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The effects of positive student-teacher relationships on students' perceptions of school safety

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The Effects of Positive Student-Teacher Relationships on Students' Perceptions of School Safety

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Abstract

Previous research has resulted in positive information regarding the student-teacher relationship and perceptions of student safety, from the perspective of adults. A number of studies have investigated relationship building and student safety, teacher characteristics, school connectedness, and perceptions of safety. However, previous studies have not included the stories and perceptions from students themselves. This study aims to use interviews conducted with middle school students to inform the perspective of middle school students on their student-teacher relationships and perceptions of school safety. Each participant was asked questions related to their feelings of safety at school, current relationships with teachers, their ideal student-teacher relationship, and how relationships with teachers impact their perception of safety. Data from the individual interviews were analyzed using narrative analysis to give meaning to the participants' stories. Analysis of results examines common themes among participant responses in regard to their feelings of school safety as it relates to their relationships with teachers. Suggestions for future research and implications for school psychologists are included.

Introduction

In the fields of Educational Psychology, School Psychology, and Developmental

Psychology, a common topic of interest and research involves assessing student-teacher

relationships among school-age children and their educators. Much of the research

focuses on outcomes related to academic achievement, positive or improved classroom

behaviors, internalizing behaviors, and externalizing behaviors through channels of

building relationships. Moreover, research focuses on the school connectedness aspect of

building positive relationships between students and their teachers. A great deal of this

research is conducted from the perspective of adult professionals, rarely from the point-

of-view of the students. Education professionals provide valuable insight into the

relationships between students and teachers; however, examining only professional

points-of-view offers limited information and insight. Conversations regarding

relationships ideally consider the points-of-view of both parties.

This begs the question, what do students anticipate in their relationships with

school faculty, teachers, and administrators? How do these relationships, whether mainly

positive or negative, affect a student's view of feeling safe at school? Students should

have a voice in their education and in their relationships with educators. Do they desire a

fun, light-hearted, and joking relationship, or would they prefer someone to turn to in

confidence when they need a serious conversation? Is it possible for a teacher to be both a

confidant and a light-hearted supporter? It would be appropriate to assume that some

students would differ in their opinions of what an ideal student-teacher relationship looks

like. It would also be appropriate to assume not all teachers, administrators, and educators

are able to provide the relationships their students may prefer. Perhaps educators are

already providing the ideal, preferred relationship for our students.

Whether or not teachers are able to provide a student's preferred relationship, it is

beneficial to understand more clearly a student's ideal student-teacher relationship. This

study will explore middle school students' positive student-teacher relationships and how

these relationships effect their perceptions of safety at school.

Literature Review

A review of the current research conducted in the area of student-teacher

relationships highlighted a variety of outcomes and variables, as the research base is vast.

Research has focused on the effect of positive relationships on the externalizing

behaviors of students, internalizing behaviors of students, as well as academic

performance and achievement, and social outcomes for students. Because "learning is

influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with

others," (American Psychological Association, 1997) it is important to know what

aspects of these interactions and relationships with others are desired by students. Most

importantly, what aspects of teacher-student interactions and relationships are desired by

students? While positive student-teacher relationships are often a topic of research for

developmental, educational and school psychologists, minimal research relating positive

student-teacher relationships to a students' feelings of safety in their school environments

has been conducted. Further, minimal research is done by way of asking students how

they perceive their relationships with teachers and how positive student-teacher

relationships and feelings of safety at school are connected. For the context of this study,

student and school safety is defined as the feeling of physical and psychological comfort

of all community members. The construct of student safety will be discussed next.

With school violence being a prominent subject in the media, it is important to

ascertain that all students feel safe going to school every day. Due to the media coverage

of violent events in schools it is probable that most middle school students are aware of

the recent increase in school tragedies that has occurred in their lifetime. For the purposes

of this study, school safety refers to the physical safety of students and school staff "from

violence, theft, and exposure to weapons and threats, in order to establish a secure

learning environment" (National Center for Safe and Supportive Learning

Environments).

Relationship Building and Student Safety

Compassionate teaching, as discussed by Jennings (2019) is central in the trauma-

sensitive classroom. Jennings noted three key characteristics of compassionate teaching:

building supportive relationships between teachers and students; creating safe and caring

learning environments; and building upon strengths to support the development of self-

regulation. The importance of teacher support is critical in teachers' relationships with

students. Specifically, the students' perception that their teachers are sensitive to their

needs, the willingness of a student to turn to their teacher for help, and the relatedness a

student feels with their teacher are important in building a lasting relationship between

teachers and students (Jennings, 2019). In order to create and maintain a safe and caring

learning environment, safety must come first. At the forefront of this work is the idea that

"students learn best when they feel protected and connected" (Jennings, 2019, p. 68). In

order to establish safe and caring learning environments, teachers must set clear

expectations, value cultural differences, be consistent with routines and procedures, and

offer options for students with a lack of control in their lives (Jennings, 2019). This is not

the work of one individual. Safe and caring learning environments should be school-wide

and with all adults in a school building, beginning with classroom teachers.

Tillery and her colleagues (2013) discuss the importance of positive adult

connections for adolescents' sense of belonging at school. Positive adult connections can

act as protective factors for at-risk youth, and research has shown that positive student-

teacher relationships may be more important for older students (middle and high school

students) than for elementary school students (Tillery et al., 2013). These researchers

aimed to inform school-based practitioners of the significance of adolescents' connection

with adults in supporting a sense of school belonging. They discuss adult connections in

three frames: self-determination theory, social capital, and student-teacher attachment.

Tillery and her colleagues (2013) discuss student-teacher attachment and the

quality of relationships between students and their teachers, as Baker et al. (2003) did, as

providing the foundation for the students' social interactions that could affect their

perceptions of the school as a psychologically healthy environment. Initiatives such as

smaller learning communities, school development programs, and positive behavior

interventions and supports (PBIS) can facilitate school belonging and adult connections.

Also, Tillery et al. (2013) found that the collaborative decision making and interesting

instructional strategies that use hands-on learning foster stronger relationships between

students and school faculty and staff and strengthen feelings of belonging. When students

are interested in what they are learning and work directly with their teachers throughout

lessons, stronger relationships are built.

Cook et al. (2018) evaluated how professional development and the use of follow-

up supports for teachers increase the use of relationship-focused strategies to improve

relationships with students and students' behavior in the classroom. Using the EMR

method, in which relationships are Established, Maintained, and Restored, these

researchers describe the phases of each relationship where first the teachers put forth

intentional efforts to establish relationships with their students. Teachers then maintain

their relationships with ongoing positive interactions with each of their students. Efforts

must be put forth to maintain these relationships and avoid deterioration over time. Cook

et al. (2018) describe the final restore phase as occurring when harm to the student-

teacher relationship has taken place due to misunderstanding, conflict, or a negative

interaction. Cook et al. (2018) provided training and follow-up support to staff members

working within the schools and used the Establish-Maintain-Restore Approach as an

intervention. The researchers found support for the Establish-Maintain-Restore method in

cultivating teacher-student relationships and students' classroom behavior. This method

is valuable as some students and teachers alike may have difficulty with the maintaining

relationships aspect of building relationships. Keeping relationships strong and stable is

vital for teacher-student relationships.

Teacher Characteristics

In addition to the process of building strong relationships, teacher characteristics

are a fundamental aspect of teacher-student relationships. Knoell et al. (2015) conducted

exploratory research regarding the characteristics of teachers that draw students to them.

Knoell and his colleagues' intent was to find out "what teacher behaviors influence fifth-

grade students' perceptions of desirable teacher characteristics?" (2015, p. 39). Knoell

and his team based their research from an idea proposed by McCombs and Whisler

"learning occurs best in an environment that contains positive interpersonal relationships

and interactions in which the learner feels appreciated, acknowledged, respected, and

admired." (1997, p.10). Knoell and his colleagues recruited fifth-grade students from two

rural elementary schools with contrasting populations. One population was considered

impoverished while the other was considered affluent. All participants completed the

Teacher-Student section of the *ClassMaps Survey* (CMS; Doll, 2010) and were

subsequently interviewed regarding their responses. The *ClassMaps* Survey is a measure

created to assess students' perspectives of classroom environments with the hopes to use

the measure to create classwide interventions (Doll, 2010). Doll and her colleagues found

that the *ClassMaps* Survey is a promising measure used to gauge students' perspectives

of their classroom environments. *ClassMaps* will be discussed briefly prior to Knoell

findings.

Doll and her colleagues (2010) described teacher-student relationships as

asymmetrical because there is power held by the teachers in all teacher-student

relationships. Because of this power differential, students may be hesitant to engage in

closer knit relationships with teachers because they feel the authority from their teachers,

whether purposeful or as an aspect inherent to the environment. The 'My Teacher'

subscale on the CMS was designed to assess these relationships. Questions on the survey

included items such as: "My teacher listens carefully to me when I talk," "My teacher

makes it fun to be in this class," and "My teacher respects me." (Doll, 2010; Doll, 2014). The questions in the 'My Teacher' subscale seemingly avoid reference to the power teachers have in all teacher-student relationships. By placing less emphasis on the power differential, students are able to focus on their feelings in class, and accurately assess the environment.

Following the semi-structured interviews based on the *ClassMaps Survey*, the transcription was analyzed for recurring themes. Knoell and his colleagues (2015) found six common themes of teachers' behaviors explicitly stated by the students: consistent help (with high expectations), sense of humor, making learning fun, active listening, providing a sense of community, and encouragement. Researchers then inferred that a focus on character is important. Knoell et al. implied that their work can be used as a roadmap for teachers to develop positive relationships with students. The characteristics described by the research team are relevant to diverse learners as they purposefully gathered a diverse sample.

As discussed in Doll et al. (2010), teachers can improve relationships with students by displaying warmth, modeling fair behavior, being open and honest, encouraging and empowering student independence, and using humor appropriately. Some students may adhere to or be drawn to one or more of these aspects of enhancing relationships, while other students are drawn to different teacher attributes. For instance, some students are drawn to warm and caring teachers, while others are drawn to empowered and empowering teachers, and even more students may be drawn to teachers who make learning fun and funny.

For students who have experienced trauma, it is important for educators to take action to build supportive relationships with those students and assist them in building positive relationships with other adults (Jennings, 2019). Jennings states that the positive social and emotional support from teachers plays an important role in healing from trauma. It falls on teachers to provide a safe, warm, and predictable learning environment comprised of people who care for and respect them.

School Connectedness

Some of the research regarding relationship building ties back to school connectedness. School connectedness is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as the belief held by students that their educators and their classmates care about their learning as well as about their individual well-being (2009). Whether or not students perceive their relationships at school, with adults and peers, to be positive or negative effects their well-being and functioning in the classroom. Students who feel an overall disconnect in their schools attribute this to poor student-teacher relationships and diminished feelings of relatedness at school (Suldo, 2016). When students feel a sense of community in their schools and in their classrooms, they are more likely to feel safe in their surroundings. Safe communities and safe relationships encompass physical safety and emotional safety and well-being. Positive student-teacher relationships and strong school connectedness are important for all youth and in particular for marginalized youth. Teachers can help to create this sense of community and increase student satisfaction as well as academic engagement.

Murray and Malmgren (2005) worked to enhance teacher-student relationships in one high-poverty urban high school. The researchers reported that students with a greater sense of connectedness to their parents and schools showed greater gains in achievement as compared to a group of students with weaker perceptions of connectedness at school. Murray and Malmgren (2005) found that the effects of a teacher-student relationship program showed a positive effect for grade point averages, but no effect on students' social and emotional adjustment based on the measures used.

Perceptions of Safety

Williams and her colleagues (2018) examined students' perceptions of school avoidance and school safety, or lack thereof. Researchers utilized a school-wide survey to better understand school climate and the experiences of the student body. Measures included data regarding bullying, school environment, and student mental health. Students' perceptions of physical safety at school as well as where they felt most unsafe in their school buildings were reported. The number of missed days of school because of feeling unsafe either in school or traveling to or from school was calculated. Williams et al. (2018) employed The Colorado Trust Student Survey to assess students' perceptions of cohesiveness of the student body and faculty cohesiveness. Further, the researchers examined the disciplinary structure of the school for the consistency of application, communication, and transparency of rules. Finally, the researchers discussed the physical structure of the school, whether students view the school structure as positive or negative and their sense of belonging. The research team conducted a five-stage regression analysis to predict students' perceptions of school safety, looking at 1) gender and race of the participant, 2) frequency of bullying victimization, 3) student relationships and

climate, teacher relationships and climate, and adherence to school rules, 4) positive and

negative perceptions of the school environment as predictors, and 5) student sense of

belongingness. Another five-stage regression analysis was used to predict students'

school avoidance with the same five stages. Williams et al. (2018) reported that in their

sample, one quarter of the students described some degree of feeling unsafe in their

school. Further, the researchers found that perceptions of school safety increased when

positive student-teacher relations were reported, and when students trust teachers,

perceptions of safety and belongingness increased. Thus, it is vital for students to feel

safe at school. Trust in their teachers and positive student-teacher relationships increased

perceptions of school safety,

Côté-Lussier and Fitzpatrick (2016) examined whether feeling unsafe at school

had effects on students' classroom engagement and whether or not this is mediated by

aggressive behavior problems and symptoms of depression. Teachers reported which

students listened attentively, followed directions, finished their work on time, worked

independently, and put in effort. Further, teachers were asked to report the extent they

agreed that students feel unsafe, staff feels unsafe, physical zones of the school that

students and staff avoid, whether staff are willing to intervene in violent situations, and

whether students are easily bullied. To assess feelings of safety at school, Côté-Lussier

and Fitzpatrick had their student participants report the extent they agreed with the

statement "I feel safe at my school" on a scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

To assess victimization, student participants reported how often they had been called

names or had mean things said to them, how often they had been purposefully ostracized

from a group, how often another youth pushed, hit, or kicked them, how often a

classmate said mean things about them to another student, and how often a classmate has

mocked or laughed at them. Students were also asked to report symptoms of depression,

while their teachers reported any incidences of physical aggression on the part of the

students. Results of this study indicate that youth are more engaged in their classrooms

when they feel safe at school and those students who felt safer showed less depressive

symptoms than those who felt less safe at school.

While both of the research studies mentioned above included students'

perspective via surveys and questionnaires it seems important to learn more by hearing

the personal stories of students as proposed in this study to learn about both physical and

emotional safety and connections to relationships with teachers.

Hypotheses

The current study explored middle school students' positive student-teacher

relationships and how these relationships effect their perceptions of school safety. Based

on a review of the literature, this research aimed to answer the following questions:

Research Questions

What are students' perceptions of safety in middle school?

> Hypothesis: Students' perceptions of safety in middle school depend largely on
>
> threats of physical violence.

What relationships do middle school students report with their classroom teachers?

> Hypothesis: Middle school students report varying relationships with teachers.

How do middle school students perceive their ideal student-teacher relationship?

> Hypothesis: Middle school students' ideal student-teacher relationship is pleasant
>
> and friendly.

How do students connect safety to student-teacher relationships?

Hypothesis: When relationships are positive, students will identify feeling safer

than when relationships are negative.

Methodology

Participants

   Nine middle school students in grades 6 through 8 were recruited to participate in

the current study. Four participants completed interviews. Two participants identified as

female and two participants identified as male. At the time of the interviews, two of the

participants were enrolled in seventh grade and two of the participants were enrolled in

sixth grade. Permission forms were distributed to parents and assent was gained from the

students. Participants were recruited through an extracurricular activity with no ties to

their educational institution. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning a code to each

student recruited instead of the use of their name.

Procedure

   Parents of middle school aged swimmers were sent a recruitment email from the

head coach of the swim team. The recruitment email can be found in Appendix D of this

document. All participants were students in the same county in Pennsylvania. Interviews

were conducted outside of school hours in a private study room at the Public Library.

   Following consent from the parents, and prior to beginning interviews, child

assent was obtained through an initial greeting and explanation of the current study. The

consent and assent forms can be found in Appendix B and Appendix C of this document,

respectively. Once parent or guardian consent and participant assent was obtained for

each participant, the researcher conducted a personal interview with each of the

participants, gathering stories with as much detail as possible.

   In order to encourage participants to be vulnerable and honest during the

interview, the researcher prefaced each interview with a statement regarding the purpose

of the interview and the request for participants of middle school age. By placing value

on the participants thoughts and experiences, the researcher built rapport and established

a foundation for each interview. This pre-interview statement included acknowledgement

of the various relationships middle school students may or may not have fostered at

school. By normalizing the fact that some middle school students do not have positive

relationships with teachers, the researcher aimed for a more transparent interview.

Acknowledging the truth that not all students have fostered positive relationships, the

participants would, hopefully, feel more inclined to share their true experiences however

negative they could be.

Following the pre-interview statement, the researcher started each interview by

asking each participant what grade they are enrolled in, how long they have attended their

school, and how they identify their gender. The researcher then asked each participant to

rate how safe they feel at school on a scale from one to ten. Each participant was asked to

justify why they chose that number and then explain what at their school makes them feel

safe and unsafe. The following interview questions were organized into three sections:

discussion of their ideal or perfect teacher, discussion of their current favorite teacher,

and discussion of their current least favorite teacher. The participants were asked to

picture their ideal or perfect teacher and describe them. While picturing their ideal

teacher, the participants were asked how this teacher would treat their students, how they

would make their students feel, and what their personality is like.

The interview then transitioned to a discussion of the participants' favorite

teacher. Prior to this discussion, the researcher acknowledged that each participant may

like or dislike all of their teachers, but they most likely have a favorite and a least

favorite. Again, it was important to validate the participants' feelings and experiences.

The participants were then asked how their favorite teacher treats them and their

classmates, what they like about this treatment, what they dislike about their treatment,

how their favorite teacher makes them feel, and what their personality is like. The same

questions were then asked in regard to the participants' least favorite teacher.

Each interview concluded with the following questions; What would you like

your teachers to know about what you need from a relationship with them? Earlier we

talked about how safe you feel at school and you chose a number; how could a teacher

change this number to help you feel safer? By ending with these questions, each

participant had the opportunity to partake in self-examination and self-reflection.

Materials

The researcher utilized an independently drafted interview with each of the

participants. The researcher asked the participants questions about their relationships with

the teachers at their school, how their teachers make them feel at school, and whether or

not they feel safe at school. Participants were asked how they feel with their favorite

teacher. The researcher also asked students if they feel safe in their schools, and how they

would prefer to have relationships with teachers. The list of interview questions can be

found in Appendix A of this document. By gaining stories, the researcher hopes to give

voice to students and allow them to express their concerns and their triumphs in their

student-teacher relationships and how their relationships effect their feelings of safety in

the classroom and in the school building. The interviews were recorded via audio

recording device which only the researcher had access to. Recordings were then

transcribed verbatim and deleted from the recording device promptly.

Analysis Plan

　　To further analyze the results from this qualitative study of middle school students in Southeastern Pennsylvania, the researcher conducted a narrative analysis of the stories provided by each of the participants. The researcher listened to the recorded interviews and transcribed them verbatim. By utilizing a narrative analysis, the researcher considered the potential of the students' stories to give meaning to their student-teacher relationships and allows the participants to evaluate themselves (Leech, 2008). From the qualitative data gathered, responses were coded and the researcher determined themes and common responses. Main points are summarized. The themes and common responses are in relation to positive relationships with teachers and the participants' ideas of an ideal student-teacher relationship. Whether or not students feel they have positive relationships with teachers during narrative discussions was analyzed. In doing so, the researcher aimed to find common ground to share with educational institutions regarding the relationships students desire with faculty. Ideally, the researcher can provide school buildings with strategies for building and maintaining these student-teacher relationships based on these results.

Results

In order to analyze the responses from each participant, the researcher conducted a narrative analysis of the research. With a small sample size (N = 4), the researcher is able to invoke meaning from responses. The following is an in-depth description and analysis of the participants' responses to each question.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how safe do you feel at school?

Of the four participants interviewed, three responded to this scaled question with a 10, the fourth participant noted that they felt between an eight and nine. Each participant was asked to describe why they chose their number, the responses ranged from feeling secure at school to knowing that their teachers have experience with all circumstances. Each of the participants attends school in a suburban location with no previous, recent violent acts reported.

What at your school makes you feel safe?

In response to this question, two participant responses referred to the people at their schools and the area in which they live. One participant's response indicated that everything at their school makes them feel safe. The outlying response to this question referred to the architecture of the school building itself. The design of the school in which not all classrooms have windows makes the participant feel safe.

What at your school makes you feel unsafe?

When asked to describe what, if anything, at their school makes them feel unsafe, one participant noted that there are sometimes cops walking around their school which "kind of makes me suspicious." Another participant did not report feeling unsafe at school explaining, "no one seems like they would be a threat to anyone here." Two

students responded in a similar fashion, reporting that other students make them feel

unsafe at school. One participant stated "other students that are like, odd" while another

participant told the researcher "there are questionable kids." When asked to provide

further detail regarding the students in question, the participant responded saying "I'm

worried [they] will maybe do something not the brightest that can harm me or other

students." The participant clarified that they do not feel as though they are in immediate

danger or that the students they referred to are an immediate danger.

The Ideal Teacher

Three of four participants described their ideal or perfect teacher as having a

quality of kindness with an understanding of learning styles and experience teaching. One

participant elaborated further stating that the more a teacher enjoys their subject, the more

they will like them and learn from them. The outlying participant discussed a need for

teachers to understand the difficulties of the subject they teach. They also noted their

ideal teacher would have a sense of humor.

How do they treat their students?

All four of the participants reported their ideal teacher would treat their students

with respect. Three participants used the word respect and elaborated with statements

such as "respect for [their students] and their opinions and ideas" and "they treat them

with the respect of the adults." One participant reported "if they treat us with respect then

others would hopefully treat them with respect back." Finally, the last participant noted

that their ideal teacher is never mean and "listen to what their [students] are saying."

How do they make you feel?

Two participants stated that the ideal middle school teacher allows their students to be themselves in the classroom. Middle school is a time when adolescents are coming into their own and they need a place "where they shouldn't be afraid to speak their mind." Other participants noted the idea that the perfect teacher would make their students feel happy about going to school and having fun while learning.

What is their personality like?

Three of the four participants were able to answer this question, two of whom stated that the perfect teacher would be fun and nice. Another participant noted that their ideal teacher would be "very chill and calm, not very uptight."

Favorite Teacher

Three of four participants noted that their favorite teachers are open to their students' opinions and engage with them.

How do they treat you and your classmates?

Two participants noted that their favorite teachers value their students' opinions. One participant stated that their favorite teacher "always lets us have 'free think.'" The second participant reported that their favorite teacher is "outgoing and nice to everyone." Another participant noted that their favorite teacher is very open to their students' opinions. The final participant stated that their favorite teacher is "very upfront with [their students]" and treats them with respect.

What do you like about how they treat their students?

Of the four participants, three noted they like how their favorite teacher stays engaged with them. The first participant noted "she always asks how everyone is." The next participant said "they talk to [their students] and stay engaged. My favorite teacher

talks to me a lot and pays attention." While the next participant told the researcher "She

listens to [her students]." The one outlying response to this question came from the final

participant who noted that their favorite teacher "doesn't baby us."

What do you dislike about how they treat their students?

Two students reported disliking nothing about their favorite teacher, one went on

to discuss more of their positive attributes, the other simply stated "honestly, she's really

nice." One participant noted "nothing, she doesn't play clear favorites" when discussing

what they dislike about their favorite teacher. Another student noted that their favorite

teacher "gives a lot of homework." In addition, this student informed the researcher that

although they were discussing their favorite teacher, she taught their least favorite class.

The final participant reported that their favorite teacher may become upset "because [his

students] haven't been treating him with the respect he gives us."

How do they make you feel?

When asked how their favorite teacher makes them feel, two participant responses

involved their favorite teachers respect their students' individuality. One participant

responded stating their favorite teacher makes them feel "like I can feel any way I want

about her class or what we're learning about." Another participant response was similar,

stating that their favorite teacher makes their students feel like they "can be their self."

The remaining participant responses indicated that their favorite teachers make their

students feel excited for class and learning.

What is their personality like?

To conclude each discussion of the participants' favorite teachers, the researcher

asked each to describe their favorite teacher's personality. Three participants reported a

teacher who is "always happy, kind of bubbly and excited," a teacher who is "nice," and

a teacher who is "really happy." The one outlying participant report that their favorite

teacher is "calm and chill."

Least Favorite Teacher

       Two participants reported that their least favorite teacher treats everyone the same

in negative ways. This revelation emerged from two participant responses to three of the

five questions discussed below: How do they treat you and your classmates? What do you

dislike about how they treat their students? How do they make you feel?

How do they treat you and your classmates?

       The first participant began their response by stating "she'll get kind of mad at us

easily, but we do have a lot of people that misbehave. She gets upset with the whole

class." Two other participants reported that their teachers ignore their students or

overload them with work. Another participant reported that some of their classmates talk

a lot which makes the teacher's job more difficult.

What do you like about how they treat their students?

       Overall, the participants were able to describe what they like about their least

favorite teachers. One participant responded saying "Every once in a while, we'll do a

game. She's fine. She's nice." The next participant noted that their favorite teacher is

open, explaining to the researcher that "she lets everyone think what they want." Another

participant noted that their least favorite teacher "can be nice and outgoing, but…" and

they trailed off in their answer. Opposing two other participants, the final participant

reported that their least favorite teacher does not have a temper and attributed this to their

studious class. In the next section, two participants discuss their least favorite teacher

becoming upset as the reason for what they dislike about how their least favorite teacher

treats their students.

What do you dislike about how they treat their students?

One participant reported that their least favorite teacher "gets mad easily."

Another participant shared a similar sentiment, reporting that their favorite teacher "yells

at the whole class when its one or two people. Her annoyance can spread to everyone."

This participant continued by sharing their least favorite teacher "…can yell a bit.

Sometimes it's a bit unfair when she yells to quiet down or pay attention when we were."

The remaining two participants discussed a dislike for how much their least

favorite teacher engages with their students and the amount of work assigned by their

teacher.

How do they make you feel?

Overall, each of the four participants had similar responses and views regarding

how their least favorite teachers make them feel. One participant explained that although

their teacher gets mad easily, "I don't think the anger is like directed toward me

specifically. She treats everyone the same even if it's negative." Another participant

simply stated their least favorite teacher makes them feel unhappy. The next participant

told the researcher that they are "never super excited to go to [least favorite teacher's]

class." The final participant noted that while the teacher they were discussing is a nice

person, they "just wouldn't see her as a teacher."

What is their personality like?

Of the four participants, each had a unique response to the interview question

stated above. Two of whom contradicted each other. One participant stated, "I guess

understanding." While the another stated, "I don't think she's very understanding."

Another participant questioned whether their teacher is purposefully mean, elaborating to

say, "she's better to talk to one-on-one than the whole class." The final participant

reported that their teacher "can be funny sometimes but not like all too often. She usually

just wants you to start learning. She's straight to the point."

Student-Teacher Relationship

To begin concluding each interview, the researcher asked each participant "What

would you like your teachers to know about what you need from a relationship with

them?" The first participant would tell their teachers that "everyone has their own

opinion and no one should judge them for that." The next participant would like their

teachers to "be engaged and get to know me." Another participant reported they "want to

learn stuff but it's always fun to interact with them a bit more." Finally, the last

participant stated a preference that their teachers "are open with me. That they don't try

to sugar coat things to make it sound better."

How could a teacher change your number to help you feel safer?

The final question of the interview required each participant to reflect on the

number they provided at the start of the interview and explain what their teachers could

do to make them feel safer at school. One participant explained their teachers could

"make people more comfortable by talking to them and not just teaching. Talking to them

about how everything is going." Another participant reiterated this saying "I think having

a better relationship with them would [make them feel safer]. Like if I build a better

relationship and knew more about them and stuff then I'd probably feel a lot safer." Two

outlying responses related to emergency drills during the school day and encouraging

empathy among all students. One participant expressed teachers providing reassurance

that "everything is going to be okay" during the drills would make them feel safer. The

other participant stated teachers could "teach the students not to provoke the students that

can…that can do harm to us."

Discussion

Summary of Findings

This study's findings revealed three overarching themes in each of the main areas: The Ideal Teacher, Favorite Teacher, and Least Favorite Teacher. The first theme indicates that middle school students' ideal teacher offers a quality of kindness with an understanding of learning styles and experience teaching. The outlying participant in this area discussed an appreciation for teachers to have a sense of humor, which can be interpreted as a quality of kindness. This finding is similar to previous research of Knoell and colleagues (2015) who found six common themes of teacher characteristics, sense of humor being one of them. Knoell also reported the characteristic of active listening as a common theme reported by their participants. This can be compared to the current research as all four participants expressed respect from teachers as an important quality for them.

In addition to a quality of kindness and respect, participants of the current study value classrooms that allow for self-disclosure from both teachers and students. Students want to know about their teachers lives and interests and they want teachers to know about them. Similar to Williams and colleagues (2018), responses to the final question of the current interviews indicate that positive student-teacher relationships could aid in students feeling safer at school. Two students expressed that having a more reciprocal relationship with teachers would make them feel safer at school. This implies a desire for teachers to self-disclose about their lives and interests, to an appropriate extent.

Further, participants in the current study expressed a respect for teachers who value their students' opinions and engage with them. In their 2010 study, Doll et al. reported that teachers can improve relationships with students by encouraging and empowering student independence, among other attributes. When teachers value their students' opinions, they strengthen a students' ability to advocate for themselves across settings. Providing students a place to express themselves without fear of rejection or ridicule boosts a child's regard of the adults around them and nurtures the positive relationship between students and their teachers.

Two participants in the current study discussed the behavior of their least favorite teacher in similar ways. Both participants reported that their least favorite teacher becomes mad easily. One student noted that their least favorite teacher becomes upset with the whole class when a fraction of the students misbehaves. The participant went on to state that the teacher becomes mad easily and treats everyone the same, in negative ways. Another participant reported that their least favorite teacher is strict and yells at the whole class when only a couple of students are misbehaving. These responses indicate that personality and overall mood do not go unnoticed by students. Further information regarding negative ways students are treated emerged when one participant mentioned that one of their teachers does not play "clear favorites" which allows us to make the assumption that students notice and dislike when teachers do play clear favorites.

Further insight regarding how a teacher could make their students feel safer came from a participant who reported their classmates make them feel unsafe. This interview concluded with a conversation in encouraging empathy. The participant noted that teachers could teach other students not to provoke their peers that may do harm to them.

Teachers' ability to encourage empathy against the relational aggression some students face can have a positive impact on students. By modeling positive regard for all students and encouraging students to accept their peers by showing empathy, teachers have the ability to increase student perceptions of school safety.

Implications for School Psychologists

School psychologists hold the unique position of support for both school faculty and the student population. School psychologists are able to serve as models in their schools for positive interactions with students in regard to kindness, humor, empathy, and self-regulation skills. As participants reported valuing kind adults with a sense of humor, psychologists are able to fulfill that predilection in their own relationships with students. Further, the current research indicates that middle school students prefer empathetic teachers. This again is an attribute that school psychologists can model with their students. Finally, participants noted feeling uncomfortable when teachers overreact or become mad easily. The teachers discussed as students' Least Favorite Teacher are more likely to generalize their anger or annoyance to the entire class. This signals the notion that school psychologists can model self-regulation for faculty and students at their schools.

In addition to their unique opportunity to model behavior in their school buildings, school psychologists also have the opportunity to have private and confidential conversations with students about their classroom relationships. Most school psychologists conduct interviews with their students prior to assessment or evaluation sessions and may find it beneficial to explore the classroom relationships, whether

positive or negative, that their students are experiencing. School psychologists are then in

a position to work with teachers and students to improve these relationships at a systems

level.

The current study also leads school psychologists to encourage safe and

responsive classrooms in their schools. This can be encouraged through individual

consultation with teachers or whole-faculty discussions at school-wide or county-wide

meetings. School psychologists should serve as a supportive professional in schools as

they promote the building of positive student-teacher relationships with each of their

students and school faculty.

Limitations

Although rich information was obtained from these participants, there are

limitations of this current study. The first is the small sample size. Participants were

recruited using convenience sampling. Ideally, the researcher would have been able to

use a heterogeneous random sample of participants. In addition, the researcher was

unable to complete all interviews with recruited participants, as nine participants were

recruited and only four were interviewed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related

closures and social distancing guidelines. This event resulted in a smaller N than

originally anticipated.

As previously stated, under ideal circumstances, the researcher would have

preferred to have a heterogeneous random sample of participants. This limitation is due to

the apparent lack of diversity of the sample used. All participants of the current study

shared similar racial and ethnic background. In addition, all participants attend similar,

primarily suburban, middle schools. Further, each of the participants' involvement in

organized sports may have affected their responses due to increases in their sense of

belonging. As Knoell and colleagues (2015) found, a sense of community and belonging

has a positive impact on student-teacher relationships. This sense of belonging increases

feelings of safety at school. As each of the participants are involved in athletics within

their community their overall sense of belonging likely has an impact on how they

approach relationships at school.

Suggestions for Future Research

As recommendations and suggestions for future researchers, it would be

beneficial to aim for increased heterogeneity in participants. The current sample of

participants were homogeneous in race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. All

participants attend middle school in a largely suburban area and all participants are

involved in community-based athletics. The researcher would recommend random

sampling to the extent possible.

In situations where heterogeneity is not plausible, it may be beneficial to conduct

this research with different homogenous groups. For instance, conducting this research

with participants from a rural school setting or an urban school setting would further

inform the positive effects of positive student-teacher relationships on student perceptions

of school safety. More research could be conducted with participant groups of different

races or ethnicities – for instance, with a group of Black participants or Latinx

participants. In their research, Parker et al. (2020) investigated self-determination skill

expression with Black students and reported that how teachers respond to students

mattered, the researchers continued, explaining how students felt more at ease when

teachers had positive attitudes. Parker's research references and provides valuable insight

of Black students' perceptions of teacher support, however additional research could be

conducted with Black participants to target the investigation into student-teacher

relationships. Research conducted using different racial and ethnic groups could then be

compared across groups to determine whether there is an effect of culture on positive

student-teacher relationships and student perceptions of school safety.

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APPENDIX A.

Interview Questions

"I am in training to become a school psychologist in a program at James Madison
University. Topics of interest to me include school safety and student-teacher
relationships, so I have decided to complete my research project in regard to these topics.
As a middle school student, you have a unique perspective that I would like to learn more
about. While some individuals have difficulty connecting with their teachers and
educators, others have no problem forming relationships with adults at school. Today I
am going to ask you about how you feel going to school and how you feel about the
relationships you have or have not fostered at school."

1. What grade are you in? How long have you been a student at your middle school?

2. Gender:

    ___ male ___ female ___ non-binary

3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how safe do you feel at school? Tell me why you chose that
   number…

    a. What at your school makes you feel safe?

    b. What at your school makes you feel unsafe?

4. Picture your ideal or perfect teacher, tell me about them.

    a. How do they treat their students?

    b. How do they make you feel?

    c. What is their personality like?

5. How many current teachers do you have? _____

6. While you may like or dislike all of your teachers, you probably have a favorite

    and a least favorite. Let's start with your favorite:

    a. How do they treat you and your classmates?

    b. What do you like about how they treat their students?

    c. What do you dislike about how they treat their students?

    d. How do they make you feel?

    e. What is their personality like?

7. Now, let's talk about your least favorite:

    a. How do they treat you and your classmates?

    b. What do you like about how they treat their students?

    c. What do you dislike about how they treat their students?

    d. How do they make you feel?

    e. What is their personality like?

8. What would you like your teachers to know about what you need from a

    relationship with them?

9. Earlier we talked about how safe you feel at school and you chose a (number),

    how could a teacher change this number to help you feel safer?

APPENDIX B.

Parent Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research

Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study
Your child is being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Victoria Bunting from
James Madison University. The purpose of this study is to interview students in order to gain
information about how they perceive school safety and positive student-teacher relationships.
This study will contribute to the researcher's completion of her educational specialist thesis.

Research Procedures
Should you agree to your child's participation in this research study, you will be asked to sign this
consent form. This study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual
participants in West Chester, PA. Students will be asked to provide answers to a series of
questions related to their relationships with teachers at their school and their views of school
safety. Responses will be audio taped in order to ensure accurate collection of data.

Time Required
Participation in this study will require approximately one (1) hour of your child's time.

Risks
The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your child's involvement in this
study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

Benefits
There are no direct benefits to the participants in this study however the data collected may
benefit the field of school psychology and lead to future research studies or programs which are
better tailored to perceptions of school safety and student-teacher relationships.

Confidentiality
The results of this research will be presented at the James Madison University graduate
psychology symposium and may also be presented at a conference at a future date. There is a
possibility that the results of this study will be included in a written publication. The results of
this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the
final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data.
If at any point throughout the study the student discloses that he/she or someone they know is in
danger, the proper avenues will be taken to alert parents and school officials. While individual
responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or
generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location
accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up
individual respondents with their answers including audio recordings will be destroyed.

There is one exception to confidentiality we need to make you aware of. In certain research
studies, it is our ethical responsibility to report situations of child abuse, child neglect, or
any life-threatening situation to appropriate authorities. However, we are not seeking this
type of information in our study nor will you be asked questions about these issues.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your child's participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to allow your child to participate. Should you choose to have your child participate, he/she may withdraw their participation at any time without consequence.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or concerns during the time of their participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of a one page summary of this study, please contact:

Victoria Bunting   Tammy Gilligan
Department of Graduate Psychology   Department of Graduate Psychology
James Madison University   James Madison University
buntinvh@dukes.jmu.edu   Telephone: (540)-568-6564
                                            gilligtd@jmu.edu

If you choose to request a one page summary of the results of this study, the summary will be available following the successful defense of the thesis. Defense will take place in June 2020.

Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject
Dr. Taimi Castle
Chair, Institutional Review Board
James Madison University
(540) 568-5929
castletl@jmu.edu

Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form and understand what is being requested of my child as a participant in this study. I freely consent to my child's participation. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

☐   I give my consent for my child to be audio taped during the interview. _____ (initials)

_____
Name of Participant (printed)

_____
Name of Parent/Guardian (printed)

_____   _____
Signature of Parent/Guardian   Date

_____   _____
Name of Researcher (signed)   Date

APPENDIX C.

Participant Assent Form

Assent to Participate in Research

I am completing a research study about how students perceive school safety and positive student-teacher relationships. A research study is a way to learn more about people. If you decide you want to be a part of this study, you will be asked to complete an in-person interview and respond to a survey related to your relationships with teachers at your school and your views of school safety.

There are some things in this study you should know. Participation in this study will require approximately one (1) hour of your time. Responses to interview questions will be audio taped in order to ensure accurate collection of data. No more than minimal risks are expected from your involvement in this study.

If at any point throughout the study you tell me that you or someone you know is in danger, I will need to alert your parents and school officials in order to keep yourself and your classmates safe.

When I am finished with this study, I will write a report about what was learned. This report will not include your name or that you were in the study.

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. If you decide to stop after we begin, that is okay too. Your parents know about the study too. You are encouraged to discuss your participation in the study with your parents before you decide whether or not you would like to participate.

If you decide you want to be in this study, please sign your name.

I, _____, want to be in this research study.

☐   By checking this box, I agree to be audio taped during the interview. _____ (initials)

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____
Name of Researcher (signed)   Date

APPENDIX D.

Recruitment Email

February 2020

[Redacted] Parents,

One of our coaches, Victoria Bunting, is completing her Educational Specialist degree in School Psychology from James Madison University. In order to complete her course requirements, she is required to complete a thesis project.

Her thesis project is entitled: *The Effects of Positive Student-Teacher Relationships on Students' Perceptions of School Safety.* She is in need of some volunteers of middle school age to participate in interviews about their perceptions of their relationships with their teachers.

If you are willing to have your child participate in this study, or know anyone that may be interested in participating that is not affiliated with [Redacted], please contact Victoria Bunting by phone or email.

Telephone: (484) 798-7275

Email: buntinvh@dukes.jmu.edu

Thank you,