If We Don’t Care, Who Will?
Creating Opportunities for Change Through Relational Experiences
In A Residential Day School
by
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Abstract

In the United States, there is a growing need for residential day schools, regularly identified as the “Least Restrictive Environment” for youth with acute, emotional-behavioral disabilities. Of the approximate 80,000 youth served in residential programs across the country, nearly 7,000 of these youth are in the state of Massachusetts alone. This interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study is comprised of four lead teacher participants at a single residential day school facility in Massachusetts. Ninety minute interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide designed to gather data to answer the research question: What are residential teachers’ understandings and experiences of the relational caregiving of students with emotional-behavioral challenges? Analysis of the data was both inductive and deductive in nature and was approached through the lens of Nel Noddings’ (2013) Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education as well as the participant’s descriptions of their unique perspectives. The data resulted in three themes: 1) Understanding the Building Blocks of Caring Teacher Relationships, 2) Viewpoints of the Experience of Balancing the Dual Roles of Teachers as Educators and Caregivers, and 3) Recognizing the Personal and Unique States of Emotional Labor. This study yielded a cyclic model, identified as the Building Blocks, considered to be non-negotiable factors for building relationships with youth who are resistant to connecting with adults. Balance at the individual, classroom, and professional level adopted several perspectives including the benefits and challenges to maintaining both roles simultaneously. Finally, the study sought the reflections of its participants to provide an improved understanding of the emotional labor expelled through vicarious trauma, information overload, and an unpredictable environment. Keywords: residential schools, caring in education, teacher-student relationship, emotional-behavioral outcomes
Dedication

To my family, thank you for your support and patience while on this journey. To my Morgan, thank you for reminding me to take things one day at a time and to appreciate the process. To my Hannah, thank you for offering to edit all of my work and asking thoughtful questions even though she is in the fourth grade. To my Meghan, thank you for keeping me company and sitting by my side completing her “homework” while I completed mine. To my Nathan, thank you for providing the loud music in the background while I focused on conducting a quality research project. To my Justin, thank you for giving me the drive and motivation to be my best and complete this project as we explored very challenging tasks simultaneously. To my husband, thank you for steadfast patience and unwavering commitment to ensure that the children were able to remain committed to their interests during this process. To my parents who supported this project, encouraged my development, provided time and quietness, showed their excitement, set deadlines, and held me accountable throughout the process; this is parenting done right! My family circle is wide and this project has affected most in one way or another, a missed party, an inability to attend a dance, a show, or a visit; yet throughout it all, they have stood on the sidelines cheering me on! For this I thank each and every one of you!

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Chapter I: Introduction

For decades, Residential Treatment Centers (RTC’s) have been relied upon to provide a milieu of services (through residential and day school programming) to serve an increasing number of youth. Largely, RTC’s house youth with severe Emotional-Behavioral Disabilities (EBD) and serve the most acute youth within its secure facilities (Gagnon & Leone, 2006). Most often, children who attend these facilities cannot be safely maintained in a less restrictive environment and depend on the staff to provide direct care services and ensure a quality education (Zelechoski et al., 2013).

Youth entering RTC’s enter with complex needs that must be addressed through various treatment options. Statistics reflect that of the approximate 80,000 youth receiving treatment in separate day schools or RTC’s, more students with EBD are served than with any other disability classification (Gagnon & Leone, 2006). A study conducted that meets the profile proposed in this study sought to identify common characteristics of its student population over a period of time. It was found that 49% were assigned a primary diagnosis of disruptive behavioral disorders, 31% affective and anxiety disorders, 12% psychotic disorders, and 8% other disorders. The same study reflected that nearly all children (92%) had multiple diagnoses (Connor, Doerfler, Toscano, Volungis, & Steingard, 2004). Furthermore, traumatic exposure is a common dynamic within a RTC. The complexities of disabilities and trauma histories pose a challenge when developing relationships with peers and adults.

The transition into a RTC can also be a triggering traumatizing event for a child; it can be an isolating and discomforting experience filled with unknowns (Confalonieri, Traficante, & Vitali, 2009; Kammerer, 2009). Youth are subject to learning the rules, expectations, and
available supports in order to succeed. The histories of these youth, familial structures, and environmental structures vary and stem from a wide range of neglect, maltreatment, abuse, violence, and/or severe emotional-behavioral disorders and other mental health subsidiaries and thus, the traumatizing events may be triggered. While a RTC placement may be a safe and secure environment for youth with significant EBD and trauma histories, careful consideration and reflexive care must be applied to the emotional needs of the youth.

Forging authentic, caring relationships within RTC day schools provide consistent opportunities to develop structured and unstructured opportunities for collaboration. Studies reveal the importance of developing genuine, compassionate relationships between teachers and students. These relationships prove to have direct effectiveness toward improving academic outcomes, understanding the child, providing support and encouragement in effective ways, improving the social well-being of the child, understanding problematic behavior and aggression, and developing stronger interactions (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Lemberger & Clemens, 2012). In these environments, however, it is not uncommon for youth to be hesitant to develop these relationships. Children with EBD and/or trauma histories often reflect a mistrust of adults. In many cases, the adults within the RTC are the primary caregivers and are expected to respond to the social and emotional needs of the youth (Harder, Knorth, & Kalverboer, 2013). Educators within the RTC day school typically have a background or working knowledge of youth with mental health disorders and have an educational background in special education.

The emotional labor embedded within the development of these relationships is often extended beyond equilibrium on the part of the educator as the relationships progress and digress with peaks and flows (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). The ability to care-for a child with an EBD or trauma history can rely on a person’s relational and moral ethics as well as consideration
to one’s ability to give entirely of themselves toward the person in need of care (Noddings, 2013). Often, in a day program’s class of nine students with three adults, these relationships can become laborious; however, staff continue to develop these relationships after days, weeks, and months of defeat.

Lastly, the balance for teachers as educators and caregivers in this environment remains challenging (Hargreaves, 2000; Lippke, 2012). These roles pose unique differences, however, when appropriately maintained, can yield holistic outcomes. As Kagan & Spinazzola (2013) posit, there is an opportunity in RTC’s to “…face the combined challenges of rebuilding or building safe, protective and nurturing relationships with primary caregivers” (p.707). When positive relationships are formed and teachers naturally care about their students as individuals, the lives of students beyond the context of school become the focus for teaching and learning.

**Research Problem**

When children feel they are genuinely cared for and supported, they are more likely to exhibit socially and behaviorally expected responses when compared to those who feel isolated or deprived of positive interaction with adults. For some students, especially those placed at risk (who are already exposing emotional-behavioral challenges), developing this relationship is a critical, yet often exhaustive task (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; Cole, Craigen, & Cowan, 2014; Hargreaves, 2000). Many of these students are in disbelief that adults are advocating on their behalf. There is the perception of distrust and frustration toward an educational system that is believed to have a limited value to their future or has suffocated their sense of worth (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Zelechoski et al., 2013; Certo, Cauley, & Chafin, 2003). Noddings (2013) reveals that many teachers approach “cases” involving students from a rational-cognitive approach, systematically. This approach universalizes students and their situations and applies a
directness that does not support dialogue between participants thus limiting the receptivity between teachers and students. As a result, the student placed at risk is often resistant to interaction with teachers and will respond unexpectedly as a way of maintaining a level of separation. Through deliberate efforts and constant consideration, a naturally nurturing teacher is likely to develop a rapport with students and often seeks to embrace and endure their ethical ideals (Noddings, 2013; Vidourek, King, Bernard, Murnan, & Nabors, 2011). The students’ perception in response to this endeavor is believed to develop a bond based upon trust, one which will become increasingly supportive within the learning environment. The most important aspect of building teacher-student relationships must be relatedness whereby specific care must be placed on pacing because progressing through this phase too quickly will lead to “abstraction and objectivity” (Noddings, 2013, p.182).

Students at risk who are placed in residential treatment often display problematic behavioral and social control in response to unmet needs or in retaliation toward society for producing the circumstances that he/she is experiencing (Hendrickson, 2012). In the classroom, students placed at risk may exhibit passive learning, socially destructive interactions with peers (ex. put-downs, inappropriate or uncomfortable innuendos, lack of cooperation, foul language, and areas that question the moral development of the student), lack of behavioral control resulting in safety concerns, chronic disruptive behaviors (ex. calling out, making noises that irritate others, etc.), among other interruptions. Carlisle (2011) explains these behaviors by indicating that for children “where the need for attachment and inclusion is such a strong socio-emotional need, [youth] may involve themselves in inappropriate or aggressive behavior in order to feel a sense of belonging” (p.22). In traditional teaching models, the teacher who finds the student difficult to teach and interact with is more likely to dismiss the student from the
classroom as a penalty for not conforming to the standards of the class (Byran et al., 2012). This situation has proven to be counterproductive and with limiting effectiveness (Theriot, Craun, & Duppper, 2010). Due to this, contemporary models for special education schools have been designed to improve overall performance and resiliency in children.

The ultimate benefit for the student and the responsive teacher would be to gain a holistic interest in the student while seeking to identify the underlying causes of such behavior (Newberry, 2010). Through this interaction, the teacher may become increasingly aware of the situational, experiential, and relational underpinnings which serve as an obstacle for active learning and participation. While this may be a cumbersome and perhaps overwhelming task, the potential benefit will be to guide a misguided student toward building a relationship with positive boundaries and outcomes (Birch & Ladd, 1998). The potential within each student must be sought and brought to awareness, even to the student themselves. Perhaps an important piece of the child was lost or misguided and through the lens of the teacher can be brought to awareness and supported through interest and care.

Since teachers are an abundant asset and there is no shortage of students placed “at risk” in residential care, this is an opportune time to provide quality care to students within the boundaries of school (Mihalas et al., 2009). The capacity to which caring teacher-student relationships may bear value is currently unknown when examined through the perception of teachers at this site. The aim of this study is to explore residential teachers’ understandings and experiences of the relational caregiving of students with emotional-behavioral challenges. For the purpose of this research, the presence of caring teacher-student relationships will generally be defined as “relationships between a teacher [caring-one] and student [cared-for] characterized by caring, trust, and honesty [developed to] help students feel secure with the school environment,
speak to their questions, fears, and concerns, and prepare students to succeed while building [students’] self-esteem” (Whitney & Hoffman, 1998, p.232). This process will be understood through Noddings (2013) “Ethic of Care” and the triangulation of: (1) dialogue (what we say), (2) practice (what we do), and (3) confirmation (how we know). Through this study, caring teacher-student relationships will be described, as teachers perceive them, in light of their personal experiences.

**Justification for the Research Problem**

A caring teacher-student relationship is necessary in developing a culturally defined atmosphere that prepares students who have been placed at risk for learning. According to Wang, Haertel, & Walberg (1994) “…caring teachers who express concern for students and act as confidants, role models, and mentors can contribute to the children’s capacity to overcome personal vulnerabilities and environmental adversities” (p.1). Sustaining this idea, a study conducted by Sakiz, Pape, & Hoy (2012) found that “teacher support is one of the strongest correlates with youth adjustment, social and motivational development, and achievement” (p.235).

Research has concluded that students in the elementary grades have stronger interpersonal experiences with their teachers which subside upon entrance to the middle grades (Hughes et al., 2012; Sakiz, Pape, & Hoy, 2012). Furthermore, developmental research on adolescents indicate that the middle years are critical for building positive teacher-student relationships and those that do, report as having greater motivation toward academic achievement as well as a greater self-concept (Shulkind & Foote, 2009; Black et al., 2010; Steinberg & McCray, 2012).
The caring teacher or mentor is in a unique position to guide and support students through challenges and achievements. The personal intricacies that students bring to school each day are prevalent; students do not dismiss their concerns and worries upon entrance to school and it often prohibits the student from learning to his/her full potential. As a result, research suggests that promoting a holistic educational experience provides opportunities for interpersonal relationships between teachers and students to unfold (Rich & Schnacter, 2012; MacLaury, 1995). As a result, the teacher is able to nurture the student both as an individual and as a learner. The open communication and persistent efforts from both participants connect the teacher and student through a naturally caring relationship. This process has the potential not only to improve the state of being and self-concept on behalf of the student but prepares the child to exhibit a higher level of academic achievement while minimizing the frequency of unexpected behaviors and consequences.

In traditional school models, the risk behaviors and school-related consequences for students exhibit a culturally concerning dilemma. One study, exploring the social context of traditional schools, identified the rapid effects of negative behavior control through office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions leading to school dropout, poor school climate, academic failure, and disengagement from school (Bryan, et al., 2012). In another study attempting to predict exclusion among a population of more than nine thousand middle and high school students, evidence found that consequential efforts had minimal impact on problematic behaviors and instead led to higher rates of concerning and socially impairing outcomes (Theriot, Craun, & Dupper, 2010). When students are placed in residential treatment, an alternative plan often exists for supporting and promoting positive outcomes. These plans often avoid the concept of an office referral or removal from the learning environment and align with contemporary models
of effectiveness. Additional studies revealed that teachers, the school culture, and the school environment had potential to gain a significant influence on students when the factors worked synergistically to enhance the school experience through caring and supportive relational experiences (Thoriot, Craun, & Dupper, 2010; Bryan et al., 2012). As a result, students in residential treatment that have limited connection with adults outside of their environment are in greater need of developing strong and healthy relationships with those who are responsible for their well-being.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Sufficient evidence is lacking in the understanding of caring teacher-student relationships as perceived by teachers who regularly connect with children in residential treatment. There are often unpredictable circumstances as well as those who exhibit risk behaviors and/or emotional dis-regulation, thus resulting in unsafe situations. While the literature suggests that a population of youth placed at risk, as well as most other populations, benefit from caring teacher-student relationships, the caliber to which this relational ideal is implemented, beneficial, practical, and transformational is currently unknown.

Studies focusing on caring, or the lack thereof, in schools are abundant, as the topic assumes a variety of divergent paths. For instance, McSwain (2013) delivered a dissertation on caring in middle school classrooms through Noddings “Ethics of Caring,” however, the focus investigated the role of dialogue as a transporter of caring and as a precursor for establishing the setting which resembles that of a caring environment. Furthermore, empirical studies involving socio-economic, gender (e.g., Bledsoe, 2013), and racial (e.g., Rassinger, 2011; Smith, 2011) dissemination were available. Most frequent are studies involving the collection of data from traditional teachers (e.g., Thompson, 2010) or the data is limited to identifying qualities of caring
teachers from student perspectives (e.g., Graff, 2012). An abundance of quantitative studies have also been conducted in exploration of the quality of teacher and student relationships and their impact on student fulfillment (e.g., Decker, Dona, Christenson, 2006). There were no studies identified that mirrored this study, given the sample of residentially placed students, with diagnosed emotional-behavioral disabilities, the methodology, and the transparent focus of direct teacher experiences of caring relationships among this highly vulnerable population.

**Relating to the Audience**

Integrative systems bound by caring relationships lay the foundation for permeating positive school culture and enhancing education for residential youth. These multi-tiered systems require that participants, within the context of school, who deliver educative values and curricular standards, consider a method that is derived from the root of the child. The implementation of caring relationships, used to invigorate the educational experiences and to ensure student development, is at the forefront of learning and an important aim within this study. Educators at all levels, especially those working with populations placed at high-risk will benefit from an improved understanding of the complex care practices that teachers of emotionally and behaviorally disturbed youth apply while in residential treatment centers. There is also considerable benefit in better understanding of how educators perceive their experiences with this challenging population. Administrators and counselors may also find this study purposeful in developing programs and intervention systems aimed at improving the educational experiences of students diagnosed with EBD, those who are disengaged or chronically disruptive youth. Just as importantly, families and support networks may gain an improved understanding of the process involving the potentiality through investment in authentic relationships with some of the most acute children in the state through the voices of their teachers.
Significance of Research Problem

When quality relationships do not exist between teachers and students, students become privy to isolation and emotional disengagement within schools. Literature suggests that there is a resiliency threshold that utilizes various protective factors to “make up for” what is lacking in other areas (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). For instance, a strong and supportive home environment may provide enough relational support for some students to thrive even without relational encounters with their teachers. However, for some students, especially those “at-risk”, like those receiving residential treatment, the relational support may be the difference between attending and avoiding school. In addition, the uniqueness of student situations indicate that a vast majority will attend school with personal concerns and issues that remain unresolved throughout the day. As a result, access to academic achievement becomes limited and supportive practices outside of the classroom must be adopted, requiring that the student miss additional instructional class time. This, as research suggests, is counterproductive to establishing and sustaining caring teacher-student relationships and may have lasting negative effects on personal and social development (Bryan, et al., 2012; Theriot, Craun, & Dupper, 2010).

By developing thoughtful relationships between teachers and students, students may begin to engage in emotional and interpersonal relationships within the context of school. Many schools provide a semi-structured environment for students to foster relationships and practice relatedness and receptivity through exploration of the ethical ideal (Noddings, 2013). Teacher-student relationships should be created through listening, understanding, guidance, and support, resulting in a working connection that supports each child holistically. In careful review of this vision, Carnegie (1989) posits “…every student needs at least one thoughtful adult who has the time and takes the trouble to talk with the student about academic matters, personal problems,
and the importance of performing well in middle grade school” for optimal outcomes (p.37). Fostering this positive social-relational development will send the message to students that they are first cared-for as individuals then as intellects. Students “must be aware always that for me [they are] more important, more valuable, than the subject” (Noddings, 2013, p.174). In his study, Kramer (1992) found that students desired a teacher who had the characteristics and personality to gain personal and academic knowledge about each individual and who sought to build a true “care and concern” relationship (p.32). A positive teacher-student relationship throughout schooling is an indicator of relatedness and supports growth and development in childhood.

In opposition, negative experiences with adults or peers may inhibit this development and prevent a child from gaining the relational connectivity that they thrive for during these developmentally transitional stages. Research supports that children who do not cultivate a rapport with their teachers are more likely to be considered “at-risk” academically, behaviorally, or socially and may isolate themselves, creating a negative synergy that potentially leads to emotional detachment from school. Often times, children have experienced a wide range of home and school placements prior to being placed in residential treatment and care. As a result, the quality of their relationships with adults and peers may be diminished at the time of placement, converting residential treatment into an isolating environment, although not its intent. Kramer (1992) explains the consequences of believing oneself is isolated rather than supported. It was found that the child’s belief might make the difference between making lofty decisions (alone or with guidance), and the long-term effects that may arise. It is clear that the experiential and environmental perspectives, as well as one’s ethical ideal, vary between teacher and student. Each individual, therefore is gaining an adequate understanding of the building blocks necessary
to foster a teacher-student relationship in addition to holding the ability to identify the presence of authentic relationships within the context of a residential treatment day school, is critical.

As youth progress toward adulthood, many researchers report that student’s feel an increase of emotional distance from their school and their teachers. Developmentally, adolescent students are increasingly prepared to engage and converse with teachers. This adult interaction, as noted by several philosophers, is a necessary opportunity to grow and develop. However, the establishment and organization of many educational systems’ procedures and expectations provide minimal opportunity for the levels of engagement that are critical for optimal development.

Noddings (2013) discusses the differences between being cared-about and cared-for. Through this distinction, she indicates that in most schools, students are cared-about (with some distance and minimal effort or concern for the other person). However, the process of caring-for someone is much more intricate and requires giving of self, an ethical ideal that teachers are not always willing or equipped to support. In nurturing and caring relationships, teachers have the ability to connect with students. Noddings (2013) writes:

When we see the other’s reality as a possibility for us, we must act to eliminate the intolerable, to reduce the pain, to fill the need, to actualize the dream. When I am in this sort of relationship with another, when the other’s reality becomes a real possibility for me, I care. Whether the caring is sustained, whether it lasts long enough to be conveyed to the other, whether it becomes visible in the world, depends on my sustaining the relationship, or, at least, acting out of concern for my own ethicality as though it were sustained (p.14).
This research will provide insight to the building blocks that direct care teachers of acute residential treatment youth apply, when developing authentic teacher-student relationships. The research will also provide insight to the challenges and emotional labor that staff have experienced firsthand. Furthermore it will marginalize the extent to which society believes children in residential care are defeated and rather focus on their level of resiliency and ability to reconnect at a relational level.

**Positionality**

As an educator in the field of special education for the last decade, exploring both the public and private sectors, I am currently employed at the research site as a member of the school’s administrative team. Prior to employment at a residential facility, unbeknownst to me, was the quality and level of care that would be provided to children who participated in schooling through residential and day treatment. Balancing both academic curriculums while developing a relationship with students is believed to be a challenge. In traditional school models, academic output is required of the educator and the student. Building a relationship is often a secondary gain from which some benefit. One apparent difference is that in most cases, children in traditional schools have someone else to turn to for guidance (ex. Parent, relative, peers, neighbors, religious supports, etc.). However, in residential treatment facilities, the adults hired to care for children are the only adults who many of these children encounter on a regular basis. Through the lens of a teacher, learning to care-*for* each child rather than caring-*about* them in a general sense can be a real challenge. This is especially true with children who have experienced undesirable outcomes with adults in the past. An investment of time, patience, and understanding is often necessary to work through the relational barriers triggered by student history. Within the context of this research location, many educators assume a dual role as a
caregiver as well as an educator, and harmonizing these roles can certainly be a balancing act. These educators return to their work day after day, without noticeable regret, filled with unconditional care for their students, some authentic-some as a duty of their position. It is for these reasons that I seek to explore the relational understandings and experiences of teachers of residential day treatment students who have emotional and behavioral challenges.

**Post-Research Positionality**

There is much research still to be conducted in the area of relational caregiving among youth in residential day schools; however, much of the information gathered through this study has remained pertinent for educators in a traditional school setting who struggle to develop strong and caring relationships with their most troubled students. Teachers have a resiliency factor that has proven to motivate them to improve their relationships with their students. As a result many teachers carry an abundance of emotional weight as they navigate the moral and ethical responsibilities imposed on them through state and federal mandates, regulatory programs through licensure, and the information they receive about the welfare of the children they support. For teachers to excel in their positions and support youth to the extent they require, it is critical that appropriate supports are available for teachers that aim to nurture their ethical and moral ideals. As educator-caregivers, teachers aim to provide balance and consistency in their relationships while maintaining rigorous academic standards, a challenge even for those with multi-year experience. In review of the process, it is clear that a substantial amount of time and effort is devoted to the social-emotional-behavioral well-being of students and it is with confidence that it can be reported that each teacher has utilized their resources to develop sound relationships with students who initially distanced themselves from adults in an effort to avoid a positive relationship from forming. The instability of some youth indicate that a caring
relationship is needed for students to improve their levels of self-worth, to readapt to their environment, to understand how nurturing relationships function, and to identify the people they are comfortable confiding in. Each of these areas allow for a student to make gains toward their therapeutic and academic goals, eventually becoming transferrable to other members of the environment and within the community.

**Research Question**

Central Question:

- What are residential teachers’ understandings and experiences of the relational caregiving of students with emotional-behavioral challenges?

**Theoretical Framework**

The framework used to guide this study reflects Noddings’ (1984, 2013) relational approach to ethics and moral education. By considering the ontologically of relations “we recognize human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human existence” (p.4). Through a relational perspective, Noddings asserts that all human encounters have affective consideration toward our ethical ideal. Our ethical ideal as Noddings describes, refers to a moral sense that is fed through experiences and relatedness with others. It is a personalized set of beliefs and judgments about oneself and others that are enhanced or diminished based on the situation, interpersonal relations, and experiences. She clarifies that, “It is the recognition of and longing for relatedness that form the foundation of our ethic, and the joy that accompanies fulfillment of our caring enhances our commitment to the ethical ideal that sustains us as one-caring” (p.6). In caring relationships, there are two identifiable roles: the caring-one and the cared-for. For the purpose of this study, the teacher will be referenced as the caring-one and the assumed role of the student as the cared-for. Noddings explains the possibility of caring-about a
wide population but having the capacity to care-for a much smaller number. Caring-about another provides some distance between self and cared-about. For instance, a teacher may care-about the well-being of students within the school but could not possibly develop an authentic caring relationship with each one. Noddings suggests that, “If we can understand how complex and intricate, indeed how subjective, caring is, we shall perhaps be better equipped to meet the conflicts and pains it sometimes induces” (p. 12). Using this theory, a single teacher could not possibly gain relationships of this capacity with each student in a traditional model. However, a teacher may care-for the students in her class. For example, when students are exhibiting difficulty, “I may experience the engrossment as motivational displacement of caring” (p. 16). Once a caring relationship is forged, “the commitment to act in behalf of the cared-for, a continued interest in his reality throughout the appropriate time span, and the continual renewal of commitment over this span of time are the essential elements of caring” (p.16).

Noddings’ work on ethical caring provides a pathway toward teacher-student relationships and formally explains the process of caring as well as possible pitfalls and expectations within the context of school. For the purpose of this study, a focus will remain within the context of the relational aspects of caring and avoid a focus on moral education and pedagogy. This study will delve into the relational opportunity and potentiality as explored by the knowledge and experiences provided throughout Noddings’ work. At the start, it is critical that a review of the concepts and theoretical foundation be provided and used to effectively guide this study.

The relational encounters that teachers and students submit to on a daily basis provide an opportunity to develop a nurturing environment expected to benefit youth of all ages. The prevalence of caring in classrooms must reflect a relational approach that is student centered as
well as one that is derived from concrete situations. The caring-one is then able to view both the perspective of the cared-for as well as their own, through each lens, reciprocally, while remaining as close to concretization as possible. According to Noddings (2013):

Apprehending other’s reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible, is the essential part of caring from the view of the one-caring. For if I take the other’s reality as possibility and begin to feel its reality, I feel, also that I must act accordingly; that is, I am impelled to act as though in my own behalf, but in behalf of the other (p.16).

Many children, especially those in residential care, assert “Nobody Cares!” (Noddings, 2013, p.7) when in reality, many people make the effort to care about students. Through a relational approach, the caring-one (teacher) may make an effort to care; however, if the cared-for is not receptive or responsive to these efforts, then an authentic caring relationship does not exist. “A caring relation is present only if the following two criteria are met: (1) The one-caring cares for the cared-for, and (2) if the cared-for recognizes that the one-caring cares for the person cared-for” … “its reception becomes part of what the one-caring feels when she receives the cared-for” (p.69). Receptivity is derived from the perceived and received attitude of the caring-one as well as the cared-for. “The one-caring comes across to the cared-for in an attitude” (p.59) perhaps one of receptivity, but there “is a receptivity required of the cared-for also” (p.59). As a result both parties, the caring-one and the cared-for, have a responsibility to “meet each other morally” (p.4). This receptivity is reflected by the caring-one through body language, eye contact, non-interrupted engagement, focus, connection, understanding, and availability. Giving of self in this way informs the cared-for that you are willing and able to
participate in a caring relation and that the caring-one is committed to engrossment and sustainability of the cared-for, an act not contained by limits of time (Noddings, 2013).

Teacher-student relationships must be built upon a foundation of trust, security, and commitment toward fostering a caring relation based on an ethical ideal. This process, in itself, supports a teacher’s ability to naturally care about their students by reflecting upon the responsiveness of the cared-for. The teacher-student relationship is unequal in the sense that the cared-for (student) is seeking to benefit from the caring relation in some way. The teacher, however, is likely to have what the student needs and the ability to provide it. As a result, the teacher and student relationship is somewhat burdened by this fact, and it is here that the child must be comfortable enough to confide in the teacher. Many school based situations, are handled through a cognitive-relational approach which, in a sense, universalizes the situation and abstractly identifies the problem, rather than concretely focusing on the uniqueness of the student and their individual circumstance. In a cognitive-relational approach, the perception of the child is transformed from a person to a problem and a designated ‘somebody’ should be assigned to solve it. This example exemplifies the traditional processes; however, it does not represent a caring relationship or the nurturance of an ethical ideal.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Focus and Limitations

This literature review research aims to provide insight to the benefits of caring teacher-student relationships both in traditional and RTC models, since the research solely related to residential setting is limited. The research conducted will also explore the benefits and risks of developing the relational ideal among resilient youth placed at risk when supportive and unsupportive environments are presented. Finally, a consideration to the emotional balance and labor exhumed by teachers as caregivers of EBD youth is explored. The focus of this literature review is solely related to caring in schools (both traditional and residential); therefore, it is beyond the scope of this review to consider the positive or negative emotional or behavioral effects derived from environments from outside the context of school. In addition, the study recognizes that each situation is unique and that there are perhaps many key participants that contribute to the relational ideal of any particular youth, however, for the purpose of this study, the focus will be primarily on educator’s relationships with students. This literature review will consist of several parts: the environment and community in which residential education exists, the context of care within these environments, the preparation and role of an educator in RTC’s, emotional labor exhumed when working with challenging students, and the role of an emotional-behavioral disability when building caring relationships. While the literature will focus on traditional and non-traditional school models, consideration toward relational caring of youth placed at risk will be present.

Environment and Community in which Residential Education Exist

Recent research conducted by the National Conference of State Legislatures (2014) report that 58,000 American children reside in residential placements, psychiatric institutions, or
emergency shelters. This is a significant increase since 1977 when 30,000 youth were living in residential treatment centers (Carlo, 1985, p.159). The increase in residential placements has been attributed to “decreased access to inpatient treatment and that residential treatment centers increasingly serve as an alternative to inpatient psychiatric care for many seriously emotionally disturbed children and adolescents” (Connor et al., 2004, p.498). In the state of Massachusetts alone, nearly 7,000 children between the ages of birth and 21 are being served by private special education, Chapter 766 schools, through the Massachusetts Association of Approved Private Schools (MAAPS, 2015). Of the 85 schools approved by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education through the state of Massachusetts, 58 of them offer both residential and day treatment services for youth between the ages of 3 and 22. These residential schools often serve the most acute youth in the state who exhibit emotional and behavioral challenges originating from mental health conditions or circumstances of trauma exposure which prevent the youth from participating in less restrictive environments (Zelechoski et al., 2013). Gagnon & Leone (2006) report that there are more youth with emotional and behavioral disorders placed in restrictive settings than any other disability making specialized care critical.

It is through this specialized care that children are provided with treatment and support services in an effort to improve the level of acuity so that children may be placed in less restrictive living and educational settings. While the goal for many of these children is to return to safe and supportive environments within their family structures, the complexities of each situation require that child welfare teams determine if these structures are an appropriate fit or unsuited for each youth (Dvir, Weiner & Kupermintz, 2012; Carlo, 1985). Due to the severity of emotional and behavioral outcomes, many children in RTC’s have had multiple placements for extended periods of time, beginning at very young ages (Connor et al., 2004). As a result, the
residential and day treatment facility becomes a temporary and sometimes long-term home and learning center for youth placed at risk.

While each youth situation is unique, the transitional phase toward a residential treatment center and participating in the day program can be especially challenging for children. Hyde & Kammerer (2009) conducted a study with adolescents revealing their perspectives of, “out of home” placements and found that adjusting to new routines, meeting unfamiliar caretakers, finding a place in which to belong among the other children can all be daunting tasks to a child. In addition, the insecurity related to family and home situations, next placements, and the unexpected instilled a level of discomfort. As a result, caregivers receive varied amounts of training focused on the care and comfort of children and are often prescribed with the responsibility of availing themselves to help a child settle in to his or her new environment (Harder, Knorth, & Kalverboer, 2013). Kagan & Spinazzola (2013) refer to residential treatment as an opportunity to “face the combined challenges of rebuilding or building safe, protective, and nurturing relationships with primary caregivers” (p.707) specifically with traumatized youth. Nonetheless, a placement in residential care can often trigger an emotional, behavioral, or even traumatizing response at the onset provided the rapid and often unexpected environmental change (Confalonieri, Trficante, & Vitali, 2009).

History of Residential Care

Throughout the last century, residential care for youth in the United States has evolved into specialized practices serving a wide range of needs. While residential care was available in the 1920’s, it was utilized primarily as housing for youth who were abused or neglected. The 1940’s era became the turning point for providing mental health care to adolescents in residential care. In the 1970’s and 1980’s, residential treatment facilities identified their role in the mental
health field that was unique from hospitals given the staffing differences, environmental intricacies, and acuity of population served (Magellan, 2008). Since the 1990’s, residential programs have been controversially identified as “community protection” housing the most acute youth for the protection of the community members (Magellan, 2008) while others report that it is a therapeutic learning center for the growth and protection of children (walker.org).

**Relational Barriers**

As with any relationship, building trust and relaying care can be a challenging task. For children in residential care, this task can be especially challenging, mainly due to child and/or familial history, interference with typical development, subdued relationships with caregivers as a result of emotional or behavioral instability, and lack of self-preservation. In some instances, children bear the burden of their environment and are not provided with the care and connectivity required to reach their potential. In other cases, mental and behavioral health concerns may impede the ability of a child to accelerate beyond the scope of their current ability and may require reliance on additional support services. While the value of the family structure fluctuates from situation to situation, one thing that remains constant is that every child has the right to access a healthy lifestyle and caring, supportive adults that will guide them during the phases of early childhood and amid young adulthood by way of developmentally appropriate manifestations.

For a majority of children residing in residential treatment facilities, risk behaviors are evident. Since displacing a child from the home environment can be traumatic experience in itself (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009), it is believed that there is a discrepancy between the actual number of children with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and those who carry the symptoms but have gone undiagnosed (Harr, Horn-Johnson, Williams, Jones, & Riley,
2013). Correlations between traumatic exposure and risk behaviors, as well as internalizing behaviors such as self-harm and suicide attempts, have also been linked in a recent study conducted by Harr, Horn-Johnson, Williams, Jones, & Riley (2013). Relational connection with adults that breed positive characteristics such as “…trust, attention, empathy, availability, affirmation, respect, and virtue” (Harr et al., 2013, p.394) are components of building resiliency among traumatized youth.

Since RTC’s are often specially designed to accept the most challenging youth with complex emotional and behavioral care needs, an exorbitant number of cases reveal specific challenges with relational connectivity. In situations with youth involving distant or non-existent family relationships, it is common for youth to have a “…fear of abomination and difficulties in forming relationships” and are “…living with feelings of total distrust toward all those around [them], especially toward the adult world” (Dvir, Weiner & Kupermintz, 2012, p.296). While the circumstances differ for each child, research suggests that “Children who do not experience a warm relationship during their early years internalize a model of distrust and continue seeking a warm relationship, but have difficulties forming one and making it difficult for others to relate warmly to them” (Dvir et al., 2012, p.286). The prevalence of these challenges poses a threat to the overall success and treatment during a youth’s stay at a RTC.

**Human Value of Authentic Caring Relationships**

The ethic of caring refers to the systems of being cared-for and the one caring as basic human needs, rights, and responsibilities. From this perspective, “To receive and be received, to care and be cared-for: these are the basic realities of human beings and its basic aims” (Noddings, 2013, p.173). The interactions between people and the relationships that are forged are central to shaping an individual’s ethical ideal. It is through this process, that morals and
values develop and nurturing or caring instincts are managed both through longing and ethical responsibility. In most relationships, roles are assumed so that there is at least one-caring and one-cared for member interacting (although not always verbally). Noddings’ supports the notion that the one-caring has something to offer the cared-for whether emotional, social, monetarily, or otherwise. When the relationship is generated and roles determined, often naturally, the caring-one will provide the support, comfort, and dedication necessary to begin the process of full attainment by reaching to accept the perspective of the cared-for. The establishment of such relationships does not justify reciprocity beyond the level of acceptance. After forming a caring relationship, the caring-one serves as a support or a guide for the cared-for and the cared-for response serves as the benefit or acknowledgement of the caring-ones actions.

*Developmental Outlook*

It is widely known that early education experiences through the elementary grades contain a great amount of nurturance through teacher and student relationships. The research contends that at early levels, inclusive classrooms with smaller groups of children afford themselves to improved interpersonal connections where teachers tend to value their relationships with students at heightened levels when compared to those students who have transitioned to the middle or secondary grades (Gehlbach, Brinkworth, & Harris, 2012).

In early childhood, children rely on adults to get their needs met while learning to increase their independence. During typical development, regular interactions with adults reflect nurturance and care during this rapid developmental stage. However, when physiological, social, or familial challenges impede on a child’s ability to grow and develop with normalcy, the social and emotional outcomes can be delayed. Psychologist Abraham Maslow, as cited in McLeod (2014), refers to a hierarchy of needs whereby one cannot reach full attainment until previous
needs have been met. According to this hierarchy, needs must be endured in the following order: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. For many children, like those living in residential care, one or more of these early needs may have been challenged through neglect, trauma, medical diagnosis and stigma, or unsafe living conditions. Erikson’s psychosocial development phases pose trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identify vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and integrity vs. despair as stages of human social development from birth through death (Vogel-Scibilia, McNulty, Baxter, Miller, Dine, & Frese, 2009). In early childhood, the focus is on the first three phases which begin to be supported during infancy. While typical growth and development may reflect these phases, it is not uncommon for those in residential care, especially those with trauma related histories, to exhibit a discrepancy even with the earliest of phases.

During youth years, children typically aim to explore their world with a dependency on adults. A continuation of the psychosocial development phases delve into the relational aspects of this period where self-concept is established and children aim to please the adults who have supported them while exploring boundaries (Erikson, 2008). It is during this time that relationships with peers, typically of the same gender, are established and the early stages of self-exploration are considered. Likewise, a devaluation of reliance on adults will occur if the root cause of concern was initiated through a once trusted relationship. Despite challenges, strong, nurturing, and supportive teachers within classrooms are believed to improve outcomes for youth placed at risk (Spilt, Wu, Hughes, & Kwok, 2012; Meehan, Hughes, Cavell, 2003). In youth who have experienced trauma, maltreatment, or who suffer from an emotional-behavioral disorder, the process of self-exploration and relationship fostering becomes complicated, and
often lost, during this phase. Furthermore, children with histories of traumatic experiences or 
EBD often have a skewed perception of the events occurring on a regular basis due to the 
heightened awareness of self-safety and anxiety. In some cases, a fight or flight stress response 
often seizes a person’s physiological state, preventing the rationalization of thoughts to be 
initiated. Relationships involving the youth can be demanding and complicated (Newberry, 
2010). Exposure to trauma resulting in PTSD has also been studied and reveals that a multitude 
of levels of functioning are often affected and include: language delays, increased aggression, 
emotional dysregulation involving hyperarousal and anxiety, difficulty recognizing facial 
expressions, and difficulty applying an appropriate emotional response (Spates et al., 2007). As 
a result, youth with EBD become increasingly complex as they mature into adolescents.

During the unique period of adolescents, youth are seeking a pathway into adulthood 
socially and will develop bonds and relationships with those who matter most. On a social 
development level, adolescents become decreasingly family-centered and rely more heavily on 
the thoughts and opinions of peers. It is during this transitional period that relational bonds are 
often formulated and choices made with the potential of lasting a lifetime (MacLaury, 1995; Li et 
al., 2011; Ayers, 1994; Li et al., 2011). Optimally, these relationships are built upon healthy 
habits and connections; however, during this period adolescents are often persuaded by peers to 
escape their previous sense of value and morality and in turn, building unsafe relationships, 
where, in exchange, they feel a sense of social-emotional relatedness (Murdock, 1999). These 
relationships, regardless of quality, can become paramount and distinguishing factors in gaining 
a sense of individualism.

Adolescent developmental trends regard relationship building and belongingness to be 
vital for social and emotional growth. However, the environment and culture at the middle level
are often counterproductive to the desired outcomes. Middle school teachers often have many more students for whom they are accountable for teaching in less time and often bring with them more formalized subject matter knowledge and leaving them more distant from their students (Eccles et al., 1993; Gehlbach, Brinkworth, & Harris, 2012). Supporting this claim, Carlisle’s (2011) investigation revealed that:

Middle school students no longer have one teacher with whom they spend the majority of their time; their day is divided into blocks with multiple teachers and new subjects. Middle school teachers teach a greater number of students compared to elementary school teachers and, therefore, many spend less time with individual students and thus have less of a connection with individual students. (p.20)

As a result, many students begin to feel a sense of detachment during transitional periods leading to middle and high school.

*Global School Environment*

Schooling provides a context for social-emotional learning in which peer and staff relations have the potential to influence the lives of children (Black et al., 2010; Cassinerio & Lane-Garon, 2006). This context offers both structured and unstructured opportunities to collaborate with peers while managing the expectations of adults. Within this realm, students have the potential to actively learn and be socially integrated while exploring the expectations that society has placed on education. It is here, that the school can become a nurturing and welcoming environment (Jeffrey, Auger, & Pepperell, 2013; Certo, Cauley, & Chafin, 2003) or one that is isolating (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010; Wilkins, 2008; LaRusso & Selman, 2011; Schultz, 2011) in the view of students.
Within the context of school, some students who are experiencing a lack of emotional connect from the people within the environment, are apathetically seeking a caring and nurturing environment from which they can become reconnected. Others are seeking to avoid the ‘relational ideal’ whereby the relationship is joint and sincere, a culmination of caring-for another as well as accepting the reciprocity of being cared-for (Noddings, 2013). At times, this is for fear of rejection, feeling of unworthiness, or the possibility of further distancing themselves from those seeking the relationship. To replace the need for a relationship, students may appear withdrawn, or conversely, acting out of defiance, exhibiting problematic behaviors in the classroom. In typical schooling environments, a common result would be an office referral for a behavioral disruption. However, this negative consequential impact further distances the student from the school environment and further separates the student from his or her teachers (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Schiff, & BarGil, 2004). While disruptive behavior is problematic, the consequence remains a latent tool that is in itself problematic (Bryan et al., 2012). Students who would benefit from confiding in a caring adult are the ones who may appear least likely to do so. Once the bond is developed and the seal broken, there are endless possibilities to the guidance and support that can be exchanged (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Lemberger & Clemens, 2012). It is during the height of misunderstanding or frustration that a sense of care could be applied and utilized as an opportunity for leading change.

Teacher Expertise

Trained in the profession of special education and child development, day treatment teachers are a prime source for gathering age appropriate data and understanding the social and emotional exchanges of the students they teach. Caring teachers have the potential to make holistic differences in the lives of their students. A nurturing teacher has the ability to take an
interest in the lives of students, develop an attachment to them, and interact with them in an
effort to understand and support their ongoing development (Goldstein & Lake, 2000; Lippke,
2012; Michalas, Morse, Allsopp, & McHatton, 2009). Carnegie Council on Adolescent
Development (1989) supports this idea that “Every student needs at least one thoughtful adult
who as the time and takes the trouble to talk with the student about academic matters, personal
problems, and the importance of performing well” (p.38). Once a supportive and trusting
relationship is forged, students and teachers will be able to interact about the many facets of life
that residential youth endure. As a result, students will be less likely to develop unhealthy and
consequential relationships out of desperation in an effort to feel a sense of emotional
relatedness.

_Making the Connection_

When positive relationships are formed and teachers naturally care about their students as
individuals, the lives of students beyond the context of school become the focus for teaching and
learning. Jackson & Davis (2000) respond through the statement that “…relationships with
adults form the critical pathways for their learning; education ‘happens’ through relationships”
(p.121). The climate of the school transitions from learning-centered to student-centered and the
culture becomes a supportive one (Meece, 2003). In authentic, caring relationships between
teachers and students, the student recognizes that they have a nurturing adult that will be
supportive and take the time to understand and follow up with concerns related to school and life
(Newberg, 1995). This relationship may make the difference between positive and negative
outcomes for a student that will impact them well into adulthood (Davis, 2001). When caring
student-teacher relationships are present, students and teachers alike benefit from a cohesive
school culture that integrates human relations and connection as a fortifying tool for cultivating multi-faceted student learning.

Students developmentally thrive when participating in positive relationships with adults (Carnegie, 1989). Those children that do not have at least one caring adult that they can turn to for guidance are increasingly likely to explore their world in realms that are potentially harmful. With an extraordinary percent of youth placed at risk, presenting themselves as participants of risk behaviors, expressing a disassociation or disengaged from school, and/or making decisions that potentially have negative effects well into adulthood, it is a critical time for educators to rethink school and develop focused criteria that nurtures the child socially, emotionally, and developmentally. While a multitude of studies have been conducted focusing on the need for reform in education that fosters the socio-emotional growth and development of each child, some reflect that schools are intended to foster the academic growth of each child and as a result should not assume the dynamics explored within this research.

Finding Balance

Some critics believe that teachers within a teacher-student relationship should maintain a sense of authority. It is supported that the maintenance of order to ensure the safety and security of all students remain at the forefront of educative systems. However, it should be considered that all beings aim for a sense of belongingness (Maslow, 1943?) and within these systems, nurturing and caring relationships can be fostered by educators while maintaining these aspects. As Noddings (2013) posits that an obstacle in education is formed when the “rational-cognitive approach [is utilized to address problems or concerns]…when we [the teachers] share the justification for our acts and not what motivates and touches us” (p.8). This process is a systematic approach, expecting the student to respond to and emotionally surrender to the teacher
when the teacher does not reflect the same underpinnings. Other critics claim that “The sort of relatedness and caring I [Noddings] have been discussing is often dismissed as impossible because of constraints of number, time, and purpose” (Noddings, 2013, p.179). This idea is refuted through Noddings claim that this is “exactly the kind of caring ideally required of teachers” (Noddings, 2013, p.179).
Chapter III: Methodology

Paradigm

The constructivism-interpretivism paradigm fostered a revealing consideration to the perceived understandings and beliefs of teachers related to caring teacher-student relationships. The aim of this study was to focus on the individual experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and understandings as they related to nurturance and care within the context of school. It is expected that participants will reveal a unique and dynamic set of differences as the researcher collects data and guides discussion. For this purpose, connective dialogue between participant and researcher will be abundant. Constructivism-interpretivism provides the researcher an opportunity to construct meaning from the voices of the participant’s and interpret the data reflexively.

The individuals’ reality is at the root of this study. The perceived understandings, beliefs, and experiences are not common among participants, regardless of whether or not their lived experiences were. This paradigm relies on multiple realities as an individual views it through their unique lens and as the researcher is able to interpret it. Here, it can be assumed that personal history and the events predating the focus of this study are exclusive to the individual and should be subject to examination as such (Ponterro, 2005). Ponterro (2005) continues, “the researcher neither attempts to unearth a single ‘truth’ from the realities of participants nor tries to achieve outside verification of his or her analysis” (p.130).

Research Tradition & Design

Throughout this empirical study, educator voices were heard through descriptions and details pertaining to specific beliefs, understandings, and perceptions about caring teacher-student relationships. Qualitative research methods provided a system of exchange between
participants and the researcher as well as for the interpretative framework of this study (which 
inductively focused on key components of the study) in an effort to build an understanding of the 
perceptions of direct care teachers, an asset that quantitative research would not provide. 
Through this process, acknowledgement of data was to be both inductive and deductive in
 nature. It was hoped that results would provide an improved understanding of the beliefs,
 understandings, and perceived experiences of the participants related to the phenomena of
 authentic caring teacher-student relationships within the context of a residential treatment day
 school.

According to Creswell (2011):

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of 
interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems
addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human
problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging
qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive
to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and
deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or
presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a
complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the
literature or a call for change. (p.44)

In understanding the basis for a qualitative research method, one must consider the
holistic perspective of the participants and make sense of the data collected. This process is
subjective, allowing the researcher to interpret findings and develop connections between data
sets.
Extracting experiences and beliefs from human consciousness related to this complex phenomena will require interaction with and an in-depth understanding of the dynamic systems and holistic perspective that are together synergic. Through the qualitative method, the researcher aimed to gain foundational (concrete) as well dynamic (abstract) data from which analysis will begin. The nature of this study was aimed at Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun’s (2012) five characteristics of qualitative research: (a) the natural setting is the direct source of data, and the research is the key instrument in qualitative research, (b) collected data is in verbal or written form generally free of numbers, (c) the process is as informative as the product, (d) analysis of data is often completed inductively, and (e) the process by which individuals perceive and understand their lives is particularly important to qualitative researchers (p.426-27). The alignment of these characteristics to the study is clear. This study sought to maximize the process of research without concern for statistics. In addition, this study did not aim toward a universal statement that supported all of its participants but rather individualized perspectives and experiences from which to gain a better understanding of the experiences underpinning these relationships; therefore the qualitative method was most appropriate.

In this study, an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach was used to examine how teachers made sense of their relationships with the students they taught within a behaviorally challenging environment. By using this methodology, the study was developed strategically using the guiding principles of IPA. To be considered IPA, a study must utilize a philosophical approach to study an experience, provide a theoretical basis stemming from hermeneutics, and provide rich ideography.

This study examined phenomenon through Husserl’s developed vision. As Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) noted, “[Husserl]… was particularly interesting in finding a means
by which someone might come to accurately know their own experiences of a given phenomenon, and would do so with a depth and rigor which might allow them to identify the essential qualities of that experience” (p.12). This study aimed to examine two-fold the reciprocity of caring which involved children with mental and behavioral disorders and their teachers, as well as an understanding of the emotional labor exhumed when teachers partake in a dual role as caregivers. Through these experiences, one brought to consciousness this experience, viewed it through a kaleidoscope lens, and made meaning of its complexity.

Hermeneutics, known as the theory of interpretation, often has dual purpose within interpretative phenomenological analysis. It is through hermeneutics that the researcher intends to assume the dynamic understandings and experiences (as experienced) of the participant while suppressing preconceptions and relying on the disguised manifestations which develop by bringing these experiences to consciousness. In doing so, the “hermeneutic circle” (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, p.27) provides a model for operating in wholes and parts with versatility offering a dynamic and progressive process encouraging the researcher to transition fluidly among data at various levels with multiple perspectives.

Ideography relates to the “particulars” or details. Within the IPA process, the depth of analysis and the clarity of detail provide an understanding of “…the particular experiential phenomena [that] have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context” (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, p. 29). This level of depth often resulted in a manageable and carefully selected study population where individual cases were analyzed with precision before generalizations were considered.
Participants

This study aimed to recruit at least three out of ten lead teachers considered to be directly responsible for teaching and caring for youth with acute emotional and behavioral challenges from a single private residential and day school in Massachusetts. The purposive sampling strategy involved a request to participate which extended to all of the lead teaching staff at this school serving children ages 4-14. All teaching staff were state licensed teachers in the area of elementary or special education. Licensing information as well as educational experience, and teaching background data was collected during the interview process, while determining if this area may influence or signify an ability to build authentic relationships with this population of children. Socio-economic status, race, and other privatized information, were not used as a basis for recruiting participants nor conducting the study and therefore was not collected.

Recruitment & Access

Recruitment of lead teachers at this private, special education school in Massachusetts required permission from the CEO and the VP of Performance Improvement. According to their policy this was the initial step in conducting a study at this organization. Access to the CEO and VP of Performance Improvement, as well as lead teachers were provided through employment at this location. Once in receipt of these permissions, the recruitment letter was electronically sent to each of the lead teachers at this residential day school. Recruits were provided with a timeline of five business days to decide if they were interested in participating. Upon interest, a mutually agreed meeting time and location was established to conduct the interview.

One ethical consideration to be made within this study is that the researcher is a member of the administrative team while the participants are members of the teaching team. The
participants are not directly supervised by the researcher; however, it should be considered that some participants may not wish to participate given the positional discrepancy.

Protection of Human Subjects

The internal review board was jointly responsible for ensuring the projection of human subjects and their participation in research. The researcher aimed to protect human subjects by maintaining a high level of ethical consideration in reference to this study. This study involved the participation of four educators of emotional and behavioral students placed at risk within a day school at a residential treatment facility. Pseudonyms were created for all participants and other names noted within the study to protect the identity of participants. The site and participants remained confidential throughout the study, during analysis, and when reporting the results. All hard copies of data collected will be securely disposed of six months following the successful completion of the thesis defense. As a condition of the study, withdrawal from participation would have been granted upon request, although all participants continued through the process.

Data Collection and Storage:

Interviews

Lead teachers were interviewed, individually, for approximately ninety minutes. During this time, the researcher and participant met in a neutral location for both the researcher and the participant. The space was well lit and provided a table and chairs, Wi-Fi connection for recording purposes, and a door which minimized noise levels and protected the privacy of interviewees. The interview time was established outside of the regular school day and did not interfere with the participants’ professional responsibilities.
Each of the interview sessions were electronically recorded using two devices, a digital voice recorder, as well as, a pre-installed voice-recording software program available on a 4G password protected accessible device. The information was transferred to an external drive prior to transcription. The external drive was kept in a home office in a locked file cabinet. Following transfer, the interviews were transcribed by the researcher and kept on file for six months following the completion of thesis defense, at which time the data files will be erased from the hard drive and confirmed by the researcher.

The data collected from the interviews was analyzed using a qualitative data analysis software organization tool, MAXQDA. This program allowed the researcher to organize the data into themes, code the data, collect analytic memos, and highlight key information. This software program required a username and password which was available only to the researcher. The committee advising this project may request to review the data, copies protecting the anonymity of the participants will be provided. A copy of the password was securely stored and will be shredded six months after a successful thesis defense.

*Interview Guides*

To address the research questions posed through this research, the researcher developed a semi-structured, in-depth interview guide. The interview was established in three parts: (1) opening with structured and semi-structured questions, (2) central focus with semi-structured and open-ended questions, and (3) closing with semi-structured questions. The most in-depth portion of the interview will be the center to allow for a “warm-up” and “cool-down” to occur at the start and completion of the interview session. The flexible interview guide consisted of
(approximately) 20 pre-formed questions although additional thought provoking questions were asked throughout the interview process.

**Data Analysis and Coding**

The triangulation of data sets collected from interviews provided a basis for analysis. According to Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun (2012) triangulation “…improves the quality of the data that are collected and the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations” (p.517). The transcription of all data and transfer to electronic format was completed solely by the researcher conducting the study. The transcriptions were transferred from audio recordings to a data analysis program, MAXQDA as well as Microsoft Word. In establishing these documents, there was a three-column organization strategy used to maintain data and notes. In the first column, the raw transcribed data will be inputted, in column two – preliminary codes, and in column three- final codes. A codebook will be utilized to maintain accurate records of the inclusions and exclusions of the codes throughout the process (Saldana, 2009). In addition, analytic memos will be recorded by the researcher to maintain accurate reflection of the coding process including patterns, categories, questions, concerns, highlights, connections, and subcategories.

*Initial Coding*

Prior to initial coding processes, the transcribed documents were transferred to an electronic qualitative coding source MAXQDA. This online tool was designed to allow a researcher to utilize a variety of coding and categorizing strategies while supporting the process of reallocating data and adjusting codes as the interpretation of the data is formulated. The first-cycle coding process was able to lend itself to Initial Coding, synonymous with Open Coding whereby “breaking qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing
them for similarities and differences” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998 as cited in Saldana, 2009, p.81).

Grbich (2007) instructs that “open coding involves word by word, line by line analysis questioning the data in order to identify concepts and categories which can then be dimensionalized” (p.74).

During first cycle coding, a combination of structural, descriptive, and In Vivo coding processes were implemented. According to Saldana (2009) structural coding uses “question based codes” (p.67) that were used as a filing system for labeling data and identifying themes within a data set. Descriptive coding methods were derived from a single word or phrase that summarized a piece of data by lending itself to a particular topic. In Vivo coding “refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record” this type of coding process allowed for the “honor of participant’s voice” (Saldana, 2009, p.74). The use of In Vivo codes were applicable for sections of text that would not benefit from immediate interpretation thus encapsulating the idea or expression of the participant with articulation. In some cases, a single data set was coded using multiple variations of the coding process among a variety of themes; this is referred to as the process of simultaneous coding (Saldana, 2009, p.62).

**Second Cycle Coding**

Upon completion of initial coding processes, data underwent second cycle coding. This was used to “develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization for your array of First Cycle Codes” (Saldana, 2009, p.149). During this stage, the interview question guide was dismantled, aligned with the research questions, and reviewed, question-by-question. The transcribed observation notes were also aligned with the research questions in an effort to focus the data and categorically and thematically organize the data for further analysis.
Axial Coding

Axial Coding was used to “strategically reassemble the data that were ‘split’ or ‘fractured’ during the Initial Coding Process” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, as cited in Saldana, 2009, p. 159). As Glaser & Strauss (1967) advise “categories should not be so abstract as to lose their sensitizing aspect, but yet must be abstract enough to make [the emerging] theory a general guide to multi-conditional, every-changing daily situations” (as cited in Saldana, 2009, p.161). Here a constant-comparative analysis was utilized as a way of arranging data in meaningful ways. Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun (2012) indicate that the constant-comparative method was a “continual interplay between the researcher [and] his or her data…potential categories for grouping items of data are created, tried out, and discarded until a ‘fit’ between theory and data is achieved” (p.434).

From the initial composition of transcribed data, codes, categories, and themes were inductively and deductively presented. According to Saldana (2009) it is common for a researcher to have 80-100 codes that translate to 15-20 categories and 3-8 themes. At the conclusion of the coding process, the data was presented in logical manner that aimed to preserve the integrity and voice of its participants.

Sampling Strategy

The sample consisted of four lead educators of behaviorally and emotionally acute youth receiving residential care and treatment. The participants reflected a homogeneous sample which refers to a group of participants that “possess a common trait or characteristic” (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2013, p.436). By choosing a purposive sample, the researcher was limited in knowing for sure if the participants in actuality represent or are qualified to represent a sample
(Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2013). Through this process the researcher was able to identify “a more closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant” (Smith & Osborn, 2007). In interpretative phenomenological analysis, “a distinctive feature…is its commitment to a detailed interpretative account of the cases included and many researchers are recognizing that this can only realistically be done on a very small sample” (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p.56). Smith & Osborn (2007) recommend a range of one to more than fifteen participants, with three justified as the targeted number. They argue that three “allows sufficient in-depth engagement with each individual case but also allows a detailed examination of similarity and difference, convergence and divergence” (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p.57). As a result, ten lead teachers were invited to participate in the study; however, four was the targeted number thus accounting for the mortality rate.

The external validity of this study was limited due to the perceptions and experiences of participants which are unlikely to be replicated under the same circumstances in other samples. However, the overarching themes and description of authentic caring teacher-student relationships are expected to be identifiable among other high-risk populations under similar circumstances. The fact that youth development is fairly consistent and that the nature of teacher-student relationships are present across all levels, limited generalizability of this study should be maintained and considered among residential day schools.

This study sample was limited to a small group of participants within a private residential treatment day school. The sample was derived from a specific, targeted population that share common characteristics, without replicating the study using a variance in population, this study is limited to concluding information about the value and process of the understandings and beliefs associated with building authentic caring relationships between teachers and youth with
acute behavioral and emotional considerations. This sample was drawn from a single school population and therefore participants were likely to share commonalities such as: level of education, desire to work with special education students at acute levels, expectations, professional development exposure, and student population. As a result, it was possible that many of the school driven experiences were similar, although they are expected to be perceived uniquely.

**Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of a qualitative study lies upon the researcher’s duty to explore and implement a variety of measures to ensure the validity of the study. This study utilized the triangulation method involving: (1) author analytic memos, (2) peer review and member checking and (3) as well as rich description. This systematic approach to collecting, comparing, and validating data ensures that this study remains trustworthy.

In peer review, the researcher will identify a peer researcher of qualitative research in the area of education. The peer reviewer was responsible for reviewing the presented raw data and following a systematic process for coding. The codes were then compared to those of the researcher with special consideration toward all thematic discrepancies. Furthermore, the peer reviewer reviewed sections of the drafted document to ensure that the researcher refrained from biased claims. This process ensures that the researcher is presenting the data thoughtfully with attention to various perspectives.

Member checking involved the opportunity for participants to review their transcribed data to ensure that their voices were transcribed and understood with accuracy and clarity. This process provided the participants with ample opportunity to review the transcripts derived from
interview data. Participants received a copy of their transcribed data, adjusted for anonymity, and were asked to review and propose changes for clarity on the transcription thus having the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings. Feedback was accepted according to the proposed timeline and changes were developed in accordance with the participation agreement.

The researcher was actively taking measures to ensure that this study was rigorous. From transcription through coding and presentation, the researcher aimed to provide a malleable depiction of the data through analytic memos. Analytic memos were utilized during the induction phases of research and served as a resting point for determining a current status. In the case of qualitative research, it is critical that a research reflect on data throughout the process as opposed to awaiting completion of the data collection process. Analytic memos assisted the researcher in addressing various research questions or interview questions while beginning to ascertain directionality with support from data collected throughout the process.

In interpretative phenomenological studies, the trustworthiness depended both on the reliance of participants ability to effectively communicate their perspectives and for the researcher to accurately and adequately interpret such results.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The aim of this study was to understand and interpret the relational caregiving experiences of lead teachers within a residential day program in Massachusetts. To explore this area, this interpretative phenomenological analysis study was led by the following question:

(1) What are residential teachers’ understandings and experiences of the relational caregiving of students with emotional-behavioral disabilities?

Four lead teachers participated in this study. Each of the teachers had between four months and five years of teaching experience and were in possession of a teaching license certified in either elementary and/or special education. Two of the four teachers were in possession of a master’s degree while the other two held a bachelor’s degree. Each of the participants were current faculty members leading multi-grade classrooms between kindergarten and grade eight. None of the participants recall having participated in or being offered coursework in the areas of either social-emotional learning or emotional-behavioral disabilities. All four participants also revealed that they felt inadequate to lead a classroom of students with challenges to the caliber necessary at the start of their career. As a result, they turned to mentoring, coaching, and supervision to gain the skills necessary to develop and enforce behavioral plans, process incidents with students, and collaborate with a team of professionals that each shared a perspective on the best approaches to take to improve the outcomes for each student. To protect the identity of participants, a pseudonym was assigned to each participant. (Table 1).
Table 1.  
*Participant Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lead Teacher</th>
<th>Length of employment in lead teacher role</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Certification</th>
<th>Grade level taught</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meghan</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Elementary / Special Education</td>
<td>K-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacy</td>
<td>4 years (2 years, left for 1 year, returned for 2 more years)</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>4-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>&lt;0.5 years</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
<td>K-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macy</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Bachelor’s / Pending Master’s</td>
<td>Elementary / Special Education</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the analysis of transcripts, three subordinate and ten nested subthemes surfaced which encapsulated how lead teachers perceived their relational experiences with students who have emotional-behavioral disorders (EBD). Each of the participants shared insight within each of the subordinate and nested themes although the lived experiences of each participant varied based on a several variables involving both the lead teacher as a caregiver and the student’s acceptance of the relationship.

Each of the subordinate themes was conceptually developed from a broad description of the relational histories of the teacher-student relationships that were discussed. In addition, ten nestled themes were established through the interpretations of and responses from participants. The themes were: (1) Understanding the Building Blocks of Caring Teacher Relationships (1.1) mindsets on prioritizing and managing levels of care, (1.2) thoughts on unique identifiers in support of caring relationships, (1.3) beliefs surrounding an acceptance of care, (1.4) beliefs surrounding a non-acceptance of care, and (1.5) contributing components perceived to critically impact quality of care; 2) Viewpoints of the Experience of Balancing the Dual Roles of Teachers
as Educators and Caregivers (2.1) the role identity of the educator-caregiver, (2.2) perceived benefits and challenges associated with the identification of balance, (2.3) educator-caregiver understandings of the challenges associated with obtaining balance), and 3) Recognizing the Personal and Unique States of Emotional Labor (3.1) awareness of emotional resilience and expulsion and (3.2) supports). Both the subordinate and nested themes as well as inclusions within each area are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

*Subordinate and Nested Theme Table*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subordinate</th>
<th>Nested</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the Building Blocks of Caring Teacher and EBD Student Relationships</td>
<td>1.1 Mindsets on Prioritizing and Managing Levels of Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Identifying needs, managing behaviors, reaching goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2 Thoughts on Unique Identifiers in Support of Caring Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Trust, quality time together, established expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3 Beliefs Surrounding an Acceptance of Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Ways in which acceptance is portrayed and what this means for a growing relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.4 Beliefs Surrounding a Non-acceptance of Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How a caring relationship is prevented, suggested reasons why this may be, and what this means for making relational gains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.5 Contributing Components Perceived to Critically Impact Quality of Care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Impact of consistency, quality of connection, maintaining balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewpoints of the Experience of Balancing the Dual Roles of Educators as Caregivers</td>
<td>2.1 The Role Identity of the Educator-Caregiver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Role identity, characteristics of caring teachers, and establishing a classroom culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2 Perceived Benefits and Challenges Associated with the Identification of Balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Complexities of teaching and caregiving and the benefits and problems in practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.3 Educator-Caregiver Understandings of the Challenges Associated with Obtaining Balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Challenges in establishing an authentic connection as an educator and/or caregiver and what this means for students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recognizing the Personal and Unique States of Emotional Labor

3.1 Awareness of Emotional Resilience and Expulsion
- Recognizing when a situation is emotionally driven and the reflection of practice and application of dedication toward a change in practice

3.2 Approaches to a Supportive Environment
- Opportunities for support that are necessary for teacher retention within this unique environment

Context

The context under which this study was developed, delves into an understanding of who the study participants are as well as their perspectives on varying qualities of relationships with their students through the lens of Nodding’s’ (2005) Theory of Care. The focus of this area utilizes Nodding’s’ relational ideal as a basis for distinguishing between the caring-one and cared-for as a means of identifying the roles of the lead teacher and students. It also provides a basis for which each of the subsequent themes are formed.

The relational caregiving of students relies on a growing understanding of the child as an individual and serves to support the identification and maintenance of their needs within a therapeutic setting. A wide variety of students from throughout the state and beyond attend this campus. They arrive with a mixture of diagnosis(s), family complexities, historical considerations, contributing biological and psychological factors, environmental and situational elements, and personal belief systems. Through a complex process, lead teachers aim to provide a quality education as well as emotional and behavioral support while meeting their needs holistically. With varying levels of expertise within the field, lead teachers participated in semi-structured interviews which navigated a spectrum of relational qualities with students since the beginning of their careers. To best understand the complexities of these relational aspects, it is
critical that we first navigate some of the challenges that lead teachers believe have placed students at risk.

For the purpose of this study, lead teachers shared insight to the teacher-student relationship among a wide range of children. The teachers explored their relationships with students, who ranged from grades 2-8 and were both male and female. The relationships explored involved students who were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), as well as Anxiety and Mood Disorders. All of the relationships explored involved students that exhibited aggressive or oppositional behaviors toward staff and/or peers and included a range of physical, behavioral, emotional, psychological, and social challenges.

Participants were asked to discuss, in depth, their experiences among two relationships; one relationship they felt was very positive and the other that was challenging to form and perhaps never fully developed. Of the four positive relationships, three of the children were residentially placed while one remained a day student (see student #1). Of the four challenging relationships, all of the students were noted to be day students, and all but one (see student #6) was described as living in a complicated situation. Table 3 was developed to represent a visual model of the teacher-student relationship as it pertains to positive and negative perspectives of the relationship, family involvement, and complexities that must be considered while building a relationship.
# | Lead Teacher | Identified as a Positive or Negative Relationship | Residential or Day Student | Family Involvement | Areas of Concern / Exposure / Focus |
---|---|---|---|---|---|
#1 | Hope | Positive | Day | Resides with grandmother, biological mother has visitation | -Exposed to drug use, overdose - Witnessed biological mother being arrested |
#2 | Macy | Positive | Residential | State custody, infrequent visitation by biological mother and brother | -Victim of sexual abuse in previous placement -Exposure to drug abuse - History of neglect |
#3 | Meghan | Positive | Residential | Adoptive family visitation frequent, biological mother gave up rights | -Adopted into a family that already had custody of her younger sibling -Family involvement in prostitution, unclear what the student was exposed to |
#4 | Stacy | Positive | Residential | Adoptive family sought out connection, traumatized by student aggression toward the family | -Resided in residential placements for years - Aggression made living elsewhere a challenge |
#5 | Hope | Negative | Day | Resides with biological mother and sister, no known contact with biological father | -Unstable living situation - Mother struggles to maintain child within the home environment, has refused additional supports noting they are not helpful |
#6 | Macy | Negative | Day | Resides with biological mother and father and siblings | -No known trauma history - Parents invested in child’s education - Student behavior status quo at home contrary to observations within the school environment |
#7 | Meghan | Negative | Day | Resides with biological mother, biological father in and out of the house frequently, instability | -Unsafe community -Complicated relationship between parents - Feelings of insecurity - Witnessed violence - Self-entertains through video games - Regularly truant - Difficult to communicate between home and school |
#8 | Stacy | Negative | Day | Resides with biological parents | -Negative self-perceptions - Feeling others were mocking him which resulted in him being tougher and angrier -Previously negative school experiences |
Each of the lead teachers explained that the factors and influences that encompass the lives of these children prior to and while attending this campus were crucial in understanding the fundamental elements serving as a starting point for building relationships. By investigating the histories of these youth, a framework was developed from which the need and approach for care could be considered. Lead teacher experiences supported the idea that the ability to support a student changes considerably when the circumstances under which a child is raised is deeply understood. Throughout this study, lead teachers sought to explore their feelings toward the initial phases of relational development.

An introduction to Hope, a first year teacher, explores her understanding of a single meaningful experience from the onset of her relational caregiving with a student. On Hope’s first day with a new student, Hope knew very little about the person that she would begin to develop a relationship. In the moment, she was not aware of the exposure and negative experiences that had an impact on the child’s emotional and behavioral outbursts as well as their learning abilities. The relationship became transformative once Hope had accessed the available information and began making connections between his prior experiences and the responses he had to his environment. She was able to begin developing proactive responses to the child’s needs and was able to act as an advocate by consulting with the team and addressing his concerns.

I actually wasn’t aware of his home stuff when we started. I read things on agency files within a couple of weeks of starting. I learned that he was born addicted to drugs and that mom, at the time, was in an abusive relationship. Mom was only 19, Dad was in Tennessee. I learned that grandma (when the student was a few months old), took Mom and the baby to Massachusetts and
stayed with them. I learned that mom was in and out of the picture throughout his early childhood and that nine months prior to starting at [this school]; he had witnessed his mother overdosing at a playground…the playground where he was expected to go to school. That was a very scary experience for him. During that summer, mom was arrested… and was put in jail. At that point, he was not in regular contact with mom. He was asking when he would be able to talk to mom on the phone. (Hope, 2016).

After learning this information, Hope was able to approach the student with a foundation of knowledge which allowed her to adjust her practice to adapt to the students’ needs within the classroom environment. In this particular instance, insight was provided to areas of concern, a need for a caring relationship was recognized, triggering topics were considered academic and therapeutic gains were sought. By conducting this research and taking an approach that is conducive to the child’s needs, Hope’s belief was that she was better able to connect to the student from the onset which is believed to have contributed to a positive teacher-student relationship.

Likewise, Macy was able to identify a student who also had a significant trauma history and was able to begin building a relationship with a student who she identified as “high need” after learning about his history. This case signifies the level of care that lead teachers must support both therapeutically and academically within this residential day school.

He comes from a family who had a lot of trouble with drugs and neglect. I think the biggest challenge with that is that he was in a different program before now with a little bit of older boys, he was nine at the time. One of the older boys who
I believe was twelve or thirteen actually raped him. So he was in an emergency placement and so he was just shipped here right after that. That was the biggest thing. He went through a lot of violence in his home; his mother went through that with him. Mom isn't super stable enough to care for him because she struggles to care for herself. (Macy, 2016).

Macy understood her role in this relationship as a safe, secure, and nurturing role-model who serves as the most consistent adult in many of her students’ lives. She felt as though the students that she served were undeserving of this livelihood and repeatedly mentioned wanting more for them and ensuring the needs of her students were met.

While student situations are unique, Meghan sought out environmental challenges beyond the classroom, in an effort to identify underlying causes of her students’ behaviors. In addition, the consistency and persistence within the classroom alerted the classroom that the learning challenges were behind the behaviors.

I think that if you ask anyone who was here at the time, everyone would tell the same story. He was twelve years old from a section-eight housing neighborhood, in the projects and this is important because the community itself was very unsafe. He was actually suspended several times for threatening to put bombs in my car and threatening to shoot up the school. And in general, he had some really serious learning disabilities. He was also much more motivated by social stuff rather than his education because learning was hard. So once he found a body, he would latch on to that body and together they would wreak havoc on the school. There were a lot of things that went on but the biggest thing is that he had some serious
learning disabilities. He was very self-conscious. He didn't like to get things wrong. So when he got to something where there was a possibility of getting something wrong it was better to avoid it than get it wrong. (Meghan, 2016).

As a result, all four participants addressed their understandings and beliefs necessary to support the whole child by providing a balance of education and caregiving in accordance with the level of need a child had in the moment. In all interviews, participants addressed the emotional need to bolster levels of self-worth and to assist students in identifying their contribution and/or purpose.

As Stacy (2016) explains,

“I think that some students that we work with really come to us thinking that they are worthless and that they’re nothing and that people don’t care about them, based on maybe some of their past experiences or things that they’ve done.” Teachers perceive their relationships as necessary, if learning is going to take place and if the “real work” of emotional-behavioral growth is to prosper.

**Understanding the Building Blocks of Caring Teacher and EBD Student Relationships**

This theme explores the teacher-student relationship from core understandings and beliefs to realizations that are actually placed on teachers as caregivers within a residential day school. Lead teacher responses revealed five nested sub-themes to be reviewed in this section (1.1 mindsets on prioritizing and managing levels of care, 1.2 understandings of unique identifiers in support of caring relationships, 1.3 beliefs surrounding an acceptance of care, 1.4 beliefs surrounding a non-acceptance of care, and 1.5 contributing components perceived to critically
impact quality of care) each proving depth and clarity through their perspectives and the understandings of the researcher.

The building blocks of a caring relationship were thematically critical because they provided a basis for understanding the extent to which students required care, how these needs were recognized and approached, and the responsiveness of teachers toward student needs (see figure 1). These building blocks also provided a basis for investigation into the initiation and maintenance of relationships that were considered positive and those that were challenging. As referenced by participants, several influences controlled the extent to which teachers felt responsible for providing an educator-caregiving experience beyond an ethical responsibility.

Figure 1. Building Blocks of Caring Teacher-Student Relationships

Mindsets on Prioritizing and Managing Levels of Care

Universally, lead teachers reported that students arrived with a range of challenges and abilities. Absence of family, complex living situations, trauma (stemming from abuse, neglect,
unfortunate life events, or uncontrollable situations), disability and/or diagnosis (emotional, behavioral, psychological), and negative self-image are just some of the factors which influenced their need for care. The classrooms which children attend serve a wide range of ages, grades, abilities, and backgrounds. As a result, teachers must manage a variety of needs simultaneously in an effort to ensure that all students are receiving the social, emotional, and physical care they need to successfully access the curriculum.

Participants believed that caregiving was an essential tool within the residential day program setting and therefore they aimed to provide the level of care necessary for students to access their education at or beyond their ability level. Teachers were certain that if students were not in the frame of mind to learn their academic curricula their social-emotional and behavioral challenges were the first to be addressed so that the student would be able to improve their focus while engaging in the process of learning.

To prepare students in an engagement of learning, their social-emotional and behavioral needs were often observed and assessed. The lead teachers utilized the learned information while beginning the process of establishing relational caregiving by providing the student with the support necessary to ensure that their needs were met. Under some circumstances, teachers understood that it was possible to conduct social-emotional and behavioral work simultaneously while assessing students learning preferences.

One lead teacher, Hope, explained the subtleties of her initial encounter with a student who was quiet and shy. She aimed to provide the support and comfort that this day student required without waiting to be prompted or directed. Realizing that the student had been through a difficult time, she targeted stability and trust at the onset simply by placing herself next to the
student as a ready and able body when the student needed her. As a result, she was able to assess the students’ needs and abilities while initiating a relationship based on need and an unspoken understanding of the other. Also, by cycling through the building block process (Figure 1), Hope came to the realization that the students’ needs had changed as the relationship grew and, as a result, changes to practice were in order.

And so I think part of it was seeing that the child was very shy and closed off and knowing what I would've liked for an adult to have done for me. It wasn't even a lot of talking, it was just me being a person in the area who was available and who could even just look over to see if the child was struggling with something and offering help before even being asked because in these situations it is hard to ask unfamiliar people for things or even to tell them your name. (Hope, 2016).

Based on Hope’s understanding of the situation, the social-emotional arena became a target for focus based on observational findings. Specifically, she believed that this student’s negative self-esteem and self-worth were creating a barrier to both the relationship and effective schooling. This student’s need for care was obvious to Hope from the onset.

As a quieter person, he does not like it when adults immediately raise their voice and he has a negative self-image. Instead, I redirect him to having positive thoughts or doing positive things. (Hope, 2016).

The teacher felt that positive reinforcement and opportunities for praise initiated the process of maintaining the relationship even in the very early stages of establishment. The remarks were intended to preserve the work that had already been expended through the relationship serving as milestones or place holders on the continuum of care. As time went on,
additional life-happenings began to affect the way the child presented in the classroom intensifying the need for an educator-caregiver relationship. As a result, Hope began to adjust her practice to accommodate the needs of the student in an effort to preserve the relationship.

He was spending a lot of time in the classroom settling room and required a lot of flexibility on our part. To say, “hey you can just go sit in the settling room if you are feeling too overwhelmed to be in the classroom right now”. I think the level of care changed because the things happening in his life were dramatically different and the things happening in his life directly impact the way we interact with him as well as things happening in all of my students lives impact the things that are happening and the way we interact with them because obviously a student who is going through a tough time at home is going to be acting differently at school. (Hope, 2016).

In contrast, when limited research or effort is emphasized during the initial stages of relational caregiving, the outcomes are believed to negatively impact the relationship. When a child is newly assigned to a classroom after the year has begun, they are particularly vulnerable and it is believed that this is an opportune time to begin establishing the relationship by ensuring the students’ needs are met and by sharing routines and learning about one another. It is likely that the student will, by nature of the transition, be more heavily reliant on the staff in the classroom to provide guidance and instruction related to daily expectations and activities.

From the same classroom, another day student that had just been transitioned into the classroom (toward the end of the school year) was received in a different manner. The intensive investigative prospects that had been applied at the onset for the previous student (positive
relationship) were not similarly applied upon admittance to the classroom for this student
(negative relationship) and was considered by the teacher to be a factor in the challenges exposed
within this teacher-student relationship.

I mean to be honest, I don't know that much about his past. I know that he
transitioned to [the classroom] and that it was sudden and I feel like I don’t know
him as well and the past six weeks, not that this is an excuse for not reading all
the information about him, but they have been crazy. So I know what I've heard
anecdotally but I have not officially read any things about him although I was
asked to fill out things for a neuro-psych evaluation recently which I think I was
definitely able to do that accurately. I checked in with [previous classroom] about
a couple of things but it all led to executive functioning difficulty from what I
interpret it. (Hope, 2016).

All children who attend [this school] require some level of educator-caregiver need. In
this example, as a matter of default and circumstance, child was welcomed primarily from an
educator perspective with the intent that the caregiving aspect would occur naturally over time.
However, analysis of the data derived from the interviews revealed that if the lead teacher did
not provide a level of comfort and support at the onset of the relationship, the relationship was
much more likely to be viewed as a challenging or negative one as revealed by this lead teacher.

In Macy’s reflection of her relational experiences both positive and negative, she
challenged the notion of a need for care. Throughout participant recount, one recurring message
was to supply the amount of care necessary for a child to succeed, no more - no less. By
providing more care than a child needs, she felt that a level of dependency was established and
believed it to be non-therapeutic. On the other hand, providing inadequate levels of support can lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and failure which Macy also believed to be categorically non-therapeutic. At the onset of a relationship, the teacher must rely on prior knowledge and experience in an effort to gauge the level of need and modality for approaching these needs. However, this teacher understands that she must exercise a level of uncertainty and flexibility so as to approach the relationship with care while learning new information and adjusting her professional practice to fit the current needs of the student. Macy shares two examples of her initial assessments and approaches to working with children who have vastly different circumstances.

In the first relationship (positive), Macy recalled meeting the student for the first time and having reviewed the historical information that arrived with the student.

I knew his background. I knew his history and what he was going through. I also knew he had been residential for so long. I also knew where he was behaviorally a year ago so I saw how much caring relationships had really changed him for the better. So I think that I knew he needed that relationship to continue being successful here. (Macy, 2016).

Upon identifying a need she aimed to bond with him quickly, on the journey to building a trusting relationship. Shortly after getting to know the student, she reported:

He's the sweetest, most caring person up there that I know. He cares so deeply for people which I find to be rare here. I think that a lot of kids here have attachment issues because of their trauma. I feel like he genuinely cares for people and develops really solid, genuine relationships…He is sensory overload so he
struggles a lot keeping his body calm, keeping his body from moving in general, keeping his mind from moving, keeping his thoughts calm. So he needs a lot of support doing that, he needs, he is a really smart kid although he is a little behind but he is a smart kid and he enjoys learning, he does well in our academic times. He needs a really positive, he has really positive peer relationships and he is a really great friend. He definitely has those big downs though, his tolerance for anger is very low, he's very quick to react and in a very violent way. When he gets overheated, he gets angry; if he gets too silly, he gets angry. That usually ends in physical aggression, there's a lot of posturing. He has ADD and PTSD. (Macy, 2016).

In this instance, Macy relied on transparency between her understanding of the reported information and the level of need exhibited by the student. This cycle of information prepared Macy to recognize the needs of the students and respond in a way that was both therapeutic and caregiving. The student was also able to access the curriculum and improve academically as a result of the teacher-student relationship and Macy’s ability to utilize the relationship to build a trust with the student in turn encouraged academic risk-taking and thus success.

Within the same classroom, Macy struggled to connect with a student who had transferred into the classroom with an urging sense that this student (negative relationship) was unable to recognize the high level of support he had (at home), a contrast to the other students in the classroom. Macy explains that she was “Trying every possible thing that I can possibly do because he is not an aggressive kid, he comes from a great family, and he doesn’t have the trauma that I described with the other kid.” While she admits that she had provided a wide variety of supports and motivators, she began to assume that her efforts would not benefit the
student as she believed things always had a way of becoming insufficient, especially when positive efforts were twisted into something negative. As a result, she created distance between herself and the student.

He is someone that I can see transitioning out quickly. But at the same time, it is so frustrating because you try and I know that he doesn’t want to be here but every time we try to teach him how to be a student what it’s going to look like to be in a public school or collaborative and being a student includes all of the things like: no talking, so side conversations, raising your hand, not swearing at the teacher, not being unbelievably rude and he just didn't get that. (Macy, 2016).

However, when reflecting upon her practice and experiences, Macy indicated that, “No matter what class I have, there’s always someone that just needs. You can tell that they need a little extra love to get by and succeed.” (Macy, 2016). She feels pride when she is providing for her.

In Meghan’s shared experience, the level of care is greater when children are the bystanders of unsound circumstances. When children have familial assets that cease for no cause of the child, the process is difficult for children to understand. In these cases, growing teacher-student relationships are essential for the emotional growth of the student.

I'm thinking of two separate instances with two separate kids where they had families at home and siblings then all of sudden they had nothing. It really breaks my heart, it’s not fair to these kids, and they are so innocent and so loveable and so needy that they can't count on anyone and that just effects them so much more
that they have to go through this. And the times like holidays and certain things that you just take for granted. (Meghan, 2016).

Stacy’s perspective on the level of care students need is simply put, “Most children go home to receive the additional support they need but [most of] our kids don’t.” As a residential day school, Stacy is accompanied by many students in need of a significant level of care. She identified one particular girl to highlight how she knew a student was in need of a caring relationship.

She was adopted. She had sort of been in residential placement for a very long time. She was extremely aggressive at home and her parents were traumatized by her behavior. So I think that although they wanted to sort of be connected and be close with her, there wasn’t that connection. So I think she was in need of a caring relationship. (Stacy, 2016).

Collectively, participants recognized the lack of family involvement and engagement the primary identifier of students who require a teacher-student caregiving relationship. In managing their care, students are often prioritized based on level of need in the moment. While reunification with families has its own set of challenges, costs and benefits, lead teachers aim to provide the security and care student’s require while awaiting a more promising verdict.

**Potential Triggers**

Many children experience frustrations or triggers that can lead to aggressive behaviors, self-depreciating behaviors, and contribute to a negative self-image. Each of the participants shared several known triggers that alter student behavior which often rely on sound relationships to return to baseline. One of the key messages among participants was to identify problematic
situations before they occur thus empowering the lead teacher to circumvent the situation prior to an incident. In some cases, identifying the problem was obvious while in other situations it was multi-layered and complex often requiring exploratory measures.

On a daily basis, Hope relied on her positive relationship with a student to bypass peer led incidents. Some investigative work was necessary to identify the root cause of this student who was having difficulty with peers, frequently aimed to isolate himself, and who often became frustrated with other adults in the room. This investigation led her to understand a commonality among those he cared about; his mother, his lead teacher, and his clinician were all pregnant and soon to expect the arrival of their babies. He frequently became aggressive toward these pregnant women, an unusual behavior for this student. As the expecting staff began to go on maternity leave, he became increasingly triggered by his peers revealing a low tolerance for those he considered friends.

I think it changed last November when his teacher, his clinician, and his mom were all pregnant and due within a few weeks of each other. He was having a really hard time last fall just with the impending births of all of these babies and the uncertainty of it. (Hope, 2016).

Hope sought to improve the relationship between the two of them in an effort to build a trusting relationship; she perceived that the relationship had been successful. An understanding was reached between teacher and student that fostered the ongoing growth and development of the student during this difficult time. The classroom team was able to develop a plan with the student to ensure that his needs were met, that he had a method for sharing information that he
was concerned about, and was offered an opportunity to utilize the settling room as he saw fit as a way of allowing himself space from the group without having to exhibit aggressive behaviors.

When these children feel that there is a heightened level of risk or that something important to them is in jeopardy, they will often respond with, “fight or flight”. Lead teachers reported learning the triggers of students in an effort to minimize the occurrence of behaviors and emotional outbursts.

In Macy’s story, her student has become very protective of her. When he anticipates that she could potentially be harmed, he becomes extremely anxious and responds out of fear. The student response and behavior, while stemming from his traumatic history, is obvious and connected directly to the problem. In addition, Macy is able to connect this behavior to the student’s previous history both as a victim of assaultive behaviors as well as a feeling of a loss of control when he was removed from the care of the adults charged with supporting his well-being but failing to do so.

He's very protective of me, very affectionate towards me, gives me a hug every morning when he comes into the classroom and before he leaves. I think that the most adorable thing is that if other kids are being aggressive and they are in their downward spiral, he is very protective of me. For example, I was with a different student who was also very aggressive and a few times, I got my hair pulled or a baseball to the eye, I'd walk back into the classroom after being switched out with another staff and he was sitting there crying. The other staff had to hold him back from leaving the classroom. He was crying and just making sure with worry that I was going to be okay. (Macy, 2016).
While triggers are not always preventable, the classroom staff aimed to provide necessary support to avoid unnecessary triggers from occurring whenever possible. Participants revealed that triggers often took them by surprise initially, but they quickly began to decipher the situational experiences of the child. From there, they were eventually able to pinpoint the antecedent and causation of the trigger while aiming to prevent and/or coach the student through similar situations in an effort to replace their response behaviors. The treatment goals for students are often addressed in the moment in situations such as the one described above.

Academic triggers are also common among students on campus and fall into two categories, either (1) work avoidance or (2) inability to complete a task. Meghan shares an example of how the complexity of learning challenges impacts the behavioral aspect of a student. In this case, the lead teacher was persistent in determining the cause of regular behavioral outbursts.

And in many cases they [students] are able to see the true reason for their outbursts at that time. For one, if schoolwork is the trigger you cannot address the problem because you are just addressing the behavior. And I remember that my first year there was one child that when I got him they said he is never in class... blah blah. It was not an option for him not to be in the classroom and he liked to do his work, thankfully. One day, we were sitting up against the wall and he was just having a problem and literally started crying and for the first time after all year, we were in April, we could see what his disability actually was which you can’t see that often because the behaviors mask it. (Meghan, 2016).
The close observation of the lead teacher in this instance led to the identification of the underlying cause of his behaviors and thus equipped the team to support the student appropriately. Since academic tasks were a trigger for this student as a result of a learning disability, additional supports could be applied to the process and improve student outcomes while rebuilding a sense of self-image in this area.

A common trigger in this residential day school is noticed when students are attuned to inconsistencies in treatment and expectations. While they are often aware of differences in the treatment of themselves and peers, some also have difficulty adjusting to the adult personalities and expectations among the many caregiver-educators they encounter on a daily basis. As Stacy posits, “…I think that sometimes kids have a hard time when you are trying to switch back and forth from caregiver to educator.” It is through the understanding of a true caregiver-educator relationship that lead teachers begin to navigate the balance between these roles and how to best manage the expectations that they impose on children.

**Thoughts on Unique Identifiers in Support of Caring Relationships**

**Qualities and Characteristics of Caring Teachers**

“Children should always feel like the adults are living in this world to nurture them, to take care of them, to protect them from any bad thing that might come”

–Chris Cornell

The idea that high quality teacher-student relationships provide a caring yet educational place for students to flourish is a supported one; however, not all relationships receive the same outcomes. The development of a relationship requires a particular connection between the caring
one and the cared-for (Noddings, 2005). While there are many variables related to the student that should be considered, a flexible teacher has the ability to adjust him or herself to the situation in an effort to maximize the precision and likelihood of a relational match. Participants suggested a wide variety of qualities and/or characteristics that may be identifiers of a caring teacher.

**Presence and Availability**

Being consistent and available was identified by all four participants as one of the primary qualities of a caring teacher. Many of the students served by participants had experienced some form of loss (e.g. loss of trust, loss of self-worth, death, separation, loss of safety, etc.) from a caregiver and therefore had difficulty allowing him/herself to engage in a close relationship out of fear that these outcomes will be reoccurring. It was also suggested that because so many students served on campus have limited access to adults, they can count on to be present, stability is key in reflecting that you are committed to building the relationship.

I think that I show students that I genuinely care by being there for them every day, by providing them with consistency and support. (Stacy, 2016)

As employees of a residential day school, however, it is important to note that while lead teachers are present much of the time, they are not always available. Participants reported having some level of emotional labor around being needed but not available and exploring by default how this changes the relationship. While the lead teacher is responsible for ensuring the needs of an entire group are met, they also seemed to be very attentive to the individual needs of those within the group. If they are aware of a missed opportunity to be present for a student,
they often aim to “make up” the time and spend that time connecting with students so they know they remain cared-for.

In one example, Meghan mentioned having arrived at work early one morning to meet with a student whom she had missed the day before. In an effort to nurture the relationship, she wanted to be sure that she made the time and space to accept his offer and reciprocate with a similar level of care.

I set my alarm this morning to make sure that I remembered to go onto the unit this morning to give one of my kids a hug. He had run up to the classroom to give me a hug yesterday and I wasn't there so… (Meghan, 2016).

Even under difficult circumstances, the reassurance that the care does not cease is imperative. In some instances, children are reactive to relationships often seeking to diminish, dilute, or impersonate a relationship. Regardless, the supportive adults must remain just that.

There were adults out there that no matter what she did to them or what she said to them, they would stick by her. (Stacy, 2016).

The lead teachers who participated in this study expressed their awareness of the behaviors and emotional challenges that are commonly present prior to employment, although perhaps not to the extent that their experience has provided. They consistently sent the message that they are aware of the potential harm that may be inflicted upon them, yet they choose to come to work each day. It was reported that their goal is to reveal to students that they are present and will not give up on supporting their students through difficult situations while teach new strategies for dealing with difficult behaviors. As a result, the presence of a lead teacher is a powerful component of the building blocks of a caring teacher-student relationship.
Attentiveness and Willingness to Listen

Being present alone is simply not enough; the lead teacher must be attentive to the needs and concerns of their students so that they become comfortable with the idea of open communication in a safe and secure forum. Many students attending [this school] have experienced some form of trauma and perhaps have been encouraged to disclose information to officials or representatives of a child welfare organization. Based on their personal experience and outcomes, a child may or may not be interested in sharing information pertaining to their traumatic experience. Despite this, it was deemed important by participants to provide an outward willingness to listen in an effort to ensure that children are empowered to use their voices. The encouragement to use their voice prevents students from packaging their concerns resulting in explosive behaviors later.

I think that a caring teacher is someone who is willing to listen to the children and not sort of always correct but sometimes just be a sounding board or just be able to guide them in some direction. (Stacy, 2016).

An attentiveness and willingness to listen was gleamed as beneficial especially when children report having issues with one another. In order to preserve positive peer interactions, it is crucial that students with social-emotional issues are provided with mediation coaching and support in the moment to clarify any misinterpretations and/or assist in identifying potential resolutions.

Body Language

The body language of a teacher is believed reflect their ability to connect with students. Typical of students with social-emotional disabilities is a difficulty in reading social cues and
following lengthy conversations. In two of the interviews, the way a teacher carried him or herself was a portrayal of kindness and care. Energy could be explored through body language and reveal an excitement that students yearned for.

I think this person more often has a smile on their face than does not. I think body, posture, and language says a lot in terms of how the teacher is interacting with the students. (Hope, 2016).

I feel like I am a very animated person. I like to talk, I'm very loud and outgoing, I definitely think my body language and overall excitement when I physically see them or the success they've made or see something that they've done or when they've done something nice for another student. I think they see how excited about seeing them and care about them being successful. (Macy, 2016).

In these cases, body language was a visual representation of acceptance and appreciation for the cared-for. It also represented a level of confidence, comfort and stability for the students within the classroom. Participants noted that it was observable and obvious, a way of informing students and other staff that the environment is under leadership with clear cues portrayed through movement, stance, and facial expression. Given the population of students, this is important because many students with social, emotional, and behavioral challenges are not able to read subtle cues from within their environment.

Establishing Boundaries and Expectations

Collectively, the interview participants shared that by establishing boundaries, limits and expectations and upholding them, the environment became increasingly predictable. They indicated that when children are have clear guidelines they are able to make informed decisions
and have some control and choice regarding the outcomes. When children are unsure of the expectation or have minimal faith that a teacher will follow through the instability causes tension within the relationship. As a result, teachers should show students they care by establishing sound expectations and ensuring the delivery of expectations. Within a residential setting, clarity was noted as key. With the risk of an unsafe environment, establishing clear expectations and a plan of execution are crucial.

The two beginning teachers are clearly in the process of developing a balance of expectations, limits, boundaries, follow-through and caregiving. During the interview process, both teachers at the onset felt as though establishing these boundaries would sacrifice their ability to show students they care, however, through practice and modeling, both teachers admit that they see the benefit to placing these boundaries in an effort to show students they care.

I think another part of being a caring adult however, is establishing limits and boundaries because you don't want to get to a point where a child is just doing whatever they want and the adult is very passive and laid back as opposed to... in Psych class it is like being an authoritative parent not that the teacher is a parent, but just in terms of the laying out understanding and compassion but the same time establishing boundaries instead of always letting down rules and negative reinforcement are always just being very permissive. (Hope, 2016)

On the contrary, the more seasoned teachers were able to voice that once a caring relationship has been formed, the establishment of boundaries and expectations are crucial for their ongoing success. They expressed that they provided students with the support and care they
need while learning how to remain within the limits and are able to receive consequences or accept support with increased readiness.

You've gotta hold them but do it in a way with a relationship. So maybe in the beginning you might want to start off with a caring tone of voice and then you can get past that point because by then they believe you, they're invested in you and your invested in their future. If you're just yelling at them then they are like who cares. (Meghan, 2016).

I think that the fact that I treat them like their capable and I provide, some would say, high expectations but I am also sort of helping them on their journey to meet those expectations. (Stacy, 2016).

To have a strength-based relationship that both parties can benefit from, both must understand the boundaries, limitations, and expectations. According to the data obtained, it was in the best interest of the child to be transparent in these areas although often difficult for new teachers who believe that by doing so it may challenge the quality of the relationship.

*Establishing Self-Worth*

In all four participant stories, they told of students who held a negative self-image and very little, if any, self-worth. The lead teachers expressed that they felt as though in many cases, the situations of the youth they serve were unjust and left students feeling unwanted and unworthy.
These kids have such strong connections relationship wise that this is what they thrive on. They need those feelings security for a relationship or they need that feeling of self-worth or the feeling of being wanted or needed. (Macy, 2016).

As a result, they shared their efforts to empower their students through positive talk and elevated levels of praise, providing opportunities for students to “give back” to their classmates or their community, and assist in reestablishing their self-worth.

I think I really was someone who tried. I think I was his teacher in this situation more than anything else. I just tried to build up his confidence, I tried to encourage him and praise him when things went well but then I also felt it was necessary, especially for him moving on, to set those expectations and expect him to sort of follow them. (Stacy, 2016).

They also shared that in many cases, the relationships that they build with these students are the only relationships some students have and as a result feel it is their responsibility to develop their students into confident, purposeful children who are able to recognize the importance of their presence and contributions.

Not just treating them like they are a group but that they are a group of individuals who all have different strengths and challenges and interests and taking the time to know each of those. (Stacy, 2016).

Even with relationships that are difficult to establish, one lead teacher reflected upon her continued efforts to build the confidence and self-esteem necessary to complete a challenging task prior to a situation escalating.
I tried to support him but it was hard for me to be the one like after breakdown
time to be the one to let him carry on. But I would, before we got to that point, I
would try to encourage him and provide him with words of support and
encouragement to try and build him up before we got to that point. (Stacy, 2016).

In all cases, participants indicated that when a child had a sense of positive self-worth,
their approach to new skills and adapting to challenging tasks improves. Several references were
made to the notion of children refusing before even initiating a task for fear they cannot
successfully complete it. By providing ample opportunities for children to establish a sense of
self-worth, they are build the confidence necessary to approach tasks they would have otherwise
avoided academically and therapeutically. Children were also noted as having appeared to be
increasingly willing to assist with classroom responsibilities, were able to maintain improved
friendships, and sought to improve academically and behaviorally as they obtained a stronger
sense of worth.

Advocacy

Advocacy on behalf of students takes on many forms within residential day school
programming. Since lead teachers self-report that they consistent adults who spend a significant
amount of time with their students while acquiring and sharing a great deal of information, they
are often identified as ideal advocates for their students. They assume this role along with other
members of the team to ensure that students’ needs and voices are adequately represented when
decisions are made on their behalf.

In some cases, advocacy means encouraging growth so that the child is able to move onto
a less restrictive environment. Despite a quality relationship, lead teachers explain that they
must account for the “big picture” when considering what is in the best interest of the child. By taking a professional perspective and reviewing the behaviors, emotional stability, and academic needs of the child, they are able to make personalized recommendations when a student is preparing for another placement.

I feel like I can be a really positive influence in his life but have a really good understanding that we need to do what is best for him. So my goal for him is to get out of [this school] and to get into a classroom and hopefully move down to a collaborative instead of staying in a highly restrictive setting. My challenge is not that I want him to stay at [this school] or anything like that. (Macy, 2016).

In other cases, it means opening the lines of communication between home, school, and the clinician in order to provide the most effective care, even when the student does not approve. In one case, the student sought for the school and home to be separate entities that were isolated from each other. The negative behaviors revealed at home were not present at school; however, by learning about these behaviors, the teacher was able to support the student with strategies and practiced routines that would alleviate some of the frustrations at home.

Our relationship also formed because she was able to use the classroom team as an ally for her. At home, she didn’t really like to talk about home that often, if there was a big blowout though we would talk about it. After a while the relationship gets strained a little bit but it was a safe place for her. She knew that we appreciated her and that it was tough to be at home. (Meghan, 2016).
Investment of Time and Energy

One of the greatest factors that resonated with the participants was the investment of time and energy which, according to this data, led to the greatest benefit. They globally articulated that when you spend quality time with students getting to know who they are and participating in things they enjoy, the relationship becomes a powerful tool for shaping and managing student outcomes.

Macy discusses how she intimately gets to know the past and present status of her student’s lives. This also encourages student voice by having them share how they feel during role play and provides them with a teacher who is interested in knowing what they prefer and what they need. This process creates a sense of unity and collaboration and avoids the assumption that another individual knows what’s best for you all of the time.

I think caring in the sense of caring for the child as an individual. Caring to know where they come from, their family, what they go through, what they enjoy, what they don't like, what they're good at, what they're not good at, how they learn, who they interact with, and then even deeper like what their family's like, how they react to certain communications like if they like phone calls or emails and how we can talk with them. Trying to get to know all you can and really caring for their success. Trying to make sure like, "Oh, that kid can't do that" …that's not what you do. It's like "Oh, they can't do that... okay, how do I fix it so that this kid can do the work?", and really making sure that that all kids have the sense of success. (Macy, 2016)
I think a lot of the 1:1 time was like the biggest one. I think that he really liked the attention from staff but I also think that he needed the time for us to get to know one another. (Macy, 2016)

The investment of time has also been known to reach beyond the scope of the school day and allow for the development of teacher-student relationships off school grounds. In some cases, students encountered their first restaurant experiences while in others the opportunity for a Red Sox game.

I would, over April vacation, he was the only one out of my nine students that didn't go home or get to leave campus, so I came over vacation and took him out for a few hours. He was the only one who didn't get to do anything so I felt bad. We went to Dave and Busters; he had never been in a restaurant before. I was teaching him how to order and how to talk to the waiter and stuff. It was really eye opening. One of the greatest experiences, he was so happy. Like I said before, I've never seen a kid that happy. It was one of the greatest feelings in the world. He was having so much fun, so happy, and so appreciated everything. He was so excited to learn about a new experience that most people just take for granted. (Macy, 2016).

And I actually got the opportunity when [the school] asked who was interested in Red Sox tickets and you can take a kid. So I took the tickets and said “let’s go to the Red Sox game!” (Meghan, 2016)

Sometimes, the investment of time had become a challenging balance in itself. Participants often questioned themselves about the level of equity and the best way to meet
student needs without taking away from the remainder of the group. Stacy shares the internal conflict that she had during her first year as a teacher and questioned her practice while finding a balance between one student’s needs and the entire groups’ needs.

I think that with her, it was maybe and I wonder too if it was during my first year and if I was trying to navigate “how much time and effort do I put into one student as opposed to the group?” (Stacy, 2016).

Similarly, Hope expressed her concern about providing care to a student who had recently been through a very challenging time and while her intent was to provide equitable care to all of her students, it became apparent to students and a staff member that perhaps the level of care needed to be readjusted.

Yes, I have questioned the quality of the relationship when it has been pointed out to me by other staff that I may be treating him differently than other students in my classroom. I try really hard for this not to be the case, I don't like to think that it is the case, it was mentioned in supervision that two other students may have mentioned that I have treated him differently which made me feel really upset because that is the last thing that I want the other kids to be thinking. (Hope, 2016).

*Mutual Interests*

Identifying mutual interests have been notable in establishing and expediting the formation of a caring relationship as well as providing the power to prevent unwanted behaviors from occurring. Mutual interests were used as “getting to know you activities” as well as external motivation to meet an expectation. Mutual interests, even when non-authentic, provide
a connection between the teacher and the student from which initial communication originates eventually transforming into something more tangible.

She really liked cute things like drawings and cute animals and so I tried to tap into her interests so we would spend time coloring together. We would look at pictures at animals with big eyes – this is what she liked. I just really tried to spend a lot of time with her. (Stacy, 2016)

*Other Common Characteristics*

Other qualities and characteristics shared by at least one participant are believed to have had an impact on the quality of teacher-student caregiving relationships and included: perseverance, respectfulness, flexibility, empathy, affection and equity.

I also try to be understanding and empathetic with the kids, sometimes to a fault, but most of the time I think it works well. (Hope, 2016)

I think I try to be caring about the things that I can be empathetic about like when other kids are being unkind and he is feeling upset. (Hope, 2016)

And then I’m always for a good hug. I think hugs are the biggest thing here and that is another reason why I work at [this school] rather than other places. It’s because some people don’t believe in hugs, I’m sorry you’re going to tell a child you won’t hug them because they have nobody else to hug them? No, no, no. (Meghan, 2016)

The individual experiences of teacher-caregivers contribute to shaping their personality and their ability to function effectively within a lead teacher position. They are formulated and
refined through an individual’s exposure, experience, and navigational process throughout their lives. While these characteristics are believed to be personal traits not specific to the profession of teaching or the placement of a residential setting they may have some value in establishing a connection between the caring-one and the cared-for.

**Confidant and Trusted Adult**

“Trust is the glue of life. It's the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It's the foundational principle that holds all relationships.”

- Stephen Covey

The second building block of a trusting relationship is to maintain a trusting relationship, not to be confused with a secretive one. Trust was described by participants as a tool that could be used to diffuse challenging situations, provide support without judgement, and required that trusted adults were present and available when needed. Of note, participants went on to describe situations that required that students hold a level of trust in them. The caring-ones, however, participants were careful to avoid expressing that they must fully trust the student, the cared-for.

When diffusing challenging situations, a trusting adult was able to share a plan of action and students had noticeable confidence that the adult would follow-through with the outcome according to participant observations. Hope shared her experience with a student who was reactive to peers and would become aggressive to protect himself from those around him. After a trusting relationship was formed between Hope and the student, she was able to guide him into allowing her to handle peer encounters and he was able to do so after she consistently followed-through and ensured that justice prevailed.
Quite frankly, I think the benefits are his ability to stay in class and have decreased aggression because he trusts that I will follow through with what I say. Therefore, he is in class for more learning time and is able to continue to learn as a student and make progress academically which is the goal of being in school. (Hope, 2016).

Likewise, Macy utilizes a trusting relationship to improve student outcomes. Through the investment of time and mutual interests, she is able to establish a relationship where the student is comfortable discussing concerns that he had not yet discussed with his clinician. This provides a piece of the puzzle toward the rehabilitation and success of the student by allowing the information to be shared as part of his treatment.

Trying to get them to open up, getting them to trust you. But first you just have to know about them. You have to know what they like, what you can connect to them with… You have to put in the time to build the relationship where they know that you are trustworthy and that you actually care about them and slowly but surely, they will begin to open up to tell you things. (Macy, 2016).

Of equal importance was the message that when information is disclosed, it is a lead teachers professional responsible to share this information with appropriate members of the team. The information is not trusted with an individual but rather considered to be trusted within the organization. This information if often used to develop goals, provide treatment, and to support the student by providing education and care conscientiously.
We hold a lot of information, and it is really important that we are good at communicating what we know about the child to help them in other areas as well. (Meghan, 2016).

Participants commonly felt that information disclosed through the trusting relationship should be revealed as part of the student’s treatment. There was no indication that they neither felt that they have, nor should have, withheld information to protect the trustworthiness between themselves and the student. Meghan’s relationship explanation advances to the idea that by disclosing information to members of the team, she was alleviating the anxiety of the student from having to disclose the information herself.

As much as she didn’t like this at first, I would make sure that everyone involved in her case was on the same page and in communication. And while she would say that she didn't like her parents knowing what she was doing, I think there was a point when it was kind of nice, it took some of the burden off of her when they would ask what she did that day. (Meghan, 2016).

In this case, securing the level of trust within the organization supported the students’ needs and provided reassurance that her teachers efforts were in her best interest which in turn helped to promote the ongoing work toward the student’s treatment goals.

Trustworthiness also equipped lead teachers with an opportunity to assist students both academically, socially, emotionally and behaviorally that otherwise may not have been well-received. These relationships are believed to provide the support necessary to acquire new skills and overcome challenges that students typically would resist.
I think one of the things for her, because she was so guarded, and allowing me to correct her and work with her through tougher academic challenges was very... it showed that she was trusting and accepting of sorts which then did help us get through some of the more difficult things like social problems. I knew it was difficult but you've done difficult things before. (Meghan, 2016).

Stacy recalled a student that refused to enter the classroom and as a result, educating her and supporting her properly was challenging. They worked collaboratively to develop a plan that would improve student outcomes while addressing some of her treatment goals. Through a trusting relationship, Stacy aimed to gradually lead the student into the classroom where she could receive her education.

And it was one of my main goals to get her to eventually come into the room and so I worked on building a relationship with her. (Stacy, 2016).

For this student, the results of the trusting relationship led to a successful transition into the classroom with a behavioral improvement as well as access to an education. To build this relationship, Stacy engaged the student by encouraging her to take a lead role in developing a plan that she was comfortable with. By supporting this plan, Stacy exhibited some trust in the student which eventually became the foundation for a supportive relationship.

Now that the student understands where I am coming from and we’ve built trust and a relationship and they are in class more, they are accessing academics, they’re proactively participating. (Stacy, 2016).

The availability of staff to support students during times of crisis or need is also a strong indicator of maintaining a trusting relationship. Participants felt that students must trust that they
will be present, available, and attentive when they are needed so they begin to rely on the consistency. Actively accommodating a student’s needs in the moment by availing oneself to the support and guidance of a student is a regular practice of participants. This practice is believed to show children that they are cared for as individuals not only as students.

Also, I think that even though my main role is to be mainly their teacher, if they need me to step out in the hallway with them for a minute to tell me something that has been going on with them, I will. I can delegate a task to another person in the classroom while I take the time, if I am that person’s trusted adult then I will make time for them to talk to me and listen to them and help guide them through with whatever is going on. (Stacy, 2016).

This aspect of caring also supports the student’s vision of self-worth, allowing them to fully experience being the priority in the moment. And supports the recurring recommendation that more than one trusted adult be involved in the lives of each student.

I think sometimes it can be hard if the student really only wants you and you are not available. That’s challenging because you know it’s like I’m the one who sort of, or most of the time, would help her deescalate but in this situation I can’t really be there - what’s more important - like the individual or the group at this moment? And you don’t really want the student to be so dependent on just one person. (Stacy, 2016).

A confidant or trusted adult has proved to be an effective tool for improving student outcomes within teacher-student relationships when the educator also serves as a caregiver. Overall, participants succumbed to the idea that building a trustworthy relationship will utilize
valuable time but agree that the outcomes make it worthwhile. In addition, they feel as though all children should have more than one trusted adult that they can count on to alleviate some of the worry for both the student and the faculty that they won’t be available when they are needed. Trusting relationships have improved academic and behavioral outcomes, expedited treatment goal accomplishment, and provide children with purpose while establishing self-worth.

**Quality Time Together**

Lead teachers arguably spend the greatest amount of consistent time with residential students than any other adults. During the time spent together, the lead teacher is likely to learn a great deal about the student and his/her needs. Participants shared in the idea that the more they know about a student, the better they were able to identify ways to support them. By having the knowledge and access to implement strategies and guide students during trying times, they are able to gain access to the “real-work” their treatment.

You just don’t get the work done in a quick fix therapy. It is from this perspective that I get to spend eight hours with them and it means the world and makes the biggest difference. (Meghan, 2016).

During this time, lead teachers among other staff aim to provide opportunities for positive and individualized time with students. This quality time together encourages a relationship to form and fosters the bond between the teacher and the student. These opportunities allow for conversations to naturally occur and for the teacher to nurture the relationship. According to participants there were two primary goals of individual student meeting times which involved (1) learning more about the student in an effort to strengthen the relationship and (2) improve
students’ self-image by providing lots of positive reinforcement and praise in a comfortable, low-stress atmosphere.

Due to the nature of the organization and the design of our classroom teams, opportunities for individualized quality time are possible. As one participant mentions, it is feasible to provide students with individualized support and connect with them at a deeper level due to the reduced class sizes with a maximum of nine students and a high student to staff ratio (3:1).

And I feel like you can learn more about them because of the small classes you can learn more about them. You can build stronger relationships with them. In public school, I'd have 25 kids as opposed to my 9 kids that I would like have to attend to and spend time with. You just build stronger bonds with smaller classes. (Macy, 2016).

Although spending quality time together often benefits a teacher-student relationship, there are instances when quality time is limited for a variety of reasons. During analysis of four of the relationships that were considered to be challenging or negative, the individualized quality time spent together between teacher and student was extremely limited or non-existent. In some cases, the teacher aimed to provide the 1:1 attention and as a result of negative encounter, ceased the time to be spent individually with the student. A distinct correlation between the time teachers spent with students supporting a positive relationship and the lack of time teachers spent with students when the relationship was perceived as challenging or negative is notable. The limited time that teachers are spending with these students as opposed to those they have a strong relationship with may have a negative impact on the relational well-being of the teacher-student
relationship. Countering this impression, the state of the relationship may also have a direct impact on the amount of time they feel is valuable toward maintaining a relationship.

Implications for spending quality time with students are abundant, especially when the relationship is a challenging one and the efforts of the caring-one are not accepted by the cared-for. However, at the onset of this relationship, before any perceived understanding of how the relationship would form, one lead teacher (Hope) expressed that she felt unable to support individual time with an unfamiliar student. The student had newly transitioned into the classroom and was in need of a trusting adult; however, Hope had not been able to provide individualized time with him due to staffing concerns.

I have not [spent time] due to staffing. Right now it is just TA and me in the room and there is no way that I could bring him on a positive break. (Hope, 2016).

Another implication is a personality disconnect. As Macy describes her situation, she has made the effort to build a relationship with a student and has been unsuccessful. She recalls having participated in individualized activities with the student at the onset but all of her efforts were unappreciated and tended to result in unsuccessful experiences. As a result, she could not see the benefit in exchange for making the effort to build in positive breaks with the student when there was no advancement from previous attempts.

I can sit and play basketball with him but at the same time he would find a way to say that I was cheating, I know that because I’ve tried it. I did positive breaks, I tried that at one point, encouraging him to spend 1:1 time but something always went horribly wrong which made it incredibly frustrating.
In other situations, students were able to create bonds and develop relationships with adults outside of the classroom which was perceived as a reward for the student for being in an unexpected location. The lack of staff support to get the student to build relationships within the classroom was frustrating for the participant.

What was most frustrating about this student also is that relationships were created outside of the classroom with other staff. We had the tough job. We were asking him to do something that made him vulnerable and was difficult for him. (Meghan, 2016).

Lastly, balancing the amount of care provided to each student while also maintaining an educator role has proved to be challenging, even for the most seasoned teachers. Recognizing the needs of individuals and prioritizing their need for care in the moment is a balancing act since the teacher is also charged with the responsible to educate a group of students.

I still try to like spread out the amount of support and care given. It’s hard because there are kids that will seek me out more than others. I still try to make time for each and every kid with at least one of their interests and try to play that up to build relationships. (Stacy, 2016).

This section supports that positive relationships require a significant amount of quality time to build and maintain. When the time and energy are expensed toward building a relationship and is accepted by the student, the benefits seem to outweigh the time costs. However, in perceived challenging or negative relationships, the amount of quality time spent individually is limited primarily because positive results had not been observed by the participants.
Establishing Expectations

The establishment of expectations was highlighted as a necessary building block among caring teacher-student relationships. Of the four participants, the two seasoned teachers appeared confident in their responses toward the need for establishing expectations and felt as though it benefitted students when the expectations were clear and attainable. One of the newer teachers believed that establishing expectations was necessary and reported setting expectations as being “strict” but something that had to be done. And finally, the newest teacher shared the challenges of remaining consistent with expectations and felt as though it was sufficient to be an attentive listener and improve student self-perceptions whenever possible.

The experienced teachers were able to layout the expectations and format for expectations while providing a reason for their choice. They did not view expectations as an uncaring act nor did they indicate that the goal was to provide consequence. Quite the contrary, they felt that because they care, they had a responsibility to build reasonable expectations and share them with students. When these two processes worked synergic, students were able to rise to the occasion and knew exactly what they had to do to get there.

Holding them to expectations, that is my number one thing. I make that pretty clear. (Meghan, 2016).

I think that the kids really find comfort in someone who sort of shows them what the expectations are and sticks to them and I also think that shows someone who is caring for them and their future. (Stacy, 2016).

I think that I have found that the kids really do benefit from knowing what is expected of them. Not really hiding anything from them. If I want them to be
able to do x, y, and z, I am going to tell them that that is what I expect. (Stacy, 2016).

While developing expectations, consideration toward the abilities and levels of the children you serve is essential. At this site, students are placed in classrooms that are multi-age and grade, with a potpourri of developmental, academic, social, emotional, and behavioral levels. As a lead teacher within this residential day school, participants were encouraged to develop a set of classroom expectations that support the notion of safety as well as individual expectations that address the needs of the child. The participant responses commonly revealed that there are four parts to developing and maintaining sound expectations: (1) develop expectations for students individually, (2) be concise when explaining the expectations, (3) provide necessary support and encouragement for students to reach the expectation, and (4) follow-up to ensure the expectations were met, if not appraise the situation and respond accordingly. Developing expectations that are unreasonable may contribute to negative self-worth and feelings of subordination. Contrasting this idea, expectations that are attainable may improve feeling of self-worth and confidence.

Obviously, we teach to their developmental levels which are different in every classroom. (Meghan, 2016).

In addition, both teachers shared how they go about supporting students on their journey to reaching and adhering to the expectations.

It is really important that you hold these kids to an expectation so you can find out what the problem is. You aren’t going to give them something that is outrageous. That is your job as the teacher to not give them something outrageous you want to
try to meet them where they are and work with them to show that you care enough about them to handle what they are addressing then handle the problem. (Meghan, 2016).

When students make the choice to neglect the expectations, push through boundaries, and exceed limitations, Meghan reminds them that they are worth more than they are holding themselves accountable for. She creatively explains…

I think whether it’s with me or with the kids, I try to be someone, who to me, holds them to the expectations. And just saying that this is for you and reminding them why… you deserve this expectation, I'm not going to let you take it away from yourself, and it’s not going away. You've earned it. You've earned this; you wouldn't be in this classroom if you didn't earn this that's why we're here. You're here and you're sitting in this classroom it means you've earned it for something. (Meghan, 2016).

In some cases, for circumstances beyond the control of the teacher, expectations must be adjusted. In Meghan’s story of a challenging situation involving the adjustment of expectations, she expressed feelings of defeat. She felt that she had exhausted her means for encouraging the student to attend the classroom and in a sense had given up on him by bending the expectations.

He is the one student who I have bent all expectations for. We're talking to get him in class he earned a gummy worm every ten minutes. This was a team plan, not a just me plan, just to clarify. This was every ten minutes and that included when he was sleeping. So it wasn't easy. (Meghan, 2016).
The participant noted that she felt as though she was catering to his preferences rather than encouraging him to participate to the best of his ability. During the interview this was clearly an observable moment where the emotional labor of this case had taken a toll on the participant. Her philosophy, confidence, and practice waivered leaving her to question her motivation and ability to educate this student.

Like a waitress, “how can I help you?” I had the motivation to get him to learn and we would try everything including taking every expectation away. This was the bane of my existence and I didn't even know if it was the right thing. But we couldn't. We had to do it to get him in the classroom because he'd get at least some learning done there. It was like trying to be crafty. (Meghan, 2016).

In an effort to understand the purpose of expectations and the role they play in a residential day school setting, educator-caregivers were asked to share some of the implications that arose from finding a balance. Macy expressed challenges related to balancing the expectations of a teacher with those of a caregiver.

I care about their wellbeing. At the same time, I feel that me holding them to a pretty high standard and being strict also shows them that I care about them. As mad as they get with me for setting standards and limits they know that I care because I am setting those limits and I stick to them. (Macy, 2016).

Participants, especially those newer to the field, admittedly noted that remaining consistent and following through are difficult areas to master. While Macy stressed the importance of expectations, she referred to the process as being “strict” but necessary. She alluded to expectations as having a negative connotation and led consideration toward
expectations and caregiving requiring balance as two separate entities not jointly serving children.

I think that's like a really fine line, not a fine line, but it is a hard thing to balance because you need to be strict with the kids in order for them to be academically successful. You need to make sure they are doing their classwork and homework and making sure that it is up to standard whether they want to or not, whether they are sad or not, whether they are feeling self-conscious or if their self-esteem is low or they're upset about something else that's going on. Yes, it is important to care about all of those things but at the same time you need them to be learning academically and doing their best work and being able to absorb what you teach them. (Macy, 2016).

For newer teachers, establishing expectations and upholding them with students who exhibit regular emotional-behavioral outbursts is a challenge. Important to note, those teachers who had expressed increased difficulty with classroom management and lacked the experience to define expectations and implement a consistent approach to managing unwanted behaviors were most common.

I know group management is sometimes something that I struggle with and I think it goes back and forth between how I express my caring-ness as a teacher because sometimes I am too permissive and sometimes I am too much authoritarian and I am working on finding that balance for me. (Hope, 2016).

With the challenge of classroom management, Hope has relied on her ability to be an attentive listener paired with positive talk to improve student self-image.
I think that I acted as a consistent adult who is consistently able to show the child that I would listen and that I will care about him but at the same time that I will set boundaries. I know that some people think I don't set boundaries enough but I think that just being consistently able to listen and consistently able to provide the statements to provide or help him reestablish his self-worth and also just to help him grow as a person - I think that has been my role. (Hope, 2016).

Establishing expectations is at the forefront of the first two interviews, although, identifying a balance does not always mean equal expectations. When aiming to find balance, it is highly focused on each individual in a particular time and space. This makes it especially challenging for educator-caregivers who support the idea of consistency.

And consistency. These children are very observant and they see everything that we do. They watch our interactions with other children and our interactions with them. Yes, individualized plans are great but they are also watching to see if you are going to do something like that for me or "hey, this kid did this or you did this". They want to make sure that they are feeling safe and cared for and thought about. (Meghan, 2016).

**Beliefs Surrounding an Acceptance of Care**

Authentic caring relationships through the lens of Noddings (2005), implies that the cared-for has accepted the relationship. Without a sign of acceptance, the caring relationship is not considered genuine.
The establishment of these educator-caregiver relationships has broadly impacted the support and care provided to students. Once a relationship has formed, participants have reported being able to coach a student in the moment that would have been otherwise refused.

Once a child has the relationship with you, then you can say "Hey, can I sit down with you and help you with this?" and "hey, I can help you with this?" that the child will actually believe that. Instead of just being the teacher that is a savior that puts knowledge in your brain and you have to sort out the knowledge by yourself. Or the teacher that says “hey, I care about you, you don't have to do this if it makes you frustrated. (Hope, 2016).

I think that by eventually coming into the classroom. And I think that her sort of her opening up more, so instead of people having to or me having to probe her all the time with “Something must be bothering you" or "what is going on” she was more willing to talk about things on her own. (Stacy, 2016).

Students are also enthusiastic about school and aim to please their teacher also serving in the role of their caregiver. Participants reported that once students have accepted the relationship, the motivation they have to continue satisfying the teacher improves. This caused the teachers to continue to strive for a stronger caregiving relationship.

I think they are excited for their work and want to show it off "[Teacher], look what I did!" They are proud to show off their work to someone who cares - they want to make me proud of them. When they tell me they do something good, they don't like to disappoint me and that shows me that they care. (Macy, 2016).
When comments about how, I mean just, ya know what a nice teacher or good teacher I am. The fact that they can see that, even though you may be strict, you are always there. Even though you may expect a lot from us, you help us get there and the cards, the little notes, the comments randomly throughout class. (Stacy, 2016).

They take pride in their classroom and aim to beautify and maintain it. By respecting their environment they are likewise respecting themselves and those in it. Participants perceived the classroom environment as a shared space and when students were determined to improve that space, teachers felt as though they were accepting of the relationship.

They also write notes or make pictures to hang in the classroom. (Macy, 2016).

They ... I mean quite frankly I think the biggest way they show me they care about me right now is that they put a lot of effort into cleaning at the end of the day. We have a lot of classroom jobs and they have been really good about making the classroom look nice at the end of the day. To me, I don't know what goes on in their minds, but shows me that they care about the space they are in and therefore show me they care about me because I am also in that space. (Hope, 2016).

Students show they accept the relationship when they refer to their teacher positively outside of the boundaries of school. Even if students aren’t accepting of the relationship in the moment while they are in crisis or experiencing a challenging situation, they may eventually become more accepting of the relationship. In both of the discussions surround this area, participants were notified, after a student had moved on, that they had valued the relationship.
Mom says that he always compares all of his teachers to Miss [teacher] because I cared about him so much. (Macy, 2016).

We also got an email from him. He is very savvy he had his mom's iPad and he would email me or delete the emails so I would get if you call my mom I'll just hang up and delete the voicemails and emails. I would get an email saying like... so and so did four miles for the marathon but it was all spelled wrong. But that actually turned out okay because later he sent me an email saying I'm really sorry for what I did but I'm doing a nice job and playing football now and I know I was a big trouble maker. (Meghan, 2016).

When students are motivated by learning and aim to put in the effort to acquire new skills, they are often accepting and approving of the relationship. They aim to work hard to please the teacher and once finding themselves in a successful situation seeking to have increasingly similar experiences.

She really invested in her learning. She was able to open up and for her to be able to open up that really made us feel good. Me and my team were just happy knowing that we created this space for her. That was certainly some of the ways. (Meghan, 2016).

I think one of the things for her because she was so guarded and allowing me to correct her and work with her through tougher academic challenges was very... it showed that she was trusting and accepting of sorts which then did help us get through some of the more difficult things like social problems. I knew it was difficult but you've done difficult things before. (Meghan, 2016).
Becoming a preferred adult or receiving affection from a particular child is also a sign of acceptance of the relationship. When students are comfortable and accepting of a relationship, they become increasingly affectionate. According to the records of participants, students began to view the relationship as both a caregiving and educational one.

Another way is accepting and asking for hugs, raising his hand and specifically asking for me when another adult tries to respond and just like in my opinion he doesn't get as aggressive as soon or as frequently when I'm around. (Hope, 2016).

I love getting hugs in the morning, so every time they walk in the room they say good morning and give a hug. (Macy, 2016).

**Shared Responsibility**

Participants described the changes they observed in students once an educational-caregiving relationship was formed. This residential school emphasizes the transfer of skills from within this environment to those within the community and with people other than staff. The goal for participants was to decrease aggressive behaviors while empowering students to utilized learned strategies regardless of situation.

Some of the behavioral changes reflect an improvement of behavior within the classroom. Participants reported noticing that students would utilize their communication skills more readily and indicate their needs as opposed to acting out.

I think that one of the biggest things is that they still have challenges and they still get upset, but they are able to use strategies to help them or in this particular case they show me a card and they know that when they show me the card we will do
one of the things on that list and it’s been huge for that student in particular. (Stacy, 2016).

I think that changes with academics are positive. Changes in the student, once I've formed a good relationship with the student, they feel more comfortable coming to me with things they worry about or things they are in trouble with. In the past they have had a big blowout in the past. With one student in particular a student responds with I'm scared, frightened, or sad with no seeming cause - although believed to be boredom. I say, “I'm sorry you're feeling that way” and ask her if she knows why. She usually says no. I invite her to stand next to me for a few minutes and works well enough for her to turn back to her desk and remain on track. That has only happened because we have formed a teacher student relationship with each other. (Hope, 2016).

Various staff members encounter these students on daily basis, so when positive information can be shared and celebrated from one department to the next, the student’s self-worth improves. The recognition they receive also provides encouragement to continue aiming for self-improvement.

Last Friday, I walked into [residential housing] with a student and just announced "Guess what! It’s been two full weeks that he has been safe and he hasn't left space" and he was the first one back and got a full round of applause from the six staff that were in there. And he looked really pleased with himself that I was able to give that message. I try to give lots of nurturance and caring. (Hope, 2016).
The relationships between teachers and students are not always transferrable. Having to rely on more than one adult to get their needs met is often a challenging task. One way that participants have observed student growth and transfer of skills is by inviting other adults to be a part of their plan.

I think one of the major challenges is that he is becoming too dependent on having me there to always answer questions and to always do things which is why when he asked another adult to put his sweatshirt in his backpack, it was a really big deal for her and I was also really pleased to see it because it shows that he was able to rely on other adults in the classroom because I'm pretty sure that he will be moving on at the end of the school year so he will not have me as his teacher after the next six weeks. So I'm really glad that another staff has a good relationships, I want to see him continue to build relationships with other adults here and at his new program. I don't want him in a situation where he relies on only one adult at his new school. (Hope, 2016).

By forming relationships between teachers and students, lead teachers recognized some of the powerful differences in student personalities and confidence. Students often yearn to meet the expectations in an effort to please their educator-caregiver.

I feel like once a relation is formed... when you have that sense of security in a relationship, where you feel wanted, where you feel like you are a part of something, your confidence goes up and your self-esteem is higher and you kind of strive to be better in all aspects of your own life. So behaviorally I don't want to disappoint this person so I am not going to do this. Like I said your self-esteem
so your social, everything changes I think when you form really solid relationships and you feel you are a part of something. (Macy, 2016).

Community and home life situations may also improve as a result of a teacher-student relationship. One participant reported that by having increased communication with the home, the student’s ability to engage with her family had improved.

So I worked with her clinician at the time as well and every day I would send home notes before the time when we sent emails home, I’d send home a paragraph about the events of that day so that they had something to talk about. And by the end she was looking good. They were connecting and the parents would send us cards and things like that. (Meghan, 2016).

As a stepping stone, some students were afforded an opportunity to transition their classroom skills to the residential housing units or an appropriate less restrictive environment. For a child who excels within the classroom and has reflected some quality skills, it was only natural to begin to take the next step.

She was actually purposefully put on what was at that time the younger child unit away from older kids just so that she could be a leader. (Meghan, 2016).

When she graduated I felt that things were going on a positive track. She moved to a group home closer to home she was going home on the weekends. She was preparing and making connections. She will be fine on her own in the future because she is very independent but that doesn't mean that she doesn't need a family. (Meghan, 2016).
The transferability of skills is a challenging task; however, participants aim to provide students with the strategies and experiences to “practice” within the community. While some of the scenarios are explored on campus others like attending a Red Sox game or ordering from a menu in a restaurant are not uncommon practices as previously mentioned. In order to prove success, participants shared in the belief that students should be provided with ample opportunities to learn and grow within the context of childhood rather than solely within the contexts of residential care.

**Decreased Negative Behaviors**

Creative planning and situational experiences have led participants into identifying opportunities for students as motivation while placing them in a leadership role within the day program. While adding additional staffing is always helpful, it is not always feasible and as a result, teachers have coordinated their efforts to share students while providing new opportunities.

More staff, that's always the biggest thing. I feel that a lot of the issues we see with these kids would be eliminated if we had proactive staff support. You will often see myself as the first person to take a new staff under my wing and say that this is your new classroom until someone tells you otherwise. Because so many of these kids just need someone to sit next to them because they want to feel safe and know that someone cares for them. They don't need teachers; they just really need someone - a person. I also found that bringing the older students to work with the younger students helpful. It was me and a student from next door and we were rocking it because I was able to attend to the one child that needed an adult’s
care and the other child that just needed someone to sit next to them had that. So if we were fully staffed, it would make a difference. I think it would result in an extreme amount of restraint reduction because I can just think about a lot of the incidents and if there were a staff available to help the children either by being with the children behaving or those struggling or even to sit next to a child that you think might struggle. We would have, I would gather, 50% restraint reduction. (Meghan, 2016).

Other classroom related interventions have included non-verbal communication tools. Some participants had reported using hand signals or key words to signify anxiety, stress, or frustration and as a result would be afforded a break from the group with a staff member. One teacher utilized a card system that had a variety of strategies available to the student which had been a useful tool when the student was unable to verbalize their needs or wants in the moment.

I think that one of the biggest things is that they still have challenges and they still get upset but they are able to use strategies to help them or in this particular case they show me a card and they know that when they show me the card we will do one of the things on that list and it’s been huge for that student in particular. (Stacy, 2016).

In other instances, having a preferred adult with whom the student has built a relationship with has been known to decrease negative behaviors. Participants believe that the sense of security that is maintained when people who you know care about you is, at times, enough to reduce anxiety. Since the relationship is built over time, it may be so that the students are
familiar with the expectations and are able to predict the outcomes that come with familiar and trusted adults.

Another way is accepting and asking for hugs, raising his hand and specifically asking for me when another adult tries to respond and just like, in my opinion, he doesn't get as aggressive as soon or as frequently when I'm around. (Hope, 2016).

As a result, students are able to identify ways to get their needs met while remaining at baseline thus reducing the need to engage in aggressive behaviors to get what they want or need.

Celebrations across campus are widely spread and are a time for staff to celebrate student successes. Many of the students are also engaged in this positive display of appreciation and support one another to the best of their ability. The celebrations involve a yearly graduation for any students who have moved on from campus throughout the past year and are designed to bring staff, students, families, and caseworkers together to join in the cause. Also, student successes are shared on a regular (daily) basis between home, school, and residences in an effort to bring realization to students that adults notice their efforts. These celebrations are to make note of any student gains and/or efforts that they have made to improve their own livelihood. They may address some or all of the details shared in the acceptance of care, transfer of skills, or decreased negative behaviors.

**Beliefs Surrounding a Non-Acceptance of Care**

Each of the four participants were afforded the task of identifying one student who they felt did not accept their care and as a result presented as a challenged or negative relationship. Frictions between personalities, a refusal to partake in the relationship, or increased levels of frustration have made these relationships difficult to manage according to participant stories.
Hope’s Story

Throughout Hope’s journey with a particular student, she has felt a sense of disconnect and unpreparedness. The student was transferred from one classroom to hers with only two days’ notice and as a result reported having focused on his arrival for educational purposes (setting up his desk, adding his name to classroom charts and bulletin boards, gathering academic materials and resources). Hope was unable to conduct research to explore his history, experiences, and challenges. Due to some of his learning disabilities, the student was at a disadvantage when compared to his peers, which she later learned. The student was slow to learn new routines and had difficulty adapting to the change a new classroom afforded. Hope went on to invest her time transitioning the student with an academic focus rather than nurturing the relationship.

I think one of the barriers was just the suddenness from which he was placed in [this classroom] and the fact that we had all of these routines established and from the beginning he was behind in catching up on these routines. From the beginning he was behind in knowing what was happening in class and what was happening next which I think from a certain extent prevented the relationship from forming. I was so focused on making sure that the transition was smooth and that he was where he needed to be and doing what he needed to do and getting consistent that way that I didn't have time to make a personal connection with him. I, yeah, I mean also we haven't been in the same classroom for a lot of time and these relationships can take time. Even with other kids in the class that I haven't known as long as student #1, I have a pretty good relationship with them. (Hope, 2016).
During her reflection of the initial encounters with the student, Hope wondered how she could have improved the relationship and whether factors such as her race or gender played a role in the student’s perception of her.

How can I make this relationship better with this student? He'll run up to the TA and will cling to him but wants nothing to do with me. Perhaps that he doesn’t know me that well, or that I'm a female figure, or that I'm white, or what any of the things are because the racial, gender, all those things come in to play with these interactions, yeah, all the time. (Hope, 2016).

Although the relationship is still new, Hope admits that she needs to learn what she can about the student (as she has done for other students) and make time to prioritize him so he knows that she cares about him.

*Macy’s Story*

Macy’s relationship with a particular student was rocky from the start. During her first encounter with the student, he had made sexual innuendos and had engaged his peers in sexual talk about her.

My first impression is actually a pretty negative one. I remember we were in the summer; he had just come into my classroom. On one of the first days in the class, we went on a field trip and he was talking to other students and making very vile sexualized comments about me to other kids to make them laugh. So, automatically, I was grossed out. So that was my first impression.
The student was transferred into her classroom as a student from another classroom at the time of this encounter. He was described as a student who didn’t appear appropriate for this school due to his non-aggressive nature, supportive home environment, and non-traumatic history.

He lives at home, he is a day student. He lives with his Mom and Dad and has an older brother in college. Has an involved family, his Mom is amazing, she has it together. And she is very strict, she's very on top of his work, has good morals and values of what this student should be working on and what it means to be a student. She really understands that - she wants him to be very educationally focused. And she's very supportive of what we do here at [this school]. (Macy, 2016).

Macy soon learned that this student was a challenge in other ways. He was a constant talker, often interjecting himself in peer and adult conversations; he would make inappropriate remarks at students and staff in regular intervals for no known reason, and setup his peers secretly and without notice. Still, Macy felt that in comparison to the needs of other students on campus, graduating from this highly restrictive environment was the next natural step. She began developing expectations that aligned closely with those of a public school, developed motivational charts and created incentives for him to reach these goals. Instead of buy-in the student tore through the charts, was displeased with any and all incentives, admitted to being in control and behaving much differently at home, and increased his attention seeking behaviors to be in control.
I think that I have a very crucial role in trying to teach him how to be a student. Trying every possible thing that I can possible do because he is not an aggressive kid, he comes from a great family; he doesn’t have the trauma that I described with the other kid. He doesn't have that; he has a great family and comes without the baggage of other kids at this school. And he's not aggressive so I feel he isn't a [this school] kid, he is someone that I can see transitioning out quickly. But at the same time it is so frustrating because you try and I know that he doesn’t want to be here but every time we try to teach him how to be a student, what it’s going to look like to be in a public school or collaborative and being a student includes all of the things like no talking, so side conversations, raising your hand, not swearing at the teacher, not being unbelievably rude and he just didn't get that. It was really frustrating for me not only to deal with it but also to know that like I am not preparing him to be, I mean I'm trying to, but I'm not. (Macy, 2016).

Macy shares that she had identified basketball as a mutual interest and would take him outside for quality time together but it would result in frustration when he accused her of cheating, breaking the rules, or lying. Macy turned to supervisors as well as other teachers and staff for advice, but after many attempts they failed.

"His talking is constant, constant, constant. I tried every possible strategy in the book. I went to every human ever possible working within a 100 mile radius asking “what do I do?” It's just very, very frustrating. I talked to his teacher from last year and asked what worked and what didn't and then tried those things, even if they worked, even if they didn't work, I tried them again. I thought of new ideas, met with supervisors, asking if we could try and brainstorm more ideas to
get him to stop talking. It’s not just getting him to stop talk, it’s talking about nothing, side conversations, instigating, putting his negative two cents in whenever he can. (Macy, 2016).

After some time, Macy noted that she began decreasing her efforts to develop opportunities for quality time together and started to anticipate what would go wrong, supplying her with little drive to develop a relationship with him.

[He was] negative about peers, negative about the work that I was presenting, negative about the unit that we were learning, negative about the food that we were eating, negative about the party that we were having, think of the greatest thing in the world and he was just always negative. It’s not because he is unhappy, it is because he wanted to start an issue, which was his goal. (Macy, 2016).

This relationship, although appeared a simple case initially, turned out to be one of the greatest relational challenges this teacher has faced thus far. Macy indicated that she felt helpless but managed to persevere as an ethical responsibility to the student. Despite the fact that the student did not appear to accept the relationship, Macy continued to deliver the expectations and held him accountable to being a student, regardless of the repeated attempts by the student to diminish these expectations. She relayed the importance of continued effort and support to students even when they are unwilling to accept them wholeheartedly.

*Meghan’s Story*

Meghan’s memoir of a student who had a deep and complex personal history and fun-loving personality was regarded as the relationship that never came to fruition. The pre-
adolescent student was brought up in a challenging neighborhood surrounded by unsafe conditions. He resided with his mother of whom he had control over. His dad was inconsistently present, would show up and disappear without warning.

He was twelve years old from a section 8 housing neighborhood, in the projects and this is important because the community itself was very unsafe. (Meghan, 2016).

The relationship between his parents was very complicated… He would come in and have a problem all day, running around. I told him that we know when you have a problem sometimes it because of something that happens at home. And then he would come back with like his parents were in and out and his Dad was in an out of the home and he missed his Dad. My parents got into a fight again and my Dad left. My Dad came back stayed overnight then left and wasn't there in the morning. And the way that this child presented, we were very aware that he didn't have the interpersonal skills or understanding. It was very confusing to him and very upsetting. His Mom also just didn't really follow through with much so it was he'd go home and witness fights. (Meghan, 2016).

Meghan describes situations at the onset that involved the student threatening to put bombs in her car or to shoot up the school which had resulted in suspensions. He was a student who enjoyed the social aspects of school; he could build peer relationships, recruit friends to join him on his riots, and build relationships with staff who had little expectations for him.
Later, Meghan was able to identify that he had serious learning disabilities which had always been covered by his behaviors. The student refused to try many activities for fear that he would get something wrong, a trigger for him.

And in general, he had some really serious learning disabilities. He was also much more motivated by social stuff rather than his education because learning was hard. So once he found a body he would latch on to that body and together they would wreak havoc on the school. (Meghan, 2016).

In an effort to get the student to attend class, she was expected to reduce her expectations to simply having him present in the classroom.

He is the one student who I have bent all expectations for. We're talking to get him in class he earned a gummy worm every ten minutes. This was a team plan, not a just me plan just to clarify. This was every ten minutes and that included when he was sleeping. So it wasn't easy. (Meghan, 2016).

Just getting him to be in the classroom was a challenge. Since he was so likeable, many staff aimed to spend time with him and due to this he frequently left the classroom to gain the attention of those staff.

What was most frustrating about this student also is that relationships were created outside of the classroom with other staff. We had the tough job. We were asking him to do something that made him vulnerable and was difficult for him. And there were moments toward the beginning where he started to do it but towards the end started to unravel. But he would leave class and he would go fool around with some of the staff outside of the classroom so the battle with him was
also very difficult because it kept coming back that like well how do you ya know there was these things about well you have to gain his respect. But it was very difficult to gain his respect when he knows that he can come out and have more fun outside of class than he could in class. So I not only had to monitor the classroom team myself but I also had to sit outside to monitor his plan which almost never happened. He was a very fun kid. He was a very likable kid, I liked him a lot and so did all the TA’s but he would just would not stay in the classroom and would become violent toward classroom teams and stop as soon as anyone else came. It was very targeted behavior versus others. I saw it as a strength as the relationship developed because it ended up getting better. (Meghan, 2016).

Meghan believes that because she had the dual role of educator-caregiver, the student would not fully accept the relationship. She admits that when she played the role of caregiver, she was able to spend quality time with the student and that he was humorous and interesting to learn about. However, when she was in the role of educator, he would respond aggressively to classroom staff and often remove himself from the classroom in an effort to engage with adults in a non-academic atmosphere.

Well, I think that the fact that I was literally losing my mind over the whole thing, he knew that and appreciated it. He liked to watch me go out of my mind. One time he ran away; he ran into the classroom. When I went into the classroom he wasn't there. He was hiding behind the curtain. When I went outside he knocked on the window smiling. Like here I am you're out of your mind and here I am. I mean that the thing that is challenging is that we all loved him ;one of the funniest
children you'll meet just listening to him. But that was the thing which was difficult; I had to keep my role as the teacher. I could sit and listen to him and have a conversation all day long and we'd have no problems. But it was when I had to ask him to be a student which was my role is when things went sour. So I immediately curtailed a meeting. All of the small classes were good for him when it was just me or me and one other person with him he was fine.

Meghan rethought her practice and began to realize that she had been emotionally connected to the relationship and each time the realization that the relationship was not powerful enough to overcome some obstacles, she began to question her ability to reach this student.

It was a very weird relationship because it wasn't that we didn't have one. It was like I think I also was extremely emotionally too invested in it because I knew that we had the relationship and then to see him fall apart. I don't like to not have some sort of control over things and that was just like something that was like in the back of my mind plus I was getting stuff from staff outside like, “Wow what is going on why can't you do this?” First of all, we needed to be on the same page and second of all I don't know. So it was very frustrating so ya know my role as the teacher was difficult for him. (Meghan, 2016).

Furthermore, Meghan felt as though she was at a disadvantage each time she attempted to contact home. Throughout his time, he would monitor and respond to voicemail and email on his mother’s behalf. As a result, Meghan could neither relay nor acquire any new information that may assist the student in becoming successful in the classroom.
I think that the lack of parent involvement became very difficult as I said he controlled his Mom’s email and voicemail. It was basically like he was parenting himself and I was communicating with him about his behavior. I learned that there was nothing, I’m sure that Mom crumbled or rolled her eyes whenever we communicated. There was a point where this was every day, same conversations over and over and over again. (Meghan, 2016).

Despite trials and tribulations, Meghan’s investment of time and energy did not cease, she aimed to continue nurturing the relationship. Following an aggressive incident, Meghan recalls that she met with the student after her return holding a calming demeanor. She continued with her planned activities as she would’ve on any other day. On this day, she felt as though two things were accomplished (1) the student was able to open up and ask her a question about something that had been bothering him since the incident and (2) the student knew that regardless of his behavior, she would remain a consistent adult for him.

There was a point when he was becoming increasingly violent. It was only increasing toward classroom staff and there were a lot of attempted holds he would stop and it was I had to like get supervisors to practice TCI (Therapeutic Crisis Intervention) with me because I just felt like it was unhealthy. And unfortunately because everyone’s thought is that you need to deal with this so when he became violent he actually put me out of work for three days. But he was becoming extremely violent toward my staff, my two TA’s, nobody was responding because everyone was like you need to deal with this then it becomes an unsafe situation. We tried to hold him but we couldn't. It became a power dynamic because he was a good sized kid he was about my size. The power
dynamic was given back at him -which wasn't helpful. That time when he did kick me and put me out for three days, I couldn't walk, when I came back we were doing our reading group me and he asked me what does ironic mean. I asked him why he was asking me and I guess the day after he had put me out by kicking me he wore a shirt that read "just kickin it" and one of the staff mentioned to him "Oh, that's ironic that you're wearing that shirt". So he cared enough to want to know. He said, “Well, I was wearing this shirt and someone said something.” He was just so frustrated I think he also knew that how much he was going to hurt me I wasn't leaving. (Meghan, 2016).

As the yearly graduation crept up, the student began touring and interviewing at new placements. When the student was moving onto a new placement, Meghan recalls the student’s excitement to share the news.

But what’s very telling is when he graduated and was looking at new schools he was very excited to tell us that the school he was going to had locked doors so he couldn't go out. He was excited to say that the classrooms were locked so he just couldn't leave. It was very telling.

Sometime after leaving [this school] the student sent a follow-up message to Meghan apologizing for his behavior during his placement and sharing that his outcomes had improved.

But that actually turned out okay because later he sent me an email saying I'm really sorry for what I did but I'm doing a nice job and playing football now and I know I was a big trouble maker.
Meghan described this relationship as a challenging one that never reached the full benefit of an authentic caring relationship.

I mean, I just, even when he graduated, things were not perfect. I felt frustrated because it was kind of a failure in terms of us getting a respectful relationship I also got frustrated in myself because of my competitiveness because there were good relationships with him that we real out of class that would frustrate me because it was like my teacher assistant and I couldn't compete. (Meghan, 2016).

In her descriptions, she was never able to get him to fully participate in the classroom routines or academics nor was she able to get him to the point of building positive peer relationships. However, the relationship certainly did have some gains and served the purpose of security and continuity throughout his time at [this school].

Stacy’s Story

Stacy’s experience with a student mirrored a teacher-student relationship in a traditional school setting. The student she worked with faced some personal challenges that may have contributed to his behavior in the classroom

I think they, I mean they were… they had low self-confidence. They were always worried about their appearance. He was a bit of a heavyset kid. He used that to his advantage at times but overall that kind of impacted the way he felt about himself. This may have been behind some of his behaviors. I think that he felt that people were always looking at him or laughing at him. I think this may have come from his experiences in a different setting.
From the onset, she had assumed the role of educator as opposed to caregiver with the intent that the student would become acquainted with the expectations of school and move onto a less restrictive environment.

I think I really was someone who tried. I think I was his teacher in this situation more than anything else. I just tried to build up his confidence, I tried to encourage him and praise him when things went well but then I also felt it was necessary, especially for him moving on, to set those expectations and expect him to sort of follow them. (Stacy, 2016).

According to Stacy, the day student with which she felt the relationship was challenged or negative was a day student that had lacked a positive self-image and often exhibited work avoidance behaviors. In response to negative work behaviors the student would often display emotional outbursts in response to expectations or consequences. Stacy expressed that she had aimed to support the student but regardless of her efforts, his behaviors tended to avail.

I think their biggest thing was work avoidance but they used their size as intimidation when they wanted to be work avoidant, but then like the minute you set like are you explaining a consequence for behavior they would start weeping like to the point that they would wet your clothes with their tears. And that was hard for me to like the roller coaster ride of that every day during multiple classes was difficult to connect with. (Stacy, 2016).

After some observation, Stacy learned that the student’s reaction was within his control. Stacy aimed to provide coaching around this behavior in order to reduce its occurrence and prepare the student for a next placement.
I think, like, I thought that they knew I knew they were capable. They were a capable student but I just really wanted to figure out why they felt it was best to go through this roller coaster than just sort of doing the work. I don’t know. (Stacy, 2016).

Stacy maintained that the student needed set expectations with accommodations as necessary. When the student refused the work, he often turned to intimidation as his source for creating a space between him and the work.

So the challenges that we faced in the classroom was the work avoidance and I have to say that they did have difficulty with writing. Writing was hard for them but even still when given the proper accommodations it was still not enough. They just didn’t want to do it regardless of what you were going to do for them.

She became the one who consistently responded to the student’s work avoidant behaviors which created some tension between them. In turn, he would begin to build relationships with other staff in the classroom. In hindsight, she feels that if she had an opportunity to let another staff member take the lead on following through once in a while, she may have been able to build the relationship with more success.

Yes, probably. What would I do differently with him? I mean maybe I wouldn’t always have been the one to try to like to be the one to jump in first. Maybe it could’ve been, ya know if I was feeling a little bit “enough of this” with him than maybe it could’ve been that one of the teaching assistants could’ve give him the expectations of the assignment and seeing if I could’ve been the one to jump in an
help him once an escalation had started and maybe that would’ve made some changes. (Stacy, 2016).

On the contrary, she believes that her role at the forefront of the problem was ideally where she was able to provide the support, encouragement and praise in an effort to get him to complete the tasks required.

So, like I said, I tried to support him but it was hard for me to be the one like after breakdown time to be the one to let him carry on. But I would, before we got to that point, I would try to encourage him and provide him with words of support and encouragement to try and build him up before we got to that point. (Stacy, 2016).

In the role of educator, Stacy aimed to ensure that the student was able to access education and did not want to forfeit the expectations because he was capable. The participant believed that it was self-fulfilling for the student to watch time pass as staff comforted him and talked about what was bothering him as opposed to completing his work. As a result, she maintained expectations despite student attempts to diminish them.

That maybe he would’ve been too dependent on knowing that expectations may have been lowered or maybe he wouldn’t be getting as much learning done because there would be more support “let’s talk about this, hug and cry about this” as opposed to more learning.

While the primary focus was academic, Stacy utilized non-academic opportunities to engage in a mutual interest. She learned that the student really enjoyed football and would aim to improve the status of the relationship by spending quality time with the student.
I had one. He liked to play football, he was big into sports so I would try at times if there was a time that he was taking a break or something to be the one and throw the football with him because I knew that I had trouble connecting with him. (Stacy, 2016).

As a result, she noticed that the relationship began to emerge although she did not feel as though they had reached the level of an authentic caring relationship.

I think over time the student began trusting me more. Due to that maybe more time or effort or trying to connect with them on something they were interested in.

In all four narratives, participants shared their beliefs and understandings of identified challenging relationships where they had attempted to improve the status of the relationship, however, non-acceptance prevailed. In building caring relationships, the caring ones must meet the cared-for where they are and assume their perspective or understanding. In none of the four instances discussed, was this aspect of a caring relationship disclosed. Instead, participants held students accountable, taught them the expectations while supporting them in the moment, with the understanding that these students would move to a less restrictive environment. The absence of a caregiving relationship can be challenging to the teacher and student alike. As expressed by participants, non-caregiving teacher-student relationships yield increased behavioral outcomes and a reduction in the level of academic coursework that students can accomplish. These unstable relationships are also believed to become obstacles between a student and their ability to reach their full potential, improve their self-image and self-worth, and establishing a meaningful purpose. Participants unanimously felt that once the student was invested in the relationship they
were more likely to engage in positive behaviors, often reflected ownership of their environment, aimed to please adults, and sought out opportunities for growth.

**Contributing Components Perceived to Critically Impact Quality of Care**

**Impact on Consistency**

Within this residential day school, it was widely mentioned that lead teachers felt they are some of the most consistent adults in the lives of the youth they serve. In some cases, students are limited to staff [within this facility] as the only adults that attend to their needs and provide care. It was supported that this consistency is perhaps the greatest contributing factor to the establishment of a teacher-student caregiving relationship. Two areas of focus were developed in this section (1) being present and (2) finding balance between educator and caregiver. When teachers are able to show students that those who care about them are present and available, it fosters the idea of readiness and portrays the message that students are worthy of the time and effort it will take to build the relationship. In most cases, teachers noted that they show students they care by being there for them through consistency and support. By being present, lead teachers are providing the consistency that many students are not familiar with.

At the same time you are more than a teacher to them because a lot of them don't have anyone else. So you are really one of the most consistent adult figures in their life. You are there Monday through Friday everyday unless well I don't really even take sick days but I am very consistent for them. You form a bond with them that is more than a teacher more of like a caregiver as well which is great. (Macy, 2016).
One teacher explained that the amount of time that students spend with the same people in school is greater than time spent with any single person on campus for residential students. She feels that this puts teachers at an advantage toward accessing information, building relationships that are solid, and contributing to the treatment goals of the student.

It ends up being that we are the most consistent adults for any child on the residence. I mean if you look just at their shifts at school and the residence, the number of hours, we actually spend the most time with these children so we are the people that know them quite well and it used to be that we would use that a lot. (Meghan, 2016).

Meghan goes on to mention the importance of remaining consistent in the classroom as important since the interpretations of individualized plans by some students can be challenging. By having consistent adults responding to the same group of children it is often to teacher benefit.

And consistency. These children are very observant and they see everything that we do. They watch our interactions with other children and our interactions with them. Yes, individualized plans are great but they are also watching to see if you are going to do something like that for me or "Hey, this kid did this or you did this". They want to make sure that they are feeling safe and cared for and thought about. (Meghan, 2016).

Likewise, maintaining a balance between educator-caregiver and preventing the management of these approaches in isolation, can be beneficial. When teachers flip between the two roles rather than finding a way to combine them, the situation can be come unstable.
And I think that sometimes the kids have a hard time when you are trying to switch back and forth from caregiver to educator. (Stacy, 2016).

In this case, it is important for the teacher to identify balance so that even when expectations are developed and managed, students still know they are cared-for and supported. Finding this balance can be especially challenging, aiming to find your place in the situation to ensure that students are making both academic and treatment gains simultaneously.

I think that I acted as a consistent adult who is consistently able to show the child that I would listen and that I will care about him but at the same time that I will set boundaries. I know that some people think I don't set boundaries enough but I think that just being consistently able to listen and consistently able to provide the statements to provide or help him reestablish his self-worth and also just to help him grow as a person - I think that has been my role. (Hope, 2016).

The overall aim of consistency is to build a platform from which a relationship is able to launch and be maintained. A child must know that you are present, available, and responsive to their needs if they are going to count on the teachers in their lives. Teachers felt that if they are available to develop this consistency they are signifying interest in the relationship.

Quality of Connection

Persistence, established trust, consistency, support, body language, and quality time spent together were identified as contributing dynamics in developing a quality connection. In positive relationships, many if not all of the above factors were present at high levels in an effort to build the relationship and establish a sense of greater being within the cared-for. Of those relationships that were lacking a quality of connection the above were not noted as regularly
present nor present to the degree at which they were present in positive relationships. According to Stacy (2016), “There are kids you connect with and other kids that you don’t connect with as much.” The quality of a connection is a determining factor into the level at which the caring-one had made an investment into the relationship in the way the cared-for desired.

Getting to know them. Trying to get them to open up, getting them to trust you.

But first you just have to know about them. You have to know what they like, what you can connect to them with. Like “Oh, you like basketball, I like basketball, lets to play a game together.” You have to put in the time to build the relationship where they know that you are trustworthy and that you actually care about them and slowly but surely, they will begin to open up to tell you things.  

(Macy, 2016).

When a teacher was reminded of a potentially challenging situation, she would remind herself that she needed to continue muddling through the challenges so that they together would reap the benefits. She was also reminded by the depth of many intense histories that children brought with them to [this school] on a daily basis.

Yeah, I mean the relationships can always get better. There are some kids that are harder to gain relationships with because of things that have happened to them in their past and so they take longer to warm up given the fact that I’ve been moved to so many different places, I think that I’ve gotten better at building relationships quicker but that doesn’t mean that they are as deep as I would like them to be to get to the learning and healing that can happen through that. (Meghan, 2016).
Meghan also admits that due to many of the negative school encounters that these students have experienced, building a relationship is crucial in leading students to the point that they can complete the work and in turn improve their self-image.

The relationship has to come first; nobody is just going to listen to you. These kids are smarter than that. You really have to build the relationship and create a space where learning can happen first. That’s why they say you can’t teach for the first week or month of school. (Meghan, 2016).

In a single explanation of how a positive relationship between Macy and a student emerged, she exposes signs of persistence, consistency, body language, and time together in an effort to build a trusting and supportive relationship.

I definitely knew who he was just because he is one of the heavier hitters here at [this school] but I didn't really know him too well. Last year I was in another school. This past summer I was in his class and so I really got to know him. He had a great relationship with one of the TA's that was in the room with me. He [the teaching assistant] moved on and the child began to attach to me because I was the more consistent one and I think that's where it really started. I just couldn't get enough of him; he was so adorable and so caring which really drew me to him. So I definitely got to know him in the summer. He is a fun kid, always looking to play. I could ask him to go outside to throw a football, or play outside, or go swimming or lets to do this and he was always like really active and wanting to do stuff. Whereas the other kids would be like "I just want to play on the iPad". And I'd be like okay let’s go, let’s go do something so we'd spend a lot
of time like that when the other kids didn't want to play over the summer. (Macy, 2016).

Even in some of the challenging relationships, the foundation of a relationship was established; however, reaching its full potential was diminished prior to gaining the full academic benefit.

When I say that he was challenging, we actually had a very good relationship in terms of we could tell that we cared and he cared and I cared but there was no productivity from him until the end. (Meghan, 2016).

Another relationship has not reached the stage of acceptance; Hope utilizes persistence and consistency in an effort to reflect her interest in pursuing an educator-caregiver relationship.

I continue to pull up chairs next to him so if a special with the group is run, I will sit with him. Or if it is a group activity I will put my chair between three children. Often if I do this, he will ask for space and ask me to move further away. (Hope, 2016).

She responds to his request by moving away, however, mentions that she returns once the next activity begins as a way of signifying that she is ready and available to support him when he is ready.

Although each of these relationships is in a different place along the relational journey, they reveal conscientious effort and strategic attempts to move the relationship along at a pace that the cared-for will accept. Since the time spent on campus is limited for most students, the examples shared here reflect lead teachers focus to accelerate the process by catering to the
needs of the students with a focus on teaching and treatment. The educator-caregiver role is one that has been marked as possible and although it has been noted as a fulfilling task, it is clear that the time and energy that are required to establish these relationships can be tremendous.

**Viewpoints of the Experience of Balancing Dual-Roles of Educator-Caregivers**

**Role Identity of an Educator-Caregiver**

The role of an educator-caregiver can be a challenge in itself; however, the complexities that are brought to this role through the placement of students within a residential day program are exponential. To begin understanding the role of an educator-caregiver, participants were asked how they describe their roles. They described themselves as leaders, planners, instructors, learners, caring-ones, counselors, secure figures, coaches, and advocates among many other roles including teachers. In order to reach the academic phase of schooling, each of these roles facilitate as transporters that assist children in reaching and achieving their academic and non-academic goals.

Hope discusses the challenge of being a classroom leader for students and staff while being a first-year teacher and how she has managed to navigate the process without a strong foundational knowledge beyond the college atmosphere.

I am expected to lead a classroom team of an assistant teacher and I hear we are getting a child care worker next week which is exciting but regardless lead the team of assistant teacher and whomever else is in the classroom at the moment as well as planning and doing all of the instruction and activities that aren't specials. (Hope, 2016).
She goes on to explain how her experience in the classroom as created a learning environment for her as a leader. She recognizes that there are many areas that she is not familiar with and navigating them with the support of colleagues has been beneficial. Hope wishes to gain this knowledge at an accelerated rate so that her engagement with student benefits with true and tested responses, however, experience and observation have been noted as the most influential ways to learn how to navigate this population.

But I also see myself as a learner because it is my first year teaching and there is so much that I don’t know and so much that I don’t even know that I don’t know. At the same time, I am fully aware of how much I can grow in this role and it’s both frustrating me and empowering me at the same time. I want to be able to do it all now and it’s a balance between leading with what I can do now and continuing to learn new things to bring to my instruction and management. (Hope, 2016).

As caring-ones, participants addressed the use of their bodies as a way of showing students they care. They show them through the use of body language and affection that they are accepting and supporting of the efforts of their students. Macy notes that these are the visible traits that are exposed and can be very beneficial for a student who has difficulty reading cues or reading situations.

Attentive, affectionate, you could tell by their body language and facial expression and their eye contact. You can tell what they can pick up on like if they’re sad or upset. If the teacher is really caring they will be able to identify that
the child looks upset, whereas if they are not caring they will not know the difference. (Macy, 2016).

Advocacy is also a central part of the teacher role in the support of the youth served at [this school]. To be a quality advocate, participants noted that there has to be an investment in the children you work with. By forming solid relationships with them and understanding their journey a lead teacher may assume the role of advocate in the areas of planning and sharing.

If I didn't have all of these great relationships with my students I wouldn't want to come to work. Why would I want to come to work fighting the good fight for kids that you don't care about? You have to figure out how to get them to be successful even with all of the challenges; it would be a terrible day if you didn't care. If we were getting paid like a million dollars some people would suck it up but we don't do it because of the money, we do it because we care, because we love it. (Macy, 2016).

The teaching role involves planning and instructing, however in this environment it also means taking into account the curriculum, the age and ability of students, the disabilities and triggers, the trends and needs of each child you serve. Often this requires significant planning so that a lesson is meaningful for the entire group.

It is really important that you hold these kids to an expectation so you can find out what the problem is. You aren’t going to give them something that is outrageous. That is your job as the teacher to not give them something outrageous you want to try to meet them where they are and work with them to show that you care enough
about them to handle what they are addressing then handle the problem.

(Meghan, 2016).

Although there were many examples led by participants sharing their experiences of acting as a secure figure for students, Meghan recalled an event when she was coerced by a student which led to physical harm. She recited the story which involved her continuing to be present in the student’s life and ensuring him that she was not giving up on him.

He was just so frustrated I think he also knew that no matter how much he was going to hurt me I wasn't leaving. (Meghan, 2016).

Teachers at [this school] have many responsibilities that require an understanding of the academic expectations as well as the emotional well-being of the students served. This person is responsible for the coordination of efforts to help establish caring relationships and academic outcomes.

I think that the role of the teacher at this school takes on a lot of different responsibilities. I think it is my job to create a comfortable learning environment and to be able to try to access children’s learning where they are at. So that takes being really flexible and also on top of being the teacher at times you need to be able to be, ya know, I don’t want to say a therapist or clinician but some sort of emotional support for the students as well. (Stacy, 2016).

Likewise, Meghan’s experience supporting a youth with adoption proceedings placed her in a close role with the family and therapist.
When I first started I would spend time in adoption and if there was a disruption in the adoption, I would be able to sit down with the mom and daughter and the clinician and go through what happened and where it was at and I think we are just as much their moms as their therapist and their teachers.

Coaches teach, train, motivate and prepare the team to work harder and together to reach excellence. As a coach, Meghan built a foundation for youth, displaying the message that students are deserving of the best and that she would not allow them to consequence themselves by taking those expectations away.

Which is like, you deserve this expectation, I'm not going to let you take it away from yourself, and it's not going away. You've earned it. You've earned this; you wouldn't be in this classroom if you didn't earn this that's why we're here. You're here and you're sitting in this classroom it means you've earned it for something. (Meghan, 2016).

The role of an educator-caregiver is a complex one that assumes many roles. In order to successfully maintain these roles and the ethical responsibilities that are aligned with each, it is essential that balance is obtained and maintained. These many “hats” encourage an educator-caregiver to design their professional being and shape who they will become in this role. As participants concluded the fluid transition between hats must go unnoticed, since each is a part of another.

Perceived Benefits and Challenges Associated with the Identification of Balance

In this role, balance blends a mosaic of information, ethical responsibility, and relational caregiving, melded together to formulate educator-caregiver relationships. All participants
focused on balance as the primary token required for all of the necessary elements to work collectively. It is the bond of a teacher and caregiver roles aiming to provide security and continuity in the care of youth placed in their care. Given the extraordinary range of students placed at [this school], this balanced approach is individualized in nature and supported systematically.

There are a multitude of areas where balance was described as a necessary ingredient to the approach portrayed and included balancing: (1) level of challenge and ability academically, (2) balancing emotional well-being and academic outcomes, (3) directives vs. choice, (4) establishing boundaries and allowing for autonomy, (5) time and effort among all students to ensure their needs are met, (6) situational experiences and recognizing when a student is experiencing environmental and/or relational stress, (7) proximity and support, (8) transitions among staff allowing children an opportunity to develop relationships with more than one individual, (9) social peer coaching and teacher intervention, and (10) body language and tone of voice with the message provided. When these areas are balanced, teachers have reported greater academic and emotional strength among students. They have also indicated that these areas provide a structured, semi-predictable classroom which allows for children to gain comfort and security within this environment and has been known to expedite the opportunities that teachers have had in building positive relationships with students.

Academic triggers are a major cause of child dysregulation, leading to outbursts of anger, anxiety, and exit from the classroom. For teachers to successfully accomplish their goals, their students must be present and in good space to receive the instruction and partake in the lesson. As a result, teacher’s must identify a balance between academic tasks that are too easy and those too challenging. The ideal is for a ‘just right’ activity to be placed in front of the student, one
that accomplishes the goal of teaching something new that can be completed with minimal-moderate support and one that is not visually or academically overwhelming. The tasks should provide the student with enough practice to show they have mastered the skill but not overwhelming in the sense that they must complete a tremendous amount of work repetitively before proving they’ve learned the new skill.

It’s how can you balance instruction so that it is accessible to them its finding things they can do so they can learn but not making it so challenging that they can't do it. It can even be the way you lay it out on the paper so that they perceive it as too hard, because even if they can do the work, if it is laid out on the paper real close together it looks like a lot and they will still just refuse. (Hope, 2016).

When balancing emotional well-being and academic outcomes, it must be noted that in participant experiences, without emotional balance, academics cannot be approached successfully. On a regular basis, students at [this school] are receiving updates and news about situations involving family, adoption status, foster placements, transitions to new residential facilities, changes in their care, medication changes, and staffing changes to name a few. These changes have a tremendous impact on student learning and/or behavior and must be approached with care. In part, lead teachers are marked with the responsibility to analyze student information, discuss outcomes with students, provide care and support, and still meet the criteria for benchmark testing and academic rigor.

So it is a big thing for them, especially for these kids in this population because there are so many times that they are not at baseline and being able to learn at their best level. You have to make sure they are okay and show that you care
about them and show that you are willing to help them but also make sure that they do their work and they're learning and being successful in the classroom. (Macy, 2016).

Once a teacher acquires the information necessary, the aim is to balance the student so that he/she can learn effectively.

That fine line where you have to make sure that all of their needs are being met but also on the education part where like yes you have to worry about their well-being, their needs being met, and their emotional stability, and all these things but I also need to be able to get them to pass their tests and to learn this, this, and this from my unit. I need to get you to be able to type, and pass MCAS, and do all of these things on top of making sure that you're at baseline. (Macy, 2016).

Another component of balance is to provide students with an opportunity to make choices when possible. Due to the level of restriction in a residential facility, students are often directed to the expectations, activities, and actions to take place. As a result, some students become ill-equipped to make decisions with independence and confidence, an inability to experience the world with a sense of autonomy. Once a student is prepared to make choices with limited risk, it is important that these opportunities are afforded. Meghan’s example identifies ways in which choice and autonomy (forum for which reading class was delivered and materials that were to be used) were delivered while still holding the student to an expectation (completing his assignments and meeting the standards for reading class).

And the last two months, we did a motivation thing where he and another student that he enjoyed, [a pair] who we were trying to steer off of this "I'm going to...it’s
really funny to wreak havoc all over the world" kind of path toward becoming a student. He helped the child that I had as a 1:1. And I said that I would do a reading group with the two of you if we can get it together and our reading group became very successful. We used some of the things that initially were maybe not so good like the social things that were keeping him from being a part of school and structured our policy. We read a book about baseball which he was also a very talented baseball player. (Meghan, 2016).

Thus far, each of the interventions and building blocks that have been shared has required time and effort on the part of the participants. As a rookie teacher, it is difficult to manage the education and caregiving of, at minimum, nine students simultaneously. At the start of many teacher’s time at [this school] they must develop a system for managing the amount of individual and group time and effort spent to ensure that proper amounts are allocated to each student’s needs.

I think that with her it was maybe and I wonder too if it was during my first year and if I was trying to navigate how much time and effort do I put into one student as opposed to the group? (Stacy, 2016).

Other considerations involve the complexity of the child’s case in the moment. The multitude of changes that occur to their cases and situations are life-altering. It is important for the teacher to recognize when a student is likely to prioritize his/her situation and be flexible enough to understand that academics are not always at the forefront of the student’s mind. When situations are particularly altering, the teacher may adjust the expectations or provide opportunities for the student to learn and grow in different ways.
He was spending a lot of time in the classroom settling room and required a lot of flexibility on our part. To say, hey you can just go sit in the settling room if you are feeling too overwhelmed to be in the classroom right now. I think the level of care changed because the things happening in his life were dramatically different and the things happening in his life directly impact the way we interact with him and as well as things happening in all of my students lives impact the things that are happening and the way we interact with them because obviously a student who is going through a tough time at home is going to be acting differently at school. (Hope, 2016).

Providing students with a variety of experiences that involve both direct teaching and peer collaboration helped to prepare the student for real world experiences and the workforce. The guidance should be readily available when needed, however, encouragement for the student to explore a situation in an effort to resolve a problem is also an essential skill.

Specifically with this student, I think that I have to balance giving positive reinforcement and positive encouragement about the students capabilities with having the student complete the work independently or with a partner or with teacher support depending on what's needed. (Hope, 2016).

When children learn to solve problems independently or with a peer they learn to build confidence in themselves and begin to utilize readily available resources instead of relying on the knowledge of the teacher.

As students begin building relationships with the teacher or other staff members, participants believed that the transfer of skills should be managed and practiced. The reliance on
only one individual while in residential care could lead to instability. Often, when children at this placement have a preferred adult, they aimed to rely on that adult to support and guide them through all of the challenges brought with home, school, and life. Unfortunately, the teachers are available during the traditional work week which means that support is not always available from a single adult during all of the times they are needed. It is beneficial both to the student and the preferred staff member to have more than one trusted adult, active in the life of the child. To establish this relationship, staff must coordinate their efforts as opposed to competing for student favorability.

I don't like to not have some sort of control over things and that was just like something that was like in the back of my mind plus I was getting stuff from staff outside like wow what is going on why you can’t do this. First of all we need to be on the same page and second of all I don't know. So it was very frustrating so ya know my role as the teacher was difficult for him. (Meghan, 2016).

A natural phase of childhood is learning to navigate peer interactions. This experience is not limited to residential care, although perhaps due to the number of children surrounding an individual at all times of the day, the importance of navigating these experiences may be vital. At times, the teacher must intervene in the interaction, although in many of the participant responses they discussed how they coached the situation rather than commanding it.

I also met with each kid at some point to discuss ways to phrase it because "shut-up" doesn't work. I was like can you use the words please stop talking, hey, I'm trying to read a book can you please stop. The kids would turn to me, they
decided to be nice about it and if I'm not nice the teacher will intervene. They tried to be nice. (Macy, 2016).

To identify balance among children who typically have difficulty reading social cues and facial cues, teachers are encouraged to verify that their body language and tone of voice aligns with their messages. When teachers are frustrated about a behavior yet smiling, it sends a mixed message to the student that the behavior is accepted. Based on learned experiences, students typically rely on the tone of voice and body language more so than they do the actually message being shared. Macy used her body language and tone of voice to consistently ‘show’ students that she was excited and proud to have them as students.

I feel like I am a very animated person. I like to talk, I'm very loud and outgoing, I definitely think my body language and overall excitement when I physically see them or the success they've made or see something that they've done or when they've done something nice for another student. I think they see how excited about seeing them and care about them being successful. (Macy, 2016).

Balance is the key to successful caring teacher-student relationships. In established relationships, the balance is often in place, however, the nurturance of a new relationship brings its challenges. New relationships often bring trial and error, an exploration of what students are capable of, and an infusion of time and energy into building a trusting relationship that will eventually become the cornerstone of the quality of the relationship.

*Educator-Caregiver Understandings of the Challenges Associated with Obtaining Balance*

While balance creates an ideal situation for authentic, caring relationships, it is not always feasible. Many external factors may play a role in how balance is managed within the
classroom setting and has a tremendous impact on the way students present. In this residential day school setting, safety is the primary goal for the benefit of students and faculty.

He was a very fun kid. He was a very likable kid. I liked him a lot and so did all the TA’s but he would just would not stay in the classroom and would become violent toward classroom team and stop as soon as anyone else came. It was very targeted behavior versus others [we have seen]. (Meghan, 2016).

Even in the most notable classrooms, the balance may shift due to obvious and/or unforeseen changes. To name a few of the areas that may affect typical balance: medication changes, negative self-image, emotionally triggering information, management of student behaviors, adjustments to the investment of individualized time, the effectiveness of a sound plan diminishing, and peer interactions. Examples of how some of these areas affect the balance in classrooms are shared from the four participants.

When medication regiments are affected, participants have noticed the effects as they present in the classroom. The student attends school with a different mindset and abilities from one day to the next due to the inconsistencies in his/her medications.

He definitely presents as grumpy at home. He will get off the bus and Grandma asks about his day and he says fine and that is it. It does not sound as self-depreciating as he is at school. We had a conversation one day after he hadn’t had meds and she mentioned that there are times on the weekend or vacations when she doesn't give him his meds because he goes to run and play with his friends outside and she cannot tell that he isn't on his meds but we can definitely tell at school. (Hope, 2016).
Hope also mentions the challenge of providing positive praise to those doing well as opposed to shaming those who aren’t doing what’s expected. In her experiences, students with negative self-images often perceive themselves to be in the non-praised group on a regular basis although this is often not the case.

I like to think that I provide nurturance and care frequently in my classroom to every child who is in there. Both when I'm teaching and when I'm not teaching, I'm a big fan of positive praise and praising students who are doing well as opposed to calling out students who aren't following directions. That is something that I struggle with because when I do praise kids who are doing a good job, he assumes that he is not in the praised group which goes along with his self-esteem. (Hope, 2016).

When issues of safety arise, proper protocols must be followed and the once established balance may be challenged. It is during these times that participants agree that flexibility is key allowing students to collaborate to formulate a plan that will ensure safety.

There was a lot of targeting, increased aggression, a lot of leaving space, a lot of defiance and yelling. Very low frustration tolerance and he would yell at anyone who would make him frustrated. We ended up telling him he could use the settling room because that was a safe space for him to be when he was having all of these worries about all of the things and our priority for that month was for him to stay safe. (Hope, 2016).
Participants shared the frequent stories of overcoming a challenge by strategically implementing a plan with a student only to find that the next time the behavior would occur, the student refused to adopt or follow the plan resulting in the need for immediate intervention.

Some of the challenges are when you've planned something to do and then all of a sudden there is a big explosion and you need to evacuate the room and making sure you are keeping everyone safe and remaining in control. It really just takes someone that can be flexible in those situations and know that they can try that lesson again later. (Stacy, 2016).

Having the experience to retract and idea and implement a new one without hesitation is a skill that must be quickly learned at [this school]. Often times, students are unaware of the strategies to choose from and having a wide variety available to you as a professional are important.

Their downs. Every single one of their downs. Learning how to tent each one of the kids is so individually based there is not one answer for each kid. It’s not like if they are being aggressive do this and it will fix everything. No... this time for this particular kid, it might work. You need to have a huge toolbox of all these strategies that you can use at any given time based on their needs, based on what their problem is, and I think learning how to use those tools appropriately is the biggest challenge and making sure they are the most effective. (Macy, 2016).

In one case, the student was remorseful for harming classroom staff which was not an isolated incident. He was in need of new strategies that would help him to understand his reactions and provide him with new ideas as he grew.
He felt bad, I'm sorry Ali. He was always sorry for the hurting which is why I couldn't understand why he would do it. I think he was just frustrated that he didn't have any more skills. He also had a great clinician. (Meghan, 2016).

One of the greatest challenges noted by three of the four participants was spending quality time with a student whom they felt consistently refused to accept the relationship. Here, teachers described incidences where they had anticipated the negative outcomes of individualized time after some effort ceased the opportunity to continue engaging in the activity.

I can sit and play basketball with him but at the same time he would find a way to say that I was cheating, I know that because I've tried it. I did positive breaks, I tried that at one point, encouraging him to spend 1:1 time but something always went horribly wrong which made it incredibly frustrating. (Macy, 2016).

The teacher cannot possibly anticipate all interactions among peers; however, participants did agree that it was important for them to have a backup plan for when the balance of the classroom abruptly shifted.

Obviously, some of the challenges are the dynamics of the children among each other. Our first and foremost job is to be the teacher and making sure that that is still at the front of your mind despite that so and so came in, in a really bad mood. The first thing is that they couldn’t sit next to each other but that seems to be getting into their way the most, the children and their interactions. (Meghan, 2016).

**Recognizing the Personal and Unique States of Emotional Labor**
Awareness of Emotional Resilience and Expulsion

The emotional connectivity to the role of educator-caregiver at [this school] yields a profession that is not simply forgotten as one walks out the door. It is not uncommon for teachers to think about their students outside of work hours nor is it uncommon for them to devote their personal time toward the improvement of the lives of children they care for. The reflection of practice and rethinking what’s working and what’s not are common as the participants have reported. The lead teacher position at [this school] requires an immense amount of time and energy both related to the educational aspects of teaching and learning as well as the caregiving side of improving the lives of children who count on the faculty to meet their needs.

As a new teacher, it can be expected that a significant amount of time would be spent planning for academic instruction, however, this position requires much more. The two participants that are fairly new to the field admit that they have limited time to engage in anything non-work related.

I don't know if this counts as emotionally connected but I know that work and being here takes up so much of my life at this point that I frequently talk about it or mention it when I am not at work. (Hope, 2016).

The investment toward students is relatable to those in their family. The teachers often expend their own material resources to ensure that students have what they need and that they don’t go without.

Like 100%, that’s my job. I spent more money on my kids than I do on myself in a given week. I was lucky enough where I had a good upbringing.
everything we needed and these kids don't and my job as their teacher and a consistent caregiver in their life is to give them all that I can and make sure that they can be successful and do the best I can to make sure they don't repeat this cycle. (Macy, 2016).

In some cases, staff expressed concern that students were not able to remain competitive with their non-residential peers as it relates to afterschool activities and functions. While students on campus do participate in community activities, some lead teachers expressed that specific opportunities are not offered that they believe would improve the skillset of specific students.

Another one that I always see is sports and things. Some kids participate in it but I don't think it’s enough. Like on the residential side of it. I see signs on my way to work for Pop Warner Football, advertisements on the side of the road and I always think of like the first kid and how he'd be so good at something like that. He needs that. If he was anywhere else, if he had the same skillset would he of had a different upbringing, how would things be different? (Macy, 2016).

All participants shared at least one instance of how they were emotionally connected to a situation or experience outside of working hours. They frequently mentioned the holidays, vacation weeks, and events that are usually spent with family, as times that are harder for them to enjoy knowing that their residential students are likely on campus.

Daily. I just feel like there is no way that you are leaving this campus and not thinking about something. And there’s no way you are waking up in the morning when you're getting ready and not thinking about what you need to do. I set my
alarm this morning to make sure that I remembered to go onto the unit this morning to give one of my kids a hug. He had run up to the classroom to give me a hug yesterday and I wasn't there so. (Meghan, 2016).

Finally, reflecting upon problems of practice and/or areas for consideration are common rituals among participants. They often playback incidents to determine if problems could be avoided in the future and lend themselves to considering alternative strategies to be readily accessible when necessary, also they focus on changes for the following day to improve the structure and dynamics of the classroom.

There have been some situations that have been hard to let go of so I will just sort of go home and mull it over and think about playing it back in your head maybe trying to figure out how did that happen? Why did that happen? What’s tomorrow going to be like? Ya know, based on the situation. (Stacy, 2016).

All in all, it is clear that emotional labor is present both during the school day as well as during non-working hours. Concern for the livelihood of the students extends beyond the classroom and is often thought provoking during personal time. The extensive consideration that is involved in the planning, structure, and implementation of educational and caregiving practices is exponential and simply cannot be fully constructed and deconstructed during the school day.

*Approaches to a Supportive Environment*

To maintain the mental health of lead teachers, they too must rely on members of the team. In order to be strong and secure for students, the lead teachers must also support their own well-being. Among the teams are clinicians, supervisors, coordinators, administrators, human
resource personnel and classroom colleagues. Each member of the team is encouraged to collaborate with peers and supervisors to establish a system of well-being. In this field, members of the direct care team are increasingly susceptible to vicarious trauma and so it’s important that regular conversations about the personal and professional well-being of staff is addressed.

There were several reinforcements in place to aid educators which were noted as valuable to their practice. Some of these supports include: an open communication policy, observations with quality feedback, weekly professional development, sharing responsibilities with members of the team, and recommendations for providing care to children with difficult behaviors. Participants have also shared areas where additional support would be beneficial. These areas included: aligning participant learning styles to recommendations intended to support an improvement of their practice, connecting with co-workers, increasing staff proactively, and having an ability to take a break.

One participant discussed how she would benefit from incident debriefings to be aligned with her learning style. She aims for a team approach, however, debriefings often conclude with changes to practice or focus on antecedent behaviors. This participant requested that the information be provided to her with several recommendations at a time, an ability to try them and a follow-up/check-in several days later. She indicated that by receiving all of the information at one time, it can be overwhelming and she often is unsure where to begin making changes to the plan.

I think just being willing to talk things through so if something went terribly during the day or there was a problem, instead of immediately jumping on ways to fix it, being willing to talk through the event itself too. Sort of debrief the
event before moving on to how to make it better. I think that would be very helpful. I remember when we had our fistfight awhile back, I think one of the things that we did do was talk through it beforehand that notifies the person that when things like that happen, I like to talk through it. And then when I get the feedback I appreciate it but I can be overwhelmed. There are opportunities to talk about the things that have happened and get feedback in a non-overwhelming way. Maybe for me it would look like one or two things but then following up a day or two later instead of having all of the suggestions at one time, my brain can't hold all of those things when it is feeling upset. (Hope, 2016).

Connecting with co-workers is helpful both to improve practice and to develop relationships with those you are surrounded by throughout the day. Participants universally shared that discussing stories related to [this school] with people who do not work here is often an isolating tasks. Most of the participants shared at least one example of discussing work related experiences with friends but felt as though they were not fully understood or asked to refrain from speaking further about their experiences making their work an isolating endeavor.

There just like the funny stories I think about, when someone will be telling a funny story about their work then I share that one of my students said this... or... That's something that's great about this community. There is nothing I like more than going out with my work people. You can vent, because no one else gets it. I think that's the biggest thing about places like this, you can talk about it all day long but you don't really get it until you experience it and see it. I think we all connect on a deeper level because we all get it and we're all a little crazier because of it. (Macy, 2016).
People who don't work at [this school] don't want to hear about [this school] all the time. And because it’s such an emotionally draining full body investment at work you end up talking about and you end up letting it just wave over you. And you just can't do it. That's what you have co-workers for. Your co-workers and you can just talk. There was one year when I was just having a terrible time not students and I would just rant and rave rally for like an hour and my roommate said okay you have to stop. (Meghan, 2016).

Participants also noted that by increasing the amount of staff available, teachers would be able to proactively plan for student breaks and to have someone support their academics in the classroom. As a result, lead teacher participants believe that this would significantly reduce the amount of time out of class resulting from behavioral incidents.

More staff; that's always the biggest thing. I feel that a lot of the issues we see with these kids would be eliminated if we had proactive staff support so you will see myself as the first person to take a new staff under my wing and say that this is your new classroom until someone tells you otherwise. Because so many of these kids just need someone to sit next to them because they want to feel safe and know that someone cares for them. They don't need teachers they just really need someone a person... So if we were fully staffed it would make a difference. I think it would result in an extreme amount of restraint reduction because I can just think about a lot of the incidents and if there were a staff available to help the children either by being with the children behaving or those struggling or even to sit next to a child that you think might struggle. We would have, I would gather 50% restraint reduction. (Meghan, 2016).
Lastly, providing the support necessary for staff to be relieved from their duties for a while in an effort to reenergize themselves was mentioned twice as a support strategy that they feel would improve their practice. Currently, lead teachers are not required to attend specials classes, however, some of the classes are held in the classroom and the additional support is often necessary in classes beyond the classroom.

They say that everyone doesn’t have to go to gym because other people are supposed to step in and deal with it but I always feel guilty not going to specials. Even if there was a person to fill in our place for 15-30 minutes to replace us so we didn’t feel so guilty. (Stacy, 2016).

By acknowledging beneficial teacher supports and aiming to improve the practice from an administrative level, the lead teachers expect to be able to provide increased care to the students they serve. The outcomes, should they come to fruition, are expected to far outweigh the costs and therefore should be taken into consideration as programming adjusts.
Chapter Five: Discussion of Research Findings

Chapter five presents a discussion of participant experiences as educator-caregivers in connection with their unique experiences of building, managing, improving and maintaining relationships with emotionally and behaviorally disabled youth who have been placed at risk in the context of existent literature and theory. The phenomenon of caring teacher-student relationships of children with emotional and behavioral disabilities in a residential day school setting was examined using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009) and draws upon the theoretical framework of Noddings (2005) theory of care and the available literature that highlights the relational caregiving of students by their teachers. The research problem centered upon the basis that children, especially those placed at risk, require a supportive relationship if they are to thrive (Isenbarger & Zemblyas, 2006; Cole, Craigen & Cowan, 2014; Hargreaves, 2000). Experiences and factors which contribute to a diminishing self-worth exacerbate the need for a caring relationship that will aim to strengthen resiliency and performance (Whitney & Hoffman, 1998). This qualitative research study reveals several major findings: (1) there are children placed at-risk who are diagnosed with co-morbid emotional and behavioral disorders are capable of developing positive and nurturing relationships with their teachers within a residential day program, (2) there is continuity in how teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities establish relationships as outlined in the section titled “Understanding the Building Blocks of Caring Teacher and EBD Student Relationships”, (3) positive teacher-student relationships tend to improve student outcomes academically, behaviorally, and therapeutically, (4) the quality of the teacher-student relationship is believed to be highly dependent upon several characteristics (trust, quality time, expectations, and personality) as well as an acceptance or non-acceptance of the care, and (5) achieving balance
between both academic and social-emotional learning can be especially challenging, therefore it is necessary for organizations to provide support. In addition, this chapter concludes with limitations set forth by this study as well as recommendations and considerations for future research.

**Revisiting the Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this study was to explore residential day school teachers’ understanding and experiences of the relational caregiving of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. While teacher training provides educators with the information and skills necessary to teach academic curriculum, teachers at residential day schools must also rely on social-emotional learning contexts if they are going to reach the children they serve. Many of the children in the residential day school reside on campus; receiving their care around the clock from their teachers and support staff while the remaining students arrive daily from group homes, foster homes, and family residences throughout the state. The children served tend to have co-morbid disabilities, psychological challenges, and/or trauma histories which are believed to have an impact on their ability to develop, accept and maintain relationships. This study explored the benefits and challenges of developing relationships with this population while maintaining appropriate academic standards. Furthermore, this study explored the multitude of obstacles that create barriers between the teacher and student from forming trusting relationships and other factors that influence the acceptance or non-acceptance of such relationship from forming.

**Reviewing the Methodology**

This qualitative study investigated how four private special education teachers serving in a single Massachusetts school serving the Commonwealth perceive their relationships with their
residential day school students, providing in-depth accounts of their journeys with those they felt they had strong and positive relationships with and those they felt were challenging and less effective. The study was guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology and designed to support educator voices through the description and detail pertaining to specific beliefs, understandings, and perceptions about these relationships. This methodology was utilized two-fold; the first in its use of hermeneutics (interpretation) where Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), specify that the hermeneutic circle provides a model for operating in wholes and parts with versatility offering a dynamic and progressive process encouraging the researcher to transition fluidly among data at various levels with multiple perspectives (p.27). The second utilization of this methodology was in its use of ideography where the depth of analysis and clarity of detail provide an understanding of “…the particular experiential phenomena [that] have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context” (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009, p.29). The homogeneous sample (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2013) of four teachers were chosen using purposive sampling (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2013) intended to recruit a “defined group for whom the research question [was] significant” (Smith & Osborn, 2007). This sample size was within the recommended range of one to more than fifteen participants, with three as the recommended number (Smith & Osborn, 2007). IPA was implemented to explore the interpersonal teacher-student relationships under complicated situations, with students who have complex mental and behavioral health needs. Given the aim and context of the study, the research was connected to a single question:

- What are residential teachers’ understandings and experiences of the relational caregiving and educating of students with emotional-behavioral challenges?
Guided by this research question, qualitative data was collected using semi-structured interviews as instrumentation. To thoroughly engage in the data analysis process, the researcher transcribed each of the four interviews independently. The analysis lent itself to the open coding process whereby the data was fragmented, analyzed, conceptualized, and categorized systematically (Saldana, 2009; Grbich, 2007). During the initial coding process, a combination of structural, descriptive, and In Vivo coding processes were implemented. The initial step of the analysis involved single line extractions of data from which the essence was described through the voices of participants; the same was then done word-by-word. This initial process led to emergent themes that were identified that were unique to each participant. The second cycle coding was used to “develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conception, and/or theoretical organization” (Saldana, 2009, p.149) from the first cycle codes. The interview guide was dismantled and aligned with the initial codes and reviewed question by question that the data could be categorically and thematically organized in preparation for further analysis. Axial coding heeded the final phase where I focused to “strategically reassemble the data that were ‘split’ or ‘fractured’ during the Initial Coding Process” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, as cited in Saldana, 2009, p.159). A constant-comparative analysis was utilized as a way of arranging the data into meaningful units that were sculpted until a “fit between theory and data [was] achieved” (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012, p.434). The constant-comparative analysis was critical to analysis because it emphasized the similarities and differences among participant experiences while preserving their viewpoints.

The conclusion of the analysis process established three subordinate and ten nested themes, from which the four teachers understood their relational experiences with their students. In response to the research question, these emergent themes revealed that their relationships with
their students, both positive and challenging, were perceived based on: (1) understanding the building blocks of caring teacher and student relationships within this context, (2) viewpoints of the experience of balancing the dual roles of educators as caregivers, and (3) recognizing the personal and unique states of emotional labor. From these themes, the following major findings from this study are presented as follows:

1. Teachers of children placed at-risk are able to establish positive and nurturing relationships with their students within a residential day program.

2. There is continuity in how teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities establish relationships at this site.

3. Positive teacher-student relationships tend to improve student outcomes both academically and therapeutically.

4. The quality of the teacher-student relationship is highly dependent upon several characteristics (trust, quality time, expectations, personality, etc.) as well as an acceptance or non-acceptance of the care.

5. Achieving balance between both academic and social-emotional learning is challenging, especially for newer teachers, declared in part to the unfamiliarity of mental and behavioral health concerns among children at the onset of employment.

It is important to note that while participants provide a kaleidoscope of situational and relational experiences, they were recruited from a single site for the purpose of maintaining a level of acuteness among the student population that would be difficult to compare elsewhere. As a result, the participants have similar training, support, and populations which allowed the researcher to delve deeper into the emotional and situational antecedents at the onset of relational development.
Theoretical Framework

Nel Noddings’ (1984, 2013) relational approach to ethics and moral education were used as a theoretical framework for this thesis. Through a relational perspective, Noddings’ asserts that all human encounters have affective consideration toward our ethical ideal. Our ethical ideal as Noddings describes refers to a moral sense that is fed through experiences and relatedness with others. It is a personalized set of beliefs and judgements about oneself and others that are enhanced or diminished based on situation, interpersonal relations, and experiences. Noddings’ work investigates the need for care in educative settings and has surmised to the idea that current educative practices misalign the relational and academic components required for students to learn to their potential. She highlights that children require supportive and caring relationships to thrive, whether that be a teacher or other trusted adult. In some schools, the relational supports that children have in the home setting are adequate, however, in many cases, children arrive to school with a need for relational caregiving. Similar to this study, the children entrusted in the care of participants had complex needs which have impaired their ability to form and stabilize lasting relationships with adults. As highlighted in Chapter Four, prioritization and nurturance of the relational ideal was an essential component of rebuilding student self-worth, establishing trust, providing a therapeutic environment, managing behavior, and accessing academics. This framework both utilized in the identification of an appropriate placement of relational care within educational settings as well as provided insight to the ethical ideal that engages one to commit to the relational caregiving of students despite the challenges posited within this setting.
Findings

The findings of this thesis research consider both discrete and cross-connected understandings of situational and relational experiences that influence student outcomes and educator-caregiver balance in a residential day school setting. It contributes to the existing literature related to the importance of building strong relationships with students placed at risk to support resiliency (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006; Cole, Craigen, & Cowan, 2014; Hargreaves, 2000). Furthermore, this study begins to develop an improved understanding of the benefit to children placed at risk for which the relational ideal is implemented, beneficial, practical, and transformational within this setting, an area absent in current literature. This study also contributes to the limited body of qualitative data and literature related to the emotional, behavioral, and academic well-being of children in residential school settings from the perspective of teachers; current literature is based on quantitative data sets primarily rating scales (Harder et al., 2014; McGill, Tennyson, & Cooper, 2006; Attar-Schwartz, 2009). The findings from this study reveal a set of beliefs and perspectives that are drawn from both distinct and collective understandings of participants’ situational experiences.

Teachers of at-risk children placed within a residential day program are able to establish positive and nurturing relationships with their students. Universally, the teachers described a relationship in which they were highly engaged in a caring connection with a student placed at-risk. The analysis of data revealed that the higher the risk of the student, the greater the identified need for care. As a result, teachers were more likely to engage in and maintain a positive and supportive relationship with those placed at highest risk. In many cases, these were the youth who resided and schooled within the residential treatment facility and often lacked a parental or familial support system. In these cases, the teachers collectively revealed that these
students had the lowest levels of self-worth, were emotionally unstable, had a limited advocacy group, had a history of trauma, and had very little trust in adults at the onset. While they all agreed that these children were most in need of a caring relationship, it was believed that these children were also believed to be the most resistant to caring relationship with their teacher. Through their stories and in comparison to those who they had the most difficulty establishing a positive relationship, these students were actually more willing to accept the support and encouragement of a trusting adult.

Isenbarger & Zembylas (2006) revealed that teachers face a real challenge to embrace, nurture, and encourage even the most difficult students so that they may feel cared for and supported within the classroom community. In residential day schools, children with the most complex needs and greatest number of out-of-home placements have the greatest perception of distrust and frustration toward an educational system that has not advocated on their behalf (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009). It is through this belief system that teachers “face the combined challenges of rebuilding or building safe, protective and nurturing relationships with primary caregivers” (Kagan & Spinazzola, 2013, p. 707). Participants in this study were able to develop strong relationships in the role of educator-caregiver with their students, despite many disabling psychological, emotional, and behavioral barriers, including trauma.

**There is continuity in how teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities establish relationships at this site.** During analysis, continuity was revealed through the description of the necessary components and methods used for developing relationships with students who may be resistant to relational caregiving. Participants shared insight to the “Building Blocks of a Caring Teacher-Student Relationship” in residential settings particularly with students who are diagnosed with emotional-behavioral disabilities. A
quantitative study conducted by Harder, Knorth, & Kalverboer (2013) revealed that for youth, building relationships with their teachers from the onset is especially challenging. They concluded that youth generally considered their teachers to be a secure base however they were unable to conclude the extent to which the relationship had developed. The findings from this section assist in the continuation of evidence that the relationships in residential care are authentic and the sequence to which the relationship had developed is provided. To describe these elements, there are five subordinate themes that arose through this analysis which include: (1) prioritizing and managing levels of care, (2) characteristics of caring relationships, (3) acceptance of care, (4) non-acceptance of care, and (5) contributing components (i.e. consistency and quality of connection). This systematic, although untaught, process for building and maintaining relationships with youth who have complex needs was described as widely used and dependable under most circumstances. In a variety of ways, teachers described themselves as motivated to be a trusted and caring adult that their students can rely on to get their needs met.

It can be posited that for authentic caring relationships to be present, there must be an identified need, specific characteristics must be present, the cared-for must accept the relationship, and components that contribute to the maintenance of the relationship must be enacted. This lends itself to the notion of Noddings (2005) Theory of Care which explicitly explains that the roles of the caring-one and the cared-for must be established so that the caring-one is able to assume the perspective of cared-for and that the cared-for must in some way show acceptance of the relationship.

Prioritizing and Managing Levels of Care. In sharing their stories, participants began telling of their relationships (positive and negative) by delving into their initial encounters and situational experiences which revealed the level of need that students had at the onset and how
these needs were prioritized and managed. Although the need for care was not an isolated trait in
determining whether a relationship would become positive or negative, it was a predetermining
factor of the amount of quality time that teachers would invest in building a relationship with an
individual student. The greater the need for care, the greatest amount of effort and energy went
into establishing and maintaining a relationship. For some students, especially those placed at
less risk and living at home, the need for care was noted as minimal and therefore teachers
expelled less energy and time toward the well-being of that student.

There was a level of empathy that was derived from teachers toward students with the
greatest need for care that revealed an emotional connection. Participants expressed that they
aimed to fill an emotional void within students of whom they felt had a limited amount of
consistent people to rely on. This emotional connection was explained in terms of spending
quality time with the student, maintaining “big picture” expectations, and by expending
emotional labor toward consideration of the well-being of the student during both personal and
professional time.

The need for care was determined based on a student’s prior life experiences and
situations that have placed the student at risk. Students placed in residential care received the
greatest amount of care and were noted as engaging in more positive relationships with their
teachers. The educators interviewed stated that they believe they were the most consistent adults
serving as role models and supports with the student throughout the week. Teacher-student
relationships with day students were noted as more challenging in part because teachers felt as
though their level of need was decreased because they had other involved adults in their home
environment although their living situation was described as unstable or potentially harmful in
all but one scenario. Teachers also indicated that they felt that day students had the potential to
participate in community based activities and had more situational experiences than students who attended the residential program and therefore felt as though their quality time should be spent with those who had less opportunity, as they noted, for experiences “we take for granted”. Participants aimed to identify the level of care at the onset so that their education and care could be provided in accordance with their needs.

The quality of the teacher-student relationship is highly dependent upon several characteristics (trust, quality time, expectations, personality, etc.) as well as an acceptance or non-acceptance of the care. Four areas defined the characteristics of caring relationships and included: 1) qualities and characteristics of caring teachers, 2) having a confidant or trusted adult, 3) spending quality time together, and 4) establishing expectations. These four areas are designated through participant responses and interpretation to be the classic tools necessary for successfully building an educator-caregiving relationship with a student. In alignment with the data collected is Laursen’s (2002) study “Seven Habits of Reclaiming Relationships” which identifies youth perspectives on effective relationships outlining the following key elements: trust, attention, empathy, availability, affirmation, respect and virtue. These attributes directly align with the teacher’s perspectives of contributing components of successful relationships with students in this context.

Qualities and Characteristics. The qualities and characteristics of caring teachers align with the other traits designed to build a caring relationship. Recurring characteristics identified throughout the interviews where the notion of presence and availability, attentiveness and a willingness to listen, body language, the establishment of boundaries and expectations, establishing self-worth, advocacy, investment in time and energy, mutual interests, and other common characteristics (ex. Perseverance, respectfulness, flexibility, empathy, affection, and
equity). These characteristics are necessary in establishing a quality relationship and the cornerstone for the remaining building blocks of caring relationships which include: acceptance and non-acceptance of care, and other contributing components.

*Presence and Availability.* Having a presence sends the message to others that you are physically there; however, participants described experiences that went beyond this context into the realm of availability. By being present, a message is portrayed that you are capable of being there and perhaps even consistent; however, the idea of availability indicates that you are focusing your attention and prioritizing their needs when they required the presence of the relationship. Participants reflected upon concerns they had experienced when they were not available at a time when a student they cared-for needed them and ensued their emotional responses by ensuring that they availed themselves as soon as possible in an effort to assure the student they remained a trusted adult.

Once the level of need was established, the contexts of spending time together were either academically based or of a caregiving nature and were not crossed until a relationship had been established. In positive relationships, participants were eager to spend time with the students as caregivers and articulated a starting point for developing mutual interests and learning all they could about the student and his/her friends and family. After sometime, the learned information could then be applied to teaching technique to support the student through the established relationship. In negative relationships, participants tended to take a more educative approach and aimed to provide supports, positive reinforcement, and incentives to improve academic outcomes but revealed less of a caregiving approach due to a perceived notion that the area which required the greatest attention was to focus on becoming a student. As a
result, teachers tended to spend less quality caregiving time with day students as individuals and more time focusing out academic outcomes.

*Attentiveness and Willingness to Listen*

Participants shared a wide variety of methods for listening and engaging students in conversation. They revealed that many of the students they serve are introverted and tend to keep their histories private and as a result often struggled to make progress in the realm of emotional well-being. However, research shows that through deliberate efforts and constant consideration, a naturally nurturing teacher is likely to develop a rapport with students and often seeks to embrace and ensure their ethical ideals (Noddings, 2013; Vidourek et al., 2011). Universally, lead teachers aimed to establish a classroom climate where students felt safe and secure and thus more likely to open up to those they trust. A correlation between the amounts of quality time that teacher expended to each individual aligned with the level of trust they had built with the student. Teachers were inclined to feel that students in residential care, or those experiencing difficult circumstances, required more support and as a result were more likely to be attentive and listen when the student needed them. Also, in more severe cases, teachers were more likely to listen to student perspectives and analyze them and/or share them with the team in an effort to utilize the information while maximizing student progress. In other cases, primarily with day students in limited risk situations, teachers often felt that the behaviors were attention seeking as opposed to authentic and as a result took a more direct, educative approach to dealing with challenging behaviors. As a result, teachers were more likely to clarify and adjust student stories during the listening process and provide feedback throughout the conversation which may have impacted the quality of the relationship.
*Body Language.* Messages portrayed through body language are essential and perhaps more obvious than the spoken word. For children with emotional and behavioral disabilities, it is common for them to easily confuse messages if body language and verbal communication do not match. Participants described body language as a key indicator of a teacher’s confidence in the classroom and his/her openness and satisfaction with students. A teacher with quality posture, open arms, and matched facial cues are believed to be the most in control, focused, and attentive to his/her students. Opposing this idea, a teacher who has closed arms, stiffness, and matched facial cues are believed to be frantic or having lost control, overwhelmed or frustrated, and inattentive or unfocused on his/her students. Body language was noted as a useful tool in gaining the attention of students and utilizing it as a clarification strategy for students who are unsure if they are meeting expectations. In the experiences of participants, body language was also a tool used to motivate and encourage students to try tasks difficult for them through the excitement and support of their teacher.

*Establishing and Upholding Expectations.* While establishing and upholding expectations was deemed necessary and important in holding youth accountable, yielding positive academic outcomes, and maintaining safety, the perspectives of these expectations varied among participants. Two of the participants viewed expectations as a necessity and shared their process from the onset of the relationship. From their perspectives, the establishment of expectations allowed students to grow increasingly comfortable in the classroom since they knew what they had to do to be successful and understood the consequences for their behavior should they disregard the expectations. In these cases, the researcher was able to identify that in all cases the expectations carried across settings and with the aim for students to gain the skills necessary to move to a less restrictive environment. As a
result, these teachers described the relational benefits from establishing these expectations and how it supported a trusting relationship between themselves and their students. The other two participants (those newer to teaching) felt as though expectations should be delivered once a relationship is formed and that by upholding expectations they determined may have a negative impact on the relationship and fear that students may come to distrust or dislike them as a result of their efforts. In these cases, teachers tended to apply more leniencies toward their classroom management styles and noted in both cases that it is a work in progress, a balance they continue to develop. One of the teachers admitted to setting and upholding expectations in the classroom, although she felt as though she may be more lenient with those she has a positive relationship with, but recognized that this may not be in the best interest of the child and is aiming toward a more balanced approach.

Establishing Self-Worth. Participants revealed that self-worth among students, while typically low at the onset of intake, generally improves throughout the course of their attendance. Lead teachers tend to provide built-in opportunities for establishing this self-worth among students by arranging for ample opportunities to grow themselves and build their confidence. Based on participant reports, these areas generally include multi-sensory approaches and may host a variety of arenas intended for the child to contribute and give back to the school community. Negative self-images are common among students on campus and generally participants often see students avoid classwork or refuse activities for fear they will not be successful. One study conducted by Carlisle (2011) explains these behaviors by indicated that for children “where the need for attachment and inclusion is such a strong socio-emotional need, [youth] may involve themselves in inappropriate or aggressive behavior in order to feel a sense of belonging” (p.22). In support of this idea, participants noted that when a student is lacking
self-worth, they are often unable to access the curriculum until the emotional repair work has begun; as a result teachers aim to begin this repair work swiftly. Teachers are gifted with an opportunity to identify strengths and use them to build upon weaknesses in an effort to cultivate new skills. According to participant experiences, the positive reinforcement provided by the successful completion of newly acquired skills encourage students to flourish in the classroom eventually providing students with autonomy to begin exploring their decomposition and restructuring of self. Yielded from participant responses, it seems as though quantity matters; students must be provided with many opportunities to be successful contributors even if this means smaller tasks as opposed to one great task. To form an authentic and positive relationship, the student must have some level of self-worth to believe that they are deserving of the care and connection that is being offered.

Advocacy. Especially in residential settings, advocacy often becomes the work of a league of interest holders involving a multitude of agencies, schools, parents/guardians, support services, and financers. While each member of the team plays a specific role in the care of the child, it is critical that those who have direct connection with the student also advocate on his/her behalf. Participants reported that they are perhaps the most consistent adults in the students’ lives and spend the greatest amount of waking hours with them resulting in the collection of a vast amount of information related to the student’s well-being. In addition, they are afforded the academic opportunity to explore, learn, and provide academic information to students in a variety of ways. Since the information they hold is a collection from a variety of different environments and under varying circumstances, they feel they are suited for the role of advocacy. All participants have shared that they have an ethical and moral responsibility to ensure that the student acquires the skills necessary to be successful in a less restrictive environment. Even as
relationships unfold and connections are made, the educator-caregiver relationship is believed to adhere to the educational and emotional-behavioral needs of the child not the familial situation. Through advocacy, participants have an unwavering desire to collaboratively secure successful outcomes for students by teaching lifelong skills, establishing self-worth, and proving that their ability to care and be cared-for are existent.

Investment in Time and Energy. All of the relationships explored required an investment of time and energy on behalf of the educator, however, the levels varied. Analysis of the positive relationships in comparison to those of the negative relationships revealed that teachers spent significantly more time and energy building and maintaining the relationships they deemed as positive as those they identified as negative. The underlying circumstances for this were variable and no direct consensus was made. In positive relationships, respondents divulged that the greater the need the more empathy they had, the more empathy they had, the greater the perceived void which they felt a self-need to contribute to if not fulfill. In negative relationships, respondents disclosed that they had perceived a lesser need for care and therefore focused on academia and student skills, and therefore could address many of the emotional and behavioral challenges within the classroom thus identifying limited opportunity or need for individual quality time with the student and felt less needed by the student. In review of these cases, it appears as though the students were less aggressive, however, more distant from their classroom staff. They requested space, often left space, and aimed to get their needs met through verbal and emotional imbalance. These behaviors were noted as frustrating to teachers who identified many of these behaviors and emotional irregularities as attention seeking or work avoidant. However, when students with positive relationships responded in similar ways, teachers often increased their individual quality time, lent a listening ear, and modified expectations to an
attainable level while attributing the emotional and behavioral outbursts as effects of trauma or in response to unmet needs. The data obtained within this study was not sufficient for dissecting the root causation for the difference in response from lead teachers who had persevered through trying times with some students but were not compelled to do so with others.

*Mutual Interests.* At the onset of a new relationship, identification of at least one mutual interest is beneficial to the acceleration of communication which leads to connection. When two people have something in common, a more natural approach instead of a forced approach to relational caregiving is present. While it can take time to identify mutual interests, lead teachers have taken several methods beginning with surveys or questionnaires about what the student likes and dislikes, to sharing some of their personal interests, to finding something that neither parties have done previously and trying them together for the first time. These mutual interests are intended to learn about one another during the quality time spent while building a relationship based on trust and availability. Responding to student interests reveals that they are worthy of your time and that you are willing to sacrifice the time because they are important.

While these characteristics were identified as important among a majority of participants, several additional characteristics were directly noted by at least one participant but regarded as important to note by the researcher and included: perseverance, respectfulness, flexibility, empathy, affection, and equity. While participants didn’t directly note perseverance, not giving up and ensuring that students received a high quality education was a priority among participants. Also, respectfulness was apparent as participants explored the, “give and takes” in a relationship. They focused upon the need to build a classroom climate based on respect to assure that all students feel safe and secure and so they can learn effectively. Holding empathy for students who have gone through trying times or have been abandoned was an important
characteristic because it helped to understand that the greater the empathy, the greater the perceived need for care which in turn alters the process for providing care through this type of relationship. Some participants, especially those who taught younger children noted the importance of showing affection, giving hugs, high fives, and pats on the back as a sign of approval and acceptance. Given the limited access students have to materialistic goods, accepting their affection shows the caring-one that the child is prepared to accept the relationship; it is one way that the child can give back because self is all he/she has. Finally, several examples of the impact of perceived inequality by children was both a trigger for students and a tool used to encourage the teacher to bend expectations. In one case, a teacher reported being spoken to about providing a higher level of care to a single student in the class and was told that other students were noticing. While it should be noted that this was not the teacher’s intent, the level of need for the student at that time was also more significant than usual resulting in the perceived inequity. This research suggests that there are many contributing characteristics that serve as supporting factors while establishing an authentic caring relationship.

Positive teacher-student relationships tend to improve student outcomes, both academically and therapeutically. In each of the accounts related to positive relationships, teachers were able to identify a multitude of areas (social, emotional, behavioral, and academic) that the student had made gains. While the relationship is not believed to be the sole cause of the student’s success, a direct correlation was made between the level of student gain and the quality of the educator-caregiver relationship. The acceptance of care is an essential element in the formation of an authentic, caring relationship according to Noddings (2005). This research was designed for the educator-caregiver to be the caring-one and the student to be identified as the cared-for. In order to reach the core of the work both academic and psychological, the student
must access a level of comfort and security. Through the relational building process, the cared-for may waiver from the acceptance of a relationship and provide caring-one with messages of discontent or avoid fully engaging in the relationship. Participants reported this occurring often and the patience and persistence required to overcome these challenges is necessary. Educator-caregivers in this role are charged with the responsibility of redeveloping relationships with students who have been abandoned, let down, and in some cases harmed by those who are responsible for their care. The cared-for are often resistant to engaging in new relationships for fear of the outcomes and often feel as though they are unworthy of care, sometimes they simply don’t know how to respond to another person caring for them. For the purpose of this research, the presence of caring teacher-student relationships will generally be defined as “relationships between a teacher [caring-one] and student [cared-for] characterized by caring, trust, and honesty [developed to] help student feel secure with the school environment, speak to their questions, fears, and concerns, and prepare students to succeed while building [student’s] self-esteem” (p.232).

Once a relationship is formed and a child is accepting of the relationship, participants report that the benefits far outweigh the costs. According to Birch & Ladd (1998), the potential benefit will be to guide a misguided student toward building a relationship with positive boundaries and outcomes. Likewise, the time and energy submerged into the relationship provides an avenue for educating a student academically and psychologically. Teachers shared their experiences of relationships, once formed and trusted, the child was increasingly willing to take on new challenges, aim to improve academically and behaviorally, improved their levels of self-worth, gained confidence, and began to apply their learned skills in the community. The
benefit of a high-quality positive relationship between teacher and student becomes an invaluable tool applicable in a wide variety of situations.

The acceptance of care may assume many different roles. The acceptance may be verbal or non-verbal, a change in behavior, a repayment of sorts, a nod, following of advice, the lack of argumentative response, a delay in departure, seeking more attention, or deciding upon a preferred adult. The cared-for ideally decides how they will show they accept the care. The caring-one must be especially receptive to the efforts of the cared-for as their state may be fragile and their efforts subtle. When working with youth within this setting, participants focused on the importance of changing the status of the relationship as the cared-for sees fit. For instance, if the change in relationship is to go from very subtle to somewhat known, it should be dependent upon the comfort and/or consideration of the cared-for for they are the most vulnerable. The acceptance of care then carries through the relationship until the status is changed by either party at which time the relationship should be reevaluated informally.

**Non-Acceptance of Care.** Four cases were reviewed in which teachers had difficulty connecting with a child because they did not accept the care that was to be provided. The root causation of this could potentially be based on a multitude of factors none of which can be certified through this research. The possibilities include: perceived or actual lack of need, lack of readiness, difference in perspectives, lack of trust, personality mismatch, or self-sabotage. Fergus & Zimmerman (2005) make the case that there is a resiliency threshold that utilizes various protective factors to “make up for” what is lacking in other areas whereas a strong and supportive home environment may provide enough relational support for some students to thrive even without relational encounters with their teacher. While this may be the case, added research suggests that a lack of such relationships may have lasting negative effects on personal
and social development (Bryan et al., 2012; Theriot, Craun, & Dupper, 2010; Kramer 1992). Regardless of the reasoning, which is likely to vary from case to case, the outcomes have profound effects on the level of emotional, behavioral, and academic achievement a student will make without the support of a caring relationship.

In each of the cases, participants shared a story about the attempted relational caregiving of students who, to at least some extent, refused to accept their care. In each of the cases, the relationship became an academically focused one that eventually ceased efforts of caregiving qualities such as spending quality time together and identifying mutual interests. In all cases, teachers maintained value on establishing self-worth by developing opportunities and supporting student learning by building upon strengths and continued to reflect a willingness to listen to students when they were needed.

Participants reported feelings of disappointment and frustration related to these cases. Exposing that in most cases, they had exhausted significant amounts of time and energy toward developing, attempting, revising, and revisiting plans for students that they had hoped would lend themselves to the idea that the teachers are supportive adults who wanted the child to find success. Unfortunately, they were only able to maintain this process for so long and eventually began channeling their time and energy into students who were more accepting of their care.

As these cases came to a close, participants noted that students had made less academic and treatment goal progress, tended to have lower levels of self-worth, tended to be work avoidant, and while they were able to engage in peer relationships had difficulty forming relationships with classroom staff in general when compared to those students identified as having positive relationships with their teachers.
**Contributing Components.** Other contributing components identified as critical to the compilation of building blocks involve an impact on consistency and the quality of connection. The first, impact on consistency, was highlighted in two ways throughout participant interviews: being present and available (as previously mentioned) and/or balancing and upholding expectations as the educator-caregiver role so that youth can reasonably predict outcomes. As reviewed previously, for a caring relationship to form the cared-for must recognize the caring-one as someone who is reliable and available when they are needed. This can pose challenges within a school environment since the teachers have limited schedules and access to a single adult throughout the shift is not always feasible. Next, establishing expectations and upholding them so that students become familiar with the expectations and understand the consequences of their choices should they make a conscientious choice to disregard the expectations. When participants recollected their thoughts about inconsistencies in their practice they revealed that in most cases it elicited feelings of inequality, unfairness, and authoritative vs. permissive classroom management that lacked in sound theory and justification and was noted as challenging for some students to follow. It is believed that finding this balance is a challenge and is derived from observation of others, trial and error, and coaching by skilled professionals.

The final building block results from the quality of connection between the educator-caregiver and the cared-for. From analysis of positive relationship data collected during the interview process, it is clear that the greater the relationship, the greater the outcomes. In all of the relationships that were positive, educator-caregivers placed emphasis on ensuring that time was well spent nurturing the relationship and establishing a sound foundation from which they could branch the recreational enjoyment and mutual interests into motivating factors related to academics and treatment goals.
Achieving balance between both academic and social-emotional learning is challenging, especially for newer teachers, declared in part to the unfamiliarity of mental and behavioral health concerns among children at the onset of employment. The challenge of identifying the balance for an educator-caregiver is existent among all participants. As educator-caregivers become increasingly attuned with the population, the expectations and the curriculum, they seemingly become more accustomed to the role and thus are able to identify balance within their classrooms.

The Role Identity Of The Educator-Caregiver. In exploring role identity, traits of educating and those of caregiving were combined. Perspectives of teachers were essential in determining how they perceive themselves in this dual role and if they tended to rely more heavily on one identity regularly or under specific circumstances. This study has found that teachers describe themselves as managers of both roles, often attempting to combine them, a balance that becomes increasingly refined with experience.

The notion of identity surfaced repeatedly when participants reflected on their experience of sharing stories and discussing their practice with friends in the teaching profession. Through conversation they found that they did not adequately fit the mold of a “teacher” in a typical setting and that their experiences were unmatched to that of their peers. Their friends became confounded by their experiences which eventually led to a separation of commonality by profession. While participants knew they were teachers by trade, they knew they were certainly contributing on multiple levels and knew that academia was only a portion of their contribution.

Participants referred to the position of, “teacher” as a complex one that involves many duties that do not typically fall under the category of teaching. When measured, one teacher
explained that teaching is less than one-quarter of what she does. All the participants revealed that they have also assumed the role, in some capacity, as researcher, mentor, advocate, mediator, counselor, guardian, caregiver, and supporter. Through these roles, teachers have explored caregiving while remaining responsible for ensuring that adequate academic growth is observed and preparing students for the mandated statewide testing that takes place each year. Teachers report that finding some level of balance is necessary if a child in this setting is expected to make academic growth since a pathway to the curriculum is believed to be developed once the emotional and behavioral obstacles are understood. To do this, participants revealed that the building blocks of caring relationships must be present; otherwise the obstacles of emotional-behavioral disabilities create barriers for learning. Once the building blocks are in place, participants were able to utilize their knowledge of the student paired with their trusting relationship to assist the student in overcoming obstacles a pathway that is deemed otherwise inaccessible.

Perceived Benefits And Challenges Associated With The Identification Of Balance.

Seasoned teachers imparted their beliefs on balance as an art form, rather than a skill. Their explanations revealed they firmly believed that a balanced approach allowed them to make gains with students both as educators as well as caregivers. In this way, they were able to establish and uphold expectations that were consistent and fair they way an educator would, however, they also provided the supports and care necessary to understand and apply strategic plans to encourage students to access the expectations and find success similar to that of a caregiver. It was rare for the balanced approach to fail; however, each revealed an instance of when the balanced approach became inaccessible. In the first, the connection failed to become strong enough to withstand the levels of work avoidance and poor self-confidence a child had of
himself; as a result, the teacher admitted to finding leniency within the balance and took a more educative approach. This meant that solid expectations were developed and upheld, the student received support and encouragement, but the teacher believed that it was in the student’s best interest and ability to be afforded similar expectations to that of a traditional school model so that the child would be able to access a less restrictive environment. While this example does not provide the research with a clear model of uncaring relationship, it does indicate that there is fluctuation in the balance and that at times, identifying this balance becomes challenging. The care in this relationship was behind the scenes in that the teacher was able to envision the possibilities for an improved educational outcome and aimed for the student to reach it with guidance, however, the balance became questionable when the teacher began to solely connect on educational matters and relied on the support of the classroom team to serve the student in emotionally connected areas. In the second example, the teacher was able to build a surface relationship with the student on a social level; however, the emotional connection was not strong enough to consistently support the educational matters which arose. After months of effort toward the relationship and no gains, the teacher was encouraged to diminish expectations against what she described as “the bane of my existence”. While this act reflects the length to which the teacher was willing to go to adjust her practice in an effort to improve outcomes for the student in a caring way, she also admits that there was a level of defeat in that she felt as though she was sacrificing his education, a service that she believed he had a right to attain. According to these reflections, a balance is challenging to obtain and managed at varying levels dependent upon the strength and acceptance of the relationship. When emotional-behavioral disabilities present as obstacles in the learning process, the educator-caregiver must succumb to relieving some of the components serving as roadblocks to learning. Upon reaching this point,
an educator-caregiver may then utilize the relationship to assist the student in gaining access to other arenas.

*Educator-Caregiver Understandings Of The Challenges Associated With Obtaining Balance.* Beginning teacher participants indicated that developing a balanced approach to educator-caregiving was a tremendous challenge. They base this decision upon the learning curve of working with this population with limited prior knowledge or experience from which to draw from on both the academic as well as the caregiving sides. The teachers often assumed both the roles of an educator and that of a caregiver but were unable to balance them simultaneously. This is believed to be due, in part, to a perception the participants had about setting and upholding expectations and whether or not this response would diminish the caregiving aspect of their relationship. These new teachers perceived expectations as falling within the domain of educator but not that of caregiver. While they identified some benefit to having expectations, they admit that holding youth accountable became a challenge. Both teachers seemed to understand the role of the educator and explained that regardless of emotional status, they knew that children had to access the curriculum if they were to make gains. They also knew that the role of the caregiver was to provide support and care, to be a listening ear, and to coach children through situations so that they could achieve success. They maintained that they felt a high level of empathy for many of the students with more complex cases and they believed that this could be a contributing factor in their ability to hold children accountable. According to their examples, it appeared that the greater the relationship, the few expectations they upheld, which was believed to be negating the student’s treatment plans and goals and in turn creating a situation that was not in the best interest of the student.
Shifting Roles and Corresponding Outcomes. According to all participants, it was apparent that changing between the two roles became a complicated process, one that students had difficulty deciphering thus leading to inconsistencies in expectations and outcomes. As teachers spent more time in the classroom, they indicated that they felt the balanced approach had value and were aiming to fully attain balance, however, it remained a changing process as the needs of the class and staffing continued to change.

Awareness of Emotional Resilience and Expulsion. Emotional labor is the process of managing feelings and expressions in order to fulfill emotional requirements as part of the job role. In this field where vicarious trauma is quite common, the goal of this theme was developed to investigate how the information and responsibilities that participants incur within their positions have an effect on their personal lives and professional practice. In all cases, participants were aware of more than one instance under which they felt as though their work as teachers manifested into their personal lives and/or caused them to rethink their professional practice. Many of the participants reflected upon holidays and experiences as times when they are especially taken aback by the lifestyle differences between children placed in residential care without supports and those living within the community. It was also noted on several occasions that when teachers perceived that their students needed them or were seeking them out as a preferred adult, they exhibited some level of emotional labor if they were unavailable or inaccessible in the moment. They often attempted to “make-up” the opportunity to reassure students that they were present and available and therefore trustworthy educator-caregivers. Participants also recalled several occasions when they chose to spend their personal time providing students with a unique experience such as a baseball game or out to dinner at a restaurant. Likewise, participants often sacrificed their personal time reflecting upon the
happenings of the day or week in an effort to build strategy for improvement to be implemented the following day. These changes affected their daily practice in that their relationship with a student was enriched and therefore subtleties in the classroom may cause adjustments to boundaries and/or expectations for the student. Also, their practices appeared to gradually improve as they responded to more needs and were able to refine the process of relationship building in an accelerated format so that the targeted work could be activated.

In some cases, teachers did not refer to some of their actions as revealing of emotional labor, however, by definition they should be considered as such. In one case, a teacher reveals to a student that she is willing to be a mentor for him; however, the process for becoming a mentor and the need had not been accounted for as of then. The teacher indicated a strong emotional connection paired with his need for care and level of acceptance and therefore has exhibited such a strong connection that the emotional labor expelled on this case is exceptional. Even in relationships deemed to be negative or challenging, the relationship continues to envelop emotional labor on the part of the teacher. In these cases, teachers often approach the issue like a puzzle attempting to fit all of the pieces to create an ideal masterpiece however if the pieces do not come together or there is a piece missing, the teacher tends to feel defeated. When this happens, participants report having replayed situations over in their heads and collaborating with colleagues to troubleshoot areas of need. The process of rethinking various scenarios outside of working hours impacts their personal life as does implementing an adjustment to professional practice in an effort to improve outcomes. Based on the data collected, there is no doubt that educator-caregivers expel significant amounts of emotional labor in an effort to make gains in the lives of children in their care.
Approaches to a Supportive Environment.

“It takes a whole village to raise a child”

In residential day schools, the art of balance for educating and caregiving is essential. There are many individuals responsible for the well-being of children in care each with a variety of skillsets, values, and personalities. In addition to educating and providing care to children within these environments, educator-caregivers must also care for themselves and their families. It is necessary to ensure that the emotional well-being of those who work with students with emotional-behavioral disabilities are nurtured so that they may provide the best care to youth.

Educating is a constant learning process. Professional development opportunities are offered on a weekly basis to ensure that all staff are trained in areas such as mental health, learning disabilities, group management, and curriculum. This level of training offers opportunities for collaboration and reflection which are designed to enhance the learning experience for both students and staff alike.

Caregiver trainings are less common; however, there are some supports in place to ensure that the experience is unique, supported, and aligned with the mission and philosophy of the school. Staff is encouraged to utilize their individual characteristics to develop relationships with children within the parameters provided at the onset of employment. Staff described supports that are already in place and involve an open communication system, frequent feedback and recommendations regarding practice, professional development that is frequent and pertinent and shared responsibility. Overall participants were pleased with the current supports in place.

Some areas that were recommended for improvement involved the consideration of adult learning and teaching styles when making recommendations to their practice, providing
additional opportunities for co-workers to connect informally, increasing staff proactively, and taking a break by being afforded a replacement. The idea of considering adult learning and teaching styles stems from an improved understanding of teacher practice is important when providing detailed information and recommendations toward student encounters and when considering student plans. It is in the best interest of the student if the teacher understands and feels comfortable implementing the plan because it aligns with their teaching preferences. Most participants described instances of emotional isolation due to the fact that they could not freely discuss their work with their friends or colleagues in other schools due to a lack of understanding. As a result, the staff turns to colleagues and co-workers who conduct the same work, to discuss their practice, troubleshoot, vent or share. Some participants made the recommendation to increase their opportunities to collaborate with one another informally, in an effort to improve their emotional well-being and in turn their professional practice. Finally, the recommendation to provide additional staff both to proactively support students in the classroom and to support staff who need a short break were identified as areas for consideration. At times, especially of frustration, teachers identified needing to take a quick break to compose their thoughts and their next steps but being unable to remove themselves from the classroom because there were no additional staff to replace them. These recommendations were made by participants in an effort to maximize student support opportunities while reducing the level of emotional labor imposed on educator-caregivers within this environment.

**Summary of Research Findings.**

Within a residential day school, the educator-caregivers in this study provide care and support to youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. The relational ideal as introduced by Noddings (2013) sheds light upon the need for high quality and sustainable relationships as provided by a
caring-one toward the cared-for. This framework highlights the acceptance of care by the cared-
for and provides insight to the depth and commitment required for the caring-one to commit
“…to act in behalf of the cared-for, a continued interest in his reality throughout the appropriate
time span, and the continual renewal of commitment over this span of time are the essential
elements of caring” (p.16). Forged from this framework is the established building blocks of
caring that were thematically developed from participant accounts of positive relational
experiences with their students.

The central research question:

*What are residential teachers’ understandings and experiences of the relational
caregiving of students with emotional-behavioral challenges?* This study supported the benefits
of positive teacher-student relationships, with gains in social, emotional, behavioral, and
academic outcomes. Despite some challenging relationships, teachers indicated that most of the
time they were able to build and sustain these relationships with the children they served
regardless of emotional–behavioral disability. The most challenging relationships were most
often with day students, those who reside in a group home or with family, the process of
relational caregiving often halted at the “non-acceptance” stage.

Balancing the roles of educator-caregiver was especially challenging since many children
required them simultaneously. Teachers indicated that the more time they spent in the role, the
more comfortable they became with this balance. Participants identified characteristics and
qualities that they associated with caring teacher-student relationships and revealed the
importance of each through their recollections of their relationships with students.
Limitations and Considerations for Future Studies

This qualitative study aligned with the recommended guidelines for conducting a reliable Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009) in exploring the understandings and lived experiences of the relational caregiving of teachers toward their students with emotional and behavioral challenges in a residential setting. To gather in-depth data from participants, as recommended by IPA, a small sample population was utilized from a single site in Massachusetts.

Limitations. The focus of this study was to conduct an in-depth investigation to the lived understandings and experiences of teachers to gain a comprehensive perspective on this phenomenon. The narrow focus of this study required a purposeful sample chosen at a single site, given that the nature, purpose, and practices of special education schools vary from location to location. The sampling criteria was limited to lead teachers expected to balance both caregiving and curricular implementation and therefore excluded assistant teachers and other caregivers at the school who may have more flexibility afforded to them to build positive relationships. In addition, the experience of teaching staff varied from four months (newest teacher) to six years (senior teacher). The study location was one of more than eighty state-approved special education schools in the state serving approximately 115 students per year. This population is relatively small when compared to the needs and services provided statewide. Also, the population served focuses on youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities who physically aggressive. This site was chosen due to the level of acuteness among youth and the resiliency of both staff and students, therefore the feasibility of this study to other sites and populations is currently unknown.
**Recommendations for Future Research.** Due to the markedly limited research related to relationships in residential settings, there are various avenues from which to further explore this topic. The first recommendation would be to replicate the study at a similar site. In determining if the building blocks of caring relationships are a typical method for establishing and maintaining relationships with youth placed at-risk additional data from various sites would be essential. Several factors may influence this including teacher experience, training, level of student need, and available supports. Managing a balanced approach to educator-caregiving is a challenge according to this study; future data may reveal a need for professional development, mentoring, or coursework so that various approaches for reaching the relational ideal are available.

A second recommendation would be to collect data from the perspective of the teacher as well as the student for comparative data. Some studies reveal that the student perspectives were much different from those of the teacher and/or clinician. While this study focused on teacher’s perceptions and understandings a confirmation of a mutually developed, relational ideal would improve the reliability of a study.

Next, a mixed-methods study utilizing both rating scales and interviews in combination to gather comparison data of day and residential students would allow the study to further focus on environmental factors influencing the relational outcomes within the school environment. At this time, we know that the teachers were able to identify four positive and four challenging relationships. We know that of the four positive ones three were residential students. We know that of the four challenging relationships, three were day students and one was residential. The external factors that may influence these relationships should be considered. According to the research, the resiliency factor is heightened if students have at least one trusted and caring adult
– a confirmation that in these cases the relational ideal was present at home may have been beneficial to this study.

Throughout this study, similarities between educator-caregiver and parent-educator remained in question. Consideration toward the balance between educating and caregiving in homeschooling settings in comparison to residential day school settings may provide some insight and clarity toward the methods and approaches designed to support these contexts. Utilizing these comparisons, one may also begin to gauge the reliability of relationship when academic intensity increases and support must be provided.

Finally, future studies could explore changes in the educator-caregiving relationship through a longitudinal lens in an effort to determine if educator perspectives on their relationships with youth with emotional-behavioral challenges change over time. For instance, the newer teachers strongly believed they had positive relationships with their students, but when asked about ways they show they care, it was highly materialized in contrast to more seasoned teachers who felt they showed students they care by having high expectations and supports in place to build their confidence. It would be interesting to determine if this is based on personality, experience, or personal beliefs best managed by reviewing their perspectives at predetermined intervals throughout their careers.

**Implications for Educational Practice**

The findings of this research carry implications toward the professional practice of caring for and educating residential youth. Current teachers, clinicians, administrators as well as mental health professionals and stakeholders may make use of these findings in order to develop sound relationships with youth placed at-risk and those with emotional-behavioral disabilities who are
considered challenging to develop relationships with. The approach to relational caregiving of these youth requires careful consideration and unwavering dedication. This study may afford a basis for which to begin to develop such understanding and properly align high quality care to this often underserved population. In addition, this work could provide a context for which the generation of stimulating ideas and concepts for building trusting and secure relationships can flourish. Finally, this study can minimize the ideology that youth who aim to separate themselves from adults are unwilling or disinterested in forming caring relationships. The research reflects that for many children who have experienced traumatic events or are challenged by mental health diagnosis they distance themselves for reasons of fear or a belief that they are unworthy of such relationship. Throughout this study, it is clear that most children are reachable with patience and a caring, trustworthy adult that has proved to be available and supportive despite challenges.

This study expands the pathway for these resilient students to provide insight to their experiences and understandings of such relationships. It was developed among limited, available literature on this topic from within this environment. In the small number of studies conducted, most were qualitative studies which referenced surveys or rating scales to gauge the quality of a relationship. This study may provide for an expansion of this work designed to gain a holistic understanding of the relational caregiving of students with emotional-behavioral disorders and aim to support these students and their families regardless of school type.

Many teachers, especially those from within a traditional school model, may benefit from this research as they await the support necessary to reach a child with emotional-behavioral challenges. There is often a frustrating transitional period where by a single challenging student in the classroom may develop the power to halt all meaningful learning from taking
place within a classroom, thus putting other children at a disadvantage. However, the building blocks of a caring relationship are intended to be free of contextual restraint and may be applicable to any caregiving relationship, regardless of setting. It is through this process that leaders of a district may fully begin to develop an understanding of the power of relational caregiving and recognize that this relationship must be nurtured and accepted prior to the expectation that academic outcomes must be present. Often the relationship can be utilized to propel academic expectations and output once it is a sound, trustworthy one.

*Achieving Balance.* The idea of achieving balance in a residential day school setting, while critical to the success of students is understood by participants as especially challenging. Experienced teachers value the balance they have achieved, however, change is constant. The population of children served in this setting will always require a high level of care, when they no longer require this care they transition and another child with significant emotional-behavioral challenges assume their place. As a result, teachers aim to provide high quality care and stability to the individuals they serve, each with a varying degree of necessary support. It is important that educator-caregivers of this population learn all they can about a student within the first few weeks of their acquaintance, in an effort to begin to establish a relationship from the onset and to expedite the supports the student requires to become successful. Time is of the essence. Once they have the information and are able to support students, there is no guarantee that the supports will be appropriate or accepted when needed and therefore one must be able to think swiftly, act at a moment’s notice, have a toolkit of techniques and approaches, and reach all children simultaneously. Academics, is an essential component of schooling whereby the educator-caregiver must focus on the emotional stability and well-being of the student while bringing them to engage in the work they need to grow and develop in preparation for an optimistic
future. Throughout this study, teachers centered themselves on this idea of balance and while focusing on these things as well as the amount of attention they provide to each student and how the time is best spent to support the relationship they are dedicated to optimizing. There is not a, “one size fits all” solution to a balanced approach, it cannot be scripted or even replicated, the idea of balance comes with professional practice and a true understanding of the individuals being served. Once this balance is achieved, children will be familiar with the expectations and have an understanding of the associated outcomes. Students will begin to build a trust in the adults who are consistent in learning about their values and those that support them. Finally they will begin to naturally accept the caregiving relationship that has been present. As a result, children will seek support and aim approval from those that care-for them and only then can the relationship be utilized optimally to enhance treatment, reach goals, and have the potential to impact relationships within other environments.

Teachers within this context are reflective in practice. They attempt to bypass areas of emotional labor and proceed along the continuum of care to ensure that students are receiving the support and security they need to be successful. Teachers felt that they were supported within the perimeter of the campus, however, had universally expressed feeling challenged by friends, family, and colleagues beyond the scope of the school. They felt that their stories, concerns, and inquiries were beyond the discussion of schooling, familiar to colleagues. Instead they felt isolated, distant, and disconnected from the world of education to focus on the emotional well-being of students in connection with academic outcomes. While this is significant, this process reveals that connecting co-workers within this environment to support one another and to provide a context for care and consideration among employees on this campus is necessary if the emotional well-being of staff will be nurtured. Now that this data is available, a renewed focus
on reenergizing staff and exploring areas for improvement, especially as it relates to day program
students is critical. More than half of the students are placed as day program students, ironically
it is also the group that has been identified as the most challenging to build a positive
relationship with, despite teacher reported recurring attempts at improving the status of their
relationship. Identifying ways in which personnel are able to connect with families, improve
their engagement with the school community, influence their active participation in the
classroom or on campus to create a presence of teamwork and collaboration are believed to be
influential factors in improving balance.

Despite the challenges of students, including those with trauma histories, the positive
relational outcomes developed within the context of school may qualify students to optimize
their levels of emotional resiliency. Broadening these relational opportunities may bear positive
outcomes by building connectivity and eventually trust, increasing the threshold for academic,
therapeutic, and emotional-behavioral improvement, and aid in the development of self-worth
and purpose. The relational ideal, when met with care, provides a moral compass and emotional
connection between the caring-one and the cared-for resulting in unlimited potential.
References


