

2021

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### Recommended Citation

Hinchcliff, E., & Newberry, M. A. (2021). Teacher Perceptions of Student Developmental Needs: It's all Emotional. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 46(9). Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol46/iss9/4>

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## Teacher Perceptions of Student Developmental Needs: It's all Emotional

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*Abstract: Previous research has suggested that emotional and social developmental domains configure most prominently for adolescents in the classroom. In this qualitative study, we first aimed to explore teachers' perspectives of students' needs, then to explore the ways that teachers came to understand those needs, and how that understanding informed their practice of attending to student needs in the classroom. Findings suggest that teachers, also, are more attuned to the emotional domain, interpreting all needs displayed by students through an emotional lens. Additionally, teachers used emotion as an entry point to connect with students and sought to support student development through attending to personal relationships, creating safe learning spaces, and showing care for students. Teachers' sources of emotional awareness varied through personal histories and experiences in the profession. Implications for teacher preparation programs are discussed, including the need for greater focus to prepare teachers for the emotion needs of their students.*

### Introduction

For students to thrive, environments should support their development. In school, that means providing students with secure, healthy, and age-appropriate classrooms in which to explore, learn, and grow (Yu et al., 2018). They perform best academically when classrooms meet their cultural, developmental, and physiological needs (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Additionally, as students advance through the transition years, they are faced with many emotional, social, and cognitive challenges through which they need to be supported and assisted. Teachers are in a position where they can be a support to their students, and to do so they must make judgments about what needs are present in their adolescent classrooms and how best to attend to those needs (Eccles et al., 1993; McDevitt & Ormrod, 2010). Previous research has determined that adolescent students have preferences for teachers who attend to the social and emotional developmental domains, leading to better relationships between teachers students (J-F et al, 2018). However, little is known about how teachers cater to the development of their students in terms of the social and emotional developmental domains.

This paper begins by first establishing what is known regarding the developmental domains of adolescence and outlining what research has established regarding those developmental affects for educational settings. We then discuss teacher beliefs and their effects on classroom environments. After outlining the method for data gathering and analysis, we share

the results of this exploration and discuss implications for students and teachers. We end with recommendations for schools and teacher preparation programs.

### **Adolescent Development in Schools**

Research classifies developmental needs as pertaining to social, physical, emotional, and cognitive domains. Many suggest that teachers should incorporate developmentally appropriate practices into their classrooms as a means to best help their students become engaged and academically successful (Daniels & Schumow, 2003; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Reyes et al., 2012). When teachers are able to provide supportive environments, gains are seen in student engagement and academic performance (Jennings & Greenburg, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Yu et al., 2018), motivation to learn (Eccles & Roeser, 2011), and students' social skills (J-F et al., 2018). To establish environments that are supportive of the varied developmental needs that accompany changes during adolescence, teachers must acknowledge the whole child during this transitional time.

In regards to the physical domain, changes for adolescents include growing pains, uncomfortable changes to the body, and unprecedented hormonal influences (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2010) leading to challenges in the classroom, for both student and teacher. During these adolescent years, it is recommended that adolescents engage in physical activity for at least 60 minutes per day (US Department of Human Health Services, 2018), which increases levels of body awareness. Today's students are less active as more of the school day is dedicated to uninterrupted study, leading to a more sedentary day. The lack of opportunity to move and have dedicated time for physical activity is leading to more health concerns for adolescents that were traditionally only seen in adults (Hall et al, 2011; Morton et al., 2015). Students need to have physical release throughout the day for their health, and even possibly, to improve cognitive functioning and processing (Council on School Health, 2013).

Cognitively during adolescence, students are developing the ability to think abstractly and critically (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2010). In order to aid growth, teachers should hold students to high expectations and challenge their cognitive abilities (McHugh et al., 2013; Steinberg, 2020). When students are not appropriately challenged, grades drop and engagement declines (Eccles et al., 1993). Students need teachers to both challenge and support them as they grow academically by appropriately scaffolding their instruction and support.

Socially, belonging is a universal need in all humans (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Belonging needs are coupled with relationship satisfaction; the feeling of not belonging has more of a negative effect on overall well-being than the positive effect of being included (Verhagen et al, 2018). More than a sense of belonging, which is often promoted as connection to school or some other group dynamic, the need to belong is only fulfilled through interpersonal relations (Chhuon & Wallace, 2012) and therefore the need to belong to a group is not as important as the quality of the relationships therein (Steinberg, 2020; Verhagen et al, 2018). The extent to which students feel connected to their peers is related to the success they find during the transition years (Reyes et al., 2012). The need to belong in adolescents is even more fulfilled by teachers who help the student "feel known" (Chhuon & Wallace, 2012, pg. 46).

Related to the social, in the domain of emotional development students need to feel that they are cared about by their teachers, both in regard to their personal, non-academic interests (McHugh et al., 2013; Yu et al., 2018), as well as in their learning (Jennings & Greenburg,

2009). Emotional connection is reinforced when teachers are warm and supportive in their interactions with their students (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000; Jennings & Greenburg, 2009), which sends a message to the student that the teacher values and cares about them as individuals (Hallinan, 2008; Yu et al., 2018). When teachers are sensitive to the emotional needs of their students, gains are found both academically and socially (Jennings & Greenburg, 2009).

Overall, given what we know about the developing adolescent and the benefits of attending to each domain, it would appear important that teachers are able to consider such development in the context of their teaching. Much of the research on adolescent development identifies the primary needs as being in the social and emotional domains (Björklund & Ahlskog-Björkman, 2018; Fischer, 2007; Hargreaves, 2000; J-F et al., 2018; Jennings & Greenburg, 2009; Steinberg, 2020). In order to understand how teachers identified, interpreted and attended to the needs students express in the classroom we specifically asked 1) how do teachers perceive the needs of students, and 2) in what ways are the understanding of those needs acquired? Additionally, once perceived, in what ways do teachers attend to those needs in the classroom?

### **Teacher Beliefs and Decision-Making**

The seminal work by Frank Pajares (1992) demonstrated that all individuals operate under belief systems that both define and help us make sense of our world. The belief systems under which teachers operate supply the lens through which they process information and consequently choose curriculum and management actions in the classroom (Ermer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). Beliefs include perceptions of self and others in regard to ability, support, traits, etc., which can at times be at odds with practices (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017). In addition to belief systems, teachers draw upon their emotional knowledge to inform their pedagogy (Zembylas, 2007). Teachers' knowledge consists of more than evidential learning and understanding, but also of 'tacit as well as explicit perceptions and understandings that drive the ways [they] act in the world—including awareness of not only content but interpersonal relationship and ways to "read" situations' (Schoenfeld, 2020, p. 359). Teachers make judgments based on both implicit and explicit knowledge.

The professional judgments made by teachers are influenced by context; not just knowing, but sensing, consideration of timing, and former experience all combine to dictate choice (Frelin, 2014), influencing all the learning that takes place in a classroom (Dogan et al, 2020). Biesta and colleagues (2015) argue that teachers tend to focus narrowly on the here and now, letting their beliefs formed in the past influence their actions within a limited view of what it means to teach within the confines of current policy rather than considering the broader application and influence of education. This may explain why, at times, teachers might approach students and enact practices that are based on deficit beliefs (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017), even when their best intent is to do otherwise. Teacher preparation programs do not spend much time dedicated to help pre-service teachers develop or reflect on their decision-making outside of curriculum building. However, teacher judgments matter as they can influence not just the academic environment but also student self-perception. Yet within the profession of teaching there are few opportunities for such discourse and analytic reflection (Artelt, 2016; Biesta et al., 2015), which may prevent teachers from improving and refining their ability to recognize and attend to the needs presented in the classrooms. Where previous research ends with the identification of students' perceptions of teachers ability to attend to preferred developmental

domains (see J-F et al, 2018), this study extends that work by exploring what preferred teachers do that might lead to socially accommodating and emotionally positive interactions. First, we will explore teachers' perspectives of students' needs, then we will explore the ways that teachers came to understand those needs, and how that understanding informed their practice in attending to student needs in the classroom.

## **Methods**

The findings presented here are part of a larger study that used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Given that this study extends the work of J-F et al (2018) which was carried out in Australia, we first replicated that study, gathering preliminary student data in which students' positive comments of their teachers were coded according to developmental domains. This was done primarily to verify the preferences for developmental domains rather than assuming that students in the US context would have identical preferences for teacher traits. The results corresponded to the previous study in that the students' responses fell predominantly in the social and emotional domains, indicating that students have affinity for teachers who provide socially and emotionally enriching environments and relationships.

As an extension of that work, we present here only the qualitative data of the teachers' reactions, which was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Both teacher-student relationships (TSRs) and the developmental needs of early adolescents were major conceptual components of this study, with TSRs being viewed as a medium through which student needs are being met. The intersection between positive TSRs and adolescent developmental needs provided the framework for this study and was the lens through which all information was viewed and analyzed.

## **Context**

This study took place in a public charter school, located in a middle class SES neighborhood in the Intermountain West of the United States. This school was chosen by convenience sampling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), for it is the school where the first author currently teaches. Enrollment for the 2018-2019 school year for grades 6-8 (ages 11-14) was a total of 403 students. Average class size in the middle school is 25 students, with each middle school teacher teaching between three and four classes per day using the A/B block schedule. Ethnic diversity of the student body in these grades was 51.6% White; 40.4% Latino/a; 2.9% Asian; 3.9% mixed ethnicities, and 0.7% American Indian, with 41% of students participating in a free or reduced lunch program. Public records show that the demographic distribution at this school is comparable to that of neighboring schools in its area.

## **Participants**

Since the focus of this study was teachers of young adolescents, only teachers of grades 6-8 were considered for participation. Teacher recruitment was determined by student nominations for 'teacher of the month' that the school conducted monthly. During the five-month collection period, all 38 middle school teachers received at least one nomination for

teacher of the month. Of these 38 teachers, the six most frequently nominated teachers were selected to be interviewed.

Students are more prone to like teachers who are attuned to their needs (Yu et al., 2018). Therefore, we assumed that the most frequently nominated teachers would be those who provided relationships or classroom experiences that were attentive to and affirmative towards students’ needs, assuming that these key individuals would “have more knowledge... or different perspectives than other members of the defined population” (Gall et al., 2003, p. 237). In this study, the six teachers who served as key informants varied in experience and content area (see Table 1), yet each had in some way connected with or helped students with what they needed.

**Procedures**

The school solicits nominations for a ‘teacher of the month,’ which all students complete. The nomination forms include the name of the nominated teacher as well as the student’s rationale for the nomination. Five months’ worth of student nominations were collected from the school and tallied, after which the top six nominations were invited to participate in interviews. Prior to interviews, the student comments from nomination forms were organized by teacher and compiled into word clouds using a free online word cloud generator.

Interviews began with structured questions about what teachers believed their students needed developmentally. The teachers were then shown their corresponding word cloud and were directed to share their perceptions. They were specifically asked to include examples from their teaching experiences and interactions with students that may have caused students to make those comments. The word clouds remained on display throughout the interviews and were referenced throughout as teachers often chose words from the word cloud and shared their interpretation of what the students may have meant.

Pseudonym	Sex	Ethnicity	Years Taught	Grade(s) Taught	Age Range	Subject
<i>Amy</i>	F	W	3	7	40-50	Language Arts
<i>Brenda</i>	F	W	20	7	50-60	Language Arts
<i>Coleen</i>	F	W	2	7-8	20-30	Home Economics
<i>Jack</i>	M	W	7	8	20-30	Math
<i>Lori</i>	F	W	12	6	60-70	Science
<i>Sandy</i>	F	W	3	7-8	20-30	Science

**Table 1: Demographic Information of Teachers Interviewed**

**Data Analysis**

Analysis began with a priori coding using the developmental domains (physical, social, emotional and cognitive) of the transcribed interviews. A second pass through the data focused

on teachers' perceptions of adolescent developmental need. Themes in perceptions were noted as they emerged and were categorized by teacher. A third pass through the data identified teachers' attempts to address developmental needs in their practice.

Cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was then used to identify common themes and beliefs and practices that were shared among teachers regarding each of the four domains. A master list of themes from all sets of data was created (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), each theme included had been identified by at least two of the teachers. In cases where multiple teachers spoke of an overlap between two of the domains, notes were made to indicate a connection between the two. Representative quotes relating to the themes that emerged were then identified and selected to demonstrate the beliefs of the collective group.

## **Findings**

Although there are four domains generally described as developmental needs (cognitive, social, physical and emotional), research has shown that students express the highest need in the social domain. Interestingly, while teachers in this study acknowledged needs of each domain, their perception of the needs were interpreted through an emotional lens. The teachers' personal history was very influential in their attunement toward the emotional and was relevant to how they came to identify and understand the needs of adolescents in their classrooms. In turn, the teachers tended to use emotions as an entry point to support the cognitive and social needs of their students when creating the learning environment or building relationships with students.

### **Emotional Lens**

Findings from the interviews suggest that teachers first identified emotions that related to each domain. The teachers nearly always connected student needs back to a perceived underlying emotional element that accompanied the needs, such as support, belonging, or care. All of the developmental needs mentioned by the teachers were framed as emotional needs. For example, two teachers specifically acknowledged the physical changes of their adolescent students but expressed the belief that puberty is "emotionally distressing." Teachers also framed positive emotions, or the cultivation of positive emotional experiences, as part of their work with students to counter the negative that would inevitably come, or as something the teachers hoped that students could feel while in their classrooms. Teachers, therefore, perceived the needs of students by considering the emotions that might accompany any situation and interaction. The majority of the teachers' discussions of needs in the classroom revolved around cognitive and social needs. Below we outline the ways in which teachers understood and framed those needs and their approach to the developmental domains.

#### ***Emotional Framing of the Cognitive Domain***

The cognitive domain was of high importance to teachers as their goals were to support learning. However, teachers identified emotions that accompanied learning. For example, Amy stated, "I think that understanding kids-- where they are, from an emotional background-- helped me to kind of see their cognitive needs a little bit more." Teachers indicated that learning was

impacted by students' emotional responses to perceived academic success or failure and suggested that negative emotions like fear, anxiety, and insecurity prevented students from succeeding. From their observations of students, they also concluded that when students felt incompetent, confused, or hopeless in class, motivation was low and success was unlikely.

Additionally, teachers perceived students as having a desire for emotional support in their learning, thus interpreting a cognitive need for success as an emotional need for support and interpreted as a yearning to be supported and helped by their teacher. Teachers believed that emotions are the "groundwork for everything," and spoke of how intertwined emotions are to the academic side of the student experience (see Hugnagel, 2019). Framing the cognitive need to achieve as an emotional concern about their grades, Brenda shared her interpretation of students' emotion when they start to fall behind in her class:

*Sometimes if they feel overwhelmed, then they think "I need homework but I don't know how to do the homework. [Then they ask], Can you help me? Can you be supportive? Can you listen? Can you care if I [get] a good grade or whatever--can you help me?" And I think it all fits together, it's like [the teacher] reaching a hand out or pushing them away.*

The perception of students' academic needs as a call for emotional support and connection motivated teachers to provide help to struggling students.

Many emotions were identified in terms of cognitive challenges in the classroom; fear being the most prevalent that teacher perceived as one that needed to be addressed. Teachers in all content areas spoke of how they try to remove the fear that students have of making mistakes. Teachers expressed that students' fear of failing prevented students from getting them "where [they] need to be... whether it's not knowing if they can do something or just getting anxious about this because they have to perform well" (Jack). Teachers also spoke of how student learning was negatively impacted when students feared that they would be ridiculed for asking questions or for seeking help when they did not understand what was being taught. The teachers believed that if they were able to minimize the fear that students had of failing, the negative attitudes and emotions that students held towards their content, whether it be math, science, or language arts, would also be minimized.

In contrast to the emotions that negatively impacted student learning, over half of the teachers mentioned positive emotions, or attempts to foster positive emotions, in order to maintain motivation and be successful, which was often connected to their academic outcomes, as well as their quality of life.

*They need to feel success. It's not because I want them to get the good grades in my class; it's because I want them to be happy individuals. Of course, you know, the good grades would be wonderful too, but... 6th grade is so pivotal to their outlook on life and how they approach their future and the dynamic and that confidence and all of that. (Lori)*

Lori's comment indicates teachers' beliefs regarding the long-lasting effects that students' perceptions of their cognitive ability can have in terms of emotional needs such as life satisfaction and self-esteem. It also speaks to the connection between their relationships that the teachers aim to forge in classrooms and the academic goals they have for students (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Hallinan, 2008; McHugh et al., 2013; Yu et al., 2018).



*Emotional Framing of the Social Domain*

The emphasis that teachers tend to put on their relationships with students highlights the existence between the social and emotional domains and is also supported by research (see Allbright et al., 2019; Rucinski et al., 2018). When asked which of the four developmental domains they perceived to be most prevalent among students in the classroom, the teachers interviewed identified both social and emotional domains, and how they ‘play off of each other.’ In our analysis, it appeared that the teachers actually framed social interactions as emotional, such as when Jack stated, “When [students] get together, all of their emotions just transfer from one person to the other.”

Due to the social environment of school and the ways in which students interact, several teachers addressed the emotional difficulties that adolescents experience at school. They cited the instability that friendships can have from day to day and contrasted it with the emotional need for students to belong and be accepted. Four of the six teachers commented on how prominently peer relationships could both magnify and cause intense emotions, such as vulnerability and self-doubt. Perceiving the heartache and sadness that students can carry as a result of hurtful words they receive from their peers, Brenda shared,

*It's easy to have power in your words, but you can't take [them] back. You can say 'oh, I'm sorry' to someone and they can say 'oh yeah, thank you' but on a hard day for them, or when they first wake up in the morning, that feeling that they have in their heart that says 'Those words really hurt me.' And they might never tell you or tell anybody else, but they feel it. So be careful with what you say to people because... it's not good to feel that way.*

The emotional pain that can affect students as a result of how others treat them was a primary concern for this teacher, and one that she hoped to prevent in her classroom. Many of the teachers agreed on this point and talked of students’ social relationships in terms of a need to be supported emotionally, accepted, and treated kindly, believing that such positive social relationships would bolster emotional well-being. Teachers perceived emotional damage that could result from social interactions so acutely that they viewed social interactions as emotional experiences for students.

In addition to peer relationships, the teachers also interpreted other social situations through an emotional lens, generalizing to all of adolescence, believing that it was an innately difficult and emotional time. Sandy shared,

*[Adolescents] are having such difficult emotional problems, and some of them do stem from social problems... It's very difficult for them, because they are so young, these emotions are extremely powerful, and they don't know how to handle it. And with their [social] situations, they don't know how to handle themselves. And they don't know how to healthily interact with other people.*

The perceived lack of matured social skills or emotional intelligence of students led many teachers to have empathy for students and develop their desire to model appropriate handling of emotions. Coleen and Sandy specifically talked about the importance of being honest and transparent with their students when it comes to how they were feeling. They did this in hopes that they could be an example of emotional awareness, control, and stability for their students, who they perceived to be experiencing “broad swings” in emotions from day to day. While the combination of both an emotionally supportive and socially positive environment helps students feel related to the school or classroom (Wentzel, 2016), these teachers also believed that such

feelings of relatedness to a school or classroom could lead to a student's increased interest in a subject, leading to higher motivation and effort, and academic success (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Hagenauer et al., 2015; Wentzel, 2016; Yu et al., 2016).

### **Emotions as an Entry Point**

As noted, the teachers interviewed in this study interpreted most student actions and needs in the classroom as relating to an underlying emotional need. As the teachers attempted to identify emotions they perceived students to have, the teachers sought opportunities to form relationships that were more emotionally connected and supportive. The emotional connection provided an entry point to relate with students, personally and academically. Teachers intentionally and unintentionally attended to the needs they perceived in the classroom by supporting the emotional connection they wanted to maintain. They did this through providing an emotionally safe environment in their classrooms, working to create positive and supporting relationships, and explicitly showing care and concern for the students.

### ***Providing a Safe Environment***

Teachers sought to make their classrooms safe for students to ask questions, make mistakes, or seek out help without fear. The teachers believed that once students were comfortable and in an emotionally safe space, they could work with them in more academically productive ways. Teachers of all content areas believed that feeling safe to ask questions was a critical element of a successful learning environment. First, teachers had to monitor interactions to maintain their classrooms as a place where “[students] have to know that they cannot shoot each other down for curiosity and for asking questions and not understanding” (Lori).

Additionally, the teachers did not stress getting good grades to their students. Rather, the teachers believed that supporting their students in becoming emotionally strong (i.e., confident, motivated, willing to make mistakes, etc.), learning the content and being academically successful would follow. For example, the Language Arts teacher, Amy, expressed that successful discussions must include a “level of comfort” where students are not afraid to either share opinions or to respectfully disagree with others. For example, she expressed that “we’re sharing our insights into literature, which is really close to sharing your feelings.” Therefore, an emotionally safe environment is prerequisite to exploring and understanding literature in class.

Several teachers also perceived that students would choose to protect their emotions over cognitive engagement. Therefore, in order to encourage academic engagement, the teachers believed that it was their responsibility to create and maintain a safe space. Brenda shared, *[students may think] ‘I don’t feel comfortable to ask you questions because you’re just going to yell at me or you’re going to tell me ‘why didn’t you pay attention in class?’... [sometimes] it takes a good quarter, a good semester before students start to feel comfortable and safe enough to approach when they have questions.*

Overall, teachers saw great value in helping their students feel that they were safe; that they would not be ridiculed or dismissed by other students or by the teacher when participating in a discussion or by posing a question. The teachers perceived that their students were often acting

in ways to protect themselves from negative emotions by not engaging in lessons or participating in discussions.

### *Creating Positive Relationships*

Related to creating a safe space, the teachers emphasized the necessity of building relationships with students. They acknowledged that they were limited as to their influences on social circles that their students choose, but stressed the importance of being one positive relationship that students could count on. This belief seemed to stem not only from an inherent belief that all people deserve to be treated kindly, but also because the teachers believed that students behave better and put forth more effort in those classes where they like their teachers (see Montalvo et al., 2007; Roorda et al., 2011).

Over half of the teachers attributed their positive relationships with students to their consistency. Coleen spoke of being “a constant” for students with “an unbiased opinion,” alluding to her consistency in response to questions or concerns that students had, and situations that occurred in the classroom. The teachers believed that this stable presence established them as a safe person to whom students could turn when they are struggling, which helped establish relationships of trust with them, being a “stable someone” that students could turn to when others were unreliable. Once established, the relationship allowed them to be able to enter into the lives of students in deeper, more meaningful ways. The result was that students related to the teachers and sought them out, opening opportunities for academic and social connection.

### *Showing Care*

Many teachers gave examples of the evolution of relationships with students as a result of intentionally showing care, which led to academic successes as well. Several shared stories of students who refused to exert effort in their class at the beginning of the year. However, as the year progressed, each of those teachers had the opportunity to work one on one with those students. This allowed them to show care individually to these students and forge a relationship. Teachers believed these daily caring interactions were what contributed to an eventual turning point in improvement from the students, both academically and behaviorally. This aligns with research that strong teacher- student relationships are not accomplished through grand, singular acts; rather, it is the small, daily interactions teachers have with their students that build and maintain the relationship (Hamre et al., 2013; Johnson, 2009; Newberry, 2010). Once teachers had established an emotional connection with a student, they believed that it led to changes in the students’ engagement, resulting in students putting forth more effort and care towards that teacher’s class (McHugh et al., 2013). Examples of this belief that the teacher’s demonstration of care leads to greater engagement emerged in a majority of the interviews, demonstrated in a statement by Sandy:

*It makes learning so much easier to know that your teacher cares about you, and that if you screw up, that there’s going to be mercy, and there’s going to be kindness, and there’s going to be love there... [students] need... teachers who genuinely care about them, because then they can be free to learn.*

The teachers believed there was a direct correlation between students feeling that they were cared for by the teacher and the effort the students put forth in class academically as well as

behaviorally. Therefore, they put effort into creating a caring environment to promote risk-taking and allowing student to be “free to learn” (see Roorda et al, 2011). As evidence, teachers recalled experiences in which the difference between caring environments and those they felt were not. For example, Sandy shared a memory of a conversation with a student in which she asked why he misbehaved in other classes but not in hers. His reply: “oh, they don't care [about me].” All teachers interviewed agreed that when their students could feel that they were cared about by their teachers, they would be willing to put forth more effort in class.

### **Acquisition of Emotional Awareness**

The basis for teacher beliefs in this study were unique to almost each participant. Although all six of the teachers interviewed shared many similar perspectives as to how prominently emotions and students’ emotional needs figure into the middle school experience, they each came into teaching with varying depths of understanding regarding those emotional needs. Additionally, the means through which they came to those understandings also varied. The three different means of acquisition of emotional awareness that emerged in the interviews were that of calling on their own personal experience as a youth, experiences with motherhood, and the collective experience during their time as a teacher.

#### ***Personal Experience as an Adolescent***

When it comes to understanding students’ emotional experiences, many of the teachers’ recollection of their own adolescent experiences influenced the way they perceived the student experience in their classroom. For example, Brenda shared, “Think back to your own life. I remember things when I was this age--6th grade and 7th grade--and that changes who you are.” The emotional experiences that influenced these teachers in their own formative years lingered in their minds and colored the ways in which they understood the experience of their students. Likewise, Sandy recalled from personal experience what death, mental illness, and difficult home life was like to experience as a middle schooler. Her personal experiences helped her feel empathy towards her students and be sensitive to the emotionally difficult struggles that they may go through, in similar or equally challenging situations (See Alten & Lane, 2018; Hosteler, 2016).

#### ***Motherhood***

Two of the teachers noted that motherhood had prepared them for teaching, not only in being able to better recognize students’ emotional needs, but in how to help and support adolescents through life’s changes. Amy, a teacher who started her career while she was already a mother of adolescents, admitted that having adolescents in her home and seeing them progress through puberty with the difficulties that adolescence can bring definitely influenced her interactions at school. She shared: “having kids of my own I think has really helped me understand kids better than I would have, say, if I had started teaching... brand new.” Being intimately engaged with the changes of puberty, first as an adolescent then as a mother, helped her remember what it is like to be in middle school. These combined perspectives consequently

helped her to be more sensitive to, and understanding of, the emotional needs of her students (James, 2010; Kang et al., 2019).

### *Teaching Experience*

Not all teachers came into teaching with a repertoire of how to recognize, understand, or empathize, let alone attend to, students' emotional needs. Three of the teachers interviewed noted how their sensitivity to student emotional needs had increased with teaching experience. Jack, specifically, spoke of the surprise he felt when realizing the prevalence of emotions in a middle school classroom. He shared that when he first began teaching, all the anxieties that students are plagued with was something that was largely foreign to him; that "I've never had to deal with it... I wasn't wired that way, but a lot of the kids are." Were it not for nearly a decade of teaching experience, he would still be unaware of those emotions that so many adolescents experience.

On the contrary, Brenda cited her understanding of students' emotional experience as the result of years of working in alternative high schools and at mental health treatment centers. This unique professional experience made her especially sensitive to the needs of her students who other teachers thought were difficult (Dogan et al, 2020; Li et al, 2019). Those experiences also gave her motivation to help her students get the assistance they needed, whether it came from her or from a school counsellor.

Regardless of their understanding of adolescents' emotional experiences prior to beginning teaching, all teachers openly agreed that their awareness of emotions in middle school had increased with years of teaching experience (Dogan et al., 2020). As Brenda shared, emotional needs were by far the most prevalent in her classes, "and more so as the years have gone on." Such comments may indicate that as teachers interact with students and see witness their students' experience each year, they accumulate knowledge that helps them identify the emotional needs students have while going through adolescence, which may increase their sensitivity to the emotional needs that their students may have.

## **Discussion**

This study extends the work of J-F and colleagues (2018) and complements their findings by exploring teachers' perceptions of needs of their students. We found that though teachers identified cognitive and social/emotional needs as the primary needs of their students, they still tended to view all needs through an emotional lens. This belief is an all-encompassing emotional aspect to learning and teaching led to the belief that if students felt less negative emotional, like fear, in the classroom, they would open up and allow themselves to take the risks necessary to grow. For over twenty years, educational researchers have submitted that teaching is an emotional practice (see Day & Leitch, 2001; Hargreaves, 2001; Nias, 1996) so it should come as no surprise that those who enter the profession do so with an eye toward the affective as well as the cognitive. However, the recognition that teachers understand and address student needs primarily through an emotional context deserves more attention. Beyond just categorizing emotion as positive or negative or attempting to avoid student negative emotion (Hufnagel, 2019), some teachers see value in using both positive and negative emotion as ways to connect.

Without a serious consideration of the gamut of emotion that may be present, most teachers are left to their own personal characteristics and innate traits to recognize, respond and manage the emotional aspects of teaching. Teacher preparation programs have a way to go in preparing teachers to attend to the affective.

The teachers interviewed in this study learned how to use student emotions as an entry point through which they could access and support not just their students' emotional needs, but also their cognitive and social needs. Given that they were most commonly able to arrive at that entry point through establishing positive relationships, both pre-service and practicing teachers could benefit from professional development related to ways that they can create consistently positive and trusting relationships, spaces, and interactions when working with students. The need for this kind of training is especially pertinent when considering the varied experience levels and pre-service training of middle school teachers. For the teachers in this study, the more teachers had exposure to adolescents, and the more they gained experience teaching them, the more adept they became at recognizing and addressing the emotional needs that their students had.

After exploring how teachers perceive the needs of their students, this study found that teachers attend to the needs of their students through attempts to emotionally connect. Because teachers tended to interpret all student needs through an emotional lens, they used emotions as an entry point in which to make personal connections and forge relationships. The ways in which teachers were able to create those connections were through such practices as making their classroom a safe environment, showing care, and establishing positive individual relationships. The efforts to create emotionally safe environments placed them in a position to be able to help their students in multiple ways, in academics or social difficulties. The teachers felt that because they first sought to create positive emotional experiences and environments for their adolescent students, students were more willing to engage with them in productive and academic ways.

Finally, this study examined the ways that teachers come to acquire their understanding of student needs. Three paths of acquiring that understanding emerged in interviews: motherhood, personal experiences as adolescents, and teaching experience. This is not to suggest that no other modes of acquisition exist, but rather that various life experiences inform teachers' approaches to understanding the needs of their students (Alten & Lane, 2018). Given what is already known about the benefits of teacher-student relationships and how attending to the different developmental domains support student success, pre-service programs would do well to provide more support and instruction regarding how to create environments that are best suited to students' developmental needs. With such an understanding of how to recognize and attend to student developmental, and especially emotional, needs teachers may have greater capacity to connect, motivate, encourage, and potentially change the lives of their students. Though the influence and strength of the teacher-student relations in middle school weakens from those in elementary classrooms (Baker, 2006; Yu et al., 2018), no doubt the potential influence that a teacher can have on her students can be profound, if not life changing.

## **Conclusion**

Though the number of teachers interviewed for this study was small, it must be remembered that this study is meant to augment the findings of J-F and colleagues (2018) by delving into the perspectives of teachers regarding adolescent needs. In validating their findings

that adolescent students primarily value the ways that teachers connected to them both socially and emotionally, we can make the assumption that the Australian and American students were similar, and therefore the teachers they preferred may attend to needs in similar ways. A replication of the study wherein a more diverse subset of teachers from across the globe are interviewed would additionally provide valuable insights into universally common teacher perceptions of their adolescent students.

In this study, teachers tended to identify the emotional domain as the most frequently observed. This is in contrast to what research has determined, where social and emotional are equally important. This slight discrepancy between researcher and practitioner perspectives on adolescent development may be explained by the ways that teachers understand their role and their approach to students. Whereas research differentiates the emotional and social domains, teachers interpret all needs-- social, emotional, physical and cognitive-- as emotional. Teachers who work with adolescents day after day observe the influence that emotions have on each interaction and activity throughout the middle school experience; they note its power and how those emotions transfer into and affect all areas of development. Their role as nurturing and caring educators calls on them to attend to those emotional needs.

The creation of appropriately supportive social environments that simultaneously cater to both academic and emotional needs was a focus for these teachers. They did so by showing care through daily small interactions and conversations. In such changing times as we now face, how possible would it be to create such an environment in an online or blended learning space? With online and remote learning becoming more of a norm across the world, whether by choice or mandate, more than ever teachers need to find ways in which to connect with and support their students when not physically present. Much research and subsequent training for teachers on the subject would benefit students and teachers as they learn and teach through online platforms.

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