative data gathered from the demographic survey (see Appendix B), timeline reflection task

(see Appendix C), and individual interviews (see Appendix D) keeping student voice as the focal point of the analysis.

3.7 Researcher Positionality

As a researcher, educator, and mother, my interest in the topic of student-teacher relationships is multifaceted. As the researcher involved in this study, I participated in the practice of reflexivity throughout data collection and analysis which involved engaging in self-scrutiny on my part and a self-conscious awareness of the relationship between the myself and the students involved in my study (Bourke, 2014). I acknowledge that I identify with the experiences shared by participants, but I tried my best not to impose my values or opinion of the impact of the student-teacher relationship on student learning and motivation by putting my own understandings aside, opening my mind, and listening to what my participants were telling me.

3.8 Summary of Key Ideas from this Chapter

This chapter explores the methodology used to establish a research study with student voice as the focal point while ensuring transparency and measures of validation occur. The design of the study implements three stages of participant-researcher contact. After recruitment into the study, student participants complete a demographic survey and prior to engaging in a one-on-one interview with the researcher, student participants reflect on their student-teacher relationships from Kindergarten to their current grade, taking a closer look at their student-teacher experiences. The chapter then explores how the data collected have been analyzed using manual coding to look for commonalities and reoccurrences that emerged from student responses and the sharing of their student-teacher experiences. Chapter four will explore the analysis of student responses in order to respond the three research questions this study set out to answer.

Chapter Four: Analysis and Results

Student perspectives about the impact of student-teacher relationships on learning and motivation were examined through the sharing of student experiences. Twenty students in the junior and intermediate grades (4-8) were interviewed to further understand their perceptions on how student-teacher relationships influence student learning and motivation. There were three research questions addressed in this study.

- How do students describe their past and current relationships with their teachers?
- What challenges do students perceive (if any) in building relationships with their teachers?
- What are student perceptions of the impact of the student-teacher relationship on motivation and learning?

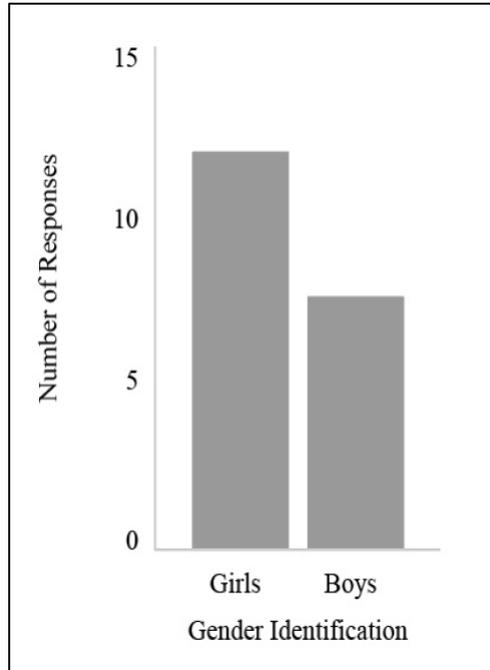
This chapter presents the results from the demographic survey (see Appendix B), pre-interview reflective timeline task (see Appendix C), and interviews (see Appendix D). Results are organized beginning with demographic information and then analysis of the data that was used to answer each of the research questions. The analysis begins with applicable survey data, followed by reflection task responses, and then responses to one-to-one interview questions.

4.1 Participant Demographics

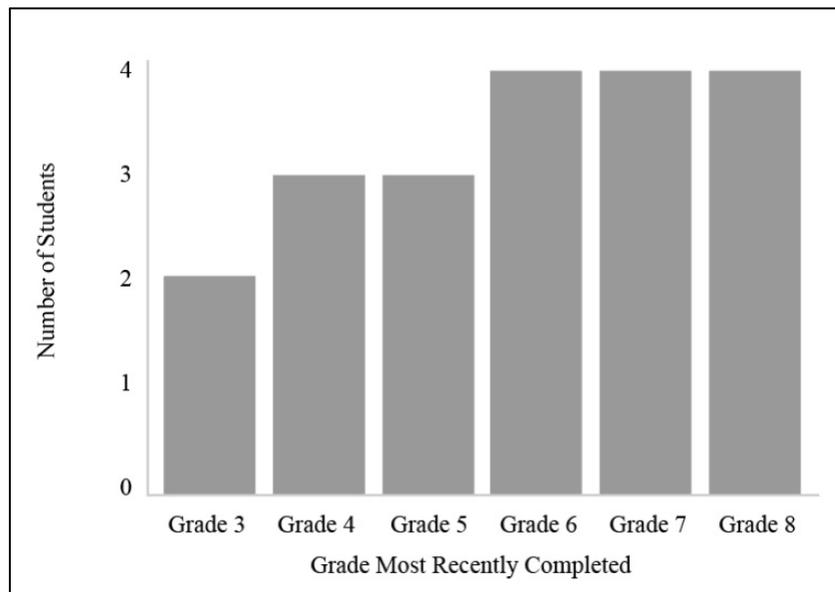
Participant sampling for this study included students who were either in the junior or intermediate elementary school grades (Grs 4-8), or those who were in Grade 9 (within one year of graduating elementary school). Figure 2 reveals how the twenty students self-identify. Although they were provided with 5 options in the demographic survey (Boy, Girl, Non-Binary, Prefer Not to Say, and Prefer to Self-Describe), all twenty students identified as either being a

boy or a girl. There was a split between the two genders at a rate of 60% identifying as girls and 40% identifying as boys.

Figure 2. Participant Demographics: Gender of Participants $n=20$



Students were also asked to reveal the grade they most recently completed to ensure they were in the grade range being explored within the study. Figure 3 reveals that all students who participated in the study were in Grades 4-8 and four students reported being in Grade 9, and had graduated from elementary school less than one year ago. Although two students were in Grade 4, they shared valuable insights into the transition from the primary grades (K-3) to the junior grades (4-6) which will be presented later in the chapter.

Figure 3. Participant Demographics: Grade Most Recently Completed n=20

In the demographic survey, students were also asked to define the term relationship. Table 4 reveals the most frequently used words which surfaced when students defined the term relationship. The commonality found among the student responses was that they all referenced the term relationship positively prior to attaching any negative connotation, possibly indicating the positive benefits of relationships were more important to their thinking. Students acknowledged the core ingredients for relationships including: sense of connection, trust, and respect.

Table 4. Frequency of Common Words Used to Define the Term Relationship n=20

Common Words Student Used to Define the Term Relationship	Frequency of Reference
Connection	15
Bond	12
Respect	5
Trust	5
Friend	5
Comfort	4
Attach/Attachment	2
Close/Closeness	2
Together	2

Students drew associations between the common terms they used to describe relationships, which revealed that connection is an important part of relationship building. Specifically, 75% of students reported a common theme of connectedness when they heard the term relationship. Students related *connection* directly to how they view the student-teacher relationship.

4.2 How Do Students Describe Their Past and Current Relationships with Their Teachers?

In response to the question: *Why have you chosen these words to describe your first school experiences connected to the student-teacher relationship?* on the reflective timeline task, students used a number of keywords, both positive and negative, that described their relationships with their teachers over the years. Although thematic coding did not reveal any strong themes that occurred across all students, there were a number of key ideas that did arise frequently, and which will be shared in the next section.

4.2.1 Descriptive Terminology Used by Students to Describe Student-Teacher Relationships

In analyzing the terms students selected to describe their student-teacher relationships from the past to the present, the reflective timeline task (see Appendix C) was used to solicit student perspectives about their relationships with teachers. Multiple unique descriptors emerged

from the data. Table 5 includes the common terms used by students to describe teacher characteristics. The data reveals students' use of both positive and negative terms that appear on their timelines. The terms were used across all grade levels and were not specific to either primary (K-3), or junior or intermediate (Grs 4-8) experiences.

Table 5. Frequency of Key Terms Used to Describe Teacher Characteristics

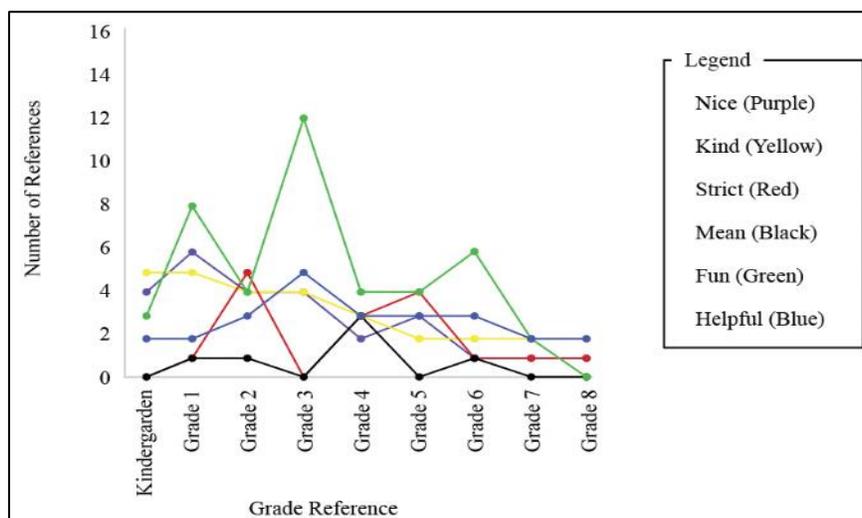
Term Used to Describe Teacher	Number of Times Referenced
Kind	12
Fun	11
Helpful	9
Strict	9
Friendly	8
Good	8
Mean	6
Nice	6
Positive	6
Trusting	6
Understanding	6
Comfortable	4
Rude	4
Angry	3
Uncomfortable	3
Fair	2
Not Helpful	2

When describing their interactions with teachers, students chose to interpret the question as characteristics of teachers that contribute to a positive relationship. 90% of the students identified that when teachers are kind and make learning fun, they feel connected to their teachers and believe their student-teacher relationships are positive. Positive, close relationships were noted as being present at some point throughout the students' experiences, however, with the exception of all students reporting positive student-teacher relationships in Grade 3, there was no consistency regarding the grades in which students reported this closeness.

4.2.2 Student Reported Incidents of Positive and Negative Student-Teacher Relationships

In response to research question 1: *How do students describe their past and current relationships with their teachers*, Figure 4 highlights the six most common terms categorized by students as positive and negative and are colour coded across the grade levels to draw comparisons in the frequency of use between the primary (K-3) and junior/intermediate (Grs 4-8) school years. The results reveal commonality in the terminology used by students to describe their positive interactions with teachers with *nice*, *fun*, *kind*, and *helpful* appearing most frequently. There was greater variability in the negative terms used, with *strict* and *mean* being the most common. Although many of the terms used by the students are similar, their responses were very personal and unique. Throughout the sharing of their stories, themes of closeness, care, trust, making learning fun, and bolstering student agency and choice making in their learning emerged. Their experiences highlighted how important it is to not lose the context of the stories and also to understand that they have a variety of often complex experiences that contribute to their understanding of relationships.

Figure 4. Most Commonly Used Positive and Negative Terms Used by Students n=20



Along with analyzing the common terms used by students to describe both positive and negative experiences, a comparison of the number of positive and negative experiences across grade divisions was also examined. Table 6 highlights the number of relationships reported as positive and negative in the primary (K-3) division and in the junior/intermediate (Grs 4-8) division. After completing the reflective timeline task (see Appendix C), relationships described as either positive or negative were analyzed. Although there are both positive and negative student-teacher relationships reported in both divisions, there is a considerable number of negative experiences reported in the junior division (42%) compared to the primary division (0.3%). The data reveals the possible efforts made by teachers in the early school years to foster positive relationships as reported retrospectively from the students' perspective. As students progressed through the elementary years however, they perceived a decline in their relationships with teachers.

Table 6. Positive and Negative Relationships Reported Throughout Elementary School n=20

Grade	Number Reporting	Positive Relationships	Negative Relationships
Kindergarten	20	20	0
Grade 1	20	19	1
Grade 2	20	18	2
Grade 3	20	20	0
Grade 4	20	10	10
Grade 5	15	9	6
Grade 6	12	8	4
Grade 7	8	7	1
Grade 8	4	4	0

The data reveals that students had both positive and negative experiences across the elementary years. Students remembered the positive student-teacher relationships in their early school years as evident by the increased number of positive relationships reported in the primary (K-3) school years and the memories they shared related to those experiences. Student perspectives about the mixed nature of positive and negative relationships in the transition from

the primary (K-3) grades to the junior (Grs 4-6) grades demonstrated an overall decline in positive relationships and the introduction of negative experiences, although the negative never exceeded the positive. Students perceived that teachers should continue to foster positive student-teacher relationships and this should extend beyond the primary (K-3) years to reach students in all elementary school grades.

4.2.3 Student Perceptions of Positive and Negative Student-Teacher Relationships

In order to understand how students classify their student-teacher relationships (positive or negative), their responses were analyzed from the one-to-one interviews. During the interview process, students were asked to reflect on their responses from the timeline task and to explain why they categorized their student-teacher relationships as either positive or negative from year to year. Student reflections revealed that 75% of students identified that when teachers are helpful and nice and make an effort to show students they can be trusted, students viewed these actions as positive. When students described their negative student-teacher relationships, they revealed that their teachers were unable to make learning fun, which students viewed as having a negative impact on their relationship and learning. In order to ensure student confidentiality, all students were given a pseudonym when sharing their experiences. An analysis of the student responses to: *What was different this year that made you think your student-teacher relationship was not as strong as your relationship in the early years?* Revealed the following student perspectives:

Elizabeth explained that,

In grade 5 the work was boring but in grade 3, the teacher made our work fun and interesting. All I feel is pressure as I move through older grades. I wish teachers didn't

think we can only focus on work - like why can't it still be fun? My relationships are always better when things are fun. (Elizabeth, age 12)

In sharing her experiences, Elizabeth revealed her perspective about the importance of teachers making learning fun. Her response illustrates a theme raised by students that when teachers make learning fun, they are engaging in actions that foster positive relationships and build new learning opportunities. However, good relationships are not dependent on having fun which Elizabeth did note later in her interview.

When asked: *What was different this year that made you think your student-teacher relationship was not as strong as your relationship in the early years?* Jessica shared:

When I first started going to school it was really fun. My teachers gave us lots of choices and really made learning fun. I feel like now that I'm older, teachers think they need to be stricter and that means less fun. Sometimes learning is no fun at all. (Jessica, age 12)

Jessica's description of her student-teacher relationship during the years she deemed to be negative revealed that learning is *not* fun when the teachers are seen to be strict or mean. Her relationships were viewed in a positive light when her teachers took the time to make learning fun. An analysis of the student responses from the reflective timeline task (see Appendix C), as well as individual interview accounts (see Appendix D), revealed that students are acutely aware that their student-teacher relationships can have both positive and negative impacts on their motivation to learn.

4.3 What Challenges Do Students Perceive (if any) in Building Relationships with Their Teachers?

In response to research question 2: *What challenges do students perceive (if any) in building relationships with their teachers*, students' accounts of their relationships during their

interviews, both positive and negative, provided insight into the challenges they experienced.

When participants were asked to: *Describe what a negative student-teacher relationship looks like*, the following was shared by Sally:

Negative student-teacher relationships are closed off. Students are not comfortable approaching the teacher for help when they need it or when they have an issue they are unsure how to handle. It happens when a teacher doesn't listen to what students are saying. Students don't want to listen to teachers either if they don't have a good relationship. It's like no one cares. (Sally, age 12)

The challenges identified by Sally reveal that she is aware that both teacher and student play a role in establishing positive student-teacher relationships. She understands the importance of interactions, and how both positive and negative interactions impact learning. Additionally, when asked the same question, Mark (age 13) explained, "a negative relationship with a teacher happens when teachers start being unapproachable, not being helpful, not talking to students, and not helping solve problems - especially when a student needs help". When asked: *What was different this year that made you think your student-teacher relationship was not as strong as your (early years or strong relationship) student-teacher relationship?* Mark added,

In grade 4, our (student-teacher) relationship was negative, and it took its toll on me. I stopped asking for help, my grades dropped from what I was used [to] getting, and I didn't like going to school. In grade 3 though, our (student-teacher) relationship was so strong. I wanted to be at school and talk with my teacher because he was friendly and kind. He made an effort to get to know me, so I was shocked with how distant and unapproachable my teacher was during my next year (grade 4) of school. I feel like he didn't want to get to know me at all. (Mark, age 13)

An analysis of these student experiences reveals students are very capable of identifying the challenges that impact their student-teacher relationships. Distance between the teacher and students that occurred in Grade 4 versus the earlier grades was a key theme raised by students in the study. Distance seemed to indicate to students that their teachers did not care about them, although this may not have been teachers' intentions.

4.3.1 The Teacher Characteristics Which Impact Student-Teacher Relationships

During the one-to-one interviews, students were asked to describe: *What qualities should a teacher have in order to build a positive student-teacher relationship with their student?* An analysis of student responses to question 6 (see Appendix D) suggests commonalities among student perspectives of what teachers can do to support building positive relationships with their students. Commonalities included teachers being kind, teachers listening to their students, teachers making learning fun, and teachers being helpful when their students needed them.

Interestingly, there was also evidence in student responses of a wider variety of teacher characteristics that negatively impact the development of relationships with teachers. For example, in her reflection about negative student-teacher relationships, Vanessa shared examples of when teachers were inflexible, cold, and distant.

I remember in Grade 4 that I had no say in my learning or what I needed. I was afraid to raise my hand or ask for help and my grades and confidence suffered. My relationship with my teacher was not good at all. (Vanessa, age 11)

Table 7 highlights students' descriptions of the negative characteristics teachers can bring to the student-teacher relationship which impact student learning and motivation.

Table 7. Negative Teacher Characteristics Impacting Student-Teacher Relationships

Term Used by Students	Number of Times Referenced
Strict	16
Mean	6
Yells	5
Angry	3
Pressuring Students	3
Boring	2
Hard	2
Rude	2
Sarcastic	2
Scary	2
Aggressive	1
Bossy	1
Careless	1
Confusing	1
Disorganized	1
Distant	1
Mad	1
Poor Understanding	1
Teaser	1
Unapproachable	1
Uncomfortable	1
Unsupportive	1

An analysis of student responses to question 6 (see Appendix D), reveals that students appear to understand which teacher characteristics negatively impact student-teacher relationships. Students identified teacher strictness as the most common negative trait impacting the development of student-teacher relationships. Student perceptions could indicate challenges with authoritative classrooms or what Freire (1968) opposed as the *Banking Model of Education* where knowledge is gained from a top-down model of learning dissemination. Students were able to identify their own challenges in response to negative teacher characteristics and appeared to recognize that they (along with their teachers) play a role in fostering positive student-teacher relationships.

4.3.2 Additional Challenges Which Impact Student-Teacher Relationships

During the one-to-one interviews, students were encouraged to compare a positive experience they had with a teacher during their primary school years (K-3), with one they described as negative during their junior or intermediate (Grs 4-8) school years. When asked interview question 1 (see Appendix D): *What was different this year that made you think your student-teacher relationship was not as strong as your (early years or strong relationship) student-teacher relationship?* Grace shared the following:

In Grade 4 I struggled with math and my teacher didn't wait for me to understand.

Everything was rushed and I couldn't keep up, so I fell behind. I was afraid to approach him. He wasn't funny and didn't make the classroom inviting so I felt like he didn't want anyone to ask for help. (Grace, age 15)

Grace's response, along with the responses of other students revealed that students are able to articulate what they need to be successful and when what they need is presumed to be inaccessible, a negative experience is formed.

A question related to a positive experience about the primary grades (K-3) was constructed because so much of the literature reviewed highlighted the emphasis placed on developing positive relationships between students and teachers in the early school years. When sharing their experiences in response to interview question 3 (see Appendix D): *Please describe the impact your relationship with your teacher had on your learning during (interviewer selected a positive and a negative student-teacher relationship experience to draw a comparison) - reflect on what you think went well and what did not go so well*, the following comments were made by student participants:

Henderson stated,

The further we go in school, the more work we have and the less fun and games we get to have. Earlier in school, there was a better balance. I really noticed I was expected to learn more once I got to grade 4. (Henderson, age 15)

Henderson's experience described a perceived imbalance between positive and negative relationships between the primary (K-3) and junior and intermediate (4-8) grades, which he felt impacted his learning. Upon further discussion, he explained that when he perceives learning to be more fun, it feels like less work and as a result, he is able to complete tasks more readily.

Elizabeth shared her reflection noting,

There is more work in the older grades and lots more due dates. I feel this makes teachers focus more on making us work and focus less on having a relationship with me. I work hard at school and I know that getting good grades is helpful, but I think making a connection with me is also really important. I wish some of my teachers knew that. (Elizabeth, age 12)

Henderson and Elizabeth's comments about connections between the quantity of work, achievement, and how they impact learning reflected what many of the other students said as well—namely, that as workload increased, the focus on relationships decreased. These students also acknowledged the important role teachers play in building connections with them so that they can accomplish even more.

In her reflections about the shift in Grade 6, Sally noted:

I really noticed a change in grade 6. I mean I always liked school; it wasn't a struggle but that year it really was because it no longer felt enjoyable. I wasn't passionate about going to school like I did before. Math is my favourite subject, and it always was. Teachers made it fun in previous years. In grade 6 I didn't put as much effort into my work. It

became tiring and draining and I didn't want to do it. I think this was because my teacher made it feel like a chore, we had to get through each day instead of making it feel like it was fun and something I wanted to do. My relationship with my teacher and with math changed. That made me just want to come home every day after school and just forget.

(Sally, age 12)

Sally's response reflects the negative impact her student-teacher relationship had on her learning.

Each of the reflections shared by students for question 1: *What was different this year that made you think your student-teacher relationship was not as strong as your (early years or strong relationship) student-teacher relationship?* (see Appendix D), emphasized that teachers should continue to foster the development of student-teacher relationships as students move through their elementary years. Students noted they were aware of the curriculum changes that occurred from the primary (K-3) to the junior/intermediate (4-8) divisions. Students' reflections suggest that they need their teachers more than ever when the curriculum becomes challenging. Students perceived that their teachers were shifting the focus in the junior and intermediate (4-8) grades away from building student-teacher relationships, to focus on teaching to meet more challenging curriculum demands. Students perceived the curricular demands placed on teachers as an obstacle to building strong connections between them and their teachers. Students' reflections on the increased *workload* may indicate that the pressure on teachers to meet increased curricular demands in the junior and intermediate grades left little time to focus on relationship building.

4.3.3 Teacher Assumptions about Students

An additional barrier related to building positive student-teacher relationships was assumptions or preconceptions made by teachers about students from year to year. Students

defined teacher assumptions as teachers believing something to be true even without proof that it is. Students described that their teachers increasingly made assumptions about them as they moved through the junior and intermediate (4-8) grades. In response to question 5 (see Appendix D): *What strategies do you think your teacher needed to use to strengthen your student-teacher relationship?* responses emerged that were related to worries about how teachers perceived students before even meeting them. The following remarks are from Yuri, a student who expressed significant worry and anxiety related to assumptions teachers made that directly impacted his past and present student-teacher relationships. Yuri commented,

If you've had a bad year before, you worry your new teacher will know about that even before the first day of school. That's happened to me and I hate it. I feel like I don't get a chance to start fresh so what's the point? My relationship with the teacher and how the year will go has already been decided. (Yuri, age 13)

According to Yuri, teacher assumptions can negatively impact the student-teacher relationship. He is aware of teacher strategies that do not support student learning. Jay added to the discussion about teacher assumptions and noted that,

Some people in my class from grade 4 thought our teacher was funny. I didn't think she was. She assumed I understood her jokes, but I didn't. I know now she was being sarcastic, and I do NOT think sarcasm is funny. That made it really hard to pay attention to what she was teaching and really changed our relationship. (Jay, age 10)

Jay's experience highlights how negative interactions between teachers and students can impact relationships and student learning.

Students described teacher assumptions as more than sarcasm and fears of what their teachers thought about them before meeting them. Students also perceived that teachers (JK-Gr.

3) focus on making learning fun, or at least disguise teacher-directed tasks through student choice but that it is less frequent among teachers in the upper elementary grades (4-8), and that it impacted their learning and motivation. Grace commented that as she moved up to Grade 4, her teacher,

Treated [students] like [they] were in high school already. He didn't stop a lesson to make sure everyone understood. He assumed everyone understood because everyone was afraid to ask him for help, so everyone ended up trying to learn on their own. (Grace, age 15)

Assumptions made by teachers as reported by students in relation to interview question 5 (see Appendix D), revealed that students viewed these assumptions as negatively impacting their student-teacher relationships, their learning, and their motivation.

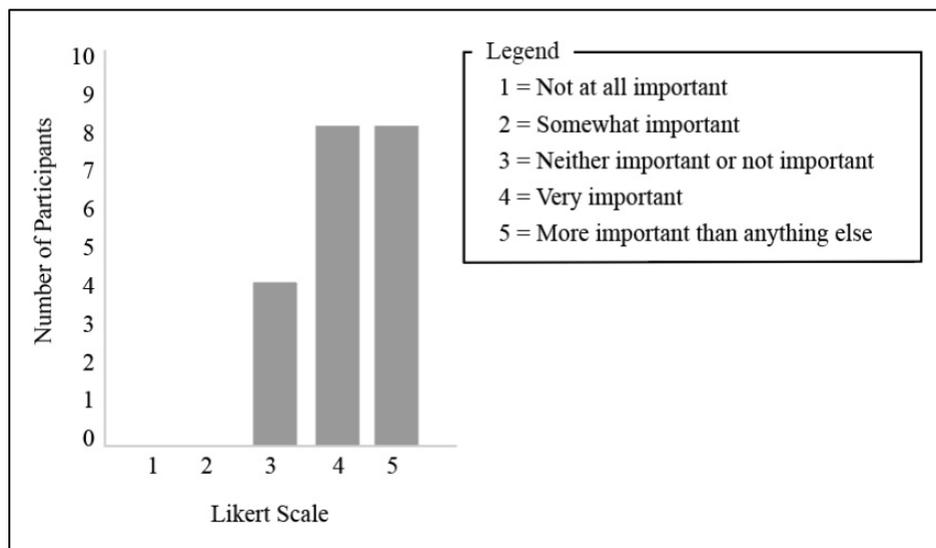
4.4 What Are Student Perceptions of the Impact of the Student-Teacher Relationship on Motivation and Learning?

The third research question explored student perceptions about the impact of the student-teacher relationship on motivation and learning. Student responses to questions 6 and 7 on the demographic survey (see Appendix B) as well as responses from the one-to-one interview (see Appendix D) were analyzed. Although the sample was small, there were several identifiable themes which emerged based on student experiences which will be discussed in Chapter 5. To address the final research question: *What are student perceptions of the impact of the student-teacher relationship on motivation and learning?* student responses have been divided into two separate headings--motivation and learning.

4.4.1 Student Perceptions of the Impact of Student-Teacher Relationships on Motivation

In the demographic survey (see Appendix B), students were asked to consider the idea that student-teacher relationships can impact student motivation. The final question on the demographic survey, question 7, asked students to rate on a scale of 1-5 (where 1=not at all important, 2=somewhat important, 3=neither important or not important, 4=very important, and 5=more important than anything else) the importance of motivation to learning? Figure 5 is a summary of participant responses and reveals that the lowest rating given was a 3 out of 5 and the average rating was 4.25. The results reveal that students believe that motivation plays a moderate to important role in their learning.

Figure 5. Participant Rating of the Impact the Student-Teacher Relationship has on Motivation $n=20$



When asked during the one-to-one interview to respond to: *How does your teacher motivate you?* (see Appendix D), the following response was provided by Gertrude.

I think it's important for teachers to give students choices in our learning for assignments because this can showcase our strengths. Making learning customizable builds in motivation. I have found that if you don't like the teacher, it's harder to ask questions and

you are less motivated. I've had more of a get it done and move on attitude than really feeling motivated to learning more. (Gertrude, age 14)

Her response reveals that she can identify how teachers can motivate her to learn by giving examples such as choice and customizing learning opportunities.

Students were also able to identify what motivation means to them in their personal learning journey and articulated the value it holds within the student-teacher relationship. When asked, *What does motivation mean to you?* (see Appendix D), Cliff made a connection between motivation and student-teacher relationships.

I think if a student has a good relationship with a teacher, it will help the motivation of the student because if students are eager and motivated to learn, the job of the teacher becomes easier. When teachers motivate students, they want to push themselves more and that supports student learning...Motivation means going above and beyond the expectations that are set for you even if you don't show it in your work. For me, in terms of school, motivation is excitement to learn more about the subject or topic and it helps when a teacher puts a good spin on learning. (Cliff, age 15)

Cliff's response reveals that he can articulate what motivation means and the impact that motivation has in the classroom.

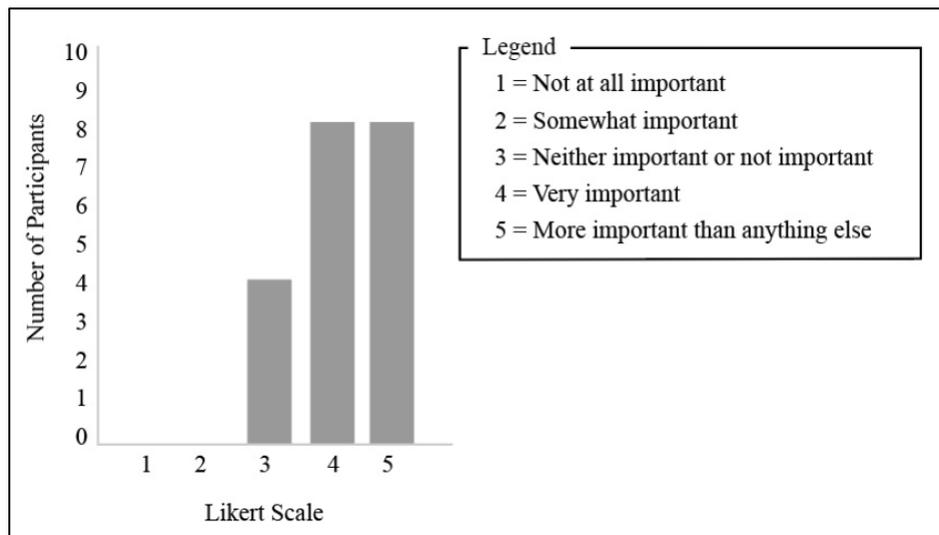
When thematically coding student responses, my analysis revealed that students recognized that motivation (both intrinsic and extrinsic) is influenced by the student-teacher relationship.

4.4.2 Student Perceptions of the Impact the Student-Teacher Relationship has on Learning

Students were asked to consider the idea that student-teacher relationships can impact student learning. Question 6 from the demographic survey (see Appendix B), asked students to

rate on a scale of 1-5 where 1=not at all important, 2=somewhat important, 3=neither important or not important, 4=very important, and 5=more important than anything else, how they rate the importance of the student-teacher relationship to learning? Figure 6 is a summary of participant responses and presents student views about the role the student-teacher relationship plays in their learning. The lowest rating given by students was a 3, indicating that they perceived at least a moderate impact on learning, and the average rating among all twenty students was greater at a level of 4.2 out of 5. Each of the four oldest participants (having most recently completed grade 8), all identified the impact of the student-teacher relationship on learning at a level of 4 out of 5 on the Likert scale.

Figure 6. Participant Rating of Impact of the Student-Teacher Relationship to Student Learning n=20



Student experiences were analyzed from their responses in the one-to-one interviews.

When asked: *Do you think your relationship with your teachers is important – Why or why not?*

(see Appendix D) Vanessa (age 11) commented: “I am more ready to learn when I am comfortable. That is when I feel like I can raise my hand – if my teacher makes me feel

confident, I feel comfortable, and my grades are better”. Vanessa’s reflection reveals student awareness of the link between creating classrooms that foster relationships between students and teachers and the impact this relationship has on student learning. Vanessa’s response showed her ability to connect teacher characteristics she viewed as positive to her learning in a positive way.

Gertrude shared a similar perspective and remarked:

I think it turns out better to have a good relationship with your teachers. It makes the year better if it is positive because you will enjoy attending and want to be around the teacher which makes me want to try harder and learn. (Gertrude, age 14)

Gertrude made the connection between positive teacher characteristics and student learning as well in her reflection. Her response reveals the relationships established between teachers and students, along with the presence of positive attitudes, can have a crucial impact on student learning.

Sally’s reflection also aligned with the other participants and noted,

It’s important to have a relationship with your teacher because having a positive relationship and connection impacts your passion for learning. Without that passion, it makes it harder to get to class and want to learn. If it is more negative, you do not feel encouraged to go to school. Fun and positive energy makes students want to learn and without that, it’s harder to want to be around the people or teachers that are negative. It’s important to feel you like something because that makes learning and wanting to be there more enjoyable. It’s a lot easier to want to go and learn when there is a teacher there to encourage you. (Sally, age 12)

Sally's reflection reveals her perspective that when teachers are positive, there is a positive impact on student learning. She made the connection between building positive relationships with teachers and being able to approach learning opportunities with ease.

After analyzing student responses to interview question 3, the data revealed that students see the student-teacher relationship as an important part of their learning process. Students have identified that they perceive there is value in working with teachers to form relationships that will support their learning. During the one-to-one interviews, participants were also asked to reflect on interview question 5 (see Appendix D): *What would you say to your teacher to tell him or her how your student-teacher relationship impacted your learning?*

In her response, Kendall shared she would tell her teacher,

By being able to talk to each other, it makes me want to put in the work to succeed.

Having a positive relationship impacts my learning because I do not want to disappoint my teacher when they believe in me. (Kendall, age 10)

Kendall's reflection reveals that the relationships students form with their teachers can help move students forward to succeed. Mark shared a similar sentiment:

I would tell my teacher our relationship impacted my learning because if she didn't make me feel safe or that I could ask for help, I would have been scared and I would not have tried my best. Having a positive relationship is really important to me and how I learn.

(Mark, age 13)

Mark's response reveals that students can identify what they need to be successful and that includes how important the student-teacher relationship is to student learning. When asked about her perspectives on the impact of the student-teacher relationship to student learning, Gertrude also noted,

Because I'm older now I think I can see the impact of student-teacher relationships more clearly. What I have found in myself is that when I have a positive relationship with a teacher, I want to meet and exceed their expectations which has a positive impact on my learning overall (Gertrude, age 14).

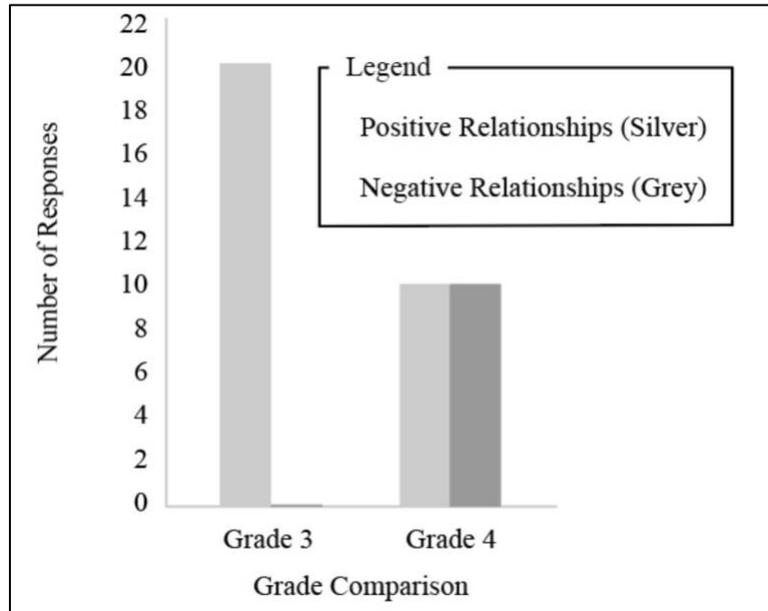
Each of the student experiences shared revealed that students recognized the impact of the student-teacher relationship on their learning. It is noted that 100% of students rated importance at a level 3, 4, or 5 on the initial demographic survey (see Appendix B) when rating the impact of the relationship on their learning. Students view the student-teacher relationship as an important element that impacts their learning.

4.5 Other Findings Discovered During This Research Study

After collecting and analyzing data from the reflective timeline task (see Appendix C) and the one-to-one interviews (see Appendix D), student responses also reveal that they experienced a change in the student-teacher relationship from the primary (K-3) grades to the junior (4-6) grades and a notable decrease in the use of external reward systems to support their learning as they got older. Although the information shared by students about the transitions from Grade 3 to Grade 4 did not directly tie back to the three research questions, the information shared by students was valuable because it provided new opportunities to reflect on the findings that surfaced in this study. Additionally, students' reports about the use of extrinsic rewards diminishing in the junior and intermediate (4-8) grades, provided insight into the student perspective related to possible factors impacting the student-teacher relationship. Students also shared their understanding of the value of teachers slowing down instruction during the school year and focusing equally on building relationships with students and meeting curricular expectations.

4.5.1 Student Perceptions About the Transition from the Primary to Junior Grades

When students discussed their positive and negative student-teacher relationships during the timeline task (see Appendix C), I observed students' describing two very different student-teacher experiences between Grades 3 and Grade 4. In Grade 3, there were reports of positive interactions, helpful and supportive relationships, and respect felt within the classroom. Contrasting that, reported experiences in Grade 4 were much less positive and were described as lacking observable connections between students and teachers. Figure 7 illustrates the reported contrast in student-teacher relationships between the primary (K-3) and junior (4-6) grades noted when students were asked to identify their student-teacher relationships as either positive or negative from year to year. Each of the twenty students recalled positive student-teacher relationships in their Grade 3 school year. Of those same twenty students, when asked about their student-teacher relationships the following year in Grade 4, 50% of students experienced an entirely different student-teacher relationship. The 50% who reported negative experiences, highlighted a change in classroom dynamics and student-teacher interactions from Grades 3 to Grade 4. They noted a greater focus on independent learning and perceived that there was less focus on teachers making specific and purposeful connections with them. The change in experience from positive to negative from Grades 3 to Grade 4 is an area that requires further exploration because it is a potential gap in the current literature (Desrosiers et al., 2012; Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004; Schaffhuser, Allemand, & Schwarz, 2017).

Figure 7. Positive and Negative Relationships Between Grades Three and Four n=20

Although all students reported positive relationships with their Grade 3 teachers, 50% of the students reported negative relationships with their Grade 4 teachers. Two of the starkest examples shared were from Yuri and Eloise who said,

Grade 3 was probably my favourite school year ever! It was fun and [teacher's name redacted] was so excited we were there every day. I woke up every morning wanting to go to school to see what she was going to teach us. The next year was totally different. (Teacher's name omitted) yelled all the time and when we asked for help because we didn't understand, she would tell us it was our fault if we didn't understand. I stopped asking for help because I got tired of being yelled at. (Yuri, age 13)

Yuri's response reveals the difference in relationships from Grade 3 to Grade 4; how the presence of a positive relationship allowed him to thrive, and conversely, how the presence of a negative relationship made him want to stop trying altogether.

Eloise commented,

In grade 4, the thing that sticks with me still is how my teacher took my work and stomped on it. We were making shapes in math and I guess mine didn't look like a shape, so he stomped on it in front of everyone. I mean I wasn't the only one that got stomped on, but it still sucked. That never would have happened in grade 3. (Eloise, age 14)

Eloise's reflection reveals a stark change in the perceived student-teacher relationship from Grades 3 (primary division) to 4 (junior division), revealing that relationships can change over time and that poor relationships can negatively impact learning and motivation.

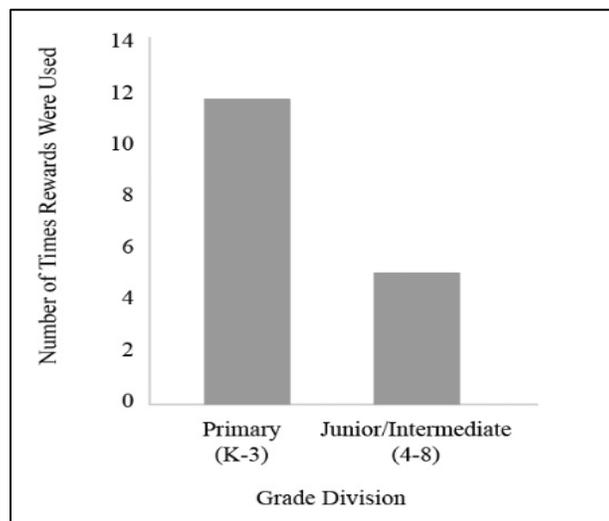
The aforementioned comments shared by participants highlight student perceptions of the impact the student-teacher relationship can have from one division (primary) to the next (junior). These students and others raised important issues around being humiliated publicly, being yelled at, lack of guidance or assistance, and lack of perceived interest by teachers in forming relationships with them. The experiences these participants shared, revealed a change in the student-teacher relationship after the primary (K-3) school years and they noted the importance of fostering relationships between teachers and students especially as students moved through school divisions.

4.5.2 Student Perceptions on What Increases Student Motivation

During the interview process, students also shared ways in which they felt their teachers used extrinsic motivation strategies to build positive relationships with them. Students spoke frequently about the use of reward systems such as fun Fridays or classroom cash being used in the primary grades (K-3), but far fewer reported extrinsic motivation from their teachers in a similar manner in their junior or intermediate years (Grs 4-8). Figure 8 represents the number of times students reported reward systems were used in their classroom experiences. The results reveal a contrast between the number of times reward systems were used in the primary grades

(K-3) to the number of reward systems that were used in the junior and intermediate (4-8) grades. When specifically asked the follow up question to interview question 5 (see Appendix D), *What strategies do you think your teacher needed to use to strengthen your student-teacher relationship?* student responses revealed that when teachers used extrinsic rewards, they viewed their teachers as observably supporting positive student-teacher interactions. Students did not consider the reduction in the use of extrinsic rewards because teachers might possibly be using supporting intrinsic motivation, which often occurs in the junior and intermediate school years (Grs 4-8).

Figure 8. Use of Extrinsic Reward Systems Within Grade Divisions n=20



I was surprised when students discussed teachers' use of reward systems as a motivational strategy because it was not something I considered would impact on their student-teacher relationships. However, when students shared the importance of extrinsic rewards in the upper elementary years (Grs 4-8), I realized how driven they were by external reinforcers. Many students were able to identify the value of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to their learning, however, what I noted was that developmentally, this recognition does not occur at the same point in time for everyone. During the interviews, students shared perspectives on teachers'

use of reward systems to support their learning and motivation. When teachers implemented reward systems, students viewed these reinforcers as supporting positive student-teacher relationships. Chase elaborated on an experience using reward systems noting,

In grade 3 we had a money system we could use to buy things. It was really fun and made me want to finish my work so that I could earn more. I really liked that the things we could buy were things our teacher knew we liked like stickers and sometimes even candy. I miss that now that I'm older. (Chase, age 11)

Chase's reflection reveals a recognition of the use of rewards decreasing as she moved from the primary (K-3) grades to the junior and intermediate (4-8) grades. Her response highlights that the teacher use of rewards systems could support student motivation. Students view teachers' use of extrinsic rewards as beneficial in fostering positive relationships between students and teachers—particularly as they progress into the upper elementary years.

Eloise reflected on an experience with reward systems in the junior grades and noted,

In grade 6 my teacher knew we were having a hard time getting ready for EQAO, so she talked to us about things we liked, and we got to vote on our favourite things. We didn't know it, but she used our idea to help us get ready for the test. We all really liked donuts, so she made donut boxes and we earned fake donuts when we completed work and participated in class. Later, she brought in actual donuts after we had filled the box with fakes one. I really liked that. I wish all my other teachers asked us what we liked and built it into our work to keep us motivated. (Eloise, age 14)

Each of the twenty students shared different experiences with rewards ranging from food, to free activity choices, to free time in the classroom. What these experiences have in common is their connection to students divulging that they are influenced by extrinsic motivation, choice, and

agency over their learning and that they connect the use of extrinsic rewards to fostering positive student-teacher interactions. Students reported an appreciation for when teachers built in multiple means of motivating students.

4.5.3 The Perfect Student-Teacher Relationship

The final question in the one-to-one interviews required students to reflect on all of their ideas related to the student-teacher relationship. By asking students to describe their ideal student-teacher relationship and the impact this relationship could have on their motivation and learning, insight was gained on how students viewed their relationships with teachers. When asked to share her perspectives about how an ideal student-teacher relationship could impact her learning and motivation, Sally noted that:

In the perfect student-teacher relationship, teachers would understand that mornings are hard, and they would be more laid back. I think it's important for student learning to still keep students in check but keep the balance between being strict and being too strict.

Teachers should know the students in the classroom and know when and how they learn best. This would support students wanting to be in class and learning all they can while they are there. (Sally, age 12)

Sally's reflection reveals positive teacher characteristics that can build and encourage student success. Additionally, when asked her opinion on the perfect student-teacher relationship, Gertrude shared her thoughts on the roles of both the student and the teacher. She noted:

Teachers, you need to make sure the student trusts you. You have to be willing to help and show students they can come to you whenever they need you. I think it's also important that teachers show students they are happy to be there. If they do that, students will be happy to be there as well. Students, we need to understand that motivation and

rewards lead to great opportunities. Students should be happy to be there and leave their attitude at the door. I think feeling comfortable, like knowing your teacher trusts you, being able to ask questions and get help, feeling confident in using your voice in the classroom, these are all things that would make a student-teacher relationship positive and have a good impact on my learning. (Gertrude, age 14)

Gertrude's reflection reveals how both teachers and students play a role in establishing positive relationships that encourage student motivation and learning. The older participants in the study (those who graduated from Grade 8 within the last year) also shared similar reflections. They noted that when they look back now, as they were encouraged to do during the timeline task (see Appendix C), they recognize their attitudes also played a role in whether their experiences were going to be positive or negative. Adding to their reflections, Gertrude shared perceptions of building mutual trust, open communication, and comfort between students and teachers to establish positive student-teacher relationships. She recognized that she has a role to play in establishing a positive relationship with her teacher and that the responsibility does not lie exclusively with the teacher.

Finally, when asked his thoughts on the perfect student-teacher relationships, Yuri shared,

I've never had one, but I imagine it would be about creating trust between a student and a teacher and making sure it's easy to talk to one another. The teacher would admit when they were wrong and would work together with the student to make learning enjoyable. I think that if I experienced that in my student-teacher relationships, I would want to be there (at school) and learn so that I could set goals and reach them. That would be pretty awesome. (Yuri, age 13)

Student perceptions about their relationships with teachers revealed the complexities underlying the relationship and the various factors that influence motivation and learning. Students highlighted the importance of fostering positive relationships between teachers and students beyond a student's first few years of school and how the nature of the relationship changed over time, with many students holding on to negative interactions with their former teachers, especially when they perceived teachers to be distant, unsupportive, or mean. Students know that their relationships with teachers play an important role in their motivation and learning. Their reflections revealed how important their relationships are with their teachers to learning and motivation. Students valued when teachers made learning fun, created a comfortable classroom environment, and found time to be present so that they could become acquainted with students both in and out of the classroom setting. Students perceived that there is an impact to student motivation and learning found within the student-teacher relationship. The impact can be either positive or negative and is just as important in Grades 4 through 8 as is it in Kindergarten to Grade 3.

4.6 Summary of Key Ideas from this Chapter

The key findings from the analysis of the data reveal students' perceptions of their motivation and learning are impacted, both positively and negatively, by their student-teacher relationships. A demographic survey (see Appendix B), a timeline reflection task (see Appendix C), and one-to-one interviews (see Appendix D), were used to answer the following research questions:

- How do students describe their past and current relationships with their teachers?
- What challenges do students perceive (if any) in building relationships with their teachers?

- What are student perceptions of the impact of the student-teacher relationship on motivation and learning?

Commonalities were found in student responses to the positive characteristics teachers exhibit to support student learning, such as being kind and helpful. Descriptions of negative teacher characteristics were more varied and described challenges students perceived in fostering student-teacher relationships including teachers being strict and mean. Students also shared concerns related to the demands of the curriculum expectations placed on teachers in the junior and intermediate (4-8) grades. Students noted that the increased curriculum demands take time away from teachers being able to focus on building relationships with their students. Student perceptions also revealed that they believe teachers make assumptions about them and that assumptions often determine whether their relationships will be positive or negative from year to year.

Data analysis reveals that students see that there is an identifiable change in the student-teacher relationship from Grade 3 to Grade 4. After interviewing all twenty students about their student-teacher relationships in both Grade 3 and Grade 4, it was noted that all twenty students experienced positive student-teacher relationships in Grade 3 and only 50% could recall having positive relationships with their teachers the following year in Grade 4. Additionally, during the initial demographic survey (see Appendix B), the timeline reflection task (see Appendix C), and the one-to-one interviews (see Appendix D), students shared their positive and negative reflections on how motivation and learning are impacted by their relationships with teachers. Students commented that making learning fun makes learning more motivating. Students connected the use of reward systems to extrinsic motivation fostered by teachers, and shared that their experiences with reward systems diminished considerably from the primary (K-3) grades to

the junior and intermediate (4-8) grades. Analysis of student experiences and comments, highlight that student-teacher relationships matter to students and the value the student-teacher relationship holds in a student's life does not diminish over time.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Final Thoughts

This study set out to explore how students view the impact of the student-teacher relationship on learning and motivation. By examining students' perspectives, I was able to gain insight into how students view their relationships with teachers. This study included twenty participants from Grades 4-8 or who recently graduated from elementary school and retroactively documented their relationship experiences with their teachers. Students first completed a demographic survey (see Appendix B) asking them to identify their age, the grade they most recently completed, how they define the term relationship, and then to rate on a scale of 1 through 5, the impact of the student-teacher relationship on their learning and motivation. Students then completed a timeline reflection task (see Appendix C) where they were asked to recall and reflect on their past and current student-teacher relationships. Students identified whether their relationships were positive or negative, occasionally noting that they were both positive and negative. Last, students were interviewed via zoom (see Appendix D for interview questions) and were asked to explain why they classified their relationships each way on the reflection task.

In order to accurately record student experiences during one-to-one interviews, student responses were checked for accuracy by reading their replies back to them to check for accuracy. Following that, thematic coding was implemented to answer the three research questions in this study. In sharing their perspectives about student-teacher relationships, I was able to extract themes and analyze them in relation to the research questions.

5.0.1 Revisiting the Research Questions

The research questions explored in this study include:

- How do students describe their past and current relationships with their teachers?

- What challenges do students perceive (if any) in building relationships with their teachers?
- What are student perceptions of the impact of the student-teacher relationship on motivation and learning?

Students' perceptions about the impact of their student-teacher relationships on their learning and motivation revealed many interesting findings. Some notable examples included: student fears about teachers making assumptions about them before even meeting them and how they were more inclined to participate and learn when they felt their teachers liked them. When coding student positive experiences about their student-teacher relationships, common terms surfaced including comfort, trust, safety, and kindness. There appeared to be commonalities among terms used by students to describe what a positive student-teacher relationship looked like, however, what was more varied, was how students described their negative student-teacher relationships. Students are aware of the differences between experiencing a positive and a negative student-teacher relationship. They highlighted how a positive relationship increases their efforts in school and a negative relationship has the opposite effect. Students were able to identify how important the student-teacher relationship is to both their learning and motivation. Evidence of this was revealed in the ways students described their experiences and reflected on how their individual learning and motivation were impacted each school year.

5.1 Students' Experiences with Relationships in Elementary School

The importance of developing relationships in the early school years is evident in the current literature (Clinton, 2013; Pianta, 2001; Shonkoff, 2009). The research collected in this study builds on Bowlby's (1988) *Attachment Theory*, Ford's (1992) *Systems Motivational Theory*, and Deci and Ryan's (1985) *Theory of Motivation*. Findings from this study link to

Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory through students' descriptions of the closeness and connection they seek from their teachers when establishing student-teacher relationships.

Bowlby (1988) posits that attachment is key in predicting relationships, both presently and in the future, and student responses are linked to this through their descriptions of what they want and need from their teachers in order to feel connected to them. Additionally, during the completion of the reflection timeline task (see Appendix C), many students noted that negative experiences are far more readily remembered. Students noted that the memories of negative relationships stayed with them a lot longer than the positive ones and were easier to recall. The experiences students shared reveal that relationships matter to them and they often set the trajectory for future relationship expectations. None of the students who recalled their Kindergarten experiences reported negative student-teacher relationships. Student experiences confirm that their recollection of the early school years (K-3) was that relationships had a positive impact on them. Student responses also signal a need to continue relationship building between students and teachers well into the junior and intermediate (Grs 4-8) school years. The student perspectives generated in this study highlight the long-lasting impact of both positive and negative student-teacher relationships and support the finding that student-teacher relationships matter for students throughout the school years and possibly beyond their school years. As both a parent and teacher, I am reaffirmed that there is value in building positive relationships with students at all age levels. Given the long-lasting impact the student-teacher relationship has on all areas of development, fostering a sense of security each academic year is imperative for student success.

In order to understand how students manage the intricacies of relationship building, an investigation into various learning theories present within the field of education was explored. Particularly relevant to this study was acquiring a deeper understanding of the connections

between the students' experiences and both *Social Cognitive Theory* (Bandura, 1986) and *Constructivist Theory* (Vygotsky, 1978). Students described their student-teacher experiences as being influenced by behaviours they observed their teachers making. Multiple students commented that when they felt their teachers treated them rudely or unkindly, they were less inclined to participate and in turn, gave the same attitude back to their teachers. Bandura (1986) refers to this observable and actionable social behaviour in the development of social cognitive theory, noting that children learn a great deal from social modeling. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist theory highlights that interactions between teachers and students influence each other and the environment through which interactions take place. Students commented that when their teachers showed calm and comforting reactions, they too felt calm and comfortable which allowed them to further explore their own learning. The idea that calm begets calm is reiterated in the work of Shanker (2015), who notes that "to engage in soothing nonverbal behaviours, one has to be calm oneself, and the more aroused the child, the harder this becomes—especially when one is under the thrall of a self-control mindset" (p. 1). The impact of the student-teacher relationship is complex and can influence a person in a variety of ways. In order to support the development of positive student-teacher relationships, student reflections reveal four key themes that require attention. These include: the transition from the primary to junior grades, teacher strictness, making learning fun using extrinsic rewards, and the curricular demands teachers encounter in the junior and intermediate grades.

5.1.1 The Transition from the Primary to Junior Division

Student reflections on the transition from Grade 3 to Grade 4 reveal that students perceived that their teachers changed their approach to building relationships with students. The focus became less on outwardly enthusiastic bonding between teachers and students and instead

was centered on teachers increasing student independence. Student perceptions of this shift link to what et al. (2020) found in their work with students and teachers. They found that as students move through school, it is helpful for educators to build relationships with their students that are grounded in a *developmental relationship* framework. Scales et al. (2020) highlight that relationships are “characterized not simply by caring or positivity but [also call for] endurance, [and] reciprocity” (p 500). By using a developmental, relationship framework, the potential to foster student agency increases. When students are able to build trust with their teachers, it leads to students feeling supported during difficult times, including the transition from the primary to the junior division. The work of Clinton (2013), Ostrosky and Jung (2010), Saul (2015), and Shonkoff (2009) supports building developmental relationships as well, noting the importance of building positive and reciprocal relationships between students and teachers in the early years and beyond. The student experiences in this research also reveal that positive relationships are an important part of early childhood success and continue to matter to students as they move through school. Bowlby’s (1988) *Attachment Theory* posits that relationships are present and persist throughout a person’s lifespan, impacting individuals both positively and negatively. Student experiences revealed that they felt there was less attention given to creating attachment-based relationships between them and their teachers as they moved through elementary school. Their perspectives confirm that the student-teacher relationship is present from school year to school year, however, the focus of this relationship changes as students move into the junior and intermediate (Grs 4-8) divisions and becomes strained according to the students.

5.1.2. Perceived Teacher Strictness Impacting Student-Teacher Relationships

During the transition from the primary (K-3) to the junior (Grs 4-6) division, students describe a change in their perceptions about the development of student-teacher relationships

(from positive to negative). Students described teacher strictness in the junior grades (4-6) as a strong factor in determining whether their relationships would be positive or negative. Student recognition of teacher strictness ties to what Maslow (1970) explores in understanding human development within the *Hierarchy of Needs*. In the junior and intermediate grades (Grs 4-8), students may not have yet reached a level of self-actualization where they can see value in goal setting. As such, students may not yet see the value of teachers showing students encouragement through a means other than being warm and caring. As a result, students in the study primarily equated strictness with negative relationships and viewed their relationships with teachers accordingly.

5.1.3 Making Learning Fun - The Use of Reward Systems in the Junior and Intermediate Divisions

Throughout the study, students identified the hallmark of learning as teachers making it fun. Students linked fun with positive student-teacher relationships, which raises the question, is education meant to be entertaining? The education system is moving away from the system Freire (1968) opposes as the *Banking Model of Education*. Students are no longer viewed as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge from their teachers. Students are now taking on a more active role in their learning including how they would like teachers to work on building relationships. Gaining knowledge has become more interactive, embracing mutual and shared experiences between students and teachers. Students described that teachers made learning more enjoyable through shared learning opportunities that were grounded in fun. Additionally, students reported a connection between fun and their motivation in the classroom.

Students reported that after their primary school years (K-3), there were fewer instances where teachers used extrinsic rewards as motivation. Could this be attributed to teachers' beliefs

that as students mature, they need less extrinsic motivators? Do students have an increased awareness that teachers become more task-oriented as they move through the grades and that it is perceived to signify that teachers are distancing themselves? As an educator, what students shared about the use of extrinsic rewards has caused me to pause and reflect on the role they play in the teacher-student dyad. In this study, students described extrinsic rewards within the context of fun. When extrinsic motivation was used, students viewed their relationships with teachers as positive. Student reflections on teachers' use of reward systems and providing spaces for positive social interactions link to Blum's (2005) concept of connections within relationships. Blum (2005) proposes that relationships, specifically between teachers and students, are established through a nurturing environment of trust and support. The concept of fun, as students described, also relates to the work of Longobardi et al. (2020) and Zee and de Bree (2016) who liken student choice and agency to what students in this study described as fun. Students highlighted that when teachers built in choice and agency over learning, this action produced views that learning had been made fun. When students identified that teachers should use extrinsic rewards in junior and intermediate (Grs 4-8) classrooms, students noted their desire for teachers to support their learning needs and ongoing success through the use of these extrinsic reward systems as they were viewed as a fun part of daily learning. Additionally, students identified that when teachers made learning fun by including rewards, they were motivated to also push themselves further. Moreover, associations can be made between student reports of motivation and Noddings (1992) concept of caring given that students made the link between their teachers making them feel successful by way of using their interests as part of reward systems. Students also highlighted that their experiences with extrinsic rewards decreased dramatically from the primary years (K-3) to the junior and intermediate years (Grs 4-8). Students revealed that they

did not need external rewards to be successful; however, they felt that when teachers' added fun such as rewards to the school day, it made them want to interact with their teachers more, therefore creating a positive interaction between them. The decline in the use of extrinsic rewards reported by students from the primary and junior grade divisions, relates to the work of Deci and Ryan (1985) who note that students need both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators in the classroom. Using motivation as a means to foster positive relationships between students and teachers needs to be considered. Students' desire to want extrinsic rewards from their teachers as they move through their elementary years reveals that they are still relying on external reinforcers to help them with motivation and learning. Why are students driven by extrinsic motivators and how has a capitalistic society that is focused on consumption compounded this issue? How can we encourage students to consider the possibilities for growth inherent in intrinsic motivation? Student work in the area of self-regulation and mindfulness may help them recognize their strengths and internal motivators.

5.1.4 Perceived Curriculum Changes Between the Primary and Junior/Intermediate Divisions

Students described the curricular demands on teachers in the junior and intermediate (Grs 4-8) as a factor that negatively impacts the student-teacher relationship. Although it cannot be confirmed because teachers were not interviewed in this study, students reported that they felt teachers were pulled away from fostering relationships due to increased curricular demands in Grades 4-8. Students noted the increased curricular demands on teachers but not on their learning as a contributing factor to strained student-teacher relationships. They placed the responsibility of fostering a positive relationship exclusively on the teacher, rather than considering the important reciprocal role they also play in contributing to successful relationships. Students'

experiences did reveal an understanding of empathy and how it is present within relationships. Although teacher perspectives were not a part of this study, students acknowledged that the changing curriculum was a barrier their teachers had work through. Students did not seem to consider that teachers may not actually conceptualize the *change* in curriculum as more taxing, but simply different. Connecting to Maslow's (1970) *Hierarchy of Needs*, students perceive their learning to be fostered through teachers meeting student's physiological needs. Students want teachers to create learning environments that support students both academically and interpersonally by developing positive student-teacher relationships.

5.2 Study Implications Connected to Attachment Theory

This study was grounded in Bowlby's (1988) work on *Attachment Theory* and as such, it is important to revisit how this study has drawn on the framework of attachment. In the experiences shared by students, a reoccurring theme emerged related to closeness and care. Students identified that closeness and care play a prominent role in their relationships with teachers and that when they are present, the relationship is positive, and when closeness and care are missing, the relationship is negative. Bowlby's (1988) work is foundational to unpacking these perceptions because his theory posits that the establishment of closeness between a child and caregiver is imperative for future relationship understanding and success.

Within this study, students were asked to reflect on their earliest school experiences and to draw connections between their student-teacher relationships as they progressed over the course of their elementary years. Given that so much work has been done on early school experiences and fostering connections between students and teachers, it was imperative that students reflect and draw links between these early experiences and their current student-teacher relationships to anchor Bowlby's (1988) work on the progression of attachment in the early

years. By exploring attachment theory in the classroom setting through student perspectives, the necessary factors that contribute to positive student-teacher experiences can be uncovered.

5.3 Scope and Limitations

The aim of this study was to explore student perspectives about the student-teacher relationship and its impact on student learning and motivation. The findings revealed a decrease in positive relationships between teachers and students as students moved to the junior and intermediate (4-8) grades. As an educator and researcher, the notable decrease in positive student-teacher relationships in the upper elementary years (Grs 4-8), has caused me to pause, reflect, and question why this decrease took place. Limitations of this study included the use of technology for interviews rather than face-to-face interactions and teacher perspectives not being included in the research. Using Zoom technology to complete interviews was a limitation because the internet connectivity for some students living in remote areas was unstable at times. Although students shared rich and detailed experiences, it is unclear if living within the restrictions of a pandemic had an impact on the development of student-teacher relationships at the end of their most recent school year and in their current school year. Additionally, even though this study aimed to honour student voices by focusing on student perceptions, a limitation arose by excluding teacher perspectives. At various points during the analysis of the data, it was evident that findings could not be confirmed without the presence of teacher perspectives on the topic as well. In order to truly see the relationship as a whole, teacher perspectives must also be explored. In the future, the research needs to include teacher perceptions about the impact of the student-teacher relationship on student learning and motivation.

5.4 Addressing Potential Researcher Bias

In order to be cognizant of potential research bias, it was imperative that I identified researcher bias from the onset of this study. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure potential bias is labeled and reflected upon within any work produced. Beginning with reflexivity and what Kirby, Greaves, and Reid (2017) describe as the researcher taking “account for how and why the research is being done, who is being researched, and how the researcher behaves as an instrument of research” (p. 8), I took action to identify potential researcher bias. The steps I took included examining my role as a parent, educator, and researcher, and defining the line between thinking as a parent and thinking as a teacher and researcher. Through the practice of reflexivity, I was able to recognize the hesitations I brought with me to the study. By working to name these limitations without interfering with the value of this study, the results from the study have the potential to bring new insights to the field of education.

As an educator with a background in both early childhood education and special education, as well as holding the title of mother to children who have moved through the early elementary (K-3) grades into the junior and intermediate (4-8) grades, I am aware of my positionality and bias related to this study. In naming my positionality, I engaged in reflexive practice and remained aware of how my own experiences with the student-teacher relationship as both a former student and as a parent contributed to the questions asked of students and the subsequent data analysis. I acknowledge the research questions driving this study have been derived in large part from personal experiences. Understanding that my experiences and views as a teacher may bias interpretations of the data, I consciously placed the student voice at the forefront of the research. In doing so, I attempted to mitigate my bias and validate connections that were found between the literature and the findings generated from student responses.

5.5 Recommendations Moving Forward

After listening to students share their experiences related to the student-teacher relationship, multiple recommendations can be offered to foster positive relationships between students and teachers beyond the early school years. Table 8 provides a summary of my recommendations which can be implemented by teachers to support the development of positive student-teacher relationships with all students, regardless of their grade level.

Table 8. *Teacher Recommendations for Fostering Positive Student-Teacher Relationships*

Recommendation	Rationale
Ask students about their perspectives and listen to these perspectives building student choice and agency into learning opportunities	Students in this study reported they appreciated when their teachers asked and listened to their thoughts and ideas. Students noted they felt supported by their teachers when teachers implemented their ideas in the classroom because this increased their comfort level and willingness to participate in class activities.
Get to know students both in and out of the classroom	Students identified their experiences as being more positive when their teachers made a point of getting to know them and building on student strengths. Students reported this created opportunities for them and their teachers to share in experiences together and created new levels of comfort and support within their relationships, ultimately leading students to feel they learned more during their time together.
Seek out and include students in all aspects of the school community	Students described feelings of increased safety and security when their teachers included them in things like leadership roles both in the classroom and in the larger school community. Students reported inclusion gives students a stronger sense of community and creates additional levels of comfort therefore increasing positive participation.
Model positive behaviour	Students supported findings from others’ research that states how students see their teachers behaving directly impacts the way students choose to behave as well. Students revealed that when their teachers came to class with the attitude that they wanted to be there, it made them want to be there as well. Students also commented that they often modeled their teachers’ actions in the classroom including how they saw themselves, their interactions with others in the room, and their abilities to reach academic success.
Engage in self-regulation and mindful moments with students	The practice of self-regulation and mindfulness has recently emerged as areas in which teachers can support student learning. When teachers were self-regulated themselves and engaged in the practice of being mindful, they were able to interact with students in calm ways which helps to foster the development of healthy and positive relationships. In turn, students respond with calm, focused and alert interactions and are able to engage in self-regulatory practices when the adult provides the much-needed co-regulation. Students reported they are more inclined to respond with shared reciprocity when safe spaces are provided and both students and teachers are emotionally attuned with one another.
Participate in training programs	The results of this study revealed there is room for the expansion of professional development related to fostering student-teacher relationships beyond students’ first few years of school. This training could explore how teachers can build environments to help students transition more smoothly from the primary to the junior grades including ways to build in higher order reward systems to help motivate students and still value making learning fun. Students reported motivation and having fun were two areas which decreased as students moved through the upper elementary grades. Students noted that fun and extrinsic motivation supported learning, especially when academics were considered to be more difficult.

An additional recommendation is for research to continue to include student voice as an active means of gathering data in the research process. Student experiences need to continue to be shared in order to provide support and build and extend new knowledge in the field of education. Researchers, teachers, and students, all have a valuable role to play in advancing understanding of the education system and the influence of student-teacher relationships in student success.

5.6 Conclusion

This study set out to explore the impact of the student-teacher relationship, either positive or negative, on student learning and motivation as viewed by students. The research questions were derived from a curiosity to explore the student-teacher relationship beyond a student's first few years of school. This study revealed the following in response to the guiding questions:

- How do students describe their past and current relationships with their teachers?
- Students in this study were able to articulate their experiences with teachers and with affirmation as to whether or not they feel their student-teacher relationships can be described as either positive or negative. Many students referenced their positive interactions by using terms commonly associated with teacher characteristics such as kind, fun, comfortable, and nice. Conversely, students used words such as strict and mean to reveal their perceptions of negative teacher characteristics which impact student-teacher interactions. The question of how students describe their relationships with teachers was explored through the use of the timeline reflection task (see Appendix C) and then further explained by students during their one-to-one interviews (see Appendix D for interview questions). The terminology students used to describe their relationships did not change from the primary (K-3) to the junior and intermediate (4-8) grades; however, what was noted were the increased references to negative student-teacher relationships in the junior and intermediate (Grs 4-8) elementary years.

- What challenges do students perceive (if any) in building relationships with their teachers?

When asked about potential challenges students experienced in building relationships with their teachers, students reported limitations related to teacher characteristics such as strictness.

Students also perceived that there were barriers their teachers encountered due to increased curriculum demands in the junior and intermediate (4-8) grades. Students felt these demands resulted in teachers spending less time fostering positive student-teacher relationships.

Additionally, students shared their frustrations that as soon as they moved into the junior years (Grs 4-6), it was assumed by teachers that students were ready for more difficult academic tasks and could handle more independence. It was noteworthy that 50% of the students commented that their most negative student-teacher relationships occurred during grade 4, which is the first year of the junior division. Overall, students shared they were optimistic they could build positive relationships with teachers and recognized that each teacher they encountered was a new opportunity to build a positive relationship to support their learning and motivation.

- What are student perceptions of the impact of the student-teacher relationship on motivation and learning?

Students reported a connection between their relationships with their teachers and their learning and motivation, evident in their ratings of 3 to 5 on the initial demographic survey (see Appendix B). Additionally, when asked during their one-to-one interviews about how they perceived the student-teacher relationships impacted learning, students noted that they felt more comfortable participating in learning experiences and as a result, learned and retained more when their relationships with teachers were positive. Conversely, students commented they were less inclined and motivated to participate when their student-teacher relationships were negative.

Although students recognized that their relationships with their teachers are not the only factor that impacts their learning and motivation, students did note positive relationships make learning better for them.

This study has added insight to the field of educational research by exploring the student point of view and its connection to understanding student-teacher relationships in new ways. Student voice was an integral part of the study and listening to student perspectives allowed me to unpack their insights. Future research may include a deeper investigation into comparing teacher perspectives with student perspectives related to the student-teacher relationship, as well as exploring unique relationships such as those shared between teachers and students with exceptionalities. As students move through the school years, the student-teacher relationship evolves. There is evidence that relationships between teachers and students can become strained during transitional times such as Grade 3 and Grade 4, which the students in this study highlighted. While researching the student-teacher relationship, one point that has surfaced is that students perceive that positive student-teacher relationships support their learning and motivation. Taking the opportunity to develop positive student-teacher relationships at all levels of educational practice reminds students that teachers believe in them and that they can achieve anything. Every student deserves to feel the impact of a positive student-teacher relationship. The study has shown that students recognize the affirmative value of student-teacher relationships. Positive student-teacher relationships have the power to impact student motivation and learning.

Epilogue

My thesis embraces student voices. The experiences they shared were rich and in order to capture some of their profound statements, I have included them here in an epilogue.

Chase (age 11) wants teachers to know: “learning should be fun from Kindergarten to grade 8 and even further from that”.

Harriet noted the following when asked what helps her learn:

To help me learn I need to trust someone, especially my teachers. A positive relationship is like having trust and keeping the important secrets instead of telling people other than your parents. In the negative relationships I’ve had, the teachers were rude and made me feel singled out. Learning wasn’t fun or motivating. I want teachers to motivate us more and make sure everyone is seen and included. Kindness and trustworthiness are important and so are humour, making learning fun, and letting the little things go. (Harriet, age 9)

Elizabeth remarked:

If I could tell teachers anything, I would tell them that they should be more positive with students. Even though I didn’t go to school for teaching I still know that. Make learning fun. Give students a chance to have their voices heard like asking us for input on things like what we want to do on our assignments. It’s important to make a connection with each student in the classroom. We are all important. (Elizabeth, age 12)

Sally remarked:

I want my teachers to know their attitude affects my attitude towards my learning. Our relationship - when it’s positive it is easier to be motivated by someone you are comfortable around - I want to be there and I am interested in what they are doing. This makes my comfort levels go higher and our relationship gets stronger. (Sally, age 12)

When asked about his final thoughts on student-teacher relationships, Mark commented:

I think the relationship I have with teachers is very important because if you don't feel safe or that you can ask for help, it affects you inside and outside of the classroom. If you are scared to go to the teacher, you will not go for help or have someone to talk to and that never works out well. (Mark, age 13)

Grace wants her teachers to understand that:

Everyone learns differently and at different paces. We struggle with different things so focus on all our strengths even if it is not your strength too. Let us take small breaks. Be approachable so that when we want to ask questions, we feel safe and comfortable enough to ask. I think if teachers could do that there wouldn't be negative student-teacher relationships. (Grace, age 15)

In her reflection on teacher positivity, Vanessa revealed that:

When teachers are positive from the first day of school and they stay that way giving us extra support when things aren't always positive, it makes a difference. I think teachers should give students chances and treat us the same way they treat other teachers and the principal. When that happens, I feel comfortable in the classroom so then I can raise my hand and participate. When I am not comfortable, I will not want to participate because I am afraid of answering wrong and getting in trouble. That definitely impacts my learning because my teachers can't see what I really know. (Vanessa, age 11)

When asked about the ideal student-teacher relationship, Ryan (age 11) highlighted, "I would like to have a teacher who doesn't give up on me and helps me through stuff. I think I would do better if my teacher believed in me and our relationship would be great".

Finally, Yuri described the thoughts he would share with his teachers:

I would like to tell teachers that when they act like they didn't want to be there, it makes me not want to be there either. I felt like that means they only see the bad things and never see when I try my best. If teachers can see that every day is a new day, even when I've had a bad day the day before, I would respect and trust them more and that would definitely have a positive impact on our relationship and my learning and motivation to be there. (Yuri, age 13)

**Appendix A**

December 2020

Faculty of Education
t: (705) 330-4008 ext. 2635
f: (705) 323-9113

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I am a Master's of Education student at Lakehead University, Orillia, who is interested in researching student perspectives as they relate to the student-teacher relationship and its impact on student learning and motivation. Under the supervision of Dr. Sonia Mastrangelo, Associate Professor and Graduate Program Coordinator, I am interested in specifically exploring student perspectives in the junior and intermediate grades and examining how they understand the student-teacher relationship. This information will be helpful in further understanding the impact the student-teacher relationship has on student learning and motivation while bringing attention to the value student voice has on the education system.

The purpose of this study will be to explore the following overarching research questions with a focus on student voice and perspective:

- How do students describe their relationship with their teachers?
- What challenges do students perceive (if any) in building relationships with their teachers?
- What are student perceptions of the impact of the student-teacher relationship on motivation and learning?

Your child(ren) are being invited to participate in this study because they recently completed a junior or intermediate elementary school grade level. Their perspectives as they relate to the student-teacher relationship are deemed invaluable to furthering this research inquiry.

Given the current physical distancing protocols in place, this study will take place electronically using tools such as your family email, Google forms (demographic survey), and a 1:1 interview using Zoom technology. Your child(ren)'s participation in this study will include an initial demographic survey sent to you through the email you indicate on the consent form. Due to collection and storage of data via an online tool, we cannot absolutely guarantee the full confidentiality and anonymity of your data. With your consent to participate, you acknowledge this. The survey will be followed by a scheduled 1 hour individual interview with your child(ren) to take place over Zoom. Your child(ren) will be encouraged to find a quiet place in your home such as their room to ensure their comfort and privacy. Your participation as their parent/guardian is not required. At the onset of the interview, your child(ren) will be asked to reflect on their student-teacher experiences from Kindergarten to their current grade (a descriptive timeline task) and then answer questions related to their thoughts on the importance of the student-teacher relationship. The interview time will be determined based on our shared availability. Their interview will be video recorded for transcribing purposes to ensure authentic student voice is present during data analysis. Personally identifying information about your child(ren), such as their name(s), their educators' names, or the name(s) of their school(s) will

not appear in any oral or written publication of the results of this study. Any reference to their shared stories and experiences will be documented under a pseudonym. Copies of written responses and video recordings and transcripts will be kept in a password-protected personal computer accessible only to members of the research team (myself and Dr. Mastrangelo), for a minimum of five years from the end of the study, at which time they will be deleted and destroyed using File Shred.

Although there is low risk of your child(ren) feeling discomfort, it is possible that your child(ren) may feel uncomfortable or shy when sharing their experiences. This may be particularly true if sharing negative experiences. Your child(ren) will be encouraged to communicate their feelings with you as their parent/guardian upon completion of the study to ensure their health and well-being, and both your child(ren) and yourself as their parent/guardian will be given contact information to connect with local supports such as Kids Help Phone (1-800-668-6868). It is intended that your child(ren)'s participation in this study be unintrusive, however, if at any point during the study you or your child(ren) wishes to end participation, you or they may do so with no consequence and yours, as well as their information will be withdrawn and destroyed using File Shred.

This study will be used to support the completion of my Masters of Education thesis and portions of the study, such as the results, may be published in educational research journals with the goal of extending research into student perspective as it relates to the impact the student-teacher relationship has on student learning and motivation. If you have any questions or concerns about this study or your child(ren)'s participation in the study, please contact me directly at ecrawfor@lakeheadu.ca (Erin Valenzuela), or my supervisor at smastran@lakeheadu.ca (Dr. Sonia Mastrangelo). Upon completion of the research study, you may also request a copy of the final written report by emailing either Dr. Mastrangelo or myself at the above mentioned email addresses.

This study has been approved by the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board. If you have any questions related to the ethics of the research and would like to speak to someone outside of the research team, please contact Sue Wright at the Research Ethics Board at (807) 343-8283 or by email at research@lakeheadu.ca. Should you wish to have your child(ren) participate in the study, please complete and return the attached consent form to signify your intention to allow your child(ren) to participate. Please complete 1 form for each child you consent can participant should you have more than 1 child that fits within the study criteria. Thank you for your interest in my research. I look forward to the opportunity to work and learn with your child(ren).

Sincerely,

Erin Valenzuela, OCT

Erin Valenzuela, Masters of Education Student

Participant Consent Form

Project Title: Student-Teacher Relationships and their Impact on Student Learning

Investigator: Erin Valenzuela, Masters of Education Student

Date: December 2020

___ Yes, I agree to allow my child to participate in the above-mentioned research study examining student experiences as they relate to the student-teacher relationship and the impact this relationship has on student learning. I acknowledge that: (please check all that apply)

Consent to the Study, Acknowledgement of My Role (As Parent or Guardian):

I have read and understood the Participant Information Letter regarding the study.

I agree to allow my child to participate in the research as described.

***Please complete a consent form for each child you are consenting can participate in the study.

I understand that my child's participation will consist of:

(a) participating in a demographic survey,

(b) scheduling an individual interview to take place using Zoom technology,

(c) participating in the 60 minute (maximum) interview where a timeline task will be completed prior to the interview taking place, and

(d) sharing experiences as they are related to student-teacher experiences

Consent to Recording, Guarantee of Confidentiality:

I give permission to the researcher to video-record my child's interview for transcribing purposes.

I understand that my child's identity will not be shared and will not be identified in any publication or presentation.

Right to Withdraw:

I understand that I or my child can withdraw from this study at any time prior to the end of the data collection period (estimated to be December, 2020), and that my child may decline to answer any question.

Specifically, I understand I or my child have the right to withdraw from the study or to withdraw my consent for the use of any portion of my data (transcripts, video-files, survey data, or timeline reflection task) prior to the end of data collection. I understand data withdrawn will be returned to me and will not appear in any presentation or publication. My privacy, my child's privacy, and the privacy of my data will be protected and only Erin Valenzuela and Dr. Mastrangelo will have access to electronic files, transcripts, or other artifacts collected and that all data will be kept securely for a minimum of 5 years, at which time it will be destroyed using File Shred. I understand my name and my child's name along with any other identifying information about us or my child's school, will not be shared and pseudonyms will be used in all presentations of the results of this study. I understand there are potential psychological risks if my child shares negative experiences they may have related to their student-teacher relationships and that my child will be encouraged to discuss their feelings including being given contact information for the Kids Help Phone as well we being directed back to me as their parent/guardian if they are comfortable discussing the interview. I also understand that I will not receive a financial or other compensation for participation in the study.

Child's Name (Please print): _____

Name of Parent/Guardian (Please print): _____

Signature of Parent/Guardian: _____

Date: _____

(Please retain one copy of this consent letter for your records and one return one copy via email to the Erin Valenzuela at ecrawfor@lakeheadu.ca)

Child Participant Assent Form

Project Title: Student-Teacher Relationships and their Impact on Student Learning

Investigator: Erin Valenzuela, Masters of Education Student

Date: December 2020

Dear Participant,

My name is Erin Valenzuela and I am a Master's of Education student at Lakehead University in Orillia. I am working on completing my thesis titled *Student-Teacher Relationships and their Impact on Learning and Motivation*. I am looking at making the student perspective the center of my research, specifically focusing on hearing from students who are enrolled in or have finished grades 4 to 8.

I would like to invite you to share your voice through completing a short survey to help me get to know you better and then meeting with me over Zoom for a reflective task and one on one interview. I will be recording our interview so that I can refer back to the information you share afterwards. When we work together during the study, the things you share will be private. I will not share your survey responses, reflection task, or your interview comments with anyone else and you can pick a code name for me to use when I complete the written portion of my thesis work. When we meet over Zoom, I encourage you to find a place in your home where you feel safe and I will be in a room at my house where it will be just me in the room to ensure your privacy. We will be talking about the relationships you have had with your teachers from Kindergarten through to your current grade. If you feel nervous or upset at any point and want to stop, you can tell me, and we will stop right away.

If you would like to be a part of my study by completing the survey and engaging in the reflection task and the interview, please talk to your parents or guardians and then sign your name below and return the form to me. If you or your parents or guardians have any questions, please contact me directly (Erin Valenzuela (ecrawfor@lakeheadu.ca) or my supervisor Dr. Sonia Mastrangelo (smastran@lakheadu.ca)). Thank you for thinking about working with me this fall.

Yours truly,

Erin Valenzuela, OCT

Erin Valenzuela

Child's Assent Form

Project Title: Student-Teacher Relationships and Their Impact on Learning and Motivation

Investigator: Erin Valenzuela

Date: December 2020

___ Yes, I do want to complete the survey and then meet with Erin over technology to talk about my student-teacher experiences. I understand that our work will be recorded but will be private. I understand that I can choose to stop at any time by informing Erin through a written letter which I will sign. The information I have shared will then be destroyed without any consequence. Erin will inform my parent/guardian that I do not wish to participate in the study any further sharing my written letter of withdrawal.

Your Name: _____ **Age:** _____

Parent or Guardian's Name: _____ **Date:** _____

(Please save a copy for your records and email one back to Erin Valenzuela at ecrawfor@lakeheadu.ca).

Appendix B**Participant Demographic Survey**[Sample Survey Sent to Participants](#)**Student-Teacher Relationships**

Please fill out the following questions. It will help me get to know you better. When you have finished, you will get an email back from me that will confirm your individual Zoom interview. If at any point you do not wish to continue participating, you may withdraw from the study without consequence. Thank you for taking the time to participate and for sharing your responses honestly. * **Required**

Your Parent/Guardian Email Address *

1. How do you identify your gender? *

Mark only one.

<input type="radio"/>	Boy
<input type="radio"/>	Girl
<input type="radio"/>	Non-binary
<input type="radio"/>	Prefer Not to Say
<input type="radio"/>	Prefer to Self-Describe _____

2. What is your age? *

3. What grade have you most recently completed? *

Mark only one oval.

- Grade 4
 - Grade 5
 - Grade 6
 - Grade 7
 - Grade 8
 - Other:
-

4. How many years have you been at your current school? *

Mark only one oval.

- 0-1
- 2-3
- 4-6
- 7-8
- 8+

5. How would you define the term Relationship? *

6. On a scale of 1-5 where 1=not at all important, 2=somewhat important, 3=neither important or not important, 4= very important, and 5=more important than anything else, how would you rate the importance of the student-teacher relationship to your learning? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
not at all important	<input type="radio"/>	more important than anything else				

7. On a scale of 1-5 where 1=not at all important, 2=somewhat important, 3=neither important or not important, 4= very important, and 5=more important than anything else, how would you rate the importance of motivation to your learning? *

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
not at all important	<input type="radio"/>	more important than anything else				

8. Would you like to have an individual interview with me to talk about the student-teacher relationship and how you think the student-teacher relationship impacts your motivation and learning?

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

9. Please tell me what days of the week and times of day are best to schedule your interview *

Check all that apply.

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Saturday

Sunday

Morning

Afternoon

Evening

Other: _____

Thank you again for your participation!

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Google Forms

Appendix D

The following list of questions will be used as a guide to support responses to the overarching research questions guiding this study:

- How do students describe their relationship with their teachers?
- What challenges do students perceive (if any) in building relationships with their teachers?
- What are student perceptions of the impact of the student-teacher relationship on motivation and learning?

“Before we begin today, I just want to remind you that I am recording this Zoom interview. I hope you are in a place in your house where you feel safe and are not worried about your privacy. I am in my room with the door closed and this interview is a private Zoom chat. I will never tell anyone your answers with your name attached, any teachers you mention by name will not know what you say, and you can leave anytime you don't want to talk to me anymore. If you want to talk to a counselor because you are upset, I can give you their information through the Kids Help Phone. Are you ready to begin?”

Questions will be asked following completion of the previously noted reflective timeline task and will be built into the interview in the order that appears to be the best fit based on the experiences shared by the student participant. The interviewer will begin interview by reflecting on the timeline task with the participant.

- ❖ In your timeline you used the words (to be filled in using participant’s descriptive language) to describe your student-teacher relationship in Kindergarten and told me you felt this relationship was (to be filled in using participant’s reflection of either positive or negative). Why have you chosen these words to describe your first school experiences connected to the student-teacher relationship?
*it is expected that Kindergarten will hold distinctive and positive memories for participants, however, if this is not the case, the first year indicated as positive will be referenced instead. This thinking aligns with the research that suggests early school experience are often seen as more relationship focused (Desrosier, et al, 2012; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004) and it is this researcher’s desire to confirm the student-teacher relationship changes over time often presenting as less of a focus or factor in student success.
-FOLLOW-UP: In your timeline, you have also used the words (to be filled in using participant’s descriptive language) to describe your student-teacher relationship in (grade to be filled in using a year participant describes the student-teacher relationships as negative) which you have said felt negative. What was different this year that made you think your student-teacher relationship was not as strong as your Kindergarten student-teacher relationship?
- ❖ In your initial survey, you defined the word relationship as (interviewer will read the participant’s definition in their own words). Describe what a positive student-teacher relationship looks like. Describe what a negative student-teacher relationship looks like.
- ❖ Do you think your relationship with your teachers is important? Why or why not?
-FOLLOW UP: Please describe the impact your relationship with your teacher had on your learning during (interviewer will select a positive and a negative student-teacher relationship experience to draw a comparison). Reflect on what you think went well and what did not go so

well.

- ❖ What does motivation mean to you? What motivates you? What would you say impacts your motivation?
FOLLOW UP: How would you say your teacher motivates you? Please share some examples
- ❖ If you could go back to (interviewer will select a grade participant has identified as negative) what would you say to your teacher to tell him or her how your student-teacher relationship impacted your learning?
FOLLOW UP: What strategies do you think your teacher needed to use to strengthen your student-teacher relationship?
- ❖ What qualities should a teacher have in order to build a positive student-teacher relationship with their student? Opposite to that, what qualities do you think they should not have?

What do you think the perfect student-teacher relationship looks like (provide examples)? How do you think your perfect student-teacher relationship would support student learning and motivation (provide examples)?

“Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in my research study. Do you have any questions before we say good-bye? I hope you have an amazing school year!”

Appendix E

Sample Recruitment Email

Project Title: Student-Teacher Relationships and their Impact on Student Learning

Investigator: Erin Valenzuela, Masters of Education Student **Date:** December 2020

Dear _____,

I am writing to you today to ask if your child(ren) _____ would be interested in participating in my Masters of Education thesis research study titled "Student-Teacher Relationships and their Impact on Learning and Motivation". I am seeking participation from students who have completed any grades from 4 through to 8 to hear their perspectives and experiences as it relates to the Student-Teacher Relationship. I am specifically looking to hear about how students describe and classify their experiences with student-teacher relationships and what kind of impact these relationships had on both their learning and motivation. I am looking for students who have completed junior and/or intermediate grades to give a voice to an area of research I feel needs to be further explored within the field of education.

Should you agree to your child(ren) participating, their personal information will be kept in the strictest of confidence. Your child will be able to choose the pseudonym used when documenting my findings or I will assign them one that will not be identifiable to outside sources. Should you wish to share this study with others so that they can participate as well, I will also forward this personal email to them, inviting them to be participants in the study. Although your child(ren)'s confidentiality will remain intact, full anonymity cannot be guaranteed since those you refer will know that your child has participated in this research study as well.

Enclosed with this email you will find a letter of information explaining the research study in greater detail, as well as both a consent form should you wish to have your child(ren) participate and an assent form for your child(ren) to help them understand their rights and roles within the study including their ability to withdraw from participation at any point. You will also find attached the demographic survey questions, the reflective timeline task that your child(ren) will complete together with me during their interview, and the potential interview questions they may be asked. Once I have received your consent forms (please sign, scan, and return them in an email to me), I will email you back the link to the live demographic survey questions for your child to fill out. From there we will schedule our zoom interview together which will last approximately 1 hour.

Thank you for considering participating in this study. I look forward to hearing from you to confirm your child(ren)'s participation.

Yours truly,

Erin Valenzuela, OCT

Erin Valenzuela

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