Examing Teacher Perspective of Relational Pedagogy
in the Middle School Classroom

A thesis presented
By
Emily M. O’Rourke

to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

in the field of
Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March 2019
Abstract

A teacher that applies the theory and practice of relational pedagogy can provide the optimal learning environment that meets the instructional and emotional needs of the 21st century learner. Therefore, the purpose of this instrumental case study was to examine teacher understanding and practice of relational pedagogy in the middle school classroom. More specifically this study aimed to understand how goal orientation, teacher disposition, and teacher support play a role in fostering a positive classroom climate. Data was collected through classroom observations, one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders, and focus groups with teachers. An observation rubric was utilized to collect data on the observable practices of care theory and relational pedagogy. The questions during the interviews and focus groups aimed to explore the learning experiences of the participants and how that reflected their educational philosophy in the middle school classroom. More specifically, the purpose of the line of questioning was to gain an understanding of what is important to the participants when developing classroom climate and how this understanding may reflect the practices of relational pedagogy. The researcher concluded that building relationships with students was a priority for teachers when building a positive classroom climate. The teachers and other stakeholders’ educational philosophies were closely aligned with Nodding’s (2005) Ethics of care theory. A secondary finding showed that teachers educational philosophies did not emulate all the components of relational pedagogy. The missing components were a student-centered approach that allows students take ownership of the construction of knowledge and learning experiences that relate to the student (Brownlee, 2004). These findings indicated a need for professional development and coursework development that interweaves instructional and emotional approaches for effectively teaching the 21st century learner.
Table of Contents

Abstract 2

CHAPTER I: Introduction 5
   Problem Statement 5
   Purpose/Intervention Statement 6
   Justification 7
   Significance and Context 9
   Positionality 10
   Author Background 11
   Bias 13
   Research Questions 15
   Theory 15
   Method 19
   Audience/Stakeholders 19
   Conclusion 20

Chapter II: Literature Review 21
   Introduction 21
   Rural Poverty 22
   Relational pedagogy 24
   Whole Child Approach 26
   Instructional Climate 35
   The Role of Self-Concept 42
   Conclusion 52

Chapter III: Methodology 54
   Introduction 54
   Research Paradigm 55
   Research Method 55
   Population and Recruitment 56
   Sampling Strategies and Criteria 56
   Data Collection 57
   Data Coding and Analysis Process 58
   Limitations 59
   Reciprocity 59
   Trustworthiness 59
   Protection of Human Subjects 60
   Data Storage 60
   Conclusion 61

Chapter IV: Analysis of Finding 62
   Study Site 63
   Participants 64
Data Collection
Theme 1: Educational Philosophy Guides the Development of Classroom Climate.  
Theme 2: Student-Teacher Relationships are Paramount.  
Theme 3: Teacher Emotional Support is Essential to Creating a Positive Classroom Climate.  
Theme 4: Learning is the Goal.  
Synthesis of Themes  
Reflexivity

Chapter V: Discussion and Implications  
Revisiting the Problem of Practice  
Significance of the Study  
Discussion of Major Findings  
Limitations  
Validity  
Future Research  
Implications for Policy  
Implications for the Classroom  
Rural Education  
Conclusion

References
Appendices  
A. Invitation to Participate in the Study  
B. Consent Forms  
C. Observation Rubric  
D. Focus Group Protocol Form  
E. Guidance Counselor Interview Protocol  
F. Principal Interview Protocol Form  
G. Superintendent Interview Protocol Form
Chapter I: Introduction

Problem Statement

Learning can be a joyful experience. However, learning can also be a frustrating and painful experience. It is the teacher that has autonomy over the learning environment. A nurturing and thoughtful learning environment can make a world of difference in the life of a student. Educators spend at least six hours a day with their students. Often, this will be more time will be spent with family on the weekdays. These hours should be spent in a safe and nurturing environment where students thrive. A negative interaction with peers or a teacher can leave a lasting effect on the student's self-concept. This interaction maybe associated with the people and environment, which can affect a student's ability to learn. There are several components to consider when designing a positive learning environment. The three components of a classroom climate are teacher support, teacher expectations and goal structure (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). Teacher support can be broken into two categories, emotional and instructional support. According to Sousa (2017), students who are dealing with emotional and physical stresses have a diminished working memory capacity to process information. David Sousa is an educational neuroscientist, who has translated neuroscience research into practical strategies and learning approaches to support students at home and in the classroom. Essentially, Sousa (2017) the emotional and physical needs of students need to be met before they can access curriculum content. The theory and practice of a Relational pedagogy approach provides an emotionally supported classroom through developing mutual trust and respect with the student (Brownlee, 2004). When designing lesson plans, it important to consider how a person learns and in what conditions Sousa 2017. The areas of the brain that control the storage of long-term memory are found in the brain that is also responsible for emotions (Sousa, 2017). It is also
important to consider a student's health condition when coming to school. The area of the brain that controls the body's internal system balance with the external environment is the hypothalamus. When the body is deprived of sleep, food, water, or extreme temperatures, the ability to process curriculum is compromised (Sousa, 2017). Therefore, a whole child approach must be considered when creating a positive learning environment (Gore, 2005). A well-informed teacher understands the impact of the physical and emotional environment of a classroom. Students are given a higher chance of learning success when lessons and the physical and emotional environment are considered when establishing and maintaining a learning environment.

The problem under investigation is that the needs of the students are not being adequately met in the classroom due to a lack of relational pedagogical knowledge. A greater awareness of relational pedagogy is needed to provide an effective learning experiences for the 21st century learner. A relational approach will address the social-emotional and academic learning needs of students. This investigation will adopt an ecological view to explore the inner workings of the middle school classroom. The outcome of this study will reveal the perspective of middle school teachers understanding of relational pedagogy and how it plays a role in the development of classroom climates that support students emotionally, physically, and academically.

**Purpose/Intervention Statement**

The purpose of this case study is to investigate the pedagogical relationships established by a teacher (Lier, 2010; Snyder, 2003). The student-teacher relationships will be observed to identify the teacher practices that foster a positive classroom climate. At this stage relational pedagogy will be generally defined as the act of purposefully establishing and maintaining a learning environment that is academically and emotionally supportive and nurturing. Knowledge
generated is expected to inform many aspects of teacher development. The first is high-quality relational skills in the profession of educating young minds. The area of concern will be to address teacher preparation programs by developing course work that teaches the three components of relational pedagogy and support per-service teachers in implementing this approach. This study will also inform districts that changing teaching practices to a relational approach should be a high priority. This leads to the development of professional development that provides teachers with the knowledge of relational pedagogy and supports the teachers in integrating these relational practices into their classrooms. In all the areas that this impacts the emphasis is on the need for high-quality relational skills in the profession of educating young minds.

**Justification**

Students in the American K-12 Public Education System have become increasingly more anxious and depressed due to schools’ preoccupation with standardized achievement scores at the expense of a nurturing, caring classroom and school environment (Fulton, Scheffler, & Hinshaw, 2015; Holbein & Ladd, 2017). The concept of meeting the needs of the “whole child” has been lost in the last twenty plus years and schools are suffering, as a result there is an increasing amount anxiety and depression amongst school-age children and in more extreme cases, violence in the schools. The No Child Left Behind movement intended to level the playing field for schools. It was meant to provide an equitable education for students in rural communities, inner cities, and the elite suburbs. This was supposed to be the answer to the achievement gap, but instead, it produced a faster-moving conveyor belt that has burnt out many quality teachers and forgotten one of the essential components to teaching, relational pedagogy (Fulton et al., 2015; Holbein & Ladd, 2017; Horn, 2018; Markowitz, 2018).
School refusal affects 2-5% of school-aged children (Lingenfelter & Hartung, 2015). School refusal is associated with anxiety, depression, and school phobia. One of the causes of school refusal is a negative experience at school with teachers, peers, or learning tasks (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2014). More astounding is the fact that an estimated one in twenty children ages six to seventeen suffer from some form of anxiety or depression (Data and statistics on children's mental health | CDC.2018). Classroom climates that exhibit a nurturing and supportive environment that takes the students' emotional and physical needs can address these staggering statistics. Classroom climate has also been found to have a significant impact on achievement. The success of education is most frequently associated with this construct. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has adopted a framework for infusing social-emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom, but the method for monitoring effective implementation of the of five competencies identified by the organization, Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) has not been developed.

This study will investigate classrooms that exhibit a nurturing and thoughtful environment that takes the students social-emotional and academic needs into consideration when fostering a classroom climate. Additionally, this study will aim to reveal the characteristics of teachers that have higher achieving students (Kurdi & Archambault, 2017; Paunesku et al., 2015; Reyes et al., 2012). Several studies have identified self-efficacy as a contributing factor to math achievement as well (Cleary & Kitsantas, 2017; Pitsia, Biggart, & Karakolidis, 2017; Street, Malmberg, & Stylianides, 2017). Schommer-Aikins, Brookhart, Hutter, & Mau (2000) evaluated middle school students' epistemological beliefs and revealed that those that believed in incremental learning were academically more advanced. Therefore, bolstering a student's self-concept could improve their ability to learn. A teacher's ability to see the larger picture of their
classroom can address the desired outcomes discussed in the previous section. It will be through a relational pedagogy lens that teachers can develop policies and procedures that will foster a positive classroom climate.

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** There are very few current studies that directly address relational pedagogy. There is a plethora of studies that examine classroom climate quantitatively and that provide evidence that there are significant correlations between classroom climate and achievement, engagement, and motivation. However, there is a gap in the literature that ties classroom climate to relational pedagogy and how teachers' knowledge and intentional application of relational pedagogy can foster a classroom that meets the social-emotional needs of all students. At the middle school level students' social-emotional needs are particularly high. Therefore, this study focuses on this demographic because of the impact that this could have on the future of our students as this is the time when students develop goals for continuing their education.

**Significance and Context**

Many students share stories of teachers ruining their day with only a few words or a look. What may appear to a teacher as a harmless student-teacher interaction can have a significant impact on the student's self-concept for years to come. For example, a student shared with the researcher that their teacher had taken away his playing cards. The student never received them back. These cards meant a great deal to the student, even in the eighth-grade he remembered how he felt. He confided that he believed that his was the moment that would never trust a teacher again. The way in which teachers greet their students or critique their work should be carefully considered. Some things in our schools have changed according to the times, chalkboards have been changed out for whiteboards and technology has improved for most schools. However,
many classrooms still have rows of desks and noisy heaters. Teachers often hand out worksheets and lecture at the front of the room while students take notes. Teachers complain that society wants them to lower their expectations because society has deteriorated. This resistance to change has caused dissidence between how the curriculum is disseminated and the way the 21st century student learns. Students of the 21st Century, sometimes known as “digital natives”, as have been born into a highly stimulating world. Students of the digital age have been introduced to technology at a young age. Therefore, the new challenge for educators is to provide a learning environment that engages and motivates the students to learn. Sousa (2017) explains that humans are “novelty seekers” by nature. Humans seek out inconsistency in their environment to keep their interest. This change in how a student learns calls for a pedagogical mind shift. Students will benefit from instruction that is designed with pedagogical relations in mind (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). The teacher's commitment to the learning process and the careful design of pedagogical relations will project a sense of caring on the students. Students who receive a well-rounded education will be more productive and efficient citizens.

Teachers who value building student-teacher relationships have higher engagement and achievement in their classrooms (Kurdi & Archambault, 2017; Paunesku et al., 2015; Reyes et al., 2012). However, creating a nurturing classroom does not come naturally to all teachers. Just like some doctors do not have good bedside manner, some teachers do not naturally make connections with students. Some believe that this trait is one that cannot be taught, however there are steps that can be taken to improve relational pedagogy in schools. Increasing teacher knowledge of the significance of relational pedagogy and supporting these teachers in creating nurturing learning environments will improve students' emotional well-being, allowing for students to focus on the process of learning (Reeves & Mare, 2017).
This research will add to the existing literature on relational pedagogy and inform teacher preparation programs of the potential courses and training that should incorporate the principles of pedagogical relations. Professional development in pedagogical relations is an important topic for school leaders to prioritize in their schools. Novice and experienced teachers can benefit from training on creating positive learning environments that make students feel safe and supported. On a larger scale, school climate may improve through the implementation of pedagogy that addresses the relational needs of students.

**Positionality**

I believe that all students can learn. As leaders in education it is our responsibility to ensure that there is an equitable opportunity for all to reach their potential. Social justice is the providing of equitable opportunities regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, social class or disabilities. It is my mission to educate children on their value and worth in this diverse world that we live. I hope to guide them through the process of finding their full potential and using that to be productive members of society. Educators are tasked with creating learning environments that facilitate learning and meet the specific needs of a wide range of students. It is important, as an educator to consider all aspects of a student's learning profile when designing instruction and assessments. Getting to know your student's interests, home life, culture, learning style and social-emotional behaviors are necessary components of providing an equitable education. In other words, education should not be a one size fits all business.

**Author Background**

For the past 15 years, I have dedicated my educational career to working with individuals who struggle to fit into the traditional learning mold in a wide variety of capacities.
Three years ago, I was faced with a particularly challenging group of students, even with the many interventions that we tried. At the end of the year, seventeen kids had failed two or more academic classes. Consequently, they were required to go to summer school to make up the classes that they had failed. The guidance counselor and I developed a summer school program that would meet the social-emotional and academic needs of the student. We had already built relationships with these students throughout the year during an after-school intervention, called 8th hour, and academic supports during the school day, so we were already aware of what these students needed. Our summer program was a success; the students learned that learning can be fun. They came every day with smiles as we fed them healthy food and listened to their adolescent adventures. The students engaged in team building activities and hands on math problems. The guidance counselor and I were anxious to see the results of our challenging work that summer unfold as the students started a new year of school. I continued to support these students throughout the school year during an academic support with consistent encouragement. These bright young minds are now in high school and are passing all of their academic classes. Recently, I ran into one of the mothers of these students. She could not wait to share with me how successful her son was. She attributed his success to the encouragement and support that I gave him through the difficult middle school years. Most striking was that she reported that I made him believe in himself again.

I believe that my upbringing as a Christian has been a major influence in choosing my problem of practice. In Matthew 25:40, Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (NIV bible.1997). My passion for servitude has extended into my classroom. It has always been my choice to work with those whose life presents many challenges. It is my opinion that their life is just as valuable as my
own. Therefore, if a student is hungry, I feed him. If a student's shoes are too small, I buy her a pair of shoes. If a student is lonely or sad, I sit and listen. In a world that differences are often looked upon as negative, in my classroom the students will be embraced for their differences.

This study will aim to investigate the practices of the teacher's that consider a student's self-concept as part of instruction, assessment, and the classroom environment. My mission as a Christian and educator is to improve the lives of others. The provision of classrooms that are safe and nurturing can foster a rich and positive learning environment.

Bias

Reflecting on my opinions has revealed the many biases that I hold, of which I did not know existed. In stating these biases, it is my mission to keep an open mind when doing research and to be aware of observer bias, as mentioned in Roulston and Shelton (2015), when interviewing professionals whose perspective might differ from mine.

Being raised in a white middle class intact family where education was highly valued predisposes me to conclusions about this issue. I have always had a love of learning and pride myself on my scholarly nature. I did not struggle with homework completion or feel animosity toward school. In fact, I was not even aware of the disadvantages that some of my peers were bringing to the classroom. The town that I grew up in is a mostly white upper to middle class college town that is nestled between many other college towns. I was aware that there were people in the world who were less fortunate than I, because I spent time doing volunteer work at Baystate Medical Center in the summer and had volunteered in other capacities to serve those with needs greater than my own. It was not until I entered the education field that I realized that a struggle starts from a very early age in the classroom. As I observed students struggling, I wanted to share with them the love that I had for learning. My positionality can be viewed as
inclusive representation by the standards of Briscoe (2005), I hope by recognizing these biases that I will be able to bring a perspective that is unbiased and free of misconceptions.

As a Christian, I carry beliefs that reflect the teachings of the Bible. My belief that fair is not treating students the same, but addressing students based on what they need to be successful drives my passion for teaching. I see the potential in all students and desire to unleash that potential. I find it challenging to understand teachers that do not see this the way the I do. As a researcher, I had to separate my opinions from the interpretation of the data in order to provide a clear picture of classrooms that produce students who are academically successful. Additionally, I had to consider other means of how teachers meet the needs of their students emotional and academic needs besides the ways in which I have adopted.

Another potential bias is the result of my positionality regarding teacher-student relationships. I believe that students should be treated with respect and kindness regardless of their behavior. As an observer, I will need to objectively collect evidence of the students showing a higher self-concept and the teacher behaviors that reinforce this phenomenon. The task of remaining neutral without casting judgement is necessary for a valid study that reveals the teacher behaviors of a positive learning environment. I also had to be open to learning about innovative ways of creating positive learning communities. I had to be aware of the other potential teacher-student relationships and interactions that promote academic and emotional success in the classroom.

**Summary**

In summary, the studying of teacher behaviors that promote a healthy self-concept in students will reveal replicable practices to be used by the learning community. As a scholar-practitioner, research is intended to be applicable. Educators and administrators can benefit from
these findings through reflection of their student-teacher relationships and implementing practices that improve the quality of educational experiences for their students. Through the interviews and observations, the identification of my biases will aid me in keeping an open mind and gathering evidence that provides a clear picture of the perspectives and voice of the participants.

**Research Question**

1) What are teachers' understanding of relational pedagogy in the middle school classroom?
   a. How does goal orientation, disposition, and teacher support play a role in fostering a positive classroom climate?

**Theory**

There are several theories that will contribute to the framework of this study. The student-teacher relationships that are established in the classroom contribute to the overall classroom climate. A positive learning environment is more conducive to learning and growth. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and care theory (Noddings, 1984) provide the foundational explanations of human behavior. Attachment theory defines the human need for attachment to another, which relates to the importance of building positive student-teacher relationships, as these relationships are an integral component of the classroom climate. Secondly, care theory defines the observable behaviors of a positive classroom climate that promotes the development of positive student-teacher relationships.

The instructional climate of a classroom consists of three components, teacher expectations, teacher support (instructional and emotional), and the classroom goal structures (Reyes et al., 2012). All of these are taken into consideration when building a safe and supportive learning environment. The policies and procedures of a classroom reflect the teacher's
goal structure and support the emotional climate of the classroom. Classrooms that support the whole student reflect a high degree of understanding of relational pedagogy (Boyd, MacNeill, & Sullivan, 2006; Brownlee, 2004; Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2008; Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). Reeves and Mare’s (2017) research suggests that classrooms that practice relational pedagogy support students learning while being aware of the students social-emotional condition.

John Bowlby (1969) developed attachment theory as an attempt to explain the behaviors of infants when separated from a parent. Mary Ainsworth (1978) continued the research of attachment theory by defining the types of behavioral reactions to separation. Cassidy and Shaver (1999) contributed to the development of the attachment theory by examining adolescent attachment behavior. Adolescence is a period in which they explore peer relationships and independence. This exploration of independence conflicts with attachments to parents during these turbulent years. It was Nel Nodding (1984) that connected the concept of attachment to the academic setting through her development of care theory, also known as the Ethics of Care. Nodding believed that the educational system should cultivate a caring environment for students to learn, like that of a home, where students build positive relationships with the adults. care theory poses that a learning environment should include four components, modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation (Nodding, 1984).

Attachment theory and care theory both provide a framework for building positive student-teacher relationships, which will significantly impact the classroom climate (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). Relational pedagogy is the theory and practice that interweaves the building of positive relationships with students and instructional practices that support student learning in the 21st century. A relational pedagogical approach fosters a positive academic self-concept (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2015; Gilbert et al., 2014; Kosir & Tement, 2014; Reyes et al., 2012;
Sakiz, Pape, & Hoy, 2012). According to Papatheodorou, a child's self-beliefs are developed through relationships (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2008). More specifically, Brownlee (2004) described the observable teaching practices as indicators of an awareness of relational pedagogy:

1. Showing respect to the student as a knower.
2. Providing learning experiences that relate to student's own experiences.
3. Articulating and facilitating a constructivist approach to learning by emphasizing meaning making rather than knowledge accumulation. (p. 14)

As discussed, higher self-concept has been established as a characteristic of higher achievement and long-term success and teacher behaviors in the classroom attribute to a student's development of self-concept. Researchers have found that students who learn in nurturing and supportive classroom climates, where positive student-teacher relationships are fostered have higher self-concepts (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2015; Gilbert et al., 2014; Kosir & Tement, 2014; Reyes et al., 2012; Sakiz et al., 2012).

Herbert Marsh is the leading researcher for understanding the significance of self-concept. He is a professor at Oxford University and founded the Self-Concept Enhancement and Learning Facilitation (SELF) Research Centre. In 1984, he developed the Self-Description Questionnaire, which is used to measure self-concept (Marsh & O'Neill, 1984). Through his research he developed the Reciprocal Effects Model, which poses that achievement and self-concept have a reciprocal relationship. His work with self-concept is world renowned and is broadly accepted as proof of the significance of self-concept in relationship to classroom pedagogy (Chen, Yeh, Hwang, & Lin, 2013a; Chen, Yeh, Hwang, & Lin, 2013b; Green et al., 2012; Marsh & Craven, 2006; Marsh et al., 2018; Seaton, Parker, Marsh, Craven, & Yeung, 2013).
There are three constructs that define a person's self-belief (Bandura, 1977; Mecca, Smelser, & Vasconcellos, 1989; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). The first being self-efficacy, which is the confidence to complete a task or goal (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy has been linked to higher achievement in English, but has conflicting results for math (Bong, Cho, Ahn, & Kim, 2012; Pitsia et al., 2017). The second is self-esteem, which is the value that a person places on their self-worth (Mecca et al., 1989). Thirdly, the construct of self-concept is the measure of a person's ability based on the external and internal measures (Marsh, 1986). According to Parker et al. (2014), the difference between self-efficacy and self-concept is the evaluative process that occurs with self-concept. This difference indicates that classroom practices that support a positive self-concept may be particularly important. It is also found that the measure of self-concept is relative to the context and subject, whereas self-efficacy has not been found to correlate with a specific subject (Bong et al., 2012; Parker et al., 2014). The impact of external factors is why research related to self-concept is included for this study that examines classroom climate.

One specific study that applied relational pedagogy to classroom practice was the work of Reeves and LeMare (2017). The researchers conducted a qualitative investigation that explored how to support teachers in improving relational pedagogy. The researcher's framework for their study relied on attachment theory and care theory to provide education on the positive effects of student-teacher relationships. A process-oriented approach to professional development had its benefits, but it did confirm that knowledge of pedagogy does not always translate to a change in practices (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). However, it did have an impact on some teachers understanding of the aim of education and how relational pedagogy is an integral part of a teacher's everyday practices.
Method

An ecological approach to the study of relational pedagogy was applied to gain knowledge of teachers' understanding of this construct. More specifically this qualitative study used an instrumental case study to examine the multiple stakeholders. An instrumental case study is different from other case studies in that the case itself is not the focus of the study, rather the phenomenon is the central focus (Appleton, 2002). The phenomenon that was the focal point in this investigation was the understanding of the role of relational practices in the classroom. Observations of eight content area teachers of math, science, social studies, and English language arts were observed in their classrooms. The eight teachers that were observed, also participated in focus groups. Three interviews of other stakeholder in the school and district were interviewed to gain insight to their understanding of relational pedagogy.

Audience/Stakeholders

There are several stakeholders that this research could impact. As a scholar-practitioner my goal is to improve the quality of education, therefore my research should directly impact the students. A pedagogical mind shift that infuses the components of relational pedagogy and aims to create classes that emulate the ideals of care theory may create learning environments that are nurturing and supportive. As suggested by the literature, this form of environment is more conducive for learning (Reyes et al., 2012). It is only natural that students will achieve higher academically, but a greater outcome will be that these students will also develop socially and emotionally through these classroom practices.

Educational research will inevitably have an impact on teachers, how teachers react to this necessary change in their approach to classroom climate will differ based on the way that leadership conveys this information. Educators may find that many of these approaches may not
only improve achievement but could address behavior management concerns, reduce the number of chronic absences, and minimize the students who experience anxiety.

It is my intention that the research I will conduct will more specifically unveil the practices of those teachers who have already mastered relational. I believe that the impact of this research could also extend beyond the classroom. Students that are emotionally healthy will make for more productive citizens that can contribute to the workplace and community. Additionally, the association between learning and a positive learning climate will motivate more students to be lifelong learners. Consequently, more students will go on to pursue higher education and eventually attain careers that will support the development of a thriving economy.

**Conclusion**

Relational pedagogy is not a commonly used term in schools when discussing instructional practices, lessons plans, and other tools to enhance the learning experience. However, the adoption of a relational approach to creating classroom climate would address the many concerns raised about a student's academic achievement in the 21st century. This approach addresses the academic and social-emotional learning needs of 21st century learner. Therefore, the aim of this case study was to examine teacher and administrative perspective of how relational pedagogy plays a role in the development of classroom climate through an ethics of care lens. The literature review that follows outlines the themes of goal orientation, teacher support, inquiry-based learning, and academic self-concept.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to define the components of the instructional climate that emulate the theory and practice of relational pedagogy, as well as, to present the research that supports the role that instructional practices play in fostering a student's self-concept. A student's academic self-concept has been found to be a predictor of academic achievement (Chen et al., 2013b; McInerney, Cheng, Mok, & Lam, 2012; Pitsia et al., 2017; Prince & Nurius, 2014; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013; Van der Beek, Van der Ven, Kroesbergen, & Leseman, 2017). Academic achievement has been defined in a variety of ways in the literature as GPA, standardized test scores, academic attainment, as well as social adjustments. However, regardless of the measure of success, according to the United States Department of Education a student's ability to achieve and self-set goals should be a priority in the public schools (U.S. department of education.). The driving force behind the setting and attaining of academic goals of achievement is the student's self-concept. The classroom instructional climate can have an impact on the development of a student's self-concept (Reyes et al., 2012). Therefore it is necessary to understand what contributes to the development of a positive classroom climate.

Place also has a significant impact on the academic achievement and opportunities for advancement (Roberts & Green, 2013). Rural poverty is particularly harrowing because of the isolation and limited resources available. These disadvantages need to be mediated through the implementation of programming that supports families in breaking the barriers of poverty. The income-achievement gap is a significant social justice problem that affects the ability for people to change social classes (Crook & Evans, 2014). The harrowing statistics presented in The Harvard Law Review (2006), reveals that one of the biggest issues in this country is the marginalization of the poor. The Harvard Law Review (2006) argues that inaction of the rich
indirectly affects the poor. It is the gluttonous behavior of the rich that prevents the poor from moving up the social ladder.

The educational system is further marginalizing the poor through unequal educational opportunities. Lim (2008) uses the theoretical framework of Bourdieu and Passerson to analyze the case studies of two sixth grade females from different races and social classes. Per Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), “cultural capital” and “social capital” is created through power relations that exist amongst races and social classes. The dominant race and social class have control of the cultural, social and linguistic characteristics that are imposed on all students. Anyon (1981) also describes the disparity of schooling provided by an affluent school and working-class school. This study examined three aspects of the school experience, work patterns, school knowledge, and student resistance. The work patterns in the working-class school engage students in rote tasks that often-involved rules and memorization of steps. In contrast, the affluent school promoted "creativity, independent thought, and personal development (Anyon, 1981)" and problem solving that promotes the development of critical thinking skills was a priority in the classroom. School knowledge also differed; the focus of the working-class school was "the basics" and the affluent school challenged students to understand conceptually. Differences in student resistance behavior were also observed. Students of the working-class school exhibited passive and active behaviors related to resistance. Students were observed avoiding work by acting out, while others would withdraw to avoid work. The students of the affluent school showed resistance through extreme individualism. Students would try to take control of their environment by proclaiming that they needed to finish another assignment before doing the assigned task. This example of disparity between educational experiences is evidence that not all schools are providing the same experience.
Based on a thorough review of the current research, several themes emerged relating to quality instructional practices for the 21st century learner. The impact of place on a student’s ability to succeed academically is examined from a rural perspective in the first section of this literature. A theme related to student success was the impact of instructional climate to a student’s achievement, motivation, and self-concept. A subtheme of instructional climate focuses on the goal structures set in a classroom, specifically the implementation of a mastery goal structure and the promotion of a mastery goal orientation. This subtheme presented many benefits to a student's learning process. The following is discussed in relation to mastery goal orientation, effects on achievement, long-term gains, reduction of negative emotions, gender differences, improved self-concept, and social-emotional learning. The literature presented identifies self-concept as a significant contributing factor in achievement, especially in mathematics. Self-concept was also found to have an impacted by adaptive learning behaviors, mindset, teacher support, and anxiety. The overarching connection between all these constructs is relational pedagogy. This theory is the framework for creating a positive classroom climate and fostering the development of a high academic self-concept (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2008).

Rural Poverty

Community and parent partnerships are essential to improving academic outcomes that result in a brighter future for our society (Schutz, 2006). Noguera (2011) suggests that poverty should not be considered a learning disability, however the effects of poverty do hinder student’s ability to learn effectively and efficiently. There are three areas that influence students’ academic achievement: external support, environmental obstacles and negative social capital (Noguera, 2011). The external support that a middle school teacher provides is particularly important. Not
all student receives the same level of support from parents or guardians. This is may be cause by a lack of education or learning disabilities of the caregivers. In some families, parents are working during the evening hours when homework support is needed. Therefore, it is the responsibility of educators and citizens to provide support to families, who have not had the same opportunities.

Miller and Votruba-Drzal (2015) examine disparities in rural and urban achievement across social classes. It was found that there is a greater correlation between poverty and reading and science achievement for urban adolescents than rural youth (Miller & Votruba-Drzal, 2015). The higher achievement in science for rural youth can be attributed to the access to the outdoors. Data also revealed that rural adolescents from affluent families out perform their low and middle income classmates (Miller & Votruba-Drzal, 2015; Roberts & Green, 2013). Although when comparing rural area social classes, the achievement gap is smaller in the rural areas according to Miller and Votruba-Drzal (2015), the findings do imply that interventions are necessary to improve student outcomes in rural areas. A significant finding, is that rural youth test lower than urban youth overall, even though suburban and rural adolescents benefit from communities that expose them to more adults and peers that promote academic achievement. Miller and Votruba-Drzal (2015) conclude from their research that after-school support programs could benefit rural low-income adolescents in improving academic achievement.

Resiliency has been identified as the key to success for rural impoverished youth. Curtin, Schweitzer, Tuxbury, and D'Aoust (2016) found that risk factors of rural exceptional (identified with a disability) youth were mediated by a positive attitude, perseverance, and help seeking behaviors. There three skills were gained through a supportive school environment with positive adult role models. These skills can be fostered through positive student-teacher relationships.
Knoell, Harshbarger, Krad and Crow’s (2015) research confirmed that student-teacher relationships can attribute to positive academic outcomes. Their qualitative study examined student-teacher relationships in affluent and poverty schools in the rural Midwestern United States. Affluent schools were defined as having 10% or less of the school on free or reduced lunch and poverty schools were those with 75% or more qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Across all socioeconomic status and achievement levels, students shared similar values in the characteristics of their teachers. Therefore, teacher preparation programs and schools should dedicate time to providing training on how to develop positive student-teacher relationships.

Although there are things that educators can do in the classroom and through extended day programs to mediate the achievement gap, it is also necessary for the community to provide supports that improve the living conditions of the impoverished. A study conducted in Twain focuses on improving math performance in rural areas (Zhang & Sheu, 2013). School-level investments and resources were evaluated for the impact they had on academic achievement. Zhang and Sheu (2013) found that the school-level investments did not translate into improved student outcomes. This lack of progress was attributed to the family conditions, which had remained stagnant in the presence of this school-level investment.

In summary, “class is much more than one’s economic standing,…it determine(s) values, standpoint and interests (hooks, 1994).” Poverty brings more than lack of “things”. Poverty brings emotional stress that can lead to health problems. People that live-in poverty are no less of a person and should not be classified as below the norm, however the circumstances of their existence is not ideal and needs the attention of all people. Teachers can make a difference in the classroom by providing equitable opportunities for academic achievement.

Relational Pedagogy
According to Papatheodorou and Moyles (2008) relational pedagogy is a learning theory that is embedded in all of the work that we do as an educator. It is pertinent that teachers enter the school building with the goal of making connections with their students as a means of opening their minds to the learning process (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2008). Nodding (2013) simplified this learning theory by stating that teachers need to show “kindness in the classroom” in a video that was intended to inform teachers of the importance of showing care in the classroom. Brownlee (2004) defined three characteristics of a classroom that adopts a relational approach to classroom climate. These three characteristics are:

1. showing respect to the student as knower;
2. providing learning experiences that relate to the students' own experiences;
3. articulating and facilitating a constructivist approach to learning by emphasizing meaning-making rather than knowledge accumulation (Brownlee, 2004).

A relational approach is a student-centered approach where the teacher becomes the facilitator of learning. The teacher’s role shifts from lecturer to coach. According to the Student Centered Research Collaborative (Students at the center framework.), student centered learning can be defined by four tenets:

1. Personalized learning
2. Competency-based learning
3. Anytime, anywhere learning
4. Student-owned learning

This coaching model allows students to be autonomous throughout their learning journey, as well as reinforces the intrinsic motivation to learn. Though, students are encouraged to be independent thinkers, it is still essential that students build a positive relationship with the
teacher for this model to be effective. In the following sections, the benefits of adopting a relational approach will be examined.

**Whole Child Approach**

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) named five principles that schools should consider when developing and implementing curriculum (Slade & Griffith, 2013). Students should be afforded the opportunity to be “healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged” (Slade & Griffith, 2013). Sanders, Walker, and Jones (2015) investigated the role of teachers in building character through a character education program. Their study examined the whole child approach to education. The concern of the researchers was the presence of pressure to increase test scores had diminished the quality of the educational experience for students. The study revealed that teachers felt that the pressure of assessments had taken away opportunities to focus on implicit curriculum that developed skills needed to prepare their students for the world. Balance is needed in schools to develop good citizens that have a broad knowledge base.

Another way to meet the needs of the whole child is through positive teacher-student relationships, which can make a significant impact on the learning environment for a student. (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2015; Gilbert et al., 2014; Kosir & Tement, 2014; Reyes et al., 2012; Sakiz et al., 2012). November (2013) and Gore (2005) focus on the concept of trust building as a key component of a successful learning community. The ethic of giving and receiving freely was promoted throughout the school in Gore's (2005) study to create a safe and nurturing learning environment. In concert with this theme, November (2013) emphasized the importance of the first five days of the school year as a time to build relationships and bond as a community of learners. Both philosophies reflect a sense of belonging. When a student belongs to a group they
feel important and needed. The reciprocity that was demonstrated in Gore's (2005) study reinforced the feeling of belonging when student's accept assistance from someone and when they return the favor. The acceptance of assistance is a binding contract to reciprocate the act.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is rarely a focus of teacher preparation programs but is another crucial factor in implementing a whole child approach to learning (Waajid, Garner, & Owen, 2013). However, it is a priority in the state of Massachusetts, which mandates that it be infused in the curriculum. Waajid et al. (2013) examined pre-service teacher's perceptions of SEL. The pre-service teachers were required to apply Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences to unit plans and lesson plans in the curriculum course. Students' reflections on the course, revealed an understanding of the importance of infusing SEL in academic learning. Another common theme that emerged from the interviews was the shift to learner centered activities to meet the social-emotional needs of their students. This an example of using a relational pedagogy approach to meet the emotional needs of the students. This whole child approach promoted the development of “self-authorship and self-regulated learning” (Waajid et al., 2013).

In a second study, Martin, Fergus, and Noguera (2010) examined a suburban elementary school that experienced remarkable success with achieving fourth grade ELA proficiency amidst the challenge of a high immigrant population. This elementary school adopted a community school approach that emulated the ideals of John Dewey (1938). Community schools are a full-service organization that partners with non-profits to meet the needs of the whole child. In addition to providing social services, a high priority was developing highly qualified teachers that followed the guiding principles of meeting the needs of the whole child. Academic achievement interventions were addressed through an after-school program that aimed at improving English proficiency. The unique characteristics of this program were building
problem solving skills, character education, teamwork, and experiential learning opportunities. Martin, Fergus, and Noguera (2010) highlighted the importance of providing adequate support and training when implementing a shift in school-wide culture. Additionally, this study confirmed that teaching the whole child had a positive effect on academic outcomes.

**Inquiry-based learning.** An inquiry-based learning approach aligns with the theory of relational pedagogy. Brownlee (2004) defines relational pedagogical practices as providing learning experiences where students construct knowledge. Classroom practices emphasizing meaning-making by implementing PBL and PrBL are examples of relational pedagogy theory and practice. An inquiry-based approach to learning is reminiscent of Reconstructivism and Progressivism, simultaneously addressing the needs of the whole child (Ornstein, 1990). In these classrooms, teachers design lessons that center around students' needs and interests. The teachers’ role under this philosophy facilitate learning through interacting with the students directly. Students in this environment take ownership of their learning and view the teacher as a support person in meeting their learning goals. There is a powerful message portrayed to students that everyone can learn. There is a strong emphasis on meeting the individual needs of diverse learners and approaching curriculum through the perspective of the whole child. Pedagogy under this philosophy would entail students engaging in hands-on inquiry-based lessons.

Freeman et al. (2014) studied the difference between a lecturing approach and an active learning approach in undergraduate courses. Students who attended courses that favored a lecturing approach were one- and one-half times more likely to fail the course than their peers who attended courses that favored a lecture approach. Students who attended the course that utilized an active learning approach scored six percent higher on assessments.
**Problem-Based learning and project-based learning.** An inquiry-based pedagogical approach also includes problem-based learning (PBL) and project-based learning (PjBL). PBL is essentially an open-ended task that has few constraints and where there is no model or example for students to imitate. These types of activities require both a high degree of complexity and difficulty. Difficulty is defined as the “amount of effort”, whereas complexity is the “kind of thinking, action, or knowledge” needed to solve the problem (Francis, 2016). The literature supports that this form of learning has significant benefits to students. Researchers have defined these benefits as higher engagement, deeper learning, motivation, achievement, development of self-regulation skills, and autonomy.

Problem-based learning and project-based learning are opened ended, ill-defined tasks that are real-world based. The students feel a sense of purpose when completing such tasks because the context of the problems have meaning to the learners. This connection to the problem/project leads to a positive relationship with learning. The purpose of this section of the literature review will be to present evidence for using a PBL or PjBL approach in the classroom to support higher engagement, motivation, autonomy, self-regulation, and achievement for students in grades K-12 (Chin & Brown, 2000; Cook & Bush, 2018; Dole, Bloom, & Doss, 2017; Gallagher & Gallagher, 2013; León, Núñez, & Liew, 2015; Loyens, Gijbels, Coertjens, & Côté, 2013; Padmavathy & Mareesh, 2013; Stefanou, Stolk, Prince, Chen, & Lord, 2013; Wirkala & Kuhn, 2011).

Wirkala and Kuhn (2011) studied the effectiveness of PBL. Their study involved three urban middle school sixth grade classrooms. There were three formats compared in this study: lecture discussion, small group PBL, and solitary PBL. It was evident from the post assessments that students who learned through this student-centered approach more actively engaged and had
the provided opportunity to apply their knowledge. Consequently, students attained deeper learning that improves the potential for long-term retention. These findings support the use of PBL to improve learning outcomes. The researcher concluded that these students are more likely to able to continue to access this knowledge to use in future learning experiences (Wirkala & Kuhn, 2011).

A third study confirmed the benefits for implementing a Problem-Based approach in the classroom. Padmavathy and Mareesh (2013) also chose to study middle school students, but their study used an achievement test to measure the effects of the PBL. The study consisted of a control group, which was taught using conventional methods and an experimental group which engaged in PBL. Through the quantitative analysis of the data the researchers concluded that students in the PBL group performed better on the posttest than the control group being taught using conventional methods.

The implementation of a PBL approach in the classroom has also been shown to improve student's attitudes toward STEM and increase engagement and motivation (Jones, Epler, Mokri, Bryant, & Paretti, 2013; Laforce, Noble, & Blackwell, 2017; Tseng, Chang, Lou, & Chen, 2013). Student autonomy or choice was identified as a motivator for learning throughout the literature on PBL (Dole, Bloom, & Kowalske, 2016; León et al., 2015). Problem-based learning provides an opportunity for student choice, but it also supports students in self-regulating their learning, collaboration and communication with peers, which develops a “sense of community” (Dole et al., 2016).

**Deeper learning.** Biggs (1987) and Marton (1983) are coined for defining two approaches to learning. The first being surface learning, which is associated with rote learning, memorization, and gaining knowledge to meet a goal (Chin & Brown, 2000). Surface learning is also associated
with extrinsic motivation and a performance goal orientation. In contrast, students who are using deep learning strategies question throughout the learning process, make predictions about outcomes using prior knowledge, and explain phenomena while in the process of learning. A deep learning approach is also intrinsically motivated. Deep processing stores information in the long-term memory to be retrieved at a later time. This deep processing has been found to be a fundamental skill for being able to think critically and transfer knowledge to solve complex problems (Loyens et al., 2013).

Cook and Bush (2018) posit that deep learning gives students a feeling of accomplishment when the students arrives at a solution. Cook and Bush (2018) study a specific pedagogical approach called design thinking. This form of problem-based inquiry is an interdisciplinary pedagogical approach that promotes the development of problem-solving skills necessary for the 21st century learner. There are five phases in the design thinking learning process: emphasize, define, ideate, prototype, and test (Cook & Bush, 2018, p. 2). In comparison to the above description of deep learning actions, ask, predict and explain, design thinking covers all of the deep learning strategies.

Wijnen, Loyens, Smeets, Kroeze, and van der Molen (2017) examined the effects of PBL opposed to lecture courses in a third-year law program. The researchers aimed to study the learning strategies of the law students by collecting data on deep processing, self-regulation, and self-study time. Students enrolled in classes that utilized a PBL approach to learning reported increase in deep processing, self-regulation, and external regulation. This significant finding can be attributed to the demands of PBL for students to be autonomous. Problem-Based Learning requires students to rely on external sources, which takes greater time investment.

**Autonomy and Self-Regulation**
Problem-based learning provides an opportunity for student choice, but it also supports students in self-regulating their learning, collaboration and communication with peers, which develops a “sense of community” (Dole et al., 2017). Student autonomy and choice was identified as a motivator for learning throughout the literature on PBL (Dole et al., 2017; León et al., 2015; Stefanou et al., 2013). Autonomy and self-regulation are two constructs that support one another. Self-regulated learning is the ability to monitoring one's learning process, such as managing and planning tasks, assessing understanding, and reflecting on learning (Dole et al., 2017). Leon, Nunez, and Liew (2015) found that students were autonomously motivated when tasks were meaningful and interesting. Students who are autonomously motivated are intrinsically motivated to complete task for learning or self-set goals. This relates to the theory of relational pedagogy, which posits that learning should relate to a students’ own experiences. Several measures were administered to examine self-regulation and deep processing and its relationship to autonomy and autonomous motivation and if this is a predictor of high school math achievement. The investigation revealed that autonomy, autonomous motivation, effort regulation, deep processing, and course grades predicted achievement. It was also noted that the classroom climate was both supportive and responsive, which leads to the conclusion that teacher support is a crucial factor in PBL. The provision of autonomous support is also essential for the development of self-regulated learning and providing opportunities for deep processing (León et al., 2015).

Stefanou, Stolk, Prince, Chen, and Lord (2013) studied self-regulation and autonomy of undergraduates over a two-year period. The researchers aimed to identify differences in the two active learning approaches, PBL and PjBL. Students reported using deep learning strategies under both conditions. Project-Based learning showed more effect on self-regulation than PBL.
Both approaches showed evidence of well-developed self-regulation but manifested in diverse ways. PBL focuses on the acquisition of new knowledge, whereas PjBL aims to apply knowledge. Students motivation was consistent throughout both course types. Students taking the PjBL course put forth less effort toward time management and study time self-regulation. Students relied on peer's expertise in a particular area as a source of knowledge when completing a PBL, which is an ill-defined and open-ended task. There was also a higher degree of autonomy support reported in the PjBL condition.

**Instructional Climate**

The instructional climate of a classroom consists of three components, teacher expectations, teacher support (instructional and emotional), and the classroom goal structures (Reyes et al., 2012). All of these are taken into consideration when building a safe and supportive learning environment. The classrooms climate has been found to have an impact on achievement (Reyes et al., 2012). The policies and procedures of a classroom reflect the teacher's goal structure and support the instructional and emotional climate of the classroom.

**Goal orientation.** There are three models of goal orientation, performance-approach goals, performance avoidance, and mastery goal (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Harackiewicz, Barron, Pintrich, Elliot, & Thrash, 2002). The characteristics of teachers that ascribe to a performance goal structure are attributed to a comparison of peers that measure outcomes as well as place a strong emphasis on standardized test scores. Similarly, performance avoidance goals relate to specific outcomes and performance to avoid the appearance of being incompetent. In contrast, a mastery goal approach is a more supportive learning environment that coach's students through the learning process. Students are evaluated based on progress and effort. Mistakes are expected, and students are encouraged to reflect on them as a part of the learning
process. Goal orientation has been extensively studied in relation to self-concept, academic achievement, student engagement, task value, and motivation, for this literature review there will be focus on the relationship of mastery goal structure to those constructs.

The mastery goal approach to learning is closely linked with a student's intrinsic motivation (Cerasoli & Ford, 2014; Murayama & Elliot, 2009). A student that has a mastery goal orientation is self-driven to attain competence for the learning objective. Murayama and Elliot (2009) draw a comparison between a mastery goal approach and performance goal approach. Their findings indicate that a mastery goal approach has a positive effect on intrinsic motivation; in contrast, the performance goal approach had a negative effect. In concert with Murayama and Elliot's (2009) findings, Cerasoli and Ford (2014) found that there is a reciprocal relationship between intrinsic motivation and mastery goal orientation. Therefore, a student who is more intrinsically motivated is more likely to adopt a mastery goal orientation and vice versa.

The type of motivation a student exhibits is a key factor to consider when developing a learning experience. Educators are expected to assess a student's achievement and adjust practices to meet the needs of each student academically. Student motivation can be measured in several ways. Kaiser, Retelsdorf, Südkamp, and Moller (2013) examined the teacher's ability to assess a student's motivation and achievement using the behavior of student engagement. The researchers conducted three studies that found that teachers more accurately judged student achievement than engagement. The findings also reveal that teachers misinterpreted a lack of motivation for low achievement. Additionally, a student's engagement in class impacts teacher judgements on achievement. A similar study found that a perceived classroom mastery goal structure resulted in students who were more engaged (Uar & Sungur, 2017). Uar and Sungar (2017) also found an increase in task persistence for students in classes that adopted a mastery
goal structure. The results of these two studies illustrate the importance of engagement and learning. The development of a classroom that focuses on progress develops a student's intrinsic motivation which indirectly affects their engagement in the classroom (Kaiser et al., 2013; Uar & Sungur, 2017). Therefore, it is pertinent that teachers create opportunities for students to show learning over time, not just in one moment in time.

**Achievement.** There are several benefits to promoting a goal mastery approach in the classroom. One advantage to a mastery goal approach is higher academic achievement (King & McInerney, 2016). King and McInerney (2016) contribute to the literature on mastery goals by examining the causal relationship of metacognitive strategies, achievement, and mastery goals. According to their study, the reverse effect was found, which is that a mastery goal approach did not directly influence academic achievement. Academic achievement predicted the use of metacognitive strategies and a mastery goal approach. The use of the metacognitive skills was also associated with a mastery goal approach. The researchers concluded that a mastery goal approach to learning is not necessary for achievement, but a natural outcome of achievement (King & McInerney, 2016). The data shows that students who attain higher academic achievement develop successful learning habits. Therefore, providing opportunities for success in the classroom is key to developing the skills necessary to continue a successful path.

In contrast to previous studies discussed, Seaton et al. (2013) found that performance approach goals were correlated with higher achievement. These contradictory findings can be attributed to two factors. One factor that contributes to the contradictory findings, is that the sampling included high school students, whereas some of the previous studies involved a younger population. Secondly, the difference in results could be reflective of the competitive edge that motivates students to attain academic success. Although a direct relationship between
mastery goal approach and achievement was not found in this study, it is still evident that a mastery goal approach does inherently create a drive to learn. According to Seaton et al. (2013), this adaptive skill develops students into committed life-long learners.

**Self-Concept.** Another benefit of promoting a mastery goal approach is the prevalence of higher student academic self-concepts (Ben-Eliyahu, Linnenbrink-Garcia, & Putallaz, 2017; Gilbert et al., 2014; Murayama & Elliot, 2009; Parker et al., 2014; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013; Turner, Gray, Anderman, Dawson, & Anderman, 2013). The mastery goal approach can contribute to the development of a student's academic self-concept (Turner et al., 2013). Murayama and Elliot (2009) conducted a study of junior high and high school math students that compare goal orientation and academic self-concept. The researchers found that a mastery goal approach indirectly affects a student's academic self-concept. Findings also showed that a performance goal approach negatively impacted a student's motivation and academic self-concept.

O'Keefe, Ben-Eliyahu, and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2013) implemented a mastery goal orientation summer intervention for high ability eighth through tenth-graders. The effects of this summer intervention were examined over a nine-month period. The relationship between contingencies of self-worth and goal orientation were analyzed. The mastery goal orientation intervention was found to have lasting affects (six months after) on students when removed from the environment that fostered the development of this orientation. Contingencies of self-worth, the competitive drive to succeed by outperforming their peers, was relative to changes in performance and performance-avoidance orientation (O'Keefe et al., 2013). This suggests that “self-worth contingent on the approval of others' approval” may be more stable over time and contexts (O'Keefe et al., 2013).
Another study that included gifted adolescents, examined academic and social behaviors in relation to goal orientation (Ben-Eliyahu et al., 2017). Although this study targets a very specific population, the findings reveal significant implications of the impact of a goal mastery approach. One important finding is that behavioral self-concepts were positively associated with a mastery goal approach. This suggests that the fostering of a learning approach that focuses on the learning process may influence classroom behaviors.

**Long-term gains.** Another advantage has been found in several studies that examine the relationship between goal mastery orientation and long-term implications of success (Cerasoli & Ford, 2014; Lazarides & Watt, 2015; Prince & Nurius, 2014; Yeung, Craven, & Kaur, 2012). According to King and McInerney (2014), the mastery goal approach is considered an “adaptive type of motivation” (p. 298). This form of motivation is transferrable to other situations and contexts. Cerasoli and Ford (2014) conducted a longitudinal study to evaluate the relationship that exists between mastery goals and intrinsic motivation and performance. The findings indicate that a student's mastery goals were consistent over the semester. Based on this finding, it can be inferred that students with mastery goal structure expect to be challenged and are willing to persist. Similarly, Prince and Nurius (2014) found an association of high self-concepts with goals and aspirations. Students who identified personal future goals were more likely to have a developed self-concept. This finding emphasizes the importance of teaching goal orientation and providing students with structure and support to attain these goals. Yeung et al. (2012) findings were based on a sampling of third through sixth-graders confirms the correlations between mastery goals, value and self-concept. Their study of a much younger population found that mastery goal orientation was a predictor of higher self-efficacy and identity and was associated
with long term gains. Competence, which is related to self-concept was also associated with long term gains.

Lazarides and Watt (2015) also conduct a longitudinal study that examines classroom goal orientation and the relationship to student motivation. Students who were in classes that projected a mastery goal approach to mathematics were found to be more likely to have mathematics career aspirations. This evidence suggested that students were more likely to aspire a mathematics career that were in classrooms that placed emphasis on task value.

**Anxiety.** The benefits of creating a classroom that promoted a mastery goal approach including the mediating effects on test anxiety (Putwain & Symes, 2012). Putwain and Symes (2012) found that a classroom mastery goal approach impacted a student's competence. Competence was defined as the perceived ability to achieve in a subject area (Putwain & Symes, 2012). The researchers compared goal orientation and levels of worry and test anxiety by examining competence beliefs, achievement goals, and test anxiety in college age students. The goal orientation was found to influence a student's anxiety and worry. Students who adopted a mastery goal orientation exhibited less test anxiety, but still reported having feelings of worry. This finding suggested that students who adopt a mastery approach still experience negative feelings, but these feelings may be the motivators to be successful. Consequently, those that believed that they could succeed were more likely to have a mastery goal orientation (Putwain & Symes, 2012). In contrast, the expectation of failure was associated with a performance goal orientation. Additionally, students with a performance goal orientation were more likely to exhibit test anxiety than those adopting the mastery goal orientation. The study concluded that lower competence drives a student's anxiety. Therefore, the promotion of a mastery goal orientation may reduce test anxiety.
Social-Emotional. Additional research that supports the implementation of classroom mastery goal approach is indicated by the findings of Butler (2012). It was found that teachers that reported relational goals as a part of their teaching practices is predictive of teacher social support and mastery instruction. Turner et al. (2013) also examines perceived teacher support and perceived mastery goal structures in the math class. Mastery goal structure was found to be interrelated with teacher affect support. The study concluded that the mastery goal structure assists in the development of a student’s self-concept. Teachers can build relationships through the establishment of instructional practices. Student feedback and interactions are particularly important in the development of a supportive and nurturing learning experience (Turner et al., 2013). The development of teacher support and a mastery goal structure was found to change over the course of a school year. According to the study, students perceived a difference between teacher support and mastery goal structure at the beginning of the school year, but by the end of the school year the students could not distinguish between the two constructs (Turner et al., 2013).

Vassiou, Mouratidis, Andreou, and Kafetsios (2016) take a unique perspective on the influence of a goal orientation. Their study examines the relationship between emotion perception and goal orientation. Students with a performance goal approach reported positive emotions. This did not take away from the significant finding that students with a mastery goal approach reported even higher affect and emotion perceptibility. This is not surprising because the construct related to affect and emotion perception are also correlated with motivation. Self-belief was also found as a predictor of academic success, further emphasizing the importance of relational goals as a priority for teachers (Vassiou et al., 2016). These findings infer that a social-
emotional environment is a key component of a classroom that fosters learning (Butler, 2012; Turner et al., 2013; Vassiou et al., 2016).

**Gender differences.** Across several studies gender was analyzed for differences in relationships. The results of Lazarides and Watt (2015) indicated differences among boys and girls in relationship to the effect of classroom goal structures. Girls were found to have a higher math anxiety and lower self-confidence. Another factor that contributes to these feelings is perceived teacher expectations (Lazarides & Watt, 2015). The study suggests that a mastery goal approach could mitigate the negative affect that girls experience toward math. Pitsia et al. (2017) also found a significant difference between the performance of boys and girls. Data showed higher mathematics achievement for boys than girls. Additionally, girls were found to have higher math anxiety, lower self-beliefs and motivation. Perhaps the lack of competence led the girls to be less successful in mathematics. Similarly, Ben-Eliyahu, Linnenbrink-Garcia, and Putallaz (2017) found gender differences when comparing mastery goal-orientation, engagement and self-beliefs. These research findings of gender differences suggested a need to inform educators of these gender differences and provide supports to improve classroom practices that reduce anxiety for girls, especially in the math classroom (Ben-Eliyahu et al., 2017; Lazarides & Watt, 2015). Vandecandelaere, Speybroeck, Vanlaar, Fraine, and Van Damme (Vandecandelaere, Speybroeck, Vanlaar, De Fraine, & Van Damme, 2012)Gender also examined genders differences in relationship to self-concept. It was found that boys had a higher self-concept of math than girls. This important finding emphasizes the importance of improving girl's mindset toward math.

**The Role of Self-Concept**
There are three constructs that define a person's self-belief (Bandura, 1977; Mecca et al., 1989; Shavelson et al., 1976). Self-efficacy, the first construct (Bandura, 1977) the belief that one can accomplish a task. The second construct is self-esteem, which is the value that a person places on their self-worth (Mecca et al., 1989). Thirdly, the construct of self-concept is the measure of a person's ability based on the external and internal measures (Shavelson et al., 1976). According to Parker et.al. (2014), the difference between self-efficacy and self-concept is the evaluative process that occurs with self-concept. It is also found that the measure of self-concept is relative to the context and subject, whereas self-efficacy has not been found to correlate with a specific subject (Bong et al., 2012; Parker et al., 2014).

**Achievement.** Findings have shown that there is a reciprocal relationship between academic achievement and a student's academic self-concept (McInerney et al., 2012; Parker et al., 2014; Pitsia et al., 2017; Prince & Nurius, 2014; Seaton et al., 2013; Van der Beek et al., 2017). It is unclear from the data which of the two constructs develops first, a positive self-concept followed by higher achievement or higher achievement develops a higher self-concept. Regardless of which of the two constructs is the antecedent, the consensus is that one mediates the other and results in positive effects for both outcomes. Prince and Nurius (2014) conducted a study involving graduating high school seniors. A student's self-concept was reflective of their GPA, which was also found to relate to their future academic intentions. This emphasizes the importance of academic self-concept as a motivational factor in future academic endeavors. Secondly, these findings suggest that a priority for high schools would be to create learning experiences that promote the development of a student's self-concept.

**Self-concept as a predictor of success in math.** Self-concept is highly predictive of mathematics achievement (Bong et al., 2012). In a study that examined students with disabilities,
it was found that students with math disabilities reported having the lowest self-concept compared to peers with reading disabilities or both reading and math disabilities (Holopainen, Taipale, & Savolainen, 2017). Sakiz and colleagues (2012) also found a connection between mathematics and emotions through an investigation that examined student's perceptions of teacher affective support. This study found that affective support makes a difference in students’ academic self-efficacy which led to an increase in academic effort. Students also reported higher levels of a sense of belonging and academic enjoyment when being taught by a supportive teacher.

Seaton et al. (2013) focuses on the impact of self-concept on mathematics achievement in high school students. The most significant finding was that providing skill improvement alone did not improve math achievement. However, an intervention that builds skills and self-concept simultaneously is a more effective way to improve math achievement. Lastly, this study concluded that the improvement of self-concept may be the key to unleashing a student's potential.

Another study involving mathematics and self-concept, suggests that students with a higher math self-concept are more likely to a pursue careers in STEM (Parker et al., 2014). The target of this study was to compare the impact of self-efficacy and self-concept to academic outcomes. It was found that self-efficacy and self-concept are positively correlated with math achievement. In comparison, the reading achievement was not found to be associated with these two constructs of self-belief. Parker et al. (2014) also found that self-concept is a predictor of future achievement.

Pitsia, Biggart, and Karakolidis (2017) added to the literature base by further developing the relationship between mathematics achievement and self-beliefs. Self-efficacy was
found to be the strongest predictor for math achievement. However, self-concept was more highly correlated with motivation and affect. Results of this study showed that extrinsic motivation had an influence on student's math achievement, suggesting that students are more motivated by grades and external incentives.

Vandecandelaere et al. (2012) also explored the mathematics learning environments and a student's perceptions of the learning environment. Three measures of student's attitudes toward mathematics were examined: academic self-concept, value of mathematics, and enjoyment. It was clear from the results of this study that the learning environment influences the level of enjoyment reported by the eighth-grade students. Students who have a higher enjoyment in the subject tend to be more engaged which indirectly leads to higher achievement in the subject area (Vandecandelaere et al., 2012). A learning environment that emphasizes learning, fosters self-regulation of learning, facilitates learning by coaching students and gives specific feedback to students provides a more effective learning experience (Vandecandelaere et al., 2012). A comparison of low and high achievers found that higher achievers self-concept is more supported in heterogeneous groups, whereas a low achiever's self-concept is better fostered in homogeneous groups (Vandecandelaere et al., 2012).

Clearly from the previous studies discussed, students' emotions are closely connected to their achievement and perceived competence in mathematics. Peixoto, Sanches, Mata, and Monterio (2017) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between achievement emotions and math achievement of sixth and eighth-graders. The researchers defined achievement emotions as boredom, hopelessness, anger, anxiety, enjoyment, pride, and relief. Higher achievement was found to be positively associated with enjoyment and pride. Students who reported a higher self-concept also reported more pleasant emotions toward math. Emotions
related to academic achievement included anger when in a testing situation and hopelessness was found to negatively impact achievement. The most significant finding from this study was the influence that classroom situations have on a student's emotions. Negative emotions related to perceived competence and value were found to be related to negative classroom experiences. This speaks to the importance of creating a positive learning experience for students. Providing opportunities for success with positive feedback has been shown diminish feelings of hopelessness and improve the potential for achievement (Peixoto et al., 2017).

Van de Beek, et al. (2017) examined the role that emotions play in mathematics achievement. The self-concept of students was negatively associated with the degree of anxiety and enjoyment that a student experience in the relation to mathematics. Higher achievement was found to correlate with higher self-concept and describe their math experience as being enjoyable. The results of this study accentuate the importance of emotions in the math classroom and the impact that improving a student's self-concept may have on achievement.

Adaptive Learning Behaviors

Brain functioning in relation to emotion and learning is particularly important in the context of creating a safe and nurturing learning environment (Sousa, 2017). The emotional state of the student can impact their ability to learn (Cole et al., 2009). When a person feels threatened, the amygdala will shut off the connections to the prefrontal cortex, where executive functioning (EF) is controlled (Cole et al., 2009). Therefore, emotional distress can significantly affect the functioning of the brain and its ability to learn (Hohnen & Murphy, 2016). One such executive function that is essential to learning is the ability self-regulate during the learning process (Friedrich, Jonkmann, Nagengast, Schmitz, & Trautwein, 2013).
Adaptive learning strategies fall under the umbrella of self-regulating skills (Amemiya & Wang, 2017). Students who exhibit self-regulated learning strategies can monitor their learning progress. Amemiya and Wang (2017) found that help seeking behaviors may increase self-concept. It is also reported that students with a higher self-concept are more likely to seek help from teacher or peers (Amemiya & Wang, 2017). A gender difference was also revealed for help seeking behaviors. Adolescent boys were less likely than girls to seek out help (Amemiya & Wang, 2017). Overall, the students examined in later adolescents were more likely to seek out peer help (Amemiya & Wang, 2017; Schenke, Lam, Conley, & Karabenick, 2015). This can be attributed to students' desire to seek autonomy, as well as the change in structure of schools and classrooms for later adolescents (Amemiya & Wang, 2017). The type of help seeking changed for students as students progressed to high school (Schenke et al., 2015). Students at the high school level were more likely to employ instrumental help, where the purpose of asking is to enhance knowledge rather than a specific answer (Amemiya & Wang, 2017; Schenke et al., 2015).

Research has shown that how a student learns impacts their academic achievement (McInerney et al., 2012). The process of learning therefore will impact a student's academic self-concept through the development of learning strategies (McInerney et al., 2012). Surface and deep learning are defined as the two types of learning strategies (McInerney et al., 2012). Surface learning can be compared to the performance goal orientation because the purpose of learning it to pass a test. Students of this mindset look for “rules” to memorize and apply to every situation (McInerney et al., 2012). Contrary to surface learning, deep learning is associated with students that monitor their learning and attain mastery of concepts (McInerney et al., 2012). Students who apply deep learning strategies develop conceptual knowledge to apply and extend the knowledge
to a variety of settings (McInerney et al., 2012). McInerney et al. (2012) found that students who employed deep learning were higher achievers in Math and English. An association between high self-concept and achievement was also noted, which led to a conclusion that explicitly teaching students to use deep learning strategies may positively impact a student's self-concept and ultimately improving academic achievement (McInerney et al., 2012).

In addition to help seeking behaviors being a positive adaptive learning strategy, it has also been found to be associated with improved math standardized test scores (Schenke et al., 2015). Students with a higher self-concept are more likely to exhibit help seeking behaviors (Schenke et al., 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013). Also, students who perceive their teachers to be more emotionally supportive are more likely seek help from their teachers (Schenke et al., 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2013) The lower achieving students exhibited fewer help-seeking behaviors (Amemiya & Wang, 2017). Another positive outcome for students who used self-regulatory learning strategies was positive emotions related to enjoyment and pride (Amemiya & Wang, 2017).

Kikas and Mgi (2017) examined the effects of a teacher’s emotional support in primary schools. Students were assessed on their task persistence, academic ability, and self-concept. In contrast to previous studies discussed, self-concept was not found to be higher in math, but was higher for reading for students who experienced an emotionally supportive first grade teacher. More significant was the finding that task persistence in reading and math was higher for students taught by an emotionally supportive teacher.

**Mindset**

Dweck’s theory of motivation, suggests that there are two kinds of mindsets, fixed and growth (Dweck, 2008). Haimovitz, Wormington, and Corpus (2011) used Dweck's social-
cognitive theory to provide a framework for their study on intrinsic motivation. This study investigated the correlation between a student's mindset and level of intrinsic motivation. It was found that students who held a belief that intelligence is fixed were more likely to have a decline in intrinsic motivation. However, students who had a growth mindset maintained or gained intrinsic motivation over the course of the school year. It is evident that embedding lessons that teach a growth mindset could benefit students with a fixed mindset.

Teachers can create environments that promote a growth mindset through policies, procedures, grading and interactions (Schommer-Aikins et al., 2000). Schommer-Aikins, Brookhart, Hutter, and Mau (2000) conducted a study that examined student perceptions of learning. Findings showed that students whose epistemological beliefs adhered to the ideals of a growth mindset earned a higher GPA. Even though a previous study (Schommer-Aikins et al., 2000) concluded that the infusion of a growth mindset philosophy should be a part of the classroom culture, Schmidt, Shumow, and Kackar-Cam (2017) encounter some success when applying an intervention to ninth graders in isolation. This six-week study included both seventh and ninth-grade students where half were assigned to the mindset intervention while the other half participated in a content writing task. Researchers intended to measure a student's perceptions of task value, mindset (fixed or growth), and mastery goal orientation. The ninth-grade students who participated in the intervention-maintained levels in all areas in contrast to the control group, where their beliefs declined. Paunesku et al. (2015) also experience positive results when implementing a mindset intervention in isolation. The high school students that participated in the online mindset intervention saw improvements in all their core course grades. This was especially true for students categorized in the at-risk group, who earned grades of above a C in more core classes. This data has a significant impact on the projection of these
student's future because higher course grades will open the doors to more courses and furthering their education.

Teacher Support

A supportive learning environment is important for learning, however the type of support that a student requires to be successful may differ depending on the learning needs of the student (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2015; Kosir & Tement, 2014). Bakadorova and Raufelder (2015) found that students with higher self-concepts needed more emotional support while students with lower self-concept needed instructional support. Additionally, students who made emotional connections with teachers were more motivated to learn. Motivation was also impacted by a teacher's feedback and the message that the student had potential was clear (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2015). Kosir and Tement (2014) found that students in classrooms with perceived teacher support and teacher acceptance at the beginning of the school year had higher achievement at the end of the school year. Students' perceptions of teacher affective support influence a student's academic enjoyment, sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy (Kosir & Tement, 2014).

Coelho, Sousa, and Figueira (2014) aimed to improve middle school student self-concepts through a social and emotional learning program. The study differentiated between the three types of self-concepts: social, emotional, and academic. Data showed an overall increase in social and emotional self-concept because of the intervention, however academic self-concept did not change. When the data was further analyzed, the intervention was shown to increase the academic self-concept of the students in the at-risk group. This corroborates the findings of
Paunesku et al. (2015) that although self-concept interventions may not be beneficial for the higher achieving individuals, the interventions still have value for those at-risk of failure.

A natural effect of academic enjoyment and self-efficacy is increased academic effort and engagement in the learning process (Reyes et al., 2012; Sakiz et al., 2012). This effect will have an impact on student achievement and attainment (Reyes et al., 2012). The effects of an emotionally supportive teacher were also validated in a study that examined teacher's relational goals (Butler, 2012). According to Butler (2012), student's perceptions confirmed that a teacher's affective support may be translated into an emphasis on progress and learning and that mistakes are a part of the learning process. The perceived positive teacher expectations and support may attribute to a student's motivation and achievement in the mathematics classroom (Gilbert et al., 2014). Teacher expectations include a judgement that teachers make about a student's ability to achieve, also known as competence beliefs. Teacher support can be defined as a willingness to help and show that they care about the student (Gilbert et al., 2014). Both competence beliefs and teacher expectations have been positively linked to a mastery goal approach (Gilbert et al., 2014). Goal orientation, utility value, and efficacy are related to a student's academic motivation and have been found to be associated with higher achievement (Gilbert et al., 2014). Gilbert et al. (2014) conducted a survey of middle school students prior to state standardized math test. According to the data, teacher support was strongly correlated with a perceived mastery goal orientation, but not to higher achievement, which contrasts with previous studies discussed. Additionally, use of reform practices was found to increase standardized test scores for students that are low achievers with low efficacy. Reform practices focuses on conceptual understanding of math and emphasize explaining answers. Not only did reform practices improve lower
achieving students, but it also increased student's perception of utility value. Utility value is the perceived usefulness or value of a given task.

**Anxiety and Self-Concept**

One of the many benefits of increasing a student's self-concept is the decreasing of anxiety (Ahmed, van der Werf, Kuyper, & Minnaert, 2013; Jansen et al., 2013; Pitsia et al., 2017). Jansen et al. (2013) found that the use of a personalized learning program for students in the late elementary to early middle school benefited from the use of an adaptive math program that adjusted the levels of questions to improve a student's math competence, or confidence in their ability to be successful. This increase in math competence reduced student's math anxiety and increased their performance in math (Jansen et al., 2013).

In another study, the data supported that anxiety levels will increase as self-concept levels decrease, it was concluded that math anxiety could be prevented or diminished through the development of a student's self-concept (Ahmed, Minnaert, Kuyper, & van der Werf, 2012). Anxiety has also been found to be associated with teacher-student relationships (Kurdi & Archambault, 2017). Kurdi and Archambault (2017) concluded that there is not a direct correlation between student-teacher relationships and anxiety, although it is a contributing factor. There is considerable variability between high and low achieving students as well as boys versus girls as it relates to anxiety. The most significant finding is that high achieving girls experience the most conflict with teachers and experience the highest levels of anxiety.

Pitsia et al. (2017) conducted a study of 15-year-old student's self-belief, math anxiety and mathematics achievement. This large sampling study revealed a lower degree of math anxiety associated with a higher self-concept. The results of this study suggest that teachers may
want to consider incorporating teaching practices that meet support a higher academic self-concept.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from this literature review that the epistemological views of the educator shape the classroom environment. Classrooms that reflect an understanding of relational pedagogy meet the social, emotional and academic needs of all students. This approach reaches students from diverse backgrounds with a care of ethics perspective (Nodding, 2005).

One such benefit of adopting a relational approach is the reciprocal relationship between a mastery goal orientation/mastery goal structure and self-concept. This finding has significant implications related to instructional and emotional practices in the classroom. The development of the emotional atmosphere can significantly impact a student's ability to learn. The lack of affective support can lead to a lack of motivation and a decrease in self-concept, consequently leading to lower achievement. A learning environment that creates experiences that place value on tasks, engages learners, and motivates students to put forth effort will result in higher achievement. The intertwining of the constructs of motivation and self-concept have meaningful implications for the classroom. A teacher's ability to deliver instruction effectively is as important as their knowledge of the content. The how and why of lesson planning should be a high priority when developing lesson plans and conveying expectations for procedures and policies in the classroom.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The success of education is most frequently associated with the construct of achievement; however, the benefits of a high academic self-concept extends beyond grades and standardized tests. Classrooms that support a higher self-concept have been found to have less anxious students (Ahmed et al., 2012; Ahmed et al., 2013; Bong et al., 2012; Jansen et al., 2013; Pitsia et al., 2017). Higher self-concepts have also been linked to higher engagement, motivation, and academic enjoyment (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2015; Gilbert et al., 2014; Reyes et al., 2012; Sakiz et al., 2012). Although these benefits are important, achievement is most widely accepted as a measure of success. However, researchers through multiple studies have established that these two constructs have a reciprocal relationship (McInerney, Cheng, Mok, & Lam, 2012; Parker, Marsh, Ciarrochi, Marshall, & Abduljabbar, 2014; Pitsia et al., 2017; Prince & Nurius, 2014; Seaton, Parker, Marsh, Craven, & Yeung, 2013; Van, Van, Kroesbergen, & Leseman, 2017). The knowledge that academic self-concept and achievement are associated leads me to want to examine what kinds of classrooms foster a high academic self-concept, so that more student can benefit from this attribute.

Classrooms that support the whole student reflect a high degree of understanding of relational pedagogy (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). These classrooms support students learning while being aware of the students social-emotional condition. The purpose of this instrumental case study is to investigate the role of teacher support, goal orientations and expectations in fostering a positive classroom at the middle school level.
Research Paradigm

Qualitative research, like a case study which investigates a phenomenon in its natural setting, constructs new knowledge through careful analysis of observations and interpretations (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). There is much ambiguity amongst the seminal authors of the precise definition of a case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). In fact, this divergence in methodological approaches to case study research is what diminishes its credibility in the eyes of the scientific community (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Appleton (2002) suggests that the definition of a case study relies heavily on the researcher’s epistemological beliefs.

One specific type of case study is an instrumental case study which gathers data from multiple sources to convey the experiences of the participants within a specific context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach marries the quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a broad perspective of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus of an instrumental case study is different from other case studies in that the case itself is not the focus of the study, rather the phenomenon is the central focus. Therefore, it is imperative that a unit of analysis be determined at the onset of an instrumental case study (Appleton, 2002). The unit of analysis for this class study is relational pedagogy. Therefore, the aim of this study will be to examine a teacher's understanding of relational pedagogy in the middle school classroom.

Research Method

Yin (1994) defines a case study based on three components.

1) The research question is a “how” or “why” question

2) It is contemporary issue.

3) The setting is an organic environment. (p. ??)

The three components of Yin (1994) have been applied to the problem of practice.
The aim of this research study is to understand teacher perceptions of the role that relational pedagogy plays in the development of the classroom climate. The contemporary issue being investigated is the teacher understanding of relational pedagogy in the middle school classroom. This study will explore how we can reduce these negative feelings through a safe and nurturing classroom while still maintaining high expectations. The setting under investigation will be a semi-rural middle school in western Massachusetts, where I am currently an educator. This school houses approximately 400 students that includes seventh and eighth-grade.

**Population and Recruitment**

This case study examined teachers' knowledge and application of relational pedagogy in the classroom. The general education teaching staff of the identified semi-rural middle school in western Massachusetts was emailed a letter inviting them to participate in the study. The general education content teachers include teacher of math, science, social studies, and English Language Arts. I will be requesting that the volunteers commit to a 20-minute classroom observation and the participation in a 45-minute focus group following the observations. The study will also seek input from the following stakeholders: a guidance counselor, the building principal, and the superintendent. These additional stakeholders will provide their unique perspective of relational pedagogy as a part of the educational system, thereby triangulating the data.

**Sampling Strategies and Criteria**

It is pertinent that an instrumental case study be the approach applied to this problem of practice because the focus of the study will be an in-depth study of classrooms at a middle school. Qualitative research most often selects participants through purposive sampling methods. There are sixteen teachers in this pool of sampling. The criterion for teacher participation is be a
faculty member of the identified suburban middle school in Western Massachusetts and teaches one of the content area courses, math, science, social studies, and English language arts. The aim is that eight teachers will volunteer to participate in the study.

**Data Collection**

Data collection differs among Yin, Stake and Merriam (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). Yin comes from a positivist lens that is exemplified through his clear and methodical process of collecting data. His approach resembles a roadmap (Yin, 1994). Stake and Merriam in contrast, define data collection more loosely and adhere to solely collecting qualitative data (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Stake does believe that you can define when you begin and end data collection (Stake, 1995). This process should occur organically, and the research will rely on intuition to guide the study (Stake, 1995). When describing the process of data collection, Stake (1995) focuses on developing the skills of the researcher as an observer. He suggests that researchers possess “sensitivity and skepticism” (Stake, 1995, p. 50).

Merriam is not as precise in her description of data collection as Yin, but not as loose as Stake. Her approach to data collection focuses on the researcher as a tool (Merriam, 1998). As with Stake, Merriam values developing the researcher's skills. The scouring of data, observation skills and conducting interviews are amongst the specific skill areas that are necessary for reliable and valid data collection (Merriam, 1998).

This case study will gather data from several sources, anecdotal evidence, eight classroom observations, two focus groups, and three individual interviews. The anecdotal evidence has been collected from students, my own children, friends and family of their experiences with educators.
The eight classroom observations will be conducted over a four-day span. Two classes per day will be observed for 20-minutes. A classroom observation checklist developed by the researcher will be utilized to collect evidence of relational pedagogy practices being applied to the middle school classroom. Detailed notes of the observations made about the classroom climate will also be included in this data collection.

The focus groups will be conducted in the school’s conference room. Two focus groups will be conducted after school for approximately 45-minutes each. Focus group participants, who were also observed will be purposefully selected for a specific focus group to ensure that each group is a heterogeneous mix of content areas and grade level teachers in each group. The focus groups will be recorded using a cell-phone voice-recording app and notes will be taken on body language and posture, as well as significant themes.

Lastly, the three interviews will be scheduled with the participant based on their schedule and will be conducted outside of school hours at a location that is convenient to them, preferably in their respective offices. The interviews will be recorded using a cell-phone voice-recording app and notes will be taken on body language and posture, as well as significant themes.

**Data Coding and Analysis Process**

Creswell (2018) describes in detail the process of analysis under the lens of a case study. Categorical aggregation fits well with an instrumental case study. This form of analysis compares several sources of data to identify similar instances that will emerge as themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Direct interpretation is suited best for the intrinsic case study. This form of research seeks to find the meaning of a single instance and looks for patterns of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The third form of analysis is naturalistic generalizations. This can be
applied to other similar contexts or a set of cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This is the last step in the analysis process.

**Limitations**

A limitation in this study is the small sampling that this middle school offers, since it is only two grade levels. Another limitation is that the researcher is a colleague of the teachers in this study.

**Reciprocity**

Teacher participants will be compensated for their time and contribution to this study by providing light refreshments during the focus groups. The interviewees will be offered light refreshments during the interviews as well to compensate for their participation in the study.

**Trustworthiness**

**Ethics**

There were three measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. First the researcher gained approval from the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board before data collection. Second, the researcher sought approval from the Belchertown Public Schools to conduct research. Lastly, participants were provided with informed contents forms and signed by the study participants.

The consent form informed participants of the purpose of the study, the benefits of participating in the study, and their rights during participation. Participants are also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. There was no incentive given for the participation in the study.
Quality of Research

This study purposefully chooses multiple stakeholders to achieve triangulation of the data. The varied data sources will provide an opportunity for corroboration of different sources (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Participants will be allowed to review the transcripts to ensure accuracy of the data collected. The investigator will ensure anonymity throughout the research process and use participant selected pseudonyms. Participation in this study does not involve legal, financial, or physical risks. There is minimal foreseeable risk or discomfort posed for the participants of this study. It is possible that a participant may feel uncomfortable with reflecting on their relational practices.

Protection of Human Subjects.

The rights of the human subjects will be protected by complying with the regulations set forth by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB). These regulations seek to protect the physical, emotional, and social well-being of the participants in this study. As a part of the IRB regulations, human subjects will sign an informed consent form outlying the risks involved in the participation in this study.

Risks. There are no foreseen risks involved that could damage the participants reputation or teaching status. All collected data will preserve anonymity to ensure that administrators could not use this data in the supervisory capacity.

Confidentiality. Confidentiality will be maintained using pseudonyms throughout the research. The school will also be referred to as a semi-rural middle school in Western Massachusetts because identifying by its actual name would reveal the interviewees identities.

Data Storage
To ensure that confidentiality is maintained throughout the study there are several measures that will be taken. The first will be that each participant will choose a pseudonym. The MAXQDA app will be used to collect recordings of the focus group and interview and transcribed. The MAXQDA 2018 app and software require a username and password to access the recordings. The transcripts will be analyzed for themes using the MAXQDA 2018 software, which is a secured website. Any paper documents created of the transcripts, interview notes, consent forms and observational notes will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my home of which I am the only one who has a key. All documents associated with this study will be shredded and destroyed after three years have passed.

**Conclusion**

The methodology and procedures of this ecological case study will unveil the perspectives of relational pedagogy of multiple stakeholders. Data will be collected through the observation of middle school classrooms, teacher focus groups, and interviews of a guidance counselor, building administrator, and district superintendent. Transcriptions will be recorded, transcribed and analyzed using the MAXQDA 2018 software.
CHAPTER IV: Data Presentation and Analysis

Chapter four presents the data collected from eight classroom observations and three interviews and two focus groups of the stakeholders responsible for creating and maintaining a positive classroom climate. The participants in this study consisted of the district Superintendent, the middle school principal and guidance counselor, and eight general education teachers of math, science, history, and English. The research questions for this study were as follows:

2) What are teachers' understanding of relational pedagogy in the middle school classroom?
   a. How does goal orientation, disposition, and teacher support play a role in fostering a positive classroom climate?

The thorough literature review identified classroom climate as a factor in student achievement and life-long learning. A positive classroom climate was also identified as fostering a higher academic self-concept. There are three components of classroom climate; teacher expectations, classroom goal structure, teacher support (academic and emotional) (Reyes et al., 2012). These three components are examined through observing the middle school classrooms and investigative questioning in focus groups and one to one interview. The care of ethics theory proposed by Noddings (2005), was used as a lens to examine this problem of practice. Noddings (2005) posited that learning environments that project a sense of caring are more conducive for learning. A person's underlying beliefs and experiences directly affect a person's educational philosophy, consequently the policies and procedures reflect this philosophy. Therefore, the identified themes from this study are the contributing factors of creating positive classroom climate from the perspective of the multiple stake holders, superintendent, middle school principal and guidance counselor, and general education teachers. The following themes were revealed through careful analysis of the data:
Theme 1: Teachers’ educational philosophies reflect the classroom climate.

Theme 2: Student-Teacher relationships are paramount.

Theme 3: Teacher emotional support is essential to creating a positive classroom climate.

Theme 4: Learning is the goal.

Study Site

This study was conducted in a semi-rural district that provides a public education to students from Pre-K through grade 12. There are approximately 2,400 students and forty-nine full-time teachers that educate these young minds. This district consists of five schools: early childhood (pre-K-K), elementary (grades 1-3), upper elementary (grades 4-6), middle school (grades 7 and 8), and high school (grades 9-12). It serves the residents of the town and fifty school choice spots open to the surrounding communities. The district operates on state, local and federal funding, as well as very active Parent Teacher Associations that run many fundraisers to supplement the growing costs of education. It should also be noted that the spending per pupil is one of the least in the state of Massachusetts (Massachusetts department of elementary and secondary education).

Even with the low budget, this district is known for a high quality and rigorous educational experience and its exceptional music programs. Another draw to this district is the student to teacher ratio of 14:1. A recent report from Newsweek (America's top high schools 2016.) ranked the high school as 13th in the state and 359th in the country. Approximately, 95.1% of students who attend this district graduate within 4 years of entering the high school and 80.6% of the students attend college after graduating. The school lacks in diversity, with only 10% of the population consisting of non-white students and 15.9% of the students are economically disadvantaged (Massachusetts department of elementary and secondary
education.). The organization's effectiveness shows through the standardized testing scores, which are above the state average in Math and English Language Arts. However, a weakness for the district involves the population of students on Individualized Education Plans (IEP), not only has this population of students shown little to no growth on standardized test scores from year to year (Massachusetts department of elementary and secondary education.), but there is a larger than average number of students placed on IEPs.

**Participant Profiles**

**Superintendent**

The superintendent of this semi-rural district in Western Massachusetts has been in the position for almost four years. Prior to beginning data collection for this project, the superintendent announced her retirement, which is mid-way through her three-year contract. During her short time in the district she has made a significant impact on the district and community. When she entered into our district, it was a contract renewal year The contract negotiations resulted in an eighteen-month contentious battle between the superintendent and the district staff. Unfortunately, this discord between the Superintendent and staff resulted in low moral across the district and resistance to initiatives generated by the new superintendent. A semi-rural district does not necessarily qualify for the grants and funding that less fortunate districts qualify for and there is not the tax base because of a lack of businesses in the town to fully fund the schools. Therefore, being a superintendent of a semi-rural district can be harrowing with a limited budget, while still providing an innovative and rigorous education. The intentions of the Superintendent were in the best interest of the students; however, these were at the cost of the staff’s wages and benefits, time, and most importantly trust. This loss of trust was by far the most damaging to making progress for the subsequent two years.
Over the course of these four years under her command, the researcher made it my mission to understand the underlying principles for her decision making that often seemed harsh or irrelevant. The superintendent has been complementary and supportive of the work that the researcher has done within my classroom and throughout the district as a change agent. It is not until this interview that the researcher truly became aware of the passion and clear vision that she had and always suspected that she possessed. She is very passionate about providing opportunities for students to succeed at their level. She showed this passion by reinstituting inclusion classrooms throughout the district and providing support through a three-year professional development plan to improve Tier 1 instructional practices. Another passion was building relationships with students through positive behavioral supports. Again, this was supported by providing professional development to teachers and administrators. This was to decrease problem behaviors and frequent student absences. Lastly, the Life is Good Kids Foundation was invited to promote the development of relationships with our students and each other. The intention of this was to improve school culture and rebuild culture amongst staff. All these initiatives project the clear vision that the Superintendent has for our district but has never been formally presented to the faculty and staff.

The interview of the Superintendent was conducted in her office, which is located at the Central Office building separate from the five school buildings in this district. She appeared to be at ease with the line of questioning and carefully answered each question with honesty and intellect. However, the tone of her voice did not change when discussing topics that she is passionate about, versus upsetting life events in her educational experience.

Middle School Principal
The principal of the middle school in this district has been appointed to this position for the past fifteen years. The most significant changes to this school have occurred in the last few years. The assistant principal, who held that position for more than seven years, left for a principal position in a neighboring district. Consequently, someone new was brought into the district, who did not share the same values and vision as our district and principal. This tumultuous time was compounded by the contract negotiations. The deadly combination of poor leadership and teacher dissatisfaction with the contract negotiations significantly impacted the morale of the building. This assistant principal did not return this year and a teacher in the building has taken the interim position as assistant principal. This shift in leadership has been a positive experience for teachers, as well as the principal. Currently, the building is regaining the positive working climate through corrective actions taken by the principal and teachers.

The interview with the principal was conducted in his office outside of school hours. He seemed relaxed and even offered me something to drink. The researcher has a solid working relationship that includes a sense of mutual respect surrounding our differing expertise in the field of education. The researcher has worked under him as principal for the last nine years. During the interview, he often repeated the question that was asked and paused to develop a thoughtful answer. There were a few questions that he seemed uncomfortable with answering and appeared visibly uncomfortable as he processed his answer. However, when talking about himself he easily formulated answers and elaborated without prompting.

He has been in an administrative position for most of his career in education both in and out of this district. When he did teach in the classroom, he taught English and History at the high school level. He reported that he continues to enjoy the field of education as an administrator and finds that each year brings new challenges, but that the summer break is enough to recharge him
even after the most challenging years. Interestingly, he characterizes himself as an educator not an administrator because he sees his position as educating the faculty and staff.

The principal offered his own interpretation of the district in response to my line of questioning regarding pedagogy. He passionately described the district as not having a clear vision or goal for several years and that initiatives are started in this district and “die out” after a year or two. Another identified cause of the inefficiency of the district from his perspective is that the schools are like five islands. Each one doing their version of the current initiative. Therefore, there is no continuity from school to school, which speaks to the fidelity of the initiative. Consequently, there is not a systematic method to measure the success of the initiative when buildings individually interpret the goal of the initiative.

As he reflects on his own shortcomings in most recent times as a principal at this school, he reported that he often “assumes too much”. In other words, he relies on his lens too often and fails to seek others' input when making decisions. This realization has made the most significant impact on our school. Teachers enjoy working in this building again. They feel valued and respected for their expertise and specific knowledge of working with middle school students. As a teacher in the building, the researcher has witnessed the principal making more of an effort to build relationships with the students and faculty this year. He is out of his office, in the halls and classrooms daily. As a part of this relationship building, there are random treats in our boxes, fresh hot muffins in the office on snow delay days and donuts and coffee on days that we have had a late-night volunteering at a school event.

The principal expressed his opinion that teachers should be allowed to be autonomous in how that present curriculum. This was expressed more than once during the interview. As a
principal, he feels that he should allow for these differences because everyone's personality will affect the way they teach, and this is something that he cannot change.

**Middle School Guidance Counselor**

The guidance counselor (GC) that volunteered to participate in this study is one of the guidance counselors at the middle school. This GC has been in this position for nineteen years. She was originally hired as an adjustment counselor because of her experience in counseling and social work. The researcher has worked with the GC for the past nine years. The GC and the researcher have become friends over the past few years because of their mutual passion for working with at-risk students. The GC and researcher developed a summer school program that infused social-emotional learning with content expectations that provide students with the adaptive learning strategies needed to be successful in the subsequent school years. They continue their work throughout the school year by providing learning centers where students' emotional and academic needs are met. In the school she leads other teachers to adopt alternative methods of teaching content to provide successful outcomes for the students of this school.

We met for the interview at a local coffee shop, where we drank tea throughout the interview process. She took the interview seriously and asked to preview the questions prior to the formal interview, so that she could formulate her answers intelligently. She was very comfortable with the line of questioning and showed signs of her emotions several times because this work is so important to her. Upon her reflection of why she continues this work, she expresses that she loves the work that she is doing and sees that there is “still work to be done”.

**Focus Group A**

Focus Group A met on a Monday after school hours in the conference room, where light refreshments were offered to the participants. All three participants appeared eager to participate
in the focus group. The two grades in this school are broken into four teams of teachers. All of the teachers in this group are on opposing teams.

Teacher A is a seventh-grade English teacher, who has been in the district for four years. The first year she was hired as a Reading teacher and when the position was eliminated, she moved into the English position. She is an active member of the school community, as a Grade Level Coordinator and Student Counsel Coordinator. She works tirelessly to teach her students through literature and community service about empathy and the importance of kindness. The researcher has never been on a team with this teacher, but she is currently the English teacher of the researcher's daughter. As a parent, the researcher has been privy to the kindness that the teacher spreads to all her students.

Teacher B is a seventh-grade science teacher, who was newly hired this year for this position, however, she is not new to the school. The researcher became acquainted with this teacher when she completed her student teaching practicum in the building four years ago. During her practicum, Teacher B would take the time to work with the at-risk students in the researcher's academic support class. She showed a dedication that it not frequently observed in pre-service teachers. During the focus group, she openly and passionately spoke about how students should be treated by teachers with tears in her eyes. She was clearly aware of the impact that teachers can have on a student's day and the many stressors that students carry on their mind and heart when they enter the classroom.

Teacher C is also new to the building this year. She has been teaching science and math for the past twelve years. She was hired at the end of the last school year to teach eighth-grade math. Teacher C and the researcher work closely together, since the researcher is the other eighth grade math teacher. She shares similar educational philosophies and a passion for the content to
the researcher. She is an innovator and constantly adjusting her practices to meet the individual needs of her classes and students. During the interview she humbly described what worked and what failed in her classroom. Her authentic answers spoke to her character and dedication to student success.

**Focus Group B**

Focus Group B met on a Wednesday after school hours in a conference room in the middle school, where light refreshments were offered to the participants. Four out of the five participants arrived promptly to participate in the focus group. The fifth participant arrived after the first line of questioning. All participants appeared comfortable and eager to contribute to this study.

Teacher D is an eighth-grade English teacher, who is a first-year teacher. Her lifelong dream has been to become a teacher. She is open and honest with her responses during the interview about the trials and tribulations of being a first-year teacher. She reports that she is continually adjusting her practices to meet the needs of the students. She is not afraid to throw out what is not working and try something new. She and the researcher are on the same eighth-grade team, so they share most of the same students and meet weekly to discuss student outcomes and success plans for the students.

Teacher E is an eighth-grade science teacher, who is also on the same team as the researcher. She has been teaching for over 20 years. Her educational experiences span several grades from preschool through high school. She started her career as a special education teacher and made the switch to general education science nine years ago when a position opened mid-year at the school. Teacher E is passionate about recognizing and supporting students in reaching their “maximum potential”.
Teacher F is an eight-grade history veteran teacher of twenty plus years. Her command and passion for the content is contagious. Teacher F and the researcher are not only on the same team, but have classrooms across the hall, therefore they have the unique opportunity to connect frequently throughout the day. They often give each other a heads up when a kid is having a bad day and needs some extra TLC. The researcher witnesses the way the teacher enthusiastically greets her students on their way into class and wishes them well as they go on their way. Most days she has a theme song playing to pair with her lesson, which inevitably turns into this teacher and the researcher and dancing in the halls. The teacher makes an honest effort every day to make connections with her students and prioritizes building relationships with students.

Teacher G is the only male teacher participant in this study. He has been a paraprofessional in a self-contained behavior classroom in the middle school for the past four years. He is currently the long-term substitute teacher for the geography teacher in the seventh grade. His passion for history and storytelling abilities are a perfect match for teaching middle school students. During the interview process he openly shared his struggles as a student and the obstacles that stood in his way of attaining academic success. He shared that he understands the stressors that can affect student learning outcomes and adjusts his expectations for students that deal with significant stressors outside of school.

Teacher H is a seventh-grade math teacher, who has been teaching for eight years. She started at the middle school as a first-year teacher fresh out of college. The researcher has had the joy of watching her blossom as an educator and leader of innovation. Most recently, she welcomed a co-teacher into her classroom when the district reinstituted the inclusion model. She flawlessly differentiates classroom tasks and assessment to meet the needs of all levels of learners. As the students’ needs in her classes change, she changes her practices. Through the
infusion of social-emotional interventions, she has built positive student relationships that has translated into improved academic outcomes. She was proud to share during the focus group that she had recognized her misconceptions of what to prioritize in the classroom and that this shift had not only impacted students emotionally and academically, but her overall attitude toward the job.

Data Collection

Observations

Observations were conducted by the researcher for all eight participating teachers. Teachers could choose the class that was observed for a twenty-minute time period. The aim of the observation was to collect observable evidence of an understanding of the components of relational pedagogy and a positive classroom climate academically and social-emotionally. As a part of this study, eight observable measures were identified as indicators of a positive classroom climate and components of relational pedagogy. This observation rubric was developed based on the theoretical framework applied to this problem of practice, Ethics of care theory (Nodding, 2005) and the work of Brownlee (2004) whose definition of relational pedagogy describes the observable evidence of relational pedagogy that is included in the rubric (See Appendix C; Table 1). In the following section, the physical environment and academic environment will be discussed as they relate to the development of a positive classroom climate.
Table 1
_Observation Rubric_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teacher A</th>
<th>Teacher B</th>
<th>Teacher C</th>
<th>Teacher D</th>
<th>Teacher E</th>
<th>Teacher F</th>
<th>Teacher G</th>
<th>Teacher H</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Centered Learning experiences relate to student's own experiences</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meanings-making is emphasized</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor goes out of his/her way to help students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor talks individually to students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students can choose activities and how they will work</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor moves around class to talk with students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching approaches allow students to proceed at their own pace</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Physical Environment.** Each room that was observed had a different arrangement of furniture in the classroom. Two of the rooms, both being science were limited in how they arranged their classrooms due to the outdated furniture and the built-in cabinetry and lab tables. The physical constraints of these classrooms did not allow for teachers to move around the class to talk to students individually. In the classrooms that had tables or desks arranged in group formations, students were observed engaged in the academic task while interacting with their peers and the teachers. Teachers were also able to redirect off task behavior in a timely manner.
because of the proximity to the students, which is contrary to the classrooms that did not have tables.

**Academic Environment.** The first academic measurable indicator of relational pedagogy is student centered learning. According to Collins and O'Brien (2003) student centered learning is defined as students’ having choice of how and what they learn. The role of the teacher shifts to facilitator of the learning process through self-paced tasks. This was not observed for any of the eight participants of this study.

In a classroom that reflects an understanding of relational pedagogy, learning experiences relate to students' own experiences (Brownlee, 2004). Based on these brief observations, the two math teachers did not show evidence of relating to student's own experiences. In one of the science classrooms the teacher used skateboarding as an example that students could relate to, to understand plate tectonics. Both English teachers used relatable generational examples of literary devices to teach students the impact of writing with descriptive language. The history teachers used two methods to provide a relatable experience for the students. One teacher used an aerial video of the historic site to engage students in the activity. The other history teacher used his storytelling abilities to draw student's interest of historical political figures and happenings.

Meaning-making in the classroom is the act of making connections to prior knowledge to create new knowledge (Brownlee, 2004). Students engage in deep reflection through discussing, reviewing, analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing concepts and content. It was observed in three of the classrooms that students were participating in tasks that emphasized acquisition and review of skills necessary for the learning to transition to meaning-making. One example of meaning-making in the classroom was a class discussion surrounding causes of World War II. The students were encouraged for their curiosity and creativity when using questioning to
synthesize the information. Another example of meaning-making was observed in a science class, where students were asked to strategize how to create a species that would live the longest. Students were applying the skills they learned about natural selection and genetics through this simulation activity. The math teacher also showed meaning-making through a problem-solving activity that encouraged mathematical thinking. Students used their previous knowledge of systems of equations to find a solution to a real-world problem.

Most of the teachers were observed going out of their way to help students. This was especially evident in an inclusion math class that is co-taught with a special education teacher. Both teachers were constantly in motion from one table to the next. The teachers guided students through the steps for solving the problems on their worksheet. After the observation, the teacher noted that having the tables is particularly helpful in assisting students. She commented that she can reteach multiple students at once in this seating arrangement as opposed to the desks, where she would frequently repeat herself to many students and runout of time to help all the students who struggled.

Again, most teachers were observed talking to students individually. However, the teacher that did not go out of her way to help students was also observed not talking to students individually. This may reflect the physical environment of this classroom, as described in the previous section. The activity planned for the class period, also required review of skills and explicit instructions. Class periods are forty-seven minutes, which inhibits teachers from diverting from the plan.

Student choice was not observed across all observations. Several of the classrooms involved lecture style lessons. The activities were generated by the teacher and proceeded at the pace set by the teacher. Two of the activities planned provided students an opportunity to work at
their own pace. One teacher differentiated the lesson by providing two activities at differing levels.

**Interviews and Focus Groups**

The interviews and Focus Groups were transcribed from a recording to text. The transcripts do not include repeated words, e.g., um, and some grammatical changes were made to sentences to better understand the complete thought of the participants. The next step of the process was uploading the transcript to MAXQDA 2018 software to encode the interview.

Codes were created based on the research questions that guided this study. During the initial coding process, the researcher examined the data to identify chunks of data that represented three major topics of interest, teacher disposition, educational philosophy, and classroom climate. Upon the first reading, these broader key codes were marked. A second more thorough review identified twelve specific codes through an inductive coding process (Miles et al., 2014). At this point in time, Descriptive and In Vivo labels were applied to the interview transcript manually. Further analysis of the topic of teacher disposition did not reveal any sub themes. Classroom climate includes TEACHER SUPPORT: EMOTIONAL and ACADEMIC, POSITIVE STUDENT-TEACHER REALTIONSIPS, and GOAL ORIENTATION. Educational philosophy included In Vivo codes: NULL CURRICULUM, TEACHER EXPECTATIONS, TASK VALUE, MEANING-MAKING, and STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING. The Second Cycle of coding identifies patterns codes. The twelve codes were analyzed to determine categorical/ thematic and cause/ explanation similarity groupings. Code set names were adjusted to offer more vivid explanation of the category or explanation.

The aim of the observations, interviews, and focus groups was to make a connection between middle school teacher's educational philosophies and their classroom practice related to
a relational pedagogical approach. The interview questions provided information on the participants' own educational experience as well as their practices in the classroom. There were several similarities to the participant's positive academic experiences and the educational philosophies that translated into classroom practices. For example, one participant identified the ideal classroom climate as being “caring” and described teachers from their past learning experiences as having similar attributes.

It is evident from the interview response data that the interview questions were well-aligned to the research questions, as well as the theoretical framework. The participants described many of the aspects of care theory to define classroom climate, teacher expectations, and their educational philosophy (Noddings, 2010). Care theory suggests that teachers create learning environments that are supportive, caring, and nurturing. The participants also used similar words such as “caring and welcoming.” The participants further describe the ideal learning environment to feel “safe” and “comfortable,” which was clarified to mean that the learning environment was “encouraging” and “supportive” throughout the learning process. The following sections will present the four themes that were revealed through the analysis of the collected data.

Theme 1: Educational Philosophy Guides the Development of Classroom Climate. A teacher’s educational philosophy is always evolving to adapt to the changing needs of the students. Teachers in this study frequently stated that they love to learn and get enjoyment out this profession because of a school environment supports their own growth as a learner. In relation to classroom climate and their underlying beliefs about the true purpose and meaning of education, two subthemes were identified; Null Curriculum Before Content and Task Value, Meaning-Making and Student-Centered Learning.
**Null Curriculum before Content.** Several participants in the focus groups discussed the importance of the null curriculum that is expected to be embedded in the content curriculum. One participant clearly described this embedding process when asked about the role of education in a person's life. The following is how she responded:

I would say teaching them the skills to help them be successful in whatever they choose to do. So, beyond the curriculum skills to read, write, collaborate, and communicate effectively, show empathy and perseverance. All of these core values that we have embedded into our curriculum. I think it's like our curriculum is a vector to help prepare them for what they're going to encounter in the future and then have them be aware of things that might interest them, so they can choose to pursue that in their future.

Another participant responded in agreement by saying that “there's also value in their education in other ways.” Other comments in relationship to the role of education included to “create global citizens” and teach “students [to] socially interact with each other and with adults.” The construct of relationships emerged before the line of questioning that references relational pedagogy. Teacher's perceive teaching student's appropriate relationship skills as a part of their job.

The teaching of adaptive learning strategies was also mentioned as a part of the null curriculum that is not described in the content curriculum. Two teachers discussed the importance of teaching students how to learn. Other teachers responded by suggesting more specific examples of teaching students to learn through making students aware of their “learning styles” and their “strengths and weaknesses.”

**Task Value, Meaning-Making, and Student-Centered Learning.** The importance of task value was expressed through the descriptions of influential teacher's in the lives of the
participants, as well as when describing their own educational philosophies. Several teachers wanted students to feel accomplished when exiting their classrooms. This was further defined by a teacher as “nothing is busy work.” Part of this feeling of accomplishment can be tied to the task that was required, as one teacher stated, “We're doing it because it's valuable.”

Task value can be attained through classroom tasks that emphasize meaning-making and relate to the student's own experiences (Brownlee, 2004) The following quote comes from the interview with the superintendent. Her description of the role of education, implies that meaning-making should be a priority.

The role of education isn’t necessarily to answer every question. The role is to become comfortable with seeking answers and to ask even more questions and become even more curious to develop a person into a contributing person and into someone who, has something they're going to be able to share.

It is evident that the Superintendent seeks to create lifelong learners in this district, where students engage in meaningful tasks. A teacher participant shared in the focus group a positive learning experience she had in high school that is an example of a meaning-making task. Here is her story:

She [English Teacher] changed my perspective on research. And this whole thing that everyone had to do just became this light for me. There was this light at the end of the tunnel, I was graduating high school, but it was the experience of going out into the field and doing this whole research thing that was so huge for us.

She also compared this experience to the current changes made to the chapter assessments in the eighth-grade.
We do way more performance tasks than I've ever done before. And the kids just thrive on them and they are an alternate type of assessment. They're showing us what they know through problem solving and writing. They're explaining their work and instead of doing ten of the same type of problem, it's one big problem.

Upon reflection of the previous teacher's response to her practices in her math classroom, the science teacher in Focus Group A commented that this is “more application of knowledge.”

A significant focus of discussions for Superintendent and GC was providing learning experiences that were student-centered. However, a student-centered learning approach did not come up in teacher focus groups, nor was it observed in the classrooms. Additionally, during the interview with the principal, he commented that when conducting observations,

The vast majority of the times we're seeing positive interactions. We're seeing direct instruction, we're seeing instructional goals being established and steps taken to fulfill them.

This comment confirms that teachers are using a more teacher-centered approach in their classrooms and that this is the desired pedagogical approach by the teacher evaluator.

Theme 2: Student-Teacher Relationships are Paramount. The participants of this study have a desire to emulate the qualities that they saw in the influential teachers in their life. There is significant overlap in the attributes that teachers describe as a teacher disposition that is effective for creating a positive learning environment and building student-teacher relationships. Several of the participants described a favorite teacher as being kind. This kindness was shown in a variety of ways. The Superintendent recalls her favorite teacher having “something positive to say to me every single day.” The GC recounts witnessing the teacher coming “in on a
weekend to help a young man and his family,” a family she described as being less fortunate than her own family.

Caring was another frequent description of favorite teachers, as well as the behaviors associated with the classroom climate descriptors. Two participants clarified the behavior of caring to mean that the teacher showed caring for “me as a person,” not just a student. This act of caring was also described as asking about a student's sports game, birthday plans, or attending a concert. More specifically the greeting of students by name and letting them know that you are glad they are there was identified as an important part of caring by one participant. The teachers that were observed at the beginning of the class period were observed applying this practice to their classrooms. One participant clarifies that the connection should be made on a “daily basis” to be effective in establishing a relationship. It also does not have to be a big gesture, a teacher shares that it is the “little things that make the connections.”

Honesty is another desired quality in an effective teacher. The honesty of a college professor led one of the participants to seek a career in science and math education. This professor gave constructive feedback that allowed the teacher to grow into a skilled educator. Honesty was identified as a quality that the teachers wanted to possess. This honesty with their students has led them to be open to sharing with teachers about their unsafe homelife or social dilemmas that they face as young adults. One teacher reflects on their experience in the following quote:

And I think if I look back and of all the teachers that were more open and honest and I knew about their lives a little bit, those are the ones you remember.

Clearly, this teacher's experience has left a lasting effect on him. He continues by discussing his own practices when interacting with his students. When accepting late work from students he
sometimes takes off minimal amount of points to emphasize the importance of the assignments, however the following statement reflects the process that takes place because of well-established student-teacher relationships.

Unless there's some mitigating circumstance, too, which if you have a good relationship with the kids, they can tell you. A lot of times they'll be honest with you, too. Is this late for a real reason? Does it come with the story or does it just come with a fun tale where you'll try to at least entertain me.

As you as see from this statement, he enjoys having fun with the kids and uses humor to build a caring and trusting relationship. A specific example of sharing oneself with class to establish positive relationships at the onset of the school is a letter writing activity. This is the 8th grade math teacher’s account of this valuable activity:

We did this at the beginning of the year. I had them write letters to me. I told them about myself and school experiences and then, you know, they wrote back to me…And throughout the letter I would say, talk about an experience and, what was it like for you? I tended to tell them more about myself.

This first five days activity started the relationship building and provided ways for the teacher to make connections with the students on a regular basis throughout the year.

The attributes of a desired teacher disposition discussed allows for positive student-teacher relationships to develop. The guidance counselor believes that student-teacher relationships are a “primary importance…within the educational setting.” As an observer and support person she states that “absent the relationship…the desired learning is not necessarily going to take place.” This revelation comes from experiences with students who fail because of a lack of connection between the student and teacher.
Another teacher shares that the act of caring can be shown through establishing “trust and mutual respect…and when that is established, I think any student is capable of learning.” Again, the teacher is connecting the feeling of care with the ability to learn. Therefore, this is pertinent for a positive learning environment. Showing interest in a student is another way to show caring and establish a positive student-teacher relationship. A math teacher states that “when you have that connection with them, then they're more willing to work harder for you.”

Lastly, a participant in Focus Group B describes a favorite teacher in a unique way. She said, “you could honestly tell he loved his job.” This statement about a beloved teacher was supported by other participants who recalled an enthusiasm for learning that was contagious in many of the positive experiences that they encountered with teachers. Making learning fun was important to all the participants. One of the teachers uses humor to build these connections in a fun way with students and redirect unexpected behaviors. She states that:

Humor is so important, and you got to have a lot of one liners. When you get some kids, who are doing some things that may be off track you got to have some ways to make it light and fun and redirectable till the last one.

This teacher rarely refers kids to the office, while maintaining a classroom climate that is conducive for learning that allows for fun activities that have students out of their seats frequently and engaging with each other.

**Theme 3: Teacher Emotional Support is Essential to Creating a Positive Classroom Climate.** According to the participants of this study, a classroom climate that demonstrates teacher emotional support is encouraging and safe and emanates an overall feeling of being comfortable. A feeling of safety can come in many different forms. The GC describes a safe space as, “students are taught how to express their feelings and opinions and that all feelings and
opinions matter.” When students are in this comfortable environment it is more likely that “they feel comfortable [to] share with you.” Students want to feel valued and in a positive climate, a teacher states “I just remember how valued it made me feel,” when reflecting on her own learning experiences. Value can also be interpreted as feeling “liked,” as was described by the principal when talking about an influential teacher in his life. He recalls that she liked him because “she thought he was a hardworking kid.” He therefore, equated his own value with the working relationship that they had established.

Two teachers described counterexamples of a positive classroom climate that they “couldn't learn in that environment.” Both examples are from math classrooms and the teacher dispositions are similar. This seventh-grade math teacher shares her story when describing how she does not want her student to feel in her classroom.

I don't want them to sit in there like I sat in one of my college math classes terrified to ask for help with tears in my eyes because I didn't understand. And if I asked, the teacher was going to yell at me and called me stupid and tell me I don't belong.

The eighth-grade science teacher has a similar experience in a high school math class. She recounts this experience in the following passage:

I had a teacher in high school that was a math teacher that I remember. I would feel sick to my stomach every time I went into that class and he would rapid fire questions at you and if you weren't ready or didn't have the answer, you felt humiliated...He ran his class like a drill sergeant and I was always a wreck every time I went in there. And so, how it changed my learning, I'm not really sure except that I think I respond much better to positive reinforcement. I couldn't
learn in that environment. I clearly lacked self-confidence that I needed and the encouragement and positive reinforcement that I didn't get there.

This teachers' recollection of this learning experience does not reflect a positive classroom climate with teacher emotional support.

Academic support was expressed as being in the form of encouragement from their teachers. One teacher recalls a favorite teacher that went as far as saying that he was proud of her. An example of teacher academic support was also observed in one of the math classes, where teacher provided leveled worksheets. She spent time with each group answering questions and guiding them through the steps of the learning task.

In contrast to the responses by the teachers, superintendent and guidance counselor, the principal is conflicted about how a student should feel in the middle school. In response to the question: when the students enter the school and exit the school, how do you want them to feel? He responds based on his understanding that middle school is a time to learn resiliency. Here is his reflection of the middle school experience and the creation of a positive classroom climate:

I struggle with, how I characterize this because I like the ideal and the concept of saying that the middle school has been a positive experience for [students] and that they've learned something. But the reason I struggle with that is because I think an honest reflection of middle school is also how difficult that experience is and how challenging that experience can be for most kids. … I almost worry that with the good intentions of trying to provide a positive environment that there's kind of like a ‘Hallmarky’ approach.

He went on to say that:
You learn from both, you know, being in a comfortable and happy and environment as well as learning how to deal with difficult challenges when they can be upsetting and that managing both is appropriate, necessary and part of the middle school experience.

He concluded by saying, “I have never been one that believes that we can overcome [challenges] just by trying to make people feel better about it.” In summary, the principal believes that by making a school climate that is overly nurturing, will take away the opportunity to learn the skill of overcoming obstacles and developing the character trait of resiliency.

**Theme 4: Learning is the Goal.** The teachers in this study have recently changed their policies for lateness of work to better emphasize learning outcomes rather than performance. They generally have some sort of late penalty for late work, but it is a minimal percentage taken off. The penalty is applied to show that there is value in turning things in on time. They also discussed that having too high of a penalty prevented students from turning in the late work, therefore, the learning never happened. One teacher believed that “if you're falling behind, it only makes sense to try to go back and figure it out.” It can be inferred from this response that the missing assignments can cause gaps in learning, which makes it more difficult to access the grade level curriculum. Therefore, providing opportunities for turning in work late only improves the learning outcomes. Another teacher looks at the late work from another perspective that may help other teachers understand these flexible classroom policies.

When it comes to late stuff, sometimes I think to myself if I haven't gotten around to grading it yet. Exactly, how can I really justify it?

Many would not take off points when they knew the underlying causes of the lateness. This can only happen when the teacher builds a trusting relationship with their students. This mutual respect and trust also resulted in harder working students as reported by the two math teachers.
Additionally, they reported that students were more willing to take risks and overcome failure in the climate that they had established.

The guidance counselor suggested a student-centered approach to grading that reflected “what a student can actually do rather than what they don’t do or don’t know.” The teachers discussed differentiating tasks to meet the learning style of students. One shared:

I often will give them an opportunity to demonstrate or show what they know because really the end goal is that they're getting something from the curriculum and that they're learning. And if they can show me their learning process and the steps behind it, then an assessment isn't the only way for me to understand that they understand the material.

This teacher and the English teacher allow for alternative methods to assignments to meet the needs of a struggling student to comply with the teacher created assignment.

Risk-taking and mistakes are a natural part of the learning process (Dweck, 2008). Teachers and the superintendent believed that this should be an integral part of the classroom climate. Teachers often expressed that they wanted students to “do their best,” over meeting an expectation of perfection. During Focus Group A, the teachers discussed modeling the way to behave when confronted with a mistake. A math teacher suggested that you “acknowledge [a personal a mistake] instead of just ignoring it. It makes them feel good [that you can make mistakes too] and you validate how they feel [through this process].” The science teacher in Focus Group A continues the discussion by sharing:

I encourage my students to take risks to pursue their personal best and that I make mistakes often and that it's okay and they can as well. And we can feel confident in the fact that at the end we all kind of want the same thing. We want to achieve and feel like we're being successful in learning.
The experience of one of the teachers with a capstone research project that she had to complete to graduate from high school emphasized the learning process as the outcome. The students were expected to fix their mistakes until the assignment met the criteria set by the teacher. In this instance an equitable learning opportunity was provided for all students because they were given the support of the teacher. Some teachers use the way that they grade assignments to teach students about mistake making, others teach this concept explicitly in their classrooms. In Focus Group B, a teacher shared this classroom discussion.

The best scientific discoveries have been made by mistake. So, you know, I encourage them, I tell them, you know, we celebrate mistakes in here that it's okay to make mistakes. Somebody will give me the wrong answer. I'm like, ah, I'm so glad you said that. That's not correct, but this is, this is what we'll learn from this kind of thing.

Based on these statements, there is more than one way to show students that learning is the goal in a classroom. The participants of this study have described implicit and explicit ways to create a positive learning environment that emphasizes learning.

Synthesis of Themes

There was a consensus amongst the teachers and other stakeholders that they would like to see a kind, welcoming and caring teacher that makes them feel valued and gives them a sense of accomplishment through consistent encouragement and engagement in tasks that are meaningful. Throughout the interviews and focus groups, it was clear that the participants had a literal interpretation of relational pedagogy. They had a general understanding of the two words separately but struggled with making the connection between the two constructs. The consensus was that relational had to do with a relationship that you established with your students. Which based on the themes that arouse from the data analysis is very important to all the participants of
this study. Pedagogy was defined by most as being 'how' we teach or construct knowledge. It is evident from this study that the participants are not familiar with the term ‘relational pedagogy’, however based on the themes that arose they have developed some practices that reflect an understanding of this learning theory. There are some components of relational pedagogy that teachers have not fully developed or adopted in their classrooms based on the observations and discussions in the focus groups.

**Reflexivity**

As the student of this study, I aimed to make my participants feel comfortable, considering many of the participants are friends outside of the workplace and colleagues that I work with closely at the middle school. My experience with the observations informed me of the highly intelligent and hardworking teachers with who I have the pleasure to work. Focus groups were utilized to collect data on teacher perceptions of relational pedagogy because of the conversations that can develop. A focus group is also a better model to assist the participants to feel more comfortable answering questioning openly and honestly. I did not anticipate the emotional impact that the focus group would have on me. It was a humbling experience. I found myself filled with emotion when hearing of the passion and dedication that these educators exude daily to create a positive learning environment for their students. Although I withheld from making signs of agreement or adding an affirming comment, it was hard not to smile as they discussed their practices. In the days that followed I continued think about how blessed I was to be working in the same school as these individuals.

As a researcher, I hope that the introduction to the construct Relational pedagogy peaked their interest in learning more about how to grow as a practitioner through the implementation of a relational pedagogical approach. As a practitioner and change agent I know this will make a
difference in school culture and climate. If teachers and administrators can connect the dots between relational practices and content pedagogies, students will enter the world as an adult ready to be independent and productive citizen in the 21st Century. Chapter 5 will discuss the implications of interweaving these two constructs.
CHAPTER V: Discussion and Implications

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

This study aimed to examine teacher perspective and observable practices of relational pedagogy in the middle school classroom.

RQ: What are teacher's understanding of relational pedagogy in the middle school classroom?

a. How does goal orientation, disposition, and teacher support play a role in fostering a positive classroom climate?

The following themes were revealed through analysis of the data collected through focus groups, interviews, and classroom observations:

   Theme 1: Teacher’s Educational Philosophy Reflect the Classroom Climate.
   Theme 2: Student-Teacher Relationships are Paramount.
   Theme 3: Teacher Emotional Support is Essential to Creating a Positive Classroom Climate.
   Theme 4: Learning is the Goal.

Significance of the Study

The majority of public schools continue to use an industrialized approach to teach our 21st Century learners. The emphasis needs to shift from memorizing a long list of facts to teaching students to access knowledge and transfer knowledge to other contexts. This generation of ‘digital natives’ have created students who lack motivation and drive because of the overstimulation of the pleasure centers in their brains (Sousa, 2017). An educator’s job becomes much more difficult because now they must promote the development of intrinsic motivation through a mastery approach to content. Educators can prepare the 21st century learner by providing opportunities for students to creatively solve problems that require effective
communication and critical thinking skills. A goal of a teacher should be to ignite a passion for learning. The learning experiences that an educator creates should leave a student hungry for more knowledge. Building a relationship with a student can assist in identifying a student's learning needs and passions for life. As teachers facilitate and coach their students through the process of learning, they can prepare learning experiences that capture the essence of those passions and learning needs.

More evidence that school's approaches to learning needs to change is the fact that school refusal is a growing epidemic and affects 2-5% of school age child (Lingenfelter & Hartung, 2015). School refusal is associated with anxiety, depression and school phobia. One of the causes of school refusal is a negative experience at school with teachers, peers or learning tasks (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2014). By providing more motivating and engaging classrooms, the schools would be working toward reducing the percentage of school refusals. More specifically, learning environments that emphasizes learning, fosters self-regulation of learning, facilitate learning by coaching students and giving specific feedback to students provides a more effective learning experience (Vandecandelaere et al., 2012).

Teaching methods that coach students through the learning process through autonomous support will promote the development of the necessary 21st Century skills to be a productive citizen. Students who experience learning in this type of environment will develop deep learning strategies and attain higher achievement. Additionally, students will be more invested in the learning process because of the meaningful tasks presented utilizing an inquiry-based approach. Teachers need to be educated on the ways that classroom climate and teaching practices can be adjusted to promote the development of collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking skills.
Discussion of Major Findings

The analysis of the data collected in this study revealed four themes that were discussed in Chapter 4 in relation to teachers understanding of relational pedagogy and creating a positive classroom climate. Two major findings developed from these themes:

1. Teacher understanding of relational pedagogy is incomplete.
2. Student-teacher relationships are a priority for teachers when developing a positive classroom climate.

Teacher Understanding of Relational Pedagogy is Incomplete

The way in which teachers engage students in the learning process is a key component of relational pedagogy. Without this, teachers are only applying a social-emotional approach to interacting with their students. This approach has its benefits for student outcomes, however a more comprehensive approach to teaching the whole child can be addressed by applying relational pedagogy theory to classroom practices (Bakadorova & Raufelder, 2015; Coelho, V., Sousa, & Figueira, 2014; Gilbert et al., 2014; Kosir & Tement, 2014; Reyes et al., 2012; Sakiz et al., 2012; Turner et al., 2013). According to Brownlee (2004), there are three observable practices in a classroom that define it as a relational pedagogy approach. Students learning in this environment have established a mutual trust and respect with the teacher, the learning tasks are relevant to their own experiences, and students are responsible for constructing knowledge (Brownlee, 2004).

In this study it was found that the participants are applying some of the components of relational pedagogy. I believe that the incomplete understanding of this construct is impart due to the lack of knowledge of relational pedagogy. When asking participants to define this learning theory, the participants had not heard of this educational term. They had some understanding of
the two words separately but failed to make the connection between the two words. The misconception was that these two words can be defined as building relationships in the context of the classroom. Several teacher participants identified mutual trust and respect as a priority in establishing a positive classroom climate that fostered learning. This suggests that teachers are on the verge of understating “how” students learn best. The teachers have mastered emotional support in the model that they describe in the interviews, however the missing component lies in the instructional approach to teaching content through a relational pedagogical approach. Gore (2005) and November (2013) conducted research that examined building positive relationships with students. It was concluded that students who have established this bond with the teacher are more likely accept instructional support. The teachers of this study shared that one of the purposes of establishing this bond was to support students' learning processes.

The two missing components of relational pedagogy are tasks that are relevant to the knower's own experience and the knower constructing their own knowledge. The implementation of these are a much more complex shift for teachers. For teachers to change their practices, there are several courses of action needed for effective implementation of this sustained change. To address student's constructing their own knowledge, the physical learning environments will need to be modified to provide opportunities for students to engage in inquiry-based learning. Secondly, the teachers will need to learn to effectively implement personalized learning to customize the learning process for students and streamline the process of monitoring progress. Third, teachers will need support through professional development and strong leadership to make this pedagogical mind shift.

The observations in the classroom revealed outdated furniture and inadequate space to provide learning experiences that fostered an inquiry-based learning approach. Most of the
classrooms were equipped with desks with attached chairs or lab tables and chairs. The structure of the room did not allow for teachers to make connections with students and facilitate the learning process as a guide on the side. Therefore, more traditional methods of lecturing from the front of the room was utilized. Three of the teachers in this study had upgraded their furniture with tables. However, this change in furniture did not equate to changes in instructional practices as observed on that day. Two of the three teachers were observed at the front of the room leading a classroom discussion. Therefore, a shift in instructional practice will take more than just a physical change to the learning environment.

For students to construct their own knowledge and create their own path, teachers need to be open to new ways of teaching. For students to construct their own knowledge and create their own path, the role of the teacher needs to shift from lecturer to facilitator of learning (Freeman et al., 2014). Currently, in the district several technology tools have been purchased and introduced to teachers to support this shift. A district benchmark assessment is administered three times per year to provide information on student's relative abilities in math and reading. This information along with Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is used to identify the strengths and weaknesses in these essential skills for accessing curriculum. Additionally, in the middle school, teachers and students have access to a personalized learning software embedded in the textbook. This software pinpoints specific skills that are weak in mathematics and customizes the learning path for students. Teachers can manage the content; this customization supports students in accessing the curriculum. For example, all students are working on content related to linear equations. For some students this is working on prerequisite skills for the chapter until they have gained the skills to access the chapter standards, while other students may be following a path similar to the sequence of the lessons in the textbook. This software offers an
opportunity for all students to be challenged at their level of understanding of the content. A student-centered approach to learning can be supported with the use of this tool, however not all teachers are ready to effectively utilize this tool.

Student choice is one of the essential components of relational pedagogy (Brownlee, 2004). This was not observed in the classrooms. During the interviews, teachers referred to student choice as a social-emotional learning intervention. When discussing at-risk students, the teachers offered the student choice. This intervention was an attempt at engaging a student who had otherwise “given up.” In this situation the students had refused or failed to complete the assigned task, consequently the teacher offered the student another way to show the learning.

Providing choice when a teacher has ninety or more students can be daunting. Not only will this teacher have to grade ninety individual assignments, but she will have to keep track of the students' progress throughout the learning process. However, the literature suggests that students are more motivated and experience deeper learning when given choice (Dole et al., 2017; León et al., 2015; Stefanou et al., 2013). Therefore, these findings suggest that the structure of schools be created to allow teachers to give their students the time and attention needed to implement a relational pedagogy approach.

The principal, who is also responsible for teacher evaluations in the school reported during the interview that he is looking for direct instruction of content when conducting observations. This contradicts the teaching approaches that are being supported by the superintendent. The interview with the Superintendent revealed that she envisions students having the opportunity to explore the unknown in the classroom. It is also evident because of the allocation of funding for technology tools and professional development to support a student-centered approach. One of the benefits of teaching in the middle school is that the teachers are
given the freedom to explore innovative teaching approaches. During the interview, the Principal shared that he believes that teacher autonomy is important and that is why he allows teachers to choose the way that they present the curriculum. The Superintendent also expressed that teachers should have the freedom to be creative and try new things. This teacher autonomy creates pockets of innovation in the school and inconsistencies in classroom climate. Therefore, when a method of teaching is effective, it is the responsibility of the leaders to recognize this approach and try to replicate this.

**Student-Teacher Relationships are a Priority for Teachers When Developing a Positive Classroom Climate.**

A positive classroom climate is the fuel for improving learning experiences. The three components of a classroom climate are teacher expectations, teacher support (instructional and emotional), and goal structure (performance or mastery) (Reyes et al., 2012). It was clear from the focus groups and interviews that establishing student-teacher relationships was a priority for developing a classroom climate conducive for learning. The interview questions asked teachers about what was important when developing a classroom climate. Teacher responses primarily addressed teacher emotional support and teacher expectations in the classroom. Teachers did not mention goal structure until directly asked about policies and procedures for late work or failing tests. However, even these small efforts can make a difference in learning outcomes. The literature supports that the improvement of classroom and school culture can improve student academic outcomes (Martin et al., 2010).

Teacher's focus on the emotional supports may be reflective of the current initiatives in the district. Professional development at the district level has been focused on improving Tier I instruction through implementing SEL strategies in the classroom. Additionally, at the middle
school teachers and administrators have been working toward improving school culture through the development of a common language around expected behaviors and restorative justice practices for modifying behavior. Although, these initiatives may have impacted their responses, their experiences as learners reflected how they learn best and their desire to mimic this experience for their students.

According to Butler (2012), teachers that make relational goals a priority have more nurturing and supportive classrooms. In this study this rings true for the participants and is also reflective of the ideals of the Ethics of Care theory (Nodding, 2005). Nodding's (2005) theory poses that educators can fully adopt this theory through four instructional practices, modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation. The teachers and guidance counselor discuss the practice of modelling throughout the interview when describing how they aim to make students feel valued and cared for. Gore (2005) also found that feeling valued is an important component of classroom climate. Several teachers described how they intentionally created opportunities to dialogue about caring with their students. One of the English teachers purposefully chooses literature that engages students in discussions about empathy. Another teacher begins class with discussions that allow students to reflect on their own experiences and emotions related to these experiences. Practice, from the perspective of the Ethics of Care is the action of creating opportunities for students to practice caring. The seventh-grade English teacher uses a supported study that meets daily to practice the act of caring, it is called the Kindness Project. The students engage in writing thank you notes, selling empathy bracelets for charity, and creating slides to share with their peers about tolerance, acceptance and empathy, just to name a few activities. The theory of practicing caring in the classroom seems logical however, in reality the overwhelming amount of content takes up the classroom time at the expense of the implicit curriculum. Lastly,
confirmation is the act of encouraging others and supporting them in being their best. All of participants of this study shared that encouragement is important to a positive classroom climate. It was also identified as a disposition of favorite teachers by many of the participants of this study. It is clear from the observations and interview process that the participants of this study are practicing many of the components of the ethics of care theory.

**Limitations**

The limitation of this study is that the study was conducted at one middle school in Western Massachusetts. Therefore, any conclusions drawn are only directly in relationship to the participants of this study. A second limitation to this study is self-selection bias. Consequently, the sample is not a representation of the whole. Lastly, only one observation was conducted for twenty minutes for each of the eight classrooms. This may not be a fair representation of the kinds of tasks and routines that are expected in this classroom.

**Implications for Future Research**

Following this study, the process of developing an assessment tool to measure classroom climate is necessary. This survey would be given to students to determine a teacher's ability to create a positive classroom climate. The information gained from the assessment would be used to identity and support teachers that struggle with creating and maintaining a respectful environment that motivates and encouraging risk-taking in a collaborative learning space.

The development of an assessment tool that measures classroom climate would provide the needed feedback to the MA DESE on the effectiveness of the systems that have been put in place. This would not involve a significant amount of money, seeing that it would not require additional staff to implement, therefore this would be both highly efficient and effective. Additionally, this would support the ongoing initiatives that promote SEL integration in the
classroom and assist with gaining funding for use by districts to support their relational pedagogy initiatives. The public is likely to adopt this new tool with open arms. The public would like to see classroom climate improve for children seeing that they spend a great deal of time in this environment.

Secondly, to extend the learning from this study, could be to include the student perspective of the teachers interviewed. All of the teachers in this study clearly wanted to be perceived as a caring, thoughtful teachers that maintain a positive classroom climate. Further investigation of these perceptions would gain more information about what students are looking for in a teacher and what they perceive as a positive classroom climate. This study could utilize the Self-Description Questionnaire and Classroom Climate Survey to collect data from a whole population (Marsh & O'Neill, 1984). Focus Groups could be conducted to gain insight into the student perspective of teacher disposition and classroom climate that is most effective for them to learn.

Another study to extend the learning from this study would be to examine cognitive engagement after implementing a relational approach in the classroom. The teacher participants of this study would attend a summer week long course to be introduced to the components of relational pedagogy. Teachers would apply the approach to their classrooms with support from the instructor of the course throughout the school year. Monthly meetings and observations would be held to ensure fidelity to the approach. Student engagement will be measured using self-report surveys and the AIMS observation instrument. This study's purpose is two-fold, one it will evaluate the effectiveness of relational pedagogy on student engagement and it will add to the literature on methods for shifting teaching practices.
Implications for Policy

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was the first attempt that the federal government made to intervene with education standards. The more recent No Child Left Behind (NCLB), established in 2001 and the current existing policy Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) established in 2008 is also aimed at improving the lives of people with disabilities and those in poverty. The establishment of these three acts are significant because of the role that the federal government plays in regulating education. Before ESEA, NCLB, and ESSA were enacted, education standards were regulated by the individual states (Rippner, 2015). Regardless of the policies that exist or the opposing opinions of the political parties of how to educate the students, the answer to eliminating poverty is education. However, the educational policies are not always written by people who work directly with children. The plans and policies to create equitable education for all students regardless of race, disabilities, socio-economic status, location or religion in theory should effectively create opportunities for students to continue education through college. Education should be about learning, and it is often about checking off the boxes of standards that have been set by a group of people who are privileged. These unrealistic expectations have created a barrier and made it impossible for the specific group of people that these policies are aimed to help, to rise above. An incremental approach to policy change would focus on the classroom climate where as past policies have focused on the rigor of the curriculum and state assessment outcomes.

The NCLB (2009) enacted by President Barack Obama influenced the implementation of the teacher evaluation systems which aimed to provide an equitable education for all students. This also prompted the Race to the Top initiative that promised funding to schools willing to participate in competing against other states as measured by state assessments aligned by the
Common Core Standards. Measuring growth was not the only indicator of success, teachers were also evaluated on their practices to gain feedback and improve the quality of instruction.

Massachusetts was one of the states that sign on to the Race to the Top initiative and along that commitment they would also need to adopt a teacher evaluation system. In 2010 a taskforce of forty professionals were invited by the Massachusetts Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, Mitchell Chester to develop and implement a strategic plan for the educator evaluation system (Brown, Partelow, & Konomoske-Graf, 2016). This task force developed a system of evaluation that included self-assessment and analysis, goal setting and plan developing, implementation plan, formative assessment/evaluation, and summative assessment, which encompassed three categories of evidence. The Massachusetts Teacher Association (MTA) was also integral part of the rollout plan. The MTA worked closely with the Department of Secondary and Elementary Education (DESE) and the district superintendents to ensure that the Teacher Evaluation was in the best interest of the teacher. In fact, the DESE recommended a staggered implementation, where the Race to the Top schools were expected to implement the teacher evaluation system with half of the teacher for the 2012-2013 school year. During the second year (2013-2014), the second half of the staff was expected to participate in the teacher evaluations of the Race to the Top Schools. By the 2014-2015 school year, all teachers in Massachusetts were evaluated using this system. The evaluations included student achievement (growth percentiles), classroom observations, surveys, lesson plans, self-reflections and student work samples. Although Massachusetts was one of the first to adopt a teacher evaluation system, by the year 2016 most of the states have created and implemented a plan (Brown et al., 2016). The most recent change has been to remove student growth as a measure of teacher performance.
One specific policy change would be to increase the number of required yearly observations. Closely monitoring teacher’s classroom climate through observations and student surveys would enable administrators to identify and intervene with educators struggling with the development of a positive classroom climate. Frequent observations and feedback sessions would also provide time to reflect on practices and adjust practices as needed. In this model an administrator must take on the role of instructional leader. Several studies have established that frequent observation and feedback can influence teaching practices. Therefore, instructional leadership is needed within the public schools.

A policy that monitors, evaluates, and supports teacher’s development of relational pedagogy and classroom climate may improve the educational experiences for all students. The current indicators that DESE has established as effective teaching practices does not included many key components of social-emotional awareness. Teachers that build a rapport with their students are more likely to learn and take academic risks. The establishment of the positive student-teacher relationship builds a sense of community around learning. Teachers who are not engaging in this community building make school an unpleasant experience for students. Identifying these weaknesses can improve the overall school climate by supporting these teachers in gaining the relational skills needed to work with students effectively.

The strength of this policy change is the ability to intervene and assist teachers in improving their classroom practices. Additionally, the students would benefit from a positive classroom climate (Reyes et al., 2012). There are several drawbacks to this policy change. This would take an exorbitant amount of time for administrators to observe and give feedback to their teachers. A more efficient system of evaluation and observation would need to be developed to
provide time for this process. Another weakness of this policy is the pressure that it places on teachers to be assessed on a regular basis. This may deter teachers from entering the field.

Another policy change would be to require a relational pedagogy course. This policy change would involve the development of a relational pedagogy course and mandating that it be a requirement for pre-service teachers. This course would include hands-on learning and observing of teachers who promote a positive classroom climate. Although, a practicum is required to obtain a MA Educators License, it is not a given that all pre-service teachers will be mentored or learn from the practicum experience. This course would explicitly address the relational pedagogy and the importance of it in the building a positive classroom climate. The addition of a relational pedagogy course would provide the pre-service teachers with the theoretical knowledge, but no hands-on practices. The development of the course and adjustments to the programs would take a considerable amount of time, however the addition of only one course would not greatly impact the students.

The last suggested policy change is to require current, pre-service educators and administrators to obtain an SEL endorsement. The addition of an SEL endorsement in Massachusetts would force all teachers to be knowledgeable of relational pedagogy and developing a positive classroom climate. This would also be a way of keeping track of which teachers have not completed this requirement. The SEL endorsement covers all the educators and administrators to ensure that the students of Massachusetts learn in the optimal environment. The Educator endorsement would provide course work, observation and feedback from their supervisor. The administrator endorsement would provide training in the area of observation techniques and behaviors to look for when observing. This could impact people pursuing a career in education, but it could also weed out those who are not prepared to take on all that is required
of an effective educator. This policy is not cost effective and would demand great deal of time and resources administratively. Teachers unions and teacher preparation programs may also disagree with the stringent regulation of classroom climate.

**Implications for the Classroom**

The findings suggest there is need to make room in the school day to intentionally make connections with students. A relational pedagogical approach suggests that teachers establish mutual respect and trust with the students (Brownlee, 2004). A classroom practice that supports the development of a positive student-teacher relationship is the implementation of an advisory. An advisory is a block of time dedicated during the school day to interact with the students in a small group. The purpose of these advisories is to build a connection with the students and provide academic and emotional support. It can serve to identify more significant academic and emotional concerns that might not be visible in a content area course and larger setting. Teacher can then make referrals to the appropriate service provider that can provide more intensive support. The implementation of an advisory will also give students an opportunity to make connections with each other, which may strengthen the school community.

Developing a culture in the classroom that promotes the development of help-seeking behaviors is another classroom practice that parallels the theory of relational pedagogy. The physical environment of the classroom may be a factor in supporting help-seeking behaviors. Tables that encourage collaborative learning will support students in seeking help from peers. The proximity of the teacher to the students may also impact the students help-seeking behaviors. Students may be more likely to seek help from a teacher when the teacher sits amongst the students. The expectation from the teacher must be expressed clearly that help-seeking is expected. The behavior of the teacher may also impact a student’s willingness to seek
help from the teacher. Stating that students are welcome to ask questions may not be enough for a student to approach the teacher for help. Therefore, a teacher that appears available to help by not engaging in other tasks, such as checking email or grading papers while waiting for students may increase help-seeking behaviors in the classroom.

Another essential component of relational pedagogy is the emphasis on learning (Brownlee, 2004). The goal structure of the class can impact a student’s mindset toward the learning process (Dweck, 2008). A mastery goal approach to learning emphasizes the learning over performance (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Harackiewicz et al., 2002). In the classroom, teachers can create policies and procedures that reflect a mastery goal approach to learning. A classroom policy that allows students to retake assessments is an example of putting the emphasis on progress versus performance. Another example is acceptance of late homework, which places value on the task a means of learning. A policy that does not allow submission of homework late suggests to students that the purpose of the task was compliance. Lastly, this approach will promote the development of intrinsic motivation, self-regulation skills and autonomy (Cerasoli & Ford, 2014; Murayama & Elliot, 2009). Teachers can provide way for a student to keep track of skills that they have mastered, such as a checklist of standards in student friendly language. The process of keeping track of the skills learned supports the development of self-regulation skills (Waajid et al., 2013). Students learn to identify what they know and therefore can target the skills that are challenging with additional practice. Being aware of the skills that a student has accomplished may motivate them to continue to make progress.

**Rural Education**

When students do not have the basic needs for life, how can we expect them to learn or reach for the goal of a college education. Equality of wealth is not realistic but narrowing the
gap between the rich and poor needs to be a priority in this country. It is the white, middle-upper class population that continues to control our countries government, which also controls our educational system. Most teachers continue to be white, females, and administrators, white males, which does not reflect the diversity of our students. Our learning community needs to emulate the diversity of our country. Our responsibility as educators is to encourage, support and expose all students to the many opportunities that exist regardless of race, class, gender, and religion. A relational pedagogy approach meets the needs of the diverse population of students in a rural district.

**Conclusion**

Through the review of the literature of learning methods and this case study, the researcher concluded that relational pedagogy encapsulates the ideals of Nel Nodding's ethics of care (Nodding, 2005) and a Constructivist approach to learning (Ornstein, 1990). This dynamic approach to learning will meet the needs of the 21st century learner through a supportive learning environment that challenges students to reach their full potential.
References


Ayon, J. (1981). Elementary schooling and distinctions of social class. Interchange on Educational Policy, 12, 32.


Biggs, J. B. (1987). Student approaches to learning and studying. research monograph


Dewey, J. (1938). In Dewey J. (Ed.), Experience and education


King, R. B., & McInerney, D. M. (2016). Do goals lead to outcomes or can it be the other way around?: Causal ordering of mastery goals, metacognitive strategies, and achievement. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 86*(2), 296-312. doi:10.1111/bjep.12107


Massachusetts department of elementary and secondary education.


Noddings, N. (2013, September 12.). Kindness in the classroom lecture intro. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rVDot3W7k&list=PLDpcyv4euXaVfw pBuffer3BAg0b9Vgyg_PT


Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2013). *School goal structure: Associations with students' perceptions of their teachers as emotionally supportive, academic self-concept, intrinsic motivation, effort, and help seeking behavior* doi://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2013.03.007


Snyder, V. (2003). In Broadway F. S. (Ed.), *An ecological view of the phenomenon of pedagogy in a freshmen small learning community within a large urban high school* ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.


Students at the center framework. Retrieved from https://studentsatthecenterhub.org/interactive-framework/


Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in the Study

To: Jabish Middle School General Education Teachers

From: Emily O'Rourke. Doctoral Candidate at Northeastern University

This Winter 2019, I am conducting a study on classroom climate. I will be gathering data by conducting classroom observations, focus groups, and interviews. I am looking for eight general education teachers to participate in this study.

I will begin conducting observations the week of January 7th, 2019. The observations would last 20 minutes in length. Following the teacher observations, I will conduct focus groups with the eight participating teachers. These focus groups would be conducted at Jabish Brook Middle School in our conference room during long block. The focus groups would be 30-45 minutes in length and light refreshments will be served. All of the data collected during the focus groups will be kept confidential.

I am available to answer any questions you may have about this study or the results of this research at phone. The Human Subject Research Protection coordinator at the Northeastern University IRB office, Nan Clark Regina, may be contacted concerning rights of participants in this study at (617) 373-4588 or n.regina@northeastern.edu.
To: JBMS Guidance Counselors, Administration, and Superintendent

From: Emily O'Rourke, Doctoral Candidate at Northeastern University

This Winter 2019, I am conducting a study on classroom climate. I will be gathering data by conducting classroom observations, focus groups, and interviews. This memo is to invite you participate in this research study. I am looking for one guidance counselor and building administrator from Jabish Brook Middle School and Superintendent of Schools.

I would like to begin scheduling interviews at your convenience the week of January 28th. The interviews will be conducted at a location of your choice between the hours of 2:30-5:00 pm. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes in length. All data collected in the interview process will be kept confidential.

I am available to answer any questions you may have about this study or the results of this research at phone . The Human Subject Research Protection coordinator at the Northeastern University IRB office, Nan Clark Regina, may be contacted concerning rights of participants in this study at (617) 373-4588 or n.regina@northeastern.edu.
Appendix B: Consent Form Documents

Observation/Focus Group Consent Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of Investigators: Kristal Clemons, Ph.D. (Principle Investigator), Emily O'Rourke (Student Investigator)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title of Project: Examining the Perspective of Relational pedagogy in the Middle School Classroom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have.

When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to participate because you play a role in educating middle school students.

Why is this research study being done?

This research involves how teachers intentionally develop classroom procedures and policies that reflect their educational philosophy. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to understand how teachers want their students to feel when they are in their classrooms and what it is that teacher’s doing to achieve this.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a classroom observation and focus group.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

The classroom observation will take 30 minutes. The focus group will be conducted during the school day in the conference room of Jabish Brook Middle School. The Focus Group will take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There are no foreseeable risks or discomfort for you.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There will be no direct benefit for you for taking part in this study.

Who will see the information about me?

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.

Participants will remain anonymous in this study using self-selected pseudonyms. All data collected from this study will be kept confidential and stored in a locked safe. The password protected site www.maxqda.com will store the audio files and transcriptions of the focus groups and interviews. Observational notes will be kept in a locked safe in my home, as well as any other hard copy collected data. All recordings will not include actual names and any accidental names that are captured in the recordings will be eradicated. Transcriptions and data analysis obtained from MAXQDA will be downloaded onto a portable drive and stored in the fire-
resistant locked safe. After three years of time the materials related to this study will be destroyed.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No research-related injuries are possible from this research.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise as an employee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Emily O'Rourke, the person mainly responsible for the research at . You can also contact Dr. Kristal Clemons, the Principal Investigator, at</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: <a href="mailto:n.regina@neu.edu">n.regina@neu.edu</a>. You may call anonymously if you wish.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Will I be paid for my participation?</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You will not be paid for your participation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Will it cost me anything to participate?</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is no cost to you to participate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>I agree to take part in this research.</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of person agreeing to take part</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Printed name of person above</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Printed name of person above</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigators: Kristal Clemons, Ph.D. (Principle Investigator), Emily O'Rourke (Student Investigator)
Title of Project: Examining the Perspective of Relational pedagogy in the Middle School Classroom

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to participate because you play a role in educating middle school students.

Why is this research study being done?
This research involves how teachers intentionally develop classroom procedures and policies that reflect their educational philosophy. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to understand how teachers want their students to feel when they are in their classrooms and what it is that teacher's doing to achieve this.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a one on one interview.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interview will last for approximately 45 minutes at a location of your choosing.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no foreseeable risks or discomfort for you.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit for you for taking part in this study.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.

Participants will remain anonymous in this study using self-selected pseudonyms. All data collected from this study will be kept confidential and stored in a locked safe. The password protected site www.maxqda.com will store the audio files and transcriptions of the focus groups and interviews. Observational notes will be kept in a locked safe in my home, as well as any other hard copy collected data. All recordings will not include actual names and any accidental names that are captured in the recordings will be eradicated. Transcriptions and data analysis obtained from MAXQDA will be downloaded onto a portable drive and stored in the fire-resistant locked safe. After three years of time the materials related to this study will be destroyed.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We
would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**
No research-related injuries are possible from this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise as an employee.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Emily O'Rourke, the person mainly responsible for the research at orourke.em@husky.neu.edu or (413) 687-4820. You can also contact Dr. Kristal Clemons, the Principal Investigator, at clemons.k@northeastern.edu or (850) 629-9132.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
You will not be paid for your participation.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
There is no cost to you to participate.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of person agreeing to take part</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Printed name of person above</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Printed name of person above</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix C: Observation Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom Climate Measures</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Centered</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning experiences relate to student's own experiences</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning-making is emphasized</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor goes out of his/her way to help students.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Instructor talks individually to students.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students can choose activities and how they will work.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor moves around class to talk with students</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching approaches allow students to proceed at their own pace.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Researcher's Observational Notes:**

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Appendix D: Focus Group Protocol Form

Institution: _____________________________________________________
Interviewee (Title and Name): _____________________
Interviewer: _____________________________________________________
Part I: Introductory Protocol
You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about classroom climate in the general education setting. My research project focuses on the experiences of educators with developing a positive classroom climate. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into the best practices for promoting a high academic self-concept. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can improve teacher preparation programs and create professional development opportunities for schools. Because your responses are important, and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [if yes, thank the participant, let them know you may ask the question again as you start recording, and then turn on the recording equipment]. I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subject's requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me [provide the form* - note there is no actual form for this class project]. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?
This interview should last about 45 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?
Part II: Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)
Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of in the participants' general with the research topic. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.
A. Interviewee Background
   1. Would anyone like to share a story of a favorite teacher in school?
      a. How did they influence you?
   2. Would anyone like to share a significant event in their school history that has stayed with you?
      How did this influence your learning experience?

Part 2:
As a part of this study, I am interested in understanding your educational philosophies and what is important when creating a classroom climate. The following questions highlight the components of classroom climate and daily habits in your classroom. In the event that you discuss the practices of other educators, please do not use their real name. Please indicate that you will be using a pseudonym for this person.

1. What is the role of education in a person's life?
2. Describe what relational pedagogy means to you.
3. What is important in developing a classroom climate?
4. How do you want a student to feel when entering and exiting?
5. How do your policies, procedures, and expectations reflect your educational philosophy?
6. What practices in your classroom would you classify as a social-emotional learning intervention?

Possible Follow-up Questions, if time allows

Why did you choose to become an educator?
1. What aspects of teaching are rewarding for you?
2. What is most challenging about being an educator?
3. Why do you continue to be an educator?

Ask participant if they have any questions and thank them for their participation.
Appendix E: Guidance Counselor Interview Protocol Form

Institution: _____________________________________________________

Interviewee (Title and Name): ______________________________________

Interviewer: _____________________________________________________

Part I:

Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about classroom climate in the general education setting. My research project focuses on the experiences of educators with developing a positive classroom climate. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into the best practices for promoting a high academic self-concept. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can improve teacher preparation programs and create professional development opportunities for schools.

Because your responses are important, and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [If yes, thank the participant, let them know you may ask the question again as you start recording, and then turn on the recording equipment]. I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subject's requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me [provide the form* - note there is no actual form for this class project]. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

This interview should last about 45 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part II: Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of the participant's experience with the research topic. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.

A. Interviewee Background

1. Would anyone like to share a story of a favorite teacher in school?
   a. How did they influence you?
2. Would anyone like to share a significant event in their school history that has stayed with you?
   a. How did this influence your learning experience?

Part 2:

As a part of this study, I am interested in understanding your educational philosophies and what is important when creating a classroom climate. The following questions highlight the components of classroom climate and daily habits in your classroom. In the event that you discuss the practices of other educators, please do not use their real name. Please indicate that you will be using a pseudonym for this person.

1. What is the role of education in a person's life?
2. Describe what relational pedagogy means to you.
3. How do you contribute to the development of classroom climate?
4. What is important in developing a classroom climate?
5. What policies, procedures, and expectations reflect a social-emotional approach?
6. How do you support teachers in creating a positive classroom climate?

Possible Follow-up Questions, if time allows
1. Why did you choose to become a guidance counselor?
2. What aspects of guidance counseling is rewarding for you?
3. What is most challenging about being a guidance counselor?
4. Why do you continue to be a guidance counselor?

*Ask participant if they have any questions and thank them for their participation.*
Appendix F: Principal Interview Protocol Form

Institution: _______________________________________________________

Interviewee (Title and Name): ______________________________________

Interviewer: _____________________________________________________

Part I:

Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about classroom climate in the general education setting. My research project focuses on the experiences of educators with developing a positive classroom climate. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into the best practices for promoting a high academic self-concept. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can improve teacher preparation programs and create professional development opportunities for schools. Because your responses are important, and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [If yes, thank the participant, let them know you may ask the question again as you start recording, and then turn on the recording equipment]. I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subject's requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me [provide the form* - note there is no actual form for this class project]. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

This interview should last about 45 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part II: Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of in the participants' general with the research topic. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.

A. Interviewee Background

1. Would anyone like to share a story of a favorite teacher in school?
   a. How did they influence you?

2. Would anyone like to share a significant event in their school history that has stayed with you?
   a. How did this influence your learning experience?

Part 2:

As a part of this study, I am interested in understanding your educational philosophies and what is important when creating a classroom climate. The following questions highlight the components of classroom climate and daily habits in your classroom. In the event that you discuss the practices of other educators, please do not use their real name. Please indicate that you will be using a pseudonym for this person.

1. What is the role of education in a person's life?

2. Describe what relational pedagogy means to you.
3. How are the teachers supported in the practices of relational pedagogy?
4. What is important in developing a classroom climate and school culture?
5. How do you want the students to feel when entering and exiting this school?
6. How do the policies, procedures, and expectations at this school reflect an understanding of relational pedagogy?

Possible Follow-up Questions, if time allows
1. Why did you choose to work in the field of education?
2. What aspects of leadership are rewarding for you?
3. What is most challenging about being a school leader?
4. Why do you continue to be a principal?

Ask participant if they have any questions and thank them for their participation.
Appendix G: Superintendent Interview Protocol Form

Institution: _____________________________________________________

Interviewee (Title and Name): ________________________________________

Interviewer: _____________________________________________________

Part I: Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about classroom climate in the general education setting. My research project focuses on the experiences of educators with developing a positive classroom climate. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into the best practices for promoting a high academic self-concept. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can improve teacher preparation programs and create professional development opportunities for schools. Because your responses are important, and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [If yes, thank the participant, let them know you may ask the question again as you start recording, and then turn on the recording equipment]. I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. To meet our human subject’s requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me [provide the form* - note there is no actual form for this class project]. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used? This interview should last about 45 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part II: Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of in the participants' general with the research topic. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.

A. Interviewee Background

1. Would anyone like to share a story of a favorite teacher in school?
   a. How did they influence you?
2. Would anyone like to share a significant event in their school history that has stayed with you?
   a. How did this influence your learning experience?

Part 2:

As a part of this study, I am interested in understanding your educational philosophies and what is important when creating a classroom climate. The following questions highlight the components of classroom climate and daily habits in your classroom. In the event that you discuss the practices of other educators, please do not use their real name. Please indicate that you will be using a pseudonym for this person.

1. What is the role of education in a person’s life?
2. Describe what relational pedagogy means to you.
3. What are the essential components of classroom climate?
4. How do you want a student to feel when entering and exiting classrooms?
5. How do the policies, procedures, and expectations in this district reflect your educational philosophy?
6. What is your vision for the Belchertown district?
7. How do you plan to see this vision come to fruition?

Possible Follow-up Questions, if time allows
1. Why did you choose to dedicate your career to education?
2. What aspects of being a superintendent rewarding for you?
3. What is most challenging about being a superintendent

Ask participant if they have any questions and thank them for their participation.