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# Do Relationships with Helpful and Not-Helpful Teachers Make a Difference? Perspectives from Nine At-Risk Adolescents

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# DO RELATIONSHIPS WITH HELPFUL AND NOT-HELPFUL TEACHERS

# MAKE A DIFFERENCE? PERSPECTIVES FROM NINE AT-RISK

# ADOLESCENTS

By

Emanuel Pariser

BA, University of Chicago, 1972

University of Maine, 2011

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Interdisciplinary in Education and Psychology)

The Graduate School

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May, 2011

Advisory Committee:

Gordon Donaldson, Professor of Education Emeritus, Advisor

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**THESIS**

**ACCEPTANCE STATEMENT**

On behalf of the Graduate Committee for _____, I affirm
that this manuscript is the final and accepted thesis. Signatures of all committee members
are on file with the Graduate School at the University of Maine, 42 Stodder Hall, Orono,
Maine.

_____

Committee chair's signature, name, and title                    (Date)

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# DO RELATIONSHIPS WITH HELPFUL AND NOT-HELPFUL TEACHERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE? PERSPECTIVES FROM NINE AT-RISK ADOLESCENTS

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Emanuel Pariser

Thesis Advisor: Gordon Donaldson, Professor of Education Emeritus


An Abstract of the Thesis Presented

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

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Every year in the United States close to 25% of students fail to graduate with the classmates with whom they began high school. The economic, social and personal impact of not completing high school is staggering on the individual and society. The literature fails to adequately document relational factors in the classroom that can alter the academic trajectory of at-risk students.

This dissertation explores how nine at-risk adolescents view the impact of relationships with helpful and not-helpful teachers on their academic success. My three research questions were: (a) what qualities do at-risk students attribute to helpful and not-helpful teachers; (b) how do they describe their relationships with these teachers; and (c)

what impact do they perceive that these relationships have on their engagement, academic growth, and persistence in school.

Students selected for the study were attending a public alternative school in one of two Maine school districts. I interviewed the nine students individually and observed them interacting with teachers they had designated as especially-helpful, helpful, or not-helpful. I interviewed the teachers about the students with whom they were paired and asked them to provide evidence of student growth and engagement.

Students clearly appreciated teachers who could facilitate their academic learning while establishing a helpful relationship with them. They noted that helpful teachers had nine capacities including: being able to create active learning experiences, reading students' cues well, caring for them while holding them accountable, responding to them non-judgmentally, and listening attentively to their interests, concerns, and disclosures. They described relationships with helpful teachers as feeling open, close, collaborative and caring. They felt that their academic growth, engagement and persistence were distinctly compromised in the classes they had with not-helpful as compared with helpful teachers.

The outcomes of this research indicate that to be successful in helping at-risk adolescents complete high school we need to provide teachers with training and professional development to enhance their relational skills while increasing their ability to personalize instruction. Central to this effort will be our ability as teachers to elicit and learn from student perceptions.

**DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Ray and Geula Pariser, who have steadfastly

supported and inspired me intellectually and relationally throughout my life.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research and writing that went into this thesis could never have happened without an entire community of support.

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I want to acknowledge my brother, Professor Amiel Pariser, for his steady and unwavering support for my academic endeavors – always pushing me to keep my momentum going and my eyes on the prize. And, of course, without the models of my sons, Eli and Eben, intellectuals and autodidacts in their own right, I may not have had the motivation to try something this big.

The community of scholars who encouraged, challenged and advised me, helped push this work to another level. Aside from the students and teachers whom I interviewed, I probably learned the most in this process from my dissertation committee. I am deeply grateful to my advisor, Professor Gordon Donaldson for understanding and teaching me how arguments need to flow, and the logical structure for following them through in a work of this length. He showed me how a teacher could be highly challenging while being supportive at the same time. I am thankful for Professor Albertson's passionate interrogation of my material and her unflagging responsiveness and availability as an advisor. Without Professor William Davis, I would likely never

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I am deeply indebted and grateful for the support and engagement of the directors, teachers and students at the two schools in which I conducted my research. Along with teaching me the most important lessons of this journey, these communities of learners held me and my work with them with the same compassion and curiosity that they apply in their life changing work each day.

I would never have had the interest or passion for engaging in this research without my 33 years of experience with students and teachers at the Community School. First I want to acknowledge the ongoing support, inspiration and guidance I received from my colleague and Community School co-founder, Dora Lievow. Next, I would like to recognize the former students whose lives have touched and changed me in so many ways that I can't enumerate them. In particular I am thankful for the contributions that Brian Witham, a graduate of the Community School, has made over the last two years as he carefully reviewed my writing.

I am also deeply indebted to my other colleagues at the Community School past and present who always challenged my thinking and to this day teach and re-teach me what it means to be a skillful facilitator of learning.

These acknowledgements would not be complete without mentioning the many people who have pored over parts of or the whole of this text to help me make it better

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I am deeply grateful to all whom I have mentioned above and to the many students, teachers, and friends who have been significant to this process whom I haven't been able to recognize here.

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**Chapter 1**

**INTRODUCTION**

In her award winning essay high school senior Jynelle Stevens (May 9,

2007) describes what drove her fellow students to drop out:

> If you face real challenges so young, the desire to do as told and to
> succeed in school is subsided….Once we lost that focus to accomplish
> something, many of us failed to see the connection between school and
> success.  By the time we reached high school, book learning just didn't
> seem valuable.  (p.1)

Not a dropout herself, Jynelle saw many friends leave school.  She understood

what was missing at school: "I think there needs to be more support for kids at school.

Students still need caring advisors and counselors to help them deal with issues in their

lives" (Stevens, 2007, p. 1).  Jynelle intuited the link between the lack of adult

involvement in her friends' lives and their decision to leave school before graduating.

From the adult side of the education experience, I also intuited the importance of the

relationship between teacher and student in my work with high-risk adolescents at the

Community School in Camden, Maine.

My research explores some of the aspects we do not yet fully understand about

relational connections between at-risk students and teachers.  Within the context of

specific relationships, can we discover how these students perceive their teachers? Can

they articulate what makes a teacher helpful? Not helpful? What do their relationships

with different teachers feel like? How much do they think these relationships affect their

engagement in school and academic outcomes?

**How My Own Experience Leads Me to this Research**

My life work has been devoted to teaching and advocating for students who have

not thrived in conventional school environments.  In 1973, I co-founded the Community

School, a residential and home-based program helping Maine dropouts to complete their

high school education.  For the next 33 years these youngsters taught me about the

painful and promising experiences that led them to our school and in many cases on to

meaningful, productive lives.

My students taught me about their backgrounds, their courage, their assets, and

their deficits; about what they needed to thrive and what kept them from thriving.  I met

their parents and extended families and learned more.  Over many years I thought and

wrote about the student transformations I saw occurring at the Community School

(Pariser, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2005).  Intuiting that the

relationships we developed with our students were a key element in their success, we

began to call our teaching practice at the School "relational education" (Pariser, 2001).

My research has allowed me to listen carefully to a new set of formerly "at-risk" students

who were studying in two quite different Maine public alternative programs.  Their

intriguing and thoughtful insights into themselves, their teachers present and past, and

their relationships with those teachers form the basis of my findings.

**The Significance of Relationships in Staying Connected to School**

In a 2007 poll conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill and

Melinda Gates Foundation, 467 students ages 16 through 25 who had dropped out of

school were interviewed and brought into focus groups to explore why they had dropped

out and what could have helped them stay in school. Although almost every one of their

suggestions involved improving relationships, several were aimed specifically at

improving relationships with teachers:

> More than three out of five (62 percent) said their school needed to do
> more to help students with problems outside of class…These young
> people craved one on one attention from their teachers, and when they
> received it, they remembered it making a difference. (Bridgeland et al.,
> 2006, cover page)

"Craved" is a strong word to use in a report designed to build public policy. What

these young people were starved for was individual time to be with their teachers, an

experience of greater connection and care.

In his book *Enhancing Relationships Between Teachers and Children* (1999),

research psychologist Robert Pianta explores the complexities of developing positive

connections with students coming from high-risk backgrounds. He points out that

because of their previous experiences, these students have developed a negative "working

model" for relationships with adults. Their tendency to avoid or be too dependent on

their teacher puts them at greater risk of a variety of poor outcomes, including negative

relationships with important school-based adults such as teachers and administrators.

Carl Rogers (1983), the founder of client-centered therapy, frames the student-

teacher relationship as a helping relationship in which a teacher can become an effective

facilitator of student learning by mastering interpersonal skills, including empathy,

congruence, and acceptance (p.135). Aspy and Roebuck (1977) conducted studies on

Rogers' assertions and found significant correlations between teacher interpersonal skills

and student engagement and performance.

## The Impact of Teachers whom Students See as Caring

Researchers including Wentzel (1997, 1999), Wubbels and Levy (1992), and Pianta (1999) have studied the key role that student perception of student-teacher relationships plays in enhancing motivation and engagement. Caring teachers are especially important to marginalized, alienated, behavior-disordered, and at-risk students, according to several researchers (Davidson, 1999, as cited in Woolfolk & Weinstein, 2006; Dillon, 1989; Miller, Leinhardt, & Zigmond, 1988; Schlosser, 1992). Students in these studies perceived teachers as caring if they showed an interest in their personal lives, held them to an attainable but challenging standard of performance, and were both empathetic and fair (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999). Bernieri (Hall & Bernieri, 2001) has explored the concept of rapport and found that subjects quickly perceived subtle behaviors, such as eye contact and laughing synchronously, as indicators of the presence or absence of rapport.

In conclusion, based on the relevant literature, we know: that as humans we are "wired" to rapidly assess the level of connection between ourselves and another; that students who come from high-risk backgrounds will be less inclined to engage in positive relationships with adults; and, that a teacher perceived as "caring" is more likely to establish a supportive relationship with at-risk students. Students who feel relationally supported are more likely to engage in school and, therefore, more likely to succeed and less likely to drop out (Wingspread Declaration, 2003). Since teachers who are perceived as not-caring may induce dropouts, and teachers perceived as caring may prevent dropouts, we need to study student-teacher relationships with much greater specificity to gain a deeper understanding of their dynamics and their importance.

**What Do We Need To Know?**

       We have insufficient knowledge about how at-risk high school students perceive relationships with particular teachers.  We do not know from their perspective, what specifically goes into making a relationship helpful or not and to what extent they attribute successes or failures in learning and school to the quality of their relationships with teachers.

       To date, no studies have explored the perceptions non-minority at-risk high school students have of specific current teachers.  Nor have studies attempted to determine the role that perceived teacher characteristics, such as positive regard or congruence, might play in establishing positive relationships.

**Research Questions**

       My study focused on three major research questions:

       1.  What teacher qualities do at-risk high school aged students identify as necessary to establishing a helpful teacher-student relationship?

       2.  How do they describe a relationship with an especially-helpful, helpful and not-helpful teacher?

       3.  How do they perceive a relationship with an especially-helpful, helpful or not-helpful teacher affects their engagement and academic growth and decreases or increases the likelihood of their dropping out of school?

**Study Design**

This study involved interviewing nine at-risk high school students about their connections with teachers past and present and how they saw those connections affecting their engagement and academic performance in school. The students attended two differently structured, geographically distant, but similarly sized alternative programs that functioned as part of a local public school district. Students designated all their current teachers as especially-helpful, helpful and not-helpful on a survey and then I interviewed each student about two current teachers whom they had designated differently.

I thematically coded interviews and central themes emerged in the context of each of the research questions. With regard to the final research question I included teacher perceptions and field observations to triangulate the students' sense that they had made academic progress in specific teachers' classes.

**Significance of this Study**

Academic progress, achievement on standardized tests, dropout rate decreases and graduation rate increases have become the holy grail of conventional educational efforts at the secondary level. The public discourse on education has paid little attention to the critical relational foundations of these student outcomes. As noted, relatively little research has been undertaken to study and understand the relational dynamics between at-risk adolescent students and their teachers. The current study provides researchers, policy makers, and practitioners a direct link to the language and perceptions of at-risk adolescents as they describe specific teachers with whom they currently work.

Focusing entirely on what these at-risk students found helpful or not about their teachers and their relationships with them, this study can assist education professionals grasp both the complexity and foundational nature of relationships in the learning enterprise. The study also supports the importance of adult-youth connection throughout the learning span, and of secondary teachers shifting attention from a complete focus on content mastery to a more balanced focus that includes learning and practicing interpersonal skills such as listening, empathizing, and affirming. Folding a relational approach into teacher training, recertification, school climate efforts, and professional development could play a significant role in keeping all students more connected to their education. More specifically, reorienting our focus at the secondary level could eventually have an impact on high school dropout and graduation rates.

**Chapter 2**

**LITERATURE REVIEW**


*We Real Cool*

We real cool.  We
Left school.  We

Lurk late.  We
Strike straight.  We

Sing sin.  We
Thin gin.  We

Jazz June.  We
Die soon.

Gwendolyn Brooks (1960)


<u>**Introduction**</u>

Dropping out of school has been a chronic and extraordinarily costly problem which, in 2006, was dubbed a "silent epidemic" by policy makers and funders of educational research (Bridgeland et al., 2006).  The reasons that students drop out of school are numerous, ranging from individual and family factors to school and public policy factors (Davis, Forstadt, & Lee, 2006).  Chapter 2 will provide an overview of the forces that impact students leaving school early, including a brief review of the historical context of schooling, the costs of dropping out, the factors that put students at risk and how schools contribute to these, and the key elements of successful dropout prevention efforts.  Next, the chapter explores the research on enhancing student social engagement at the institutional level, focuses on early and  more recent research on the importance of

teacher-student relationships, and then reviews the important role that student perception plays in the establishment of relationships with teachers. Chapter 2 concludes with a discussion of what further research needs to be done to better understand the impact on the at-risk student of their relationship with teachers.

## Dropping Out of School: A Historical Perspective

The purpose of public education in the United States has long been a subject of contention. Dewey (1989) argued that schools were a forum where students could learn democratic habits of thought and action through social experience. He felt that schools should be representative of the communities they served, and be deeply integrated into those communities. Other educational leaders, such as William Bagley (1925), Herbert Croly (1909), and Wilson Gill (1913), saw schools as environments that helped prepare students for a productive and efficient role in society (Spring, 1972). Students were to learn the habits that would prepare them for successful participation in industry and in a democracy.

The significance of dropping out of school has changed enormously over the last 100 years. At the turn of the 20th century, most students found jobs and a place in society upon completing 8th grade. Only 10% went on to secondary schools (Tyack, 2002). The students who left school to work or raise a family *were not considered dropouts*. As the demands of business and industry required more complex skills on the part of the workers and as labor unions helped to end child labor, the economic system needed more students to stay in school for a longer time. Public junior high schools and high schools began to be developed. These schools again were primarily designed to

produce orderly workers who could fit smoothly into America's industrial future.  Spring

(1972) comments on this approach:

> Educators believed that schools could accomplish the goal of
> specialization by providing an education that would meet the needs of
> individual students in terms of their future occupations….The goal of
> cooperation and a sense of common purpose was to be achieved through
> social activities (such as sports and extra curricular clubs, etc.).  Junior
> High and High School resulted from these changes…. (p. 21)

The paradox that this approach raises for students who come from communities

with fewer resources and where high rates of unemployment have persisted for

generations is clear: work may be valued, but the opportunities to find it are sparse.

Spring further points out that schools were loath to give students a real voice in the

running of the school itself, and that "student government," potentially the most

democratizing of all extra-curricular activities, never had authentic power within the

system (p. 119).  He also reviews the fact that historically school boards often did not

reflect the make-up of the communities these schools served.

For students coming from impoverished communities and for under-resourced

families, schools could often not successfully serve their originally intended purposes as

a preparation for active citizenry and productive work.  With few future job opportunities

and limited involvement in the governance and structure of schooling, it makes sense that

these students are most likely to become alienated from education and disengage.

The dropout rate of 25% has stayed relatively consistent since the mid 1960s, and

a significant portion of those who drop out come from low socioeconomic backgrounds

(Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).  Rothstein (2004) describes how non-school-based issues,

such as the availability of health care, employment, and housing, play an enormous role

in determining how well children learn and how likely it is for them to persist in school.

His basic contention is that if marginalized youth in poverty had access to the supports and non-school educational experiences that middle class youth have, they would be able to perform at least on par with their more affluent counterparts.

In addition to replicating the asymmetric power relationships that exist already in society, schools are more likely to treat their marginalized students as objects rather than subjects. Psychologist Erich Fromm (1960) in the introduction to *Summerhill* (Neill, 1960), speaks to the objectification of the individual from the perspective of the needs of the larger social system:

> Our economic system must create men who fit its needs; men who cooperate smoothly; men who want to consume more and more. Our system must create men whose tastes are standardized, men who can be easily influenced, men whose needs can be anticipated. Our system needs men who feel free and independent but who are nevertheless willing to do what is expected of them, men who will fit into the social machine without friction, who can be guided without force, who can be led without leaders, and who can be directed without any aim except the one to "make good." (Fromm, 1960)

In its song, *Just Another Brick in the Wall*, the band Pink Floyd (1979) has personalized Fromm's point, chillingly describing the way a student may perceive his or her own objectification by school:

> We don't need no education
> We don't need no thought control
> No dark sarcasm in the class room
> Teachers leave those kids alone
> [yells] Hey, teachers! Leave those kids alone!
>
> [chorus] All in all, it's just a
> Nother brick in the wall
>
> [chorus] All in all, you're just a
> Nother brick in the wall
> (Waters, 1979)

The effect of feeling unnoticed and uncared for in this way resonates through much of the input researchers have gathered from at-risk students as to why they ultimately left school (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Muller et al., 1999; Wehlage, 1986).

**<u>Dropping Out of School: Costs</u>**

For the purposes of this study, a "dropout" means "any person who has withdrawn for any reason except death, or been expelled from school before graduation or completion of a program of studies and who has not enrolled in another educational institution or program" (State of Maine, Title 20A, Section 5102). We know that dropping out of school is associated with a long list of risk factors (Davis & Forstadt, 2006) and an equally long list of negative outcomes for these individuals, for their communities, and for society at large.

In an economy that is changing from reliance on manufacturing and natural resources to one that is a service economy, the impact of not completing high school is staggering on the individual. There are fewer adequately paying jobs in the marketplace for people without high school diplomas, and the financial consequences of this alone are considerable (US Census Bureau, Iceland, 2003). High school graduates earn 43% more than individuals without high school diplomas while the median wage for dropouts is a shocking $415 per week (US Department of Labor, January 2007). Compared to high school graduates, early school leavers are 65% more likely to be unemployed, and 300% more likely to be unemployed than a college graduate (US Department of Labor, March 2007). Philip Oreopoulos's research (2003) indicates that people with more schooling

report higher levels of satisfaction with their lives overall, even when controlling for income.

Nationally the numbers add up.  According to Levin et al. (2007), on average, each student who drops out of school costs the public at large: $139,000 in reduced tax payments; $40,500 in increased public health costs; $26,600 from increases in crime; and $3,000 in increased welfare costs over the course of his or her life.  If school systems and communities in the USA generated 50% fewer dropouts, American taxpayers on average could save $45 billion annually.

These figures, however, do little to help us grasp the enormous suffering of individuals, families and communities when their loved ones are sick, incarcerated, or unemployed.  Given these costs, the Federal Government is exhorting researchers, theorists, and practitioners to consider how to ameliorate the conditions that lead students to drop out of school.

Considering the forces of history discussed briefly above**,** it is a welcome development  that the chronic condition of 25% of students in the USA leaving school before graduation has recently been discussed as unacceptable and called a "silent epidemic" (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006).  Perhaps the United States is finding the "political will" Rumberger (2004) insisted was necessary to reduce this rate of school disengagement.  To enhance the future possibilities for students coming from less advantaged backgrounds, it is crucial to understand the barriers they face in succeeding within the public school system.  The next section of this chapter will review our current understanding of the conditions that place children "at risk" of school failure.  Following

that, I will provide an overview of some of the interventions schools and systems have made to prevent students from leaving school early.

## **<u>Dropping Out of School: Causes</u>**

Educational historians and theorists have made a compelling case that public schools have historically underserved the poorest sector of the public and continue to do so to the current day (Rothstein, 2004; Spring, 1972). The orientation of the public system has been geared more to preparing its products to participate in the economy than to close the educational resource gap between the wealthiest and poorest families (Spring). Public policy analysts question whether America has the will to close this gap and create a truly equitable and representative public educational system (Orfield, 2004; Rumberger, 2004).

Beyond this societal context, many other factors contribute to students' decisions to leave school early. The literature on risk and protective factors in children's lives points to a variety of factors including individual, societal, community, family, and school that play important roles in students' lack of persistence in school (Benson, 1998; Bernard, 1996; Dryfoos, 1997; Garbarino, 1999; Lewis, 2000, Keogh, 2000 as cited in Davis & Forstadt, 2006). Some argue that educators can have the largest impact within the school-based factors that cause students to leave school (Davis, 2006). A variety of studies single out a caring adult-student relationship as a key element in supporting students' efforts to stay connected to school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Connell & Klem, 2004; Wingspread, 2003). The substance of these studies will be discussed later in this chapter.

**What Puts Students "At Risk" of School Failure**

A great deal of work has been done to analyze the risk factors that make it more likely that a student will drop out of school. Some researchers explore the proximal factors that lead to dropping out, such as students saying they were bored, or had conflicts with a teacher (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In analyzing the data from four national longitudinal studies (*Project TALENT, Youth in Transition, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth Labor Market Experience,* and *High School and Beyond*), Wehlage and Rutter (1986) note the central reasons students give for leaving school. Nevertheless, there is a clear trend in what students say. They leave because they do not have much success in school and they do not like it. Many of them choose to accept entry-level work or to care for their children, choices that apparently are seen as more attractive than staying in school (p.376). Other researchers focus on the root causes of dropping out. Davis, Forstadt, and Lee (2006) divide these root factors into two areas: individual risk factors and institutional risk factors.

Individual risk factors include features, and combinations of features, such as: demographic variables, low socioeconomic status, student disabilities, substance abuse, mental health problems, and a lack of connection or belonging to school (Davis, Forstadt, & Lee, 2006; Rumberger, 2004). Institutional factors include features related to: public policy, family function and status, community and peer factors, and school factors (Benson, 1998; Bernard, 1995, 1996; Dryfoos, 1997; Garbarino, 1999; Lewis, 2000 and Keogh, 2000 as cited in Davis, Forstadt, & Lee, 2006).

In his analysis of what contributes to students leaving school, Rumberger (2004) emphasizes the issues relating to family function and status and community concluding

that dropping out is generally an extended process beginning with a student's encountering problems in elementary and middle schools. These problems, as Rothstein (2004) supports above, can be connected to the lack of resources and support in students' families and communities (p. 147). From Rumberger's (2004) perspective, ameliorating these issues will take significant intellectual and financial capital, and he wonders whether the United States has the "capacity and political will to reduce dropout rates and eliminate disparities in dropout rates among racial and ethnic groups" (p. 148).

Based on an analysis of the *High School and Beyond* data (Peng, 1983), Wehlage and Rutter (1986) argue that public schooling is actively undermining the positive educational expectations of at-risk youth rather than promoting them (pp. 381-2). From their perspective, schooling is contributing to and compounding the lack of resources and opportunity that students experience in their communities and homes. The following section will look at how schools contribute to students' "at-riskness."

## How Schools Contribute to Student Disengagement and Dropping Out

Shannon and Bylsma (2002) argue that schools increase students' at-risk status through their policies, structures, and climate. Rumberger (2004) notes that school size is a critical factor in dropping out especially for those students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Wehlage (2004) finds that small schools are more likely to promote engagement of both students and staff. Two studies, Croninger and Lee (2001) and Lee and Burkam (2003), showed that school social capital, reflected in positive relationships between students and teachers, reduced risks of dropping out *especially among high risk youth* (cited in Rumberger, 2004).

To discern the effect of student-teacher relationships on dropping out of school, Croninger and Lee (2001) analyzed the NELS (1988) longitudinal survey of eighth grade students between 1988 and 1992. They focused on two variables: teacher relations and student-teacher talks outside of class. The student perception of relationships that the survey measured as "teacher relations" included students' feeling that a teacher valued what they had to say, praised them for working hard, wanted them to succeed, and cared for them, and was interested in them. Their findings confirmed that the more at risk a student is the more likely he or she is to benefit from both a positively perceived relationship with a teacher, and having access to the teacher after class. The latter variable correlated the most highly with these students not dropping out of school.

These two researchers admit that their measures were rather "blunt," and they do not detail the scope of interaction, the frequency of interactions, or the quality of support and guidance provided to them (students) (p. 569). They suggest that more "detailed measures" of student-teacher relationships would demonstrate an even greater benefit than their study was able to do (p.569).

In their comprehensive look at the research examining school factors that contribute to students dropping out, Davis et al. (2006) find that school policies such as high stakes testing, retention, zero tolerance disciplinary processes, and suspensions are negative factors in student success. Other potentially at-risk heightening factors include class assignment issues such as tracking, course content perceived to be irrelevant or unchallenging, and school climate issues which include the quality of relationships between teachers and students (pp. 21-4).

Despite the deck that is stacked against them and that they stack against themselves, schools can create learning environments that temporarily level the playing field and allow students at risk of school failure to thrive, succeed, and complete.  Next, I investigate research on school-based dropout interventions.

## What Supports Student Success in School

### School-Based Dropout Interventions

The Wingspread Declaration (2003), a document issued at the Wingspread Conference on School Connectedness, has identified—based on extensive research—key practices that schools can implement to increase student connectedness and reduce dropping out.  Based on current research, the most effective strategies for increasing the likelihood that students will be connected to school include:

- implementing high standards and expectations, and providing  academic support to all students;

- applying fair and consistent disciplinary policies that are collectively agreed upon and fairly enforced;

- creating trusting relationships among students, teachers, staff, administrators, and families (in part, as measured by Croninger and Lee (2001), discussed above);

- hiring and supporting capable teachers skilled in content, teaching techniques, and classroom management in order to meet each learner's needs;

- fostering high parent-family expectations for school performance and school completion; and

- ensuring that every student feels close to at least one supportive adult at school (p. 1).

The Wingspread Declaration goes on to note that student connectedness to school

increases the likelihood of greater school attendance, classroom engagement, and

educational motivation, which are in turn predictors of increased academic achievement

(p. 233).

Supporting the findings noted above, Dynarski (2004), who studied federally

funded programs that focused on dropout prevention, found that effective programs had

the following features: a non-threatening environment for learning, a caring and

committed staff that accepts personal responsibility for student success, a school culture

that encourages staff risk-taking, self governance and collegiality, a low student-teacher

ratio, and small class size to promote engagement (p.266).

Researchers recognize some specific models for school intervention as having

particular promise.  McPartland and Jordan (2004) examine the Talent Development

Model, developed at the Johns Hopkins Center for the Social Organization of Schools,

which is a school reform approach for the most poorly performing schools in the nation.

They find that by breaking schools down into smaller working units, improvements are

found in faculty teamwork, logistics, relationships, and how well known each student and

teacher are by each other.  They find that teachers in this model become more invested in

student success and are more likely to care for and reach out to the students with whom

they are working.  They characterize the relationships between students and teachers in

these programs as "respectful and friendly" and note that teachers actively seek out

students who are frequently absent in order to re-engage them (p. 273).

Finally, in an overview of the efforts to diminish the national dropout problem,

Rumberger (2004) notes that effective program models exist "from early intervention

programs serving preschool students to supplemental yet comprehensive middle school programs to alternative middle and high school programs" (p. 251).

More recent research into dropping out of school continues to assert that schools might decrease dropout rates if, among other actions, they "ensure that students have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school" (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). These research findings support the idea that dropping out is a problem with two dimensions: academic engagement and social engagement (Rumberger, 2004). The objective of this study is to explore whether, as perceived by at-risk students, the second of these dimensions, affects the former.

**What We Know About Enhancing Social Engagement at the Institutional Level**

Social interactions within schools are shaped by the school factors that Davis et al. (2006) enumerate, including: school policy, structure, class and program assignment, course content and implementation, school climate, and relationships (pp. 27-29). The complexity and multiplicity of these factors has led to many different approaches to reform and improve the function of schools for a wider variety of students. At the institutional level, some schools have grouped students into smaller schools, using a school within a school concept. Other schools have created a variety of alternative programs that appear to function for students not thriving in the traditional system. Much work has been done to enhance school climate through reducing bullying, and implementing student-involved conflict resolution processes (Greene, 2008).

Noddings (2005) discusses establishing care as a central theme for school culture and academics, exploring the capacity of teachers to make strong connections with

students. Bryk and Schneider (2004) completed an extensive study of three Chicago elementary schools, exploring what they called "relational trust" among all members of those learning communities. They found that they could correlate schools with higher "relational trust levels" to improved student academic performance.

Knowing how to operate schools to ensure that each student is connected to at least one adult requires an understanding of how students, teachers, and other school-connected adults relate to one another. In her book, *In Schools We Trust*, Meier (2002) discusses how effective schools establish trust between teachers and students. She enunciates eight principles that guide the teaching and learning that occur in these schools: the schools are safe physically and emotionally for all members of the community; they structure a high ratio of adult "experts" to student learners; they encourage these adults to demonstrate their knowledge in "highly personal ways;" they provide students with multiple ways of learning; allow learning to evolve rather than demanding it on a set schedule; they make learning engaging, connected to student interests and fun; they make school relevant to day to day life; and they surround all members of the learning community with the "love which doesn't allow us to give up" (pp.20-23).

At the high school level, strategies to achieve a trusting connection have been developed in schools. One such strategy is to implement an advising relationship between teachers and students, with examples from the Community School's concept of a "one to one" (Pariser, 1990) to a wide array of advisory processes that systematically connect teachers to groups of students for one or more academic years in high school (Anfara & Brown, 1998).

## The Importance of Teacher and Student Relationships

To understand the conceptual framework and research at the foundation of this study, this section begins by exploring the work of Carl Rogers (1969) and that of Aspy and Roebuck (1977), who researched the application of Rogers's concepts in the context of education.  Before discussing more recent research, this section cites several studies from the late 1970s to the early 1990s that support Rogers's contention that positive teacher-student relationships are connected to better student outcomes (Garmezy, 1994; Pederson, 1978; and Werner & Smith, 1992).  I then explore the more recent research from the late 1990s to the mid 2000s on the impact of student-teacher relationships on learning.  This section focuses on the work of Robert Pianta (1999).

## Early Research: Rogers, Aspy and Roebuck, and Others

In a public dialogue between philosopher Martin Buber and psychologist and founder of Client Centered Therapy, Carl Rogers, Rogers put forward his belief in the basic wisdom of the human organism:

> Human nature is something that is really to be trusted.…One does not
> need to supply motivation toward the positive or toward the constructive,
> that exists in the individual....If we can release what is most basic in the
> individual, it will be constructive. (Anderson, 1991, p. 80)

Applying this notion to education, Rogers (1994) states in the third edition of his book (originally published in 1969), *Freedom to Learn*:

> Students who are in real contact with problems that are relevant to them,
> wish to learn, want to grow, seek to discover, endeavor to master, desire to
> create, move toward self-discipline. *The teacher is attempting to develop
> a quality of climate in the classroom and a quality of personal relationship
> with students that will permit the natural tendency to come to fruition*
> [emphasis added]. (p. 160)

Rogers believes in what I would call a "cascade of empathy." If teachers and administrators are trained to be empathic, which he firmly believes they can be (Rogers, 1994), then they set the culture for the entire institution by modeling this behavior with the implication that students will follow suit with one another.

According to Rogers (1994), the basic competencies of an effective facilitator of learning (which is a term he prefers to teacher) are:

1. Empathy - the teacher's ability to understand how the student is experiencing life at the moment, including how they are experiencing the facilitator/teacher.

2. Congruence - the capacity of a teacher to own his or her own feelings and be transparent to her students as a real human being rather than a role-defined authority. He notes (1994), "When the teacher trusts the constructive tendency of the individual and the group...feelings become a part of the classroom experience, learning becomes life and a very vital life at last" (p. 160). Congruence calls for a great degree of self-knowledge and self-confidence on the teacher's part which lays the foundation for trust and trustworthiness in his or her relationships with students.

3. Acceptance - the teacher's capacity to non-judgmentally accept the student, and find them interesting for who they are in the moment. This results in the "prizing" of the other, that is, establishing their worthiness in the teacher's eyes.

Rogers's work catalyzed research that began in the 1960s and extended through to the late 1970s. Two researchers, Aspy and Roebuck, analyzed the outcomes for students who had facilitative teachers. They found that teachers trained in facilitative skills displayed greater response to student feeling, higher use of student ideas in interactions, more discussion with students, more praise of students, increased tailoring of contents to

individuals frame of reference, more smiling with students, and a greater level of eye contact (p. 210). They found that students of these high-facilitative teachers missed five fewer days of school on average, increased scores on self-concept measures, increased academic scores in math and reading, displayed fewer disciplinary and vandalism problems, were more spontaneous, and used higher levels of thinking (Aspy & Roebuck, as cited in Rogers, 1983, pp. 202-3).

Summing up 17 years of their research with the National Consortium for Humanizing Education, Aspy and Roebuck (cited in Rogers, 1983) stated: "Students learn more, and behave better when they receive high levels of understanding, caring and genuineness, than when they are given low levels of them. It pays to treat students as sensitive and aware human beings" (p. 199). When they explored the effect of high-level teacher facilitation on students who were encountering serious learning difficulties, Aspy and Roebuck found that the teacher's ability to connect with them was the "single most important contributor" to enhancing student outcomes on all of their outcome measures (p. 207).

Later studies (as cited in Pianta, 1999) by Pederson (1978) and Werner and Smith (1980) demonstrate that positive relationships with teachers are correlated with improved outcomes for both risk and non-risk student samples. According to Garmezy (1994), these relationships continue to be some of the most commonly cited among protective factors for competence in school.

## Later Research:  Pianta and Others

In *Enhancing Relationships Between Children and Teachers*, Pianta (1999)
makes a strong case for the importance of helping teachers and students to develop
positive connections with one another.  Working first as an elementary level special
education teacher, and then training as a developmental psychologist, Pianta has
researched and published papers on student-teacher relationships for the past 23 years.
His work is based on two key theoretical constructs, Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969)
and Ford and Ford's General Systems Theory (1987).  Although his work has primarily
been with elementary school-aged children and their teachers, his approach provides a
useful guide for looking at connections between teachers and adolescents.

Pianta (1999) believes that students with difficult relationships at home will
experience difficulties with the tasks they are called upon to perform in school (p. 9).  He
cites Bowlby's (1969) taxonomy of attachment to categorize four types of children at
school:  (a) the "securely attached" child, who has experienced acceptance and support at
home and comes to school eager to investigate and able to receive support from the
teacher when needed; (b) the "avoidantly attached child," who has experienced angry,
undependable caregivers, and comes to school avoiding relationships and unable to
express his or her intense emotions; (c) the "ambivalently attached" child, who has
extremely inconsistent caregivers and who is highly dependent on his or her teachers but
seek adult attention in counterproductive ways such as whining, complaining, etc.; (d)
and the "disorganized attached" child, who fluctuates between the avoidant and the
ambivalent forms of attachment and comes from a home where abuse, overly controlling,

and neglectful parental relations are often present.  Students in this group fluctuate between over-dependence and premature autonomy (p. 62).

The second aspect of Bowlby's (1969) work that Pianta uses is the concept of the Internal Working Model.  The child initially bases his or her model for relationships on his or her first experiences with caregivers.  As the child develops, new experiences with other adults can result in a change in the Internal Working Model (Bretherton & Mullholland, 1999).  As the working model changes, the child's expectations, perceptions, and behavior can change as well (Pianta, 1999).  In light of my study's focus on relationships between at-risk high school students and their teachers, this theory becomes very important, as it suggests that helpful teacher-student relationships can move students away from counterproductive behaviors and towards positive social ones.

Pianta cites General Systems Theory (Ford & Ford, 1987) to create a framework for understanding the contexts within which dyadic relationships such as teacher-student relationships take place (pp. 33-34).  He explains that dyadic relationships are made up of a variety of elements including the biology, developmental history, and representational models of the individuals; the interactions that take place between the individuals and the boundaries that become established for those interactions; and the school, family, community, and societal contexts within which these relationships take place (p.72).

In discussing the interactions between teacher and student, Pianta observes that the ways people communicate (tone of voice, physical posture, proximity, etc.) may have a greater impact on how exchanges are perceived than what is verbally communicated (as cited in Greenspan, 1989, p. 76).  This finding is strongly supported by Bernieri's (2001) work on rapport.  Finally, Pianta emphasizes that teacher-student relationships, like all

adult-child relationships, are asymmetric and require the adult participant to take greater responsibility for the quality of the interactions.

Focusing on the role of relationships within the instructional domain of schooling, Pianta states that "instruction is embedded in relationship," such that if the relationship with the teacher mirrors a difficult home-relationship—the teacher's timing is not good, she doesn't read the student's cues successfully, and gives the student distorted feedback on his work—then academic learning will not be enabled (p. 81). On the other hand, if the teacher-student relationship is positive and the child views the teacher as a nurturing and supportive resource, then Pianta notes, "When children have these perceptions of teachers, they are less likely to drop out of school, less likely to engage in high-risk behaviors, and more likely to succeed academically and socially" (p. 146).

In their research, Muller, Katz, and Dance reviewed three studies—a national quantitative study (National Education Longitudinal Study, 1988), and two urban qualitative studies conducted by Katz (1994) and Dance (1995)—to see if they could discern a relationship between how teachers and students viewed their relationship with one another, and how that relationship affected student academic progress. Through a combination of interviewing and observing 70 high-risk urban African American adolescents (Dance, 1995), and eight seventh-grade poor Latino students (Katz, 1994), and reviewing the NELS (1988), these researchers made several important findings.

Looking through the lens of Coleman's (1988) theory of "social capital," Muller, Katz and Dance (1999) found that students decide whether or not they are going to engage in a relationship with a teacher based on perceived outcomes such as good grades and having fun in the class. According to their research, minority at-risk students valued

the following qualities in their teachers: a good sense of humor, a pedagogical approach that is fun yet educational, the ability to motivate all students to work hard, fairness and accessibility, and empathetic regard for students (p. 315).

They determined that teacher expectations of student academic success based on completion of their homework correlated with students graduating from high school, but, interestingly, not with learning gains. At the same time they found that having a positive connection with a teacher and getting good grades correlated with student learning gains. When teachers did not express care and did not hold high expectations for students, the minority students interviewed were inclined to see teacher behavior as discriminatory. This research confirms the importance of the individual expectations students and teachers hold of each other in forming the teacher-student relationship, and shows that these relationships in turn play a key role in supporting student learning gains as well as completion of high school.

Over the past ten years, numerous articles and research have explored the impact of teacher-student relationships on students' short and medium-term outcomes. *The Journal of School Health* devoted an entire issue (September, 2004) to the impact of school connectedness on student behavioral and academic outcomes.

In this edition of the *Journal of School Health*, Connell and Klem (2004) studied the impact of teacher support on elementary and middle school students' engagement. Their study also explored whether or not student levels of engagement were associated with academic growth and performance with respect to grades and nationally normed tests. Working with a sample of more than 1800 students, these researchers surveyed teachers, students, and parents to determine levels of student engagement and teacher

support.  They also surveyed teachers as to how supported and engaged they felt in their work.

Connell and Klem (2004) define two kinds of student engagement: ongoing engagement and reaction to challenge (p. 262).  Students who experience ongoing engagement understand the meaning of their class work, experience positive emotions while learning, and spend time and effort on the task at hand.  Students who can experience a challenge, such as a perceived failure in school, and can persist rather than withdraw are considered to be highly engaged in terms of their reaction to challenge. Students engaged in school, according to Connell and Klem (2004) and a number of other researchers (Connell, Halpern-Felsher, Clifford, Crichlow, & Usinger, 1995; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Goodenow, 1993; Willingham, Pollack, & Lewis, 2002), are more likely to achieve academically and less likely to dropout.

Connell and Klem's findings were highly supportive of the notion that positive student relationships with teachers play a "vital" role in student engagement and academic success (p. 34).  They describe positive relationships as ones in which students feel their teachers are involved with them, care about them, give them some autonomy in their choice of work, and give them work that is relevant to their lives.  They also assert that students want adults to make their behavioral expectations clear and to make consequences for not meeting those expectations fair, predictable, and consistent. Connell and Klem found that low levels of teacher support as described above resulted in a 50% increase of disengagement for elementary students.  Middle school students reporting high levels of engagement were found to be 75% more likely to achieve high levels of academic performance.

Research compiled in this journal also explored the ways relationships and school connectedness interfaced with violence and victimization (Wilson, 2004). Libby (2004) conducted meta-research to determine the importance of relationships to developing school connectedness, which in turn is connected to student outcomes, and found that teacher support among a number of other connectedness indicators, across a wide variety of research efforts, was consistently associated with positive student outcomes including both improved academic performance and a variety of positive health behaviors.

Noam and Fiore (2004) also devoted an issue of the publication, *New Directions for Youth Development*, to "The Transforming Power of Adult-Youth Relationships." In that issue, Frederickson and Rhodes (2004) call upon schools to enhance the relational capacity of teachers by lowering the teacher-student ratio, changing schedules to provide more time for one to one interactions between teachers and students, and providing for continuity between teachers and students through designing program elements that include multi-year student-teacher connections. Davidson's (Davidson, 1999) study, *Negotiating Social Differences: Youths' Assessments of Educators' Strategies*, analyzed data from the Multiple World's Study—a 24-month longitudinal study of 49 adolescents from seven cultures. The study focused on these students' perspectives regarding what dynamics impacted their school engagement. Davidson found that these students particularly responded to teachers who they perceived to care about them, had their best interests at heart, had positive academic expectations of them, and who conveyed an understanding and acceptance of their differing cultural backgrounds. They preferred a non-lecture, active curriculum in which they had a voice, and disengaged from teachers they viewed as authoritarian and/or unaccepting.

On the basis of her findings, Davidson highlights the critical role of positive

teacher-student relationships for adolescents and exhorts educational systems to

encourage the development of teacher capacity and school culture in this regard:

> One strong theme that emerges from these findings is the fundamental
> importance of students 'relationships with classroom
> teachers….Therefore, it is clear that when seeking to develop more
> inclusive approaches to education, schools and teachers must think beyond
> written curriculum or new pedagogical techniques.  On a daily basis, the
> degree of personalization in teacher-student relationships, authority
> patterns, and teacher expectations work in combination with the written
> curriculum and a school's social organization to convey messages to
> students about the possibilities of working and interacting with people
> who are socially different…. (p. 362)

**The Role Student Perception Plays in Establishing Student-Teacher Relationships**

Student perception plays a key role in determining the progress of establishing

and maintaining a relationship with a teacher (Muller et al., 1999; Pianta, 1999).

Researchers including Wentzel (1997, 1999), Wubbels and Levy (1992), and Pianta

(1999) have studied the role of student perception in the dynamics of student-teacher

relationships.  Wentzel cites research that adolescents' perceptions of caregivers'

behaviors have greater predictive power than perceptions of other onlookers (citing

Feldman, Wentzel, & Gehring, 1989).  She also finds that "perceived support" in middle

schoolers is a motivator for academic and social goals (Wentzel, 1999).

In their meta-research on student and teacher perspectives on classroom

management, Woolfolk and Weinstein (2006) find that students consistently attest to the

importance of teachers' caring about them as individuals and about their academic needs.

Minority students followed this same pattern (Cothran & Ennis, 2000, as cited in  &

Weinstein, 2006), and several researchers (Davidson, 1999, as cited in Woolfolk &

Weinstein, 2006; Dillon, 1989; Katz, 1990; Miller, Leinhardt, & Zigmond, 1988; Schlosser, 1992) concur in their findings that caring teachers are especially important to marginalized, alienated, behavior-disordered, and at-risk students. Students in these studies perceived teachers as caring if they showed an interest in their personal lives, held them to an attainable but challenging standard of performance, and were both empathetic and fair (Muller et al., 1999).

In their research on keeping students connected to school, Connell and Klem (2004) explore how student perceptions affect their relationships with teachers, and in turn, how the nature of these relationships affects student engagement and progress in class. In a White Paper presented to the Marion Kaufman Foundation (2003), The "First Things First" National Reform Movement advocates for schools to foster positive helping relationships between teachers and students to keep students engaged and successful in school. The Movement's research corroborates findings that students who see teachers as supportive are more likely to stay connected to school and, in turn, less likely to drop out (Connell & Klem, 2004).

Wubbels and Levy (1992) argue that teacher and student perspectives are important for both research and professional development. Citing Walberg (1976), they argue that student perceptions of teachers' behavior play a key role in academic achievement. They focus on teacher characteristics of dominance, submission, cooperation, and opposition. Based on their longitudinal study of student and teacher perceptions, Wubbels, Cre'ton, and Hooymayers (1985) developed a questionnaire (the QTI or Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction) to measure student and teacher perceptions of interaction, and have folded this tool into teacher training efforts in the Netherlands

and other countries (Wubbels & Levy, 1992). When teachers were coached on interpersonal teaching competencies, using the QTI as a feedback instrument, the researchers found that teachers were "perceived as more friendly, as providing more student responsibility/freedom and as less dissatisfied, admonishing and strict" (Wubbels et al., 2006, p. 1187). They tied these perceptions to gains in student achievement and attitude, although their study also found that the "repressive" teacher style had the highest outcomes for student achievement. Students experienced repressive teachers as rigid, competition oriented, and suppressive of student initiative (p. 1172).

In a guide to teacher evaluation based on a meta-research study (Little, Goe, & Bell, 2008), the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality discusses the reliability and validity of student ratings of classroom teachers and conclude that they "do not seem to be more susceptible to bias than college students or other groups" (citing Follman, 1992, 1995; Worrell & Kuterback, 2001). The study conducted by Worrell and Kuterback (2001) also demonstrated that younger students focused more on teacher-student relationships and older students focused more on how much they were learning. In one study (Wilkerson et al., 2000) student perceptions, manifested by their ratings of teachers, were actually found to be "more highly correlated with student achievement than teacher effectiveness ratings given by principals and teachers. Student ratings were the best predictor of student achievement across all subjects" (as cited in Little, Goe, & Bell, 2008, p. 18).

The evidence cited above demonstrates that student perception is a valuable source of information about the quality of the teacher-student relationship and student achievement. Given that the quality of that relationship has been shown to be connected

to academic outcomes in a variety of studies, a further question arises.  How can we explore those relationships in greater depth to determine what may be key to their positive development?

## **What Needs to Be Learned**

Current research on student-teacher relationships has been primarily directed at students in Kindergarten to Grade 8.  Understandably, less work has been done at the high school level, when developmentally well-adjusted students become more peer-oriented and begin to work towards autonomy.  However, as the research cited above demonstrates, at-risk students who may have encountered multiple barriers and gaps in their development respond positively in both social and academic realms to teachers whom they perceive as caring.

Researchers have called for further research in this area.  Wentzel (1997) cites the need to explore "students' perceptions of specific teachers or on differences in student perceptions across multiple classrooms" (p. 417).  Pianta (1999) states that much research is needed to follow students as they develop beyond elementary school.  He calls for a greater understanding of developmental issues in the context of student-teacher relationships (p. 190) and says, "Studies are needed that focus on the child, the teacher, and the child-teacher relationship as the units of analysis" (p. 191).

Wentzel (1997) also calls for a better understanding of processes that underlie the connection between student perceptions of a teacher as caring and student motivation. She notes that research has also not been conducted on how student characteristics

predisposing them to perceive teachers as caring or not might affect student-teacher relationships.

Working from the perspective of classroom management, Woolfolk and Weinstein (2006) call for research to understand how teachers create positive relationships with students, and to understand the factors impeding the development of these relationships. They also note that few studies have compared both teacher and student perspectives to see how well they correlate.

I found few studies that focus primarily on the relational perceptions of teachers by at-risk youth. Although studies cited above (Davidson, 1999; Muller et al., 1999) have found that disadvantaged minority students perceive teacher support as critical to their engagement and highly value teacher empathy, I could not find qualitative studies that explored the perceptions of non-minority at-risk high school students, nor studies that determined the role other perceived teacher characteristics, such as positive regard or congruence, might play in establishing positive relationships. Furthermore, current studies do not appear to explore how at-risk students perceive the quality of their relationships with a current helpful and not-helpful teacher.

My study is intended to phenomenologically explore the perceptions of nine at-risk high school students in three areas. What do they see as the essential attributes of a helpful teacher? A not-helpful teacher? How do their relationships with teachers who are either helpful or not helpful feel? To what extent do they believe their helpful and not-helpful teacher relationships have played a role in their engagement with school, academic progress, and likelihood of graduating?

**Chapter 3**

**DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDY**

**<u>Introduction</u>**

This study was designed to explore the perceptions of nine at-risk adolescent high school students on the characteristics they associated with helpful and not-helpful teachers and how they experienced relationships with these teachers. The study also examined the extent to which students felt their student-teacher relationships affected their engagement in school, capacity and desire to finish school, and academic growth. The study included teacher interviews and assessments of student engagement and academic growth and my observations of students and teachers in formal and informal teaching and learning settings. This chapter will detail the methodology I used to gather and analyze the data, to carry out the study, and to create a trustworthy study.

**<u>Research Goal</u>**

The purpose of this study was to understand better how at-risk adolescent students perceive helpful and not-helpful teachers, their connections with these teachers, and whether they connect these relationships to their motivation and capacity to engage in school. A better grasp of student perceptions will allow us to begin to understand how to build relational capacity for both vulnerable adolescent youth and their teachers and whether building such capacity could have a significant effect on school-related student outcomes.

**Research Questions**

My study focused on three major research questions:

1. What teacher qualities do at-risk high school aged students identify as necessary to establishing a helpful teacher-student relationship?

2. How do they describe a relationship with an especially-helpful, helpful and not-helpful teacher?

3. How do they perceive a relationship with an especially helpful, helpful or not-helpful teacher affects their engagement and academic growth and decreases or increases the likelihood of their dropping out of school?

**Research Terms**

The following key terms are used in this study.

*At risk*: Students who are considered to be in danger of not completing high school, such as students who are teen parents, who have abused substances, who have been involved with the criminal justice system, who have missed a lot of school, or who are truant frequently (Davis & Forstadt, 2004).

*Student Academic Growth*: improvement in a learner's knowledge without specifying a defined objective (Ashlock, 2002*).*

*Student Classroom Engagement*: Students who are engaged in a classroom are not absent frequently, participate in classroom activities, and have a sense that they belong in their school (Willms, 2002).

*Student-Teacher Relationship*: A student-teacher relationship is an asymmetric bond that develops between teacher and student over the course of their time teaching and

learning together.  The primary purpose of the relationship is to advance student learning.

These relationships are considered asymmetric because of the difference in

developmental stages and roles between the teacher and the student (Pianta, 1999).

*Teacher*:  Any faculty member who teaches one or more classes in the program

without having to be supervised.  (This would include certified teachers as well as

Educational Technicians, Level 3.)

*Helpful and Not-Helpful Relationships*: In the context of teaching and learning, a

relationship with a teacher is helpful if she is perceived by the student as assisting him or

her with what he or she needs to succeed in school.  In *not-helpful* relationships, the

teacher is perceived as not providing the student with what he or she needs to succeed,

and sometimes as actively undermining the student's capacity and motivation to succeed.


**Conceptual Scaffolding from Rogers and Pianta**

As discussed in Chapter 2, both Rogers (1983) and Pianta (1999) have provided

this study with elements critical to its theoretical framework.  Immediately below I will

review these two conceptual frameworks as they relate to this study.

In his exploration of teaching and learning, Rogers (1983) developed the concept

of the teacher as a learning facilitator, putting the emphasis on student learning just as he

put the emphasis on the client in his approach to client-centered therapy (Rogers, 1959).

He posited that the same professional capacities that constitute the practice of good

therapy form the basis of a capable facilitator of student learning.  He suggested that three

capacities are essential to the effective facilitation of learning: empathy, positive regard,

and congruence.

*Empathy* for Rogers is the capacity of an individual to comprehend how the other person experiences his or her situation. Rogers (1983) describes empathy in School as "When the teacher has the ability to understand the student's reactions from the inside, has a sensitive awareness of the way the process of education seems to the student" (p. 125). *Positive Regard* is the ability of an individual to value the other for who she is "in her own right" (Rogers 1983, p. 123). In education this would involve the facilitators' manifesting a non-judgmental acceptance of students as well as uncovering and valuing their areas of interest and competence. *Congruence* is a teacher's capacity to behave authentically, honestly disclosing and reflecting on how she or he is feeling as the situation warrants it (Rogers, 1983). In School, this means that at appropriate times and in appropriate ways teachers would disclose their own feelings, and reveal aspects of their lives that help a student better understand the teacher.

One of my goals for this study is to see whether—and to what extent—students specified these three capacities when identifying a teacher as helpful or especially helpful.

Pianta's (1999, 2000) work provides the study with a "systems" theory context for understanding the dynamics of a dyadic relationship between student and teacher. Systems theory suggests that each partner in a dyad brings his or her own characteristics and history to the relationship. In the context of School, although the partners have conventionally prescribed roles of teacher and student, developmentally they are adult and adolescent. The environmental contexts of school climate and culture, the culture of the community in which the school is located, and parental involvement play a role in how the relationship between student and teacher can develop. But, more importantly for

this study, Pianta (1999) stresses what he calls the role of "Information Exchange

Processes," which include the ways the partners interact and the kind of "tolerances" the

teacher has for those interactions (p. 72). How these processes unfold helps to create the

"feel" of the relationship for each participant. Pianta also suggests that each member of

the dyad creates an internal "representation" of the relationship and that this

representation is anchored in an internally evolving model of relationships (pp. 58-60).

These elements of Pianta's work relate directly to my second research question on the

student experience of a helpful relationship.

### Research Setting:  Selecting Two Public Alternative Programs
#### Why Alternative Programs?

I chose to work with students already enrolled in alternative programs for several

reasons. Students in most Maine alternative education programs meet the definition of

*at-risk* because they have been referred and accepted based on the assumption that

without intervention the likelihood of their dropping out of school is substantially

increased. Alternative programs in Maine tend to be small and highly personalized. I

believed I would be able to identify, connect with, observe and interview students chosen

for the study in an alternative program more effectively than if I had tried to interview

disengaged students in larger conventional high schools.

Students who enter Maine's secondary alternative education programs have

experienced difficulties in conventional high schools that put them at risk of not

completing high school. They often have some combination of the following

characteristics in their background:  substance abuse, childhood trauma including sexual

abuse, mental health issues, sexual orientation issues, low socioeconomic status, high

geographic mobility, low academic credit accumulated, and few positive connections

with adults in their lives. These factors put them at greater risk of dropping out of school

than students who do not share these characteristics (Davis, Brutsaert-Durant, & Lee,

2001). Students in alternative programs are therefore appropriate candidates for this

study

Students accepted into alternative programs however, are not likely to be the most

disaffected and disengaged students in our public system; these programs tend to make a

strong effort to engage students and integrate them into their school community. For this

reason, I felt confident that I would be working with students who would be solidly

attached to their programs and able to engage with the study, and with me, an unknown

adult. Having co-founded and co-directed the Community School—an alternative school

for at-risk adolescents—for 33 years, and having been involved in district, state, and

national work on alternative education, I knew that I would be comfortable undertaking

the study in almost any program in Maine.


**Site Selection**

Initially, I looked at four Maine alternative programs that served students who

weren't thriving in the conventional system. Two were very different structurally from

the rest and from each other. One of the programs is in a city high school, has more than

100 students, and would have required interviews with teachers who may have had a

limited connection with the students. The other program is small, rural, and the students

accomplish most of their work independently with their teachers rather than in classrooms.

After visiting all four sites, I chose the two most similar programs. The Rocky Beach School and the River City School are roughly the same size, serving between 30 and 40 students annually. They each hold classes, though Rocky Beach is much more experientially-oriented and has modified its schedule significantly to reflect this orientation. River City has a particular focus on teen parents, is located close to daycare, and is staffed and organized to reflect its teen parent orientation.

## Research Sample:  Students in Alternative Programs

Table 3.1 presents elements of the at-risk background of the nine students in my study. These students had uniformly failed to thrive in their conventional school environments, demonstrated by high absentee rates and low grades. At the same time that they were considered to be at-risk, they also were currently connected enough to their programs to make them accessible to me for the purposes of this study.

While two-thirds of the students were eligible for school lunch (i.e., have the low-income risk factor), only one of nine had been incarcerated (that is, has the risk factor of being sent to jail), and none had been expelled. On the other hand eight of the nine students had multiple risk factors including high risk conditions such as homelessness, being a parent, and having dropped out of school previously. According to their records three of the nine suffered from anxiety, which is one of the most common mental health

challenges facing children and adolescents, and can result in disengagement from school

and other social activities (Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health, 1999).

Table 3.1 illustrates key information about each student in the study.

**Table 3.1**.  Student Sample: At Risk Data

| Student | School | Age | Gender | SES | Current Living Situation | Current Grade Level | Time in Alternative Program | SEI * | At-Risk Factors |
|---------|--------|-----|--------|-----|--------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|-------|-----------------|
| Robert | Rocky Beach | 19 | M | | Parents | Senior | 1.8 years | No | Poor Attendance |
| Fred | Rocky Beach | 19 | M | | One Biological Parent, One Step parent | Senior | 2 years | Yes* | Anxiety Behavior |
| McNulty | Rocky Beach | 18 | M | Eligible school lunch | One Parent | Senior | 5 months | No | Incarceration, Substance Abuse, Behavior |
| Opal | Rocky Beach | 16 | F | Eligible school lunch | Both Parents | Sophomore | 1.8 years | Yes* | Anxiety |
| Eric | Rocky Beach | 17 | M | | Both Parents | Junior | 3 months | No | Poor Attendance Anxiety |
| Amelia | River City | 17 | F | Eligible school lunch | Grandmother | Junior | 5 months | No | Truancy, Dropping Out, Poor Grades |
| Angel | River City | 18 | M | Eligible school lunch | One Parent | Junior | 1.4 years | No | Substance Abuse, Truancy, Dropping Out, Tardiness, Homeless |
| Julia | River City | 18 | F | Eligible school lunch | Living Independently | Senior | 1.4 years | No | Legal Infractions Teen Parent |
| Jenny | River City | 17 | F | Eligible school lunch | Both Parents | Freshman | 5 months | No | Substance Abuse, Truancy, Dropping Out, Parental Criminality |

SES (Socioeconomic Status)

SEI (Special Education Identification)

*Student has Individual Education Plan (IEP) in place

**Student Selection Process**

I contacted the program directors of the Rocky Beach School and River City School and received their support to begin the project. (To protect confidentiality, the names of both schools and all students have been changed.) I spent two to three days observing in each program before discussing the project with teachers and students. After holding a meeting with the entire student body to give them an idea of the nature and purpose of the study, I asked the program directors to mail permission slips to the parents for students under 18; students over 18 were given consent forms. (Consent forms have been attached in Appendix J. Data collected will be destroyed within three months of dissertation completion.) The Director collected the signed permissions. This process resulted in a 48% and 50% study participation rate in Rocky Beach and River City schools respectively.

**Creating the 18 Student-Teacher Dyads**

This study focused on generating data based on student perceptions of specific teachers. I hoped to be able to match each student with a pair of teachers who would represent a range of "helpfulness" to them. Ideally, each student would have picked a current teacher who was helpful or especially-helpful and would have identified a current teacher whom they did not perceive as helpful. I hoped to learn what made a teacher helpful in a student's eyes—and, conversely what made a teacher not helpful—, how the student experienced the relationship,, and whether the student would attribute progress in the subject area, engagement in the class, and perseverance in school to the relationship with that teacher.

Using the "Student Connections Survey" (see Appendix G), I asked all participating students in each program to circle the names of current teachers they found especially-helpful and helpful, and to put a star by the names of teachers from whom they were not currently taking classes. The names of teachers whom students did not perceive as helpful were left uncircled. Using the "Teacher Connections Survey" (see Appendix H), I asked faculty to identify students to whom they were helpful or especially-helpful. The names of students whom teachers felt they were not helping were left uncircled. Wherever possible I formed pairs of students and teachers who had a common assessment of the teacher's "helpfulness." That is, if a student found a teacher helpful or especially-helpful, he or she was paired with a teacher who viewed himself or herself as helpful or especially-helpful to that student. And conversely, I paired students who did not circle a teacher's name because they did not experience him or her as helpful with a teacher who also did not feel that she or he was helpful to that student. This resulted in each student being paired with two teachers, one of whom (for 8 of 9 pairs) was perceived to be more helpful than the other.

I selected the nine students for the study based on three factors: (a) the degree to which their ratings of teachers' helpfulness matched the teachers' assessment of their helpfulness to the students, (b) whether their current schedule put them in classes with their prospective paired teachers, and (c) whether the students were recommended by the directors as amenable to an extended interview process. By comparing the Student Connections Survey with the Teacher Connections Survey, I found that I could exactly match eleven of the eighteen pairs of ratings. Nine of these pairs became my "especially-helpful" teacher-student dyads. Of these nine pairs, three students rated their teachers as

more helpful than the teachers had rated themselves and six student and teacher pairs concurred on their helpfulness ratings.  I created a second set of nine student-teacher pairs to reflect the group of teachers whom students perceived to be "less" helpful.  As one might have hypothesized, there was slightly less agreement in these ratings.  Of these nine pairs, five student and teacher assessments agreed with each other and four did not.  In the four pairs whose perceptions didn't agree, students rated their teachers as less helpful than the teachers had rated themselves.

Ultimately I assigned two teachers to each student.  In eight cases, one teacher was perceived to be more helpful than the other, and in the remaining case both teachers were perceived to be equally helpful.

## Gaining Access

As I will describe in detail below, I initially obtained permission from four program directors to visit their schools as potential sites for the study.  Having chosen two programs as the setting for my interviews, I worked closely (as described above) with both program directors to obtain parental and student permission to participate in the study.  I met with the full student body to describe the project and asked them to consider taking part in it.  I invited eligible students to participate through permission requests: students over the age of 18 signed their own forms, and the younger students took the slips home to parents for their signatures.  After receiving the signed permissions, which had been returned to the directors, I asked students to fill out their Student Connections Survey and I collected their completed surveys.  At the same time, I met with each faculty group to explain the purpose of the study and the risks and benefits of undertaking

the study at their school.  I asked and received permission from all teachers in each

program for their participation in the study.  I then asked teachers to fill out the Teacher

Connections Survey and collected their completed surveys.


**Interview Design**

I chose to use a structured individual interview design to help discern student

perceptions of their relationships with teachers.  In particular I wanted to give the

students an opportunity to reflect on their school history with those teachers perceived as

especially-helpful, helpful and not-helpful, and on their current experiences with two

teachers whom they had rated as either "especially helpful," "helpful," or "not helpful." I

hoped to find themes in their commentary that would help me understand my three basic

research questions in a more precise way.  First, what made a particular teacher especially

helpful, helpful or not helpful to a particular student? Did students attribute specific

helpful or not-helpful qualities to the teachers they discussed? Second, what were the

students' perceptions of those teacher-student relationships?  And third, did the students

perceive that the relationship had an impact on their learning and on their persistence in

school? I triangulated this final question by asking current teachers for their perceptions

and for evidence to support their evaluation of their students' level of engagement and

achievement of academic growth in their classes.

The design for teacher interviews mirrored the student interviews to allow me to

compare teacher responses with student responses.  This comparison was especially

important for teachers' evaluation of academic growth and engagement.

A combination of sources initially informed my interview design. For student interviews, Pianta's (2000) and other researchers provided examples of some validated tools that have been adapted for use with adolescents (Johnson, Johnson, Buckman & Richmond, 1985; Lazarus, 1989; Weinstein & Marshall, 1984; Wellborn & Connell, 1987).

I developed my interview protocols in 2007-8 during a pilot project that tested a similar set of questions with four students and seven teachers. I shortened the interview for teachers in this study by eliminating questions about previous students and by focusing questions on the current student with whom they were paired.

For students in the current study, I followed the approach advocated by Seidman (2006) that suggests a three-interview protocol for "in depth phenomenological interviewing" (p. 34). During two to three 45-minute interviews over the course of one to two months, I asked students a series of questions designed to help them reflect on their connections with teachers past and present and the effect of those connections on their schoolwork and eventual completion of high school (See Appendix C).

## Interview One

I organized the questions for the student interviews to begin with less personal and more general information such as: why they enrolled in the alternative school, what it was like to learn in their new program, and what subjects they liked best (see interview protocol, Appendix C). I assumed that asking students to begin by talking about past teachers rather than current teachers would be slightly less personal and, therefore, less threatening for students.

I decided to begin by asking about students' positive experiences because I believed this approach would not be threatening and would provide the student and me with a positive framework before we entered the realm of their negative experiences. I asked students to identify a teacher from their past whom they found helpful and asked them describe the qualities of the teacher that made them feel helped. These questions began generating data for my first research question because all students were able to identify some of the positive qualities of their previous teachers.

Toward the middle of the first interview, I began asking the students about their current "especially-helpful" teacher. I wanted to determine if students could identify specific characteristics—how teacher taught and how he or she related to the student— that made the teacher particularly helpful. Interview questions focused student consideration on specific areas that relate to Rogers's (1983) three criteria for effective facilitators: congruence, empathy, and positive regard, (for a sample of questions organized by Rogers's characteristics, please see Appendix B) and to Pianta's (2000) work on student-teacher dyadic learning systems, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

To discern if there were patterns in how students designated teachers and whether teacher capacities correlated in their minds with their academic growth—my third research question—I ended the first interview by asking students whether they felt they learned more from the teacher they had rated as especially helpful than the second teacher with whom they were paired.

**<u>Interview Two</u>**

In the second interview, I also began with some general questions about qualities that the students felt they possessed that described how they learned (see interview protocol, Appendix C). I then asked the students to think of a former teacher whom they had not found helpful, and asked them to describe learning from this teacher. Within these questions I gave students a chance to articulate how the relationship felt to them (my second research question), and the impact the relationship might have had on how much they learned from that teacher (my third research question).

I continued with questions about especially-helpful teachers, including questions that asked the students to judge whether, and to what extent, the relationship had affected the students' classroom engagement and persistence in school (research question three). To understand how students gauged the depth of their connection with their teachers, I used the Lazarus (1981) "Life Circles" Technique (see Appendix A). This technique allowed the students to designate the level of intimacy (best friend, good friend, acquaintance, stranger) they felt with each of their paired teachers. This felt sense of the relationship relates directly back to research question two, that is, how do they (at-risk students) describe a relationship with an especially-helpful, helpful and not-helpful teacher?

In the second interview I asked students to respond to the Life Circles Technique regarding only their especially-helpful teacher. I ended the interview by asking the same initial set of questions about the second teacher (perceived to be less helpful) as I had asked about the especially-helpful teacher. The second interview included an opportunity for students to fill out a behavioral survey that I will discuss below.

**Interview Three**

The third interview followed the pattern of the first two except that it did not

begin with any "ice-breaking" general questions; rather, it returned to exploring the

experience students had with their less helpful teacher (see interview protocol, Appendix

C). The questions followed the same sequence as the interview about their especially

helpful teacher. After administering the Lazarus Life Circles Technique and the

behavioral survey about the second teacher, I concluded the interview with some general

questions about the factors students identified as critical for their school persistence.

**Teacher Interviews**

Teacher interviews provided me with a context for the students' perceptions of

specific relationships. I was able to determine if large differences existed in how the

student-teacher dyads perceived their connections with each other. I was also able to see

if my perceptions corroborated the student reports on teachers.

Teacher interviews mirrored student interviews but with less discussion about

their previous experiences with students (see Appendix E). Most questions focused on

the teacher's perception of the relationship with the student with whom they were paired,

how they saw their own role within the relationship, how they imagined the student saw

the relationship, and what evidence they could present of student academic growth and

engagement. Teachers also filled out the behavioral survey mentioned above, and

responded to the Lazarus Life Circles Technique about the students with whom they were

paired.

## How Was Information Gathered?

### In-Depth Interviewing:  How, Where and When Were Interviews Conducted

I interviewed each student two to three times for up to 75 minutes per interview during the school day in a quiet space where there were no other activities.  At Rocky Beach this meant interviewing in an art room, the program's kitchen, or an unused classroom that was occasionally shared by other programs.  In the tighter quarters at River City, I interviewed students in a staff member's office or the school's library.  I scheduled interviews for students at least two days apart.  All interviews were recorded both on my iPod—an Mp3 recording device—and on a portable tape player as back-up.

I interviewed teachers during the school day, during prep periods, or after school, most often in their own classrooms.  I generally interviewed each of the 8 teachers twice for up to 90 minutes per interview.  In order to help both students and teachers feel as comfortable as possible I always brought in some snacks and a "squishy ball" for them to play with while talking.  Three quite shy students participated successfully in these interviews and added their insights to the six more talkative and gregarious students.

Only one student of the original nine chose not to continue after an initial interview, and the rest completed their interviews with much less rescheduling than I would have predicted.  I replaced the one student who dropped out of the study with an alternate I had chosen earlier.

**Interview Trustworthiness**.  Making connections with young adults proved to be smoother than I had anticipated.  While some students seemed to be eager to interview, others were wary.  All students appreciated the $20.00 gift certificates awarded to them at

the end of the process. I received no feedback from teachers, parents, or students that the process was negative in any way for students.

The information gained from students' accounts of their experiences with particular teachers was richly nuanced. Students did not jump to the conclusion that they always learned more in the context of a helpful relationship with a teacher; they saw other factors coming into play as well. Because students were given at least two chances to talk about themselves as learners and about their teachers' approach to learning, I was able to determine the relative internal consistency of each interview and found that the interviews were consistent.

Based on my limited time at each site, I did not have a chance to establish a trusting relationship with each student interviewed. As a result, students who entered the process more warily were less forthcoming at times (as in one instance when a student responded with a string of "don't knows" in answer to my questions, and then joked, "I guess we've gotten to the 'don't know' part of the interview"). For this student, reflecting on feelings was extremely difficult, making it difficult to obtain his perceptions without a lot more time and effort on my part. Of the nine students, five were very open during the interview process: willing to elaborate on answers when asked to and able to disclose their struggles with schooling and teachers in an authentic manner. Of these five more open students, four had been in their programs for more than a year.

Four of the nine students were less open and tended to provide one-word answers to questions and they were not able to elaborate. Three of these four had been in their programs for less than a year. They appeared less willing than the more open students to disclose a personal narrative about their school struggles.

In one case a student kept his distance by establishing a "persona" that did not always feel authentic to me. The resulting data were likely skewed to fit this more idealized sense he wished to project of himself rather than who he was "authentically." This student had chosen a representative strategy that vulnerable students frequently adopt to maintain their image in the eyes of others and themselves, and in that light, his interview responses are useful.

Given the wary nature of at least a third of the students in this study and the personal disclosure I was seeking, I believe that if the research had continued over an entire year, I might have developed closer connections and received richer data from them.

Some teachers reported enjoying the interviews, which they saw as a time to reflect on issues they had previously had little time to consider. Teachers spoke quite frankly about their experiences with specific students, and, surprisingly, frequently underrated their degree of helpfulness toward a particular student in comparison to the student's rating of them. Because I allowed teachers to choose their evidence for student academic growth and engagement, I did not secure data that were comparable from one teacher to the next. The teachers were clear in their perceptions of student progress, but often not exacting in providing evidence of student growth and engagement. While teachers at River City presented clear records of student progress, such as internal test scores and attendance records, teachers at Rocky Beach provided anecdotal incidents and representative student products. I did not receive any negative comments from program directors or teachers about the interview process for teachers.

**<u>Behavioral Survey</u>**

My second research question asked students to describe a helpful and not-helpful relationship with a teacher. The behavioral survey was constructed to give students a chance to describe these relationships in behavioral terms. For instance, as we will see below, students were given an opportunity to gauge how often a teacher interrupted them while they were speaking; or how frequently a teacher called on them in class. The student had rated these teachers as helpful, especially-helpful, or not-helpful prior to filling out the survey. As a result, this instrument provides us with important behavioral data from the students' perspective about the teacher behaviors that particular students experienced as helpful or not-helpful. Teachers also filled out these surveys, which meant that I could compare student and teacher perceptions about behaviors that indicate "rapport" (Hall & Bernieri, 2001) and see the degree to which the perceptions of student and teacher were aligned.

The behavioral survey, comprising twenty-one questions, provided me with a second source of information from both student and teacher (see Appendices D and F). Using a Likert scale, I asked students and teachers to circle answers to a series of questions evaluating interactions with each other in terms of *frequency* (always, often, sometimes, seldom, never), *proximity* (very close to you [1/2 to 1 ft], fairly close to you [2 to 3 ft], not very close to you [3 to 4 ft], far away from you [more than 4 ft]), *agency* (teacher, mostly teacher/some me, equal, mostly me/some teacher, me), and *intensity* (small and resolved, small and unresolved, large and resolved , large and unresolved).

In the interviews, I found that the language students used to describe the emotional resonance of relationships lacked nuance. I prepared the survey in order to

provide students with another means to process their relationship with the two teachers with whom they were paired. These survey questions were far more concrete and less global than the interview questions and were intended to provide students and teachers with the opportunity to consider very small interactions that have been linked to the concept of rapport, as I will discuss below.

Because so much salient relational communication is non-verbal (Hall & Bernieri, 2001), 10 of the 21 questions referred to interactional behaviors that could indicate the presence or lack of rapport (Hall & Bernieri, 2001) between participants. Rapport questions asked about eye contact, proximity, smiling, movement towards one another, synchrony (i.e., laughing together), and supportive actions such as head-nodding and saying, "Uh huh." The other eleven questions dealt with verbal interactions to help ascertain: (a) the degree of conflict in the relationship (three questions) and (b) the perceived frequency and nature of verbal interaction between the pair (eight questions), e.g., student asking questions, teacher calling on student, initiation of informal conversations, and interrupting behavior.

The data set available from these surveys provided a second vantage point on the relationship between individual students and teachers. To the degree to which the students understood the questions, the survey was a useful tool to compare responses with those derived from the interview. The behavioral survey also allowed me to compare student and teacher perceptions of specific patterns of interaction with each other, and to compare their perceptions with my own observations.

Factors limiting the utility of these data include the students' and teachers' interpretations of distinctions between "always" and "often" for a particular behavior.

"Always" meant "all the time" to some people or "every time" to others, depending on the unit of time, i.e., a class, a meeting. Second, some of the interactions were positive for some students (such as teacher moving closer) and negative for those students who like to maintain a physical distance between them and their teachers. An interaction only has a positive or negative valence within the context of the relationship and the proclivities of the student and teacher who are paired with each other. Finally, when asked about conflict, most participants responded that they did not have conflicts with their partners. However, students may not have understood that the term "conflict" could include both small conflictual interactions and huge blowouts.

## **Observing Relationships**

To experience student-teacher relationships as they unfolded in school, I attempted to observe each student-teacher dyad three times: twice in the classroom and once in an informal "non-teaching" context such as lunchtime or after school. My goal was to develop my own sense of the relationship in order to be able to compare student and teacher reports of the relationship through the interviews with the survey results. I looked for the type and frequency of interactions between the teacher-student pairs during a class or in an informal setting. I was looking for eye contact, initiation of verbal contact, physical contact, movement of teacher or student towards or away from each other, over-talking (i.e., one person talking while the other was talking), interrupting, sentence completion (one person finishing the other's sentence for them), head-nodding, laughing, and any other synchronous behaviors.

The unique approach of each school's program made certain kinds of observations more difficult in one program than the other. Observing students with their teachers in formal teaching settings at Rocky Beach School was difficult because of several factors: a quickly changing schedule, students' daily choice of teachers for electives, group activities changing the schedule for the day, a shorter school day, and classes primarily taught through a team teaching approach.

At Rocky Beach School, I was more likely to observe students and teachers interact informally rather than in a formal teaching or learning situation. In one student-teacher dyad at Rocky Beach that was perceived as not-helpful by the student, I had few opportunities to observe because the student chose not to be involved in many activities with the not-helpful teacher.

On the other hand, in the River City School, which placed a much stronger emphasis on students' participation in conventional classroom work, it was a slightly more difficult to observe informal interactions with teachers because time was very tightly scheduled. River City's lunchroom, teacher prep time, and study halls provided the greatest opportunities to observe informal interactions.

Data from observation were limited by several factors. First, I did not have enough time in either program to obtain a full sense of the teacher-student relationship because it took place in informal environments. To achieve this full understanding, I would have had to place myself in an unnoticeable spot while one-to-one discussions took place. For any kind of intimate discussion, my presence was a limiting factor. Second, I was not fully prepared for the range of interactions as I tried to observe a Rocky Beach classroom; with team teaching and a highly active classroom, I could not

easily hear or see all nuanced non-verbal communications (such as eye contact) between

the teacher-student pair I was observing.  My facility at doing this grew over time, and

the more traditional single-teacher River City classrooms were an easier context within

which to observe particular teacher-student pairs.


## Evidence of Academic Growth and Engagement

In addition to observing students and teachers interacting, I asked teachers to

provide evidence of academic growth and student engagement for the student(s) with

whom they were paired, in any subject they taught the student over the course of the

current academic year.  Differing approaches to academics in the two programs resulted

in different kinds of evidence.

At River City, teachers had portfolios of student work and identified trends in

grades and work accomplished more readily than teachers did at Rocky Beach, where the

emphasis was on the social, emotional and relational progress students were making.

Despite a more informal approach to academics, teachers at Rocky Beach had clear

perceptions of the level of student engagement and work, which provided evidence of

student growth based on student projects, individual pieces of work accomplished, and

narratives of student behavior in particular situations.


## Data Analysis and Interpretation Methods

To interpret the data for research questions one and three (What teacher qualities

do at-risk high school age students identify as necessary to establishing a helpful teacher-

student relationship? How do they perceive a relationship with an especially-helpful,

helpful or not-helpful teacher affects their engagement and academic growth and decreases or increases the likelihood of their dropping out of school?), I used a phenomenological approach (Seidman, 2006) which places student perceptions at the center of this study. To examine student and teacher interaction and relationship (the second research question), I looked through the lens of symbolic interactionism, employed by Blumer (1969), Hughes and Hughes (1952), Becker and McCall (1990), and Spradley (1979), who "directed their attention to the nature of interaction, the dynamic activities taking place between persons...focusing on the interaction itself as a unit of study" (Cohen & Manion, 1989).

The following steps guided my exploration of the student interviews: listening to all the interviews and transcribing them; reading and highlighting sections of interviews that related to my research questions; grouping similar student perceptions into clusters under each of the three research questions and sorting these into themes which students repeated most frequently, or which some students voiced with the strong conviction; reviewing my own field observations and teacher perceptions from their interviews; and teacher evidence of student academic growth and engagement. I also looked for student comments that would support, contradict, or supplement Rogers' theory (1969) of the three essential characteristics for an effective learning facilitator. As constructed the central themes that best reflected student perceptions of teacher characteristics and relationship, I began working on several vignettes of particular student-teacher dyads that strongly represented some of these themes. Because the whole process was recursive, I went back and forth between the central themes I was developing on helpful teacher characteristics, the feel of helpful relationships, the vignettes, and teacher reports and

commentary as these elements reinforced each other.  As I developed one area, I found it

necessary to revisit another.  For instance, when I explored student interviews, with

Rogers's concept of congruence in mind, I saw that students were divided on the

importance of teachers' emotional transparency; however, students were very insistent on

knowing about the teacher as a person beyond their role in the school.

## Encountering the Student Perspective

Upon completion of my field research, I had 22 and 27 hours of taped interviews

with students and teachers respectively, and 36 behavioral surveys.  I transcribed the

recordings into written transcripts using a voice-activated digital transcription process.

After creating the transcripts, I began coding them for statements that appeared to be

related to my three research questions as described above.

## First Research Question:  What are the Attributes of a Helpful and a Not-Helpful Teacher?

My first research question led me to explore the characteristics students attributed

to teachers they found especially helpful, helpful and not helpful.  I went through each

student interview several times looking for statements about a teacher whom this student

had rated as helpful, such as this one from a Rocky Beach student:

> So if you have a question instead of staying in front of the class and saying
> and answering your question in front of the whole class she will come up
> to you.  She will walk to you and talk to you directly so it's more, I guess
> it would be very personal. (SJO T2, p. 2)

I read each transcript systematically to identify all the characteristics students

attributed to teachers who were not deemed to be helpful.  In the following example, a

River City student discusses a not-helpful teaching style that contrasts with the statement by the previous student: "Like it was not the teachers that I didn't like at the high school it was the way that the classes were taught…I didn't have enough time to do the work that I was being given because I didn't know what it was that was being given…I was really dumbfounded about things" (SDM T1, p. 6).

I looked for statements that discussed a teacher's teaching style, disposition, and content mastery either in the context of an identified helpful or not-helpful relationship. Individual student perceptions were cross-checked with perceptions by the other students, and themes began to emerge. Eventually the themes themselves suggested categories. For instance, I divided teacher capacities into two areas: teacher capacities that facilitate learning, and teacher capacities that facilitate relational connections. This division helped me identify two types of listening that students saw in helpful teachers: in the first type, listening related to the teacher's ability to listen to student interests and passions and then connect them where possible to the academic content to be mastered; in the second type, listening involved the teacher's capacity to listen attentively and caringly to the non-academic issues that challenge students on a daily basis.

Gathering meaningful responses to the second research question, in which I asked students to identify qualities they associated with the relationships they had with teachers they designated as especially helpful, helpful and not helpful, was more challenging in part because most students' descriptive language about relationships is undeveloped. It was considerably easier for students to identify characteristics of teachers they liked or didn't like than it was to articulate how they experienced the relationship with that teacher.

In looking for student descriptors of a helpful or not-helpful relationship, I focused on how students felt and acted in the context of the relationship. For example, here are two statements by a Rocky Beach student that attracted my attention: "It's kind of hard to describe, but if you're friends with somebody you're more laid-back with them if they understand your humor. He [an especially-helpful teacher] understands when I make a wisecrack" (SWZ T1, p. 24). The same student then offered the counter example: "Back to high school. If I made a wisecrack they didn't have the leeway. No sense of humor. I think he [my teacher] knows I'm going to get something done" (SWZ T1, p. 45).

## Second Research Question: How Do At-Risk Students Describe a Relationship with an Especially-Helpful, Helpful And Not-Helpful Teacher?

As with the first research question, responses revealed that student perceptions of how a helpful relationship feels fall into four categories (open, close, collaborative, caring,).

As mentioned above, the behavioral survey was another tool to obtain student and teacher data on the experience of their relationship with each other. The survey asked about small measurable interactions that could identify the presence of rapport, care, connection and conflict in the relationship. I was able to ascertain more clearly the reliability of student answers to interview questions by comparing them with the survey answers.

My field observations also played a part in developing my own sense of the nature of the connection between paired teachers and students. By watching teachers and

students in formal and informal teaching or learning situations, I was able both to confirm the connections that students portrayed in their interviews and to bring my own perceptions and thoughts to their interactions.

Finally, throughout the student interviews I coded comments that related to the presence or absence in teachers and in relationship of any of Roger's (1983) three "helping" qualities of congruence, empathy, and positive regard.

When I clustered coded passages into overarching themes for each student and among the students (Seidman, 2006), I found few unanimously expressed themes. However, a majority of students mentioned or alluded in their own words to all of the discussed themes. For instance, although each student did not use the word "open" in their description of a helpful teacher relationship, many used the word "flexible" or "laid back", or they used "pressured" or "no leeway" to allude to how an open or a not-open relationship might feel to them.

The interview gave students a chance to look at themselves and identify salient personal characteristics such as emotional reactivity, learning style preferences, learning content preferences, and their schooling history. These perceptions helped me better understand and describe the characteristics and history that each student felt they brought to their relationship with the teacher. For instance, Robert, a Rocky Beach student, felt that he was very capable of telling how a teacher was feeling and didn't need or want teachers to disclose how they were feeling. On the other hand, Amelia, a River City student, felt that mutual disclosure was the primary way in which she could connect with a teacher, and if it didn't develop, she wouldn't engage.

**Third Research Question: How Do Helpful or Not-Helpful Teacher-Student Relationships Affect Engagement, Academic Growth, and the Likelihood of Dropping Out of School?**

In addition to interview data, I had information from the teachers and my own observations in teaching or learning situations to analyze. Without asking teachers to provide me with particular assessments, I gave them an opportunity to present me with evidence they felt was significant in determining whether a student had engaged or grown academically, or both, in the course of his or her being in class. Teachers offered products including examples of writing, thinking, and reading facility. A few discussed grades and attendance.

As mentioned earlier, River City teachers seemed more geared to collecting observable products, and Rocky Beach teachers tended to emphasize growth in the socio-emotional realm through their anecdotal recollections of a student. Because of the very different nature of the data I collected in this area, I could not provide reliable cross-comparisons between programs, but was obliged to accept the testimony of both teachers and students at face value. Students and teachers in this study did not disagree significantly on the extent of student academic growth and engagement. The other limiting factor relating to this research question was that because students designated only three of their current teachers as not-helpful, fewer data were obtained.

**<u>Encountering the Teacher's Perspective</u>**

Although I spent less time interviewing each teacher than I did each student, teacher interview questions about the student paralleled student interview questions about the teacher. After obtaining a brief working history of each teacher, I explored in detail how the teacher perceived his or her relationship with the student with whom he or she was paired. Each teacher filled out a behavioral survey with questions that paralleled the survey that I gave to students. The full teacher interview and survey are included as Appendix E and Appendix F.

**<u>Field Observations</u>**

While I was interviewing students and teachers, I was also observing them interact in and out of the classroom and recording the following discrete observable physical actions: physical proximity, engaging or avoidance of eye contact, student or teacher movement in relation to each other, frequency of interaction between pairs, and synchronization of activity such as laughing, talking at the same time or head-nodding. I recorded these interactions to see if patterns of behavior emerged for the dyad I was observing.

By observing student-teacher interactions both in class and in informal settings, I could determine if my perception of the relationship conformed to or contradicted what students were telling me through their interviews and surveys. I also used my field data observations to triangulate student and teacher perceptions of student academic engagement.

**<u>Trustworthiness</u>**

       The most important aspect of my data collection process was obtaining student buy-in to the study because the heart of my research is based on students' perceptions recounted to me in their own language. In order to ensure that I had student engagement with this study, I made sure that students whom I selected to interview understood that this was a completely voluntary process on their part, and that at any time, they could leave or could choose not to answer a question.

       I always allowed students to reschedule when they were not prepared to be interviewed or if they had conflicts with other activities. For students whose schedules were erratic, I employed a check-in protocol to confirm the status of their interview on the day that I encountered them in school. This procedure added to the flexible and informal feel I was seeking, and these students responded graciously to my check-ins with them, often making a quick plan to meet later in the day, or deciding it was not a good day, leaving me to find them on another day. The interviews themselves were most often conducted in a private space to ensure that the information was shared in private and would be protected as confidential. I encountered no questions from students asking who would be privy to what they had said.

       As I have recounted above, although one student chose to discontinue the interviews after the first one I had with her, the other nine completed their set of interviews with fewer than expected reschedules, and no no-shows (although I had expected some no-shows from this group as a whole). This level of student comfort and engagement suggests that the information they imparted to me was not coerced or

extricated for some extrinsic rewards or to avoid punishment, but rather came from a genuine desire by the students to offer insight and share their experiences.

Another element of trustworthiness built into this research design was the number of vantage points from which I could view the student interview data. In addition to the interviews about student perceptions, I had a written survey for each student in which they rated their two teachers, as well as a matched survey from the teachers. I had the opportunity to observe the student-teacher pairs in action and, through the interviews, to gain each teacher's perception of the student with whom he or she was paired. Finally, where it was available, I analyzed tangible evidence that teachers offered me of student growth and engagement.

Notably, there were no major incongruities between student interview, student and teacher survey, my observations of student teacher pairs, teacher interview, and teacher academic appraisal. No student claimed to be making great progress with a teacher who could demonstrate that the student, indeed, was not progressing. No students portrayed themselves as highly engaged in the classroom of a teacher who said the opposite. A deeper analysis reveals disagreements between students and teachers— especially with teachers rated as not-helpful—about conflict intensity and resolution. Here, however, a much tighter definition of conflict in the survey (as noted above) would have clarified the question because students appeared to perceive and label an interaction as a conflict at a subtler level than teachers did.

I was initially concerned that my analysis of the student and teacher interviews would be skewed by my own bias in favor of alternative education. Certainly the majority of teachers identified as not-helpful belonged to the students' past experience in

conventional high school, and for some students there were some very negative feelings attached to experiences in that previous system. However, as the interviews targeted specific relationships with specific current teachers, my own biases about the broader subject of alternative education were not called into play. Rather, I was pulled into the dynamic of the interactions with helpful teachers the students described, some of whom were more articulate than others.

Of greater significance, I was concerned that my own bias towards the importance of the teacher-student relationship that propelled my interest in the study in the first place would skew my analysis of what the students had to say. I believed that there would be a direct relationship between how helpful a teacher was perceived to be and how much a student felt they were learning with that teacher. I was delighted to find that the students offered me a very nuanced picture of how teacher relationships affect learning. Although a large majority agreed that the relationship was a very important part of their school experience, some did not think they necessarily learned more as the relationship improved from helpful to very helpful. And although all agreed they learned less from teachers they rated as not-helpful, at least two were able to find some academic benefit from current teachers they had rated as not-helpful. Thus, my original intuition that there would be a direct and constant relationship between the perceived helpfulness of a relationship and the degree to which students felt they were progressing was not borne out in a variety of cases.

As mentioned above, the majority of student commentary about not-helpful teachers, and not-helpful relationships came from their past experiences in conventional schools. It was not within the scope of my research to go back to these teachers and

obtain their impressions of the students I interviewed, nor was I able to obtain their

version of the relationship that evolved between them and these students. These missing

data limited my analysis of and conclusions about my second and third research questions

about not-helpful teachers. The data for these questions depended in some measure on

input from the teachers, on student and teacher behavioral surveys, and on my

observation of student-teacher interaction. For these former teachers, none of those data

were available.

The lack of a uniform and clear-cut correlation between student-identified teacher

helpfulness and student learning reassures me that I was not simply finding what I was

looking for in terms of study outcomes. Further, students added to my understanding of

teacher helpfulness by being very clear that helpful teachers not only had to know how to

connect with students but also had to have the capacity to help them engage and grasp the

academic materials they were being asked to understand.

## **Conclusion**

Student perceptions are the central focus of analysis for this study. I wanted to

see in a very fine-grained way how particular at-risk students looked at their connections

with particular teachers past and present, the extent to which they felt these relationships

affected their engagement and academic growth, and the sense they had of their ability

and capacity to complete school. The study uses methods from both phenomenological

(Seidman, 2006) and interactionist (Spradley, 1979) traditions to gather and analyze data.

My analysis of what students and teachers told me via interview, survey, and the Lazarus

Life Circles Technique (Lazarus) was focused by my three research questions and by the

three qualities critical to helpful learning facilitation that Carl Rogers outlines (Rogers, 1983).  Teacher perceptions, teacher evidence of student engagement and academic growth, and my observations of student-teacher interactions were designed to be triangulation points and to provide a context to understand fully student perceptions.

  The data for the helpful and especially helpful teacher and relationship were much richer and more abundant than the data for the not-helpful teacher and relationship.

Chapter 4

NINE STUDENTS AND TWO SCHOOLS: INTRODUCING THE LEARNERS

AND THEIR LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

**Introduction:  Student and School Profiles**

In this chapter, I provide profiles of the nine students involved in the study.  In each profile I offer a glimpse of the student's interests, background, and current status within his or her school.  I have organized the students according to the school they attend:  Robert, Fred, McNulty and Opal attend Rocky Beach School, and Amelia, Angel, Julia and Jenny attend River City School.  Tables 3.1 and 4.1 which provide key information such as student age, length in the program, and risk factors, precede the profiles.  I describe their alternative programs to give a sense of the learning environment in which each student is developing their perceptions of helpful teaching.

This information is intended to orient the reader to the students and their schools and to provide some of the necessary contextual information to frame the students' thoughts and feelings as they are presented in the chapters that follow.

This chapter will have two sections:

- Student Profiles
- School Profiles.

<u>**Section One: Student Profiles**</u>

<u>**Data: Student Backgrounds & Connections With Current Teachers**</u>

Table 4.1 illustrates key information about each student in the study including

their connection with current teachers.

**Table 4.1**. Student Data Including Connections with Current Teachers

| Student | School | Age | Gender | Current Grade Level | Time in Alternative Program | At Risk Factors | Number Especially-Helpful Teachers Chosen | Number Helpful Teachers Chosen | Number Not-Helpful Teachers Chosen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Robert | Rocky Beach | 19 | M | Senior | 1.8 years | Poor Attendance | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| Fred | Rocky Beach | 19 | M | Senior | 2 years | Anxiety, Behavior | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| McNulty | Rocky Beach | 18 | M | Senior | 5 months | Incarceration, Substance Abuse, Behavior | 5 | 2 | 0 |
| Opal | Rocky Beach | 16 | F | Sophomore | 1.8 years | Anxiety | 3 | 4 | 0 |
| Eric | Rocky Beach | 17 | M | Junior | 3 months | Poor Attendance, Anxiety | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| Amelia | River City | 17 | F | Junior | 5 months | Truancy, Dropping Out, Poor Grades, | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Angel | River City | 18 | M | Junior | 1.4 years | Substance Abuse, truancy dropping out Tardiness, Homeless | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Julia | River City | 18 | F | Senior | 1.4 years | Legal Infractions, Teen Parent | 2 | 0 | 3 |
| Jenny | River City | 17 | F | Freshman | 5 months | Substance abuse, Truancy, Dropping out, Parental criminality | 2 | 2 | 1 |

The students in this study are at the older end of adolescent development: Eight

are 17 or older and only one is 16 years old (see Table 4.1). They are close to completing

their high school academic careers; four seniors, three juniors, one sophomore, and one

freshman make up the group. The group is split between females (four) and males (five),

and the risk factors the group presents are moderate relative to profiles one would expect of at-risk students.

However, these students were clearly at risk of not completing high school before they entered their alternative programs. A third of the students had already dropped out of school once. All but one had multiple at-risk factors including coming from lower income families (6), facing acute challenges such as homelessness (1), living independently while being a teen parent (1), and having mental health and substance abuse issues (3).

It is worth noting that, despite what one might expect, the students who have attended the alternative program the longest do not identify a significantly greater number of their teachers as helpful. This fact corroborates data from the interviews, in which most of the students described making a connection quickly with their helpful teachers.

**Students Attending Rocky Beach School: Robert, Fred, McNulty, Opal, and Eric**

The students profiled below all attend Rocky Beach School, an off-site, public alternative program working with 35 students who have not thrived in conventional school settings. Situated near a major Maine city, Rocky Beach is located in a natural, non-commercial setting. The school has a highly experiential focus and a low staff-to-student ratio. All core classes are team taught by the four primary teachers, assisted by four educational technicians. Teachers in the study have taught at Rocky Beach for an average of six years.

*Robert* is six feet tall and has a muscular build. When he talks, his words slip out softly and smoothly. Born and raised in rural Maine, he has watched the woods and

fields where he's hunted for years be decimated by development.  He views high school as a necessary evil but feels that he and his family have been unfairly targeted by teachers and the administration.  His family has no telephone or access to the Internet.  He thinks school should not interfere with home-life, and refuses to do homework.  The high point of his year is hunting season, during which he takes two weeks off from school.

Robert felt pushed, disrespected, and rushed in conventional high school.  His desire is to master material and to turn in work of which he can feel proud.  He did not feel appreciated by his teachers in high school.  He comments: "I'd rather fail than pass in something that's not genuine" (SWZ T1, p. 10).  After some serious medical problems that he felt weren't taken seriously at the high school, Robert applied to the Rocky Beach alternative program.  He is clear that if this alternative had not been open to him, he would have dropped out of school.  Despite his outwardly brusque and mature appearance, Robert is highly sensitive to others' behavior and judgments towards him.  He appears eager to talk about his experience in both alternative and conventional learning contexts.

Robert carries himself with dignity; he is consistently genuinely respectful in his remarks.  In his alternative program, he has found a group of adults who value him, who look to him for his leadership qualities, and who are clearly focused on his post-graduate success.  After three years at Rocky Beach, Robert graduated three months after our interviews had been completed.  In recognition of his quiet strength, he received the "John Wayne Award" at his graduation.

*Fred's* transformation at Rocky Beach from a highly volatile, relatively unengaged student to a learner willing to work on his literacy represents an iconic change

that most alternative programs prize. In Fred's case, he works with a teacher who "gets him," and everything else seems to flow from that perception. Fred is a laconic non-reader who, even in a program for students who don't fit, doesn't fit easily with his peers. At all-school meetings he generally sits outside the community circle often with his "John Lennon" sunglasses on, tilting backwards in his folding chair. He is very much there and paying attention, but also not quite there.

Fred's willingness to participate in something as verbal and intimate as the interviews for this study is a testament to his self-confidence and willingness to help his school. Fred will talk along with me in the interview, sometimes threading his words in with mine, so that it's difficult to tease them out for transcription. He is also aware of the times when he isn't giving me much information, at one point apologizing, and another time laughingly exclaiming that we had gotten to the "don't know" questions of the interview.

Repeatedly pointing out that he doesn't like the "touchy-feely" approach that characterized his last school placement, Fred is clear that there are effective and ineffective ways to "handle me" when he gets agitated. Fred's volatility does not come out in aggression towards other students or teachers, but is more highly internal and impulsive. Through his positive three-year connection with one teacher, and the generally nurturing atmosphere of his school, he has come to manage his behavior better, while tackling more securely the academic challenges that constitute his road to graduation.

Fred's re-married mother is a strong support for him and an important figure in his life. He owns his own vehicle and takes great pride in its upkeep. He was the only

student in the entire school to speak at graduation, when he focused on the help he

received from his teacher.

*McNulty* is a relatively new student, who just joined Rocky Beach this year.  He

has ascended quickly to the leadership of his peer group and within the program.  When I

first saw him in action, he was running the School's morning meeting with aplomb.

Sporting his sideways hat and bandana, McNulty's large physical presence and

charismatic personality place him closest to the stereotype one might have of students

who populate alternative programs.

McNulty's previous school was in the youth jail.  He has ongoing issues with

substance abuse and he hasn't been in a mainstream classroom for years.  He continues to

be connected to both the criminal justice system and, by rumor, to a local gang.

McNulty speaks repeatedly of how important it is to respect adults, and how he

has enjoyed being a role model in his new school.  He is one of the few students to cite

his parents' sayings, e.g., "don't act your shoe size, act your age," and to state that adults

are always right, so why bother arguing with them? He is the only student in the study

who seems to have a major and ongoing unresolved conflict with one of the alternative

program staff.  His divorced parents appear supportive but are not able to provide much

structure in his life.  Displaying his outstanding social intelligence, McNulty was the only

student in the program to welcome me on many days by shaking hands and saying "Hi."

Yet on other days, he totally ignored me.

McNulty speaks rapidly in our interviews and often charges ahead in answering a

question after misunderstanding what I have asked him.  He is easy to talk with, but at

times I feel that he is telling me what he thinks I want to hear in order to make a good impression. He graduated in June three months after our interviews were completed.

*Opal* loves animals. At home she raises chickens, tends a large fish tank, and has numerous other pets. Despite her considerable artistic talents and interests in fauna, she was never able to find a comfortable niche in conventional school, experiencing her days feeling overwhelmed by impossible tasks assigned by teachers who simply did not know how to teach her. Opal is of slight build, is quiet, and is not given to aggressive or attention-getting behavior. She is the kind of student who could fade easily from view in a large setting if no one was paying attention to her. In fact she was frequently absent in conventional school because she found that excused absences allowed her both to stay out of school and to catch up with previous work that was due.

Opal's mom appears to be a supportive adult in her life and has helped her look for and try schools that would work better for her than her conventional one. Opal has attended Rocky Beach for the last two years and has two years until graduation. Where she may have been invisible or an enigma in her conventional school, Opal is greatly appreciated at Rocky Beach. Her art work adorns the school. As one walks up the front stairs of her school, one is greeted by a blow-up of her drawing of two fish intertwined with each other in a Yin-Yang composition—with definite Escher-like overtones—at the top of the stair landing.

Opal has connected strongly with a female teacher who seems to have the right blend of patience and enthusiasm to help Opal feel safe and confident. Although Opal is regularly quite withdrawn and turned inwards, she is consistent about taking part in our interviews and is exceptionally thoughtful and thorough in her answers. More than any

other student whom I interviewed, she understands that I am looking for the particulars of her experience, and often cannot come up with responses with which she is completely satisfied.  Her responses are often accompanied by a slightly nervous laughter that flitters in and out of the conversation.

*Eric*, another relatively recent arrival to Rocky Beach, is a talented musician and a relatively unsuccessful academic student.  His family, more middle class than most of the other students at his school, has moved frequently.  However, now they seem committed to supporting his interests as well as his schooling.  Eric found conventional school anxiety-provoking; at the same time he was capable of performing music in front of audiences of 100 or more people, including high school assemblies.  He missed many more than the 10 days allowed for excused absences at the conventional school and fell far behind in his work.  He does not seem to struggle much with anxiety in his current placement.  The classes are small (usually fewer than 10 students) and he can easily keep up with the academic load.

Eric, unlike many of the other males in the program, does not act out.  He *acts in.* He still misses school fairly frequently, performs below his potential, according to his teachers, and views some of his classes as unorganized.  He is of average height and weight for his age and is completely non-threatening.  He has not made strong bonds with teachers or students, but is generally respected due to his musical talents and his ability to stay out of melees when they occur.

During our interviews, I experienced a lack of buy-in from Eric.  He was relatively friendly and jovial, but I had the sense that his reason for participating was primarily to avoid class work.  His comments are not widely represented in data that I

explore because they often seemed to skim the surface of the questions and we did not have the time to establish a connection that would have allowed us to progress beyond that level of response. Eric speaks in a quiet monotone; the passion, the color, and the emotion of his life are expressed by the connection his fingers make with the strings of his guitar.

**Students Attending the River City School:  Amelia, Angel, Julia, and Jenny**

Like Rocky Beach, the River City School is a public, off-site alternative program and works with a population of 45 students. With the exception of "Make-Up Fridays," the program follows the home district's class schedule closely. River City's focus is on providing a nurturing relational environment for its students, none of whom have found success in the conventional school setting. Classes are small and the program has a particular focus on working with teen parents. Two of the four primary teachers have worked at River City a total of 22 years.

*Amelia* is a recent arrival at River City. Upon first meeting her, I was bewildered about why she felt unsuited to conventional schools and what prevented her from succeeding in a conventional school setting. Although Amelia is someone I would expect to see graduate eventually, her strong desire for authentic connection put her at high risk of dropping out of school. She demonstrated this by missing an enormous amount of school (many more than the 10 days allowed for excused absences) at the conventional high school.

Now firmly ensconced at River City, Amelia seems bright, adaptable, and motivated to finish school. She is one of the few students in her school who owns a car,

and comes from a more middle class family than do her peers.  An uncle seems to have been a big help with some schoolwork; other than noting his role, Amelia does not mention her home life.

Amelia is particularly motivated by the idea that teachers and students need to develop a certain level of mutual knowledge and acceptance of each other to enhance the learning potential of any situation.  She did not find this mutuality at the conventional high school.  In her first two months at River City, she almost dropped out before realizing that the teachers did care, and that they were willing to be more open to her than were the teachers in the conventional school.  They also wanted her to give the program a chance.

Amelia enjoys the interview process.  She is generally cheery, discursive, and interested in the questions she is asked.  More than many of the students, she seemed to become comfortable quickly with the interview process and to participate without self-consciousness or reservation.  Amelia appeared to be flourishing in her program when I interviewed her, and had made a strong connection with at least one teacher.

*Angel* was referred to River City after a bout of homelessness disrupted his efforts in conventional high school.  He speaks quickly and is in constant motion during our interviews, rolling the interview ball or playing with a pencil or pen.  Angel is highly self-aware and often comments on his comments.  Perhaps more than any of the other interviewees, Angel is quick to acknowledge his negative behavior.  Coming from New York City three years ago, Angel has found it challenging to adjust to life in a medium-sized Maine city.

Angel identifies with what is a non-mainstream culture for Maine, in his case Hispanic. He loves learning about Spain, and enjoys working on his Spanish. Angel's mother has serious mental health issues and relies on Angel; before Angel goes to school, he is responsible for preparing breakfast for his younger brother and seeing him to the school bus. Angel invariably arrives at River City a half hour to an hour late. Angel's artistic sense radiates from the unusual "gold-plated" backpack he wears to school. He speaks excitedly of how much he has learned from his teachers at River City. One he sees as a nurturer; the other, a mentor. He is so tuned in to both these teachers that I witnessed him regularly finishing their sentences in class.

Despite the confidence he has gained in himself as a learner, Angel is unclear if he will be able to stay the course and complete high school, even with the supports he has at River City. His half-day experience in the technical school has not been entirely successful, and as a result of consistent tardiness, he may not receive credit for his work in those courses. Because of his volatility, lack of home support, and economic status, Angel is at risk of much more than not making it through school. He has one more year in school before he is due to graduate.

*Julia* immigrated to the United States two years ago from Central America. She had previously attended mainstream programs in her country of origin and speaks in an English patois that is not always easy to understand. Julia describes her decision to come to River City as a choice to concentrate on school and her two-year-old child, and not to become overly involved in sports as she would have in the conventional school.

Julia is an effusive, extroverted young black mother. Laughter peals out of her frequently and I find myself laughing with her during our interviews. The center of

Julia's life is her two-year-old son.  She lives independently in an apartment with two other teen mothers.  Her father lives in a nearby town and her mother has remained home in Central America.  At the point of our interview, she had not heard from her mom for several months.

Julia learns through discussion and argumentation.  She challenges her teachers constantly as a way of engaging them and the subject matter.  She loves a good argument and is willing to listen to the teacher's perspective and maintain her own opposing perspective in good humor.  Once she has decided that a teacher is trustworthy, she is willing to work hard to meet that teacher's standards, but she constantly shifts between resistance and compliance in her relational approach.  One of her teachers describes her as a woman-child because her behavior oscillates regularly between maturity and childishness.

Without an environment that provides her with high levels of support and understanding, Julia would have been highly unlikely to finish high school through the conventional route.  She was at high risk of becoming a dropout, although my sense is that she would have found a way to complete her education eventually if that had been necessary.  Julia graduated in June following our interviews and received heartfelt commendations from the staff at River City.

*Jenny* has just joined the River City alternative program this fall after not being enrolled in school for some time.  Her family has encountered deeply troubling challenges this semester, and she has faced serious health issues in the past year.  She is under five feet tall and carries herself with a certain solidity that projects a gritty determination to get on with, and through, school.  Both her physical and personal

demeanor suggest that she wishes to break out of a downward spiral that has already led her to leave school once before graduation.

In the course of our interviews I have witnessed two sides to Jenny. When her family was in chaos she held her mouth in a grim straight line, never making eye contact, and rarely smiling. When things were going a little better outside of school, she had a sparkling smile, made direct eye contact, and was more open to participating in the interviews than I would have suspected.

Jenny's determination has won her support from teachers at River City. The staff recognizes the enormous challenges she faces every afternoon when she returns home. Despite her apparent shyness, she has found a teacher in whom she can confide, someone she trusts and enjoys learning from. She has a work ethic that includes finishing her work at school. School *is* work for Jenny because she enjoys neither reading nor writing. In conventional school, Jenny appeared to have no connection to any teachers or adults. When she encountered teachers who she felt were "mean," she would drop their classes, a behavior that eventually led to her dropping out entirely. Although discussion is not a strong point of hers and her nature is reclusive, Jenny is a responsive and thoughtful participant in the interview process. Her answers to questions are expressed simply and directly.

### Section Two:  School Profiles

Students and teachers in the study came from two alternative programs that are focused on working with students who are not thriving in the conventional school system. The programs are roughly the same size and function in mid-sized (for Maine) school

districts. Rocky Beach is in a district of 2,729 students and River City's district has 3,700 students. Although each program has four lead teachers and one principal, the Rocky Beach School has at least twice as many adults on campus each day because most classes are team-taught with an educational technician. The profiles of each school should provide a general idea of the teaching and learning environments of the teachers and students.

## Rocky Beach Profile:  School for Opal, McNulty, Robert, Eric, and Fred

Rocky Beach is an alternative program in a large, southern Maine school district serving students primarily from within the district but also acting as a regional program for 10 or more other southern Maine districts. The program's location is off-campus in a large three-story building that it shares with several other programs. Although established in 1984, Rocky Beach has only operated in its new location for three years. This location is enviably close to both a metropolitan area and areas of great natural beauty.

The program serves 32 students from grades 7 to 12 who "have experienced extensive intervention for behavior and emotional problems and/or are unmotivated and unsuccessful in their present academic placement" (School website, confidential to protect identities). Students who have special education diagnoses can attend as well.

The program describes its approach as having "elements of Day Treatment programming, Therapeutic Adventure activities, flexible scheduling, and small-group settings" (School website). Every student has a personal learning plan.

Rocky Beach's building is surrounded by an extraordinary natural environment that includes large stands of White and Black Pine and Spruce trees, rocky and sandy beaches within walking distance, and picturesque views of an island-dotted Maine bay.

Upon entering the area of the building that houses Rocky Beach, one is welcomed by hand-made signs and quotations on fluorescent poster board hanging from the walls. One sign states, "All cruelty springs from weakness!  Don't be weak." Another welcomes us "to the Rocky Beach School: The way school should be," with a quotation beneath attributed to Mark Twain: "Kindness is the language the deaf can hear and the blind can see."  A smiling life-size cardboard cutout of President Obama greets us in the "office" of the principal, who has a small desk in the hallway outside the administrative office.

From the fluorescent signs and the works of student art to the blackboards plastered with notes, masks, and assignments, one experiences the intense energy of the place.  There are four classrooms, one administrative space, one counseling space, and a large group room in which morning and afternoon meetings take place.  Students and staff are active and engaged in a welter of activities that it took me some time to understand.

Rocky Beach's daily schedule resembles conventional high schooling in very few ways.  Most students' days begin when they are picked up at home up by one of five small minivans.  Some students drive to school.  The school day starts at 10:00 when all students and staff gather in the large group room to eat a snack and hold morning meeting.  Morning meeting is facilitated by students; it includes informational relational communications and a question for all students and staff to answer, such as "what is your

favorite fast food?" or "What can you do to make Rocky Beach a better school to attend?"

A one-hour block of "math and literacy" classes, with students in their "advisory" groups follows morning meeting. The rest of the day is divided into three 40-minute blocks of classes, including one 40-minute elective period at the end of the day, lunch, and a final 15-minute all-school debrief when the school reassembles as a community to reflect on the day and sometimes undertakes a group building exercise.

Two days a week, students spend a half-day and a full day in the community on a variety of service, field trip, and outdoor projects. Students choose all electives, field trips, and academic courses with the exception of the math and literacy classes. "High scoring" students having first choice of the classes.

The school operates with a point system that is laid out in gently humorous terms. Numerical scores for students' behavior are based on perceptions by the staff: (a) Have a pulse and you are breathing; (b) Some some, so so; (c); Making it, nothing above and beyond; and (d) Totally awesome you rock! Staff members score students in the following areas: (a) Going above and beyond expectations, (b) Being where you are supposed to be, (c) Treating others with respect and kindness, and (d) Being safe. At the end of each day, a student receives a cumulative score as determined by the staff in the meeting, and at the end of the term these scores are transformed into student grades.

School staff members include "special education teachers, alternative/regular education teachers, education technicians, a licensed counselor, administrative support and transportation support staff" (School website). All classes are team taught, and several of the bus drivers remain at the program to volunteer their help during the day.

For some of the students, in particular Fred and McNulty from the student interviewees, relationships with the drivers can be very supportive. Other adults, including student teachers, social work interns, and community members volunteering time to teach a class or a workshop, are frequently present during the school day. The administrative assistant provides transportation for students to and from school when needed, has close connections with some students and many graduates, and has been with the program since its inception. In one class that I observed, there were two teachers, 10 students, and five other adults, including me.

A climate of fluidity, energy and nurturance pervades the entire school community. Students learn in small classes, most of which were self-selected. Most of these classes change every six weeks because pairs of teachers come up with new ideas and new curricula roughly six times a year. As one of the staff pointed out to me when I first began trying to set up interviews with students, "It is almost not worth it to make appointments with kids because things change so much" (Observations journal). Students can gravitate to the classes taught by teachers with whom they are most compatible.

Although the staff is committed to student growth in academic areas, the primary focus of the program is relational and behavioral. Much staff meeting discussion focuses on explosive in-school events that have to be addressed for safety, as well as the out-of-school challenges these students routinely face: homelessness, parental neglect, and so forth. Rocky Beach's relational and behavioral focus made it more difficult for me to collect compelling, objective evidence concerning students' academic progress beyond

student and teacher perception.  Behavioral indicators of school engagement and connection were less difficult to ascertain.

The Rocky Beach School is an energized juggernaut of a program, continually shaping and reshaping itself to best meet the needs of the students and the interests of the staff.  Highly personalized, humorous and irreverent, the core curriculum nevertheless takes learning seriously but packages academics in highly non-school-like frameworks, such as a history class titled *Songs of the Sixties*, and a science class based on a forensic investigation.  Strong emphasis is placed on activities outside of the School, including service work, field trips, expeditionary programming, and community-based experiences.  Rocky Beach leverages its high adult-student ratio to make the program a safe container for the high concentration of students with track records of acting out.

**River City Profile:  School for Amelia, Julia, Angel, and Jenny**

The River City School currently comprises two programs: a teen parent program that was started in 1974, and a district alternative high school program that was begun in 1987.  Serving up to 40 students primarily from a mid-sized (population of more than15,000), central Maine city's school district, with some students coming from contiguous districts, the River City program places a strong emphasis on serving parenting teens.

River City is located off-campus on a main street within a complex of buildings owned and operated by a local non-profit organization.  Next door to the program is a day care center that serves many of the children of teen parents who are students at River

City. The program has been at its new location since 2003 when the teen parent program and the alternative high school program joined forces.

The School's building has a plain exterior with nothing indicating that it houses an educational program. Walking into River City School, my initial impression was one of compactness. Located on two floors of a two-story building, River City has four academic spaces: a library, an auditorium, two administrative spaces, one counseling office, and a group meeting room. The hallways are small and the rooms are small; it is tight space for 40 kids and seven or eight adults.

The flow of students following the schedule from room to room is purposeful, and classes are held in what appears to be a fairly conventional format: The teacher is at the center of the action and the students participate in question and answer. The classroom spaces are downstairs and because of the small, high windows, they have a slightly underground feel to them. Rectangular tables, in the center of the room and often arranged in a horseshoe shape, are ringed by write-boards on the walls and by banks of computers.

Projects on poster board, drawings, paintings and collages from the art class decorate the walls of each classroom and the hallways. These works are mixed with commercially produced signs that articulate aspects of the school's philosophy. upstairs there is a much more home-like feel in all the rooms I visited. The group room, the director's office, and the counseling space all have comfortable couches. The lunchroom is a miniature version of a school lunchroom and food is transported from the conventional school's cafeteria daily.

The River City School's schedule follows the alternating principle of the conventional high school: "red" days alternate with "white" days and each day has a different class schedule. Students have two one-and-a-half-hour classes in the morning, lunch for thirty minutes, and then three 40- to 45-minute classes in the afternoon. Fridays are Make-Up days when students can come in to catch up on work they have missed or need to re-do. Fridays serve as a kind of super-tutorial day in which students have a chance to work one on one with their teachers. At all other times, informal time with teachers is limited to before and after school, lunch, and some study halls.

The staff at the River City School is composed of four certified teachers, one program director, a licensed clinician, and an administrative assistant. A part-time math teacher joins the program several times a week. Two of the teachers came from the teen parent program and have a strong orientation to this subgroup (comprising roughly a quarter of the school's population).

The School's primary focus as stated on their website is:

Major emphases are placed on the following areas: 1. Caring Atmosphere—Our students know that we care about them as individuals as well as students. 2. Self-esteem—We feel that we must do everything in our power to build students' self-esteem. When students respect themselves, they will respect others. Without self-esteem, there is no courage and confidence to face and conquer life's unending challenges. 3. Respect—Everyone here deserves dignity and consideration. In many cases, as we work together, respect will grow. However, everyone deserves recognition for his or her unique strengths. 4. Responsibility—Students must be responsible for themselves and their actions. They must learn to choose and live appropriately with those choices.

The philosophy of the program is to:

Identify those students whose needs, as directed by past educational and personal experiences, cannot be met by a traditional educational experience. Once these students are identified, it then becomes our responsibility to design and implement an educational option that addresses their needs. (School website)

Although the school has the stamp of the conventional system on it, the teachers, director, and counselor operate in a subtly non-conventional mode. As mentioned above, one entire day of the week is devoted to helping students catch up and give them one to one time to interact. Personal conversations and observations between teachers and students pepper academic classes while the lesson plan is being worked through, creating a personal and comfortable interactional environment. A student who is having a hard day is allowed to curl up on a couch, wrapped cocoon-like in a blanket, and fall asleep. People seem to know each other well and the atmosphere is nurturing; at the same time, teachers expect students to complete work and do it well. Everyone appears to be keenly aware of the extraordinary challenges that these students face outside of school.

Teachers in River City, although primarily interested in the success of their students as whole human beings, were able to marshal evidence of "academic progress" in part because of the pressure from the school district to operate as similarly to the conventional high school as possible.

The River City School is a carefully coordinated program that has implemented a highly personal approach to alternative education. Students are expected to complete a quite recognizable curriculum through class work that is intelligently personalized and adapted to each student's needs and capacities. In addition to specializing in working with teen parents (both male and female), the School is committed to helping students with their own mental health and real life problem-solving through on-site counseling, close relationships with primary teachers, and issue-related prevention courses and workshops. The school's autonomy is constantly under pressure from the demands—

such as the need to mirror the larger high school's schedule—of the larger system within which it operates.

**Table 4.2.** Rocky Beach and River City at a Glance

| Rocky Beach | River City | Both Schools |
|---|---|---|
| Serves 35+ students | Serves 45 students | |
| Highly experiential, field trips, community service (Thursday & Friday) | More conventional academic expectations, with focus on teen parents | Counselors on site |
| Morning whole school meetings – group work is a focus | Friday make-up days | Highly relationally-oriented |
| Six teachers and four educational technicians | Four teachers | Off Campus |
| All core classes team taught | Core classes taught by one teacher | Teaching staff averages 6+ years in program |
| Shares building with other programs | Building is dedicated to River City | Highly individualized learning plans |
| Non-conventional schedule | Follows school district schedule (except Fridays) | |
| One full and one half day of every week spent outside of school building | Few field trips, most teaching/learning done in school building | |
| Students choose most classes | Students are assigned to classes | |
| Eric, Fred, Opal, McNulty, Robert | Angel, Amelia, Jenny, Julia | |

Table 4.2 focuses on key aspects of each program. The key similarities between Rocky Beach and River City are their intention to serve an at-risk population in a small, off-site learning environment; their highly committed, long-term staff who are adept at individualizing student learning; and their provision of on-site counseling.

The programs differ considerably in curriculum delivery, student choice of classes, and weekly schedules. River City appears much more conventional and Rocky Beach follows a highly experiential curriculum in which student choice is more explicit and the staff-student ratio is much lower.

**Chapter 5**

**WHAT MAKES A HELPFUL TEACHER HELPFUL: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS
OF ESPECIALLY-HELPFUL, HELPFUL AND NOT-HELPFUL TEACHERS**

**<u>Introduction</u>**

In this chapter I explore the nine students' perceptions of behavior, attributes and

dispositions of their especially-helpful, helpful, and not-helpful teachers, based on their

experience with past teachers and two current teachers.  I have gathered data from

interviews with the students about their past schooling history, about two current teachers

they identified as especially-helpful (10), helpful (5), or not helpful (3); from a survey

they completed about their interaction patterns with these teachers (see Appendix D); and

from their responses to the Life Circles Technique, a relationship gauging activity

(Lazarus, 1989) undertaken in relation to these teachers (see Appendix A).

To simplify the analysis below, I include especially-helpful and helpful teachers

in one category—the helpful teacher category—and place the not-helpful teachers in their

own category.  As explained in Chapter 3, these categories are based on student response

to the Connections Survey (see Appendix G), in which students placed staff in one of

these three categories.

I conclude Chapter 5 with a discussion of how and why I categorized the themes.

**<u>Helpful and Not-Helpful Teacher Behaviors, Attributes, and Dispositions</u>**

In this section I explore my first research question: What teacher qualities do at-

risk high school age students identify as necessary to establishing a helpful teacher-

student relationship? To arrive at the common themes, I read through each student interview and highlighted statements that seemed significant to all three of my research questions.  I reviewed the interviews a second time to determine the dimensions of teacher helpfulness the students discussed and the ways in which these dimensions were repeated within and across interviews.  Finally, I analyzed the collected student statements to look for clear thematic similarities.

As I noted earlier, in the review of literature, Pianta (1999) describes the relationship between teacher and student as a system in which each partner brings his or her own attributes to each interaction.  I explore the students' perceptions of the attributes that teachers bring to their interactions with the students within and outside of the classroom.  I have divided the discussion in Chapter 5 into two parts: the first part analyzes the teacher's role as academic learning facilitator; the second part discusses the teacher's interaction attributes and capabilities that contribute to helpful connections with students.

Table 5.1 shows the students' assessment of the relative helpfulness of designated teachers at Rocky Beach and at River City.  Table 5.2 provides basic information about these teachers.

**Table 5.1**.  Relative Helpfulness of Teachers

| Student | Teacher Identified by Letter | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **A** | **B** | **C** | **D** | **E** | **F** | **G** | **H** | **I** |
| **Rocky Beach** | | | | | | | | | |
| Eric | | | Especially Helpful | | Helpful | | | | |
| Fred | | | | Especially Helpful | | | | Not Helpful | |
| McNulty | | | | | Especially Helpful | Especially Helpful | | | |
| Opal | | | Especially Helpful | | | | | Helpful | |
| Robert | | | | | Especially Helpful | | | Helpful | |
| **River City** | **A** | **B** | | | | | **G** | | **I** |
| Amelia | | Especially Helpful | | | | | | | Not Helpful |
| Angel | | Especially Helpful | | | | | | | |
| Jenny | Helpful | | | | | | Not Helpful | | Especially Helpful |
| Julia | Especially Helpful | | | | | | | | |

**Table 5.2**.  Teacher Characteristics

| | Teacher Identified by Letter | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Characteristics** | **A** | **B** | **C** | **D** | **E** | **F** | **G** | **H** | **I** |
| Gender | Female | Female | Female | Male | Male | Male | Male | Male | Male |
| No. years in alternative school | 14 | 6 | 2 | 7 | 5 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 3 |
| Time with student | Julia: 1.7 years Jenny: 0 .7 years Angel: 1.7 years | Angel: 1.7 years Amelia: 8 months Angel: 1.7 years | Eric: 8 months Opal: 8 months ? | Fred: 3.7 years | Robert: 3.7 years McNulty: 8 months | McNulty: 8 months | Julia: 8 months | Fred: 1.7 years Robert: 3.7 years Opal: 3.7 years | Jenny: 8 months Amelia: 8 months |
| No. designated by students as: Not Helpful Helpful Especially Helpful | 2 1 | 1 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 2 | 1 2 |

Tables 5.1 and 5.2 shed an interesting light on the connections between students

and teachers in this study, particularly in terms of gender and of length of time at a

particular school.  Both male and female students designated only male teachers as not

helpful. Teachers who had worked less than five years in the alternative school were more frequently designated not helpful, although some were rated especially helpful and helpful. In contrast, teachers with five or more years of experience all received designations as helpful or especially helpful.

It is of interest to note that two teachers were designated as both helpful and not helpful by different students. This finding supports Pianta's (1999) systems-based analysis that suggests that each student's perception is the outcome of the interplay of his or her characteristics with those of a specific teacher. The lack of correlation between the length of time students have known a teacher and their designation of the teachers as helpful or not helpful was unexpected. This finding, too, is supported by data from student interviews that, in most cases, helpful relationships were good from the initial meeting.

**Teacher Capacities that Facilitate Academic Learning**

First I describe the prevalence of the particular teacher capacity among the student interviewees, and then I discuss the capacity itself, with representative quotes from the student interviews. I also link each capacity, where appropriate, to one of Rogers's (1981) three essential abilities for effective facilitation of learning. A thorough discussion of the correspondence of my findings to Rogers's findings is found in Chapter 8. I will end each subsection with a brief conclusion.

**Breaking it Down**. Seven of the nine students stressed the importance of having a teacher break down a learning task into understandable sections. Below, McNulty and

Opal explain how this behavior is helpful and Robert and Angel describe how the absence of this behavior is a serious detriment to their learning.

McNulty, who sees himself as having special needs as a learner, describes what a helpful teacher needs to do for him: "Sit down with me.  Keep on telling me what to do.  Help me out.  I like to do stuff over and over until I get it, so I'm kind of an alternative learner at an alternative school" (SUU T1, p. 3).  Further on, he continues: "I like alternative learning where they get up and *show* you how to do it…, I have to have somebody help me and show me so I can make progress" (SUU T1, p. 23).  McNulty is expressing his need to work closely with a teacher on the assigned content, to have the process demonstrated, and to have many chances to practise a procedure before he can integrate it.

Because Opal has difficulty learning in groups, means that one-to-one conversation during a class is critical for her progress.  She illustrates eloquently how her especially-helpful teacher achieves this:

> She'll come right up to you and talk and answer your question….(SJO T2, p. 2).  So if you have a question instead of staying in front of the class and saying and answering your question in front of the whole class, *she will come up to you.  She will walk to you and talk to you directly* [emphasis added].  So it's more I guess it would be *very personal* [emphasis added]. (SJO T2, p. 9)

And a little further in the interview Opal adds**, "**That's why I like it when they come over to you and really sit down and explain it more thoroughly" (SJO T2, p. 9).

In order for Opal to benefit from the class, she needs to have the teacher close by to answer her questions directly and immediately.  Her need to have the material reviewed methodically by the teacher to make sure she understands is echoed by Eric, who states, "In math and lit … she [his especially-helpful teacher] would make sure that

we understood before we went on (SQI T1, p. 20). He continues, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, she tries to go through things thoroughly and make[s] sure that you understand" (SQI T1, p. 7).

Students highlighted fast pace and not being sure that the student understands the material as not-helpful teacher qualities. Robert goes back to his experience at the high school: "*They throw the papers in front of you* and they say 'work' and the process doesn't go through" (SWZ T1, p. 13). He comments further on the experience of trying to keep pace with the flow of information coming from a teacher: "At the high school they would put up on the board and if you didn't catch up with the board you will be behind and that's it" (SWZ T1, p. 5).

Like Robert, Angel did not thrive on the disorienting rush of assignments in his previous high school. He describes how he could not keep up in that school:

> Like it was not the teachers that I didn't like at the high school, it was the way that the Classes were taught....I didn't have enough time to do the work that I was being given because I didn't know what it was that was being given....I was really dumbfounded about things....You have this chapter to read and this question and another quiz in the next class and make sure you remember that. And I'm trying to remember all those things and…it baffled me. (SDM T1, p. 6)

Robert describes how a teacher's concern for *covering curriculum* reduces her attention to what students are actually learning from the information "covered":

> If they helped more, and [had] gotten the class moving….*They think the more they do the more they* [students] *learn* but it's not like this. They could go through half the stuff that they would cover in a year as long as the kid[s] learned it, it would be better than going through everything but the kids not learning it. (SWZ T1, p. 27)

Thus, Robert's teacher needs to be sensitive to both the material their students are learning and how much of the curriculum has been "covered". Given Robert's proclivity to understand things in a more than cursory fashion, he values a thorough understanding

more than a broad overview.  For Robert to learn optimally, teachers need to move at a careful and thorough pace so that he can dig into the material.

In closing, students in this study value a teacher who can take the material and break it down into smaller parts so that it is comprehensible.  For some students, such as Opal, that the approach has to be personal; for others, such as McNulty, the process may have to be repeated a number of times before the student "gets it".  All of the students who have voiced this need also express the importance of the "breaking down" process occurring in a *one-to-one* interaction between student and teacher.  This capacity is in contrast to the students' experience in conventional school where a flurry of bewildering assignments, without a teacher making sure they are comprehensible to the students, left students on their own to sort things out.

**Creating Active Learning Experiences.**  None of the students in this study had found success learning from standard lecture-style textbook instructional strategies.  They got lost, fell behind, and weren't engaged.  In their alternative programs they found teachers adept at making classes relevant to student interest and learning style.  For most of the nine students, what they called "hands-on" learning experiences provided the most engaging and fruitful context for learning.  Below we will hear from Amelia, Eric, Opal, Angel, and others about the ways in which they are engaged directly by projects that capture their imagination and allow them to do something with their hands and minds.  A few students comment directly on how they were affected when teachers only used conventional teaching strategies.

Amelia is clear and emphatic about what works best.  When I asked her, "What is the best strategy to help you learn something new?" (SVU T1, p. 4), she responded: "Like

really creative things, hands-on stuff like projects like movies and books and stuff like

that" (SVU T1, p. 4). Later in the interview she explained what makes learning fun for

her:

> Movies. And then we do a lot of projects we do a lot of posters and stuff.
> We do things with our counselor like on the Great Depression we connect
> it with depression in people so we're doing creative things. (SVU T1, p.
> 12)

Amelia is describing how her teacher has created a cross-disciplinary connection between

a historic moment from long ago and a chronic mental health issue that is likely to be

much more "present" in student's lives. Amelia is allowed to demonstrate her

understanding in a multi-disciplinary approach, such as through an oral presentation

supported by a poster she has created.

In a similar effort to connect an active project with a student's deep interests,

Eric recounts how his teacher helps him think about an assignment to do a self portrait:

> And he was like showing me cool things I could do for self-portraits. Like
> one of them was, since I like the guitar, he told me I should try taking a
> picture of the tuners on the guitar since they are metal they would reflect
> me in them so I can see my face on the tuners. (SQI T3, p. 2)

Here the helpful teacher is tapping into the adolescent fascination with self by tying it to

Eric's intense interest in playing the guitar. He has found a creative way to bring these

passions into a third medium—photography.

Angel, who has a strong visual learning style, echoes Amelia's disinclination

towards lecture-style textbook teaching: **"**I like visual and hands-on type things not just

to be told something" (SDM T2). For Jenny, who finds reading "boring" because she

"can read fine but I get stumbled over big words" (SDL T1, p. 4), an activity such as

making a map is interesting and memorable. When asked to think about a positive

teacher she had before coming to River City she says there *aren't any*, but lands on a

seventh-grade teacher who taught her in a way that worked for her. She explains how the teacher taught: "Hands-on, like we would pick a country we have to do a map and put in the water and people…the villages and label everything" (SDL T1, p. 4).

While Angel doesn't like lecture classes and Jenny doesn't like reading, they both like the opportunity to learn through making things. Opal introduces the idea that projects are not just a way to pitch something to a student's preferred learning style; they can also offer more student choice in learning, thus creating more engagement. Explaining how this works at Rocky Beach, she says**: "**We can pretty much choose what it is that we want to learn because we pick the class every quarter and then in that class we pick the project" (SJO T3, p. 10).

Active learning experiences can also make even the most rudimentary learning processes fun for a student for whom traditional pedagogy is ineffective. Robert is proud of the progress he has made in math since coming to his alternative school. He remembers an early experience learning math with his helpful teacher:

> When I first got here I did not know my times tables in ninth grade. And he taught me that. And we'd repeat the times tables. He would throw a ball at me and say nine time seven and I would throw the ball back with the answer. (SWZ T2, p. 13)

This simple experience is memorable to Robert, in part, because he knew he should have known more math by ninth grade. However, instead of experiencing criticism or shame about it, he met a teacher who helped him learn in a way that was both fun and effective.

To conclude, students in this study want activities in the classroom that actively engage them. This means the activities need to: involve student creativity; be relevant to the student; and, wherever possible, be chosen by the student. Creating relevant and successful activities with a student, as we will see below, depends on the teacher's

facility at learning the students' interests, creativity in coming up with suitable project options, and devoting time to each student to help him or her create a meaningful project.

**Listening Attentively to Student Interests and Learning Concerns**.  Through their teacher's attentive listening and response, the students experience how it feels to say something considered as significant and interesting.  The teacher learns what students' interests, discoveries and learning concerns are.  Teacher listening opens the doors of communication with students—and keeps them open.  Seven of the nine students found that their teacher's ability to listen attentively to them when they were speaking was an important aspect of their teacher's helpfulness.  Whether seeking information, wanting to negotiate, or looking for academic help in or after class, students who feel "heard" by their teacher feel encouraged to communicate.  Listening is dealt with both in this section and the next because the interviewees identified two different realms in which teachers could demonstrate their capacity to listen: the academic realm and the personal realm.  As we have seen, these two realms are intimately connected but they are different enough in student responses to warrant being placed in two separate categories.  The comments below from Angel, Julia and Jenny will illustrate how they perceive their teachers' attentive listening.

Angel, whose bright and inquisitive mind often leads him to find academic content intrinsically interesting, describes his helpful teacher's capacity to listen as integral to his engagement: "Anytime I ask she listens whether it be classrooms or something random that I found on the news.  She's always listening and will have like feedback on [it]" (SDM T3, p.19).

Angel discusses how this dynamic works between his teacher and him. When he finds an interesting article in the news that relates to a class and brings it in, his teacher is receptive and listens to him: "She knows a lot of stuff like that. [I] come to her looking for knowledge and I'm looking to know something" (SDM T3, p. 21). Not only does his helpful teacher listen but, in Angel's eyes, she is knowledgeable and open to his inquiries.

Julia also finds her especially-helpful teacher a capable and interested listener: "She's always willing to sit down and listen to me. When I tried to pick a subject [for] her paper she'll give me ideas on what I can do" (SVN T1, p. 12). When asked whether her non-helpful teacher listened attentively, her response is surprising; the positive trajectory that particular relationship eventually took may have been founded on some times when Julia felt as if the teacher had really listened. Below she gives us two examples of this.

Julia remembers a time when this teacher seemed to be listening carefully to her:

The other day I was talking about rocks in caves and the stuff that we had in [her home country] and he was really interested. He was looking at me and say[ing], "Wow that's pretty cool is that for real" and nodding his head. He really got into it... it felt really good to have that one-to-one time with "my not-helpful teacher." (SVN T2, p. 30)

Julia is recognizing this teacher's genuine interest in what she is talking about as well as his willingness to spend time just with her.

The second example involves a negotiation around class requirements in which this teacher again demonstrated his capacity to listen to Julia's concerns:

Yes…we had these sketchbooks to do for him, and it was really demanding. [We said to him], "We don't have the time to do this after school, just give us five to do…" and he actually did this. He used to give us 10 to do, and then he listened and gave us five, and this helped us get

better grades. It felt good, and I know we are going to get a better grade and he actually listened. (SVN T3, p. 2)

Jenny characterizes both of the teachers with whom she has been paired as good listeners. Although she does not present herself as talkative or enjoying dialogue, Jenny explains how she knows these teachers are listening attentively to her through their responses to what she is asking or saying: "I know he [especially-helpful teacher] listens to what I have to say and he'll float his own opinion out." When I asked if she liked that, she said, "Yeah" enthusiastically. With her helpful teacher, Jenny explains how she knows the teacher is listening: "Yes... if I have a question in class *I know that she's listening because she will look at me* and give her opinion and stuff" (SDL T2, p. 10).

Having their teacher listening attentively to them is highly important to most of the students in this study. In the context of the student's intellectual life, this kind of listening is a key aspect of Roger's facilitator qualities of empathy and being non-judgmental. However, with the exception of Fred's description of his dispute with a prior teacher (discussed below), none of the students stated unequivocally that "not-listening" was a negative.

**Reading the Student Well.** Sometimes a teacher's attentiveness seems almost magical to the students interviewed. A teacher's capacity to understand a student's needs and to respond in a way that the student can accept, constitutes "reading the student well." Eight of the nine students commented on the capacity of their helpful teachers to read them well. Angel, Eric, Opal, Fred and McNulty lead us through their experiences with teachers that do and don't read them well.

Angel and Eric comment on the ability their helpful teacher has to sense that they are getting lost in the lesson. Eric, who is not given to hyperbole, comments:

> Like today we were doing this fake blood typing stuff and she explains
> how to do it but I still didn't understand and *I didn't even have to ask her*
> and she came over to help me anyway. *She kind of sensed it*. (SQI T2, p.
> 1)

Angel reflects on a similar capacity his teacher has:

> Even though she's talking to the class *she will see that I have a perplexed*
> *look* on my face and after she explains it she'll be like, "Hey, 'Angel,' I'll
> help you out with this" so she gives me like a second chance you would
> say. (SDM T1A, p. 3)

Angel is aware that he gives a signal—a "perplexed look on my face"—with which his

teacher is familiar and to which she will respond, whereas Eric is not clear how the

teacher is reading him so accurately.

The helpful teacher understands how the student needs to be approached. Opal,

who is intensely private, observes:

> So if you have a question instead of staying in front of the class and saying
> and answering your question in front of the whole class, she will come up
> to you she will walk to you and talk to you directly. So it's more…I guess
> it would be very personal. (SJO T2, p. 3)

Several students identified the qualities of attentiveness and responsiveness that

makes up a part of "reading" the student well. They see this quality manifest itself in the

teacher's checking in with them when things are difficult. This ability links directly with

the capacity to demonstrate care that I will discuss below. McNulty provides an example

of the way in which his especially-helpful teacher can read him well:

> I'd come in not smiling the way that I usually [smile] do and *he asked me*
> *"what's up?" and I would talk to him and he would give me advice….*
> [That felt] good …(SUU T1, p. 17). Yeah that's a good key for a teacher
> *to notice a kid when they're upset* so you can talk to them…(SUU T1, p.
> 17). He comes up to me if I'm just sitting there being quiet, [and says],
> "Hey how you doing?" (SUU, p. 17)

McNulty, like Angel, is aware of the signal he is giving that alerts the teacher to check in:

he is quiet and not smiling and that's enough for this teacher to check in one-to-one.

**When "Misreading" Occurs.** Fred describes the relational downgrading that occurs when a teacher misreads the student and then doesn't listen to what the student is asking. Fred was not happy in his placement before Rocky Beach and describes the result of an interaction with a teacher with whom he had difficulty: "I hated him. He was a teacher at the day treatment and he was just too touchy-feely for me" (SUS T2, p. 1).

Why did he hate him? Fred sets the scene for us. Fred was working at some math problems, and math being his favorite subject, he was not pleased to hear the teacher tell him that he was going about his work "the wrong way." The teacher "wouldn't leave me alone…(SUS T2, p. 2). He was mostly trying to egg me on, [to] push me to do it his way" (SUS T2, p. 2). Fred's perception is that the teacher was not trying to help him, but rather incite him. He ascribes a motive to the teacher that may be entirely incorrect, but because the teacher was crowding him and pushing him to "do it his way," Fred started feeling uneasy.

Things only worsened. Fred continues:

He put his hands on me. He says, "Fred, you got to calm down" and I don't like that….He comes over behind me, I knew he was coming on over and I was like…"I can do the problem" and I started working on it. He's like, "Fred," puts his hand on my shoulder, "You can't do it that way" and I kind of flipped out sort of .…I was already mad at him too. (SUS T2, p. 1)

Fred, who cherishes his autonomy, perceives the teacher to be telling him that he was incorrect in his approach to the problem, and that the teacher was not allowing Fred to work on it. Moreover, the teacher had just violated Fred's personal space by putting his hand on Fred's shoulder.

Fred responds:

> I was, "You don't really want to touch me right now" and he was like, "I had to touch you to keep you calm." And I said, "No"….In the end I had given a few chances and he still has an arm on me, so what I did was I rolled my shoulder back and I grabbed his arm and pulled it off me and I was sitting on a desk that wraps around. I moved up and turned around and said, "You go f  yourself!" because you can't really give the guy too many chances to stop touching you and to get his hand off you. (SUS T2, p. 6)

In Fred's view he had made a clear request for the teacher to remove his hand, and had been ignored, so, angry, he took matters into his own hands. The consequences of this misreading and misjudgment on the teacher's part were immediate and irreversible for Fred: "After that I don't want anything…*I shield up once I say the f bomb* to a certain person that I really did not like… You can't really rustle up to him again so I don't really do that" (SUS T2, p. 6). Fred explains that he no longer wanted to work with this teacher in any way because he no longer felt that this teacher was willing to listen to him: "I don't like listening to someone who doesn't want to take something to advice…to take advice to prevent something" (SUS T2, p. 6). To Fred, if the teacher is not willing to listen to him, he is unwilling to listen to the teacher. All chances for effective teaching and learning are lost at this point.

**The Error of "Crowding" or "Hovering"**. Other students agree that teacher "crowding" or "hovering" can make students anxious or irritated. The teachers they rate most helpful understand this. Robert describes what he needs from a teacher:

> *Give me my space until I ask for help* because that's the way I normally go about it ….I like to be told how to do it through his lesson and let me work on, and then if I have trouble I'll ask him. (SWZ T3, p. 4)

Fred echoes this sentiment somewhat more pointedly; he wants his teacher to: "Shut up and give me the work and let me ask the questions" (SUS T1). When I ask why Angel

accepts his especially-helpful teacher's disciplinary behavior, he replies: "She's not on my back all the time… once she tells me I'll get to it, it's not like I will do it that very second… if I don't have anything else to do then I will" (SDM T3, p. 3). Because the teacher is not crowding or hovering expectantly around him, Angel still maintains control over his schedule to do the assignment. His sense of autonomy has not been disrupted. She has read him well.

To conclude, a teacher's ability to understand and respond directly to a student's needs, moods, and subtle behaviors in a way that is acceptable to the student is an attribute highly valued by students in this study. The teacher may be picking up cues that a student is lost in the lesson, that she or he is feeling upset and needs to be approached in a certain manner, i.e., not "crowded", or the teacher may be responding to direct requests from students. This demonstrated capacity to understand and respond appropriately is founded on Rogers's facility of empathy: having a firm sense of the student's experience. Not reading a student well can have disastrous results for learning, illustrated above by Fred's story.

**Teacher Capacities that Impede Academic Learning**

The students in this study found that not-helpful teachers acted in certain ways that reduced their engagement with and progress in learning. Two of the not-helpful capacities involved strategies for delivering the curriculum. In the broadest sense students wanted the teacher to be as tuned into them as learners as they were to the subject matter being taught. When they experienced lock-step, lecture-style textbook instruction they became bored and disengaged – the process was too passive and remote

for them to connect with. When they experienced the pace of classroom teaching as too fast for their own learning needs and there appeared to be no effort on the teacher's part to make sure that everyone was integrating the material they felt baffled and lost.

Robert's comment that "They (not-helpful teachers) think the more they do the more they (students) learn." speaks to his experience that he saw his not-helpful teachers more invested in covering the curriculum than being sure that each of their students were learning the material. Although students did not say this directly, underlying these not-helpful capacities, was the experience that these teachers did not manage to spend one to one time with students – there was something fundamentally impersonal in their instructional strategy. Students experience the final two not-helpful capacities through interactions that have gone wrong. In both of these cases, misreading and hovering, the teacher is interacting directly with an individual student but is getting it wrong. As Fred describes above, when a teacher misreads student cues a cycle of behavior and response can get initiated that leads quickly to conflict. When teachers hover and deny students some of their autonomy as learners, students get anxious, annoyed and disengage. These teachers are perceived as not trusting them to take responsibility for their learning.

## Teacher Capacities that Facilitate Relational Connections

Teachers designated as "helpful" have the disposition and capacity to engage students in facing challenges in their daily lives—in and out of school—and their own interior struggles. As a result, helping relationships develop. We often think of these capacities more as counseling than teaching skills.

**Listening to Personal Disclosures.**  The first listening section focused on a teacher's ability to listen carefully during academic instruction.  This second section addresses the teacher's capacity to attend to student disclosures about their personal lives and their interior realm.   In this section, Angel, McNulty, and Amelia discuss their experiences of being heard by their especially-helpful teachers.

Two thirds of the students interviewed were able to describe specific instances of their helpful teacher listening carefully to them in discussing highly personal issues.  Angel captures the dynamic with his especially-helpful teacher when he confides in her that his father didn't contact him on his birthday:

> I was really upset.  That was one time that she really listened to me and gave me positive insight onto things.  She said, "Don't let it bring me down he's the one that's missing out it's not you he's the one that's falling into something not you." (SDM T2, p. 6)

When I ask how that response felt to him, he says:  "It was good it was like a second opinion I was going to my mom about things like that…but just having somebody there to reassure me made it better" (SDM T2, p. 6).

Angel values having another adult in his life with whom he can discuss an issue of this magnitude.  The teacher does a wonderful job both by reassuring Angel.  By suggesting that Angel look at this incident primarily as his father's problem, she clarifies that she thinks Angel is eminently worth calling on his birthday.  Angel does not recount even a tinge of negative judgment directed towards his father from the teacher.

Early in his stay at the alternative program, McNulty recounts talking with his two helpful teachers on a school outing to the beach:

> We went to the beach and it was like in September or October; and I was sitting on the sand out there and [Especially-Helpful Teacher E] and [Especially-Helpful Teacher F] came along.  They're both listening to me but [Especially-Helpful Teacher E] was listening pretty well as well as

> "Especially-Helpful Teacher F" [I thought], "Wow, *I was really talking to somebody* right now." We were talking about what's the reason behind me being a quiet kid. (SUU T1, pp. 8-9)

These two teachers both stopped to talk with McNulty on a school outing when they could have just as easily continued their own conversation, or let him sit there quietly. Their intense attention to what he was saying registered with him. Later in the interview McNulty reflects again on this incident:

> I felt like he was really listening to what I have to say....He was like looking me in the eye he was agreeing to what I was saying and saying, "Yeah I know what you mean" and stuff like that, so that felt warm. (SUU T3, p. 7)

Unlike McNulty, who identified five of his teachers as especially-helpful, Fred identified only one. His connection with this teacher was a key factor in his success at Rocky Beach. Fred's experience of this teacher's capacity to listen to and understand him is crucial because he doesn't feel he has many other teachers who can listen as well: "Like last week I had a problem at home and...he understood that it was serious so he was okay with [it], whereas I wouldn't be able to talk to someone else that easily" (SUS T1, p. 17).

Amelia notes that being able to disclose personal information safely to her teacher is a key aspect of teacher helpfulness. She discusses one instance with her especially-helpful teacher:

> Yeah we had a long talk one time about my sister. We both know my sister and she knows my sister's boyfriend. She gave me a lot of advice...it felt really good to have someone to talk to because it also dealt with a lot of parenting issues and my [especially-helpful teacher] is a parenting teacher and to get a lot of advice from her was good about what I should do. (T1, p. 18)

Amelia finds it useful to consult with her teacher about a problem brewing at home. She accepts advice from her teacher because she acknowledges the teacher's expertise in parenting, and that the teacher knows the people about whom Amelia is talking.

In conclusion, experiencing a teacher who is interested and able to listen to personal disclosures and respond to them "reassures" students, as Angel puts it. The students have someone to whom they can turn with issues that are consuming them. Listening in this way is a fundamental capacity that a teacher must have in order to demonstrate Roger's facilities of both empathy and positive regard. If one factor separates teachers designated as "especially-helpful" from teachers designated as "helpful," it would be this sense that they are safe and wise listeners whom students can consult about personal issues.

**Non-Judgmental**. A teacher's ability to respond to students without judging them emerges as a critical factor in students' finding that teacher helpful or not. All the students in this study indicated their sensitivity to both positive and negative judgments from their teachers.

When these students feel that they are accepted and are not being judged in a negative fashion, they unclench, reduce their defensiveness, and become more open to their teachers and to learning. In this subsection, Angel, McNulty, and Jenny discuss the value of not being judged, while Julia, Opal, and Robert recount their responses to being judged negatively.

In the passage below, Angel expresses his nuanced understanding of how his especially-helpful teacher is able both to completely accept him and yet not accept some

of his behavior.  I asked him: "To what degree does she accepts you for who you are?"

He paused and then responded:

> To what degree I don't know to what degree.  I guess to some point there's always been a bit of something about a person that somebody's not going to like….She accepts most of what I do but sometimes I lash out and become an asshole and start swearing and screaming at people and of course nobody's going to accept that.…That's just intolerable, being an ass in school….But for the most part she accepts me for who I am or what I do.  (SDM T2, p. 9)

Further on in the interview he adds: "She won't alienate me because I'm doing these things like 'you are doing drugs and drinking I can't talk to you or help you'" (SDM T2, p. 10).

Angel understands that many teachers would "alienate" him if they knew he was engaged in illegal and dangerous behavior.  He appreciates the willingness of his especially-helpful teacher to accept him despite these challenges, and her capacity to see past his occasional poor behavior that he acknowledges shouldn't be accepted.

Through not being judged negatively, McNulty senses a basic equality between him and his especially-helpful teacher.  He explains: "I'm a normal person….He treats everyone like a human being; *he respects all people at the same level*….All men are equal to him.  He sees himself at the same level as I do" (SUU T1, p. 16).  Giving an example of his experiencing this kind of acceptance, McNulty continues:

> When he is to pick me up for the mountain to go skiing we would talk him and I and the other kids.…All the time we would talk about trucks and sports, the NCAA.  Every day I feel accepted by him.  (SUU T1, p. 16)

The helpful teacher's lack of negative judgment and his acceptance of McNulty as a "human being" at the "same level" set the context for a relationship that feels friendly and equal, as I will discuss in the Chapter 6.

Sometimes a student interprets a lack of judgmental criticism when it is expected, as acceptance. Jenny recounts an early incident in her connection with her especially-helpful teacher:

> In gym… my first couple of times playing "Around the World" I didn't win and everybody else did and everybody else was picking on me. And he was like, "It's okay it's not your fault is just your first time." (SDL T1, p. 14)

Not only did the teacher not criticize her, he was a mediating influence on Jenny's peers who were "picking on her." He was telling Jenny that she was doing well enough and he didn't expect more from her, given that it was her first time to play the game.

Uniformly, students felt that teachers they rated as not helpful judged them negatively. In the most provocative case, Julia, a student of color, describes an incident with her teacher:

> It was real tense....We had this real conflict about [use of the word] "gay." I don't know [if] he's gay or not but we had a conflict about "gay." I always used to say, "This computer is so gay" and he would get offended and he would say, "What if somebody called you a nigger?" and I was like, "Nigger and Gay have nothing to do with each other, I'm not calling anybody gay." We had that conflict. (SVN T2, p. 18)

Despite this highly volatile start to their relationship, Julia—with support from other teachers—was able to make enormous progress towards feeling more comfortable with and accepting of the teacher, who became less defensive towards her. A more in-depth view of their relationship will be presented in Chapter 6.

Negative judgment can also be conveyed more subtly, as Opal describes with a teacher from a former school:

> It was just kind of frustrating…(SJO T3, p. 1). Maybe she thought I was lazy or being rebellious…(SJO T3, p. 2). I think maybe she thought I wasn't putting my full effort into it. I think that's where she got that. And through her tone of voice she might have implied that I was lazy. (SJO T3, p. 4)

Because Opal did not raise the issue with her teacher, she was not able to discuss what she perceived to be the teacher's assumption or judgment that Opal was lazy. The relationship did not have the opportunity to get back on track.

Robert speaks of the environment of judgment in the conventional high school: "You get a vibe in high school *automatic judgment soon* as you walk in there and you just feel it there is just no way around it" (SWZ T1, p. 14). Later in his interview, he observes: "At the high school it feels like *teachers judge you* as soon as you walk in and they expect something every day rather than them wondering how you're feeling, like teachers do here [at Rocky Beach]" (SWZ T3, p. 6). Robert believes that his teachers "expect" negative behavior that would validate their negative judgment of him.

In conclusion, unlike many of the other areas under discussion, all students clearly understood when they felt judged negatively and when they didn't. None of the teachers who were picked as especially helpful were considered judgmental, and all except one of the helpful teachers were also considered to be non-judgmental and highly accepting. Being non-judgmental is a factor that correlates closely with the construct of positive regard that Rogers (1983) included as one of the three elements necessary for effective facilitation of learning (see Chapter 3).

In the interviews, a sense of being judged negatively emerges as a powerful factor in students' experience of their teachers. Sometimes it is picked up through subtle communications, such as tone of voice, and at other times it is obvious to the student from the teacher's language. The interviewees were unanimous about their experiences with teachers in this area: the helpful and especially-helpful teachers were deemed to be

non-judgmental with one exception, and the not-helpful teachers were almost entirely felt

to be negatively judgmental.

**<u>Humor: Offering and Accepting Humor Reciprocally</u>**.  Five of nine students

commented on the value of their teachers' use of and allowance for humor in their

learning experience.  Some students feel that reciprocal humor reflects the teachers'

openness to classroom banter that puts the students at ease and loosens the rigid feeling

that they experience with formal instruction.  Angel, Jenny, and Robert discuss how

humor helps set the emotional foundations for connection, while Robert discusses how

the lack of humor creates a sense of rigidity for him.

Angel points out that his helpful teacher takes her teaching seriously but,

nevertheless:

> I feel comfortable to run a joke in her class because I know she won't be
> like, "Shut up" or "Pay attention."  She will laugh and go back to her
> work.  She has her limits; we can't be telling jokes when she's teaching.
> [If we do] we get that nasty look.  (SDM T1, p. 15)

Angel knows that his teacher will enjoy his sense of humor while expecting him to keep

his jokes to himself when she is "teaching."

When talking about a helpful teacher, whom he regards as a friend, Robert

comments: "It's kind of hard to describe, but if you're friends with somebody you're

more laid-back with them if they understand your humor.  He [one of his especially-

helpful teachers] understands when I make a wisecrack" (SWZ T1, p. 24).  Robert has

noted several positive qualities of relationship that can arise when humor is used:

friendliness, "laid-backness," and understanding.  He is not talking here only about the

teacher but about the student as well.

In the negative case, Robert notes: "Back to high school: if I made a wise crack they didn't have *the leeway*; no sense of humor.  I think he [especially-helpful teacher] knows I'm going to get something done" (SWZ T1, p. 45).  When Robert uses the word "leeway" he is alerting us to his perception that the teacher's ability to tolerate a joke is one element that makes the class feel open and relaxed.  His teacher knows Robert well enough to understand that he can joke and "get something done" at the same time.  Robert implies that in the old high school, they did not trust Robert to joke and do his work, resulting in a less "laid-back" and more formal atmosphere for him.

Humor can also help students know their teachers better, as Jenny, a quiet and occasionally withdrawn student, points out when asked why she feels humor is important: "It's more relaxing you're more at home.  The teachers are not strangers.  You know them.  They are not hiding behind a shell or something" (SDL T1, p. 9).  When her teacher is more visible, Jenny feels more "at home" and "relaxed." This correlates with the teacher quality of genuineness which I will discuss below.  At-risk students, who have often experienced extreme issues with the adults in their lives, derive a sense of safety that makes the learning environment work when teachers are no longer "strangers" and are not "hiding in a shell." Humor is both a vehicle for developing connections with students and a sign that a connection exists between teacher and student.

**Energy and Enthusiasm**.  A majority of these students think that the energy and enthusiasm of their helpful teachers is a positive attribute.  The disposition to demonstrate energy and enthusiasm about the subject matter, the students, and the work of teaching constitute the attribute of "energy and enthusiasm" for these students.  For some students,

it is a key factor in their enjoyment of the classroom.  Jenny, Robert, and Opal discuss

below the importance of a teacher's enthusiasm and energy.

As much as Jenny extols the pluses of her especially-helpful teacher being "laid

back," she also appreciates his energetic approach to teaching: "He's always moving, he

walks around his room… (SDL T1, p. 10).  Some teachers just sit there and it makes it

tiring; I like energy and he kind of has energy" (SDL T1, p. 10).

Robert goes further in emphasizing the significance of the energy of his

especially-helpful teacher, and the impact of the lack of energy he experiences from less

helpful teachers**:**

> He makes it more exciting, puts more enthusiasm into it….The other
> teachers at the high school would be like, "We're learning this which I
> already know…" [Robert says this in a very dull voice] (SWZ T1, p. 16,
> 335 on tape).  Even if [my especially-helpful teacher] already knows, he's
> acting like he's just discovering it.  (SWZ T1, p. 16)

When I ask him how his teacher shows this, he replies:

> He's really enthusiastic about teaching the problem...He wants to learn it
> with you.  Whatever he teaches it seems like he's really into it.  [If] he
> wasn't into it he wouldn't teach it, which is another thing where we
> connect.  If I wasn't liking something I wouldn't teach it that's what I
> would do.  (SWZ T1, p. 16)

Robert is aware that his teacher is not learning the subject matter along with the students,

but experiences the teacher's excitement and energy as though he was encountering the

material for the first time.

Opal experiences her teacher's enthusiasm as a magnet, drawing her into material

that might otherwise repel her:

> One thing that helps me is that she's [her especially-helpful teacher]
> *enthusiastic* about stuff.  So there might be a project that needs to be done
> that might not be that much fun.  The way she talks about it kind of, I
> don't know, gets you more excited or motivated to work on it…(SJO T1,
> p. 11).  Two quarters ago I was in her science class, and I had to write

something on mad cow disease.  And I don't know just wasn't that into it I guess but she helped me find websites for it and just the way she was talking about it got me more interested.  (SJO T1, p. 11)

This enthusiasm, however, doesn't always work for Opal.  When asked if her helpful teacher does anything that makes learning harder for her, Opal replies: "The only thing I can really think of is that at the end of each subject we're supposed to do presentations, and then she'll try to use that enthusiastic thing to get me to do a presentation but I really don't like that" (SJO T1, p. 13).  She laughs and says: "That's the only thing that makes me uncomfortable" (SJO T1, p. 13).

Opal recalls how energy and interest come together in her only memory of a positive teacher prior to coming to the alternative program.  Describing an early elementary teacher, she says: "She seemed very *upbeat and into her job*.  I think that's a good thing - a teacher who likes being a teacher.  It makes it easier on both the student and the teacher" (SJO T1, p. 7).  Opal responds positively to this teacher's enjoyment of her role as a teacher.

Although the students do not discuss the mechanical or apathetic natures of their less helpful teachers, a majority concludes that a teacher's energy and enthusiasm enhances their learning experience.  Some students find it draws them into the subject matter, others find that it makes learning more interesting and more intriguing, and other students find that it adds needed energy and excitement to the classroom.  What a powerful experience it must be to sense that your teacher is with you on this learning expedition, "discovering" the answers just like you are, as Robert articulated.

**Caring with Accountability**.  Some students use the word "mother" to describe teachers with whom they have a strong caring connection.  "Mother" connotes many qualities to them, including patience, concern, and accountability.  This attribute includes the

capacity of the teacher to be comforting, kind, and concerned, while holding students

accountable for their actions. Five of nine students spoke of this capacity in their helpful

teachers. In the accounts below, Angel and Fred explore the capacities of their teachers

to be caring while holding them accountable.

> Angel describes his especially-helpful teacher's nurturing qualities:
>
> She's always been like the mother of the school. She's always had like that comforting feel…(SDM T1A, p. 3). I came to her as if she were like my mom….She is the mother hen of this school; so anybody goes to her like before they go to "Ms. Counselor," which is weird because she's the guidance person. My [especially-helpful teacher], she connects with people….She kind of gets through to those kids somehow. (SDM T1, p. 9)

Angel is "comforted" by her, and also sees her "getting through" to other kids beyond

himself as an attribute that makes her the school's "mother hen."

> When asked what a "mother-like" attitude was, Fred, who lives with his mother

and feels strongly about her significance in his life, comments on the way an especially-

helpful teacher can call students to account:

> Tone. I can't think of any other thing than a mother's tone….You know you're not supposed to be doing this but [she talks to you] in a motherly way and you kind of cringe away…(SUS T1, p. 7). Yeah the tone is serious but it's kind of like you're getting scorned something serious. I know it's directed right at you…strong, something severe, something like that and it's more like you are in trouble but you're not. (SUS T1, p. 8)

The teacher is quite serious, "severe" in Fred's language, but not in a punitive way, "you

are in trouble, but you're not"—she is going to hold you to account but not through

hierarchical channels of authority.

> Angel comments further on this combination of care and accountability that his

teacher demonstrates:

> It helps out like a kick in the ass almost….Like my mom is not here to kick me in my ass to do this stuff…and my [especially-helpful teacher] is

here to get me to do this stuff; but she's not mean….If she has to be she
can be disciplinary like, "You have to get this stuff done." (SDM T3, pp.
2-3)

On the one hand, Angel has been held accountable, but in a motherly way; on the other

hand, he has retained the autonomy to work on his "schedule."

From the accounts of these students, motherliness is experienced as a supportive

teacher attribute, connected with kindness, comfort, and an ability to mobilize the

student's sense of accountability without anger, crowding, or being threatening.  None of

the male teachers was described as "fatherly," which was not touted anywhere in the

interviews as a positive attribute.  Caring with accountability is a teacher attribute that

correlates closely with empathy, one of Rogers's (1981) three attributes of effective

facilitators of learning.

**Genuineness**.  Although they uniformly placed their most helpful teachers in the "good

friend" category on the Life Circles Technique (Lazarus, 1989), which I will discuss in

Chapter 6, students were divided on whether they found their especially-helpful teachers

emotionally transparent.  This teacher attribute is the ability to be direct about how she or

he is feeling and clear about who they are as a "person." Angel, Fred, and Amelia provide

us with examples of teachers who were willing and able to let students know how they

were feeling; Eric, McNulty, and Opal discuss teachers who were "never mad" and

"always nice."  This characteristic was not perceived as phony or fake but was

recognized as the teacher's choice to present positively and avoid "putting [negative

feelings] on [the students]," as Robert explains below.  Finally, Julia, Jenny, and Fred

discuss how they were troubled by not knowing who their teachers are.

Four of the nine students found that their teachers were willing to disclose their

feelings frequently enough that the students felt they had a good sense of this

characteristic.  Jenny compares two teachers, both of whom were emotionally expressive: her especially-helpful teacher, who discloses how he is feeling; and a not-helpful teacher who acts it out without expressing his feelings verbally.   I ask Jenny (on a scale of 1-10, where 10 is easiest): "How easy or difficult it is for you to tell how he's feeling on a given day?" She responds: "About a five or a seven." I ask again: "Has he ever come in just giving examples of whether he feels good or bad?" She responds: "Yes, he does that. I like that because I know how he's feeling.  Teachers in the other school would just be grumpy and they wouldn't say why" (SDL T1, p. 11).  Later in the interview, she explains that she wouldn't ask for help in a grumpy teacher's class because she was "scared" of him.  She eventually dropped his class.

Teacher genuineness can be a helpful transparency for some students, familiarizing them with their teacher's emotional process so that they are not unnerved or surprised by the teacher's behavior.  Fred, who describes himself as not liking "touchy-feely" stuff, nevertheless appreciates his especially-helpful teacher's willingness to acknowledge his own discomfort:

> Last Tuesday he just came out and said, "I had a splitting headache it's your fault, your fault" [pointing at kids].  He kind of made a general level to the class.  He said, "I could name a few kids," but it was in general for the whole class it was mostly a process of saying that he didn't have it [headache] when he got here.  (SUS T1, p. 9)

I asked him: "What did you feel about that?" Fred responded: "I was just trying to think about which kids he was mad at. *I know that he gets aggravated.  When he's mad I can sense that* and he generals everyone" (SUS T1, p. 9).  Fred is confident that he "knows" when his teacher is aggravated.  He is not provoked into fear or defensiveness by this teacher's emotion, but rather can maintain a curious and slightly detached stance from what could be highly triggering for him.

Amelia's comments clarify how a teacher's transparency can defuse potentially difficult interactions:

> Yeah, sometimes she will tell all of us all at the same time, "I'm having a really bad day." As she had a lot of really bad days when she was taking her Master's project. She would tell us that. She wouldn't like take it out on us but she would let us know that she was a little "irritated" but she might not act the same way and not take it out on us. That made me feel a lot more comfortable….[If] I actually did something wrong [and she acted "irritated"] I would actually know that she was having a bad day so to not take it personally. (SVU T1, p. 15)

In her typically astute fashion Amelia is explaining that by the acknowledging difficult feelings, the teacher does not "take it out on us." At the same time, it helps Amelia understand uncharacteristic behavior that might directed at her if the teacher is "having a bad day," and allows Amelia to react less to that behavior by "not taking it personally." I explore in Chapter 6 the importance of mutual personal disclosure in building a strong helping relationship, especially for Amelia.

Angel is another student, who, like Amelia, enjoys a close personal and reciprocal relationship with his especially-helpful teacher (who happens to be the same teacher who is Amelia's especially-helpful teacher). He asks his "especially-helpful teacher" how she is doing, and she is willing to let him know: "I will go up to her and say 'hey how's it going?' and she'll say 'Hello I am really having a pretty bad day'" (SDM T2, p. 3). He recounts an example of genuineness in an extreme circumstance:

> One time, she was reading a paper and found out that a friend of hers had run over her own child and she was devastated. And she couldn't teach the class and we were like, "Listen, [especially-helpful teacher], go deal with this stuff. Don't worry about our class right now." (SDM T2, p. 3)

Her transparency with him engenders a caring response. Their connection is strengthened.

Angel articulates another aspect of genuineness linked closely to the relational quality of "equality" that I will discuss in Chapter 6. The fact that his especially-helpful teacher presents herself beyond her role as a teacher immediately gives him a different feeling about her as he describes in his first impressions of her:

> Like, when I came to my interview, I saw her. I thought, "I like this teacher." She seems so real and down to earth like rather than being stuck up about these teaching thing[s]. She was just like a regular person. She'd go off and talk about something else and then we had to get back to class. I guess her realness is what I like about her. (SDM T1, p. 12)

One third of the students felt that the helpful teachers wrapped themselves in a positive attitude that the students knew could not always be true. Eric discusses this when asked if he can tell how his especially-helpful teacher is feeling: "Well I'm not sure because she's always nice and I know like somebody's not always feeling great, so I know to a certain level she must be putting on a front" (SQI T1, p. 8). I followed with, "Would it be correct that she was hard to read?" and he responded, "Yeah she's on a scale of 3-6 something like that" (where 10 is the easiest to read) (SQI T1, p. 9). I asked: "Can you think of any time when you directly knew how she was feeling?" He commented, "Yeah like if she's really happy she'll say something I guess….She told me she likes it when I play the guitar like that's her favorite part of the day…; she really likes that" (SQI T1, p. 9).

McNulty's comments echo this sense of a positive cloak surrounding his helpful teacher:

> My [especially-helpful teacher] is a 10. He's always happy. He's always very calm in bad situations. He's mellow….I've never seen that guy mad….Even if there's a couple of dummies of the school acting out, he is, "Hey guys, guys can you stop…." Of course, they don't stop, he doesn't yell in any way. He might get serious sometimes, but it's like straight face, "Can you please stop?" That's about it. (SUU T1, p. 12)

McNulty appreciates his especially-helpful teacher's calmness, even if the situation might warrant more aggressive action in his eyes. About his second, also especially-helpful teacher, he says: "It's pretty difficult [to rate his teacher's transparency]. Pretty much every day he's happy but I can't tell if he's upset or not because he knows how to hide" (SUU T3, p. 5), and McNulty does not seem to be concerned about this.

Two out of three students who rated one of their teachers as not helpful found them very hard to read. Fred talks about his not-helpful teacher with me. I ask, "How easy is it for you to tell how he's feeling on a certain day?" Fred responds, "No idea" (SUS T3, p. 5). I persist: "Would that be true for you and any teacher or particularly him? It's hard to read him?" Fred opens up a little, "I can't read him and I can't read 'teacher 3' because I don't pay attention to them I just don't pay attention" (SUS T3, p. 5). Fred is taking responsibility for his inability to understand teachers, acknowledging that he avoids them by not "paying attention" to them.

Julia also feels she can't "figure" her not-helpful teacher out:

He's really difficult to read he is really odd I can't figure him out I really can't I try to ask him about his personal life and he won't tell me he just says he have a cat and he lives by himself. (SVN T2, p. 25)

I ask her, "Does he let you know how he's feeling?" She says "No." Then I ask: "He's one of the teachers you know the least?" "Yes." This was confirmed by her ranking this teacher in the Lazarus Life Cycles Technique D, or "acquaintance" category. There is a certain mystery about this teacher that makes Julia curious and slightly uneasy.

At one point, Julia and a friend notice the teacher driving down the road and they follow him to see where he lives. He notices they are following him and Julia recounts his behavior:

> He parks his car. He's asking us where we [are] going and we say, "To your house" and he started to laugh like, "You guys are crazy, you guys better get going," and I asked him, "Where do you live?" and he says, "Right here at the Thai restaurant." (SVN T2, p. 25)

Although he has made a humorous response, this teacher does not discuss his discomfort with being followed and having his personal life investigated by Julia, and he continues to maintain the mystery about his personal life.

Robert also stresses his ability to read his teachers, albeit with a slightly different interpretation of the attribute of teacher transparency. He is the only student to rate his knowledge of one of his teachers in the Lazarus near B "Best Friend" verging on "Closest person to me" category. He describes his capacity to read his most helpful teacher: "I have just like [a] sixth sense. I can pick up on people's [feelings]" (SWZ T1, p. 18). I ask him, "Is his "especially-helpful teacher" easier than most people [to read] or about the same?" Robert says, "About the same. I can tell if something was bothering him." When I ask if the teacher has ever told Robert directly that something was bothering him, Robert replies,

> No, he doesn't want to put it on to somebody else and I'm the same way. But if he's having a hard time with the class like some days he won't be feeling like putting up with what's going on and I'll step in and try to help with controlling the classroom. (SWZ T1, p. 19)

Thus, Robert sees a lack of transparency as a positive attribute; the teacher is not burdening others by "putting it [his negative emotions] on someone else."

Student interviews revealed that teacher genuineness—or "realness" in Angel's words—is a complex attribute. It includes the ability to be emotionally transparent and to disclose how one is feeling to students in a way that helps them calibrate the teacher's behavior. For a significant number of students, the fact that their helpful teachers did not

disclose their negative feeling states, and seemed "always happy" was not problematic. And one student (Robert) found this lack of direct self-disclosure an admirable trait.

Genuineness also includes a notion of the teacher as more than a teacher doing her job, but, using Angel's words again, as a "down-to-earth" human being. Helpful teachers wove their own life-experience into their interactions with students, thus providing a more complete picture of who they were. Genuineness correlates closely with Rogers's (1981) construct of congruence, in which the learning facilitator is willing to acknowledge their internal state and make personal disclosures when it would be helpful to do so.

At-risk students found a current teacher not helpful when they lacked a sense of that person's emotional life, or their life beyond their role as a teacher.

## Teacher Capacities That Impede Relational Connections

First, of all deleterious teacher capacities, judging students negatively impedes relational connections most clearly in the eyes of these students. Sensing that they are being judged these students frequently react with anger. They withdraw and become inaccessible to the teacher. Second, when a teacher appears not to know her students and does not let them know her as a person outside her role as a teacher, these students often feel uncomfortable and unsafe. They are not as likely to confide important issues in their lives that are affecting their capacity to attend to schoolwork. Third and finally, when a teacher does not make time for conversation and connection, these students do not feel that the teacher is particularly interested in or cares about them. They have not

experienced a one to one connection confirming the teacher's concern and capacity to respond with understanding and accountability.

## Conclusion

I have explored the most commonly cited attributes of the helpful teacher from our nine interviewees. In order to clearly distinguish teacher dimensions, I separated teaching capacities (that helped these students engage their academic studies) from relational capacities (that helped students connect with the teacher). A majority of students identified the following attributes and dispositions of their not-helpful, helpful and especially-helpful teachers:

### Teacher Capacities that Facilitate Academic Learning

Again, students in this study cite the following four perceived teacher capacities as most helpful in assisting their learning academic skills and content:

- **Breaking it down**: the teacher's capacity to break material to be learned into component parts and go through these thoroughly with the student;

- **Creating active learning experiences**: the teacher's capacity to create a learning environment in which students are active and able to choose personally relevant hands-on projects;

- **Reading the Student Well**: A teacher's capacity to understand a student's needs and to respond in a way that the student can accept;

- **Attentive listening**: the teacher's capacity to listen to student interests, discoveries, and their learning concerns.

### Teacher Capacities that Impede Academic Learning

When describing not-helpful teachers' instructional strategies students found the following capacities to impede their engagement and learning:

- **Lecture-style textbook instruction:** A teacher's primary dependence on lecture-style textbook instruction does not allow for active enough student engagement with the subject matter;

- **Fast-paced, curriculum-centered instruction:** A teacher's focus on covering the required curriculum in a specified time period without making sure that all students can work at that pace and are integrating the material;

- **Misreading the student:** A teacher's failure to understand student cues and respond accordingly;

- **Hovering:** A teacher's tendency to crowd students about their learning tasks and responsibilities.

### Teacher Capacities that Facilitate Relational Connections

Students noted the following six teacher capacities as fundamental to their helpful teachers being able to successfully establish and maintain relationships with them:

- **Listening to Personal Disclosures**: A teacher's capacity to attend to student disclosures about their lives and their interior realm and to respond appropriately;

- **Non-judgmental**: A teacher's ability to respond to students without personal judgment;

- **Energy and Enthusiasm**: The disposition to display energy and enthusiasm about the subject matter, the students, and the work of teaching;

- **Humor**: The disposition and capacity to model and accept humor as part of the interactional flow inside and out of the classroom;

- **Caring with Accountability**: The capacity of the teacher to be comforting, kind, and concerned, while holding students accountable for their actions;

- **Genuineness**: A teacher's ability to be direct about how she or he is feeling and clear about who she or he is as a person.

## Teacher Capacities that Impede Relational Connections

- **Judgmental:** The perception that a teacher holds negative judgments of a student such as "she or he is lazy, unintelligent, immoral, etc.;"

- **Does not know and is not known by the student:** Teachers who do not give students a chance to know them outside of their role as teachers, and who do not make the effort to know a student beyond their academic output;

- **Inaccessible:** Teachers who do not provide time and space to interact with students on a one to one basis.

Students in this study reported on two kinds of teacher capacity present in their helpful teachers. They valued teachers who could both help them engage with and succeed at the academic work required of them while creating sustaining relationships based on "getting" who they were, caring about them, and having their best interests at heart. At the same time, the students did not associate the lack of certain attributes, such as energy and enthusiasm and listening attentively, with not-helpfulness. Students were evenly divided on the importance of genuineness in their teachers' emotional transparency. Some students felt that keeping one's negative emotions to oneself was not

a negative attribute.  Students also did not provide examples of not-helpful teachers who were "fake" or "phony" in contrast to their more "real" helpful teachers.  However, a majority of students did find teacher self-disclosure helpful and interesting.  Two thirds of the students with current not-helpful teachers were unsure of who these teachers were outside of school.

In Chapter 6, the students describe their relationships with helpful and not-helpful teachers.  I explore the ways in which students perceive teacher attributes contribute to the positive or negative patterns in the student-teacher relationship.

**Chapter 6**

**AT-RISK STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH HELPFUL**

**AND NOT-HELPFUL TEACHERS**

The second research question in this study analyzes students' perceptions of

relationships with helpful and not-helpful teachers. The literature review (Chapter 2)

revealed that, from a systems perspective, dyadic relationships involve "the features of

the individuals, feedback mechanisms and [their] interactive behaviors" (Pianta, 1999, p.

79). In Chapter 4, I introduced the characteristics of the students in the study, and in

Chapter 5, I did the same with the teachers with whom they were paired. In order to

explore the "feedback mechanisms" between student and teacher, I examine their modes

of communication with each other and the students' perspective on the relationship.

First, I present the results of a behavioral survey of both students and the teachers

with whom they were matched. Results from the survey provide a more quantitative and

less personal response to the research question. I then explore the four relational themes

that most frequently arose from student interviews. These four themes provide insight

into the students' perceptions and sense of helpful and not-helpful relationships.

In the conclusion to Chapter 6, I review the four themes and discuss my

justification for and methods of categorizing the themes. I then discuss how the themes

in Chapter 5 (the characteristics students associate with helpful teachers) support and

result in the themes of Chapter 6 themes (the experience of a relationship with helpful

teachers). Finally, I review the common factors that are associated with perceived not-

helpfulness, and explore ways in which relational qualities support and build on each other.

## **Data from the Survey: What Does the Helpful Relationship Look Like Behaviorally?**

I chose to survey students and teachers about their verbal and non-verbal interactions in order to obtain measurable data in a written, more linear framework than the interviews could provide. The survey offered students metrics with which to explore small, measurable aspects of their own and their teachers' behavior. The survey provided both responses that could be compared and contrasted as well as a cross-reference to the interviews. As a result, I was able to validate the student designation of teachers as helpful or not-helpful.

The 21-question survey asked nine students and nine teachers to reflect on interaction patterns between the matched pairs of students or teachers (see Appendix D and Appendix F). The survey asks seven questions about verbal interactions, such as who interrupted whom, who initiated conversations, where the conversations took place, and how frequently; 10 questions about non-verbal interactions, such as proximity (e.g., how closely teachers or students would stand to one another) and indicators of rapport, such as nodding one's head when talking, eye contact, and laughing together; and four questions about caring and conflictual interactions, such as the teacher offering to comfort the student when upset and the frequency of intense and resolved conflicts.

I focused on six questions that were most readily linked to the presence or absence of a helping relationship between student and teacher (see Table 6.1). I did not

include questions that may or may not be indicators of a helpful or not helpful

relationship depending on the particular individual who is responding. For instance

comfortable proximity in this group of students is quite variable depending on the

individual.

Results for the survey questions analyzed include indicators of closeness,

openness, frequency of conflict, rapport, and caring:

1. An indicator of closeness and relationship beyond classroom interaction:

   talking before or after class (Question 7);

2. An indicator of openness in communication: the student asking questions in

   class (Question 3);

3. Two indicators of rapport: (a) mutual eye contact (Question 2) and (b)

   laughing together (Question 16);

4. An indicator of conflict: how frequently students and teachers conflict

   (Question 19);

5. An indicator of teacher caring: how frequently the teacher offers comfort

   when the student is upset (Question 15).

As described in Chapter 3, the students were paired in three kinds of dyads: with teachers

they felt were especially helpful (nine students and 10 teachers), with teachers they felt

were helpful (five students and five teachers), and with teachers they felt were not helpful

(three students and three teachers). In the dyad of students with teachers who were

especially helpful, one student picked two teachers who were especially helpful. Several

teachers showed up on the list of more than one student.

**Table 6.1.** Student Perception of Relational Behaviors within Helpful and Not-Helpful Relationships

| | Especially-Helpful Teacher (10) | | Helpful Teacher (5) | | Not-Helpful Teacher (3) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Questions** | Student Response | No. of Responses | Student Response | No. of Responses | Student Response | No. of Responses |
| 2 (Both make eye contact) | Always<br>Often<br>Sometimes | 6<br>3<br>1 | Often | 5 | Often<br>Sometimes<br>Never | 1*<br>1<br>1 |
| 3 (You [student] ask questions in class) | Always<br>Sometimes<br>Often | 1<br>3<br>6 | Always<br>Often<br>Sometimes | 1<br>2<br>2 | Often<br>Seldom<br>Never | 1*<br>1<br>1 |
| 7 (Talk after or before class) | Daily<br>> 1/week | 4<br>6 | Daily<br>> 1/week<br>> 1/month<br>Almost never | 1<br>2<br>1<br>1 | > 1/week<br>> 1/month<br>Almost Never | 1*<br>1<br>1 |
| 15 (Teacher offers to comfort you when you're upset) | Always<br>Often<br>Sometimes | 1<br>7<br>2 | Often<br>Sometimes<br>Never | 1<br>3<br>1 | Sometimes<br>Seldom<br>Never | 1*<br>1<br>1 |
| 16 (How frequently do you laugh together?) | Always<br>Often<br>Sometimes | 4<br>3<br>3 | Always<br>Often<br>Sometimes<br>Seldom | 1<br>2<br>1<br>1 | Sometimes<br>Seldom<br>Never | 1*<br>1<br>1 |
| 19 (Frequency of Conflict) | Never<br>Infrequently | 5<br>5 | Never<br>Infrequently<br>1/month<br>No verbal Conflicts | 2<br>1<br><br>1<br>1 | Never<br>2/ week | 1*<br>2 |
| * Starred items are all Amelia's. Her ratings of her not-helpful teacher were mostly what one would expect of a helpful teacher. | | | | | | |

## Contrasts in Relational Behaviors Between Especially-Helpful Teachers and Not-Helpful Teachers

Table 6.1 reveals some trends on the ways that students experienced their helpful and not-helpful relationships with teachers.

Responses to Question 15, an indicator of caring inquiry, indicate that the especially-helpful teacher offered to comfort "often"—70% of the time in student perception—while students perceived their not-helpful teachers offering to comfort "sometimes, seldom and never." The difference in these responses illuminates the

comparative distance and lack of concern the students experienced in not-helpful relationships. Conflicts appear to happen much less frequently with helpful teachers, and "laughing together," an indicator of rapport, happens "always" or "often" with 70% of the helpful and especially-helpful teachers; such rapport is found only "sometimes, seldom or never" with the not-helpful teachers. In Question 7, which explores "interactions beyond the classroom," 87% of the students stated that they talked with their especially-helpful teachers often, from more than once a week (eight responses) to daily (five responses). In contrast, only one third of the students spoke with their not-helpful teachers more than once a week, which supports the students' sense of distance in these connections.

Measured against these indicators, expected trends emerged very pronouncedly. Only two responses of 189 possibilities had a student rate the less favorable teacher with a more positive response than the more favorable one. In aggregate, the scoring for the positive behavioral indicators decreased the more the relationship was perceived as less helpful, while the frequency of occurrence of the only negative behavioral indicator (on conflict, Question 19) rose as the relationship was perceived to be less helpful.

Amelia's responses were an interesting anomaly; she rated her not-helpful teacher much "higher" than the other students rated their not-helpful teachers. On the basis of her rating, one would conclude that this teacher would have been considered a "helpful" teacher. In her interviews, however, Amelia described herself as having a high standard—perhaps higher in comparison to the other students—for a teacher to be considered helpful.

**Data from the Interviews**

My interviews with the nine students allowed them to reflect on what it felt like to be in helpful and not-helpful relationship with specific current teachers. My process for deriving the relational themes, which I will discuss below, was to review each interview and code statements about the students' relationship with teachers past and present. I sorted each student's statement into categories of shared issues and I noted statements that seemed to be of high importance to the student, even if they were only mentioned once.

Within my discussions of each theme I highlight words students chose to describe their experience with teachers, such as open, relaxed, embarrassing, pressured, comfortable, and caring.

I found four basic themes in how the students reported their relationships with helpful teachers. A feeling of *openness* describes the first relational theme and encompasses the sense that students feel safe to be themselves with a teacher; their relationship is experienced as informal, comfortable, relaxed, and accepting. A feeling of *mutuality* is embedded in the three following relational themes: **close, collaborative** and **caring,** in which the students experience a basic relational reciprocity with the teacher.

At both Rocky Beach and River City, the majority of the students made an immediate connection with a teacher who they thought was going to be helpful. None of these relationships evolved in a negative direction. In one case, a teacher and student developed a relationship that was perceived as not helpful to begin with, but over time moved to being perceived as helpful. Most of the negative teacher relationships took place in the failed learning environment of the high school from which they had come. In

this study, 10 of the teachers were classified as especially helpful, five teachers were classified as helpful, and only three teachers were classified as not helpful. Two of these three were classified as helpful in one dyad and not helpful in another (see Table 5.1).

<center>**Four Relational Themes**</center>

**Relational Theme One: A Comfortable and Relaxed Openness**

For eight of nine students in the study, an open-feeling relationship with the teacher generates a sense of comfort and relaxation. In this section, Julia, Angel, McNulty, and Jenny speak eloquently of the effect on them of this relaxed openness. Jenny, Robert, and Opal discuss the continuum between comfort and openness on one end and pressure and closedness on the other. The students' observations include the teacher capacities discussed in the Chapter 5: listening attentively and responding non-judgmentally. For example, Julia describes how she responds in the classroom of her especially-helpful teacher:

> I'm not scared to ask a question. It feels open to me. It feels like she [teacher] says, "You can ask me a question, feel free," and I will give an answer that I want and we can discuss and I won't be wondering what this teacher is going to be like ….I feel comfortable asking questions anytime. (SVN T2, p. 2)

For Julia asking questions and having a dialogue with the teacher is a primary medium for learning. She feels welcomed into discourse by her especially-helpful teacher.

Speaking about his especially-helpful teacher, Angel describes a sense of openness that links his teacher's capacity to listen and respond non-judgmentally to the feel of the classroom: "Her classroom had this tranquil and relaxed aura. If anyone needed someone to talk to they would go to 'my especially-helpful teacher.' She would listen. She would give them feedback without judging them" (SDM T1, p. 12).

In much more global terms, McNulty considers the effects on him of an especially-helpful teacher relationship:

> It made me feel comfortable in the class…made me actually want to learn. My whole life I've never wanted to learn; I always wanted to drop out of high school and do my own thing. But since coming to the school …these teachers have this power on students where they can practically make them do anything they want. (SUU T3, p. 5)

McNulty attributes his ultimate success in school to the sense of comfort that this connection engendered. McNulty is explaining that this sense of ease was a motivating force in his school life that made him "actually want to learn" and not drop out of school.

**Feeling "Laid Back" and Feeling "Pressured:" A Continuum is Uncovered**. In Jenny's comments she uses the term "laid back" that Robert used in Chapter 5. The term "laid back" appears frequently in student descriptions of helpful relationships. Discussing her especially-helpful teacher Jenny clarifies her preference for this informal attitude: "He's not really strict and he's laid back....I like laid-back people; I don't like strict people…; laid back people give me a sense of relaxation" (SDL T1, p. 8). The term "laid back" connotes not being crowded or pressured and an informality that can permeate the classroom. One student may be allowed to play his guitar during the class, another can disagree with the teacher on academic material without fear of repercussions, and another who is not feeling well is allowed to sit at her desk wrapped cocoon-like in her blanket.

**When Openness is Absent**. Conversely, what some students identify as "strictness," teacher "grumpiness" (lack of humor), and rigidity (lack of openness) are linked to relationships that feel pressured and closed. Opal comments about a teacher whom she did not find helpful in high school: "Maybe she just didn't have a very friendly nature, I

don't know. I even felt uncomfortable asking questions. I didn't like being in the class with her at all" (SJO T3, p. 3).

Opal uses the word "overwhelmed" to describe her reaction to pressure she felt from teachers in her high school to complete her work by a certain time and in a certain way. Opal connects this pressure to being obliged to follow a prescribed format in her class work: "I really am thirsty for knowledge, though I get easily overwhelmed if there's a certain way to do something. So the flexibility in the content of the projects is better for me" (SJO T2, p. 8).

In closing, students use the term "open" to describe their relationships with helpful teachers in which they feel free to interact, ask questions, and engage the task at hand. Openness is connected to the students' sense of a teacher's willingness to, and interest in engaging with them. Relationships that feel too formal, judgmental, rigid, or closed result in students' communicating less.

When a student "feels free" to ask questions without feeling "scared," as Julia put it, the lines of communication are opened for learning.

## Relational Theme Two: A Sense of Closeness - Being Friends

Seven of the nine students in the study experienced a sense of equality and closeness with their especially-helpful teacher that they often described as "being friends." In this section, Julia, Opal, Angel, and Amelia offer their perceptions of closeness and equality with their teachers. Amelia and McNulty discuss how the sense of closeness leads them to feeling able to disclose personal issues to their teachers, and

finally the students' responses to the Life Circles Technique (Lazarus, 1989) supports their perceptions of closeness and equality.

Julia illustrates how teaching and learning as equal activities flow between her and her especially-helpful teacher, even while she acknowledges that they have fundamentally different roles as they work together:

> We get down to the simple step first. Then we discuss and she'll say what she thinks and I will say what I think and then she'll remind me that she's a teacher and I'll remind her that I am a student. And we discussed this and we discussed that and we put it together and we come to an agreement that I'll write this or do this. And I think, okay I can do that. (SVN T1, p. 12)

Julia and her teacher have negotiated an agreement about the work she needs to do. By the end of the process, Julia is feeling confident and willing to follow the plan.

Julia is eloquent on the basic equality she experiences with this same teacher:

> She makes it feel like we're all the same age. She doesn't make it feel like she's the boss and we have to do everything she says. And she's more like 'let's just do this' and it's more like a friend type thing. (SVN T1, p. 1)

The teacher does not present herself as older and wiser or as a "boss"; she encourages and invites Julia to join in an activity as a friend would.

In the following example, we hear another student's take on the "friend-like" quality of helpful student teacher relationships. Opal, who is acutely shy and reticent to interact, connects the informality in her school with her feeling of being friends with the teacher. When asked about what makes learning fun in the helpful teacher's classroom, Opal says:

> Yeah that's probably a good word, informal. And I guess especially since in our school you don't know teacher's last names you just call them by their first names. It's more like you're talking to a friend than a teacher. (SJO T2, p. 7)

Opal experiences a greater sense of parity because of the informality of addressing her teachers by their first names.

Knowing that a teacher has had to struggle with issues similar to those a student is facing reinforces the sense of equality students experience with their helpful teachers. McNulty elaborates about one of his especially-helpful teachers: "I feel like he's had the same stuff in his life that I've had in my life…this guy has shared like the same struggle that I have" (SUU T3, p. 11). Amelia comments on the less helpful of her two chosen teachers. When she learns that she and her not-helpful teacher both have young children who are behaving in similar ways, she comments:

> I like that. It makes communication easier with him because like he has some of the same issues as I do sometimes. Like him being open with me and me being open with him makes it easier to ask him questions and stuff. (SVU T2, p. 9)

Amelia returns to the sense of openness in the relationship that is necessary for the kind of sharing that sparks her comment. Her teacher is disclosing some information about himself that is directly linked to the work they are doing in class. Amelia is willing to offer this positive insight despite her overall sense that this teacher was not helpful.

Angel, whose emotional life is strong and close to the surface, describes the sense of closeness that has developed with his especially-helpful teacher and contrasts that with the distance he felt from teachers in his high school:

> I feel like some kind of closeness to her. She was explaining that when she had vacation that she missed all the kids in the class and I realize that I missed the teachers and I actually missed being in school and I missed the teachers and never realized that. When I had vacation at the high school it was like okay I'm out of here. (SDM T1A, p. 2)

When Angel hears the teacher's explanation that she missed her students, Angel experiences that he is worth missing. He is then able to acknowledge a vulnerable feeling

of connection to the teacher, in part because it is reciprocal.  Finally, he recognizes that this whole sense of connection was missing for him at the conventional high school.

Echoing the last sentence of Angel's commentary, Amelia describes the distance she felt with the teachers at her conventional high school:

> Teacher-wise they don't really try to get to know you.  You're just another person there.  They don't take the time to get to know you and I don't like that very much because when they try to teach you in the beginning of the year, it's very hard there because they're asking "Who are you?" again. (SVU T1, p. 1)

Sounding very much like a line from the Song "Just Another Brick in the Wall" (Pink Floyd, 1979), Amelia's commentary points to students' feeling of alienation when it seems that teachers don't even know "who their students are" and aren't interested in finding out.

**Feeling Safe for Personal Disclosure**.  When students experience close relationships, they also feel safe in disclosing intimate information.  Students identify their most helpful teacher-student relationships as ones in which they feel safe discussing personal issues without fear that their confidences will be betrayed.  Amelia talks about her trust in the confidentiality of her helpful teachers: "And I know that they won't go tell the other teachers, they won't tell another student or somebody at their house or something like that, so I can really trust them" (SVU T1, p. 31).  In a similar way, Angel describes a teacher with whom he has had many highly personal conversations: "And so I feel comfortable talking with her about anything" (SDM T2, p. 2)….I know she's not going to go to the other teachers and other people on the staff and tell them what I said" (SDM T2, p. 2).

McNulty describes the degree to which some students are willing to confide in their helpful teachers. When asked about a time when talking with his helpful teacher had helped him to feel better McNulty responds:

> I talked with him when I started using again about a month ago and I sort of figured out it's not anything to worry about with him. It was like a 10-second awkwardness talking to him. I was afraid that he was going to tell my PO [Probation Officer]. (SUU T2, p. 4)

McNulty trusts this teacher enough to disclose highly volatile material that could result in serious consequences for him if the teacher did not hold the information in confidence.

In order to disclose personal matters to a teacher and discuss their experiences outside of school, students need to know that this information will not be shared with others. The process of confiding is supported by a deep sense of trust that the teacher will understand that the information being divulged is personal and private. Teachers who are not perceived to be helpful will not receive these disclosures and, therefore, will not be as likely to understand their students and the lives they lead.

**How Results from the Life Circles Technique Support the Student Sense of Closeness**. Students were asked to respond to the Life Circles Technique, a technique devised by Lazarus (1989) to help people gauge how close they are to another person. Students confirmed their statements from the interviews that they experienced especially-helpful teachers as friends. (The five concentric circles that make up the continuum are ranked as follows: the A circle at the bull's-eye of the diagram represents the most personal and trustworthy relationship; the B circle, the next concentric circle out, represents the closest friends; the C circle represents good friends; the D circle represents acquaintances; and the outermost E circle represents the most impersonal of relationships). All of the students interviewed ranked their relationships with the most

helpful teachers in at least the C or "good friend" zone, for how well they knew their teachers **and** how well their teachers knew them. When a teacher was ranked as not-helpful, all the rankings slipped to the D or "acquaintance" zone, for how well they knew their not-helpful teachers, and between the C and D zones for how well they felt known by their teachers.

A majority of students tend to see their helpful teachers as "friends," a relational designation that implies a mutual caring and fundamental equality. Eight of nine students know their helpful teachers as well as "good friends" would, and seven of nine feel that their teacher knows them as well as they would know a good friend. The intimate interactions, built within the framework of friendliness are person-to-person, help to reduce the student sense that they are unequal to their teachers despite the acknowledged asymmetries of age and role. The interviews reveal that less helpful relationships were perceived as less equal and students and teachers were more "strangers" to one another than "friends."

## Relational Theme Three: A Collaborative Connection

Eight of nine students identified a connection that feels collaborative as a second attribute of helpful relationships. A majority noted that they are encouraged to engage in challenging work if they perceive that the teacher is *asking* for their cooperation and is willing *to work with* the students. In the following section, Fred, Robert and Opal give examples of collaborative efforts with their teachers. Amelia and Opal explore collaboration more deeply. They describe how well the teacher has come to know them and their interests, and how the teacher has co-constructed a curriculum that is both

relevant and engaging.  Robert, Julia, and Amelia discuss the opposite end of the

collaborative spectrum, where authority for learning is not shared and the teacher is

perceived as the "boss."

**<u>Experiences of Collaboration</u>**.  Acutely aware of his own limited reading skills, while

needing to feel autonomous and to receive support at the same time, Fred details how a

former teacher asked him, rather than commanded him, to try reading a book.  Fred

explains how he was able to respond to that request:

> She put the book on my desk and she said, "Fred, if *you can please* read
> this." I was sitting there doing nothing because it was a book report class,
> "It's something you can write a book report on and can you please write
> it," she said "I'm not going to give you anything else unless you read
> something." And then I opened it to skim through it, and I started reading.
> She *asked me*.  (SUS T1, p. 3)

In the context of a collaborative connection, teacher requests are not perceived as orders

so much as helpful encouragement.  Angel talks about two helpful teachers at his school:

> Yes, my [helpful teacher] is likely hard-assed on me, she's not riding on
> my back—she gets me to do it because the persistency of her and I feel
> like I know I've got to get this done for my [helpful teacher] because she's
> looking out for my best interests obviously.…If I didn't have my [helpful
> teacher] or my [especially-helpful teacher] here I wouldn't come to
> school.  (SDM T3, p. 16)

Angel accepts his helpful teacher's "hard-assed" persistence because he senses her

commitment to his "best interests."

Collaboration reduces the feeling of isolation some students encounter when faced

with an academic task.  Opal describes how work that is challenging can be done **<u>with</u>**

her teacher rather than on her own: "I learn a little bit slower; so I really like it when the

teacher comes and sits with me like one on one, and really goes through it with me.  Then

it's just easier for me" (SJO T1, p. 3).  From Robert, one has the sense of his helpful

teacher's accessibility: "He's always right there to help you help to understand it more"

(SWZ T1, p. 13). Teacher and student work together to understand the project, even while the teacher is "breaking it down" in a teacherly way.

When asked how his helpful teacher might describe their working relationship, Robert predicts the teacher would say: "[Working together with Robert was]…great, easy to get things done and we never argue and he doesn't complain" (SWZ T1, p. 23). For Robert, collaboration with the teacher extends beyond their working together on academic work to helping his teacher do his job. Speaking again as the teacher, Robert says: "'Robert will make himself interested even if he is not interested': I'll still make myself interested because I know it's something he [the teacher] wants the class to get" (SWZ T2, p. 14).

In order to support the teacher, Robert looks for interest in the material. A sense of loyalty is at play here. I ask: "What does he [Robert's especially-helpful teacher] enjoy the most about working with you?" Robert replies: **"**My overall respectfulness and kindness**;** how *I try to get other students to participate*" (SWZ T2, p. 15). Robert is seeing that collaboration is not limited to doing his own work but extends to the teacher's accomplishing his goals.

**<u>Collaborating Around Common Interests Leads to Relevant Curriculum</u>**. Building on the sense of equality and trust that helpful relationships engender, mutual personal disclosure allows teacher and student to identify areas of interest, some of which they have in common. When teachers and students in this study talk about their interests, their connection to one another is strengthened. In the section below, Opal, Eric, and Amelia explain how shared interests help teachers and students develop projects that make class work relevant.

First, Opal comments on the development of a learning experience with her teacher. She realizes how one common interest has been the basis for most of her important teacher connections:

> Okay, well recently we've been incubating chickens and I have chickens so I figured I could help her [teacher] out raising them or whatever. She only wants them when they're little because they're cute so I was going to take some of the chicks. And she knows some people that want chickens so...I'm actually working on that now. So she's she bought the incubator and I'm just going to help her raise the chickens (SJO T1, p. 9)….Yeah actually most of the teachers I have gotten along with have had some sort of connection with animals. I have never noticed that since you pointed it out now….Yeah that's one thing I can connect with people on. (SJO T1, p. 10)

Next, Eric acknowledges his teacher's effort to connect projects with his interest in music:

> Like she knew I was interested in music stuff and like she does the art elective most of the time. And I would go in there with the guitar and play in there and she really liked that. And she went through a bunch of effort contacting these people….It's like [she contacted] the Maine Society of Music like a group that you get into certain concerts around Big City for free. You just have to pay like a $20 fee yearly I think and you get newsletters and stuff like that. So she hooked me up with that. But she put in a lot of effort. It might have even been off school time to do this because it was like to [from] her personal e-mail. (SQI T1, p. 6)

Finally, Amelia demonstrates very clearly that a teacher's knowledge of a student's interests can lead to ideas for curriculum. Amelia's especially-helpful teacher helped her connect with a history project about the Roaring 20s by suggesting she research the style of the Flappers. When I asked her: "How did she [teacher] know that you would be interested in fashion?", Amelia responded, "Because I talk to her a lot and then I tell her most of my interests and she tells me a lot so she figured it out from that" (SVU T1, p. 20).

When teachers and students have time to learn each other's interests, and especially if they have a common interest, they can build a stronger sense of connection. They have a more complete sense of the other as a person beyond their asymmetric roles. Furthermore, the teacher can take an area of student interest and personalize the curriculum to make it relevant.

**Learning in the Context of an Uncollaborative Relationship**.  In the section below I explore some of the uncollaborative learning experiences of the nine students: ones in which they feel "bossed," "pressured," and unequal.  These experiences are an important component of a not-helpful relationship.

After he was out of school for a few weeks due to some serious medical problems, Robert's treatment by school officials and teachers conflicted with his expectations of respectful interactions.  He explains:

> They'd like to use their power to their full extent; they seem to like to just jump on you.  Like when I got back after having my seizure I was walking down the hallway.  I got harassed for walking down the hallway.  (SWZ T1, p. 2)

Robert is describing his sense being victimized by adult power used to its "full extent" in a case where he did not feel it was applicable.  Nothing about the interaction feels collaborative to him.

Julia, for whom discussion is the key modality for learning, explained earlier that when she feels "bossed," she is less engaged relationally and academically.  Discussing the beginning phase of a relationship that eventually grew into her especially-helpful teacher connection, Julia comments:

> At first she [teacher] didn't know what I was saying because of my accent…I would say something and she would be like "are you cursing??" And I would say, "No, I've been giving you the answers" and she would say, "I hear something different." We didn't have a relationship; it was

just do this, do that….Because she always gives me this look, she was not very open to me.  I just went to her class because I had to.  (SVN T1, p. 10)

There is no give and take for Julia here.  She experiences the teacher as suspicious and full of orders.  She is in the class only because she believes she must be there.

In a more involved example of how this command-control behavior on the teacher's part is perceived by the student, Amelia recounts a set of interactions that contributed to her exit from conventional schooling:

My "not-helpful" high school teacher taught history.  It was always like a really like down mood for everybody in that class because he was mean.…Like there was one time that I got an answer wrong in front of the whole class….He said, "That's not right so spend the next five minutes looking in your book until you can give me the right answer" and I didn't like that very much....It was kind of embarrassing and second of all it was pushy.  I got it wrong and he wasn't helping me enough and now you are still expecting me to do it by myself.  (SVU T1, p. 24)

For Amelia the side effects of this incident resulted in the following behavior on her part:

I stop talking.  I would stop answering stuff and he would call on me and I would just shake my head and say I'm not going to answer...because anybody that answers, he'd make you feel really stupid....I knew I'd probably get a question wrong so I just didn't answer (SVU T1, p. 26).  I don't think he liked me very much either (SVU T1, p. 25)....I was skipping his class a lot so Mrs. Counselor made me talk to him and that didn't go very good either.  So he said, "I don't see why I should help you when you're not coming to my class" and I said, "I would come to your class if you would help me.  I was coming in your class all that time and you still didn't help me." And he still kept making excuses to make me look like I was a bad one.  (SVU T1, p. 25)

In conclusion, when eight of nine students in the study sense that a teacher is asking him or her to engage and will collaborate with the student on the task at hand, the students are more willing to take steps towards learning.  They have the sense that they

are not being left to face their learning challenges alone, that the teacher is there and interested in working with them on their tasks.

When students are simply told what the task is and left to their own devices, they find it much less motivating to begin working and to stay with it. Students avoid and resist teachers who use their institutional power either to exert behavioral control over them or to demand their engagement in the work of the classroom. The students resist the unilateral flow of power by disengaging with the teacher, not talking, ceasing to ask questions, and generally avoiding interaction.

On the other hand, when role-based power is not employed and a more "friends-based" authority is used in a collaborative way, students are willing to work with a teacher, in part because they are convinced that the teacher—as Angel puts it—has their "best interests" at heart.

## Relational Theme Four: Caring - A Sense of Validation, Accessibility and Support

The caring interest a teacher demonstrates in a student's academic and personal life, and the willingness of a teacher to be accessible before, during, and after classes is felt by a majority of the students as validation and support.

In the first section below, Amelia, Julia and Angel discuss their perceptions of how accessible and understanding their especially-helpful teachers are. Next, I draw from McNulty's interview and an observation by Julia to give two very different examples of teacher accessibility. Finally, Robert and Julia explore what it feels like when the care is not there.

A teacher's capacity to care with accountability, listen attentively, and be non-judgmental can set the foundation for a relationship that feels caring, as the students describe below.

Amelia discusses how the teachers in her program are accessible and knowledgeable about her, and that they care:

> Because like the teachers [in her alternative program] are always available for help. Like they know you too, and know what's going on outside of school. So if you're having a real hard time in school they sit down and help you with it more so you're not all stressed out about everything at one time. (SVU T1, p. 2)

Amelia feels known and supported. She experiences her teachers at River City as available to her when she is having a rough time. A bad situation does not get worse.

Julia describes how she is comforted by an interaction with her especially-helpful teacher when she [Julia] is having a rough day:

> The other day the day care closed at five…I had to go to a college thing….I had to find somebody to watch Timothy and I thought, "This is ridiculous." My [especially-helpful teacher] gave me a hug and I screamed….She asked "What's the matter, 'Julia'?" "It's not the college thing it's everything at once, coming at once…." It really felt better after I talked to my [especially-helpful teacher]. It's not the end of the world I learned....She is really comforting. (SVN T1, p. 22)

Julia's teacher has put her current plight into perspective in a highly personal and sensitive way. Julia accepts her teacher's framing of the issue and feels relieved, realizing that her world is not ending.

Angel describes an interaction with his helpful teacher, concerning a school-related issue, in which he feels supported and validated:

> When I was in Voc she'd tell me, "Didn't you know Angel you have to get to Voc….Geez," she says "if I have to I'm going to come to your house and lay on the horn and I'll bring you to Voc every day." She always tells me because she's looking out. Because she knows that I can excel. She

wants me to use my brain for what it's worth instead of making poor decisions. (SDM T3, p. 16)

Angel's sense is that this teacher is "looking out" for him. She wants him to succeed in school and, beyond that, to make better decisions. Angel believes in her commitment to his success.

**<u>When the Teacher is Accessible: The When and Where of Caring Instructions</u>**. In eight of nine of the interviews, relationship-building interactions occur in places outside the classroom and during non-classroom time. These other venues—such as the lunch room, vehicles traveling to and from out-of-school learning destinations, field trips, and classrooms after hours—allow student and teacher relationships to unfold and deepen within a context that is not bounded by the parameters of a conventional class room.

Within more personal and informal social contexts, student and teacher have a chance for extended and personal interchanges. I offer two examples of this informal interaction: one from an interview and one from an observation.

In his interview, McNulty explains about one of his especially-helpful teachers: "He pretty much talks to me all the time in morning meetings so that I'll feel comfortable at school for the day" (SUU T3, p. 3). McNulty is noting that this teacher checks in with him regularly in a non-classroom context, and ascribes the teacher's behavior to his intention that McNulty be "comfortable in school." Next he discusses an interactional opportunity at the beginning of his enrollment at Rocky Beach:

> It was him [especially-helpful teacher1] and [especially-helpful teacher 2] at the beach and he was asking me about what Juvie was like and what happens when I get mad. And he was like "Whoa, I don't want to get you mad" and I said I was just kidding I'm not going to freak out at school it just wasn't worth it (SUU T3, p. 7).…I felt like he was really listening to what I have to say. I asked McNulty "How did it feel?" He replied, "Practically because he was like looking me in the eye. He was agreeing

to what I was saying and saying, "Yeah I know what you mean," and stuff
like that so that felt warm.  (SUU T3, p. 7)

At the very outset of his experience at Rocky Beach, McNulty has a chance to have an important dialogue with two teachers whom he would eventually designate as especially helpful.  McNulty experiences the interested attention of two teachers in a conversation that takes place in the informal environment of a school field trip to the beach.  The response he receives to what he is telling them confirms that these teachers know and understand what he is saying.  It feels "warm" to him.

When Julia and her especially-helpful teacher get together on a Friday make-up day at the River City School, they are working on her essay about Cyrano de Bergerac. Julia sits at a table, and her especially-helpful teacher stands next to her looking at what she is writing.  There is a flurry of interchanges between them—two to three times as many as they would have in a normal class.  Sometimes the teacher sits down beside Julia, sometimes she goes back to her work area to continue a project on which she is working.  For the moment, no other students are in the classroom.

In this informal setting Julia can attend to her work with support from the teacher. She can obtain quick responses to her questions and she and her teacher can joke and laugh.  Work is done in a friendly and relaxed relational context.

Both of the examples I have cited are possible only because both alternative programs built time into their week for teachers and students to connect in such settings. Field trips and out-of-school venues are productive habitats for relationship-building for students and teachers at Rocky Beach School.  For students at River City School, the optional Friday "make-up day" allows for personal interchanges built around obligatory schoolwork, frequently offering student and teacher chance to have one-to-one time.

Students in this study find it helpful and connective to have non-class time with their teachers, preferably in an environment where they can discuss one-to-one what is happening for them at home, with peers, and with school.

**<u>When Care is Not There</u>**.  In contrast to the illustrations above, Robert describes what it feels like when teachers are indifferent to his life outside of school:

> Even like with life goals, teachers at the high school would never have tried to set me up with like an interview with the police.  They don't care what happens to you outside of school.  They want to get you through and that's it.  (SWZ T1, p. 4)

Robert reads the teachers' lack of interest in his life beyond the classroom as an indicator that they don't care about him, and, although not said, that his success is only important to the degree that it furthers the teachers' or the school's agenda.  He doesn't understand why the teachers have missed a chance to further him in his career search, and reads their inaction as indifference to his future.

> Julia puts a fine point on the discouraging feel of an uncaring approach:
>
> It happened in the old high school….It was like once [something was assigned] and that's your responsibility.  It wasn't like "Julia, you got to do your work," it was like, "If you don't do it it's your responsibility." And in that old high school it's a do or don't.…It wasn't like I have to….They don't say, "We want to see you graduate." (SVN T1, p. 2)

Julia who is highly relational, finds this approach cold and distancing.  She feels no sense that the teacher's energy is on her side of the equation and that the teacher wants her to succeed.  Instead, she is told that the task is hers to accomplish on her own—it is "your [her] responsibility." Both a sense of care and collaboration are missing.

In conclusion, students in the study respond positively to the sense of caring evident in their relationships with their helpful teachers.  Caring interchanges validate the

seriousness of life-issues with which students are dealing every day. At the same time, such caring makes the students feel that they do not have to deal with their issues alone.

## Conclusion

All of the students interviewed are highly sensitive to the feel of their connection with a teacher. Among the nine students interviewed, the most helpful relationships were categorized in four themes as feeling:

- Open;

- Close like "friends" and "equals";

- Collaborative;

- Caring and interested in one another beyond the classroom.

Students describe the helpful relationship as open enough to accommodate humor and interchanges that extend beyond the parameters of conventional teacher-student relationships, thus allowing teacher and student to become more visible and known to one another. Students interact with teachers as friends and equals and experience their schoolwork as collaboration. Students are willing to confide personal information to teachers and to disclose their interests and passions. They become interested in their teachers as human beings as well, and want to know more about their teachers' lives. Students feel cared for and validated. At times they find themselves reciprocating the care they receive from teachers by working "for" them and helping teachers out as role models with other students.

Only three of the 18 current pairs of teachers and students were perceived by students to be not helpful. Most of the negative relational experiences took place before

the students joined the alternative program. For this reason, we can derive less current information about these kinds of relationships from our student–teacher dyads.

The nine students interviewed described not-helpful relationships as feeling:

- "Strict" with little "leeway" or tolerance for humor and non-academic  discussion;

- Unequal;

- Pressured;

- Distant and unconcerned.

Because students experience being "bossed" and judged in these relationships, they develop a sense of inequality between their teachers and themselves. The lack of opportunity for interaction in the classroom creates a pressured feeling for students because there is little opportunity for more informal interactions, such as humor or non-academic discussions, to take place. Students and teachers have few opportunities to discover mutual interests or concerns. The flow of information and authority is uni-directional from the teacher to the student. A sense of distance and indifference frames many of the interchanges in these relationships. Students actively distance themselves from distant and indifferent teachers by disengaging from classroom activities and avoiding the teacher.

## How Do Student-Teacher Relationships Reflect Teacher Capacities?

In Chapters 5 and 6, I explored two central research questions: (a) how do at-risk students perceive a helpful teacher and (b) how do they describe the helpful relationship that develops with a helpful teacher. I wanted to learn if the nine students interviewed had common parameters by which they could gauge the helpfulness of a teacher, and

whether they had similar experiences in their relationships with these teachers. I also looked for common factors related to perceived not-helpfulness.

To help frame the discussion, I sub-divided the teacher helpfulness attributes into teacher capacities that facilitate relational connections and teacher capacities that facilitate academic learning. I categorized the feel of a helpful relationship into four relational themes: openness, collaboration, closeness, and caring. I found that most of the perceived helpful teacher's capacities correlate closely with how the helpful relationship feels to a student. I first examine a teacher's capacity to facilitate relational connections and then their capacity to facilitate academic learning in order to learn how these capacities might lead to relationships described by the students.

How might a teacher's capacity to facilitate relational connections lead to relationships that feel helpful to students? The helpful teacher themes that my interviewees emphasized were: listening, being non-judgmental, displaying energy and enthusiasm, offering and accepting humor, being caring and holding accountable, and being genuine. The helpful relationship themes included the relationships feeling: open, close, collaborative, and caring.

Some of these relational capacities and helpful relationships align quite closely. If a student perceived his teacher as caring and able to hold students accountable, he or she would likely experience his or her relationship with that teacher as close and caring. When a student encountered a teacher who had good listening skills and offered caring inquiry, the student might consider that teacher to be caring and interested. When this teacher was also considered to be genuine, then the student might well consider himself or herself close to and more willing to collaborate with that teacher.

A teacher who could listen well and respond non-judgmentally to a student could create an open and relaxed learning atmosphere. In such a classroom, students could be confident that they would not be demeaned or ignored if they were to ask a question. A teacher who could both be humorous and accept student humor as a part of day-to-day communication would also likely encourage an open and relaxed sense of connectedness.

Teachers who disclose aspects of themselves and their past would encourage the same from their students through their modeling of genuineness, thus increasing the sense of closeness in their relationships with students. Finally, although the data are unclear about a direct link between the dispositions of energy and enthusiasm and the feel of the relationship, they suggest that energy and enthusiasm make the process of learning more interesting for the student. This may be because the teacher appears authentically interested in the material.

Specific capacities within the teaching-related facilities could lead to a helpful feeling relationship as well. A teacher who is skilled at "reading the student" could easily be seen to create a relationship that felt collaborative, caring, and close. A teacher who listens attentively to student academic interests and issues might create a relationship that felt close, interested, and collaborative. A teacher who took the trouble to thoroughly break down a learning process into manageable sections according to the student's needs could also be perceived as forming a relationship that felt close and collaborative. Finally, teachers who are committed to creating active learning experiences for students might be perceived as being a part of more open, relaxed, and collaborative relationships.

Although all helpful teachers did not necessarily have all of these facilities, the students made it clear in their interviews that if a teacher lacked several key qualities,

they were likely to be designated as not helpful and the relationship with them was also felt to be not helpful. Students in this study curtailed interactions and engagement quickly when they felt they were: being judged negatively by teachers, being pressured by teachers who they felt didn't know or care about them, and being treated as beneath their teachers.

Finally, one can see an overlapping and recursive quality among the different themes mentioned in the student perceptions of helpful relationships. It makes sense that if a teacher appears to be caring and interested in a student that the student would feel close to that teacher. A sense of being close could lay the foundation for a collaborative working style, and vice versa. The opportunities for students and teachers to be close, to collaborate, and to care for one another would appear to be much greater in a classroom in which interactions felt open and relaxed. Opportunities for connection and help would be less present in relationships that felt rigid, rule-bound, unequal, impersonal, and distant.

In the next chapter I will explore the connections students see between these helpful and not-helpful relationships and the students' progress in the academic realm.

**Chapter 7**

**HOW DO HELPFUL AND NOT-HELPFUL RELATIONSHIPS AFFECT**

**ACADEMIC GROWTH AND ENGAGEMENT?**

**Introduction**

Chapters 5 and 6 examined my first two research questions on the qualities

students attributed to their especially-helpful, helpful and not-helpful teachers and how

the students experienced relationships with helpful and not-helpful teachers.  Chapter 7

contains a brief overview followed by two sections in which I investigate my third

research question on how students perceive the effect of relationships with especially-

helpful, helpful and not-helpful teachers on academic growth, academic engagement, and

the desire and ability to complete school.  Divided according to the student-attributed

helpfulness of the teacher, the first section addresses the perceived effect of relationships

with not-helpful teachers and the second section explores the perceived effect of

relationships with helpful teachers.

To provide a richer context for the third research question, each of these sections

will be followed by vignettes of specific student-teacher relationships that students

designated as not helpful and especially helpful.  Within these vignettes I will explore the

degree to which students perceive that their teachers possess the three attributes

(empathy, positive regard, congruence) that Rogers (1983) proposed were necessary to

effectively facilitate learning.

The data I gathered regarding student academic growth from both the teacher and

student perspective were less robust than the interactional data I gained from the

interviews and observations. As mentioned in Chapter 3, teacher-supplied evidence of academic growth and engagement was a mixture of important anecdotal information with some traditional measures of attendance and grades. However, student and teacher perceptions of positive academic growth and engagement within helpful student-teacher relationships were strongly aligned.

## Overview: Student Perceptions of the Effect of Helpful and Not-Helpful Relationships upon Learning

As explained in Chapter 3, students designated teachers as especially helpful, helpful and not helpful by circling their names more than once, once, and not at all respectively on the Student Connections Survey they was given at the beginning of the study (see Appendix G). When asked if they felt the student-teacher relationship was an important factor in how much they learned from a particular teacher, students' responses were varied. However, students were unanimous in responding that they learned more in the classrooms of their helpful teachers than of their not-helpful teachers. They were almost unanimous (eight out of nine) in terms of the deleterious effect of not-helpful relationships on their learning.

The students were less clear when comparing their helpful relationships with specific teachers. Five of the students (Amelia, Julia, Fred, Jenny, and Robert) felt a helpful relationship was very important to how much they learned. Four (Eric, Opal, McNulty, and Angel) felt a helpful relationship was important but not necessarily critical to how much they learned from a teacher when compared to another helpful teacher

**Section One:  Student Perception of the Impact of Not-Helpful Relationships on**

**Learning**

Students were unanimous about the impact of a not-helpful relationship upon their learning: at best, they learned less than in the classes of teachers with whom they had helpful relationships; at worst, generally refused to engage, skipped the class, and dropped out.  Data for two thirds of the students came primarily from their previous schooling experiences and not from their current educational setting in an alternative program.  Below, I explore students' perceptions of academic growth, engagement, and desire and ability to complete school when being taught by a not-helpful teacher.

**Academic Growth and the Not-Helpful Teacher**

I begin by analyzing Amelia, Jenny, and Robert's experiences with teachers perceived to be not helpful to explain how they connect a particular teacher-student relationship with their academic growth in that teacher's class.

Amelia describes her avoidance of not-helpful teachers in high school: "With the other teachers I didn't like, I just didn't go in most of the time.  And when I did, I would like zone out and do something else" (SVU T1, p. 8).  Clearly not much academic learning was taking place.  Earlier in this study, we looked at Amelia's detachment from a particular teacher who embarrassed her in front of the class.  She resolved the problem by skipping the class until she had to drop it.

Jenny's response to not connecting with the teacher in a positive way is to drop the class.  Experiencing major problems in her life outside of school, Jenny was

particularly fragile when she encountered her "grumpy" teacher. He taught social

studies, stood behind a podium, and shouted at people:

> I don't know, I think I was scared of him because he was big and
> grumpy"…(SDM T1, p. 18). He called on me in class a couple of times
> and I said I didn't know the answer and so he moved on. (SDM T1, p. 20)

The immediate effect of this not-helpful teacher on Jenny's learning was that she

stopped asking questions in class: "I was shy, I didn't talk I was failing his class because

I didn't do the work" (SDL T1, p. 18). I asked: "What went into your not doing the work

for the class?," and Jenny responded, "I was too shy to ask for help." Jenny dropped the

class in two weeks. Sometime after that, she dropped out of school for two years.

Robert's reaction to not-helpful relationships with teachers at his old

school was more global: "Every day in high school I thought about dropping out.

Every day, it was not once a week." I asked, "Mostly because the teachers didn't

connect with you?" and he responded, "Yeah, there was no problem with students

it was the teachers and the whole staff." (SWZ T3, p. 5)

> Robert saw the staff as needing to show their "power" over the students:
>
> They just like to use their power to their full extent. They seem to like to
> just jump on you. Like when I got back after having my seizure I was
> walking down the hallway I got harassed for walking down the hallway,
> and I said I was just back from the hospital and I was looking for my
> classes and I didn't feel comfortable and I had just gotten back from the
> hospital and she gave me a whole lecture and said I was going to get a
> detention...I said I'm just walking down the hall. (SWZ T1, p. 2)
>
> Another result of Robert's classroom experience was his shutting down, like

Jenny and Amelia, and choosing not to ask questions: "I wouldn't ask questions in the

regular high school because it felt like everybody else wasn't going to ask" (SWZ T1, p.

12).

In an example of how his shutting down could spiral out of control, Robert talks about an encounter with a teacher at the high school, after Robert has decided to come to the Rocky Beach School:

> At the high school I was going to sit out this test because I'm going to the Rocky Beach School and she [teacher] said, "You can't do that you can't do that'." There was another teacher there at the time and she must've felt like she had to impress. At the beginning of the year I got along with her and I can't remember what happened but I started failing because I missed those days due to my seizure...and she was coming down hard…. [I ask,] "Did you ask her to help you catch up?"
>
> [He responds,] "At that time I knew I was transferring, it was just a matter of time I wasn't going to misbehave just didn't make any sense to do the work." (SWZ T1, p. 24)

When I ask Robert if he ever tried to rectify the issue with this teacher, he responds: "That's when I decided to go to the Rocky Beach school. I was just tired of the school. I wasn't even going to attempt it" (SWZ T1, p. 26). Robert has been defeated and wants out; the situation is no longer tenable for him in the high school. It is likely, from his account, that if he hadn't had the option to attend an alternative program he would have left school altogether. In this environment, academic growth clearly is not possible.

In these three not-helpful relationships, I do not have the perspective of the former [high school] teachers to triangulate the perceptions coming from the students. It seems, however, that teachers whose classes the students skipped and dropped would be unlikely to report much academic growth, if any, for these students.

## Engagement with the Not-Helpful Teacher

Student responses about the level of engagement with the three current teachers designated as not helpful were varied. Fred saw himself as disengaged, and attended this

teacher's classes infrequently. Julia's engagement was tied to how smoothly she and the teacher were getting along. When there was a "tension going on," she would simply go through the motions:

> At first he was just a weird guy to me....I would say stuff and he would make fun of me and I would feel like that's not proper, I'm asking a serious question....I would never ask him a question I would just do it and he would go no and I would say, "I wouldn't ask you anyway." I have to go to [his class, because] he teaches me. I just do whatever he says to do to get it over with. (SVN T2, pp.18-19)

Later in the interview, Julia focuses on the immediate impact of having a "tension" with her not-helpful teacher. When things are less tense, she will engage and participate in a way that connects her to the work of the class. One of the breakthroughs for her with this teacher was his decision to give students more choice in their work, which Julia found important in order to engage.

Students' experiences with previous teachers who were seen as not helpful led to patterns of avoidance and resistance and diminished engagement, often entirely. Students stopped asking questions, stopped coming to class, and eventually dropped the class entirely, as I described in Amelia's encounter with a not-helpful teacher in the high school. For five of the nine students, classroom disengagement was followed by missing classes, multiple absences, classroom departure, and—for one student—dropping out.

**Ability and Desire to Complete High School and the Not-Helpful Teacher**

Although Amelia did not consider her second teacher helpful, she did think she was learning useful skills in his class: "I think the way that he prepares us for tests will help me a lot" (SVU T2, p. 17). Julia allows in the following dialogue that she is also

gaining something from her not-helpful teacher.  I ask, "Has working with him helped

you finish high school?" She responds:

> No…but actually he always talk[s] about his professor…and he talks
> about college and it makes me want to go….He talks about this college
> professor and not wanting to do the work and then deciding to do the work
> and starting to pass the class, and now he and his professor are best
> buddies, and I say, "That's cool." (SVN T3, p. 3)

Here, we see a similar dynamic to the one described earlier with her helpful teacher:

stories about teachers in college appear to motivate Julia.  And when I asked what he was

doing that gave her the confidence to believe that she would receive her diploma, she

replies, "He has been responsive….Yeah he gives us more choice in the art class….[The

teacher says,]'Just be yourself and do what interests you' and I can do that and I am

passing his class" (SVN T3, p. 3).

Only one student (Fred) of three paired with not-helpful teachers felt that he had a

current not-helpful teacher who had lessened his likelihood of completing his studies.

Because I did not ask students directly about their perceptions of the impact their former

not-helpful teachers had on their ability and desire to complete, the remaining data here

are incomplete.


**Vignette One:  Julia and Her Not-Helpful Teacher (Teacher G)**

**Snapshots from Observation: Julia in Class**.  Julia comes in late to her not-helpful

teacher's class.  She explains that she is late because her porch is a mess and her landlord

is giving her a hard time about it.  She and her teacher make direct eye contact as she sits

down.  He responds, slightly irritated, "You have got to let the principal know" [I assume

about being late].  Julia looks over at her especially-helpful teacher who happens to be at

a desk in the same room.  She responds, "I was already going to be late."

Julia's non-sequitur response may be an attempt to explain that there was nothing she could do about being late.  Tardiness, as we will find out later from Julia's teacher, is an issue for him and they have been addressing it for some time.  His first response to her story is to tell her that she has to bring her lateness to the attention of the authorities, the principal in this case.  He does not communicate that he understands that her difficulties are the reason for her lateness.  A split second after his response, she shifts her gaze to her especially-helpful teacher, who likely would have given her a more empathetic response.

Later in the same class, Julia negotiates with her teacher for extra time to write her paper.  Her teacher stands next to her while she is seated at the desk.  She is looking up at him.  She says she has written most of the paper, but needs more time to complete it.  Her teacher says that she has to do it and moves about seven feet away from her.  Julia says, "Oh, come on, Mr.  Teacher," and he replies, "If you don't do this, you will have to take the final exam." Julia points out that he had already decided to let her do the paper instead of the exam when they last talked about it.  Her teacher says, "OK, let's compromise."  He decides to give her an extension on the paper.

The tone of the negotiation is smooth and relatively respectful.  These two individuals have experienced similar conflicts before and they know how to manage each other's responses quite effectively.  This demonstrates significant growth on the part of both of them, compared to the way the year began for them.  I will discuss the earlier part of their relationship below.

**Snapshot Two from Observation:  In the Lunchroom**.  Julia and some other seniors are in the lunchroom for a break.  They are chatting about whether people with AIDS

should have their heads tattooed. Her not-helpful teacher is behind the lunch counter reading the newspaper. The discussion changes directions and focuses on pedophiles. Julia jokes that her not-helpful teacher is a pedophile. He looks at her directly over the newspaper he is reading and says nothing.

Yes, the relationship has improved, but here is an example of how Julia baits her teacher by making a harsh comment presented as a "joke". Her teacher does not respond as he has previously, with an attempt to challenge her comment and criticize her behavior, nor does he acknowledge that he has just been insulted. He stays out of verbal contact, and the conflict does not escalate. Will he come back to her and discuss this interaction one-to-one?

**Background to the Relationship**. Julia and her not-helpful teacher have been working together since September (for nine months). When we encounter them, she has been at the River City School for two years and will be graduating in three months. He has worked within the special education department in the larger school system for five years, but this is his first year at River City. Julia was born and raised in the Caribbean. Her family immigrated to Maine when she was in high school. Her father has stayed in the area, but her mother has moved back to the Caribbean. Julia has her own child and lives independently with the support of a local social service agency. She is outspoken, vibrant, warm, and confrontational. Her not-helpful teacher speaks quietly and has a shy, but serious, air about him. Their relationship has been trying for both of them.

Earlier in Chapter 5, we met Julia and her not-helpful teacher in the midst of a conflict that loomed large in Julia's mind. According to her account, while getting upset with a computer she was using, she called it "gay." Her teacher told her this was

inappropriate language, as it would be if he were to call her a "nigger." Julia is black and

she angrily rejected the analogy her teacher was making, and said:

> I was like, "Nigger and gay have nothing to do with each other. I'm not
> calling anybody gay." We had that conflict. I'm not killing no gay or
> crushing their car. I'm just talking to the guy, "Why do you have to up
> and jump into my business then, like that? I'm really upset with the
> computer and it's getting on my nerves and you're making it worse."
> (SVN T2, p. 22)

Julia is questioning the teacher's logic and his judgment. In her mind, using a

"logical" analogy that insulted her was not a way to teach her about her own use of

insulting language, especially when she was already upset. When I ask her teacher

whether he can recall any particularly contentious interactions, he first says that he can't

(TRK T1, p. 9) although earlier he has explained that:

> She comes from a different culture. Basically we see things differently.
> We have different perspectives on what respectful is. At first I don't think
> it [the relationship] was as respectful, but she seems to be more open-
> minded to other people's opinions and ideas now rather than make a
> blanket statement that something is wrong or stupid. (TRK T1, p. 9)

Her teacher is focusing here on the student's growth and development, but not on

his. One does not perceive a sense of mutuality from this statement. In the following

description, he describes Julia's contentiousness as a function of her difficulties in

meeting the tasks required in his art class:

> At first when we were doing projects she would get frustrated very quickly
> and she would quit on the project before trying to work through the
> problem with me. We're now at a middle ground where she can persevere
> through what we're trying to do. I can see she's stopping and thinking and
> meditating on her next choice before this kind of impulsively plowing
> through the project to get it out of the way. She's making choices and
> asking questions and taking a little pride in what she's doing and seeing
> that she can do this stuff which I've been try to tell her all along that she's
> capable of doing. (TRK T1, p. 9)

Again, the teacher's rendition presents his input as supportive. He does not recount any actions that upset Julia. He does perceive that her initial impulse is to get the work done willy nilly, without asking him questions, but he does not attribute her way of doing her work to what Julia would call "a tension goin' on" between the two of them. Is he keeping his cards close to his chest, not acknowledging some of the more possibly troubling moments of his first year to a researcher who may end up writing about him, or is he not aware that his behavior was a big issue for Julia?

In her account of how she approached the work in his class, Julia clarified:

Yes if me and him have a tension going on I won't even bother asking a question. I won't ask him how to do it and I'll just go ahead and do it now, do it even if it's wrong and then I'll say, "Oh, I thought that is the way that was supposed to be done." When we don't have a tension going on I feel much freer to ask, "How do I do this?" or "What do I do next?" (SVN T2, p. 22)

She attributes her non-engagement with the project to her unease with him. He does not see this link, or he is not willing to recount it that way to me, or he believes that her frustrations lie primarily in her capacity to tackle the projects he assigns to her. Regardless of how he describes the situation to me, this teacher has not become entrenched in his position vis-à-vis Julia, but has continued to grow in his work with her—a difficult and sometimes not particularly rewarding tack to take.

For Julia, gaining a sense of who her teacher is on a personal level is very important. She finds it hard to understand her teacher:

He's really difficult to read; he is really odd. I can't figure him out. I really can't. I try to ask him about his personal life and he won't tell me. He just says he have [has] a cat and he lives by himself. Then one day he has a girlfriend, the next he doesn't have a girlfriend and then his girlfriend is calling from Texas. And I asked him, "Who is your girlfriend? Are you sure you don't have a boyfriend?" So we just tease each other. I know that he has a cat. (SVN T2, p. 40)

Her teacher plays his self-disclosure cards very close to his chest, which creates an unsettling blank space for her. Could this teacher be gay? What is he hiding? Why doesn't he disclose more? This blank space increases the likelihood that Julia will fill in the unknown by projecting fears based on past experiences with adults. She is compelled to make her own conclusions when she has conflicts with him. Julia remembers the teacher's comments during non-class time, when her teacher was supervising a snack break. We can see how she weaves the comments into a judgmental and unaccepting image of the teacher:

> And in the cafeteria and stuff at breakfast we're talking about kids and birth and everything and he was like, "Oh I don't want to hear about that." You're working with teen parents, we are going to talk about birth and breast-feeding and everything else. This is our breakfast time if you don't like it you can leave the cafeteria. We're not going to talk about cartoons. This is reality Mr. "Teacher." And it was new for him to be teaching teen moms and he would be like, "Stop talking about this. I don't want to hear about your private parts tearing open that much." And I was like, "You coming to a teen parents' [program], you're going to hear about this" (SVN T1, p. 29)….And one time he said he didn't like kids and he was not going to have kids or anything like that. He said, "Kids, No! Pew." [I said,] "If you're going to teach teens…, relax and at least pretend like you like kids. Seem like you love them."…He's not really a father type, but I don't think he hates kids and sometimes I think something is wrong [with that] man. (SVN T2, p. 30)

If her teacher's comments were attempts at humor, Julia didn't catch them. She is offended by his comments, and she is left with a paradox to resolve: why does this man, who says he doesn't like kids, teach at a school that has teen parents? And as her last statement indicates, she is worried about his nature, asking if something is "wrong" with him? But Julia's charitable nature also alludes to her understanding of what may be fueling some of his misstatements here; as a new teacher, he is nervous and needs to relax more. She elaborates on her sense of the teacher:

> He was new and he was *trying to be perfect*. He was very self-conscious so I would think, "Just free up…" I would say to myself, "Here we are a newbie."…He sometimes wonders about the other art teacher before him…I would say, "He is nothing compared to you, Honey." Then he would say, "Just hold my head up, Julia." (SVN T2, pp. 23-24)

> Julia thinks her teacher is rigid in how he "enforces" the rules of the program.

She feels he is trying too hard to "be perfect" as she noted above and describes below in another lunchroom encounter:

> We'll be doing something and he will be like, "Did you ask 'Ms. Principal'" or 'Ms. Head Teacher' about this?" We'll be sitting in the cafeteria and he'll come in and he'll say, "You guys shouldn't be here." And we will say, "We have a study hall and we didn't have time to get breakfast sandwiches….[We] came in to get some milk." And he'll be like, "Go ask 'Ms. Principal'" and we'll be like, "Why should we ask 'Ms. Principal' if we can have milk? We're already drinking." It's like really dumb stuff; he wants to make sure everything is clear. (SVN T2, p. 42)

> What I found extraordinary about this dyad is that despite a large gap in

perception and temperament, they both agree that the relationship has improved. In the

behavioral survey, Julia and her not-helpful teacher agreed slightly more than half as

many times as she and her especially helpful teacher. They disagreed twice as much as

she and her especially helpful teacher. It is a testament to both of them that they have

persevered in their connection with each other.

> Julia's teacher describes the evolution of the relationship:

> It's evolved. At first she was very contentious. I'm not sure what happened. First either she became more comfortable around me or became more successful in art and became more comfortable....I'd say the relationship has grown more comfortable and it's more mutually respectful. (TRK T1, p. 8)

> Later he points out that Julia has earned his trust and he is beginning to

understand her situation better:

> If she's always tardy, it seems at first I would [have reacted] because she was not getting her work done on top of being tardy. I may have gotten

into the questioning, "Where's your work?  What's going on?" [I] have given her the chance to do things in her own space and time.  Sometimes even though she may be tired or tardy I kind of know she will take care of what she needs to.  She knows how to take care of business now it seems. I understand that she will be tardy sometimes because of her child.  (TRK T1, p. 10)

And a little later in the interview he adds:

I know that I can trust her.  She's been proving time and again lately she's been making a better product, is working hard, more conversational, polite, and negotiable in a proper young adult-to-adult way which is what we shoot for, the interpersonal part which is just as vital as the rest.

I ask, "You guys can negotiate these things without setting each other off?"  The teacher responds, "You can trust the person who can take a step to negotiate" (TRK T2, pp. 1-2).  Julia's teacher gives her more space to do her work at her own pace and is less suspicious.  He has begun to experience her as productive and trustworthy.

Julia has seen a change in the relationship.  She feels that her teacher has become more flexible and more mutual, and that he is willing to negotiate with her:

Yes…we had these sketch books to do for him, and it was really demanding.  [I would tell him,] "We don't have the time to do this after school, just give us 5 to do."…And he actually did this.  He used to give us 10 to do, and then he listened and gave us 5.  And this helped us get better grades…it felt good....and he actually listened.  (SVN T3, p. 2)

Julia sees her teacher loosening up, listening, and responding to student requests that were (in her eyes) reasonable.

**How Much Has Been Learned?**  Julia, like most of the students, is not specific about what she is learning or how much she is learning in her art class.  However, she indicates that things are getting better, although with some reservations:

"Like really I am improving [in] his class.  Before I was like, just get it done…but now I just take my time with his class...sometimes I ask myself, "Why am I doing this man's work?" (SVN T2, p. 37)

Julia is acknowledging that she is putting more of herself into the work, but sometimes it still feels like it's **his**, *not* **her** work.

Julia's not-helpful teacher begins his discussion of Julia's progress by discussing her decreased absences and tardiness. His class is in the morning, and he knows now that pulling everything together to get to school on time for this teen parent is not an easy task; he points out that Julia has gone from four absences and six tardies in the first quarter of his class to one absence and three tardies in the last quarter. He calls this a "slight improvement" because he co-teaches a job readiness class in the afternoon that she never misses. (TRK Profile, p. 1)

Her teacher also points to her improving grades as evidence of progress: "Her grades have steadily increased….Her engagement is better. She's making a much better product, [and] is taking her time instead of just hurriedly trying to get things done." (TRK Profile, p. 1)

To demonstrate the improvement in her work, he discusses two pieces of art: an earlier product—a rushed effort—and a more recent one, into which she put more effort and time:

> Taking a look at a couple of things on the wall…she hurried in the background. It was the last day of the quarter and she slapped the background on. This is her trying to manage her time and failing. She took her time with the central piece. (TRK Profile, p. 4)

He points out that she was much more involved in the second piece, providing more images than she was required to do. Clearly, Julia's teacher thinks that the second project was much more appealing to her. Julia created and used symbols depicting important aspects of her life to produce a meaningful image, as opposed to her first project, which focused on skills as she struggled to master perspective.

**Conclusion: Julia and Her Not-Helpful Teacher.**  Looking at Julia and her not-helpful teacher, I see a hopeful story unfolding.  Initially the relationship seemed to be purely negative from Julia's perspective.  Her teacher appeared to have such little empathy for her as a teen parent that Julia remembers challenging him about whether he fit the job, given that he was working in a school that focuses on teen parents.  She felt strong negative judgment coming from him in their first confrontations when she used the word "gay" negatively in a frustrated outburst.  Finally the almost complete mystery of his private life concerned her, allowing her mind to construct scenarios based primarily on her own prejudices and assumptions.  In Rogers's, terms the not-helpful teacher was not congruent, and, as a person, was almost completely opaque to Julia.

The story is hopeful because this student and teacher never became completely lodged in their negative dynamic.  Neither gave up on the other, and both listened to, and took advice from other teachers about how to cope with their conflicts.  For his part, the not-helpful teacher loosened up a bit and began negotiating with Julia about requirements.  He developed empathy for her situation, especially regarding her coming to a morning class late.  He also began to transform his negative judgment of her into a positive one, as she worked on her own attitudes through the year.

When asked if she feels that her not-helpful teacher accepts her, she answers, "Yes," and tells the following story to explain why she answered the question positively:

> We had this harassment workshop at the high school and I was going over
> to help a friend.  As I got up there with her I was thinking I had nothing to
> say….And I said [to the audience], "When I came here I had a hard time
> with gay people because I believe you can be gay, but not openly.  You
> can't be gay at school, maybe at home….I never harmed them, burn the
> house down.  I just wouldn't talk to them once I knew they were a gay.
> And so my word was, 'This is gay, that's gay, everything is gay' around
> me.' And somebody said that wasn't working well.  So, like I said, I

would try to find substitute words so that I wouldn't hurt people who [were] around me....They might be gay, and I said that one of my teachers help[ed] me to understand that it wasn't people's choice to be gay..." And then my not-helpful teacher came up to me after I said that and he shook my hand [and] said, 'Julia you have come a long way.' And I thought, 'I think he's gay.' I was really surprised he was like shaking my hand and hugging me and he [was] really listen[ing] to us! (SVN T2, pp. 48-9)

With the assistance of another, more helpful teacher, Julia adopted a different attitude to this issue. In her typically fearless fashion, she was willing to discuss this change in front of a full auditorium of high school students. She then saw how delighted her not-helpful teacher was with what she had done, and re-assessed his level of acceptance of her.

Empathy and positive regard, both Rogerian-defined teacher assets, increased on both sides of this pair as they worked through their conflicts. Congruence was the only factor that was stable as the year progressed, given that Julia did not seem to gain a more satisfactory sense of who her teacher was outside of school. Both teacher and student acknowledged both academic growth and greater engagement in the class work. Julia's ability to maintain the relationship and work on it was heavily supported by teachers with whom she had more positive relationships who encouraged her to look more closely at her own attitudes and behaviors. In an educational setting where she didn't have close relationships with other teachers, it is less likely that she would have allowed the relationship with her not-helpful teacher to progress positively towards being a helpful one.

**Conclusion Section One: Student Perception on the Impact of Not-Helpful**

**Relationships on Learning**

      The strongest theme of these interviews is that students tend to disengage when

they perceive a teacher as not-helpful, especially within a learning environment in which

they are not experiencing success, that is, their previous high schools. This

disengagement from the teacher(s) leads, in some cases, to skipping classes (Amelia),

dropping out (Jenny), refusing help from the teacher (Fred), and leaving school for an

alternative (Robert, Amelia, Eric, Opal, Angel). The impact of disengagement on

academic growth and engagement is self-evident. The data do not provide enough

evidence to clarify if the students feel any lasting effect on their ability or desire to

complete. The evidence from Julia's experience, described in the vignette above, adds to

the notion that disengagement is not an inevitable process, and that within a generally

supportive environment, teachers and students can learn to address their differences and

work together more productively.

**Not-Helpful Teachers' Perceptions of Student Academic Growth and Engagement**

      Of the three current teachers designated as not helpful, one, as represented in the

vignette with Julia above, felt that his student had made significant academic progress as

well as being much more engaged in class work. The second teacher cited no signs of

either progress or engagement with Fred, but had limited interactions with him. The third

teacher found Amelia to be making steady progress and from his perspective to be

increasingly engaged.

**Section Two: Student Perception of the Effect of Helpful Relationships on Learning**

All of the students felt as if they were making some progress in the classes they were taking with their helpful teachers. For some, the progress was in mastery of specific academic skills, whereas for others, the progress was in engagement: asking more questions and generally participating in more activities. Students in River City were able to be somewhat more specific about their academic growth than were students at Rocky Beach. Below I briefly review student perceptions in each of the four areas for inquiry.

**Academic Growth**

Although all nine students felt they were making progress in the classes of their helpful teachers, some were explicit in giving examples of academic content they were mastering. Amelia and Angel, for whom simply engaging in history was a task, both had a teacher (the same one) who found a way to make history more approachable. Amelia describes how the relationship with her especially-helpful teacher has allowed her to express her feelings about the challenges she encounters with difficult subject matter: "The relationship is important because history is so hard already and it's important to be able to talk to someone about how I feel so that I can learn it" (SVU T1, p. 22). She goes on to discuss her sense of accomplishment in this class:

> Definite[ly] a lot of progress. In the beginning of the year I was failing and now I'm on the honor roll. She made a lot of progress with me too…she did things that she knew would help me make it through class because I never used to like history. History's never been one of my things but now I actually like it a lot because it's put in a way that I can understand it...it's always been hard for me. (SVU T1, p. 21)

Amelia continues by describing how her teacher, through her knowledge of Amelia's interest in fashion and design, helped her choose a project about Flappers for the 1920s historical study in which they were engaged. The project was engaging and fun for her to undertake.

Angel is enthusiastic about how much he feels he has progressed in his social studies classes:

> But I still don't like history and I didn't know how she was going to make it better for me and after a few weeks I was like noticing that I was actually doing the stuff. Later on I realized like, wow, I'm really doing this work. I'm doing awesome in this class. I would check my grades and I would have an A in the class and [that] is definitely like, wow, that's a big change from the C- I got last year in it (SDM T1, p. 13). I actually do the homework in our class, I never used to do history homework and stuff like that…I've been getting a lot more information for my projects rather than throwing a bunch of crap together at the last second. (SDM T2, p. 8)

Not only is Angel finding himself doing the assigned work, he is doing it with more care, and in a timely fashion!

When asked how important it is to have a personal connection with his helpful teacher to help with learning English, he responds: "I definitely think it helps. She kind of *just gets me. In a way she understands me—who I am. So she works with me as opposed to working against what I do*" (SDM T3, p. 25). Angel articulates his perception that the teacher is *working with, not against him* in the learning process. "And I'm actually having a good time writing things as opposed to like waiting 'til the day before to get it done" (T1, p. 5). Then Angel becomes more specific about how he makes progress in his writing:

> You get these things out and give it to her as a rough draft and she'll help you get into good flowing paper and as she started to do that I would start to pick up on things that I was doing wrong so I was correcting myself on my papers. I started double thinking things that I was saying to make sure

that there was things like pronoun agreement and the things we learned in the vocabulary.... (SDM T3, p. 11)

Angel is deepening basic writing skills as he learns to edit himself and as he engages in the task of writing and rewriting drafts.

Although with fewer specifics, both McNulty and Jenny agree that they have been making progress. McNulty comments on his understanding of how this is happening: "I came here and it's like it's going in[to] my head here. All the other times it has been going out my ears but this time it's going into my brain" (SUU T1, p. 3). Jenny acknowledges that her writing, which has been very difficult for her, is improving, "My writing has gotten a lot better I'm starting to explain what I mean in my writing" (SDL T1, p. 13).

## Especially-Helpful and Helpful Teacher Perceptions of Academic Growth

Eight of the nine teachers agree with their students that they have made academic growth over the year. Rocky Beach teachers mostly cite products and incidents that demonstrate growth. Robert's helpful teacher describes an autobiographical work Robert produced as, "error-free, with great attention to detail, a story told with dignity and respect" (TCH SWZ Profile, p. 1) and he adds, "His writing improved from the practice…we had weekly vocab assignments and he made the effort to integrate those words into his writing"(TCH, SWZ Profile, p. 1). McNulty's especially helpful teacher cites his ability to conduct a science experiment which "he would not have been able to do this at the beginning of the year. It's not going to win a science fair, (but) it's much more than he would have been able to do at the beginning of the year"(TPF Profile SUU, p. 1).

River City Teachers tended to cite more traditional measures of academic growth, such as improvement in grades and test scores as we will see below in Amelia's vignette. For example, Angel's especially-helpful teacher describes his improvement from the previous year:

> In his case I can clearly see the change over the two years that he's been my student…he's a much better student this year than he was last year…even though I knew he was smart, he underachieved majorly in modern world history; it was really common for him to miss a lot of classes and not do his work…this year his grades in US history have been really good like As. [But] he still will…push the limit on getting work done on time.

The only exception to the agreement between student and teacher perception of academic growth appears with Eric, who felt he was making some progress but whose especially-helpful teacher felt he was just doing what he needed to get by. Aside from that exception, especially-helpful and helpful teachers quite closely echoed students' sentiments that academic progress was being accomplished.

## **Academic Engagement**

All of the students felt they were engaged in the classroom work of their helpful and especially-helpful teachers. Despite their distaste for history as a subject, both Amelia and Angel consider themselves engaged as a result of their teacher's ability to help them find an area of interest in the subject matter.

Having a choice of focus within content areas matters greatly to Opal, as I have explored in Chapter 5. Being engaged is a way that Robert, McNulty, and Julia show respect to the teacher. Both Robert and McNulty can model engagement to the other students, a role they relish and feel is expected of them.

**Especially-Helpful and Helpful Teacher Perception of Student Academic**

**Engagement**

With the exception of Eric, teacher perceptions of student academic engagement mirror student perceptions. Eric's especially-helpful teacher agrees that he and she have made a good connection but as far as his perception that he is relatively engaged thus far, she points out: "The relationship and the connection has been more than anything else. I would say that Eric is still not fully engaged with our program he has not fully bought in" (TCC Profile SQI, p. 1). In contrast, Jenny's especially-helpful teacher describes how she overcame her shyness in his class, moving from the safety of a seat in the back to the front row. According to him, she takes pride in her work, is "meticulous," and doesn't give "one-word" answers to test questions but goes into the material thoroughly (TTR Profile SDL, p. 1-2). Robert's especially-helpful teacher enthuses about his willingness to get involved in creative activities such as photography, which he has never tried before. The teacher notes: "He gets exactly what this assignment is and what the expectations are and he chooses to follow through better really more than any other student. My assignments have lots of different tangents and he really goes through all the tangents (TMM Profile STW, p. 1). It would appear from these representative examples that especially-helpful and helpful teachers' perceptions tend to be similar with regards to academic engagement.

**Affect on Desire and Ability to Complete**

Students were asked how their helpful and especially-helpful student-teacher relationships at the alternative school had contributed to their desire and ability to

complete school. The answers here did not sort into groups as neatly as in some of the other sections. A minority of students (Fred, Opal, and Jenny) stated clearly that they were going to graduate regardless of the degree to which they were working with teachers whom they found helpful. When asked about the effect of his especially-helpful teacher on his desire to complete high school, Fred responds: "Not at all because I'm going to finish high school and I know I was, so it didn't really affect me" (SUS, T 2, p. 10).

However, some students agreed that they had acquired important skills in these teachers' classes that would contribute to their ability to finish school. A majority (Robert, Julia, Eric, Angel, Amelia, and McNulty) felt that they had more capacity to complete due to the connections they had established with their teachers.

**Desire to Complete.** With the exception of Fred, Robert, and Opal, all the students found their especially-helpful and helpful teachers contributed in some way to their desire to complete. They formulated the impact of the teacher on their motivation in different ways.

For Amelia, who seems surprised that she is making as much progress as she is, the support and the tangible evidence of success through good grades increases her desire to complete. When asked if her experience with her especially-helpful teacher has affected her desire to finish school, Amelia clarifies:

> It's better. At the beginning of the year I didn't think I was going to graduate high school. I thought that by this time I was, okay I'm going to be a dropout…but I am ready to graduate next year! (SVU T1, p. 29)

When asked how her teacher has managed to increase her desire to complete, Amelia points to the support she receives from the teacher and evidence of her success in the class: "When she helps me on things and when I get really good grades on it, [this] makes me feel like…I'm going to get through the class" (SVU T1, p. 29).

Just as some students find motivation in the support and success they experience in a helpful teacher's class, Julia finds that her desire to complete is increased through being able to identify with her especially-helpful teacher's life:

> She has shared her college story. [It] is an experience that she's had that made me want to do it....She talked about her different jobs and her family and her college experience, places that she visits, places that she['s] live[d] and I thought to myself "I want to do that too." (SVN T2, p. 14)

In this situation, Julia is starting to identify with her teacher; she sees herself as being able to lead a similar life if she follows her teacher's path to college and beyond.

Jenny has a difficult time articulating how her especially-helpful teacher motivates her but finds the greatest support is from his disposition. At first she notes that he motivates her "through his good personality," and then, when asked to elaborate, comments, "The way that he actually is, not like a grumpy teacher, he is like a happy teacher" (SDL T1, pp. 24-5). Jenny felt that her realization, after she had dropped out of school, that she needed a high school diploma in order to become a mechanic spurred her desire to complete high school. When asked how being at the alternative program might help her towards completion, Jenny says: "[The] teachers are a lot nicer. They don't have one million kids to pay attention to. The teachers are more understandable here" (SDL T2, p. 18) and adds, "At the high school they just brush you off if you needed help but here they don't" (SDL T2, p. 18). She has broadened her range of interactions from being motivated by just her e helpful teachers to being motivated by others on the staff.

Angel experiences one motivating factor in his teacher's interest and ability in keeping him engaged, and another in his teacher's desire to see him succeed. Discussing his especially-helpful teacher's way of keeping him productively engaged, he says:

> It helps out like a kick in the ass almost, like my mom is not here to kick me in my ass to do this stuff. My especially-helpful teacher is here to get

me to do this stuff.  But she's not mean.  If she has to be, she can be disciplinary like, "You *have* to get this stuff done." (SDM T3, pp. 2-3)

Angel finds that his helpful teacher's positive directness, or what Rogers (1981) might have called positive regard, motivates him: "I think anything she's ever said to me was to get me to come here so I can pass and graduate….She's never done anything that was negative towards my school capability" (SDM T3, p. 31).

**Ability to Complete**.  When students were asked to think about how their especially-helpful and helpful teachers might have assisted them in learning skills that would enable them to complete school, I found several different kinds of responses.  Robert and Angel found that they were picking up helpful skills in classes of both their helpful teachers and other teachers in their alternative schools.  Amelia and Julia acknowledged that they were picking up skills in the classrooms of teachers whom they did not perceive as helpful as well as from their helpful teachers.  McNulty, Fred, and Opal all felt they were gaining some important skills from their helpful teachers.  Jenny wasn't sure if she could identify having gained skills that would help her graduate.  Eric thought that the assistance of his especially-helpful and helpful teachers in gaining skills that would help him graduate was neutral:  neither more nor less than what he was acquiring in other classes in his alternative school.

On first consideration, one might assume that student answers to this question about skills contributing to ability to complete would lie in the realm of academic skills gained, and many do, but not all.  Robert and Opal commented on experiencing an increase in self-confidence and on gaining relational skills, respectively.  When asked how his especially-helpful teacher helps him to complete school, Robert notes,  "Yes, he has encouraged me to, [it's] his encouragement….He taught me not to get discouraged"

(SWZ T2, p. 5). I then ask how he would use this skill and he responds, "At the high school if they were trying to get me to do a subject and they were being discouraging I just wouldn't do it (SWZ T2, p. 5). "And if you met a difficult teacher in the future?" I ask, and he concludes, "I would think of what he [the especially-helpful teacher] said, his confidence, his good words would outweigh anything that anybody could say" (SWZ T2 p. 5). In addition, Robert is very clear that his helpful teacher (2) assisted him greatly in mastering math skills, starting with multiplication tables as I described previously. Robert notes, "I can honestly say that my math skills have been much more than I would've gotten in high school" (SWZ T1, p. 28).

Opal discusses a skill, learned from a helpful teacher with whom she has some occasional difficulties that will help her complete school:

> Well actually since I have a hard time communicating with him
> sometimes...just that: approaching people…being more comfortable with
> that, that's something I've gotten better with in his class...and as far as
> math and literacy I have excelled more in that, too. (SJO T4, p. 9)

Opal is acknowledging that, despite the difficulties she faces with this teacher from time to time, she can persevere and succeed.

Students varied in their ability to articulate the critical academic skills they were gaining that would help them complete school. For Amelia, the ability of her especially-helpful teacher to make history interesting was clearly important in that she found herself engaged and successful in a required class that she normally would have found uninteresting. Julia cites reading comprehension and writing as clear and important gains acquired from her especially-helpful teacher (SVN T2, p. 15):

> And we discussed this and we discussed that and we put it together and we
> come to an agreement that I'll write this or do this. And I think, "Okay I
> can do that." *She's always willing to sit down and listen to me* when I try
> to pick a subject for her paper and she'll give me ideas on what I can

> do....I would say I'm about to give up…[and she would say], "You never fail if you finish." And she reminds me of all the negative things that will happen if I fail, and we worked on this paper for a whole other week and finally I was making progress.…When I got my paper back, I was like "holy moly, I never got a 97 on an English paper before." She really helped me, she was sitting down with me for like three hours that Friday morning just doing that. (SVN T1, p. 11)

Julia knows that her teacher has set a level of proficiency that she wants Julia to achieve, and she experiences the teacher's willingness to collaborate with her to achieve that proficiency. This process increases Julia's feeling that she can do the work and that she is a capable writer.

### Two Student-Teacher Dyads with Especially-Helpful Teachers

My final discussion of the findings in this study will present two representative student-teacher dyads with a specific focus on academic growth and engagement within the context of an especially-helpful relationship. The vignettes present Fred and then Amelia's relationships with their especially-helpful teacher, using data from their interviews, their teacher's interview, and my observations. The vignettes follow the same form as the first one above that described Julia and her not-helpful teacher. I have included two additional vignettes, of Opal and Julia and their especially-helpful teachers, describing the context and effects of a helpful student-teacher connection, in the Appendix I.

**Vignette Two: Fred and His Especially-Helpful Teacher (Teacher D)**

**Snapshot One from Observation: Fred Graduates**. Standing in front of his graduating class, Fred holds his piece of paper carefully as he begins to read his graduation speech. He is not the valedictorian of the class, he is not the salutatorian; he has chosen to be the

only one of eight students in Rocky Beach's graduation this year to give a speech, and the

focus of that speech is the gratitude he feels for his primary teacher at Rocky Beach:

> I wrote about the person who most influenced me who was "Teacher D."
> When I first met him I was attending a school I didn't like. My first
> impression of him was that he was a funny guy. I would walk by his class
> and everyone was usually laughing. When I started going to the [Rocky
> Beach] school I was privileged to be placed in his class [where] *he treated
> me like a real person and not a punk.*
>
> He gave me a clean slate even though I was hard to get along with. He
> was my first teacher since I came to Maine who talked to me like a person
> and not like I was a troublemaker. He listened to what I had to say even
> though if it wasn't coming out the way I meant it.
>
> He had the patience to figure out what was bothering me when in the past
> I would just be written up or put in detention. As for teaching, the topics
> he would discuss would range from school work *through what happened
> in his personal life….* He kept me interested, which is very hard to do,
> and most *of all I know that I could talk to him about anything. He didn't
> judge me, he listened and he helped me work through more than school.*
> Thank you to him and everyone at the [Rocky Beach] school. (Graduation
> Speech, SUS)

**<u>Snapshot Two from Observation: Fred and Teacher D in Class</u>**. Observing Teacher

D and Fred in class together is like watching a dance routine between partners who enjoy

each other's moves and who collaborate with each other, understanding how each set of

steps is likely to play out. I have entered their classroom in the final stretch of their two-

and-a-half-year partnership, and am struck by the qualities that each display. For the

most part, Fred maintains his outsider stance even in a classroom full of outsiders. His

teacher uses storytelling about his own life as a method to make the classroom

entertaining and fun while at the same time embodying some aspects of Roger's concept

of congruence. Fred is quiet and attentive. Several times in the class, he will correct

Teacher D when he is telling a story that Fred has already heard and if the teacher is

changing the details.

It is as important to note what Fred is *not* doing as what he *is* doing. I see him here as communicative and engaged, not shut down, not volatile, not disruptive, and not detached.

**<u>Background to the Relationship</u>**. In the two years prior to coming to Rocky Beach, Fred showed no progress academically, according to his currently especially-helpful teacher. He was described as a volatile kid to be dealt with carefully, as Teacher D notes: "We were hearing horror stories about him from the day treatment program." (TRM T1, p. 9)

As is evident from his speech, Fred and his teacher hit it off immediately upon his entry into Rocky Beach. They have worked together now for three years. From his teacher's perspective, there was ease to their connection:

> Initially things went smoothly no great connection immediately. But by the end of the first year he knew what to expect from me in the classroom and out of the classroom and in terms of stuff I would do throughout the day. And I understood how he worked." (TRM T1, p. 10)

The two have established a solid beginning to a transformative relationship. Talking as Fred, Teacher D would say this about their relationship:

> My teacher is a really nice guy. He really gets me. He knows what I like, he knows what I don't like. He's always willing to listen to me if I've got a problem...I like to talk with him about stuff, things that are going on in my life, like my job, my family, my tree house, things at school with the other kids.…He is really good with listening to me about that….He's funny, makes you laugh. (TRM T2, p. 2)

How does the teacher's portrayal tally with Fred's perception of working with his teacher? Here is Fred talking about a critical incident:

> Like last week I had a problem at home and...he understood that it was serious so he was okay with [it]. Whereas I wouldn't be able to talk to someone else that easily....He knows me because he's a teacher. He knows my reaction when I'm upset or mad something like that and I was

nervous and upset so he knew there was something important.  (SUS T1, p. 17)

Since Rocky Beach students often have the option of choosing their teacher for some courses, Fred and his especially-helpful teacher have worked together on literacy and math skills in addition to social studies and science.  During my observations, Fred was taking a social studies class.

**<u>How Much Has Been Learned?</u>**  Fred has difficulty being articulate about his academic growth and engagement, as did most of the students in the study.  (Is this in part because we teachers so rarely have these discussions with them?) The following is an example of my interviewing him on this topic.  I ask, "How much has working with your teacher affected your desire to complete high school?" Fred replies, "Not at all because I'm going to finish high school and I know I was so it didn't really affect me" (SUS T2).  I follow up, "How about your ability to finish high school, did he help you with some skills?" Fred replies, "Yep" and then adds that he has learned some math from his teacher that will help him get his diploma.  We discuss how his teacher makes math interesting to him: I ask, "What has Teacher D taught you that makes you more sure they'll get your diploma?" Fred replies, "Math probably."  I ask, "Does he just give you the math to do and come back to see how you're doing?"  Fred responds, "Well, sort of he turns it into a story.  It's usually easier to do the math then" (SUS T2, p. 10).

His teacher, not surprisingly, goes on at much greater length.  In the following passage, the teacher recalls Fred achieving an important academic benchmark:

> [The] biggest time that I can remember [is] when he really read a book and he had never done that before.  I'd sort of let him do his own thing in literacy class.  I encouraged him to read and helped him to go with this thing and he finished the book.  It took forever but he finished the book and he came up to me and he had pride radiating from him, just radiating from him.  I had tears in my eyes….I called his mom almost immediately

and she was bawling.  It was awesome; [I'll] never forget that moment.
(TRM T1, p. 12)

Not only is the teacher moved by the accomplishment and Fred's self-evident pride, he

immediately relays the information to Fred's biggest ally: his mother, bringing the family

in right at the moment of achievement.

The second example is less emotional but no less telling in terms of the kind of

progress Fred has experienced as the teacher recounts:

> I was doing a unit on the solar system.  He created [a] papier-mâché
> [model], maybe Mars.  Compared to what the other kids did it was
> horrific…[but] he was able to do a public display, a written paper with
> references from multiple sources….He had [done] only one project before
> that. *This was the first one in nine and a half years of schooling.*  Besides
> that, to allow himself to hang these things up in the room, publicly where
> people could see what he had done; he was really proud of it.  I was really
> proud of it.  (TRM T1, p. 20)

**Conclusion: Fred and His Especially-Helpful Teacher (Teacher D).**  With a volatile

resistant student such as Fred, a relational connection is a highly successful way to create

a more collaborative and productive approach to academic work.  The especially-helpful

teacher and Fred have worked on the dynamics of their connection so that Fred feels safe

to trust his teacher, and knows his teacher understands him.  Fred is unlikely to become a

Rhodes Scholar on the basis of what he has learned at Rocky Beach under his teacher's

tutelage, but he is also unlikely to be lost in despair, and to lose his temper in outbursts

that land him in a correctional facility.  In the teacher's eyes, academic growth and

engagement are linked clearly with relationship.

In Fred's eyes his teacher makes school "interesting" and understands him well

enough to "know what to do" when high stress situations arise.  Thus, mistakes are

avoided.

Some of the key factors that go into this sense of being understood reside in the teacher's ability to embody Roger's three principles of being a successful learning facilitator: empathy, positive regard (being non-judgmental), and congruence.

Fred's graduation speech presents all three factors clearly and gracefully. He describes his experience of his teacher's positive regard in terms of his teacher's treating him as a human and not labeling him: "*He treated me like a real person and not a punk. He gave me a clean slate even though I was hard to get along with… he didn't judge me….*" (Graduation speech). Fred also articulates his teacher's ability to empathize: "*He listened to what I had to say even though it wasn't coming out the way I meant it….* He had the patience to figure out what was bothering me…and most *of all I know that I could talk to him about anything.*" Finally, Fred speaks to his teacher's congruence, "As for teaching, the topics he would discuss would range from school work *through what happened in his personal life*" (Graduation Speech).

My own observation of this shy, slightly withdrawn, "odd bird", as his teacher characterizes him, standing in front of his graduating class and reading a piece of his own writing, confirms the enormous progress this young person has made academically and socially in the context of an exceptionally helpful student-teacher relationship.

**Vignette Three: Amelia and Her Especially-Helpful Teacher (Teacher B)**

**Snapshot from Observation: Amelia in Study Hall**. During her study hall, Amelia is working on a project at one of the computers on the side of the room. Other students are also at computers or looking at texts at the long tables that River City uses for desks. Her especially-helpful teacher checks in with her, kneeling next to her so that her head is even

with the computer screen but several inches below Amelia's head. The two are within

inches of each other. After several interchanges in which her teacher is showing Amelia

how to find citations on the Internet, her especially-helpful teacher sings out, "You are on

your way." Before leaving to check in with another student, the teacher leans against

Amelia and playfully pushes her arm while encouraging her to go for an interview for a

job that has recently become available. Amelia does not pull away from the contact.

**Background to the Relationship**. When asked to talk about Amelia, Teacher B is

surprised and says, "I would have never guessed that she would pick me. She's not

somebody that I thought I had a strong connection with at all."

Teacher B is a veteran social studies teacher in the River City School and has

been particularly attuned to the teen parent population that makes up almost half of the

school's roster. Amelia is not a teen parent and, to begin with, teacher B did not "see"

her as she describes: "She was one of those that didn't stick out. She was a quiet one that

you'd sort of go [over]….I don't think she was particularly engaged with any classes to

begin with. Her attendance was really spotty."

Having entered River City in the fall of the year, Amelia had worked for eight

months with Teacher B by the time I asked her to rate her teachers. It is clear to her that

Teacher B was an especially-helpful teacher:

> I think even before I was doing really excellent in class we had a really
> good connection. I think I would get frustrated sometimes, [and] she
> wouldn't freak out on me….She wouldn't say, "I don't want to talk to
> you," she would still be there (T1, p. 22)....the relationship is important
> because history is so hard already and it's important to be able to talk to
> someone about how I feel so that I can learn it. (RQ3 T1, p. 22)

Because Teacher B's perceptions of how the relationship evolved is closely intertwined with her narrative of Amelia's academic growth, her observations have been included in the section below.

**How Much Has Been Learned?**  For Amelia, the relationship preceded and set the framework for her ability to achieve in her especially-helpful teacher's class.  The story of her year in this social studies class was one of unprecedented success.  First, here are her observations on her positive trajectory:

> [I have] definitely [made] a lot of progress.  In the beginning of the year I was failing and now I'm on the honor roll.  She made a lot of progress with me too….She did things that she knew would help me make it through class because I never use to like history.  History's never been one of my things but now I actually like it a lot because it's put in a way that I can understand it.

Amelia's observations parallel closely the perceptions of her especially-helpful teacher:

> Amelia started this fall not attending very regularly and academically not doing very well....Her midterm exam grade was a 61 but actually it was a 53 and she had to do something for extra credit [to pass].  She wasn't really mastering the material she wasn't putting very much into it.  She was quiet and she was pretty unengaged at the beginning....She didn't attend much, and] when she was there she was silent.  She didn't seem to talk, she seemed very shy and like she just didn't care that much about what I was teaching at the beginning….Her attendance did really begin to get better and her grades have significantly improved.  I'm looking at a test third quarter that was a 78 on a unit that was the Great Depression.  That was a good job for Amelia and then we got into the Holocaust.  She got 100 [on] her final project [which] is really, really well done….I give her the "Most Improved Student in History" award because her grades are like classic textbook started out with 60s and [going] up to 90s.  She's made a clear projectile [trajectory] of achievement academically.

In addition to matching Amelia's work to her interests, Teacher B became sensitive and responsive to Amelia's health issues that sometimes impeded her receptiveness to learning.  Amelia recounts the following incident:

I was really sick one day, so she like she would do things like with a headache type issue. Instead of [my] reading. She was like, "Well I can read it out loud for you if that would make it easier." (SVU T1, p. 21)

Amelia's positive academic trajectory can also be seen in Teacher B's account of

Amelia's presentation of her last project on World War II concentration camps:

When she presented she was so into it. She was really comfortable in front of the class [and] really knew a lot about her topic. I learned a lot from her research. The kids might have been a little bored even because she was doing such a detailed job. She spent 20 minutes and she didn't want to be stopped and it was coming on lunchtime when usually, like we're out of here and she didn't care. I really tried to give her the space to do it. And she wanted to say everything about it. She didn't just read it off her card. She'd look at the card and then she'd say and she'd remember the information and really discuss it and present it spectacularly.

**Conclusion: Amelia and Her Especially-Helpful Teacher.** In Amelia's mind, there is

no question that her connection with this teacher was the vehicle enabling her to engage

with subject matter she had previously always found difficult to learn. In terms of

Roger's (1983) theory of effective facilitation of learning, this connection allowed

Teacher B to learn who her student was and what interested her, and then to propose

ideas for projects and subject matter that linked to her interests. Teacher B exhibited

empathy and positive regard for Amelia, in Amelia's eyes by "staying with" her when

she was frustrated without "freaking out" on her (positive regard), and taking her state of

mind and her health seriously when she was not feeling well (empathy). Amelia's only

request of the teacher for the future was that she would "…just open up more. She's

opened up quite a bit but a bit more wouldn't hurt" (T1, p. 31). In Roger's terms, Amelia

feels her teacher could improve in the area of "congruence"—she would like to feel she

knew her teacher a little better.

This teacher-student dyad clearly feels comfortable with one another, and enjoys working together. Amelia's tendency to avoid and absent herself from school has been addressed directly by the program and her unprecedented success in history has allowed her to envision finishing high school instead of dropping out. Teacher B is genuinely excited about the progress Amelia has made in the year in which she has worked with her.

## Conclusion Section Two: Student Perception of the Effect of Helpful Relationships on Learning

The students in this study perceived the effect of their relationships with teachers upon academic learning in a number of ways.

Two thirds felt that the quality of the relationship with the helpful and especially-helpful teacher was very important to how much they learned and a third felt that it was important but not critical.

All students agreed that a not-helpful relationship with a teacher was an extremely limiting factor in terms of how much they learned, and that they learned less in classes taught by not-helpful teachers than in those taught by helpful or especially-helpful teachers.

Students all agreed that they were making progress in the classes of their helpful and especially-helpful teachers and pointed to improved grades, self-confidence, and study skills as examples of this progress. They also all felt engaged in the classes of their helpful and especially-helpful teachers.

When comparing helpful teachers with especially-helpful teachers, one third of the students found that learning might be more "fun" or "relaxed" in the classes of their especially-helpful teachers but they did not feel that they necessarily learned more.

Agreement was less evident around student perception of the effect of the helpful-teacher relationship on ability and desire to complete high school. One third of the group reported that their helpful teachers had no impact on their desire to complete high school; these students expressed clearly that the desire to complete preceded their connection with the teacher. A few students who were motivated to complete school by their teachers noted good grades or completing the required class as the motivator; for others, motivators included wanting to emulate the teacher, the teacher's faith in them, or the teacher's willingness to work with them.

A clear majority of students felt that their helpful teachers had contributed to their ability to complete high school through a variety of means: by increasing their self-confidence and ability to work through challenging situations, by helping them make basic gains in critical areas of literacy and numeracy, and again, by validating their learning through awarding them good grades for their work.

The perceptions of students in this study broadly demonstrate that when a relationship with a teacher is perceived as not-helpful by an at-risk student, academic engagement is significantly less likely to occur. For most students, disengagement from the teacher eventually turns into disengagement from the classroom, terminating all further opportunity to learn from that teacher. In general, the reverse seems to be true for these students with helpful and especially-helpful teachers. These students perceive

themselves to be engaged and more academically successful with their helpful and especially-helpful teachers.

Especially-helpful and helpful teachers' perceptions mirrored student perceptions with regard to academic growth. With one exception, teachers in this study concurred with their students that students were demonstrating academic progress and engagement and gave evidence of this through descriptions of academic products, classroom incidents, as well as through attendance figures, grades, and test scores.

**Chapter 8**

**STUDY REVIEW AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Our educational system was developed to be one of the foundations of American democracy, a route for all members of society to achieve equality regardless of their origins. At the beginning of the 20th century, students in American schools continued through eighth grade until, as young adolescents, they could find jobs, apprenticeships, or home-based work. In 1900, only ten percent of students entered high school and six percent graduated from high school (Tyack, 2002; Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2005).

Vast changes in the social and economic landscape over the last 110 years have now made leaving high school before graduating an unfortunate decision for most students, a decision that often negatively affects their future health, well-being, and economic welfare. Since the 1960s, concern has risen about the number of students who leave school without graduating. The numbers, however, have stayed roughly the same nationally, with an average of 25% of the student body dropping out of school (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2005). The economic, social, and individual costs are staggering.

Although powerful cultural forces create the social context for who drops out and who makes it through, schools are capable of changing the trajectory of students slated for failure. Research has shown that along with class size and other institutional factors, student connectedness can make a difference in academic engagement and growth. A significant component of school connectedness is a positive relationship with a school-

based adult.  Until now, few studies have explored how at-risk adolescents view their connections with specific secondary school teachers as being helpful or not helpful to their school careers.

To fill this gap in our understanding, my three research questions investigated how nine at-risk students in Maine perceived: (a) the helpfulness of their teachers; (b) their relationships with them; and (c) the effect those relationships had on their academic growth, engagement, and persistence in school.  The information derived from these students and their teachers will help to inform our efforts as educators, administrators, and policy-makers.  To re-create schools that support helpful student-teacher connections and to formulate more effective teacher training, development and assessment, we need to learn from what these students tell us.

## **Methodology**

I chose to work with nine students from two similarly-sized public alternative programs designed for students who are not succeeding in the conventional system.  I deemed students in these programs to be at risk of not completing high school because they had been referred by school districts in which they were failing.  Conditions that put these students at risk included poor attendance, legal issues, dropping out, substance abuse, and being a teen parent.  To match pairs of students and teachers, I asked students to fill out a "Connections Survey" (Appendix G) in which they could designate which teachers they experienced as especially-helpful, helpful, and not-helpful.  I asked teachers to fill out a similar form (Appendix H) to sort their connections with students into designations of especially-helpful, helpful, and not-helpful.  Where possible, I

interviewed students and teachers who were currently in class together, and who had similar perspectives on the helpfulness of their connection. Each student (with one exception) was interviewed about two teachers whom they had designated to be at different levels of helpfulness.

Students and teachers participated individually in three hours of interviewing that, although covering some school background history, primarily explored their experience with the teachers or students with whom they were paired. Both groups were also surveyed about how they experienced their own as well as the designated teacher or student's behavior in terms of verbal and non-verbal interactions. To put these relationships into context, I observed the teacher-student pairs during formal classes and under informal conditions, such as during lunch or between structured class times.

I coded interviews to discern the attributes that individual students associated with helpful and not-helpful teachers, the feel of their relationships with those teachers, and the effect that the students felt these relationships had on their academic growth, engagement, and persistence. I developed categories and themes from student interviews that reflected the most frequently discussed attributes of teachers, their relationships with the teachers, and the effect of those relationships. I asked teachers to provide me with evidence of academic growth and the engagement level of students with whom they were paired in order to compare their evidence with the students' perceptions.

## Limitations of Methodology

My study was limited by several factors: access, teacher sample, teacher data, gathering relational data, and analysis of teacher perceptions.

**Limitations of Access**

Because of the wary nature of my interviewees, I needed substantially more time to develop trusting relationships with them. This resulted in more guarded interviews with some students. Second, my brief time in each of their programs (four to six weeks) did not allow me to observe each student-teacher pair in the full range of circumstances. At Rocky Beach, where almost all the teaching is done in teams, more time watching and learning how to observe classroom interactions with students would have been useful. At River City, more time would have allowed me to witness more interactions in non-classroom settings. In both settings, I could have observed more facets of the relationship qualities students noted if I had gained a greater degree of "invisibility."

If I had been able more successfully to become a part of the "woodwork," I might then have obtained richer and more compelling data from observations of one-to-one teacher-student encounters. This data would in turn have helped me to understand more clearly what lay behind some of the distinctions students made between helpful and especially-helpful teachers.

**Limitations of Teacher Sample**

Because the teacher sample has only three of eighteen student-teacher pairs designated as not-helpful, I lacked current data on students' experience of not-helpful teachers. Thus, the themes that emerged describing not-helpful teacher attributes were less developed.

It was not within the scope of this study to follow up with prior not-helpful teachers in the conventional high school to obtain their evaluation of these students'

academic growth, engagement, and persistence. Without input from these former not-helpful teachers, I did not have access to their perceptions of the students, nor did I have the opportunity to look at the students' academic records with these teachers. Although for the most part I do not doubt students' assessment of the negative impact that these relationships had on their academic outcomes, there may have been instances of students who really didn't like a teacher, rated them negatively, but, from the teacher's point of view, performed reasonably well in their class.

## Limitations of Evidence of Academic Growth

The data that teachers offered as evidence of student academic growth and engagement were not uniform. Teachers at Rocky Beach were much more anecdotal in providing their evidence, whereas teachers at River City used more conventional measures, such as grades and attendance records. Though the teacher-supplied data supported student perceptions of their progress for the most part, they did not allow for comparisons between Rocky Beach and River City.

A more uniform data set might have revealed patterns of student performance that were related more to the specific learning environment than the specific teacher relationships. This information might then have led to a better understanding of the interplay between the culture of the program and the quality of student-teacher relationships that are formed.

## **Limitations of Gathering Relational Data**

Asking students and teachers to reflect on their connections with each other requires them to bring awareness to a dynamic upon which there has been little reflection or questioning.  The research from Bernieri et al. (2001) on rapport helps to underscore the extraordinarily fluid, fast, and largely unconscious communication that transpires between people eliciting connection or disconnection.  Human interactions are difficult to grasp and comprehend, especially in real time.

With more practice at thinking and talking about relationships in schools, all students in this study might have been able to discuss articulately and more consistently what their teachers did that was helpful and how it made them feel.  Some researchers, including Pianta (2009), have begun to use video cameras as a way of studying teacher-student interactions in the classroom, catching instances of relational connection and disconnection.  Videos, however, might have much more limited utility when trying to gather the more intimate one-to-one student-teacher interactions that constituted much of what students valued in their relationships with helpful and especially-helpful teachers.

## **Limitations of Analysis of Teacher Perceptions**

The final limitation of this study is that it did not provide a robust exploration of teacher perceptions and backgrounds.  Although the decision to focus on student perceptions helped to keep the study focused, clear, and accomplishable, it sacrificed the half of the relational puzzle affected by teacher background and perception.  The understanding we could gain from exploring and explicating teacher background and

perceptions would contribute greatly to our comprehension of the process of relationship-building and its effects.

In conclusion, these limitations suggest a research approach that would require more time, a methodology that would include more not-helpful teachers, a more uniform request from the researcher to teachers for evidence of academic growth and engagement, some use of non-intrusive technology that could capture significant moments of student-teacher interaction, and an in-depth exploration with teachers of their backgrounds and relational perceptions.

## **Researcher Biases**

My investment and belief in alternative education created a concern for me that my research might be biased towards finding that students would <u>only</u> have academically and personally nurturing learning experiences at the alternative programs. Despite the fact that students experienced the majority of their not-helpful teachers in conventional schools, most also experienced at least one helpful teacher in those same schools. Three of nine students also experienced a not-helpful teacher in their alternative program. I was also concerned that my thinking about the primary importance of student-teacher relationships would not be challenged by my findings. Although the study does support the fundamental necessity of helpful relationships for students to engage in learning, it does not support a simple one to one correspondence between perceived helpfulness and learning. The findings are nuanced. Students in the study *could* learn within the context of a not-helpful relationship if that relationship was improving and, just because they experienced a teacher relationship as especially-helpful they did not necessarily feel that

they learned more academically from that teacher than in a relationship perceived to be helpful.

## Major Findings

### Helpful Teacher Attributes

When I looked at the responses of all nine students, I found that they identified five capacities they associated with a helpful teacher. To be perceived as helpful, teachers needed to be seen as **non-judgmental**, able to "**break learning down**," able to **read the student well**, capable of **caring with accountability**, and able to **create active learning experiences for students**. I have selected these attributes from a longer list that students agreed upon because students consistently perceived teachers who lacked any of these capacities as not helpful.

Three of these five qualities ("breaking it down," reading the student well, and creating active learning experiences) are teacher capacities that facilitate academic learning, while two (being non-judgmental and caring with accountability) are capacities that facilitate relational connections.

The choice of capacities that facilitate academic learning reflects the importance that students place on succeeding at the overt work of school: mastering academics. They are looking for teachers who understand their learning needs, know how to engage them in the subject matter, and can explain how to approach a learning task clearly. The capacities to "break it down" and to read the student well require the teacher to have deep knowledge of the material being taught and of each student, as well as an ability to connect with any student on a one-to-one basis as needed. The capacity to create

successful active learning experiences requires teachers to shift their teaching to a style that requires more student participation and to have some qualitative knowledge of each student's interests.

Essential teacher capacities that facilitate relational connections include being non-judgmental and being caring while holding the student accountable. These attributes address the students' need to feel validated, nurtured, and safe. This group of students indicated that fulfillment of these needs is a precondition of perceiving a teacher as helpful.

In this study, students describe not-helpful qualities as having the greatest effect when a teacher is perceived to be judgmental, uncaring, inaccessible, unknown, unable to read them well, and primarily dependent on a lecture-style textbook instructional strategy. Faced with teachers who manifest these attributes, the nine students find themselves feeling put down, bewildered, alone, overwhelmed, disinterested, and disconnected from their teachers and the academic work of school.

## Indicators of Helpful and Not-Helpful Relationships

Students emphasized a sense of mutuality in three of the four descriptors they used to talk about their relationships with helpful teachers. These three descriptors— collaborative, close, and caring—can all be thought of as based on a perceived sense of mutuality and reciprocity between teacher and student. Students felt a relationship was collaborative when they perceived the teacher was working with them as a "co-worker" not a boss. They felt a relationship was close with a teacher when it felt like a friendship in which both parties knew each other well. Students felt a relationship was caring when

the teacher made it clear that they had a student's interests at heart, and when the students found themselves caring about the teacher as well. When students felt that their teacher was treating them as an equal, was interested in their lives, and wanted them to know who they were beyond their role as a teacher, relationships were perceived to be helpful.

Students deemed openness—the fourth descriptor of how a helpful relationship feels—to be important because this quality invited their participation, discourse, humor, and dialogue. Openness, to them, meant feeling "free" to communicate. They felt welcomed and safe in the community of the classroom.

In their relationships with not-helpful teachers, students used descriptors that can be seen as the inverse of the four descriptors above. What emerges most clearly is that students resent being "bossed" by people who are negatively judgmental towards them, don't know them, aren't interested in getting to know them, and do not appear to have their best interests at heart. Relationships under these circumstances feel pressured, restricted and not mutual. Students in this study relate that they respond to a not-helpful teacher relationship by withdrawing and disengaging.

## Effects of Helpful and Not-Helpful Relationships on Academic Growth, Engagement, and Persistence

For the nine student participants, encountering a not-helpful teacher in past school settings was frequently perceived as deleterious to their learning and their chances of completing school. (This finding is in sharp contrast to the comparatively more positive range of responses given to the experience of current not-helpful teachers in the alternative program environments – see Table 6.1 and the vignette of Julia and her not-

helpful teacher.)  Unsure of whether they would be unfairly judged, embarrassed, or put on the spot, students became incommunicative, lessening their ability to obtain support from their teachers when needed.  These students then fell behind academically, began avoiding classes, and eventually left school or transferred to an alternative program.  Few had the self-confidence or support at home or in school to rectify a situation that was beginning to deteriorate.

Student responses indicated that they did not all agree about which current teachers were helpful and not helpful.  Four students considered the same two teachers helpful and not helpful.  Similarly, some teachers were designated especially-helpful by some students and only helpful by others.  These findings are important because they support the idea that student-teacher dyads are a function of the particular backgrounds that each member of the dyad brings to the relationship.  Thus, how they function is likely to be quite different depending on who the participants are.  Finally, it is important to note that this study supports the fact that negative teacher-student relations are not necessarily permanent if learning environments give time and support to teachers and students to work through their issues with one another.

When students experienced an open and mutual-feeling connection within the classrooms of their helpful teachers, they felt engaged and that they were making some academic progress.  They did not differentiate the amount they learned academically between teachers designated as helpful and especially-helpful.  However, each student in the study had a teacher they found to be especially-helpful.  One third of the student participants found that helpful teachers had no effect on their desire to finish school because the students were motivated by their own goals.  However, a clear majority of

students felt they were motivated to finish by connections with their helpful teachers and that these same teachers had helped them gain skills that would help them complete high school.

When I asked teachers to provide evidence to support their perceptions of positive student academic growth and engagement, I found that some teachers based their assessments on anecdotes while others based them on grades and attendance. The results of this study demonstrated that student learning and engagement is impaired by relationships with teachers perceived to be not-helpful, while it is enhanced by relationships with teachers perceived to be helpful. Beyond that, however, the degree to which learning is enhanced by perceived helpfulness could not easily be determined.

Looking back on my findings, I see that the most important discoveries are based on what these nine students taught me about teaching and learning.

First, their experiences with some teachers were harmful and in their minds, led them to disengaging from class work and eventually school. These experiences occurred in systems that seemed only dimly, if at all, aware of the dysfunction within these student-teacher connections. Teachers and students never had a chance to rectify their miscommunications and misunderstandings and the students' situation deteriorated.

Second, I learned how a not-helpful relationship could become more positive in a learning environment that supported teacher and student partnerships. As I was fortunate enough to witness in Julia's situation with her not-helpful teacher (see the discussion in Chapter 6), two teachers who had better relationships with Julia and the teacher with whom she was in conflict, encouraged them both to work through their difficulties. A

culture of teachers that is tuned in to the importance of teacher-student connections can effectively work to reduce the damage done by not-helpful relationships.

Third, these students taught me about the critical importance of establishing a non-judgmental and mutual approach to working with learners. Students intensely desired to be treated as equals by their teachers.

Fourth, I was struck by how much students had to say and by their self-awareness of what worked for them and what didn't. From this, I conclude that using student perceptions and input is an essential aspect of any system of education that truly wants teachers and students to be successful partners in the adventure of learning.

### A Model of Perceived Relational Impacts on Student Engagement and Growth

To show the dynamics of these findings, I propose the following three-tier model that illustrates how each tier functions in relation to each other. The major drawback of the model is its primary dependence on student perception, which is only one half of the relational puzzle. Teacher perception plays an equally, if not more important, role in determining the course of a relationship because institutional power is vested almost solely in the teacher.

With that caveat, I will briefly suggest a model based on the data the interviewed students provided in this study. To begin, I offer the three-tiered diagram in Table 8.1.

**Table 8.1.**  Three Tiers of Student-Perceived Teacher Helpfulness

**Tier Three**: **The Especially-Helpful Teacher**
- Reads students well
- Listens to their interests
- Creates active learning experiences
- Breaks down academic processes
- Works with the student,
- Is Humorous, Energetic, Enthusiastic,
- **Listens to non-academic challenges**
- Is available to students during non-class time and in non-class locations such as lunch etc.

**Relationship feels:** Open, **Particularly** Close, Collaborative, Caring

**Tier Two**: **The Helpful Teacher**
- Reads students well
- Listens to their interests
- Creates active learning experiences
- Breaks down academic processes
- Works with the student
- Is Humorous, Energetic, Enthusiastic
- Is available to students during non-class time and in non-class locations such as lunch etc.

**Relationship feels:** Open, Close, Collaborative, Caring

**Tier One: The Not-Helpful Teacher**
- Doesn't Read Students Well
- Doesn't Listen to their interests
- Doesn't create active learning experiences
- Gives them large assignments and expects them to complete on their own
- Judges students negatively
- Is not available to them
- Doesn't appear to know students and students don't know him/her,

**Relationship feels**:  Pressured, Closed, Disinterested

At the bottom tier are the not-helpful relationships. These are characterized by students experiencing discomfort, rigidity, distance, indifference, pressure, and inequality. Teachers in these relationships are perceived to be hierarchical, uncaring, distant, humorless, judgmental, and inflexible. Almost no communication flows reciprocally between student and teacher. Students avoid and resist learning in these relationships. Academic outcomes at this level are almost entirely negative.

The large gap between tiers one (not helpful) and two (helpful) in this model indicates the completely different quality of relationship that exists between these levels as well as the significantly different academic outcomes. At the second level, students and teachers have experienced interactions that build their connection to one another. This is the level of the helpful relationship. Teachers at this level are experienced by students as responsive: they care about students and are interested in them. Students experience them as capable teachers and advisors through their capacities to break academic learning down into component parts, create active learning experiences, listen, respond non-judgmentally, read the student's needs, be humorous, energetic and enthusiastic. The relationships that students and teachers create on this level feel open, close, collaborative, and caring to students.

At level two, academic outcomes are significantly enhanced compared to the first level. Students persist in their studies, feel more confident that they will graduate, and achieve academic and personal growth in the classrooms of these teachers.

In the third tier (especially-helpful), teacher and student have created a relationship that feels safe and close enough for important personal disclosure. This is particularly true for students who enter the school day with pressing and unresolved

issues that could derail them. Teachers in this category demonstrate the highest quality listening and the most consistent caring and validating responses. These relationships feel slightly closer than the helpful relationships. Academic outcomes are not necessarily any better for students in this tier of the model. However, persistence in school may be enhanced.

Students and teachers in this study demonstrate that relationships that begin on the first tier are not doomed to remain there. If the learning environment offers time and space for dialogue between student and teacher, and if both student and teacher have some positive connections with other teachers, then the relationship can evolve positively. This model could have implications for school culture, collegial support, professional development, alternative education, and teacher assessment that I will discuss next.

**Implications for Educators**

**How Schools and Teachers Can Improve Learning and School Climate by Inviting and Utilizing Student Perceptions**

A majority of the nine students in this study were consistently able to articulate what they found helpful and not helpful about their past and current teachers. None mentioned that their teachers or anyone else had ever asked them about these topics. Although it was difficult for them to describe their experience of relationship with these teachers, they ultimately were able to develop some consistent and clear indicators of how these relationships felt. Perhaps because schooling is compulsory, students and their families are often not viewed or treated as valued partners. In fact, much political

rhetoric describes the student as a **product** of our education system rather than as a **partner** with voice in it. Critically important information is lost every time we do not make the effort to learn firsthand from our students about who they are and how best to connect with them in order to catalyze their interests and enhance their abilities. This study, even with its small sample and narrow focus, reveals that adolescent students have the capacity to articulate their experience in ways that provide guidelines on how teachers can best help them learn. Administrators and teachers have a responsibility to invite and utilize student perceptions on a regular and consistent basis to help improve the teaching and learning that occur in schools. Some existing models implement this approach including Doll's work on mapping classroom responses (Doll, Zucker, & Brehm, 2004) and the Reinventing Schools Coalition (Delorenzo, Battino, Schreiber, & Carrio, 2009) approach to student voice and choice.

More specifically, we need to improve communication between student and teacher by inviting one-to-one dialogue between them on a regular basis. These discussions would focus on what is working in the teacher's approach, and what is working in the student's approach to learning the material at hand. A systematic effort by the school system, from elementary school onwards, to encourage and support students in observing and understanding themselves as learners would form a foundation for enhancing teaching and learning. This effort should be paired with some form of a handbook in which the student compiles his or her observations and understandings, derived from reflections and discussions with the current teacher, for use when teachers are changed in the coming year. Student learning handbooks could cover both the

successful and unsuccessful teaching approaches as well as injunctions particular to the individual student, such as Fred's intense discomfort with being touched.

Teachers, too, could be encouraged to maintain a teacher handbook in which they describe their approach to teaching, including their expectations of student attitude and behavior. These handbooks would be based on their own observations and understanding of their teaching style and on the regular conversations they would have with students about the perceived effects of their approach. Teacher handbooks could be made available to students, who could use them to understand their teachers better.

Student and teacher reflection on the learning process would enable them, as partners, to individualize curricula. Students would perceive that academic work, once individualized, has high intrinsic value, thus catalyzing their academic engagement and growth. Student-teacher conferences on learning and teaching, mentioned above, could become a regular and safe venue within which relational derailments could be discussed and resolved. Regular conferences of this nature could prevent or at least interrupt the cascade of disengagements described in Chapter 5.

On a school-wide level, administrators could use data from student perceptions to analyze the degree to which students felt hopeful, connected, and engaged with school. The Gallup Poll survey of student hope, engagement, and well-being (2009) could serve as a first step for school leaders to understand the experience students are having in their institutions. Modified "connections surveys" as used in this study could also help school staff determine to what degree students felt connected to teachers and vice versa. Gallup Poll surveys might also be adapted to the classroom to gauge the levels of hope, engagement, and well-being students were experiencing with specific teachers. Plans to

repair or create relational connections for students with few or no helpful relationships could be developed.  Students in schools where these efforts were taking place would be more likely to feel connected, valued, and engaged.

To facilitate the kinds of suggestions made above school leaders would need to make sure that time was set aside for these ongoing efforts and that teachers saw helping students reflect on their own learning and making relational connections with them as core elements of their work as teachers.

**Developing Teachers' Teaching and Relational Skills**.  Little emphasis in current teacher training is placed on developing relational skills.  The closest skill set can be found under the rubric of "Classroom Management."  Particularly at the secondary level of education, attention is paid almost exclusively to mastering content matter.  Discussion of "differentiated instruction" moves closer to the ideal that I am espousing because this kind of instruction involves matching the teaching and learning styles of teachers and students.

Prospective teachers must be encouraged to understand the strengths and challenges of their own relational style.  Pianta (1999) suggests that, at least for teachers of Kindergarten through Grade 8 (K-8), this understanding is essential in enhancing their ability to connect with students.  Teachers preparing to work with at-risk students should be required to take an interpersonal skills program, such as that developed by Aspy and Roebuck (1977).

For teachers already in the field, professional development in relational skills-building could enhance student-teacher connections and significantly improve the overall school climate.  According to the data from the nine at-risk learners in this study, teachers

need to develop the capacity to listen and discern student interest as well as to create active learning experiences. Teachers must also be able to explain learning processes and enhance students' skills by responding to them with relational capacities including care, understanding, humor and being non-judgmental. Much more work is needed to create and assess the training and practice of key capacities in this area.

While this research is being undertaken, however, every school could be drawing on the skills of teachers who have what Pianta calls "with-itness"—a natural capacity to read and respond to students effectively. These teachers could become natural coaches in relational capacity. They could mentor teachers who were deficient in relational capacity and help others build on their own strengths to become more capable of reaching all students.

Schools invested in increasing the level of student-connectedness would also be concerned about enhancing the level of teacher-connectedness. These schools would undertake an ongoing effort to make sure that teachers had access to peers, mentors, supervisors, and others within the system from whom they could derive help and support. Schools would provide adequate time and space for teachers to support one another through professional learning communities, case consultations, and a multitude of other positive collegial climate strategies.

The true test of what is important to the institution of school is *what gets measured*. School systems serious about increasing school connectedness for all students would use relational capacity as an important part of the rubric for assessing teacher quality. Instruments to assess this aspect of the rubric would need to be developed and they should depend heavily on student input.

## <u>Rogers and Pianta Revisited</u>

As described in detail in Chapters 2 and 3, I based a large part of my approach to this study on the concepts and research inspired and undertaken by Carl Rogers and Robert Pianta. Beginning with Rogers, I will explore how this study's findings converge and diverge from both theorists' frameworks.

Carl Rogers expanded his thinking from the domain of therapy to education when he published *Freedom to Learn* (1969, 1983). He proposed that teachers should be thought of as learning facilitators (1983). He also suggested that congruence, positive regard, and empathy are three essential teacher qualities that facilitate learning (1983). Aspy and Roebuck (1977) conducted a series of studies and found that there was a significant positive correlation between student outcomes and the presence of these three teacher capacities in their teachers.

The findings from the nine students corroborate Rogers' theory of effective learning, with some important exceptions and additions. I will briefly compare the student-suggested list of helpful teacher attributes with Rogers's three qualities to determine where they converge and diverge. Table 8.2 provides a brief overview of how student perception and the Rogerian model compare.

**Table 8.2.** Comparison of Student Perception and Rogerian Model

| Student-Identified Capacities of Helpful Teacher | Rogers's Capacities of Essential Facilitator |
|---|---|
| Non-Judgmental | Positive Regard |
| Reading the student well | Based on Rogerian empathy |
| Caring with Accountability & Listening to Personal Disclosures | Based on Rogerian empathy and positive regard |
| Genuineness (students divided on this) | Congruence |
| Breaking it Down | Rogers Does Not Discuss |
| Listening Attentively to Student Interests and Learning Concerns | Rogers Does Not Discuss |
| Humor | Rogers Does Not Discuss |
| Energy and Enthusiasm | Rogers Does Not Discuss |
| Creating Active Learning Experiences | Rogers Does Not Discuss |

Rogers (1983) felt that an effective learning facilitator had to "prize, trust, and accept" the student (p. 123), which are facilitative conditions that were later designated as "positive regard" by Aspy and Roebuck (1977). As I have stressed above, the students made it clear that the capacity for a teacher to be non-judgmental in their interactions with them is a key capacity that can unlock the door to a helpful relationship. For at-risk students especially those who have had experience with judgmental adults, judgmental teachers are a problem. Julia describes the feeling of being in her especially-helpful teacher's classroom:

> I'm not scared to ask a question. It feels open to me. It feels like she [teacher] says, "You can ask me a question, feel free, and I will give an answer that I want and we can discuss," and I won't be wondering what this teacher is going to be like….I feel comfortable asking questions anytime. (SVN T2 p. 2)

Julia is welcomed into dialogue and is free from concern about "what this teacher is going to be like." She feels safe from negative judgment or ridicule about the questions she might ask.

The ongoing requirement for teachers to formally assess a student's work and provide them with feedback on their progress challenges their capacity to be non-judgmental. Assessment creates opportunities for student-teacher conflict and the experience of the teacher as judgmental and yet, none of the student participants cited examples of conflicts with helpful teachers over grades or other forms of assessment. Perhaps this was, in part, because of the foundation of acceptance and positive regard that the teacher had already developed with them.

Rogers's (1983) second learning facilitator capacity was one he called empathic understanding. He defined this as the capacity of the teacher to understand students from their own point of view (p. 126). Students in my study provided a somewhat different view from Rogers in this area. Some of the helpful-teacher capacities they described depended on a teacher's ability to empathize with them but most students did not talk directly about "being understood." They experienced their helpful teachers as caring and willing to hold them safely accountable, as a loving parent would. Both facets of this experience must be rooted in the teachers' understanding of who their students are and what they need.

Students experienced their helpful teachers as being able to "read them well," a capacity similarly rooted in a deep sense of empathy that guides the teacher in his or her appropriate responses to an individual student. A teacher who has the capacity to read a student well knows when to "break it down" and lead a student step by step through a particular learning process. Once again, the ability to do this effectively and without patronizing is based on a teacher's understanding of a student's need for this approach and the teacher's thorough grasp of the material. Moreover, the student-identified teacher

capacity to listen attentively to important, personal student disclosures sets the stage for understanding the student, and, therefore, it is a precursor to and developer of empathy.

The third and final capacity that facilitates learning according to Rogers (1983) is congruence or realness (p. 121). Rogers defines congruence as the "most basic of these essential [facilitator] attitudes….When the facilitator is a real person, being what she is, entering into a relationship with the learner without presenting a front or a façade" (p. 121). Rogers goes on to emphasize the importance of the teacher's relationship to his or her own feelings and to being able to express them openly.

In my study, there was a distinct difference from Rogers's model among students' reactions to their helpful teachers' congruence, particularly around the expression of feelings. Students uniformly rated their especially-helpful teachers as at least good friends on the Lazarus Life Circles Technique (1989), implying that they knew them as well as they knew their good friends, which supports the idea that these teachers were "real" people to them in Rogers's sense of the word.

The students disagreed markedly with Rogers, however, in the value they placed on experiencing their teachers as transparent emotional beings. Robert, in particular, discussed at length how much he appreciated his teacher keeping his negative feelings to himself. Other students concurred that they did not mind teachers who always seemed positive, even though they knew this was not possible and therefore not "real" in Roger's sense.

Several of the capacities students described as essential did not appear at all within Roger's three concepts. Most obviously, students looked for teachers with some facilities that would foster their academic progress. Students wanted teachers who could

involve them in creating active learning experiences and who had the skill to break down learning processes into component parts and clearly explain to them what needed to be done. They also valued teachers who, through listening attentively to their individual interests and passions, could connect them to the subject matter being studied. Despite their at-risk backgrounds and years of failing to thrive in conventional classrooms, these students gave voice to a desire to learn within the context of a helpful-teacher-student relationship. As pointed out above, the listening and breaking-down skills can only be usefully employed when the teacher understands what will work for a particular student.

The second set of capacities not reflected in Roger's triumvirate concerns the teacher's capacity to make relational connections. Students highly valued teachers who had energy and enthusiasm for the student and who were highly engaged in their content area. Robert paid one of the highest compliments to his especially-helpful teacher when he noted:

> He makes it more exciting puts more enthusiasm into it….The other teachers at the high school would be like, "We're learning this which I already know" [Robert says this in a very dull voice]. Even if "my especially-helpful teacher" already knows, he's acting like he's just discovering it. (SWZ T1, p. 16)

Finally, Rogers never mentions humor in his facilitator capacities, whereas the majority of students in this study perceived this to be an important teacher ability. Students found that the teacher's ability to generate and accept humor was significant in making learning fun, developing and deepening the sense of equality between teacher and student as well as giving them some more insight into the teacher as a human being. It surprises me that Rogers has entirely omitted a discussion of humor in his theory.

Rogers and the students in this study agreed on some of the capacities that a teacher needs to demonstrate to be considered helpful, but not all. Students found non-

judgmental and empathic attributes to be a critical part of a helpful teacher's capacities,

while they were divided about the importance of teacher congruence. Robert Pianta's

theory, which I consider next, comes closer to designating a set of teacher capacities with

which these students agreed.

I now shift my attention to theorist and practitioner, Robert Pianta. His work to

identify the forces operating on the dyadic relationship between teacher and student is

founded in large part in Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory and Ford & Ford's (1987)

General Systems Theory. Pianta's (1999) comment, "Relationships are the infra structure

of school success not only for high risk children but for all children" (Pianta, p. 6), is

echoed by most of the students in the study. They say that they would not be in school if

it hadn't been for their connections with helpful teachers.

Pianta's applications of Attachment Theory and General Systems Theory to

teacher-student relationships are supported in large part by the perceptions of students in

this study. Although I did not ask students to provide details of their relationships with

parents, it is likely that none of them came into relationship with teachers from the

"secure attachment" background characterized in Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory.

Therefore, it was fundamentally important for all the students to experience their teachers

as good friends, and caring, responsive adults. Bowlby's (1969) contention that

attachment systems are "open" and subject to change from positive (or negative)

relational experiences is most vividly illustrated by Julia's positively developing

experience with a not-helpful teacher (see Chapter 6).

General Systems Theory proposes that dyadic systems are a function of three

levels of input. First, each partner brings his or her own background: genetic,

psychological, and cultural. Second, the relationship itself is an interactional unit that evolves based on the first set of factors mentioned. Third, the context within which the relationship takes place (the school, the community and the culture) affects how the interaction develops. These factors help to explain why two students could designate the same teacher in opposite ways. They also help to explain the dynamic nature of these relationships and their potential for development. Finally, Systems Theory appreciates the asymmetry of relationships between adults and teens, putting the responsibility for initiating and maintaining a relationship squarely in the teacher's court.

As part of his efforts to understand what a teacher must do to assume this relational responsibility successfully, Pianta (1999) outlined a series of teacher qualities (p. 67):

- the ability to read the child's "cues;"

- the propensity to respond quickly to the child's relational "lead;"

- the ability to convey acceptance and warmth;

- the capacity to establish clear expectations, structures and limits;

- the ability to model "self regulation;" and

- the capacity to offer assistance with problem solving, etc.

These qualities match up closely with many of the traits that the students in my study found in their helpful teachers. Table 8.3 shows which of Pianta's helpful-teacher capacities are identified by students in my study.

**Table 8.3.** Comparison of Student Perception and Pianta's Model

| Student-Identified Capacities of Helpful Teacher | Pianta's Teacher Capacity |
| --- | --- |
| Non Judgmental | The ability to convey acceptance and warmth |
| Breaking it Down | The capacity to offer assistance with problem solving etc. |
| Reading the student well | The ability to read the child's "cues" |
| Caring with Accountability & Listening to Personal Disclosures | The ability to convey acceptance and warmth<br>The capacity to establish clear expectations, structures and limits |
| Genuineness | The ability to model self regulation |
| Listening Attentively to Student Interests and Learning Concerns | Pianta does not discuss |
| Humor | Pianta does not discuss |
| Energy and Enthusiasm | Pianta does not discuss |
| Creating Active Learning Experiences | Pianta does not discuss |

Pianta's model successfully covers relational capacities that students agreed upon, but as with Rogers, it does not cover teacher attributes of humor, energy and enthusiasm, or the capacities of listening attentively to student interests and learning concerns and creating active learning experiences that facilitate academic learning. This is not surprising because Pianta's model is focused primarily on the teacher's capacity to develop and enhance his or her connections with students.

Students in this study, Rogers, and Pianta all agree that teachers who demonstrate the core relational capacities of being non-judgmental and empathic are more likely to create relationships that youth will perceive as helpful. Beyond that, my study's findings and these two central theorists agree on the importance of teachers being able to read the student well, listen attentively to personal disclosures, and present themselves as a person

beyond their role as a teacher. Four student themes that extend beyond both Rogers's and Pianta's models are related to teacher instructional strategies (listening attentively to student interests and learning concerns and creating active learning experiences) and to teacher relational capacities (teacher dispositions of energy and enthusiasm, and humor). The work of both of these theorists, supported by the findings in this study, should compel educators to pay closer attention to the uniqueness of each student with whom they work, and to develop both the instructional and relational capacities that will ultimately enhance their students' ability and desire to learn..

### Implications for Future Research

#### Student Sample

While this study included students at risk of not graduating from high school, it is acknowledged that these students are arguably not the most disaffected or most at risk within the school-age population. Through their own efforts and those of their parents and school system, they were able to find a berth within a learning environment that was a much closer fit to their learning needs. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that all of these students were failing within the conventional system and had major risk factors in their lives (see Table 4.1). Research similar to mine, undertaken with disaffected students still attending conventional learning settings, might reveal a significantly different relational geography. These students, unlike the ones in my study, would probably have a much higher ratio of not-helpful to helpful teachers. Some might not have any current teachers whom they regarded as helpful.

The challenges in connecting with this group would be great. In all probability, their home situations would be very chaotic, negatively affecting their regular attendance at school. Not having a safe and consistent educational environment, such as an alternative program, they would be harder to identify, to connect with, or even to enroll in the study. Interviewing students while they navigated the very edge of school failure could be very valuable because the students' perceptions of and attributions for their current situation would be fresh and unvarnished. Students' experiences with not-helpful teachers would be current and intense, as would their helpful connections, if indeed they had any.

This type of research would require much more time than was required for the present study. These students would likely come to trust the researcher much more slowly and the participant dropout and no-show rate would likely be much higher than what I encountered. The researcher would need to prove himself or herself trustworthy to each participant in order to elicit and maintain engagement.

Studies could also be conducted with high-performing students to determine how they navigate the relational teacher terrain with which they are faced. How do they work with teachers they don't find helpful? Are they able to learn well from these teachers, and if so, how do they accomplish this? What do they do to help create and enhance the relationships they have with helpful teachers? What can they teach us about their behavior and perceptions that could be useful for students in much more academically and socially precarious positions?

**Teacher Sample**

New research studies could also investigate teacher perceptions more thoroughly. This could be valuable because teachers' perceptions will direct their behavior towards or away from students and might also be based on prior experiences that distort their understanding of current interactions with students. Nevertheless, in terms of both the developmental asymmetry of their relationships with students and the power vested in them by the institution, teachers have the primary responsibility of making their connections with students helpful. Therefore, as Pianta (1999) has suggested, it is critical to enhance teacher relational capacities and self awareness.

Researchers could investigate which key factors in teachers' backgrounds affect their capacity to interact helpfully with their students. Teacher perceptions of which students they are drawn to help and which to avoid could be better understood. With more understanding of teacher backgrounds and perception, professional development in schools could begin to help teachers stretch and deepen their capacity to connect with a wider range of students.

More research into the correlations between student and teacher perceptions of each other and their interactions with each other could help to develop indicators for the current "helpfulness" of a particular relationship. With ongoing information about the level at which a relationship was functioning, teachers, administrators and students could focus their efforts on particular relationships that needed support and enhancement.

As data from these future studies develop, it should become possible to isolate a set of key relational skills that are critical for teacher connections with adolescents. Studies could be developed that examined the effectiveness of training teachers in these

skills by using control and test groups to ascertain if students experienced positive outcomes in terms of connectedness, academic growth and engagement.

### Concluding Comments

"*Some are born to sweet delight, some are born to endless night*" William Blake

We humans are social animals. As young children, we come "wired to relate" because developmentally we have such a comparatively long period during which we are completely dependent on our parents and kin. This, in part, accounts for the extraordinary impact of early experience on our attitudes and behaviors. With the advent of a democratic form of government in America, opportunity and possibility became the birthright of every citizen. The prophecy of an "endless night" for anyone, due to their circumstances of birth, was no longer tolerated. A free public education was to be a tide that lifted all boats and a fabric that would keep us woven into a democratic form of government.

We are 244 years into our experiment with democracy and 375 years since the first public school opened (Encyclopedia Britannica). Far too many children in this country, however, are born into an "endless night" of poverty, mental illness, and disease. Public education has become increasingly controlled by the "Corporate State" (Spring, 1972). The family has changed its nature and fewer than seven percent of all white children live in a multigenerational home (Ruggles, 1994). The extended family has been stretched almost into oblivion, forcing the nuclear family to carry a burden it was never intended to shoulder. Communities and neighborhoods have lost their common ties, while more and more of us go "bowling alone" (Putnam, 2000).

Meanwhile, public education has had to struggle with continual funding cuts and much public skepticism while, at the same time, the national rate of students leaving school before graduating has remained at approximately 25 percent since 1965 (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2005). Students who drop out of school are predominantly poor and represent minorities that have not successfully been integrated into our culture (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). All boats have not been lifted.

I undertook my study to obtain a broader and more informed view of the potential for improving student outcomes through enhancing the connections between teachers and students. This approach originates from my personal experience of working with students who had already disengaged from their education and witnessing their transformation into happier, more productive human beings through their experiences at the Community School in Camden, Maine, an intensive, relationally-focused high school.

The vital relational bonds that tie each of us, one to the other, were rewoven in the case of these students and I wanted to explore the possibility that this work could be one part of a general effort to re-weave the fabric of our society.

For this study, I interviewed students and teachers in alternative educational settings that supported strong, helpful teacher-student relationships. I found that students had a keen understanding of the issues on which we focused: what they felt made their teachers helpful, what it felt like to be in relationship with them, and what effect these connections had on their academic engagement, growth, and school persistence. These students had found a learning environment that was a better fit for them, in large part because they had found teachers with whom they could connect. Not only were these

teachers available to help them bail when their individual boats got swamped, but they also had the capacity to help them navigate successfully in the strange seas of math, history, and other "core" content areas.

These nine students taught me four essential things about teaching and learning. **First,** their harmful experiences with not-helpful teachers discouraged them from engaging with school, and the schools that they attended missed the opportunity to repair the relational damage caused by these encounters. **Second,** I learned how, in a setting that valued the connections between teachers and students, troubled teacher-student relationships could be enhanced and begin to develop more positively. **Third**, these students made it clear to me that they wanted their learning to be in collaboration with teachers, that is, a partnership of equals. **And fourth**, I learned that these students had a keen sense, once asked, of which learning and relational approaches did and did not work for them. In order to create learning experiences that work for all students, especially those most at risk, educators at all levels must invite and include student perceptions and voice.

My greatest hope is that this research effort will lead others to learn more from students and to develop approaches and resources that support both students and teachers in establishing helpful connections with one another. Students who graduate from school competent in academic subject matter and who feel free to ask questions, actively pursue interests deeply and thoroughly, articulate their own opinions, and work through conflicts without disengaging, will be most valuable assets to their families, friends, communities, and workplaces.

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**APPENDICES**

## Appendix A

## LIFE CIRCLES BY ARNOLD LAZARUS

(Used in questions 5 & 8, student interview 2, 10 & 13, in student interview 3, and questions 5 & 9 in teacher interview.)

Life Circles by Arnold Lazarus from his book *Multimodal Therapy*:

The interviewee is presented with 5 concentric circles marked with letters "a" through "e" from the inside out.

Each circle is described as follows:

The "a" zone is the most personal and private information. Some people keep all the information in their "a" zone entirely to themselves. Others may share "a" or parts of a with a very special person who is considered totally trustworthy.

The "b" zone includes the information that we allow only our very closest friends to have about us.

The "c" zone includes information that we would let any good friend know about us.

The "d" zone includes information that we would give to acquaintances.

The "e" zone is only the most superficial information that we would give to someone who we were doing business with, or in a completely impersonal relationship with.

The interviewee (teacher or student) is asked:

Point to the circle that shows how much you have allowed your teacher or student to know you.

Point to the circle that shows how well you know your teacher or student has allowed you to know him/her.

**Appendix B**


**SELECTED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ARRANGED BY TEACHER**

**CHARACTERISTIC RELATED TO ROGERS'S THREE ESSENTIAL**

**FACILITATOR OF LEARNING CAPACITIES**


**Congruence:**
- Do they (teacher a or b) usually act like they feel - or do they try to cover up their emotions?
- On a scale of 1 – 10, where 10 is easy and 1 is difficult could you rate how easy it is for you to tell what your teacher is feeling on a given day?  Can you give an example of a day when your teacher let you know directly how s/he was feeling?  What was that like for you?  How does this compare with your experience of other teachers (is it more or less easy to understand how this teacher is feeling)
- In what ways do you know _____better than you know other teachers?  Using the Life Circles (See addendum) chart can you point to how well you feel you know this teacher?


**Caring/Positive Regard:**

- When you are not having a good day – does this teacher ever help you to feel better? Can you give an example of this?
- What does _____ do to make you feel comfortable in class?  How do they help you learn what they are teaching?


**Empathy:**

- Do you generally think your teacher is aware of how you are feeling? Do you feel safe letting him/her know if you are having a hard time? Using the same Life Circles chart, how well do you feel they know you?
- Can you describe a time when your teacher listened carefully to something important you had to say?  How did s/he act when s/he did this? Do you remember how this felt to you?
- Have you ever talked with _____ about something that was really bothering you? How did s/he respond?  How did that feel to you?

**Appendix C**

**STUDENT INTERVIEWS 1, 2 & 3**

**Student Interview #1**

Instructions for Students:

For the next 50 minutes I would like to explore with you how you connect with teachers now and in your past and what difference this has made in how well you learned from them. This will be the first of three times we will meet to talk. Thank you for offering your time to help with this project.

1.  Why did you choose to attend (name of alternative program or school)?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

2.  Can you describe how learning here is different for you than in your previous school?  Can you give me some examples?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

3.  Do you have particular subjects you like best?  What is the best way for a teacher to help you learn something you haven't worked on before? Something you have tried but not succeeded at before?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

4. Could you describe a teacher with whom you got along well before coming here? How did you feel in that teacher's classroom? What-comes to mind when you think of that teacher? Tell me about a time that you really connected with this teacher?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

5. What do you feel are some important things this teacher did to successfully teach you? Could you give some examples of these from your experience? Do you feel you learned the material in this class?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

6. How did s/he deal with other student's behavior in the classroom?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

7. Do you think you learned more in this teacher's classroom than from other teachers? Why or why not?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

8. You selected _____ as a teacher that you currently have a good connection with. For the rest of this interview we will talk about what it is like for you to be in _____'s class, and how you two work together. You can skip any question you are uncomfortable with.

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

9.  How long have you known _____? How long have you been in this teacher's class?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
    Speech

10. What do you remember it being like when you were first in _____'s class? What's it like now? If things have changed significantly can you tell me what happened ?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
    Speech

11.  What three words come to mind when you think of how you and _____, work together? For each word please tell me a specific experience or time that describes that word.

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

12.  What does _____ do to make you feel comfortable in class? How do they help you learn what they are teaching?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
    Speech

13. What does _____ do that works to get you involved in class activities? Does s/he do anything that discourages you from getting involved?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

14. On a scale of 1 – 10, where 10 is easy and 1 is difficult could you rate how easy it is for you to tell what your teacher is feeling on a given day?  Can you give an example of a day when your teacher let you know directly how s/he was feeling?  What was that like for you?  How does this compare with your experience  of other teachers (is it more or less easy to understand how this teacher is feeling/)

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

15.  What does s/he do that makes you feel uncomfortable in class?  Does s/he do things that make it harder for you to learn?

16. Have you ever felt judged by _____? Can you describe the situation?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

17. Think of how _____ gets along with other students in your class; where would you put yourself in this mix? (Easy, sometimes easy sometimes rocky, often rocky, always rocky)

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

18. Can you describe a time when your teacher listened carefully to something important you had to say?  How did s/he act when s/he did this? Do you remember how this felt to you?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

19.  Can you describe something specific that _____helped you to learn and describe how s/he helped you to learn it?  In what ways do you feel you have made the most progress in _____'s class?

**End of Student Interview #1**

**Student Interview #2**

Thanks for your time again. I learned a great deal from what you had to say, and in this discussion we will go a little further in the areas we started talking about. We will begin talking about a teacher that you didn't circle as a positive connection and also doing a quick questionnaire to get your perception of things. I am really interested in how you see these things, and there are no right or wrong answers!

1. Can you describe yourself as a student? Generally speaking, how are you feeling, thinking and acting when you are learning the best? Could you describe a day when you were really learning a lot? How about a day when you are having difficulty learning anything?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

2. Could you describe a teacher whom you didn't get along well with before coming here? How did it feel to be in that teacher's classroom. Tell me a little bit more about him/her. Can you describe an experience with them that shows how you two got along. How you worked together? How would they have described the connection between the two of you?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

3. What did this teacher do that created barriers between him/herself and you? What didn't they do that would have helped to create a more positive connection? What might you have done that created barriers? Did you or s/he ever try to overcome these barriers? What happened?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

4.  Do you think you learned more or less in this teacher's classroom than in other teacher's classrooms?  Please explain how this happens – the learning more or less?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

5.  In general what kinds of things tend to get you upset in classes?  How often do you get upset – daily? weekly? monthly? What do you find yourself thinking when you are upset?  Could you describe what you tend to do when you are feeling this way?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

Let's go back now and finish up some questions about _____, (teacher who student circled as having a good connection with).

6.  In what ways do you know _____better than you know other teachers? Using the Life Circles chart can you point to how well you feel you know this teacher? What would you imagine s/he would point to when asked how well you know him/her?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

7.  Have you ever talked with _____ about something that was really bothering you? How did s/he respond?  How did that feel to you?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

8.  What if what was bothering you was something about _____?  Have you ever talked to them about something like that?  What happened?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

9.  Do you generally think your teacher is aware of how you are feeling? Do you feel safe letting him/her know if you are having a hard time? Using the same Life Circles chart, how well do you feel s/he knows you? What would you imagine s/he would point to when asked how well s/he knows you?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

10. Overall how do you think your experience working with _____ as your teacher has affected your desire to complete high school?  Your ability to complete high school?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

11. Would you point to anything specific that _____ does that makes you more sure that you can and will get your diploma. Anything that makes you less sure?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

12. Can you describe a time when you and _____ had a conflict? What happened? On a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being really intense, and 1 being really mild, how would you rate this conflict?  How did it end up?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

13. If you were creating a handbook for teachers who would be teaching you – what would you say were the most important things they could do to make a connection with you?  What would be the three most important things they could do to help you to learn? If part of the handbook were specific to _____ what would you say particularly to them in relation to these issues?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

Now we are going to take a break to do a questionnaire.  I can read it to you if you would prefer, or you can fill it out. Please ask me if you have any questions. (5 –10 minutes)

**-- Make two copies of these, one for each teacher --**

Thanks now we will begin a few questions about _____ whom you didn't circle as someone you had a good connection with.      (*Teacher*)

1.  How long have you known _____?  How long have you been in this teacher's class?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

2.  What do you remember it being like when you were first in _____'s class? What's it like now?  If things have changed significantly can you tell me what happened ?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

3. What three words come to mind when you think of how you and _____, work together? For each word please tell me a specific experience or time that describes that word.

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

Thanks again – you have really given a lot of your time for this, and I greatly appreciate it.  Next interview we will wrap up our discussions and leave some time for you to let me know how this went for you as well. Is there anything I could do or change to make you more comfortable?

**End of Student Interview #2**

**Student Interview #3**

You selected _____ as a teacher that you knew but (you did/didn't circle them as a good connection). For the rest of this interview we will talk about what it is like for you to be in _____'s class, and how you two get along.  You can skip any question you are uncomfortable with.

1.  What does _____ do to make you feel comfortable in class? ? How do they help you learn what they are teaching?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

2.  What does _____ do that works to get you involved in class activities? Does s/he do anything that discourages you from getting involved?

3.  How important to your learning and mastering the academic material in _____'s
     class is your ability to connect well with him/her?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

4. On a scale of 1 – 10, (10 is easy, and 1 is difficult) could you rate how easy it is for you to tell how your teacher is feeling on a given day?
Can you give an example of a day when your teacher let you know how s/he was feeling? What was that like for you? How does this compare with your experience of other teachers? (is it more or less easy to understand how this teacher is feeling?)

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

5. What does s/he do that makes you feel uncomfortable in class? Does s/he sometimes do things that make it harder for you to learn?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

6. Have you ever felt judged by _____? Can you describe the situation?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

7. Think of how _____ gets along with other students in your class; where would you put yourself in this mix? (Easy, sometimes easy sometimes rocky, often rocky, always rocky)

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

8. Can you describe a time when your teacher listened carefully to something important you had to say? How did s/he act when s/he did this? Do you remember how this felt to you?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

9. Can you describe something specific that _____ helped you to learn and describe how s/he helped you to learn it? In what ways do you feel you have made the most progress in _____'s class?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

10. To what degree do you feel that _____ accepts you for who you are? Can you give me an example of a time when you experienced this?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

11. When you are not having a good day – does this teacher ever help you to feel better? Can you give an example of this?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

12. Try to Role-play this - Can you pretend you are _____? Ok, can you tell me how you get along with interviewee's name.  Please describe the way you work with interviewee's name . From your perspective as the teacher, what does interviewee's name do that makes it difficult to teach them sometimes?  What do you most enjoy about them? What does _____ do that makes it easy to teach them sometimes.

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

13. How important to your learning and mastering the academic material in
_____'s class is your ability to connect with him/her? Do you think you learn
more or less in this class than that of _____ whom you circled as having
a positive connection with?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

14. In what ways do you know  _____better than you know other teachers?
Using the Life Circles chart can you point to how well you feel you know this
teacher? What would you imagine s/he would point to when asked how well you
know him/her?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

15. Have you ever talked with _____ about something that was really bothering
you? How did s/he respond?  How did that feel to you?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

16. What if what was bothering you was something about _____?  Have you ever
talked to them about something like that?  What happened?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

17.  Do you generally think your teacher is aware of how you are feeling? Do you
feel safe letting him/her know if you are having a hard time? Using the same Life
Circles chart, how well do you feel s/he knows you? What would you imagine
s/he would point to when asked how well s/he knows you?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

18. Would you say that you understand what _____ is saying a) most of the time b) some of the time; or c) not very often.  Can you think of examples of when you did?  Didn't?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

**-- Do Student Survey here --**

1. Overall how do you think your experience working with _____ as your teacher has affected your desire to complete high school?  Your ability to complete high school?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

2. Would you point to anything specific that _____ does that makes you more sure that you can and will get your diploma. Anything that makes you less sure?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

3. Can you describe a time when you and _____ had a conflict. What happened? On a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being really intense, and 1 being really mild, how would you rate this conflict?   How did it end up?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

4. Last time we talked I asked you to consider making a handbook where  you would say the most important things teachers could do to make a connection with you and to help you learn? If part of the handbook were specific to teacher 2 what would your instructions be to them?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

5. Could you tell me three or four things in school or out that could lead you to dropping out of school? Which of these are likely to cause you the most problem in terms of finishing high school?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

6. Could you tell me three or four things in school or out that help you stay in school and complete your studies? Which of these are the most helpful to you in terms of completing school?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

Thank you so much for helping me with these interviews. I would like to know what worked for you and what didn't – any questions which you found particularly troublesome to answer or understand? Are there any questions you would like to ask me about this process, or anything else related to what we have spent time discussing? Should anything come up for you, please contact me at 861-4004, or by email at resirap@yahoo.com.

**Appendix D**

**STUDENT SURVEY**

(Note: some of these questions involve some subtle observations, so if you don't have a sense of the answer, please just write cj (can't judge).

In general in your contacts with _____, (*Circle the answer that best describes*

*your experience*)                    *(Teacher)*

1.  _____ calls on you in class?

 **Always    Often    Sometimes    Seldom    Never**

Comments:

2.  When you are talking with one another you both make eye contact?

 **Always    Often    Sometimes    Seldom    Never**

Comments:

3.  You ask questions in his/her class?

 **Always    Often    Sometimes    Seldom    Never**

Comments:

4.  Do you look _____ in the eye during class?

 **Always    Often    Sometimes    Seldom    Never**

Comments:

5. How frequently does _____ interrupt you when you are talking?

**Always      Often       Sometimes    Seldom        Never**

Comments:

6. When _____ is listening to you, does s/he stand or sit? (circle answer)

**Very Close to you (1 – 1/2 ft)**          **Fairly close to you (2-3 ft)**
**Not very close to you (3-4ft)**           **Far away from you (more than 4 ft.)**

Comments:

7. Do you talk with one another after or before class?

**Daily   More Than Once a week        More Than Once a month        Almost Never**

Comments:

8. Who does most of the talking?

**Teacher      Mostly Teacher/Some Me    Equal    Mostly Me/Some Teacher      Me**

Comments:

9. _____ smiles at you.

**Always      Often       Sometimes    Seldom        Never**

Comments:

10. How frequently do you interrupt _____ when s/he is talking?

**Always      Often       Sometimes    Seldom        Never**

Comments:

11. When you want help from _____ with something academically does s/he tend to move closer to you?

**Always    Often    Sometimes    Seldom    Never**

Comments:

12. When you listen to _____, you stand or sit:

**Very Close to them (1 – 1/2 ft)          Fairly close to them (2-3 ft)**
**Not very close to them (3-4ft)           Far away from them (more than 4 ft.)**

Comments:

13. Do you nod your head, or say "uh huh" when you are talking with them?

**Always    Often    Sometimes    Seldom    Never**

Comments:

14. When you talk to _____ outside of class, who usually starts talking?

**Me     Mostly Me/Some Teacher     Equal     Mostly Teacher/Some Me          Teacher**

Comments:

15. _____ offers to comfort you when you are upset?

**Always    Often    Sometimes    Seldom    Never**

Comments:

16. How frequently do you laugh together?

**Always    Often    Sometimes    Seldom    Never**

Comments:

17. Does _____ nod his/her head, or say "uh huh" when you are talking with them?

**Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

| Comments: |
| --- |
| |

18. Do you smile at him/her?

**Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

| Comments: |
| --- |
| |

19. _____ gets into conflicts with you how often?

**Every Class      Twice a Week      Once a Month      Infrequently    Never**

| Comments: |
| --- |
| |

20. Most of the conflicts you and _____ get into are initiated by:

**Teacher    Mostly Teacher/Some Me      Equal    Mostly Me/Some Teacher      Me**

| Comments: |
| --- |
| |

21. Most of the conflicts you and _____ get into are:

**Small & Resolved      Small &Unresolved    Large &Resolved    Large & Unresolved**

| Comments: |
| --- |
| |

Thanks for completing this survey!

Any other comments on these questions?  Anything that I left out?

**Appendix E**

**TEACHER INTERVIEWS 1 & 2**

**Teacher Interview #1**

Instructions for Teachers:

For the next 45 minutes you will be teaching me about how you connect with students and what you think and feel when connecting with them. I am also curious about the degree to which you feel your relationships with students impacts their ability and desire to learn what you are teaching.

I am interested in stories about events in your teaching career that have led you to adopt the approach you have now, and in descriptions of incidents illustrating how you connect with students.

1. What brought you to working with students who were not succeeding in conventional school?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

2. How long have you worked in education?  Alternative education?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

3. Could you tell me about the range of kids that you have taught and how you have experienced them?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech
    a. For example could you give me an example of a student you found easy to reach, and how you went about doing so?
    b. Now could you give me an example of a student who was difficult for you to reach, and how you tackled that challenge?

4.  How would you like kids to experience your classroom? Your relationship with them *individually*?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

**(Begin here for teacher interview #3 if teacher is paired with more than one student.)**
This interview will explore more in depth what it is like for you to be _____'s teacher, and how you two get along.  You can skip any question you are uncomfortable with.

5.  How long have you known _____? How long have you had him/her as a student in your class? Using the Life Circles chart can you point to how well you feel you know this student? What would you imagine s/he would point to when asked how well you know him/her?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

6.  What three words come to mind when you think of how you and _____ work together? For each word please tell me a specific experience or time that describes that word.

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

7.  What do you remember it being like when you first had him/her in class?  What is it like now? How has your relationship with _____ developed since you first met him/her?  Was there a key interaction that helped to create greater connection? Greater distance?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

8.  What do you do to make _____ comfortable in class?  To help them learn?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

9.  *In what ways* do you let your students know how you are feeling whether
    you are feeling up or down, glad or angry, etc?  Using the same Life Circles chart,
    how well do you feel they know you?  What would you imagine they would point
    to when asked how well they know you?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

10.  Can you describe a time when you listened carefully to something important
    _____ had to say?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

11. How often do you know what _____ is feeling on a given day?  Can you
    give an example of a day when _____ let you know how s/he
    was feeling and allowed you to help them feel better?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

12. How interested do you generally find yourself in  _____?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

13. In what ways do you think how you are getting along with _____ affects his/her ability and/or desire to learn material you are teaching?  Can you give me some concrete examples of how this might work?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

14. **Role Play this**:  If you were _____(student) how would you describe the relationship you had with _____ (teacher's name)?  Can you describe one or more key situations that helped you come to this conclusion? What would you stress as the most important aspects of this relationship?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

Thanks for helping me with this first interview. I would like to know if you have any reactions to the questions – were there any you didn't understand? felt uncomfortable with? Could see a way of improving?  Next time we will be talking more about these same relational areas, and also do a quick survey.

**End of Teacher Interview #1**


**Teacher Interview #2**


We will continue talking about your connection with _____ in this interview as well as exploring some broader issues.

1. Did you have any further thoughts about what we talked about in interview #1?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

2. What is it you most value about teaching right now?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

3. If you saw _____ in a store and knew that they hadn't seen you yet, and you were in a bit of a rush, what would your first impulse be? (question to get at immediate teacher reaction to other under moderate stress – move towards, away from, etc.)

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

4. Have you ever been able to talk with _____ about something that was bothering you about them? How did they respond?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

5. Can you describe a time when you and _____ had a conflict with each other? What happened? How did it end up? What sorts of things do you and _____get into conflict with each other about? Has there been a key conflict that helped to shape the relationship as it now stands?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

Now we are going to stop for a few minutes and I would ask you to fill out the survey – along with answering the questions please write comments on the questions themselves if you think they could be improved or are problematic in any way.

6. How comfortable are you disclosing information about yourself in your class? When you talk with _____ one on one? Do you do this:

       Often     Regularly     Sometimes      Rarely

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

7.  How do you establish the ground rules for behavior in your classes?  How do you
    balance the need to honestly assess student performance with the need to be
    encouraging and supportive. Give me an example of how you would explain ~~the~~ your
    rules to me if I were a student entering your class in the middle of a semester.

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

8.  When you think of how _____ gets along with other teachers – where do you
    put yourself in this mix?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

9.  What do you feel are your most important attributes in terms of connecting with
    students?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

10. What do you feel are your biggest challenges in this area?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

11. If you were to publish a handbook for students on how you  develop connections
    with them and what they could do to help with this process from their end– what
    would you say?  If you were able to individualize this handbook for each student
    what would you include specifically for _____?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

12. What kind of connection have you established with _____'s family?

Body Language
Tone of Voice
Facial Expression
Speech

**End of Teacher Interview #2**

Thanks again for participating in this - First I would like to know if you have any reactions to the questions – were there any you didn't understand? felt uncomfortable with? Could see a way of improving?  Anything obvious left out?

**Appendix F**

**TEACHER SURVEY**

(Note: some of these questions involve some subtle observations, so if you don't have a sense of the answer, please just write cj (can't judge).

In general in your contacts with _____, do you find that

1.  You often call on _____ in class?

    **Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

    | Comments: |
    |---|

2.  When you are talking with one another you both make eye contact?

    **Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

    | Comments: |
    |---|

3.  They ask questions in class?

    **Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

    | Comments: |
    |---|

4.  They look you in the eye during class?

    **Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

    | Comments: |
    |---|

5.  How frequently do you interrupt him/her when s/he is talking?

    **Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

    | Comments: |
    |---|

6.  When you are listening to _____, you stand or sit _(circle answer)_ to him/her?

**Very Close (1 – 1/2 ft) Fairly close (2-3 ft) Somewhat close (3-4ft) Distant (more than 4 ft.)**

7.  You talk with one another after or before class?

**Daily      More Than Once a week      More Than Once a month      Almost Never**

| Comments: |
|---|

8.  Who does most of the talking?

**Student        Mostly Student/Some Me        Equal        Mostly Me/Some StudentMe**

| Comments: |
|---|

9.  You smile at him/her?

**Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

| Comments: |
|---|

10.  They interrupt you when you are talking?

**Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

| Comments: |
|---|

11. When you want to help _____ with something academically you tend to move closer to him/her?

**Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

| Comments: |
|---|

12. When _____ is listening to you, s/he stands or sits _(circle answer)_ to you?

**Very Close (1 – 1/2 ft) Fairly close (2-3 ft) Somewhat close (3-4ft) Distant (more than 4 ft.)**

13. Does _____ nod his/her head, or say "uh huh" when you are talking with them?

**Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

Comments:

14. Who initiates talking outside of class?

**Student    Mostly Student/Some Me      Equal      Mostly Me/Some Student      Me**

Comments:

15.  You offer to comfort _____ when s/he is upset?

**Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

Comments:

16. How frequently do you laugh together?
**Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

Comments:

17. Do you nod your head, or say "uh huh" when you are talking with them?
**Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

Comments:

18. _____ smiles at you.

**Always      Often      Sometimes      Seldom      Never**

Comments:

19. _____ gets into conflicts with you how often?

**Every Class        Twice a Week        Once a Month   Infrequently   Never**

Comments:

20. Most of the conflicts you and _____ get into are initiated by:

**Student    Mostly Student/Some Me        Equal    Mostly Me/Some Student        Me**

Comments:

21. Most of the conflicts you and _____ get into are:

**Small Resolved       Small Unresolved   Large Resolved Eventually        Large Unresolved**

Comments:

**End of survey**.  Thanks for taking the time and thought to do this.  Your comments and reactions are welcome!

Comments:

**Appendix G**

**CONNECTIONS SURVEY STUDENTS**

**Old version:**

**Connections Survey Students**

Instructions:  Please circle the name(s) of teachers you usually work well with. Put a line through the names of any teachers you do not currently have teaching you , or advising you, or for some other regular activity.

Teacher One                    Teacher Two              Teacher Three

Teacher Four                   Teacher Five

Please return this to Emanuel (the old guy with white hair from Orono)

Thank you

**New Version:**

**Connections Survey Students**

Instructions:  Please circle the name(s) of teachers you usually find helpful. Circle the name more than once if this teacher has been particularly helpful to you. Put a star by the names of any teachers **you do not currently** have any classes with.

Teacher One                    Teacher Two              Teacher Three

Teacher Four                   Teacher Five

Please return this to Emanuel (the old guy with white hair from Orono)

Thank you

**Appendix H**

**CONNECTIONS SURVEY TEACHERS**

**Old Version:**

**Connections Survey Teachers**

Instructions:  Please circle the name(s) of students you usually work well with. Put a line through the names of any students you do not currently work with in some capacity (teaching, advising, special projects etc.).

Student One                    Student Two              Student Three

Student Four                   Student Five             Student Six

Please Return this to Me, Emanuel.

Thanks!!!!

**New Version:**

Connections Survey Teachers

Instructions:  Please circle the name(s) of students you are usually able to help. Circle the name more than once if you have an especially helpful connection with this student.  Put a star by the names of any students you do not currently have in a class.

Student One                    Student Two              Student Three

Student Four                   Student Five             Student Six

Please Return this to Me, Emanuel.

Thanks!!!!

**Appendix I**

**VIGNETTES: JULIA AND OPAL**

**Julia and Her Especially-Helpful Teacher (Teacher A)**

**Snapshot One from Observation: Julia in Biology Class**

Julia is in a biology class with her especially-helpful teacher.  Two minutes into the class, she is quick to answer her teacher's question to the class about AIDS.  The subject turns to snake bites and anti-venom treatments and Julia jumps right in again. She tells the story of being bitten by a scorpion.  As the discussion moves on it becomes clear that Julia and the teacher have an ongoing interaction.  They are regularly making eye contact; Julia is happy to answer many of the questions the teacher poses to the group; Julia ends some of the teacher's sentences before she gets to them.  They disagree about whether Julia had a polio shot or not.  When the teacher discusses her own diabetes, and how she might faint if she didn't have the right balance of insulin and sugar in her body, Julia volunteers that if that happened she would give her teacher mouth to mouth resuscitation.  The teacher comments, "That's sweet," and the class continues.

After class Julia hangs around and the teacher notes, "You've been so prompt lately," in a pleased tone of voice.  Julia responds but I don't catch what she says. Julia and the teacher are obviously enjoying their interactions with each other.  Julia seems interested in the subject matter and brings her own experience to bear.  They are able to negotiate a difference of opinion deftly, and can express and accept a level of care and connection to each other within the context of their classroom exchanges.

**Background to the Relationship**

Julia has been at the River City School for almost two years and has worked with her especially-helpful teacher the entire span of her stay. Although she is not a traditional ELL student, her Caribbean accent is so strong that in the beginning of their connection her teacher misunderstood her and misattributed what she was saying as negative. Julia kept her distance from the teacher.

Julia remembers this clearly:

At first she didn't know what I was saying because of my accent. I would say something and she would be like, "Are you cursing??" And I would say, "No I've been giving you the answer," and she would say, "I hear something different." We didn't have a relationship it was just do this do that. (SVN T1, p.10)

Although their relationship improved over time, growing up speaking a culturally idiomatic form of English has powerful ramifications for her writing. Her written language is full of grammatical and spelling errors, according to formal English. This poses a major challenge for both her teacher and Julia because English is one of the two classes they take together, the other being Biology. Biology offers fewer difficulties as grammar and syntax play a much smaller role in the work a student is expected to produce.

The two could not be more different temperamentally. While her teacher is self-contained, wry, and serious—a proto-typical New Englander—, Julia is boisterous, loud, and enthusiastic. Given some of the immediate challenges of language and personal style, they did not establish rapport immediately, in the way Fred and his teacher did. As Julia notes, "She was not very open to me. I just went to her class because I had to" (SVN T1, p. 10).

Over time Julia came to appreciate her teacher's "ways" and her style. She notes:

> This year it's different. I really know her more. I learned her ways already and I do my work….She has a sense of humor that I love. It's a dry British sense of humor. She helped me a lot in my English for class. (SVN T1, p. 10)

Julia's sense of her teacher being "not open" to her transforms in their second year to a mutual opening up as she describes:

> I would come in and say, "[especially-helpful teacher] I had a bad weekend." And I would just run it down to her and she would say, "Just do this and do this." And she'd give me advice even so much that she would come in [and] tell me something that happened with her grandkids. Last year she would never tell me and this year she [would] come in and she [would] tell me what was going on. (SVN T1, p. 11)

From Julia's perspective she and Teacher A have transformed their connection from not-helpful to especially-helpful through their mutual better understanding, increased openness and greater appreciation of each other.


## How Much Has Been Learned?

Against the backdrop of this reciprocally opening relationship, Julia and her teacher can set about the challenging task of editing a paper of hers. Here is Julia giving an example of how this worked for them:

> She help[ed] me edit a paper. I would say I'm about to give up and she said no because [you must] finish your papers since you [will] never fail if you finish. And she reminds me of all the negative things that will happen if I fail. And we worked on this paper for a whole other week and and finally I was making progress. And the paper was really really good and she edited [it]. And I was saying, "What did you edit it again for?" and she still found some errors. (SVN T1, p. 13)

Julia sees her teacher as committed to her success and willing to work hard with her to help her achieve it.

Her teacher provides the following as evidence of Julia's growth academically and her engagement:

> One thing about her is that she's interested. She's interested in biology class, she's interested in Cyrano, she's interested in grammar....She's better at taking help...she likes to do things quickly and it's hard for me to make her slow down. She accepts help much better….She more used to blow it off I think; now she is more likely to go back and re-examine what she's done. (tcb T2, p. 11)

Teacher A is speaking directly here to Julia's engagement in the work at hand, progress in mastering study skills, her receptiveness to accepting help when needed, as well as her evident interest in the content.

> When Teacher A shows me Julia's portfolio of work she comments:

> I've only had Julia for a couple of years Julia is random. This is her portfolio [arranged] done out [of] the order of what [in which] she did them. Some are from junior English class. She has the idea but she is still really rough…This is the last letter that she did [pointing to Julia's spelling]: Syran de Bergeraca.

Teacher A continues:

> She had to interview someone in the vernacular…It was difficult to read her paper in the vernacular." [Note: I counted 40 corrections on one page on the more recent work there were 20 corrections a 50% improvement.] Her language is more careful …she did get into it [letter from Bergerac].

> Julia is clear and articulate about how her connection with her teacher has enhanced her academic work: "The connection *helps me to understand*. It's really important, *that one to one piece*" (SVN T2, p. 1). And when asked how this works in a class like biology she replies: "*I'm not scared to ask a question*. It feels open to me. It feels like she says you can ask me a question, feel free and I will give an answer that I want and *we can discuss. I won't be wondering what this teacher is going to be like*" (SVN T2).

Her academic work gains meaning in the context of Julia's plans to continue in school which influenced by her teacher's description of her own experiences. Here she relates how Teacher A is motivating her to complete high school:

> Yes it's [my desire to complete high school has] increased. She [Teacher A] has shared her college story. [It] is an experience that she's had that made me want to do it....She talked about her different jobs and her family and her college experience; places that she visits, places that she lives and I thought to myself I want to do that too! (SVN T2, p. 14)

## **Conclusion: Julia and Her Especially-Helpful Teacher (Teacher A)**

Teacher A deeply enjoys her interactions with Julia and her ability to help her navigate the nuances of academic challenges that are placed before them. This enjoyment is at the heart of her ability to provide Julia with what Rogers would call positive regard. This relationship has a fundamental reciprocity to it: just as Julia gets the help and support she needs to make it through school and succeed academically Teacher A sees the benefits she gets from working with someone like Julia. She notes: "She's so engaging I can't imagine not being able to be pulled in [to] someone [like her]. She has this joie de vivre that is so beautiful" (tcb T1, p. 17) and adds, "I would talk with her like I would talk to another woman I wouldn't talk to many high school kids about kids about going home and making a recipe" (tcb T1, p. 9).

Her training as a counselor is clearly evident when Julia needs an advisor whom she trusts to deal with real-life problems she faces as a single, low-income, teen parent. Here she displays her ability to listen deeply and empathetically to Julia's challenges. as the following example shows. Julia was having a really hard day and came to Teacher A on the verge of tears. She describes her experience:

The other day the day care closed at five. I had to go to a college thing. I had to find somebody to watch Franklin [her son] and I thought this is ridiculous. Teacher A gave me a hug and I screamed. She asked "What's the matter Julia? It's not the college thing it's everything at once coming at once." It really felt better after I talked to Teacher A….It's not the end of the world I learned....She is really comforting. (SVN T1, p. 22)

She also feels deeply known by Teacher A, pointing to the B (closest friend) area in the Lazarus chart when asked how well Teacher A knows her. Julia notes "Teacher A knows me. She knows what I want to do in life. It makes her want to help me to that extent and to encourage me" (SVN T1, p. 2).

The connection feels like a friendship to Teacher A as well as she notes here: "I think the relationship helps a lot because we're friends. I'm still her teacher and she's respectful she's always been respectful to me" (tcb T2, p. 2). The flow between them often results in laughter as she recounts: "I don't know she just makes me laugh. We might disagree [a] little but we laugh sometimes. It's about things that she does. And she says [talks about things like] that because she knows it will make me laugh" (tcb T1, p. 10).

Finally, for Julia, her teacher's congruence is what makes her advice believable when she offers it. When asked what she values about Teacher A's advice Julia points out:

"It feels good because I know her answer will always be something *that she experienced before*" (SVN T1, p. 19)….And it's great because she thinks the same. [Although] This is about something that happened to me. *It seemed like she'd been through it before* and she did give me a right answer." (SVN T1, p. 20)

Julia has deep respect for her teacher as a person and as a teacher. She has experienced considerable success on both the academic and personal level in this teacher's class. In the classroom they interact playfully, regularly disagreeing, but

always working through their disagreements to some kind of positive resolution even if it is just to agree what each of their roles are. As Julia puts it: "And then we discuss and she'll say what she thinks and I will say what I think. And then she'll remind me that she's a teacher and I'll remind her that I am a student" (SVN T1, p. 12).

Most powerfully Julia experiences her teacher as someone who is willing to work hard with her in order to help her succeed.

**Opal and Her Especially-Helpful Teacher (Teacher C)**

**Snapshot One from Observation:  Opal at the End of the Day**

It is the end of the schedule at Rocky Beach and students are in the elective section of the day taking walks, playing basketball, practicing guitar, learning board games, and planting the "peace circle," a large sandy circle surrounded by wood. Teacher C and an intern are transplanting flowers into the circle and watering them in. Opal walks up and asks Teacher C something. They stand about 15 feet apart. Opal is asking to leave school for the day.

Teacher C asks Opal what her favorite part of the day was. This is the "checkout process" that all students are supposed to be doing that day before leaving. Opal thinks about it. She's turned a little bit at an angle to her teacher, and seems impatient to go. She's not looking happy. She's not looking terribly sad either but she seems a little detached and down to me. Opal says she liked the slideshow that happened in the morning. Her teacher says okay and Opal heads off towards the buses waiting in the parking lot to take students home.

Shortly afterwards, Teacher C and I talk about Opal and how much she has to offer.  Her teacher is obviously a little frustrated and a little concerned about how to help Opal reach her potential.  She notes that what she sees in Opal and what Opal sees in Opal are quite disparate at this point.

**Snapshot Two from Observation:  Opal at the Beginning of the Day**

My second observation is taken at morning meeting.  Shortly before all the students arrive and sit down in the great circle of chairs that house morning meeting, Opal comes into the room, and walks straight to the opposite wall.  She is inspecting the incubator, carefully looking at the eggs that she and her teacher are trying to hatch.  Her movement is purposeful, her attention focused.

**Background to the Relationship**

Opal has been at Rocky Beach School for three years.  This is her first year in their new location.  Her especially-helpful teacher has also been teaching at Rocky Beach for two years.  Prior to that she worked for three years with elementary and pre-school-age kids.  She notes that this term she is the only female teacher on staff.  She is surprised that Opal did not choose a staff member with whom she was more familiar as they have only been working together for approximately seven months.  Neither Opal nor her teacher comment about a significant initial connection as other dyads have, but they do discuss some of the successes along the way.

Teacher C discusses how she experiences working with Opal and some of the fruits of their collaboration:

It's very easy to work with Opal, she's very open. She's very honest. She's quiet and shy but she's very intelligent and has high interest in almost everything that you could talk to her about….She asks pointed questions; she is always respectful; she is one of our model students….We made pajama bottoms together. She's the only person who has started and completed pajama bottoms beginning to end and she was very easy with me. I was attempting to do a pattern that had something different in it…And I kept screwing it up and we fixed it and it worked out well. She was very patient with me and now what's nice is that she works independently with the sewing machine. She just completed [sewing] a dog bed independently.

Her teacher cites another example of engagement on Opal's part. As part of her science class Teacher C wanted to raise Brine Shrimp, and Opal had done this before. The students started asking Teacher C questions she didn't know the answers to and Opal responded as the teacher recounts:

Opal would speak up and would say, "…well when I did this…," that's where it [our relationship] started. I would ask her questions, "When you did this what worked out for you?" and she would tell me."

For her part Opal recalls being nervous to ask questions for the first few days in this teacher's class. Her view of Teacher C was positive as she explains: "She seemed very upbeat and into her job. I think that's a good thing: a teacher who likes being a teacher; it makes it easier on both the student and the teacher." As the year has progressed Opal clarifies how her level of comfort with her teacher has risen: "I always feel pretty comfortable in her class and I always feel that I can go to her if I have any questions" (SJO T2, p. 1).

**How Much Learning Has Happened?**

Opal is equivocal about whether her relationship with Teacher C has enhanced how much she has learned in her class versus other not especially-helpful teachers. In fact at one point she clearly states when asked whether she learns more in her especially-

helpful teacher's class than with a teacher whom she rated as helpful: "Well I think I probably learn *about the same amount* but it's probably more fun and more relaxed in Teacher C's class" (SJO T2, p. 7). She goes on to say that she already had the desire to complete school so Teacher C hasn't added to that, but does agree that Teacher C has helped her gain skills that will help her finish school, quickly pointing out that: "In each [of Teacher C's] class[es] we pick a project and we research that project whatever that project is so…[a long pause]…I do pick up the information on whatever subject that I am studying." When Opal is allowed to pursue her interests within a subject area she experiences progress.

Teacher C's assessment of Opal's work is passionate and positive. Along with completing pajama bottoms and dog beds, Opal has engaged with academic pursuits as Teacher C recounts:

> She also took my estuaries class and she's really done wonderful[ly]. Her journal is by far the best. We had some conversations about scientific journalism and how it happens and how primarily most of it is sketching. It's trying to explain pictorially or with a diagram what you're seeing or what conclusions that you're coming to….She loves to draw [and] we found a rock and it had a barnacle on it. I said, "Opal, watch this." I put it into a cup and we watched the barnacle coming out and sweeping. She drew this detailed diagram of the barnacle and the actual appendage coming out. It was unbelievable.

### Conclusion: Opal and Her Especially-Helpful Teacher (Teacher C)

Opal and her especially helpful teacher have found a way through Opal's tendency to get overwhelmed and withdraw. They have connected around a mutual interest in animals as well as the teacher's recognition of Opal's highly developed artistic capacities, which have led them directly into a variety of projects in science and handcrafts.

Along with a strong connection through mutual interests, Opal recognizes her teacher for two of Roger's three facilitative traits. In Opal's eyes her especially-helpful teacher's strongest relational quality is her empathy. She feels like Teacher C really knows what she needs to help her get through the rough patches in her learning process. She describes an incident early in her interview when her teacher pulls her aside when she is feeling overwhelmed: "Yeah she'll tell me not to stress, and that we'll do this when class starts" (SJO T1, p. 15)….And later in the interview she adds: "When I'm not feeling good I can hear in the tone of her voice that she is more compassionate or soft spoken maybe" (SJO T2, p. 4).

In terms of feeling accepted Opal reasons that she feels accepted by her teacher because: "I don't feel like she's trying to change me into anybody else" (SJO T2, p. 3). Her level of comfort in the classroom also speaks to this level of acceptance as well as there being no indication in the interview that she felt negative judgment coming from this teacher.

Opal has a mixed opinion of her teacher's congruence. On the one hand she does not feel that Teacher C expresses or acknowledges her anger in class because:

> I don't think she comes right out with it [expressing her anger]. You know she doesn't want to put any negative energy into anything, I don't think. So it's more like you just have to observe it yourself.

But then she notes that her teacher is quite open in terms of personal disclosure:

> She and I talk about things outside of school, about family or what we like to do, just things you normally wouldn't talk to a teacher about maybe….I think she probably talks about it [her family] more than me. (SJO T3, p. 6)

The relationship is a new one, and awkward interchanges like the one starting this section are not infrequent. Nevertheless teacher and student value their connection and the work that has resulted from it—from pajama bottoms to natural history journals. In

her quiet thoughtful way Opal has discerned the importance of her level of "comfort" in

this teacher's class, but is not sure that this means she learns any more than she does in

classes where she is somewhat less comfortable.

**Appendix J**

**CONSENT FORMS**

**<u>Student Assent Form</u>**

Dear

I am inviting you to participate in a research study I am doing for my doctoral program. I have received your parent's permission for you to participate but would also like your agreement to take part as well.

I am a graduate student at the University of Maine, Orono, in the Department of Education who wants to find out more from students what they feel makes teachers helpful or not helpful, and how a helpful connection with a teacher affects what students learn.

From 1973 to 2006 I started and co-directed the Community School in Camden– a high school for students who have not succeeded in traditional schools. Working to make education better for these students and others like them has been my life work. This study will be a learning experience for me and will, I hope lead to better things for teachers and students in our educational system.

First, by the time you read this I will have given a brief explanation of the study to all students and teachers in your program. The introduction included some examples of the questions I will be asking you. I gave you a form and asked all students in the program to pick out teachers that they work well with, and all the teachers to pick out students they feel they work well with.

Second, I am asking four (three primary & one alternate) students to participate in the study. You have been one of those chosen to participate and if you are interested we will have three 45-minute interviews that I will tape record and transcribe to help me remember what you said. The interviews will be done during school and in a location that you are comfortable with and where others cannot overhear responses. I will also observe two of your classes, and be around for some non-class times during school to get a better idea of how you and your teachers work together. I will be taking notes on what I see and trying to stay out of the way as much as possible!

Third I will interview and survey two of your teachers, one whom you circled once or more than once, and one whom you didn't circle. I will be asking them general questions about teaching and specific questions about how the teacher feels s/he and you work together. I will ask the teachers to fill out a survey that asks questions about how they interact with you such as: Do you interrupt one another? How often? Who usually begins a conversation? I will also be asking each teacher interviewed to show me evidence of your academic progress such as a portfolio of your work- this could include samples of writing, artwork, photography, videos you have made, etc.- grades, and test scores – whatever the teacher feels would demonstrate the progress you have made.

Some sample questions I may ask one of the teachers when I interview him/her are:

- What is it you most value about teaching?
- Can you describe a time when you listened carefully to something important __(your student)_____had to say?

- What do you remember it being like when you first had him/her in class? What is it like now? How has your relationship with _____ developed since you first met him/her?

### *Risks and Benefits*

On the risk side of things you may not be comfortable with some of the questions and will always have the choice to leave them unanswered; you also may be concerned that some of what you say will get back to your teachers. I will work very hard as I note below to make sure that nothing that I write identifies you in any way or is available to anyone.

On the benefit side of things you might enjoy thinking about some of these questions and may learn something new about yourself. Perhaps one of these days what I find out will help more students enjoy school and achieve their diplomas. If that happens, perhaps life in school will be more positive for your own children!

### *Confidentiality*

To protect your confidentiality I will:

- Not put your name on any document;

- Give you a code name to protect your identity;

- Keep all information from the study at my home in a locked file cabinet;

- Only my advisor, Gordon Donaldson, will have access to my files – however he too will only know who you or your teachers are by your code names;

- Once I have completed my write up of the study any key to codes used for people's names will be destroyed;

- Once I have completed my write up of the study any key to codes used for people's names will be destroyed by December 2009;

If safety issues arise in the course of the interviews and/or observations, such as a report of inappropriate behavior that compromises the social, emotional or physical well being either for the student or teacher, I will report these immediately to the program director.

### *Your Participation is Voluntary!*

It is completely your choice whether to participate in these interviews or not. You will not have to answer any question you choose not to, and can stop the interview at any time without creating a problem for anyone in any way. If you are uncomfortable in any way please talk with _____, and we'll try to correct what is bothering you.                                   (Program director)

### *Contact Information*

If you have any further questions about this study, please contact me at 861-4004, 10 Pleasantdale Avenue, Waterville, or by email at emanuel@gwi.net.

If you have any questions about your rights as an interviewee, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Subjects Review Board at 207-581-1498 or email at: Gayle_Anderson@umit.maine.edu.

My instructor, Dr. Gordon Donaldson, Professor in the College of Education at the University of Maine, is supervising my work in this graduate course. If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Donaldson at 207-581-2450 or by email: Gordon.Donaldson@umit.maine.edu.

UMaine Institutional Review Board approved for use through January 19, 2010.

**<u>Student Informed Consent Form</u>**

Dear

I am inviting you to participate in a research study I am doing for my doctoral program.

I am a graduate student at the University of Maine, Orono, in the Department of Education who wants to find out more from students what they feel makes teachers helpful or not helpful, and how a helpful connection with a teacher affects what students learn.

From 1973 to 2006 I started and co-directed the Community School in Camden– a high school for students who have not succeeded in traditional schools. Working to make education better for these students and others like them has been my life work. This study will be a learning experience for me and will, I hope lead to better things for teachers and students in our educational system.

### *What Will You Be Asked To Do?*

I will hand you a sheet of paper with their teacher's names on it and ask you to circle any teacher you find particularly helpful two or more times, teachers you finds helpful circle once, and leave the others not circled.

Second:  I will hand all the teachers a list of all the students' names on it, and ask them to circle the students they feel they are particularly helpful to two or more times, those they are helpful to once, and those they don't feel they are helping leave not circled.

All sheets will be returned to me and kept completely confidential.

Third, I will ask four students (three primary & one alternate) to participate in the study. We will have three 45-minute interviews that I will digitally tape record and

transcribe to help me remember what you said. The interviews will be held during the school day and in a   location that you are comfortable with and where others cannot overhear responses. These interviews will include general questions about school, and specific ones about the two teachers – one who you circled as being particularly helpful or helpful, and one who was not circled.

Some sample questions I may ask when we interview are:

- What does _(your teacher)_____ do to make you feel comfortable in class? To learn what s/he is teaching?

- Generally speaking, how are you feeling, thinking and acting when you are learning the best?  Could you describe a day when you were really learning a lot?

- Can you describe something specific that __(your teacher)__helped you to learn and describe how s/he helped you to learn it?  In what ways do you feel you have made the most progress in __(your teacher)__'s class?

Fourth I will interview two of your teachers, one whom you circled once or more than once, and one whom you didn't circle. I will be asking them general questions about teaching and specific questions about how they feel they work with you. I will also be asking your teacher to show me evidence of your academic progress such as a portfolio of your work- this could include samples of writing, artwork, photography, videos they have made, etc.- grades, and test scores – whatever the teacher feels would demonstrate the progress you have made.

Some sample questions I may ask teachers when I interview him/her are:

- What is it you most value about teaching?

- Can you describe a time when you listened carefully to something important
  __(your name)_____had to say?

- What do you remember it being like when you first had him/her in class?  What is
  it like now? How has your relationship with _(your name)_____ developed since
  you first met him/her?

Fifth, I will observe two of your classes, and be around for some non-class times during school to get a better idea of how you and your teachers work together. I will be trying to get a sense of how you and your teacher interact with each other – do you listen to one another? Do you interrupt each other? Do you laugh together? I will be taking notes on what I see and trying to stay out of the way as much as possible!

### *Risks and Benefits*

On the risk side of things you may not be comfortable with some of the questions and will always have the choice to leave them unanswered; you also may be concerned that some of what you say will get back to your teachers. I will work very hard as I note below to make sure that nothing that I write identifies you in any way or is available to anyone.

On the benefit side of things you might enjoy thinking about some of these questions and may learn something new about yourself. Perhaps one of these days what I find out will help more students enjoy school and achieve their diplomas. If that happens, perhaps life in school will be more positive for your own children!

### *Confidentiality*

To protect your confidentiality I will:

- Not put your name on any document;

- Give you a code name to protect your identity;

- Keep all information from the study at my home in a locked file cabinet;

- Only my advisor, Gordon Donaldson, will have access to my files – however he too will only know who you or your teachers are by your code names;

- Once I have completed my write up of the study any key to codes used for people's names will be destroyed;

- Once I have completed my write up of the study any key to codes used for people's names will be destroyed by December 2009;

*If safety issues arise in the course of the interviews and/or observations, such as a report of inappropriate behavior that compromises the social, emotional or physical well being either for you or your teacher, I will report these immediately to the program director.*

### *Your Participation is Voluntary!*

It is completely your choice whether to participate in these interviews or not. You will not have to answer any question you choose not to, and can stop the interview at any time without creating a problem for anyone in any way. If you are uncomfortable in any way please talk with _____, and we'll try to correct what is bothering you.                                     (Program director)

### *Contact Information*

If you have any further questions about this study, please contact me at 861-4004, 10 Pleasantdale Avenue, Waterville, or by email at emanuel@gwi.net. If you have any

questions about your rights as an interviewee, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant

to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Subjects Review Board at 207-581-

1498 or email at: Gayle_Anderson@umit.maine.edu.

My instructor, Dr. Gordon Donaldson, Professor in the College of Education at

the University of Maine, is supervising my work in this graduate course. If you have any

questions, please contact Dr. Donaldson at 207-581-2450 or by email:

Gordon.Donaldson@umit.maine.edu.

***If you want to participate please sign below and <u>return this form to the director</u>***

***<u>of program (Pam)</u>.***

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the above

information and that you are 18 years old or older.  You will receive a copy of this form.


I, _____, agree to be in this study and give my

      (Print your name here)

permission for my two teachers to be interviewed about how helpful (or not) they feel

they have been in teaching me.

_____        _____

(Sign your name here)                       Date

UMaine Institutional Review Board approved for use through January 19, 2010.

**Teacher Informed Consent Form**

Dear ,

I am inviting you to participate in a research study I am doing for my doctoral program.

I am a graduate student at the University of Maine, Orono, in the Department of Education who wants to find out more from students what they feel makes teachers helpful or not helpful, and how a helpful connection with a teacher affects what students learn. I'll be inviting you to talk about how you work with some of your students, and I'll be asking them to talk with me about how they work with you

From 1973 to 2006 I started and co-directed the Community School in Camden– a high school for students who have not succeeded in traditional schools. Working to make education better for these students and others like them has been my life work. This study will be a learning experience for me and will, I hope lead to better things for teachers and students in our educational system.

### *What Will You Be Asked To Do?*

Once we have your permission I will follow the process I outline below:

First, I will hand all students a sheet of paper with their teacher's names on it and ask them to circle any teacher they find particularly helpful two or more times, teachers they find helpful circle once, and leave the others not circled.

Second:  I will give you and other participating teachers a list with all the students' names on it, and ask you to circle the students you feel you are particularly helpful to two or more times, those you are helpful to once, and those you don't feel you are helping leave not circled.

All sheets will be returned to me and kept completely confidential.

Third, I will ask four students (three primary & one alternate) to participate in the study. We will have three 45-minute interviews that I will digitally tape record and transcribe to help me remember what s/he said. These interviews will include general questions about school, and specific ones about two teachers – one who the student circled as being particularly helpful or helpful, and one whom they didn't. The interviews will take place during the school day and in a   location the student is comfortable with and where others cannot overhear responses.

Some sample questions I may ask them when I interview them are:

- What does _(your name)_____ do to make you feel comfortable in class? To learn what s/he is teaching?

- Generally speaking, how are you feeling, thinking and acting when you are learning the best?  Could you describe a day when you were really learning a lot?

- Can you describe something specific that __(your teacher)__helped you to learn and describe how s/he helped you to learn it?  In what ways do you feel you have made the most progress in __(your teacher)__'s class?

Second, I am inviting you and at least one other teacher to participate in regards to  _(a particular student)_.  If you are interested, we will have two 45-minute interviews that I will digitally tape record and transcribe to help me remember what you said. I will ask you to fill out a survey that asks questions about how you interact with each other such as:  Do you interrupt one another?  How often? Who usually begins a conversation? I will also observe two your classes, and be around for some non-class times during school to get a better idea of how you and your students interact. I will be taking notes on what I

see and trying to stay out of the way as much as possible!  These interviews will also be during the school day and in a   location you are comfortable with and where others cannot overhear responses.

 Some sample questions I may ask you when we interview are:

- What is it you most value about teaching?

- Can you describe a time when you listened carefully to something important (your student) had to say?

- What do you remember it being like when you first had him/her in class?  What is it like now? How has your relationship with _____ developed since you first met him/her?

### *Risks*

- You might feel your time was not spent well on this study;

- You might be uncomfortable with some of the questions;

- You might be uncomfortable with my observing in the classroom or around school during non-class time.

### *Benefits*

- You might enjoy thinking about some of these questions;

- You might learn something new about yourself as a teacher;

- I may get a better idea of what will help teachers and students work together better, and ultimately help more students finish school, and fewer teachers burnout.

*Confidentiality*

To protect your confidentiality I will:

- Not put your name on any document;

- Give you a code name to protect your identity;

- Keep all information from the study at my home in a locked file cabinet;

- Only my advisor, Gordon Donaldson, will have access to my files – however he too will only know who you or your students are by your code names;

- Once I have completed my write up of the study any key to codes used for people's names will be destroyed by December 2009;

If safety issues arise in the course of the interviews and/or observations, such as a report of inappropriate behavior that compromises the social, emotional or physical well being either for the student or teacher, I will report these immediately to the program director.

*Your Participation is Voluntary!*

Your participation is totally voluntary – you can skip any questions you don't wish to answer, or stop the interview at any time without creating a problem for anyone in any way.  If you are uncomfortable please let me know or talk with

_____, and we'll try to correct what is bothering you.

(Program director)

*Contact Information*

If you have any further questions about this study, please contact me, Emanuel Pariser at 861-4004, 10 Pleasantdale Avenue, Waterville, or by email at

emanuel@gwi.net. If you have any questions about your rights as an interviewee, please contact Gayle Anderson, Assistant to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Subjects Review Board at 207-581-1498 or email at: Gayle_Anderson@umit.maine.edu. My instructor, Dr. Gordon Donaldson, Professor in the College of Education at the University of Maine, is supervising my work in this graduate course. If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Donaldson at 207-581-2450 or by email: Gordon.Donaldson@umit.maine.edu.

***If you want to participate please sign below and <u>return this form to the director of your program</u>.***

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the above information and agree to participating in the study as described, and you are giving permission for me to ask the students participating questions about how they perceive you work with them.  You will receive a copy of this form.


I, _____, agree to be in this study. I also give my

  (Print your name here)

permission for you to interview my student(s) about their perceptions of how helpful (or not) I have been as their teacher.

_____        _____

(Sign your name here)                                              Date

Thank You!

**<u>Student Informed Consent Form</u>**

Dear

I am inviting you to participate in a research study I am doing for my doctoral program.

I am a graduate student at the University of Maine, Orono, in the Department of Education who wants to find out more from students what they feel makes teachers helpful or not helpful, and how a helpful connection with a teacher affects what students learn.

From 1973 to 2006 I started and co-directed the Community School in Camden– a high school for students who have not succeeded in traditional schools. Working to make education better for these students and others like them has been my life work. This study will be a learning experience for me and will, I hope lead to better things for teachers and students in our educational system.

*What Will You Be Asked To Do?*

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- What does _(your teacher)____do to make you feel comfortable in class? To learn what s/he is teaching?

- Generally speaking, how are you feeling, thinking and acting when you are learning the best?  Could you describe a day when you were really learning a lot?

- Can you describe something specific that __(your teacher)__helped you to learn and describe how s/he helped you to learn it?  In what ways do you feel you have made the most progress in __(your teacher)__'s class?

Fourth I will interview two of your teachers, one whom you circled once or more than once, and one whom you didn't circle. I will be asking them general questions about teaching and specific questions about how they feel they work with you. I will also be asking your teacher to show me evidence of your academic progress such as a portfolio of your work- this could include samples of writing, artwork, photography, videos they have made, etc.- grades, and test scores – whatever the teacher feels would demonstrate the progress you have made.

Some sample questions I may ask teachers when I interview him/her are:

- What is it you most value about teaching?

- Can you describe a time when you listened carefully to something important

  __(your name)_____had to say?

- What do you remember it being like when you first had him/her in class? What is

  it like now? How has your relationship with _(your name)____ developed since

  you first met him/her?

Fifth, I will observe two of your classes, and be around for some non-class times during

school to get a better idea of how you and your teachers work together. I will be trying to

get a sense of how you and your teacher interact with each other – do you listen to one

another? Do you interrupt each other? Do you laugh together? I will be taking notes on

what I see and trying to stay out of the way as much as possible!

### *Risks and Benefits*

On the risk side of things you may not be comfortable with some of the questions

and will always have the choice to leave them unanswered; you also may be concerned

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anyone.

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find out will help more students enjoy school and achieve their diplomas. If that happens,

perhaps life in school will be more positive for your own children!

### *Confidentiality*

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permission for my two teachers to be interviewed about how helpful (or not) they feel

they have been in teaching me.



_____      _____

(Sign your name here)                           Date

UMaine Institutional Review Board approved for use through January 19, 2010.

**BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR**

Emanuel Pariser was born in St. Albans, England. He graduated from Woodrow Wilson High School in Washington D.C. and graduated from the University of Chicago in 1972 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophical Psychology. He co-founded and co-directed the Community School in Camden from 1973 to 2006. During this time he founded the Passages program for teen parents, served as president of the Maine Alternative Education Association, co-chair of several state level commissions and task forces, and co-authored the book Changing Lives: Voices From a School That Works (1992). He is currently the educational program developer at the Good Will-Hinckley School. He is a candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education and Psychology from the University of Maine in May 2011.