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NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFIED TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF DEVELOPING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS: A CASE STUDY IN A TITLE 1 SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES

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By

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DEDICATION

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” Pursuing my doctorate was a lifelong dream that I had let go for the privilege of mothering five children and for a career teaching middle school. However, the selfless love of my husband would not let my dream die. I would like to dedicate this work to David, who consistently sacrifices for me and encourages me to fulfill God’s plan for my life. He is the love of my life, my best friend, and the most humble and patient person I have ever known. His support is the reason this accomplishment was possible. To David, and my children, Ryan, John, Sarah, Connor, and Catherine, my deepest desire is to support you in believing in every one of your beautiful dreams the way you have believed in mine.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore how National Board Certified teachers build relationships and cultivate empathy with middle school students in a Title 1 suburban school in the Southeastern United States. This qualitative case study was founded on the relational cultural theory, which focuses on the importance of authentic relationships. The research participants were two male and five female National Board Certified teachers of various subjects and grade levels. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to gather the data. Themes that emerged were that the NBCTs were authentic, attentive, accepting, relational, and socially and emotionally supportive in relationship with the students. By examining the relational and empathetic nature of National Board Certified teachers, greater insight may be gained in how to strengthen teacher-student relationships and build meaningful connections with middle school students.

Key Words: National Board Certification; National Board Certified Teachers; teacher-student relationships; relational cultural theory; teacher empathy; teacher care; student connectedness

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I. INTRODUCTION

The need for quality teachers has been a focus of educational policy in recent decades. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released a report titled *A Nation at Risk,* which outlined concerns for the state of America's schools in keeping up with a growing global society ("Mission and History," n.d.). In response, the Carnegie Corporation wrote *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century,* demanding higher standards for teacher excellence and reform to improve the educational system (Hakel, Koenig, Elliott, & National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2008). As a result, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was established in 1987 as an independent, non-profit organization to develop high standards for teachers to improve learning for all students, and in 1994, the NBPTS began offering teachers advanced certification (Hakel et al., 2008).

Outlined in the document *What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do,* the five core propositions are the belief system for Board Certification and the foundation for National Board standards (NBPTS, 2016). The first core proposition describes how National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) demonstrate a commitment to students by the way teachers individualize instruction, understand how students learn and develop, treat students equitably, and improve students' cognitive skills and character for the future (NBPTS, 2016). Many secondary teachers feel that teachers should keep a healthy space from students to maintain discipline and to support maturity (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013a), but according to the first core proposition National Board Certified Teachers are "passionate about building meaningful relationships with young people" (NBPTS, 2016, p. 12).

The large and diverse suburban school system chosen for this study employed 131 NBCTs, more than any other system in the state, and had approximately 14,000 students in 18 schools. The system recently underwent the attainment of Unity Status, which included a massive court-ordered rezoning of student populations that went into effect at the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year. A school system earns Unity Status by following desegregation orders in the areas of the student body, faculty, staff, transportation, extracurricular activities, and facilities according to the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling in 1954. In addition, during the 2018-2019 school year, the school system began to focus on diversity, beginning with hiring a Director of Equity and Educational Initiatives. The new personnel formed a diversity committee composed of central office staff, administrators, teachers, and counselors to make a concentrated effort to ensure equity and fairness for all students in the school district. The committee held focus groups with current juniors and seniors at the two high schools in the district during the spring of 2019 to inquire about the students' experiences during elementary, middle, and high school. According to a follow-up report prepared for the school district, the overwhelming theme found in the focus groups was that students in the schools desired a sense of connectedness at school, defined as "the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals" (American Psychological Association, 2019). The students described connected experiences as having one-on-one time with teachers, receiving a parental approach from teachers, and developing meaningful relationships with teachers.

An interpersonal perspective examines teacher effectiveness based on teacher-student relationships (Newberry, Gallant, & Riley, 2013). Although recent studies have studied teachers' perceptions of the National Board Certification process (Cast, 2014; Lustick, 2011;

McKenzie, 2013; Petty, Good, & Heafner, 2019; Singleton, 2010; Woods & Rhoades, 2012), few studies have examined National Board Certified teachers in relation to classroom interactions (Qualls, 2015). By attaining National Board Certification, NBCTs have demonstrated evidence of the ideology represented in the five core propositions; therefore, the researcher explored how NBCTs develop teacher-student relationships in a Title 1 middle school in the Southeastern United States.

Background of the Study

Adolescents in the United States have experienced hardships in recent decades due to broken families, poverty, and other stress-inducing social factors, causing some adolescents to experience severe feelings of isolation (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013b). New technologies and media have affected identity development, social networking, and relationship building in today's youth (Crosnoe & Johnson, 2011). Alongside the cognitive, emotional, psychological, and physical changes taking place during adolescent development (Watson, 2018), the changing structure from elementary school to secondary schools often leads young people to feel less connected in the classroom and less supported by teachers (Davis, 2006). The need for understanding friends and non-parental adults increases as students enter adolescence (Engels et al., 2016). In a world of frequent instability, the school can be the most secure environment in some students' lives (Blum, 2004).

Teacher-Student Relationships

Humans are largely impacted by the quality of relationships in life. Research on teacher-student relationships can lack clarity because of the ambiguity concerning the meaning of the term *relationships* (Wubbels, 2012). Relationships in this study are defined as lasting connections between two people that are characterized by shared interactions (Wubbels, 2012).

Teacher-student relationships have many qualities of other interpersonal relationships, such as meeting, getting to know one another, creating expectations of behavior, and resolving conflict (Frymier & Houser, 2000).

The study of school learning environments began over 40 years ago (Wubbels, 2012), although theorists as early as Dewey (1910) described the teacher as an influencer of a child's attitude and actions. Vygotsky (1978) noted that a social connection was a factor in the learning process because a child's motivation to perform a task was stronger when relating to an adult. Although research often focuses on instructional practices that influence student achievement, research on the relational aspects of teaching cannot be ignored. Researchers have concluded that strong teacher-student relationships increased student motivation to learn (Davis, 2006; Ikpeze, 2015; Wubbels, 2012), fostered higher levels of engagement (Archambault, Pagani, & Fitzpatrick, 2013; Baroody, Rimm-Kaufman, Larsen, & Curby, 2014; Engels et al., 2016; Roorda, Komen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011), increased achievement (Davis, 2006; Roorda et al., 2011; Yonezawa, McClure, & Jones, 2012), created a sense of belonging (Cooper & Miness, 2014), enhanced emotional well-being (Yonezawa et al., 2012), and affected high school completion (Baroody et al., 2014). Relational teachers have demonstrated the ability to communicate high expectations for success and positively shape future citizens (Wubbels, 2012).

Yonezawa, McClure, and Jones (2012) noted that positive teacher-student relationships are especially important for minority students and adolescents living in poverty. The United States has equity issues that become evident when considering the differences in the academic achievement of Black and Hispanic students as opposed to White students (Voight, Hanson, O'Malley, & Adekanye, 2015). Research on the existing achievement gaps of Black and Hispanic students has turned a recent focus to school climate factors, such as the quality of

teacher-student relationships, student connectedness, and feelings of safety (Voight et al., 2015). Language differences can be a common challenge in the classroom, but teacher-student interactions and relationships have been found to influence English language learners' motivation and engagement in the classroom (Henry & Thorsen, 2018).

Caring and Understanding

Caring teachers are the defining element in positive teacher-student relations, as students feel more connected with teachers who are perceived as caring (Cooper & Miness, 2014). Teacher beliefs might differ in what it means to be a caring teacher and how to cultivate relationships with students because the nature of relationship building is complex (Davis, Summers, & Miller, 2012). Most teachers entered the field of education because of a desire to connect with young people and impact students' lives; therefore, some researchers think that classifying teachers as caring or uncaring is unwarranted in the research field (Davis et al., 2012). Noddings (2005), however, classified two types of teacher care. Noddings (2005) defined virtuous caring as different than relational caring. Many teachers virtuously care about students by desiring student success and wellbeing, but relational caring involves knowing students individually (Noddings, 2005).

Cooper and Miness (2014) utilized the work of Noddings (2005) to differentiate between understanding and care in the formation of caring teacher-student relationships. After interviewing students, Cooper and Miness (2014) reported that students described teacher care in two forms: (1) virtuous caring perceived as a teachers' collective caring about students as a whole and (2) relational caring where teachers displayed individual understanding for students as learners and people. Personal understanding is a teacher's knowledge of a student's unique personality and interests in the world outside of academics (Cooper & Miness, 2014). A

distinction can be made between teacher caring as an overall feeling about students and teacher caring as relating individually to students (Davis et al., 2012).

Teacher Empathy

Creating a caring learning environment that facilitates interpersonal relationships for students can be challenging and involves a high level of emotional capacity from teachers (Goroshit & Hen, 2016). A person who shows empathy takes the emotional perspective of a person and shows genuine concern for the person (Warren, 2014). Jordan and Schwartz (2018) advocated that teacher empathy is part of relationship building and allows a teacher to seek an understanding of a student's experience. Although challenging, displaying empathy and taking care of students' emotional needs are responsibilities of teachers that are recognized by many professional standards and frameworks (Swan & Riley, 2015). Teacher empathy is guided by perspective-taking that uses teachers' individual knowledge of students and guides decision making in response to students' needs (Warren, 2018). Genuine empathy goes beyond acknowledging the viewpoint of a student; a teacher must be "touched, impacted, or influenced, even slightly, by the student's situation" (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018, p. 27). The teacher's expression of radical empathy, which is a term used to describe mutually understood support that brings an authentic connection, results in personal learning and creates a situation for the student and teacher to experience mutual growth (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018).

Teacher empathy has also proven to be a useful practice for teachers with culturally diverse classrooms (Warren, 2018). Effective relationship building involves understanding and considering how the students' cultures and differences affect student behaviors and ways of acting and thinking (Ikpeze, 2015). Showing understanding in relationship building can be difficult because it involves the self-monitoring of a teacher's thoughts, judgments, and

impressions (Newberry, 2010). Teachers should be aware of how personal opinions and biases are communicated and how bias might impact student learning (Baghban, 2015). Being an effective teacher in education today involves an application of empathy through perspective-taking that guides a teacher's professional practices and decision-making (Warren, 2018).

Teachers Committed to Students and Their Learning

The first proposition in *What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do* describes how teachers are committed to students and their learning (NBPTS, 2016). The proposition states that NBCTs "monitor their impressions and thoughts carefully to acquire a deep understanding of their students and the communities that shape the students' values, outlooks, and attitudes" (NBPTS, 2016, p. 14). NBCTs, described as accomplished teachers in the document, believe that every child holds potential, and the teachers are attentive to the "interconnectedness" of people in educational environments (NBPTS, 2016, p. 12). Accomplished teachers know the unique learning styles and personalities of students, and yet know more such as the students' future aspirations and home situations (NBPTS, 2016). By being aware of personal biases, accomplished teachers maintain fair perspectives and treat students equitably (NBPTS, 2016). Accomplished teachers are attuned to individual situations and changes that students encounter and carefully observe students in various environments to better understand students (NBPTS, 2016). Accomplished teachers know that "by engaging students on a social, emotional, intellectual, and physical basis" that learning can be enhanced (NBPTS, 2016, p. 14).

Student Connectedness

The need for relatedness and connectedness in school can be a powerful motivator for students to develop relationships with teachers (Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spencer, 2012). School connectedness has been shown to impact adolescents' well-being and

academic future (Tomek, Bolland, Hooper, Hitchcock, & Bolland, 2017; Waters, Cross, & Shaw, 2010), depressive symptoms (Joyce, 2019; Ross, Shochet, & Bellair, 2010), and perceptions of victimization (O'Brennan & Furlong, 2010). Emotions and interpersonal relationships influence how students learn, so the relational component of education must be recognized (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, & Schellinger, 2011). Connectedness is a motivator for relationship building (Henry & Thorsen, 2018), so examining how teachers create a sense of connectedness is a component of examining interpersonal relationships in the classroom.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the theory that humans have an innate need for connectedness (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). The relational cultural theory (RCT) is founded on the premise that humans grow through connections with other humans (Haskins & Appling, 2017; Jordan, 2018). The relational viewpoint of RCT focuses on interpersonal interactions, emphasizing the need for authentic relationships (Comstock, Duffey, & St. George, 2002). Jordan (2018) explained that isolation is a source of human suffering, but relationships and connectedness are sources for human growth. Connectedness is needed to develop personally and culturally, although the human tendency is to disconnect (Jordan, 2018). RCT provides a perspective on teacher-student relationships that is rooted in the idea of establishing healthy connections with students, identifying the causes for disconnections, and recognizing the need for reconnections (Korthagen, Attema-Noordwier, & Zwart, 2014). Teachers who form close relationships with students rather than maintaining disconnection can better understand how to support student learning and develop cognitive processes (Ahnert, Milatz, Kappler, Schneiderwind, & Fischer, 2013).

Empathy is a tenet of the relational-cultural theory because two people in relationship with one another are communicating and affecting one another's state of being (Purgason, Avent, Cashwell, Jordan, & Reese, 2016). Social cognition is necessary to gain a true picture of self and others (Swan & Riley, 2015) and is especially important for educators because the tone of the classroom is determined by the social and emotional competence of the teacher (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Through achieving certification, NBCTs have demonstrated an understanding of social and emotional competence as defined in the core proposition statements, making the nature of these relationships a worthy area of study.

Problem/Purpose Statement

The purpose of the study was to understand how National Board Certified teachers build relationships and cultivate empathy with middle school students in a Title 1 suburban school in the Southeastern United States. Relational was defined as the way people are connected. Teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning influence how relationships are formed with students in the classroom (Ikpeze, 2015). Considering the vast ways the quality of teacher-student relationships influence student success, connectedness, and well-being, research examining the nature of the teacher-student relationships was warranted (Henry & Thorsen, 2018).

Significance of the Study

The study was significant to the field of education in two ways. First, the study added to the body of literature regarding teacher-student relationships, focusing on the nature of relationships rather than the outcomes of teacher-student relationships. Research studies that identified key aspects of teacher-student relationships in secondary schools were sparse (Allen et al., 2013). Next, the study contributed to the body of literature regarding how empathy can be

developed and practiced with students as a professional practice. Lastly, the study provided needed insight into the relational nature of NBCTs, an understudied area of research.

Methodology

Research Design

The study site is one of the three middle schools in a school district in the Southeastern United States. The middle school gained close to 300 new students because of a local rezoning order, bringing enrollment to approximately 1100 students in grades 6-8. The faculty consisted of 58 teachers, 3 counselors, and 4 principals; nine of the faculty were National Board Certified. The middle school qualified for Title 1 status after the implementation of the rezoning plans, with 40% of the student population receiving free and reduced lunch. Seventeen different languages were represented in the student body. Once a predominantly middle-class community, immense development brought million-dollar neighborhoods as well as government-subsidized apartment complexes around the school. Principals at the school placed a high emphasis on relationship building and teacher empathy with diverse populations through teacher in-services, professional development school-wide goals, and the school motto, which stated, "Every student, every day." The varying factors that brought growth and change, the diverse population, the administrative goals, and the eight NBCTs on staff made the middle school an ideal setting for the case study.

Case study research involves the researcher examining a real case in a specific setting by gathering extensive data and reporting themes (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, the study served as an instrumental case study. In an instrumental case study, the researcher centers the study on a topic of focus and selects a case in which to examine the issue (Creswell, 2013). Identifying the

nature of NBCTs' relationships and empathy was the researcher's issue of focus with the middle school as the bounded case chosen to gather the data.

The researcher used criterion sampling to select volunteer participants. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2016) defined criterion sampling as participants that fall into a category or criterion, and NBCTs have a common characteristic of attaining the highest level of teacher certification. Although nine NBCTs were invited to participate in the study, two declined. The seven participants included a language arts teacher, a reading interventionist, a special education teacher, a science teacher, a drama teacher, a physical education teacher, and counselor. The key participants vary in race, sex, age, and the number of years in the teaching profession.

Research Questions

1) How do National Board Certified teachers build meaningful relationships with middle school students?
2) How do National Board Certified teachers cultivate empathy for middle school students?

Data Collection and Procedures

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted to obtain detailed insights from participants. In-depth qualitative interviewing involves seeking meaning from the participants' experiences and narratives by asking open-ended questions that encourage elaboration and details (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The researcher used an interview protocol with open-ended, semi-structured questions (See Appendix A) to guide the interviews. The researcher conducted an individual interview with each of the seven NBCTs and recorded and transcribed the interviews. After the participants checked the transcripts for accuracy, the researcher analyzed the interview transcripts for themes.

Limitations

In limiting this study to NBCTs, the study did not include other relational teachers in the school that are not NBCTs who build connections with students each day. The research was also limited by the selection site. The study did not include NBCTs from other schools within the district or outside of the district. The researcher chose the NBCTs from this school because of the uniqueness of the school's sudden increase in enrollment, diversity, and school focus to build teacher-student relationships. The case study provided a unique lens regarding creating connections with new students, relating to students in poverty, and establishing relationships in an environment where being relational was an expectation for the school culture. Another limitation was the lack of the students' perspectives on teacher-student relationships in the building. The study was one-sided in examining only the views of the NBCTs. Finally, the study did not extend beyond the teachers' perceptions of relationship development.

Definition of Key Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined to maintain consistency and mutual understanding:

Academic understanding is the knowledge a teacher has about students' academic strengths, weaknesses, learning styles and preferences, and plans for the future (Cooper & Miness, 2014).

Depersonalization is when teachers develop indifferent and negative attitudes toward students, and depersonalization can occur when teachers experience the emotional exhaustion of burnout (Dubbeld, Hoog, Den Brok, & De Laat, 2019).

Empathy is taking the emotional perspective of and showing genuine concern for another person (Warren, 2014).

False Empathy is when a person believes themselves to have empathy but does not demonstrate an empathetic response or application of empathy in a relationship (Warren & Hotchkins, 2015).

Interpersonal perspective is a perspective that examines teacher effectiveness based on teacher-student relationships (Newberry et al., 2013).

Personal understanding is a teacher's knowledge of a student's unique personality and interests in the world outside of academics (Cooper & Miness, 2014).

Personalization is the act of intentionally creating positive relationships with students in the classroom to encourage students' learning (Yonezawa et al., 2012).

Radical empathy is mutually understood support between two people that brings an authentic connection and security (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018).

Relationships are lasting connections between two people characterized by shared interactions (Wubbels, 2012).

Relatedness is feeling connected to other people (Henry & Thorsen, 2018).

School connectedness is a student's belief that the faculty and staff in school care about students' learning and care about students as people (Watson, 2018).

Title 1 is an educational program that receives federal funding for having a high concentration of poverty students (United States Department of Education, 2018).

Summary

In summary, the study provided data from the NBCTs in a Title 1 middle school in the Southeastern United States regarding teacher perceptions of how they build relationships with middle school students. Interview data provided further insight into the nature of teacher empathy and how to build a culture of connectedness in the classroom.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the relational and empathetic nature of National Board Certified teachers with middle school students in a large, diverse suburban Title 1 middle school in the Southeastern United States. The goal of Chapter II is to provide an inclusive review of literature on the following topics: (a) relational cultural theory, (b) empathy, (c) teacher care, (d) teacher-student relationships, and (e) student connectedness.

A Nation at Risk was released in 1983, describing the crisis in the United States educational system at the time and spurring a movement for higher standards for teaching and learning (NBPTS, 2019). In 1987, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was formed to strengthen standards and define accomplished teaching (National Board Standards, n.d.). Teachers created the National Board Standards and established a voluntary process for teachers to achieve advanced certification (National Board Standards, n.d.). As of fall 2019, more than 122,000 teachers have attained National Board Certification in the United States (National Board Standards, n.d.). The National Board offers certificates in 25 different subject areas and student developmental levels. The document *What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do* was developed with input from over 700 NBCTs and describes the five core belief propositions of NBCTs (NBPTS, 2016). The five core propositions describe how accomplished teachers commit to students, know the subjects they teach, monitor and manage learning, reflect

and learn from experiences, and involve themselves in learning communities (NBPTS, 2016). Content-specific standards differ in each certification area, but all standards are founded on the Five Core Propositions (National Board Standards, n.d.).

Proposition one in *What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do* describes the interpersonal nature of an accomplished teacher's commitment to the students they teach and states that accomplished teachers are "passionate about building meaningful relationships with young people" (NBPTS, 2016, p. 12). The document outlines how NBCTs believe all students can learn and make learning accessible for all students, adjusting to meet individual student's needs when necessary (NBPTS, 2016). NBCTs are aware of individual student differences and treat students equitably and appropriately (NBPTS, 2016). Examining teacher effectiveness based on teacher-student relationships requires an interpersonal perspective (Newberry, Gallant, & Riley, 2013). NBCTs possess knowledge of students' interests, abilities, skills, social lives, and family lives (NBPTS, 2016). Accomplished teachers consider the impact of students' culture on behavior and cultivate a respect for diversity in the classroom (NBPTS, 2016). NBCTs are aware that, "by engaging students on a social, emotional, intellectual, and physical basis" (NBPTS, 2016, p. 14), student wellbeing and learning are affected.

Some recent research studies involving NBCTs have examined the teachers' perspectives regarding educational policies and practices. McMillan (2016) evaluated the perspective of four focus groups of 20 NBCTs in four school systems regarding the validity of using student growth for teacher evaluation. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to gain the NBCTs' opinions of teacher evaluation efforts and the uses of standardized and classroom assessments to measure student learning. NBCTs suggested using teacher-designed assessments and portfolios instead of large-scale testing for accountability (McMillan, 2016). Swan Dagen, Morewood, and

Smith (2017) had NBCTs self-report leadership responsibilities using the Teacher Leader Model Standards (TLMS) to look at the NBCTs perspective of their school leadership. NBCTs engaged in all domains of the TLMS, but they scored themselves most highly on creating a collaborative culture to foster teacher development and student learning (Swan Dagen et al., 2017). Petty, Good, and Heafner (2019) evaluated the perceptions of 496 NBCTs to determine the influence of the National Board Certification process on student learning in their classrooms and found that 80% of the teachers felt that becoming board certified positively influenced teaching and learning.

Other researchers have compared the effectiveness of NBCTs to non-NBCTs. Cowan and Goldhaber (2016) pulled the NBCT assessment center data of 12,189 NBCTs as part of a larger study of NBCTs in Washington State, a state with one of the largest NBCT populations. Student records from standardized reading and math tests in 21 classrooms in Grades 3-8 were used to analyze the math and reading scores of NBCTs and non-NBCTs. Twelve teachers were NBCTs and 11 were non-NBCTs, and the classrooms averaged ten to 33 students. The researchers found NBCTs slightly more effective than non-NBCTs, especially in the middle schools. The middle school reading students who had NBCT scored .01 to .02 standard deviations higher on standardized testing in reading than students who did not have a NBCT ($p <$ .01). Students who had NBCT in middle school math scored about .05 standard deviations higher on standardized math tests than students who had non-NBCTs ($p < .01$). Researchers found comparable conclusions with studies done in North Carolina and Florida.

Similarly, Belson and Husted (2015) analyzed data from the National Assessment of Educational Process (NAEP) and found that there was a strong relationship between the number of NBCTs in a state and the strength of the states' reading and math NAEP scores ($p < .01$). In

contrast, Houston and Kulinna (2019) used the five core propositions to compare the effectiveness and decision-making processes of two National Board Certified physical education teachers and two non-National Board Certified physical education teachers. The researchers found no significant differences in the support of the National Board Certified teachers and the non-National Board Certified teachers during the pretest or posttest, ($p > .05$; $p > .05$) nor was there significant difference on the groups' gain scores ($p > .05$) (Houston & Kulinna, 2019).

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Study

The relational-cultural theory (RCT) is a way to understand human growth and development through the context of relationships (Tucker, Smith-Adcock, & Trepal, 2011). RCT originated as a way to understand women's relationships after Jean Baker Miller published *Toward a New Psychology of Women* in 1976 (Jordan, 2018). The theory was later expanded to acknowledge the need all humans have for relationships (Haskins & Appling, 2017; Jordan, 2018). Western culture promotes competition and isolation, advocating that people get stronger from competitiveness, boundaries, and independence (Jordan, 2018). In contrast, the tenets of the RCT honor the relational nature of humans, describe the human need for others (Jordan, 2018), and propose that intimacy with others brings self-awareness and human growth (Frey, 2013). A person using the relational cultural model views all interpersonal interactions through a "relational lens" (Comstock, Duffey, & St. George, 2002, p. 255).

Disconnections are normal in relationships due to disagreements, conflicts, and misunderstandings and often lead to feelings of humiliation and shame (Duffey & Trepal, 2016; Jordan, 2018). Emotional growth comes by working through disconnections and reconnecting, but when disconnections in relationships are recurrent or deeply wounding, a person can choose isolation (Duffey & Trepal, 2016). Sometimes, disconnections are a result of society's

discrimination or oppression of minority groups (Duffey & Trepal, 2016; Jordan, 2018). While protecting images and maintaining boundaries hinders a relationship, the behaviors can also protect a person from harm due to unhealthy power (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). RCT therapists view disconnections as the main hindrance to personal wellbeing and counsel clients towards fostering connections through growth relationships (Cannon, Hammer, Reicherzer, & Gilliam, 2012; Jordan, 2018). In schools, disconnection can take place when the traditional classroom structure promotes competitiveness and self-reliance rather than collaborative learning experiences (Rector-Aranda, 2019). Individual student growth is important but social connections among students and between teachers and students should also be viewed as important (Rector-Aranda, 2019). After desiring approval and connection from teachers in school and not receiving it, some students use disconnection as a method of safety to withdraw. When students disconnect in this way, the students might demonstrate misbehavior or a passive compliance in the school setting (Rector-Aranda, 2019).

RCT has evolved into a theory that is used to improve systems of inequality and help people who have encountered isolation or marginalization (Jordan, 2018). In the counseling field, relational cultural theorists have operationalized methods for counselors to effectively interact with and meet the needs of culturally diverse clients (Haskins & Appling, 2017). The RCT provides counselors with a culturally responsive approach for counseling clients suffering from problems associated with marginalization, power, and privilege (Haskins & Appling, 2017). Researchers have also determined that RCT is effective for counseling adolescents and working with students from diverse populations (Crumb & Haskins, 2017).

Although predominantly used as a therapeutic model in counseling, RCT is valuable in education settings since relationships are critical in educational fields (Korthagen, Attema-

Noordewier & Zwart, 2014; Ticknor & Averett, 2017). Jordan and Schwartz (2018) advocated for RCT as a theoretical framework for radical empathy in education to influence educators to engage and connect with students. RCT can be utilized in classroom interactions and in group interventions. Using RCT in group counseling contexts requires moving a group into mutual connections that can lead to growth (Cannon et al., 2012). In one Texas middle school, counselors used RCT with a group of five eighth-grade girls struggling with aggression and cyberbullying, and the team worked with the group of girls one hour a week for six weeks (Cannon et al., 2012). The researchers found that, once the girls felt seen and heard, a sense of vulnerability and initial disconnection took place as the students opened up about the painful experiences (Cannon et al., 2012). Counselors then invited the students to clarify personal needs and reconnect with one another, which brought forth understanding, mutual empathy, and a desire for change and reconnection (Cannon et al., 2012). After helping the girls acknowledge and move through the hurt, counselors were able to transition the girls to healing. RCT can operate as a relationally focused tool to help middle school counselors address problem solving, conflict management, and aggression (Tucker et al., 2011).

Ticknor and Averett (2017) utilized the RCT as a research theory in teacher education to model relationship building with pre-service teachers in preparation for the field. In the qualitative study, the researchers observed and interviewed four pre-service teachers. Ticknor and Averett (2017) found that, when participants used RCT to influence pedagogy and decision making, university classrooms became safe spaces for discussion, identity development, and relationship building. Rector-Aranda (2019) described another application of RCT in higher education applied through the use of the critically compassionate intellectualism model (CCI), a curriculum pedagogy that focuses on authentic caring and social justice to empower Latinx

youth. Using the RCT, researchers have expanded CCI to focus on authentic relationships, empathy, and caring with a goal to provide justice in education for a disempowered population of young people (Rector-Aranda, 2019). Researchers in the study asserted that compassion is a missing and critical part of teacher education programs and educational settings (Rector-Aranda, 2019).

RCT has become more popular in college settings because of the need in higher education for strong teaching and mentoring relationships (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). Crumb and Haskins (2017) described how one college used a blended approach of RCT and cognitive behavioral therapy to adapt counseling methods to accommodate the needs of diverse college students. Counselors increased transparency, evaluated identities of power, validated understanding and acceptance, restructured cognitive thinking, incorporated mutual empathy, and addressed social justice issues when working with students during sessions (Crumb & Haskins, 2017). The application of an RCT lens allowed counselors to build therapeutic relationships, decrease students' stress, and improve students' decision making (Crumb & Haskins, 2017). Purgason, Avent, Cashwell, Jordan, and Reese (2016) also applied RCT with graduate students in counselor education doctoral programs. After recognizing the 50% drop-out rates of doctoral counseling students, with a high percentage of those students being from diverse backgrounds, researchers sought an approach to meet the needs of underrepresented populations of students (Purgason et al., 2016). Advisors used the RCT themes of relational awareness, mutual empathy, and authenticity to enhance relationships with advisees and support the doctoral experience (Purgason et al., 2016). Researchers have even used RCT as a framework for placing an importance on collaboration and embracing diversity among professional colleagues within a mentoring program for professors in academic settings (Lewis & Olshansky, 2016). Lewis and

Olshansky (2016) applied the RCT tenets of mutuality, authenticity, reciprocity, empathy, and connectedness to create a mentoring program that strengthened scholarly relationships in academia.

The principles of the RCT have been used in varying contexts and applied with different types of people. Separation from loved ones, combat, and post-deployment transitioning can be difficult for military personnel, and civilian mental health counselors found RCT to be a positive approach when working with military men, women, and children (Hall, Garland, Charlton, & Johnson, 2018). Using RCT allowed therapists to explore military "cultural and interpersonal contexts" (Hall et al., 2018, p. 451) and better meet the needs of service member clients and families. RCT practices can also benefit those suffering from traumatic stress disorders that are rooted in interpersonal issues such as child abuse, violence, and sexual assault (Kress, Hayes, Zolden, Headley, & Trepal, 2018). Trauma survivors often disconnect from others for the purpose of protection but also may also disconnect from themselves (Kress et al., 2018). An RCT approach that emphasizes self-empathy and personal awareness can help trauma victims address issues of self-blame and find an inner peace that can lead to a reconnection with others (Kress et al., 2018). In a systematic review of the empirical research on the effectiveness of the RCT, findings support RCT as a framework applicable for females and males of all ages with a wide variety of challenges and issues (Lenz, 2016).

Empathy

RCT and Empathy

Mutuality is a key component in RCT because people in a relationship engage with and impact one another which requires the investment of both people to produce a shared trust (Lenz, 2016; Ticknor & Averett, 2017). Mutual empathy takes place when two people choose

connectedness and give and receive empathy in the relationship (Purgason et al., 2016; Ticknor & Averett, 2017), realizing the impact that each person makes on the other (Tucker et al., 2011). Rather than relating to others from a place of greed and selfishness, the RCT model centers on the need for humans to relate to one another with empathy and compassion (Duffey & Trepal, 2016). Mutual empathy provides an atmosphere of relational safety (Haskins & Appling, 2017). The application of empathy requires perspective-taking, adopting the viewpoint of another individual (Warren & Hotchkins, 2015). Anticipatory empathy involves anticipating another individual's life experience in order to provide support and care (Purgason et al., 2016). Recognizing another person's life circumstances and foreseeing what could affect the person makes anticipatory empathy a part of the relational-cultural theory (Purgason et al., 2016).

Teacher Empathy

The body of research related to empathy has grown in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and education (Bullough, 2019). Meyers, Rowell, Wells, and Smith (2019) asserted that empathy is an "integral part" (p. 161) of a teacher's role. Teacher empathy is the ability a teacher has to show concern for and take on the viewpoint of a student (Swan & Riley, 2015). Furthermore, Meyers et al. (2019) asserted that there are three types of empathy. A teacher uses cognitive empathy to take a student's perspective, affective empathy to consider a student's emotions, and behavioral empathy to navigate expectations and set boundaries for a student's behavior (Meyers et al., 2019). Educators cannot rely on quick tips for becoming an empathetic teacher; empathy requires continual and concentrated effort and growth (Meyers et al., 2019). As teachers grow in empathetic nature, the ability to meet the students' needs increases (Goroshit & Hen, 2016; Swan & Riley, 2015).

To grow in empathy, Meyers et al. (2019) recommended that teachers acquire knowledge of a student's social and personal contexts to understand the reasons for a student's behaviors and gain insight regarding the student's needs. Swan and Riley (2015) suggested possessing an awareness and understanding of another person's goals, beliefs, and feelings before trying to see situations from another's viewpoint. Teachers must move beyond a simple acknowledgment of feelings and enter the more complex realm of expressing empathy (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018). Jordan and Schwartz (2018) explained that, when a teacher displays the impact of being touched by a student's experience, mutual empathy occurs because the student feels less isolated and more connected to and supported by the teacher (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018).

Many teachers express that time is an issue when attending to the social and emotional needs of students and can feel ill-equipped for the task. Goroshit and Hen (2016) sampled 543 teachers in a study examining if a teacher's self-efficacy and emotional self-efficacy could predict teacher empathy. Emotional self-efficacy is the belief that people have regarding their own expression and regulation of emotions and influence over the emotions of others. After analyzing the self-reported questionnaires of the participants, the researchers found that, the higher a teacher's self-efficacy, the higher the teacher's empathy ($\beta = .22$; $p < .001$ and $\beta = .43$; $p < .001$). The researchers concluded that teachers' social-emotional competence is related to teacher beliefs regarding personal efficacy in the classroom and that strong teacher relations can be a product of high teacher efficacy (Goroshit & Hen, 2016).

In a qualitative meta-analysis examining teacher-student relationships, Cornelius-White (2007) synthesized 119 research studies involving 355,325 students, 14,851 teachers, and 2,439 schools in six countries which resulted in 1,450 findings. Empathy was considered a person-

centered teacher variable that showed an above average effect size ($r > .20$) indicating that empathy was a strong predictor of affective and behavioral outcomes.

Kaya (2016) studied 149 pre-service social studies teachers to determine if age and gender played a role in the future teachers' capacity for empathy. The researcher concluded that that the only difference between the empathy level scores of males and females were the emotional reactivity sub-factor scores ($t = 4.281$, $p < 0.05$). The females' emotional reaction scores were more intense ($M = 3.42$) in relation to the males scores ($M = 3.04$). The younger pre-service teachers in the 17-21 age group were more sensitive ($M = 3.34$) than the over-22 age group ($M = 3.12$). Due to the collaborative nature of science classrooms, Arghode, Yalvac, and Liew (2013) conducted a case study interviewing five science teachers to gain perspective on the need for empathy in science education. Although some opinions on the role of empathy in the classroom differed, all the science teachers expressed that empathy played a role in student learning. Empathy helped the teachers connect to the students in their science classrooms. Teachers also warned that personal boundaries were needed when expressing empathy in education to ensure self- care and avoid teacher stress and burnout. To evaluate the relationship between teacher emotions and empathy, Wróbel (2013) specifically studied emotional exhaustion in relation to teacher empathy with a sampling of 168 teachers. The participants filled out a set of questionnaires to self-report mood regulation strategies in the relationship between empathy and emotional exhaustion. The researchers found there to be a direct effect of empathy on the emotional exhaustion of the teachers ($\beta c = 3.33$, $p < .01$). Conclusions made by the researchers noted that teaching requires a great degree of emotional capacity, and teachers need to be taught how to regulate emotions to keep from suffering negative consequences.

Recent studies have focused specifically on the empathetic nature of teachers with diverse populations. Baghban (2015) gave 27 teachers in a graduate course an assignment created to increase empathy for English language learners. The professor initiated activities to promote discomfort among the graduate students, which enabled the teachers to consider the emotions an English language learner could feel in a classroom setting (Baghban, 2015). The teachers' journals reflected increased personal awareness and sensitivity to the population of students in their classrooms and the difficulties they faced (Baghban, 2015). Warren (2014) studied the behavioral, academic, and social-relational interactions of four White female teachers and Black male students through teacher interviews, observations, and empathy surveys. Although the teachers had different styles and approaches, each showed empathy as a professional disposition, using knowledge of students first to establish an understanding of how to interact with and adjust pedagogy to connect with students (Warren, 2014). Warren and Hotchkins (2015) defined "false empathy" (p. 267) as a person who believes him or herself to have empathy but does not demonstrate an empathetic response or application of empathy in a relationship. Warren and Hotchkins (2015) studied the interactions of eight White female teachers with students in two urban settings. The researchers found that racism emerged in the classroom and shaped teacher decision making, demonstrating false empathy. White teachers could not accurately show empathy to the students; teachers had incorrect perceptions and stereotypes of what students of color needed, the strengths the students possessed, and the cultures the students represented. The researchers recommended an increase in efforts to educate pre-service teachers regarding how racism affects language and professional decision-making and equip future teachers to understand racial differences (Warren & Hotchkins, 2015). Since White teachers cannot actually empathize with the experiences of the students, they must be

particularly sensitive when using empathy to understand students suffering from marginalization and injustice (Bialystok & Kukar, 2018; Warren & Hotchkins, 2015). In cases of White teachers with diverse populations, Bullough (2019) advocated for the teacher to take on the role as an engaged listener to ensure empathetic accuracy. Listening to the students' stories creates social awareness for teachers and allows for better teacher connectedness and compassion (Bullough, 2019).

Teacher empathy can help students to develop empathy for others (Bar, 2011; Goroshit & Hen, 2016). Empathy initiatives in schools, though, must be careful not to confuse tolerance with empathy, and adults cannot expect students to accurately empathize with situations outside of students' understanding (Bialystok & Kukar, 2018). Attempting to understand the lived experiences of another person can be easily misinterpreted by that individual, so navigating empathetic responses can be complex (Bialystok & Kukar, 2018). Despite the growing research documenting the effectiveness of teachers adopting empathetic practices and dispositions, few teachers receive training to address the social and emotional components of teaching, and few instructional frameworks exist to apply empathy to social relationships in schools (Warren, 2014).

Teacher Care

Early Adolescence

Enkeleda (2017) described the three phases of adolescence as early adolescence (ages 11-14), adolescence (ages 15-18), and late adolescence (19 and after). Adolescence is a time of change characterized by an increased desire for independence from authority and increased cognitive development (Conklin, 2018). Adolescents face developmental changes related to forming peer relationships, accepting physical bodies, growing in emotional independence, and

considering future goals and occupations (Enkeleda, 2017). In addition to the normal physical and cognitive changes that take place for this age group, many adolescents today are burdened with stress related to poverty, divorce, blended families, addiction, abuse, neglect, and transiency (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013b). Twenty percent of adolescents show signs of depressive symptoms (Possel, Burton, Cauley, Sawyer, & Spence, 2018). The support of family during the stressful time of adolescence is needed (Possel et al., 2018), but sometimes family can be a source of stress and may cause additional risks for adolescents (Enkeleda, 2017). Teachers who are aware of the emotional factors affecting the students' lives can be present to help students in crisis (Enkeleda, 2017). Educators need to be aware of the challenges and issues many young people deal with outside of school so that schools can be a place of support and connection (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013b; Enkeleda, 2017).

Society views adolescence as a time of traumatic conflict, yet some recent studies have focused on the positive aspects of the period of development (Viejo, Gómez-López, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2018). Viejo et al. (2018) conducted a study to develop a scale to measure adolescent wellbeing and to analyze the psychological and subjective wellbeing of 1,590 adolescent males and females focusing on self-acceptance, positive interpersonal relationships, autonomy, and life development. After analyzing data from mixed methods, the researchers found the items showed high values in terms of standardized factorial weight, which was over 0.49 and significant in all cases: self-acceptance (0.87), positive interpersonal relationships (0.79), autonomy (0.80), and life development (0.83) with a total wellbeing (0.95). Findings encouraged the promotion of positive adolescent development rather than a narrow view of the current state of adolescent wellbeing. Researchers urged a more open perspective about the state of adolescent wellbeing.

Despite the encouraging research, early adolescence can still be a particularly difficult time for some middle school students (Conklin, 2018; Tucker et al., 2011). Propaganda now plays a part in shaping young adolescents' perceptions of self and others and influences middle schoolers' actions and behaviors (Conklin, 2018). During the transition of adolescents' focus moving away from family and toward peer approval, middle school students often struggle with the relational aspect of connecting to a peer group as part of identity development (Tucker et al., 2011). Even with these struggles, many young adolescents have a strong desire to have healthy relationships in school. Teachers have the opportunity to demonstrate understanding and make connections with adolescents that provide them with safety and security.

The Nature of Care

Teacher-student relationships are established on the "fundamental human need" (Lumpkin, 2007, p. 158) of knowing that a person authentically cares. Caring is an act of morality, a value that causes a person to do what is best for others (Baghban, 2015). Emotions impact the implementation of care and drive people to be motivated towards wellbeing (Hedge & Mackenzie, 2012). Care is a term used in relation to the health and wellbeing of students, the school environment, and the teacher-student relationships in a school building (Hedge & Mackenzie, 2012). A caring teacher who understands the needs of adolescents is especially important in supporting and encouraging personal and academic growth (Allen et al., 2013; Lumpkin, 2007).

In the 1980s, Nel Noddings established an "ethic of care" (Stone, 2018, p. 102) as a relational approach for teachers to relate to students. In *The Challenge to Care in Schools,* Noddings (2005) wrote, "an ethic of care embodies a relational view of caring" (p. xv). Noddings (2005) described a caring relationship as a "connection between two human

beings" (p. 15) with one person caring and another being cared for, but with a contribution from both people. *The Challenge to Care* described Noddings' ideas on school reform, which framed the needs of students within the influence of the larger society calling for a caring-based curriculum to meet students' needs (Stone, 2018). Bergmark (2019) claimed Noddings' ethics of care is a useful perspective to use when conducting action research in schools because it is "relational and also situated" (p. 2).

Like empathy, teacher care is a factor that can be linked to the emotional wellbeing of teachers. Interested in the nature of teacher burnout and what makes teachers resilient in schools today, Nilsson, Ejlertsson, Andersson, and Blomqvist (2015) explored how a group of seven teachers found their overall wellbeing, both in the classroom and in their personal lives. A qualitative, participatory approach was used so that the research process could lead to positive change in the teachers' lives. Teachers were involved in the decision making regarding research questions, methodology, and analysis of the research process. The researchers concluded that caring relationships were foundational to the teachers' wellbeing. Teachers demonstrated caring in moment by moment interactions and through deliberate actions (Nilsson et al., 2015). Nilsson et al. (2015) advocated that teacher education programs must incorporate caring as a foundational part of their pedagogy. Hedge and Mackenzie (2012) acknowledged Noddings' (2005) "ethic of care" and affirmed the need for teacher education in exhibiting teacher care yet pointed out the complexity of using an ethic of care in teacher training programs. Researchers asserted that caring cannot be mechanical. Moral care is personal and a reflection of what makes up a person's being (Hedge & Mackenzie, 2012).

Lumpkin (2007) asserted that students know when a teacher genuinely cares about them. Cooper and Miness (2014) evaluated the perceptions of high school students about teacher

understanding as related to teacher care. The researchers extended the work of Noddings (2005) which differentiated caring into categories of virtuous caring and relational caring. Noddings described relational caring as more meaningful and requiring a person to attempt to adopt another person's point of view (Cooper & Miness, 2014). Noddings asserted that, by nature, most teachers have virtuous care for students but that relational care involves more individualization and authenticity (Cooper & Miness, 2014). Cooper and Miness (2014) chose to study the two categories of teacher care and added virtuous understanding and relational understanding to the study. In 33 interviews describing 65 relationships, students characterized non-caring teachers as being distant and uninterested in personal connections (Cooper & Miness, 2014). Students recognized some distant teachers as possessing care as a virtue because they do good things for others in the school and community. Students described relational caring as teachers who singled out students individually, encouraged students, provided safe learning environments, and inquired about students' individual wellbeing and personal lives (Cooper & Miness, 2014). In analyzing the students' interpretations of understanding, the researchers reported that students felt that relationally caring teachers understood them, but virtuously caring teachers did not understand them. The findings supported Noddings' (2005) notion of caring and added support for the need for teacher understanding.

Dexter, Lavigne, and De la Garza (2016) also evaluated students' perceptions of teacher care in an elementary school and a high school where a majority of the students were Latino and the teachers were White. Students at both schools described teachers as positive, instructionally supportive, and relational (Dexter et al., 2016). Although students desired the teacher to personalize learning, students were hesitant about bringing language and culture into the classroom, adhering to an English-only norm (Dexter et al., 2016). The researchers warned that

personalized care in schools must include support of the students' cultural identities (Dexter et al., 2016). Authentic teacher-student relationships will be difficult to establish if teachers have monolingual norms which do not include the students' cultures (Dexter et al., 2016).

One researcher studied a teacher's experience cultivating care after recognizing her disconnect with students. Trout (2018) shared the story of a White teacher's shift in educational practice after a cultural disconnect with her predominately Black students. The teacher used the work of Kitchen (2005) about relational teacher education, Noddings (2005) about ethical care, and Hamington (2001) about embodied care as a theoretical construct to interpret and approach her disconnect. To gather data, the teacher analyzed her field notes, analytic journal entries, course materials, student work, course evaluations, student interviews, and emails with students to understand how teachers who identify with dominant groups can be more self-aware of positionalities and make classrooms more inclusive for all students. The educator found that teacher care elicits respect and empathy, affects personal knowledge of students, grows relationships, and improves teaching practices (Trout, 2018). Allen and FitzGerald (2017) reached similar conclusions when researching teacher practices and perceptions related to cultural care in an urban elementary school. The five teachers in the participatory action research study were part of a joint professional learning community focused on utilizing inviting practices and cultural care. Using a culturally responsive pedagogy lens, the researchers examined themes drawn from interviews, observations, and classroom artifacts. Findings showed the importance of race when demonstrating care. Recognizing race and culture caused an improvement in students' academic and social behaviors and overall improvement in the learning environment and school climate (Allen & FitzGerald, 2017). Participants shared a change in perspective that was authentic and considerate of their own race and the diverse races

and cultures of their students (Allen & FitzGerald, 2017). Researchers affirmed the need for teachers to listen to the needs of students and emphasized the importance of teacher self-awareness.

Understanding that the literature supports caring instruction in the classroom, Jansen and Bartell (2013) wanted to examine the nature of caring instruction within a specific academic area. Researchers interviewed four math teachers and 22 students in four middle schools to develop a framework for caring mathematics instruction (Jansen & Bartell, 2013). Teachers and students viewed care through an interpersonal perspective of giving students emotional support and an academic perspective of knowing how students think mathematically (Jansen & Bartell, 2013). Interpersonal approaches to care included getting to know the students, providing emotional support, communicating respect to students, and creating an inviting environment. Caring mathematics instruction was reported as fun, engaging, and meaningful. Researchers concluded that caring mathematics instruction involves individualized learning, high expectations, positive learning environments, and practices to evoke student engagement (Jansen & Bartell, 2013).

Teacher-Student Relationships

The quality of a person's life can be measured by the quality of a person's relationships. Trust, closeness, positivity regarding one another, and healthy communication are qualities of relationships (Wubbels, 2012). Human contact happens through momentary experiences between people, and relationships are born from these contact moments (Korthagan, et al., 2014). Relationships are built over time, generally creating a sense of connectedness, security, and wellbeing (Wubbels, 2012). Relationships encounter positive and negative

experiences as people grow and change (Wubbels, 2012) and require regular communication and attention to thrive (Frymier & Houser, 2000).

Students in elementary and secondary schools spend a minimum of six hours a day with teachers in United States schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2007-2008). The pressures of accountability and curricular demands can often prohibit teachers from having the time to develop relationships with students; further, some teachers do not view relationship building as a professional role (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013b). Establishing healthy boundaries can be a source of confusion and stress as teachers balance curriculum and care (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013b). What teachers consider "boundaries" (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018, p. 30) can also be places of powerful interaction and professional growth if teachers are willing to become vulnerable and allow relational connections. The amount of research noting the importance of teacher-student relationships in the socioemotional development of adolescents is growing (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013a).

Teachers and students have moment-by-moment contacts that build relationships (Claessens et al., 2017). The constant interactions can be positive and negative, and these contacts drive the educational experience for everyone (Korthagan et al., 2014). Student success in many domains of functioning is impacted when students experience positive teacher-student relationships (Sulkowski & Simmons, 2018), yet when a conflict exists, students are less likely to take academic risks (Blum, 2004; Ikpeze, 2015). Thus, teacher-student relationships are at the heart of a student's school experience (Brake, 2019; Gehlbach, Brinkworth, & Harris, 2012).

Student Perceptions of Relationships

Some researchers explored student perspectives regarding teacher-student relationships. Much like other relationships in life, teacher-student relationships are developed

over time (Brake, 2019), so some studies focus specifically focused on the nature of relationships throughout the school year. In a qualitative study of ninth grade teacher-student relationships in Chicago public schools, Brake (2019) analyzed what practices ninth-graders perceived as being effective for relationship building at the beginning of the school year. Data indicated that students placed a high value on teachers who were trustworthy, patient, and understanding (Brake, 2019). Students also favored teachers who began the year with relationship-building activities, kept open lines of communication, helped students get connected in school, differentiated instruction, assessed and monitored learning, and conferenced with students to get to know them individually (Brake, 2019).

Gehlbach, Brinkworth, and Harris (2012) studied 119 middle school students and 30 teachers to determine how teacher-student relationships changed from the beginning of the school year to the end of a school year. The researchers used surveys in the fall and the spring to evaluate changes in teacher-student relationships. Surveys were given to teachers and students to study both perspectives and to learn about any positive or negative aspects of the relationships. Researchers found a correlation between the change in students' positivity regarding the relationship with the teacher and the student's self-efficacy in that class (Cohen's $d = .58$). A correlation was noted between the change in students' positivity rating of their relationship with the teacher and the effort the student reported using in that class (Cohen's $d = .49$). (Gehlbach et al., 2012). Many students perceived relationships with teachers as declining throughout the school year due to grades, self-efficacy, and effort, but some relationships did improve (Gehlbach et al., 2012). Researchers found that the students' perceptions of relationships with teachers became less positive over the course of a school year. Paired sample *t*-tests showed a decline in positivity of the relationship from fall to spring ($p < .05$). Improving teacher

relationships was proposed as a method to improve student outcomes (Gehlbach et al., 2012). Researchers called teachers to adopt perspective taking as a way to build deeper relationships with students (Gehlbach et al., 2012).

Emotions play a critical part in how humans relate to one another. Uitto, Lutovac, Jokikokko, and Kaasila (2018) examined students' perceptions of teacher-student relationships specifically examining the emotions involved. The researchers asserted that, since teaching is relational, it is emotional by nature and practice (Uitto et al., 2018). Using a narrative approach, the researchers gathered 141 accounts of positive teacher-student relationships and the nature of the emotional bonds that were created through those relationships (Uitto et al., 2018). An author of a magazine asked for people to write about their teachers, and the stories were submitted from 116 women and 25 men. The writers that submitted stories, aged 16 to 87 years old, had attended rural and urban Finnish schools. The researchers found four themes to be prevalent in the students' stories: (a) the teacher encouraged the student on an academic path; (b) the teacher showed understanding and love; (c) the teacher inspired the student and provided wisdom about life; and (d) the teacher provided relevant experiences or eventful memories (Uitto et al., 2018). The researchers urged for teachers to be relational with students and noted the importance of teacher-student relationships as part of teacher education (Uitto et al., 2018).

Like emotions, communication lies at the heart of healthy relationships. Frymier and Houser (2000) examined college students' perceptions of interpersonal relationships with teachers by focusing on teacher communication skills and the use of communication skills in relation to learning and motivation. Participants signed up for one of two communication courses and completed surveys regarding the course content. The first course ($N = 93$) centered around how important communication skills were to good teaching. The second course ($N =$

257) had students reflect on the communication skills of a previous instructor. Student surveys indicated that communication skills were important, specifically valuing communication skills in two areas: (a) teachers who explained content clearly and facilitated understanding, and (b) teachers who supported students' ego by building students' confidence in themselves (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Researchers concluded that communication between teachers and students can be relational and content-driven (Frymier & Houser, 2000).

Some adolescents also perceive teachers as protectors. Seeking to determine whether teacher-student relationships protected students from peer victimization and psychosocial distress, Sulkowski and Simmons (2018) surveyed 539 urban high school adolescents which was 94% of the school population. Two-tailed *t* tests were used to analyze the questionnaire data. The ratings indicated psychosocial distress at high, moderate, and low levels for teacher–student relationships, but the peer victimization distress was larger at low levels of teacher–student relationships than at moderate levels ($z = 2.86$, $p < 0.01$) or high levels ($z = 2.28$, $p < 0.05$). The questionnaire data revealed that students perceived the impact of teacher-student relationships as positively helping with peer victimization and psychosocial distress, but students saw overall school order and discipline as not impacting bullying (Sulkowski & Simmons, 2018). Students who claimed to have high or moderate levels of teacher-student relationships were less likely to report distress from peer victimization. The researchers concluded that strong teacher-student relationships may reduce peer victimization and its effects on students (Sulkowski & Simmons, 2018).

Student Outcomes

Until recent decades, researchers have not considered the role of teacher-student relationships in overall student success (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013b). Teacher-student

relationships affect learning in a classroom both directly and indirectly (Frymier & Houser, 2000). The potential for achievement increases when schools focused on creating meaningful contacts with students and used student-centered approaches to meet students' needs, (Yonezawa, McClure, & Jones, 2012). This personalization allows teachers to cultivate positive relations with students and use the knowledge of students as individuals to guide professional practices (Yonezawa et al., 2012).

Various studies have examined teacher-student relationships and the relation to student motivation and engagement. Engels et al. (2016) investigated the transactional relationship between early adolescents' behavioral engagement and their relationships with teachers and peers. The participants were 1,116 adolescents from 121 randomly selected classrooms in Belgium (Engels et al., 2016). The researchers administered questionnaires annually, following the students from grades 7 to grades 11, to analyze positive and negative teacher-student relationships and the likability and popularity of students with their peers. Significant correlations were found for cross-year stability of behavioral engagement (r_s = .52 to .66), positive teacher–student relationship (r_s = .43 to .60), negative teacher–student relationship (r_s = .40 to .51), likeability (r_s = .46 to .65), and popularity (r_s = .65 to .76). Behavioral engagement was positively correlated with a positive teacher–student relationship (r_s = .13 to .33), and negatively with a negative teacher-student relationship *(*r_s = -.16 to -.29) and popularity (r_s = -.10 to -.19) at each wave. Concurrent negative associations between positive and negative teacher–student relationships were found (r_s = -.19 to -.28). The associations were positive for likability and popularity (r = .59 to .67). The study confirmed the importance of teacher-student relationships for young adolescents and the impact those relationships have on academic motivation (Engels et al., 2016).

Likewise, the previously referenced meta-analysis by Cornelius White (2007) provided evidence of the impact of teacher-student relationships on student outcomes to influence student participation, motivation, and engagement. The person-centered teacher variables had an above-average association with positive student outcomes ($r = .31$), with wide variability *(SD* = .29). Building on the research of Cornelius White (2007), Roorda, Komen, Spilt, and Oort (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 99 studies of teacher-student relationships with K-12 students. In total, 2,825 teachers and 129,423 students were included in the sample. The researchers administered four separate analyses of the associations between the positive aspects of the teacher-student relationships and engagement, negative aspects of teacher-student relationships and engagement, positive aspects of teacher-student relationships and achievement, and negative aspects of teacher-student relationships and achievement. The overall effect sizes were as follows: positive relationships and engagement ($r = .39$, $p < .01$), negative relationships and engagement ($r = -.32$, $p < .01$), positive relationships and achievement ($r = .16$, $p < .01$), negative relationships and achievement ($r = 15$, $p < .01$). Positive and negative relationships with engagement were found to have medium to large associations, whereas associations with achievement were small to medium. Specifically, in secondary schools, negative relationships were found to be harmful to students, but positive teacher-student relationships were associated with higher achievement and engagement.

The classroom environment can play a role in how teacher-student relationships are formed because the classroom environment influences many factors of students' school experiences. Kashy-Rosenbaum, Kaplan, and Israel-Cohen (2018) conducted a study on the role of classroom environment on student achievement. The researchers defined the emotional climate of a classroom as the quality of the social and emotional communications between

students and teachers. To assess the emotional climate of the classroom, the researchers evaluated the students' emotions in the classroom along with the level of the support demonstrated in the teacher-student interactions and relationships (Kashy-Rosenbaum et al., 2018). The researchers used data from 1,641 students to evaluate the effect of teacher support on students' grade point average (GPA) (Kashy-Rosenbaum, et al., 2018). Researchers collected data from students' self-reported questionnaires and GPAs from school-generated report cards. Findings indicated GPAs were higher in classrooms characterized by having an emotionally supportive homeroom teacher ($\beta = 3.33$, $p < .05$). The researchers concluded that the teacher holds the role of maintaining positive interactions and relationships to create a positive climate for learning (Kashy-Rosenbaum et al., 2018).

Diversity and Relationships

Teacher beliefs about teaching students in poverty schools can shape teachers' notions about teaching and learning, and teachers often must unlearn assumptions made about students (Lampert & Burnett, 2016). Many teachers lack training in teaching students with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds than themselves, which can cause the teachers to have feelings of frustration and ineffectiveness (Dubbeld, Hoog, Den Brok, & De Laat, 2019). Relationships with minority students can be affected when teachers are not aware of the backgrounds and cultural norms of the students, and the teacher mirrors the actions and behaviors of the dominant culture in the classroom (Dexter et al., 2016).

The results of studies are varied on the impact of teacher-student relationship outcomes for ethnic minority students compared to White students (Roorda et al., 2011). School climate refers to the safety and connectedness that students experience in a school and the quality of the students' relationships with the adults in the school. A student's race can positively or

negatively impact the student's perception of school climate (Voight, Hanson, O'Malley, & Adekanye, 2015). Voight et al. (2015) used teacher and study survey data to study the racial and achievement gaps in 400 middle schools in California. Black students reported lower levels of safety and connectedness ($\gamma = 0.154$, $p < 0.001$) and adult-student relationships ($\gamma = 0.077$, $p < 0.05$) in schools with large numbers of Black and White students. Likewise, Hispanic students reported lower levels of safety and connectedness ($\gamma = 0.049$, $p < 0.001$), adult-student relationships ($\gamma = 0.151$, $p < 0.001$), and opportunities for meaningful participation ($\gamma = 0.155$, $p < 0.001$) in schools with large numbers of Hispanic and White students. In summary, the researchers found that Black and Hispanic students had fewer positive experiences with connectedness and relationships with adults than White students and recommended that schools focus efforts on closing the achievement gaps and appreciating diversity.

School settings play a part in helping ethnic minority and poverty students to form positive relationships with adults and teachers in the building (Henderson & Guy, 2017). One study of ninety schools in Chicago found that smaller schools were better environments for students living in poverty to connect with adults and engage in the educational environments (Wasley & Lear, 2001), and other studies have concurred that smaller schools foster more engaging and intimate experiences for students in poverty (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013b).

Baker, Grant, and Morlock (2008) conducted a study at an urban at-risk Title 1 elementary school to determine the degree to which closeness and conflict in teacher-student relationships helped students with behavior problems to adapt to school (Baker et al., 2008). The 68 teachers and 423 kindergarten through fifth grade students had participated in a larger study, and the students were selected for this follow up study based on their previous behavior scores.

Teachers completed a *Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC)* and portions of the *Student-Teacher Relationship Scale* and *Teachable Pupil Survey.* Researchers also analyzed social development and positive work habits on the participants' report cards to determine classroom behaviors. The researchers concluded that the quality of the teacher-student relationships impacted the students' adjustment to school in all grades (Baker et al., 2008). Students with relational teachers who displayed trust, warmth, and patience during conflict with students had more positive behavioral outcomes (Baker et al., 2008). Researchers noted that teacher-student relationships were affected by the individual characteristics of teachers, personalities of teachers, and the classroom management and teaching styles of teachers (Baker et al., 2008). Murray (2009) also found the quality of teacher trust to be an influential factor in helping early adolescents in a low income, urban middle school adjust to school. Having a strong teacher advocate in a building can improve minority students' attitudes about school and reduce misbehaviors (Henderson & Guy, 2017).

Positive teacher-student relationships are important for learners of English as a second language (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Henry and Thorsen (2018) examined the nature of momentary contacts between second language learners and teachers within the teacher-student relationship and the influence of these contacts on students' engagement and motivation in the classroom (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Four researchers gathered field data through observations and interviews in sixteen classrooms. After analyzing data, the researchers concluded that the influences of teacher contacts differed, but contact moments played a larger part in engagement and motivation in emerging teacher-student relationships. The effects were more subtle in the more mature teacher-student relationships (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). The researchers called for teacher education programs that focus on how teacher interactions influence interpersonal

connections and how moments of teacher-student contacts positively enhance teacher-student relationships.

Relationships and Teacher Wellbeing

Teacher-student relationships impact both students and teachers. Teachers who identify relationship building as important often become overwhelmed with the emotional needs of the students (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013b). People in service-related fields can encounter emotional stress that leads to detachment and loss of feeling towards people they work alongside (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013b). Depersonalization is when teachers develop indifferent and negative attitudes toward students, and depersonalization can occur when teachers experience the emotional exhaustion of burnout (Dubbeld et al., 2019). Spilt et al. (2011) explained how teacher-student relationships impacted the personal and professional lives of teachers. In a review of literature, the researchers described the need for healthy teacher-student relationships for the wellbeing of teachers and the struggles that secondary teachers can have in developing meaningful connections with students (Spilt et al., 2011). Negative teacher-student relationships in the classroom were sources of stress and caused feelings of hopelessness, affecting the self-efficacy of the teachers (Spilt et al., 2011). Aldrup, Klusmann, Ludtke, Gollner, and Trautwein (2018) tested Spilt et al.'s (2011) assumption by analyzing the teacher-student relationship as a mediator with 222 teachers who rated the misbehavior of students, teacher-student relationships, and wellbeing related to exhaustion and enthusiasm. Differing from the previous researchers, the researchers included students in the study to determine if the students' perspectives were similar to teachers (Aldrup et al., 2018). Findings indicated that misbehavior was linked with teacher wellbeing, and the misbehavior increased exhaustion and

decreased enthusiasm for teaching. The student findings were similar, but students viewed the misbehavior as less impactful on teachers than the teachers indicated (Aldrup et al., 2018).

Claessens et al. (2017) interviewed 25 teachers to determine their perceptions of the positive and problematic relationships with students. Researchers chose to examine the context of the behavior, the content of the conversations between teachers and students, and the interpersonal nature of the behavior (Claessens et al., 2017). Teachers described the positive relationships as behavior that occurred outside of the classroom (53%). Teachers described students whom they experienced positive relationships with as being highly participatory in class. Conversations were reported to be warm and encouraging and both formal and informal in nature (Claessens et al., 2017). Problematic relationships took place in the context of class and conflicts were characterized by students not paying attention, disrupting the class, refusing to engage, lying, and displaying rudeness (Claessens et al., 2017). Teachers' attitudes towards problematic students were sometimes confronting and stern but other times supportive and understanding (Claessens et al., 2017). Researchers found that positive relationships with students gave teachers satisfaction, but negative relationships were a source of stress (Claessens et al., 2017).

Teacher Connections

Humans have a deep need for connectedness (Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spencer, 2012). School connectedness is constituted by "warm and caring relationships" (Vidourek, King, Bernard, Murnan, & Nabors, 2011, p. 117) with adults in a school. The extent to which students feel connected to school can affect their health, social, and academic lives (Rowe & Stewart, 2009; Waters, Cross, & Shaw, 2010; Watson, 2018). The need for connectedness can be a powerful motivator for students to form relationships with teachers

(Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Relationships formed by teachers are at the heart of connectedness (Blum, 2004), although school connectedness can also be influenced by relationships with peers and attachment to the school (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011).

School connectedness is important during the adjustment period of early adolescence (Loukas, Ripperger-Suhler, & Horton, 2009). School connectedness research often centralizes the role of teacher-student relationships and their importance on student health and wellbeing (Brake, 2019; Garcia-Moya, Brooks, Morgan, & Moreno, 2015). Garcia-Moya et al. (2015) analyzed various factors involved with adolescent student connection to schools, including age, country, and student perceptions, and found connectedness to be consistently associated with adolescent wellbeing. Several recent studies have examined the relationship between school connectedness and adolescent depression (Carney, Kim, Hazler, & Guo, 2018; Joyce, 2019; Millings, Buck, Montgomery, Spears, & Stallard, 2012; Ross, Shochet, & Bellair, 2010; Wilkinson-Lee, Zhang, Nuno, & Wilhelm, 2011). Joyce (2019) specifically studied how school connectedness mediated the relationship between teacher support and adolescent depressive symptoms. Surveys were given to 14,738 high school students in two waves. Student perceptions of teacher care at wave 1 were significantly associated with fewer depressive symptoms at wave 2: $B = -.47$ ($SE = .05$; $p < .001$). The results indicated that strong teacher relationships are a way to decrease depressive symptoms and that the school environment is important for the emotional health of adolescents. Implications included that social work practices could have a place in schools as mediators to help support emotional well-being and prevent depression.

Feeling connected to schools and the adults in the schools can affect the students' behaviors (Blum, 2004; Loukas et al., 2009; Rowe & Stewart, 2009; Watson, 2018). Students

who feel cared about by teachers and connected to their school are less likely to participate in risky behaviors (Blum, 2004; Vidourek et al., 2011). Negative relationships with teachers and disconnection from school can put students at higher risk for peer victimization (Sulkowski & Simmons, 2018). Concerned about the disconnectedness of out-of-school suspended students, one community set up a program to intervene with short-term suspended students. Henderson and Guy (2017) investigated how the program helped to build a sense of connectedness and examined the program's role in improving teacher-student relationships. The study was part a larger study of the resilience, social connectedness, and teacher-student relationships of suspended students. As student participants ($N = 143$) entered the program, they completed a social connectedness baseline measure and demographic questionnaire, and on the last day, the students completed a post measure. Teacher-Relationship Scales were completed by 108 teachers for suspended students one week after exiting the program and returning to school. The findings showed gains in social connectedness scores from the baseline ($M = 74.69$, $SD = 8.56$) to the end of the program ($M = 76.80$); $SD = 17.20$; $t\ (159) = -3.25$; $p < .01$; $r = .81$. Overall, the results of the study revealed growth in students' connectedness and showed positive improvement in the students' perceptions of teacher-student relationships after participating in the short-term program.

Summary

In summation, many studies have indicated the importance of teacher empathy and teacher-student relationships. Teacher-student relationships are an important factor in teaching and learning. The nature of teacher-student relationships affects the quality of the academic experience for both the teacher and student. Empathy as a disposition helps teachers to provide adolescents with emotional support and relational care and guidance. Students who feel

connected to teachers believe that teachers care about learning and about the students as individuals. Although research has increased in understanding the relational aspects of teaching and learning, more studies are needed to understand the nature of teacher-student relationships and the impact relationships have on the many facets of adolescent life (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013b).

III. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to understand how National Board Certified teachers build relationships and cultivate empathy with middle school students in a Title 1 suburban school. The study provided insight about the nature of teacher-student relationships, empathy as a professional practice, and the relational nature of NBCTs. The study presented a unique lens regarding how NBCTs develop connections with students, relate to students in poverty, and build relationships in an environment where being relational was an expectation for the school culture. In chapter 3, the methodology of the qualitative case study is presented. An in-depth overview of the research design, data collection, ethical considerations, and areas of trustworthiness are addressed.

Research Design

A qualitative design was utilized for the study. Qualitative research is an inquiry that explores an issue by interviewing participants and building a picture of the problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018) in a setting. Researchers using a qualitative research design choose from a narrative, case study, ethnographic, grounded theory, or phenomenological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To determine a research approach for this study, the five qualitative approaches were explored, and the case study approach was determined to be the most suitable for the topic of inquiry. Creswell and Poth (2018) defined case study research as a study that takes place within

a “real-life, contemporary context” (p. 321). A case study gives an understanding of a case over time and allows for various informational sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study approach was appropriate because the intent of the case study was to examine and illustrate the complexity of the issue.

Specifically, the study served as an instrumental case study. In an instrumental case study, the researcher centers the study on a topic or issue of focus and selects a case in which to examine the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The issue explored in the study was the relational and empathetic nature of teachers, and NBCTs in one school were used as the bounded case to illustrate the issue, thus making the present study an instrumental case.

Context of the Study

In a qualitative study, the research happens in the natural environment so that face-to-face interactions can occur (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research in the study took place in a large, diverse school system in the Southeastern United States. The school system was comprised of twelve elementary schools, three middle schools, two high schools, and one trade school for a total enrollment of approximately 14,000 students. During the 2018-2019 school year, the school system employed approximately 131 NBCTs, more than any other system in the state.

The teacher interviews took place in the only Title 1 middle school in the school system. The school gained 300 new students in 2018-2019 after a local rezoning order, bringing the enrollment in 2018-2019 to approximately 1100 students in grades 6-8. At the time of the study, the school site had the largest population of ESL students of the district middle schools (11%), and 17 different languages were represented within the student body. Forty percent of the student population of the subject school received free and reduced lunch. Ten percent of the students in the school had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs); most of these students were

mainstreamed with co-teachers assisting with IEP goals in the general education classroom. Ten students were in a self-contained "sunshine room" attaining goals on a life skills curriculum track.

The faculty was comprised of 58 teachers, 3 counselors, and 4 principals. The school's vision statement focused on student relationships claiming, "Every student, every day." The administrative team placed a high focus on building relationships as part of school culture. The administration and counselors utilized a restorative justice model as a relational approach for discipline; the discussion-based methods centered around understanding students' actions and the roots of behavior motivations. Students were encouraged to discuss intentions, reflect on choices, and plan better methods of handing aggression and decision-making. The students were encouraged to take ownership of repairing the damage done in situations and to restore relationships with teachers and students after incidents. The middle school was an ideal context for the case study due to its recent growth, new Title 1 status, diverse population, and specific vision focused on relationship building. The interviews occurred within the school setting over a period of one month. Seven NBCTs were interviewed during their planning periods or after school, and the interviews took place in the participants' classroom or office setting.

Research Questions

As stated in Chapter I, the following research questions guided the case study:

1. How do National Board-Certified teachers build meaningful relationships with middle school students?
2. How do National Board Certified teachers cultivate empathy for middle school students?

Research Participants

The research participants were selected for the study based on criterion sampling. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2016) defined criterion sampling as participants who fall into a category or criterion. All the teachers in the school who had attained National Board Certification, the highest level of teacher certification, were invited to be a part of the study. Nine NBCTs were employed at the site, but two declined participation. The seven NBCTs included a language arts teacher, a reading interventionist, a science teacher, a drama teacher, a physical education teacher, a counselor, and a special education teacher. The demographics of the seven participants included five female participants, two male participants, five White participants, and two African American participants. An invitation to request participation in the study was emailed to each participant (see Appendix C). An interview time was made with the teachers who responded to the invitation. Table 1 displays the professional information of the participants.

Table 1

Participants' Professional Information

Participant Number	Content Area	Teaching Experience	Board Certification Attained
1	Reading Intervention	26 years	2001
2	ELA	14 years	2001
3	Theater	17 years	2010
4	Science	9 years	2019
5	Physical Education	8 years	2019
6	Grade Level Counselor	14 years	2019
7	Special Education	12 years	2018

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative researchers explore issues in the world by examining various viewpoints to determine conclusions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The researcher is the "key instrument" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 43) for data collection and interviewing participants often using self-constructed, open-ended questions. Rubin and Rubin (2012) advised that a researcher use well-crafted interview questions to pursue the overall research question in depth while intensely listening to participants' experiences. In accordance with Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher in the study conducted interviews and gathered data as the key instrument in the study. The role of the researcher during the interviews was to guide the questioning and create a safe atmosphere for the participants to share insight and lived experiences.

The researcher in this study had 25 years of teaching experience in three different school systems. During her career, she taught fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. The last sixteen years was employed at the case study site. Many demographic changes had occurred over those sixteen years in the school as the community had shifted from predominately White middle class to widely diverse in race, ethnicity, and socioeconomics

Bracketing is when a researcher carefully sets aside prejudgments of a topic of study and creates a new inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To hinder research bias, the researcher bracketed experiences as a teacher to gain participants' insights without holding prior assumptions. Suspending all preconceived judgments was important in order to understand the participants' perspectives and minimize researcher bias.

Measures for Ethical Protection

Creswell and Poth (2018) described how to address ethical issues in qualitative research studies. The researcher has the responsibility to act ethically when conducting a research study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Creswell and Poth (2018) outlined the main principles for guiding ethical research as being concerned about the respect and ethical treatment of the participants. In accordance with Creswell and Poth (2018), high ethical standards were used in all phases of the research process. Prior to conducting the study, the Southeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) gave approval for the research (See Appendix D). The researcher gained approval from the local school system and the school personnel at the research site (See Appendix E). The research participants volunteered for the study and signed an informed consent (See Appendix B) which described the purpose and procedures for the study ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. The use of the study data was clearly conveyed to the participants, and the participants were ensured that they would receive a copy of the interview transcripts for review. No anticipated risk was determined to the participants in the study. All identifying information was stored in a locked filing cabinet and/or password-protected computer only available to the researcher. In addition, pseudonyms were used to ensure that no identifiable information about the participants or site would be included in the results of the study.

Methods to Address Validity and Reliability

Validity

Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended several techniques for validating research in qualitative research and suggested that researchers utilize at least two strategies in a study. First, in accordance with Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher sought participant feedback. The participants were encouraged to determine the accuracy and credibility by reviewing and

providing feedback about the interview transcript data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participant 2 chose to add details to clarify a statement on the transcript, and the other six determined that the transcript was correct as recorded. Next, the researcher underwent a peer-review process. The researcher's dissertation committee also asked questions about the methodology, providing an external check at every stage of the data collection and analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To address issues of validity, the researcher used participant feedback and a peer-review process in the study.

Reliability

Various ways exist to address reliability in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A "good-quality recording device" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 264) be used when obtaining data and ensure reliability. In order to address reliability, the researcher used an audio-recording device and transcribed the digital files verbatim (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the researcher made the process transparent by using details in documenting for future replication and having the dissertation committee to check the materials throughout the process (Roulston, 2010).

Data Collection Procedures

Creswell and Poth (2018) defined data collection as an in-depth procedure used for acquiring data. The primary way to gain data in qualitative research is through interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In order to understand the relational and empathetic nature of National Board Certified teachers with middle school students, the researcher chose to interview the participants.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

Semi-structured interview questions were used to collect data. Roulston (2010) explained that in a semi-structured interview, the researcher uses a prepared interview guide with open-ended questions and then probes further based on the responses of the participants. In the semi-structured interview, the researcher knows in advance that follow-up questions will be needed and encourages the responders to provide in-depth details (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Although each interview has the same structure of questions initially, the interviews might vary because of follow-up questions used to probe further into the participants' answers (Roulston, 2010). To investigate the research questions, the interview protocol listed ten open-ended questions for individual interviews (Appendix A). Additionally, the researcher provided the participants with a copy of the interview protocol for reference during the interview. The interviews ranged from 10-40 minutes in length.

Accuracy was exercised in transcribing interview data (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The researcher audio-recorded and then transcribed the interviews, giving each participant a pseudonym. To validate the research data, the researcher presented a copy of the transcriptions for the participants' review. The additions Participant 2 made were made were included in the final transcripts, and the other participants verified the accuracy of the transcripts.

Data Analysis

Managing and Organizing Data

The researcher employed the analysis strategies outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). First, the researcher oversaw and organized the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher numbered the seven interviews and organized the documents into one file for easy access (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Reading and Memoing Emergent Ideas

The seven transcripts were read three times as a whole to get an overall sense of the data. The researcher made memos while reading to gather ideas for coding and theme development. The ideas gathered through memoing were sorted into an initial coding table. A sample of the initial coding table is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Sample Initial Codes from Each Participant

Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6	Participant 7
Respect is given and earned	Mentor modeled relationships	Relates content to students' lives	Builds relationships with humor	Being relational is innate	Shares self so students know her as a person	Relationships take time to build
Tells stories about self	Shares personal stories of surviving struggles.	Remembers what it was like to be a kid	Considers the students' perspective as humans dealing with issues	Cares about students inside and outside of the classroom.	Greets kids in hallways; remembers names	Being available when they need someone
Cannot always empathize	Listens to students Understands need to listen and not fix	Must know students personally to have empathy	Listens to kids Learns about their interests	High five or handshake daily	Utilizes parents, teachers, counselors to learn about kids	Openness about self; seen as teacher and person

Classifying Codes into Themes

Next, in accordance with Creswell and Poth (2018), the data were coded into themes. Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggested that coding include an analysis of relevant themes, concepts, and examples from transcriptions. As suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher began with a short list of codes and then expanded the codes as the review process continued. The initial code list consisted of seventeen codes.

Another codebook was then utilized to guide the development of the themes. The researcher determined code segments consisting of expected information, surprising information, and interesting or unusual information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The seventeen codes were then

condensed into ten thematic ideas. The researcher began with ten thematic ideas identified through the coding process: authentic, reflective, attentive, accepting, relational, emotionally supportive, collaborative, consistent, and trustworthy. The researcher later combined like themes and concluded with five themes that described the teacher student relationships as being relational, authentic, attentive, accepting, and socially and emotionally supportive.

Developing Interpretations

Interpretations are needed when conducting qualitative research to make sense of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To analyze the data, the researcher combined the themes and created detailed descriptions from the participant interviews to synthesize an interpretation of the data and the perspectives found in the literature. Table 3 displays a sample of the data displayed by themes used for interpretation.

Table 3

Sample Codebook

Theme	Theme Description	Significant Statements
Attentive	Seeks to give students individualized attention and listens to students to try to understand their situations and point of view	"It is being willing to listen to them and being able to try to understand. A lot of times they care greatly when they think that we just listen…" "It is just listening to them-- being a person just simply willing to hear them out or even hearing their side of how things went down." "I listened to her and what she said, and I thought about how I didn't want to diminish how she feels…" "And immediately my heart broke for her, and immediately I wanted to fix it, but I also needed her to know that I heard her."

Representing the Data

Finally, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended displaying the data through a discussion or tables. The researcher chose to represent the data through a discussion of the research questions and themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Summary

In Chapter III, a detailed account of the methodology used in the qualitative case study was presented. The research study was designed to understand the relational and empathetic nature of National Board Certified teachers. The process used to interview the teachers using semi-structured interviews in the school of focus was shared. The trustworthiness of the study was addressed and processes to ensure ethics were explained. The process of analyzing data was outlined to demonstrate how the research questions were explored and themes were constructed. An in-depth analysis of the data will be provided in Chapter IV.

IV. RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to understand how National Board Certified teachers build relationships and cultivate empathy with middle school students in a Title 1 suburban school. The study examined the nature of teacher-student relationships, empathy as a professional practice, and the relational nature of NBCTs. Limited research studies described the nature of teacher-student relationships in secondary schools (Allen et al., 2013). The goal of the study was to gain insight into how NBCTs develop and maintain relationships with middle school students. The data was examined through the theoretical lens of the relational cultural theory using RCT to understand the dynamics of teacher-student relationships. A qualitative approach allowed for the investigation of the relationships between the participants and their students. The school's focus on building relationships and the number of NBCTs working at the school made the school an ideal setting for a case study. The case study provided a unique lens regarding NBCTs building connections with new students, relating to students in poverty, and building relationships. Interview data provided further insight into the nature of teacher empathy and how NBCTs built a culture of connectedness in the classroom. Chapter IV provides data analysis and the results of the qualitative study.

Method of Data Collection

Data collected were from seven individual interviews. The researcher sent an email invitation requesting participation in the study to nine NBCTs at the school of focus, and seven of the NBCTs gave consent. The interviews were conducted during December of the 2019-2020

school year. The interviewees consisted of an English language arts teacher, a drama teacher, a reading specialist, a special education teacher, a science teacher, a physical education teacher, and a school counselor. Participants included two males and five females. Five of the participants were White and two were Black.

The interview protocol was designed to address the following research questions:

1) How do National Board Certified teachers build meaningful relationships with middle school students?
2) How do National Board Certified teachers cultivate empathy for middle school students?

In order to address the research questions, one interview was conducted with each of the seven NBCTs. The interview protocol guide (Appendix A) consisted of ten open-ended questions. The interview protocol guided the interviews and allowed for a consistent collection of data from the participants. During each interview, an audio-recording device was used to record the words of the participant. Following each interview, the researcher transcribed the audio files on a Google document and then shared an electronic copy with the participants, giving the participants editing rights. Each participant then verified the accuracy of the transcriptions and made any necessary additions or deletions to his or her responses.

Findings

After the interviews were completed and validated, the data were analyzed. In accordance with Creswell and Poth (2018), the seven interviews were numbered and organized into one file, and the transcripts were read three times to get an overall sense of the data. Participants were identified with the label Participant and assigned a number between 1 and 7 that served as an identification throughout the study. An initial codebook of memos helped guide the development of themes. Seventeen codes were identified initially but were narrowed

to a code list of eight categories of information. A second codebook was then utilized to answer the research questions and organize the significant data.

Research Question 1: How do National Board Certified teachers build meaningful relationships with middle school students?

Interview data indicated that NBCTs understood the importance of building relationships with the students they taught. Participants were aware that relationships were the foundation for effectively connecting students to content. For example, Participant 1 said:

> I think that having relationships with students or having a relationship is important. I think that often as secondary teachers we can be very content-driven, meaning that we put the content and love of the content first, and that's often the passion that drove us to go into teaching. However, I think that the relationship is of the utmost importance.

Participant 1 recognized that for a teacher, having relationships with students was as essential as having love for a content in the classroom. Relationships were a crucial part of Participant 1's teaching experience. As a grade level school counselor, Participant 6 had to be intentional about building 300 relationships with students each year, yet relationships with students were essential in the success of her role in the school. Participant 5 shared:

> Just always trying to build those connections because at the end of the day if we have relationships with our kids they'll do anything in our classroom. If they can see that you care about them and you love them, they'll do anything.

For some of the teachers, building relationships came naturally, but others had mentors who modeled and instilled the value of relationship building. Participant 2 learned to be relational during her fourth year of teaching by observing the nature of a mentor and seeking to emulate her behavior with students. Participant 2 said she saw the "power of building

relationships" through her mentor teacher. For Participant 4, it was an administrator that encouraged the need to connect to students through the use of stories. Participant 3 felt building relationships was a "natural part" of teaching every day. Participant 5 explained that building relationships "is just part of who I am." Whether learned or innate, relationships were a crucial part of the participants' lives and classrooms.

At the beginning of the year, the NBCTs had specific ways to get to know the students and create initial connections. Participant 2 and Participant 5 specifically mentioned learning students' names quickly at the beginning of the year and calling students by name as soon as possible to ensure that the students felt known by the teacher. All the participants expressed the desire for students to know the teachers as people and not just as teachers, so the teachers shared information about themselves. Participant 1 said she made sure to "work in a story" during the "first few days of school." Participant 6 stated that "being genuine with the kids" was important for teachers to establish initial connections and build trust. Each participant used a different strategy to gain information about the students at the beginning of the school year. The teachers utilized student inventories, learning style surveys, personalized index cards, and get-to-know-you games as ways to get to know the students. Participant 1 enjoyed using personality inventories and get-to-know-you games where students could "get up and move around." Participant 2 gave student inventories to find out about students' learning styles, personalities, and intelligences. Participant 4's students designed notecards about themselves. Participant 6 and Participant 7 used student and parent questionnaires to gain more insight about students from family members.

Although participants mentioned ways to get to know students at the beginning of the year, participants also intentionally sought to get to know the students better throughout the

school year. Participants felt that building relationships with students took intentional time, effort, and planning. Participant 6 said, "I think it is a little different for each student, but building a relationship takes time. It extends beyond the time they are in your class." Participant 3 found that time spent on drama productions and musicals gave her opportunities to deepen relationships with students. Participant 2 referenced writing assignments throughout the year as ways to learn more about the students, and she used the students' responses to spark individual conversations. Participant 1 used literature as a vehicle for making connections with characters and creating conversations about students' lives because Participant 1 felt like "literature opens the door for that kind of talk." Participant 7 continued to build relationships after a school year stating, "I'm still building relationships with students who are not on my caseload any longer." The participants referenced continuing to strengthen and further relationships at school and in the community, even when students had moved on to different grades and schools.

Teachers created one-on-one connections by speaking to students individually and intentionally starting conversations to find out more about the students. The participants felt that calling the students by name was important for individualization. Participant 5 said that, to give individualized attention, he gave students a high five or a handshake every day because the gestures built rapport and were important to middle school students. Many of the participants made a deliberate point to greet students individually at the door of the classroom or in the hallway throughout the day. Although these interactions could be brief, Participant 7 noted that, over time, interactions gave her more and information and helped her "see the students' hearts." Participants used informal times to ask students how they were, offer encouragement, and give praise. Participant 5 used his planning periods as a time to have conversations with students and sat in the lunchroom daily to visit with students. Participant 5 took advantage of any opportunity

to have conversations to build relationships with students, inside and outside of school, referencing, church, the mall, and sports events as places to connect with students. Participant 2 and Participant 4 used students' clothing and students' hobbies as subjects to start individual conversations with students in the hallways or during homeroom. Participant 1 found that attending the students' activities in the community and speaking to students when she saw them in the community helped her to build relationships with students. As an instructional support teacher, Participant 7 utilized time before school to connect individually with students on her caseload. Whether inside or outside of school, the participants made students feel valued by giving individualized time and attention.

Participants felt that positivity in the classroom and enthusiasm for teaching were important to create climates conducive to relationship building. Participant 7 stated that "a welcoming environment" helped students feel more connected to a teacher. Participant 2 shared, "When I share my passion, I also share my heart and they know me better. Participant 1 felt that being "positive and enthusiastic" was important and "a contagious feeling." Participant 4 said, "I find the best way to build middle school relationships is through humor." Participant 4 shared how laughter and his own enthusiasm for science made his classroom environment engaging. Participant 4 said, "I show them how much I love science, and then they slowly themselves start to feel the same way. My passion breathes fire into them." Participant 4 wanted students to "connect those good, positive feelings to the class" so when the content was difficult, students kept a positive outlook. Participant 1 felt that creating structure and procedures also built a classroom climate where students could learn to trust and respect the teacher. Participant 2 stated, "I am very loving" so by "being loving, open, and honest," she established a safe community in her room. Participant 1 said that "so much goes into building relationships" and

that included “building trust and respect.” Each participant told stories in the classroom to let the students know about themselves, share lessons about their middle school experiences, or connect the students to the curriculum content. The participants felt that genuineness, honesty, and kindness were important for gaining and keeping the respect of students and building a safe atmosphere for learning. The participants recognized that a positive classroom environment was conducive to relationship building.

Participants noted that consistency served a crucial role in sustaining teacher-student relationships. Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 5 discussed having healthy boundaries with students. Participant 5 told the story of a student that tested the boundaries at the beginning of the year. The first week of school, the student refused to follow the rules and meet expectations in physical education class, yet the teacher “kept being nice and showing kindness.” Participant 5 communicated high expectations for the student while showing patience with the behavior. Participant 5 kept listening to the student and building a relationship with him, expressing that “no matter what you do, I'm still going to be there for you.” Participant 5 modeled consistency, showing the student that “even when you keep doing something crazy, I’m gonna love you through it” and eventually, the student had no more issues meeting the expectations for behavior. Participant 1 made sure that students understood that she is not a friend but an adult that could be trusted. She shared:

> I always tell the kids that you have 24 other friends in the class, and I am not your friend. I am your teacher, but I am also a person that you can turn to and trust and confide in.

Participant 2 said that being open and authentic about life with students did not mean that a teacher and students should be friends. She said:

> I don't want to be their buddy, but I do want them to see me as somebody who was like them sitting in a desk doing her best, struggling at times and hoping that it all worked out in the end.

The participants noted that showing consistency in behavior towards students and with classroom expectations was necessary for students to feel safe in the teacher-student relationship.

The NBCTs had different ideas about what could damage relationships with students. Participant 1 asserted that sarcasm and favoritism destroyed relationships. Since most students fear embarrassment in school, Participant 1 found sarcasm used to single out a student for embarrassment purposes to be damaging. Participant 1 also said, "I never make promises of things that I can't follow through on. I think that destroys relationships. It destroys trust." Participant 5 said that disrespect was the biggest hindrance to relationship building because he has "high expectations" for students' behavior. Participant 2 described how relationships suffered when she gave unconditionally to students and they, in turn, did not do her assignments. Participant 2 worked through her disappointment in students' lack of motivation and communicated high expectations to students through personalized letters to students or private conversations. Participant 2 also pointed out that not holding grudges in the classroom was essential for keeping strong relationships with students:

> And I do tell them—I told my class today—one of the best things about me is that I don't hold a grudge. When I wake up in the morning, it is a new day. And I can't hold a grudge. It will kill me. So, I let everything go, which is a good and bad thing probably, but it gives everyone a fresh start in the morning.

Participant 5 also discussed the importance of not holding grudges as he tried to "give everyone a clean slate every day" so he did not bring up the past with students. Like Participant 2,

Participant 4 struggled when "a student just doesn't care." When Participant 4 attempted many methods to help meet a student's needs, and the student did not respond, Participant 4 felt like disconnecting. Participant 3 felt that when she was stressed, her temper could hurt her relationships with students. Participant 3 shared, "I snap at times" and "that causes problems with the kids." Communication was the main way that participants felt relationships could be restored when disconnections with students occurred. Participant 3 advised to "communicate and spend time" with students. Even if teachers did not feel like they did anything wrong, the NBCTs sought to repair any situations that arose between students and themselves. Participants expressed the need to look beyond outward behaviors to other factors that could be impacting students when problems occurred, and, when needed, teachers sought guidance from the counselors, administrators, or parents. Participant 4 said that he "tries to figure out if something is going on outside the school" and that sometimes "talking to parents" helped to uncover how to connect with a student. The participants recognized that disconnections happened in relationships with students, but the teachers held the responsibility for repair.

Research Question 2: How do National Board Certified teachers cultivate empathy for middle school students?

Teachers understood the need for showing empathy to students, and demonstrated the use of cognitive empathy when they took students' perspectives. Participants defined empathy as being able to identify with their students and see things from the students' viewpoints. Participant 1 stated that "empathy means being able to see things through their eyes or walk in their shoes." Likewise, Participant 4 said that empathy is "putting yourself in your students' shoes." Participant 5 explained that empathy was "sitting down with the kids and listening to the kids and seeing exactly what was going on with them." For Participants 6, empathy was

"looking at something from someone else's perspective and trying to understand." Participants voiced the importance of seeking to understand the students' perspectives and lives.

The teachers asserted that knowing students was an essential component in cultivating empathy. Participant 3 stated that "you cannot be empathetic with your kids if you do not know them." Knowing about the students helped teachers understand students' unique personalities and situations. Teachers also recognized that students were different than themselves. When speaking about developing empathy, Participant 2 shared that she taught "about 90 kids a day" and they all had different personalities and needs. Participant 2 found it important to "accept people for who they are." Participant 2 came from a different background and commented that she kept "that in check" by remembering that her students may not think like her. She understood that students had "their own perception of the world" and that the students were "still trying to flesh it out." Teachers saw that knowing students played an important role in being empathetic towards the adolescents.

Empathy was evident in the way the participants viewed their students. The participants understood that students had very different stories and that student differences should be embraced, valued, and understood. The participants referenced race, religion, and language differences as areas where teachers and students differed. Participant 2 talked about a time when she wanted to convince a student not to be an atheist, but she knew she had to accept and respect the student's beliefs. Participant 2 recognized her role was not to preach to the student, but to show the student acceptance despite the differing religious viewpoints. Participant 3 said that "religion can be brutal and destroy relationships rather than build them" if teachers were not sensitive to students' differences in beliefs. Participant 5 said that "we have different cultures, races, religions" but "it is about respecting everyone else's culture." Participant 7 emphasized

that “looking for commonalities is important.” Participant 3 felt the fine arts performances were a time to bring students together, and she emphasized, “we are all in this together, and it’s band kids, nerdy kids, athletes, all these different kinds of kids” and yet “we are all going in to do this thing together.” Participants cultivated empathy for students when they viewed students as individuals and appreciated students’ unique differences.

The participants explained that biases come naturally, but the teachers possessed the self-awareness to combat them. Participant 1, Participant 3, and Participant 4 specifically mentioned the importance of being aware of personal biases and then working against the biases. In relating to students, Participant 1 said to “focus on what we have in common” but also “be sensitive to their differences.” Participant 4 shared the story of realizing his partiality toward using White females as classroom helpers and his conscious effort to change that bias. Participant 1 felt that being “non-biased and finding things that we do have in common” was a better focus than pointing out students’ differences. Participant 1 found emphasizing commonalities as particularly beneficial with English language learners because she felt this population could be excluded and needed teacher and student connections. Teachers recognized that bias could impact empathy development and sought to negate bias in relationships with students.

Empathy helped the teachers reflect on their thoughts about students and behaviors toward students. Participant 5 recognized that the behavioral issues of one student stemmed from cultural differences in behavior and worked with the student to help him understand the teacher’s expectations from a relational point of view rather than using disciplinary measures. Participant 5 described how “it was a challenge because he came off very disrespectful” but “part of his culture was it, but I didn’t know that before I had a chance to talk to the kid.” Participant 5 used behavioral empathy to set the expectations and establish

boundaries for the student's behavior. Likewise, Participant 1 demonstrated behavioral empathy in two situations, one with a male student and one with a female student, where talking to students rather than disciplining students helped her understand the underlying reasons for the misbehavior in her class. Participant 2 also discussed a student that was disengaged and misbehaving and how she "wasn't going to engage him" when his behavior escalated in class, but instead, she "sought him out" outside of class to determine the problem and a solution. Participants sought the "why" behind the behavior rather than focusing on the behavior itself, which helped the teachers show behavioral empathy for the students.

Teachers cultivated empathy by looking beyond the outward situations and considering the factors that affect students' attitudes and behaviors. Participant 2 said that empathy was a "way to connect with students" who she knew were struggling. Participants considered students' circumstances in situations such as not having homework, acknowledging that some students took care of younger siblings at night while parents work. Participant 4 said that cultivating empathy for students involved "taking time to think about them [students] as a human dealing with issues." The physical education teacher took uniforms home to wash when he knew that students did not have access to water and washing machines. Participants described instances when they took the emotional perspective of the student such as understanding difficult family dynamics or the students' mental health. Participant 3 reflected about interacting with a student showing signs of depression:

> I remember thinking that I was going to have to find some way to treat this as serious as it was in her head…I didn't think she was in any danger, but the fact that she was willing to verbalize that openly to me meant that she was further into depression than most of our kids. So, I had to put myself in her head.

To cultivate empathy, the participants reflected on their own lived experiences in middle school. Teachers shared how personal struggles during adolescence influenced their understanding of students. Participant 2 reflected, "I always try to keep in mind that they are only 13 and 14 years old and that is why I constantly remind myself, what were you like at fourteen? And it was a mess!" Participant 3 shared that it was important for teachers not to forget what it was like to be an adolescent and remember the kind of treatment they experienced from adults. She expressed that she made "four million mistakes" as a kid and remembered adults who were loving and patient and adults who were not. Three participants shared experiences of living in poverty and how empathy for kids living in poverty came easily. Teachers also recognized that they encountered situations every day where they could not empathize with students, as Participant 1 said, "I mean we teach some students who have experienced far more than I ever will, and I pray that I don't have to."

Teachers noted that empathizing with students meant listening to them. Participant 6 defined empathy as "listening to the students" and "getting to know what is happening in their lives." The act of hearing the student and demonstrating genuine care was expressed as important when empathy was difficult. Participant 1 explained, "It is being willing to listen to them and being able to try to understand. A lot of times they care greatly when they think that we just listen." Participant 6 said teachers should "be willing to listen to what students have to say. Not that we have to agree with it, but just to give them a voice." Participant 6 felt students needed a safe place to express thoughts, feelings, and opinions without fear of judgement.

Each participant reported the value of staying attuned to the students' emotional needs. Participants used affective empathy when considering the students' emotions in situations. Teachers displayed an understanding that educating the whole child involved more

than academics and that the students' social and emotional lives played a part in their learning. As a counselor, Participant 6 felt showing empathy was a "daily process" of allowing students to "experience what they need to" so they could go back to the classroom and learn. Participant 2 had a Maya Angelou quote on her board that read, "People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel." Participant 2 knew that it was on her wall for a reason, to daily guide how she related to students. Participant 2 understood that showing students empathy affected how they felt in her classroom, and the students' feelings were highly valued.

Themes

To report themes from the data, the researcher followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) method of making memos in the margins while reading to gather ideas for coding and theme development. The data was then color-coded according to themes found in the responses, and codebooks were formed to sort the data. Table 4 displays the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Table 4

Theme Descriptions

Theme	Description
Relational	Shows interest in students' personal lives seeking opportunities to get to know students
Attentive	Seeks to give students individualized attention and listens to students to try to understand their situations and point of view
Accepting	Embraces students' differences and practices self-awareness regarding biases
Authentic	Displays humanness to students by being genuine, open, and reflective
Socially and Emotionally Supportive	Understands the challenges of adolescence and supports students' social and emotional needs

Theme 1: Relational

Relational teachers seek to know students and invest in students' lives. All the participants saw value in being relational with students. Participant 6 said that "relationship is the basis" for a teacher's job. Participant 5 said he looked for opportunities to continually "build relationships" with students because it was a part of his personality. All the participants acknowledged that relationships took time and effort. All the participants genuinely desired to know their students as people and worked on building those relationships inside and outside of the classroom. Teachers sought to know the students' interests and invest in the students' lives. Participant 5 spoke of the importance to "not only know them as students but to know them as people" so that "they know I care." He continued, "I care about the content I am teaching them, but I also care about the people that they are outside of the classroom."

The stories and examples the participants shared showed that they desired to know the students they taught. Participant 2 shared, "I am always interested in knowing who they [students] are." The teachers mentioned using the hallway, lunchroom, homeroom, and time available outside of class to start conversations to get to know students better. Participant 2 said that "in conversations with students in class, and between classes, and during homeroom, I get to know a lot about them." Participant 1 explained that it is important to "know their interests" so that "they see we have an interest in what they do." Participant 6 explained that she "likes being genuine with the kids" and asking questions such as "do you have brothers and sisters, what's your favorite sport, what do you like to do- just getting to know the student." Participant 6 continued, "If they think you are interested, they will tell you more than you want to know." Participant 7 shared that "they may not tell you everything at once, but bit by bit a teacher gets to know a student's story." Participant 1 mentioned the advisory period as a time when teachers

bonded with students outside of an academic environment in a trusting, safe atmosphere. Teachers took opportunities to speak to students outside of school to show that relationships are important in every environment.

All the participants felt that being a relational teacher was essential for teaching and learning to occur. While talking about a situation with a student, Participant 1 said, "I know this child, and this is not typical of him." Knowing the student enabled Participant 1 to intervene when abnormal behaviors occurred. Participant 2, Participant 5, and Participant 6 noted that students do not care about what content is taught if the students do not feel known and cared about by the teacher. Participant 6 said that she tried "to establish a genuine relationship, because if I have a relationship with you, and I know that you care about me, then we can move forward." Participant 5 said that if he does not have relationships with his students, then teaching is just a job. He said there must be a genuineness in the relationship because if students feel cared for, they will do anything for the teacher. Even when tasks are challenging, Participant 5 said that a student would take risks because the student knew that the teacher had the student's best interest at heart. "The best way to get your content across is by building relationships, building those connections," Participant 5 shared. Participant 4 used humor to be relational with his students and started off the year by letting the students make fun of pictures of him. Participant 4 said that if he could make learning "more funny or silly or goofy then they are more willing to go through the boring stuff." Participant 2 used writing to relate to students. Participant 2 asked her students to write "a story about a change in their lives" explaining that she "learns a lot about the students" in the assignment. Participant 2 utilized writing assignments throughout the year to be relational and create connections with students.

Theme 2: Attentive

The NBCTs realized that middle school students often desired personal time and attention from their teachers, and the participants gave the students individualized attention. Participant 7 explained:

> I think many of our students crave their teachers' time and attention. We have so much on our plates but giving them some of our time in the morning or during planning periods—I think goes a long way to show students we care for them.

The participants also understood the importance of their role as listeners in the students' lives. Participant 5 shared that he was working on being a better listener each day. Participant 5 desired to be the person that students could "come talk to" that would "sincerely sit down listen and hear what they have to say." Participant 5 understood that sometimes he could provide advice and help, and other times, he needed to refer the students to outside sources. The necessary thing, he expressed, was "just being a good listener." Participant 1 said that it was important to be "a person who will listen to them" and "a person just simply willing to hear them out." Participant 7 advised to "reach out to them" and "give them time and attention when they need help." Participant 7 also suggested to create a "welcoming environment" and to "let them know you want to hear from them, and your door is always open when they need you." All the participants valued being a person the students could talk to at school.

Although they could not always understand the lives of the students, the participants expressed the value of being available to listen. Often the participants knew they could not fix the problems or change the circumstances for a student. The participants understood, however, that the role of the listener was to help the student feel heard, not to try to fix the student or the situation. Participant 2 described a conversation with a student, saying that "immediately my

heart broke for her, and immediately I wanted to fix it, but I also needed her to know that I heard her." Participant 6 described a time when a student was dealing with a death of a family member and how it was crucial "just being there in the moment with him, allowing him to experience what he needed to." Teachers knew the moments to speak and the times when simply listening to a student was appropriate.

The participants were quick to notice behaviors that were uncharacteristic of students. Teachers carefully noted when students were acting differently than usual and took the time to investigate why. Rather than reacting with discipline or reprimand students in front of a class when behavior episodes arose, the teachers pulled students to talk to them and find out more about the root of the problem. Calling the student out in class causes added attention to the student, but talking privately with the student allowed the teacher to share expectations and listen to the student's viewpoint of the situation. Participant 1 shared an example after a student uncharacteristically misbehaved in her class one day:

> So afterward, I let the others go and just kept him for one or two minutes, just to let him know that I noticed a difference. I wanted to know what was going on and if there was anything that I could do to make his day better.

Teachers explored the reasons why a student may act a certain way, reaching out to the counselor, administrators, or other teachers to help build a complete picture of a student's life. Taking the time to know more about individual students' circumstances enabled the teacher to better empathize with and support the students. The NBCT's attentiveness to the students helped them better meet students' emotional and academic needs.

Theme 3: Accepting

Participants shared the importance of accepting students without judgment and attempting to embrace and value students' differences. Participant 1 shared, "we have to be accepting of all kinds." Participant 2 said that she is "learning to accept people for who they are" in her classroom. The teachers recognized that the students differ in ethnicities, religions, races, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses, but valued the differences. The participants acknowledged their own biases and noted that everyone had biases, but the NBCTs overcame those biases to make every attempt to treat students equitably and fairly. Participant 3 said that it was "helpful to see our own biases, even if they are not something that we are overtly doing." Participant 4 said that it was important for him to "recognize that I have certain biases and not lean on those biases." Participants intentionally worked at being open-minded and accepting with their actions and words. Participant 6 tried to approach each student with an open mind by giving each student a "blank slate." Participant 6 was careful to avoid making assumptions. Participant 6 shared how she saw "each child as an individual," and she used a "non-judgmental approach" when getting to know the seventh graders. Participant 5 said he tried "to keep an open mind with all my kids because everybody didn't grow up the way I did." He continued explaining that "some of them grew up worse and some of the grew up better." Even though students shared information that could be shocking to Participant 6 at times, Participant 6 said she worked hard to be "non-judgmental" and allowed students to "share who they are."

When the students' beliefs and backgrounds were radically different, the teachers acknowledged that acceptance could be difficult. The participants expressed honest desires to be accepting and loving despite the differences. Participant 2 mentioned being careful about expressing personal religious beliefs in the classroom to demonstrate acceptance for all students.

Participant 2 did not shy away from teaching about religious references in literature when part of the curriculum or from discussing religion when the students expressed the desire. Specifically, teachers in the language arts and reading domains referenced using literature that represented various cultures and points of view to broaden the students' experiences and viewpoints. Participants used open-ended questions to spark student dialogue about different races, religions, and ethnicities. Participant 1 and Participant 2 found using literature as a safe vehicle for students to discuss characters' situations and choices. Stories were utilized to cultivate empathy and understanding of what challenges others might face. According to Participant 3, students of all races, ethnicities, religions, and socioeconomic situations came together while working towards one goal in putting on a performance or production. Teachers displayed thoughtfulness when approaching student differences and worked at demonstrating acceptance for all students.

Theme 4: Authentic

All seven NBCTs referenced the need to be authentic when relating to students. Transparency was highly regarded in the participants' classrooms for the students to see the teachers as people and not only teachers. Participant 1 said that students "need to see us as human beings first." Participant 4 shared that he tried to have "small conversations so they see I am not just a teacher and there is more to me." Participant 6 wanted the students to know that she is "not this perfect person and makes mistakes too." Participant 6 shared with her students "information about me, so they can get to know me as a person." Likewise, Participant 7 shared things "about myself with them" so that she could "find things we have in common and ways we can relate to one another."

Telling personal stories was a technique that teachers used to be open with students. Teachers told the students stories to share their personal lives and experiences and to share about

their adolescent struggles. Teachers consistently expressed the desire for students to feel understood. Teachers shared personal lessons they had learned about life and growing up. Stories could be happy, sad, or entertaining; the teachers just wanted to show their humanness. Participant 2 explained:

> I've always shared myself with my students, so I tell them stories. I'll be in the middle of a lesson and I'll say, "I have a story that goes with this, do you want me to share it?" They always say yes, because they want to miss class, but they don't realize I'm using the story to teach the lesson…I tell them about the best friend that betrayed me…I tell them the stories because that helps them to see me no longer as just a teacher but as a person.

Participant 2 shared specific stories with her students about teachers that made her feel loved and teachers that did not. Such conversations gave her the opportunity to tell students the kind of teacher that she desired to be.

The second way teachers shared stories was in connection with their content to make the concepts more memorable for the students. For instance, Participant 4 used stories about his children to teach science concepts, using stories to relate the science content to the real world. He said:

> ... if you don't have good stories to tell when you are teaching, then you shouldn't be teaching. You are crafting a dramatic play every single day to draw kids in and you should have something- some story that you tell about the content in some way and they will remember that better than anything else…Kids still come up to me and say, "I know precisely the way the stomach works because you tell that story about your children in the bathtub and how they slosh back and forth." I have stories about my children that I

use to explain phenomena in science. And they remember those stories and how they connect to them better than anything else. So be a storyteller.

Participants were reflective about their own past mistakes while remembering what it was like to be a middle school student. Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 6, and Participant 7 specifically referenced how reflecting on their mistakes as students helped them relate to students. Participant 6 found opportunities to share that she was suspended in the sixth grade because Participant 6 felt that it is important to let students know that she was "once a kid and made mistakes." Participant 7 reflected, "I find myself often thinking about my own thoughts and feelings when I was in middle school. I try to remember myself at my students' age and this also helps me to empathize with them." Teachers approached students with humility and were thoughtful and deliberate during student interactions.

Participants were authentic with students when they admitted mistakes and apologized to students. For example, Participant 5 said that he looked within himself when he has a situation with a student to reflect on what he might have done wrong. Participant 5 looked at the circumstances from the student's perspective and considered how he could rectify the situation. Participant 3 also mentioned that apologizing to students was something she did often and acknowledged, "I can't even count the amount of times I've had to tell a kid I'm sorry. I make mistakes and have to say, 'I'm still working on it, kids; I might get there before I die.'" Teachers recognized that apologizing was part of a relationship and openly expressed an apology to students when the need arose.

Theme 5: Socially and Emotionally Supportive

Many of the NBCTs showed a depth of understanding about the needs of adolescents and the teacher's role in adolescent development. The participants realized the challenges of

adolescence and the need to support students. The social and emotional needs of students were highly regarded and referred to by Participant 1:

> …but we have a lot of kids at the middle school level who struggle with different things. The kids come to school, and it's hard for them to take a chance on themselves because I think they have a fear of being defeated. It is almost like going through a breakup all the time. They know that it is going to happen, so why should the kids punish themselves with that kind of pain or hurt? And so, we have to change that mindset.

The participants indicated that their role was far more than teaching content; teaching adolescents also involved an element of counseling students through the turbulent middle school years.

The participants looked at the social, emotional, physical, and academic aspects of students and were aware that all were important in the educational setting. Participant 1 demonstrated an understanding of young adolescents when she explained, "They are middle school students first. They want to blend in. I have students that would say, 'Oh I want to be different as long as people will be different with me.'" Participant 5 shared about a student who had "different challenges going on mentally and physically" and how he needed to recognize the social and emotional needs of the student. Participant 2 said that "we have to give them the support that they need; if I want them understand Shakespeare, I have to meet their emotional needs first."

Part of understanding adolescents was not giving up on them when they were not achieving at their full potential. Participant 2 described trying "everything from A-Z" and, when that did not work, "trying the Greek alphabet" to show a relentless effort to give the students opportunities to be successful in the classroom. Participants also did not hold a grudge towards

students because they understood the changing nature of middle school students and the need to begin each day fresh and new. Participant 5 shared the importance of being a person that students knew they could consistently turn to. He talked about "being somebody that they can come to and talk to in confidence" making sure that he was always available and that his office door was always open.

Participant 1 pointed out the importance of being willing to adapt academic goals in order to meet social and emotional needs. Participant 1 paid close attention to what was happening in her room, and even if she had "the world's best lesson prepared," if she saw that something is amiss that would hinder learning, Participant 1 was willing to change directions or adapt the lesson for teachable moments to occur. Giving middle school students emotional support also involved the participants taking the time to understand a situation before disciplinary measures were enforced. Participant 1 talked about a conversation that she had with a student:

> That emotional support for her was saying, "we both recognize that you did some things wrong. You are in trouble, but that doesn't define who you are. You might have made some bad choices and done some things wrong in life. But good people make bad choices."

Participant 5 explained how emotional understanding helped a student who was not cooperating in his physical education class:

> I had to step back and say I know we are supposed to dress and participate, but at that moment I needed to take a step back and take care of the student. At that moment, I had to take a step back and try to understand his emotions, and in this case, it turned out good. That kid is back on track; I feel like that conversation with him— me taking a step back and trying to understand his emotions— it turned out good.

Participant 7 warned that it was important to "have patience when they are challenging." Even when students were challenging, the participants advocated for patience, understanding, and grace for the difficulties that adolescent students face.

Evidence of Quality

Validity

To validate the qualitative research in the study, two strategies were used as suggested by Creswell and Path (2018). First, the researcher sought participant feedback regarding the accuracy of the interview transcript data. Next, a peer-review process was completed by the researcher's dissertation committee through every stage of the data collection and analysis. The researcher conducted the research in a trustworthy manner by bracketing her experiences as a teacher to gain participants' insights without holding prior assumptions. To ensure that the findings were transferrable to other settings, the researcher used "rich, thick descriptions" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 263) when describing the findings.

Summary

Chapter IV showed interview data with NBCTs in one school regarding how the participants built relationships and cultivated empathy for middle school students. The NBCTs intentionally sought to know students and created ways to connect with students inside and outside of the classroom. Mindful about bias, the NBCTs promoted inclusiveness and respect for all students. The NBCTs were aware that empathy was difficult but understood the power of listening. The teachers drew from personal adolescent experiences to empathize and connect with students. Themes that emerged were that the NBCTs were relational, authentic, attentive, accepting, and socially and emotionally supportive with the students. Implications derived from the study and suggestions for further research will be discussed in Chapter V.

V. DISCUSSION

This study was designed to investigate how National Board Certified middle school teachers develop relationships and cultivate empathy with their students. Positive teacher-student relationships can contribute to students' academic success and social and emotional wellbeing, but a lack of connection to caring adults can contribute to students' failure (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013b). To effectively build relationships, teachers must consider how the students' cultures and differences affect student behaviors and ways of acting and thinking (Ikpeze, 2015). Empathy allows a teacher to seek understanding of a student's experiences (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018).

After the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was formed in 1987 to strengthen standards and define accomplished teaching in the United States (NBPTS, 2019). After completing and passing the certification process, Board Certified teachers have demonstrated commitment to students by showing that they know the subjects they teach, monitor and manage learning, reflect and learn from experiences, and involve themselves in learning communities (NBPTS, 2016). As defined in *What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do,* the document that describes the belief system of NBCTs, the first proposition specifically describes the relational and empathetic nature of NBCTs (NBPTS, 2016). Few research studies have investigated NBCTs in relation to classroom interactions; (Qualis, 2015); therefore, the goal of this study was

to examine the experiences of NBCTs in regard to their relationships with students.

Chapter V provides data analysis and the results of the qualitative study. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the study's purpose, design, and research questions followed by a description of the methods of data collection. Next, the interpretation of the findings and the discussion of the research questions are presented. The limitations of the study are then addressed and the implications for further practice discussed. Finally, the chapter concludes with recommendations for further research and a brief conclusion.

A case study methodology outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018) was followed in the research study. To that aim, the following research questions guided this study: (a) How do National Board Certified teachers build authentic relationships with middle school students, and (b) How do National Board Certified teachers cultivate empathy for middle school students?

The relational cultural theory provided a theoretical framework for the study. The RCT indicates that humans have an innate need for connectedness and that interpersonal connections foster human growth (Jordan, 2018). The RCT provided a perspective on teacher-student relationships that was rooted in teachers establishing authentic relationships with students, identifying the causes for disconnections, and recognizing the need for reconnecting with students when disconnections occur. Empathy is a tenet of the RCT because teachers and students affect one another's state of being through constant communication, and social and emotional competence is imperative in those teacher-student interactions (Purgason et al., 2016).

Method of Data Collection

The purpose of the qualitative case study was to explore the relational and empathetic nature of National Board Certified teachers with middle school students. The researcher requested interviews with the NBCTs employed at a large, diverse middle school in the

Southeastern United States, and seven teachers gave consent for participation. In order to address the research questions, seven on-site interviews were con ducted. The seven interviewees consisted of an English language arts teacher, a drama teacher, a reading specialist, a special education teacher, a science teacher, a physical education teacher, and a school counselor. The interview protocol guide (Appendix A) consisted of ten open-ended questions. During each interview, an audio-recording device was used to record the words of the participant. Following each interview, the researcher transcribed the audio files on a Google document and then shared an electronic copy with the participants, giving the participants editing rights. Each participant verified the accuracy of the transcriptions and made any necessary additions or deletions to his or her responses. After the interviews were completed and validated, the data were analyzed. While reading transcripts, the researcher recorded memos in the margins. The data was then color-coded according to themes found in the responses, and codebooks were formed to sort the data. The following five themes were derived from the data analysis: relational, attentive, accepting, authentic, and socially and emotionally supportive.

Summary of Results

The study added to the existing literature about National Board Certified teachers. In accordance with Proposition 1 in *What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do,* the participants in the study demonstrated that they were "passionate about building relationships" (NBPTS, 2016, p. 12) with students. The NBCT's passion for building relationships was reflected through the relational nature of their interactions and the acceptance and attentiveness they showed the students. The teachers focused on the wellbeing of the whole child by engaging students in a "social, emotional, intellectual, and physical basis" (NBPTS, 2016, p. 14). As earlier defined, an interpersonal perspective examines teacher effectiveness based on teacher-

student relationships (Newberry, Gallant, & Riley, 2013). From an interpersonal perspective, the teachers proved to be effective in relationship building and displaying the attributes described in Proposition 1.

Research Question 1: How do National Board Certified teachers build meaningful relationships with middle school students?

As previously referenced, researchers have asserted that teacher-student relationships are at the heart of a student's school experience (Brake, 2019; Gehlbach, Brinkworth, & Harris, 2012), and the participants in the current study found teacher-student relationships to be a foundational in their role as educators. As defined by Yonezawa (2012), personalization is the act of intentionally creating positive relationships with students in the classroom to encourage students' learning. All of the NBCTs demonstrated personalization when intentionally creating positive relationships with students.

The NBCTs referenced specific ways to get to know students at the beginning of the year and how the information helped them create individual connections with students. An intentional focus on individualization drove teachers to get to know students' names quickly and create lessons to find out more about the students' personalities and learning styles. Although the findings in the current study came from the teachers' perspective, Brake (2019) reported that students favored teachers who began the year with relationship-building activities and talked with students to get to know them individually. The current study affirmed Brake's (2019) findings emphasizing the importance of building initial connections with students. The NBCTs created one-on-one connections with all their students by speaking to students inside and outside of class and using intentional conversations to get to know the students personally. The opportunities for building relationships with students was viewed as a yearlong process, and for

some teachers, longer. Six participants mentioned maintaining connections with students that were no longer in their classrooms, validating that care for the student extends outside of the academic school year.

The NBCTs exhibited relational care towards the students. Relational care involves individualization and authenticity from the teacher (Cooper & Miness, 2014). The NBCTs desired for the students to view them as people and not teachers. Uitto et al. (2018) maintained that relational teachers provided students with wisdom about life by sharing personal stories. Likewise, the NBCTs in this study discussed personal stories with their students, either to engage them in learning experiences or to encourage them with life lessons. Cooper and Miness (2014) also asserted that relational care involves inquiring about students' individual wellbeing and personal lives (Cooper & Miness, 2014). All the participants showed concern for the students' social and emotional needs. The NBCTs discussed educating the whole child and the importance of valuing the students' social and emotional health.

In the previously mentioned study, Kashy-Rosenbaum et al. (2018) found teacher holds the role of maintaining positive interactions and relationships to create a positive climate for learning. Likewise, participants in the current study felt that positivity in the classroom and enthusiasm for teaching were important to create climates conducive to relationship building. For example, Participant 4 expressed how a passion for his content created an environment that helped students love the content and make personal connections with him. Wubbels (2012) asserted that trust, closeness, positivity regarding one another, and healthy communication are crucial qualities of relationships. Brake (2019) also found that students placed a high value on teachers who were trustworthy, patient, and understanding. Similarly, in the current study,

teachers found the traits of genuineness, honesty, and kindness as important for gaining and keeping the respect of students.

Just as Roorda, Komen, Spilt, and Oort (2011) and Yonezawa et al. (2012) found that positive teacher-student relationships were associated with higher motivation and engagement, the NBCTs in this study associated their teacher-student relationships with student engagement. For example, Participant 2 and Participant 5 specifically mentioned the association between their intentionally building relationships with disengaged students and how the interactions caused the students to have more motivation and participation in class.

Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013b noted that establishing healthy boundaries can be a source of confusion and stress as teachers balance curriculum and care but that boundaries can also allow for relational connections. Likewise, Participant 1 felt that creating structure and procedures also established consistency and enabled students to learn to trust and respect the teacher. For example, Participant 5 told three stories that demonstrated an understanding of establishing boundaries and maintaining consistency with students. Participant 5 showed kindness, patience, and consistency when students were struggling emotionally or not behaving appropriately, and because of his boundaries, stronger student connections occurred.

Attentiveness was especially evident in the study when teachers felt disconnections took place with students. The NBCTs took the time to repair the relationships by talking to students and attempting to resolve the situations. The NBCTs did not seek to be right, but instead they put the need for reconnection as a priority. To reconnect, the teachers sought out students privately to discuss issues, used written communication, took ownership of their faults, and tried to identify with the students' perspectives. Duffey and Trepal (2016) reported that disconnections are normal in relationships, but working through disconnection and then

reconnecting was crucial to relational growth and wellbeing. The NBCTs in the study recognized disconnections with students but sought to repair and restore relationships with students.

Research Question 2: How do National Board Certified teachers cultivate empathy for middle school students?

Jordan and Schwartz (2018) described a complex realm of empathy that surpassed teachers' acknowledgment of students' feelings which was characterized by teachers being touched by students' experiences. Each participant told stories where the teachers were touched by students' situations and shared genuine care with students. As a result, the teachers were able to support and form deeper connections with the students.

The findings corroborate earlier literature from Meyers et al. (2019) and Swan and Riley (2015) that emphasized the need for teachers to gain a context to understand the reasons for a student's behaviors. The NBCTs were aware that social and personal issues often held the reasons for student disengagement and misbehavior. The NBCTs sought to know about and understand the students' lives, both from the students and from surrounding school personnel and families. Even though it could involve extra effort, the NBCTs expressed the value of including taking the time to include others in gaining a whole picture of a student to meet the student's academic, social, and emotional needs. The awareness enabled the teachers to seek the students' viewpoints before reacting to situations with judgment and consequences and instead, develop empathetic connections with students. As noted, the NBCTs sought to know the students individually and consider their points of view. Swan and Riley (2015) explained that empathy involves awareness and understanding of another person's goals, beliefs, and feelings, and the NBCTs demonstrated this behavior consistently with students.

Meyers et al. (2019) outlined three types of empathy, and all were evident in this research study. For example, cognitive empathy, the mental act of taking students' perspective, was evident in the actions of Participant 3 with a student who had threatened to take her life. Although she did not understand why a seemingly small incident would instigate such an extreme reaction, Participant 3 attempted to approach the situation the way the student viewed it. Participant 4 demonstrated affective empathy with a student who was struggling with a mom's heart transplant and recent move, understanding that the student's emotions were affecting his academics. Participant 4 openly expressed his understanding and support to the student in the situation as well as helped him balance his emotional life to meet the expectations of school in the midst of trauma. Behavioral empathy is used to navigate expectations and set boundaries for students' behavior (Meyers et al. 2019). Participant 5 described using behavioral empathy when a student's behavior was reflecting the way authority was viewed in the home. Understanding that cultural differences were affecting the student's behavior, Participant 5 used behavioral empathy to express to the student the difference in norms and demonstrate a different set of expectations. Baker et al. (2008) found that teachers who handled behavioral issues with warmth and patience had more positive outcomes, and NBCTs displayed those qualities knowing they could impact student success.

Bullough (2019) advocated for teachers to be engaged listeners to ensure empathetic accuracy. The NBCTs repeatedly discussed the need to set aside time to hear what the students had to say. Bullough (2019) advocated that listening to students' stories creates social awareness for teachers and allows for teacher connectedness and compassion. Not only did the NBCTs listen to students to get to know them, but they were attentive to students to try to understand students' perspectives. Enkeleda (2017) noted that teachers' awareness of emotional factors

affecting the students' lives could help during crisis and give the students needed support (Enkeleda, 2017). Patience and kindness, especially when students exhibited emotional and behavioral issues, were evident in the NBCT's listened to the students' situations. Although most of the participants noted not always agreeing with students, all the participants knew that being open to the students' viewpoints was essential in establishing and maintaining teacher-student relationships. Participant 2 recalled a time when she failed to listen to a student's perspective regarding her gender preference and how the lesson taught her to put aside her personal opinions and understand the student. Teachers also recognized that they encountered situations every day where they could not empathize with students. Rather than projecting false empathy, as Warren and Hotchkins (2015) described, the teachers in this study practiced the art of listening and communicating genuine care.

The participants mentioned the need to recognize their personal biases to treat students equitably and fairly, knowing that biases could hinder relationship building and their ability to show empathy. Rather than focusing on differences in students' races, religions, and languages, the participants emphasized the need to recognize commonalities and appreciate uniqueness. The findings corroborated with the perspective of Allen and FitzGerald (2017) that teachers should be authentic and considerate of the diversity and races in their classroom. Participant 4 reflected on his own bias as a White male, because as Dexter et al. (2016) warned, relationships with minority students can be affected when the teacher mirrors the actions and behaviors of the dominant culture in the classroom.

Goroshit and Hen (2016) found that the higher a teacher's self-efficacy, the higher the teacher's empathy. Similarly, Spilt et al. (2011) reported that negative teacher-student relationships in the classroom were sources of stress and caused feelings of hopelessness,

affecting the self-efficacy of the teachers. The present study did not measure the participants' self-efficacy or empathy levels, however, interview data suggested that the NBCTs possessed a strong relational and empathic nature. As Goroshit and Hen (2016) found that teachers' social-emotional competence is related to teacher beliefs regarding personal efficacy and that strong teacher relations can be a product of high teacher efficacy, perhaps the NBCTs possessed high teacher efficacy. The conclusion cannot be made that holding National Board Certification gives a teacher higher personal efficacy based on the data in the study, but given the above mentioned findings, the idea could be an area for future research.

Study Limitations

Even though the study provided valuable data revealing the nature of relational and empathetic teachers, the study had several limitations. First, teachers that do not hold National Board Certification but build meaningful relationships with students every day were excluded from the study. Researching teachers that do not hold certification was beyond this study's scope.

The research was also limited by the selection site. Choosing one case study site excluded NBCTs from other schools within the school district and other schools outside of the school district. Although the school district had increased efforts to meet the needs of growing diverse populations, the middle school selected was ideal for a single case study due to the school-wide focus on relationship building. In addition, the Title 1 status and recent population growth has caused the school to focus efforts on connecting with new students and diverse students, making the site fitting for the research study. However, using the single site provided a limited population and a limited perspective for data collection.

Furthermore, the primary source of data came from participants' responses in interviews and did not include other sources such as classroom observations or focus group interviews. Also, the study analysis was derived from a small sample of seven participants. Participants participated in only one interview rather than interviews throughout a school year due to time constraints. Even though the participants reviewed and verified their interviews, the participants still could have a bias when responding to the research questions. The researcher identified and addressed bias prior to conducting the study by bracketing her experiences as an educator and approaching the study with a fresh viewpoint.

Finally, the study did not extend beyond the teachers' perceptions of developing relationships and cultivating empathy with their students. The researcher chose to focus on the teachers' perspectives and did not include the students' views regarding their relationships with NBCTs. Teacher perception and student perceptions may not be the alike. However, the researcher chose to focus solely on NBCTs and the importance of the quality of the teacher-student relationship for this population of educators.

Implications for Further Practice

Effective teachers develop relationships with students and foster a sense of care and community in classrooms (Wubbels, 2012). The quality of these relationships has the potential to impact students' academic and social lives (Roorda et al., 2011). When students feel connected to the faculty and other students in educational contexts, students experience greater success with the cognitive and affective aspects of school (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Teachers need to navigate relational development with students and resolve conflict when it occurs to contribute to positive student outcomes (Frymier & Houser, 2000).

The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the relational and empathetic nature of NBCTs. Even though one single case study cannot fully reveal how NBCTs build meaningful relationships and empathize with students, the participants had attitudes and practices that enhanced relationship building. The research from the study suggested that teacher attitudes such as attentiveness and acceptance helped teachers to establish student trust. Passion for teaching and authenticity from the teacher contributed to a positive classroom environment where students could feel safe. Teachers recognized the emotional needs of students and showed genuine empathy through listening and expressing care.

Teachers' progress should be measured by more than academics; the socioemotional aspect of teaching should be supported and encouraged by school administrators (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013c). Since teacher-student relationships contribute to teacher efficacy and lessen teacher stress and burnout (Spilt et al., 2011), supporting teachers' capacity for developing caring relationships with students is needed. Environments in schools can be highly demanding, and finding ways to encourage well-being can help to retain teachers and impact student success (Baroody, et al., 2014).

Pre-service teachers would benefit from teacher education programs that emphasize practices to help new teachers relate to students and understand how personalized classrooms can benefit behavior management (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013c). Claessens et al. (2017) asserted that teacher education and teacher development programs might include educating teachers on how to build relationships outside of the regular classroom settings, which participants in the current study verbalized as helpful spaces for getting to know students. As Warren and Hotchkins (2015) recommended, efforts also can be made to educate pre-service teachers regarding how racism affects language and professional decision-making. Pre-service teachers

and teachers in the field should be equipped to understand racial differences (Warren & Hotchkins, 2015). Also, as Warren (2014) noted, few teachers receive training to address the social and emotional components of teaching, and few instructional frameworks exist to apply empathy to social relationships in schools. Further, Uitto et al. (2018) urged for the recognition of emotions in teacher-student relationships and the need for understanding the meaning of emotions in teacher education. As students form positive bonds with teachers, teachers also develop sensitivity and towards the students' emotional wellbeing (Uitto et al., 2018). Many teacher education programs need to evaluate how pre-service are being prepared to meet the social-emotional needs of students and teach diverse populations effectively.

Recommendations for Future Research

More study is needed to understand the nature of teacher-student relationships and the impact relationships have on the many facets of adolescent life. In 2015, Qualis stated that more study was needed regarding the classroom interactions of NBCTs, and closer examination of the relational and empathetic nature of NBCTs could still add to the limited existing research. Further research could increase the number of NBCTs contributing information through a quantitative or mixed-methods approach. Including a larger sample of teachers would allow for more responses to be considered. Differences in teachers' perceptions of interpersonal relationships with students at the beginning, middle, and end of the year could be compared for growth or regression.

Conclusion

Teaching is a relational profession where a significant portion of the day is spent interacting with students. The nature of discussions and interactions contribute to the quality of the relationships teachers maintain with students. Empathy positions a teacher to connect with

students, enabling teachers to meet a range of students' academic, social, and emotional needs (Jordan & Schwartz, 2018).

This study added to existing body of research regarding teacher-student relationships and teacher empathy, focusing on the National Board Certified teachers. Other studies have evaluated the nature of teacher-student relationships and empathy as a professional practice (Cornelius White, 2007), but no studies have specifically examined the relational and empathetic nature of NBCTs. Overall, evidence presented in this study suggests that NBCTs created meaningful relationships and cultivated empathy with students by intentionally connecting with students inside and outside of the classroom and listening to students with the students' social-emotional needs in mind. The NBCTs used activities, assignments, and collaboration with others to gain insight about students to help build relationships. The NBCTs fostered relationships by showing inclusiveness and respect for all students and demonstrated empathy by drawing from and sharing personal adolescent experiences. In summary, NBCTs build relationships and cultivate empathy with students by being relational, attentive, accepting, authentic, and socially and emotionally supportive.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Interviewer: Tara Bensinger

Date:

Time:

Location:

Interview Questions:

1.	Tell me about your experiences building meaningful relationships with middle school students.
2.	How do you get to know your students individually?
3.	How would you define teacher empathy?
4.	When students have different backgrounds and experiences from your own, how do you monitor your thoughts and impressions about the students to acquire an understanding of them?
5.	Tell me about a time when you had to take the emotional perspective of a student and express genuine concern for them in a situation
6.	How do differences in background, ethnicity, race, and religion bring challenges in cultivating empathy and relationship building? How do you overcome those challenges?
7.	What do you think helps students to feel connected to you in your classroom and in your school?
8.	What kind of situations can cause a disconnect between you and students?
9.	What do you do when you feel disconnected from a student in order to reconnect and restore the relationship?
10.	What else you would like to share about teacher-student-relationships or teacher empathy?

Appendix B

Adult Consent to Be Interviewed

PROJECT TITLE
NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFIED TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF DEVELOPING TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS AND CULTIVATING EMPATHY: A CASE STUDY IN A TITLE 1 SUBURBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES

INVESTIGATORS
Tara Bensinger, Doctoral Candidate
Dr. Sarah Yates, Principal Investigator, Professor of Education, Southeastern University
Dr. Janet Deck, Chair of Department of Doctoral Studies of Education, Southeastern University

PURPOSE
You are invited to participate in a study to examine the relational and empathetic nature of National Board Certified teachers. The researcher chose to use NBCTs as the participants in the study because of the relational description of NBCT's in the first core proposition in the foundational document, *What Teachers Should Know and be Able to Do*. The researcher chose the research site because of the existing school focus on building relationships with students, the diverse population, and the Title 1 status.

PROCEDURES
In an individual interview, the researcher will ask you nine open-ended questions. Each individual interview should last approximately 30-45 minutes. The researcher will record and transcribe the interviews and ask you to check the transcripts for accuracy.

RISKS OF PARTICIPATION
There are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION
There are no benefits to participating in this study. The researcher desires to add to the existing research regarding teacher-student relationships and teacher empathy. If you are interested, the researcher will send you a copy of the results of the study when it is finished.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The researcher will not reveal any kind of participation information learned through your involvement in individual interviews. Audio will be transcribed and destroyed within five days of the interview. If necessary in reporting data, pseudonyms will be used to keep your identity confidential and the institution name confidential. Data will be kept on the researcher's password-protected computer until data collection is complete, then the matching list will be destroyed. All data will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study: all paperwork

about the research will be shredded. Manuscripts submitted for publication will not include any information about participants by name or location.

COMPENSATION
There is no compensation for participating in the study.

CONTACTS
You may contact any of the researchers at the following addresses and phone numbers, should you desire to discuss your participation in the study and/or request information about the results of the study:
Tara Bensinger, ttbensinger@seu.edu [redacted]
Dr. Sarah Yates, Principal Investigator sjyates@seu.edu 863-667-5416
Dr. Janet Deck, Methodologist jldeck@seu.edu 863-667-5737
Institutional Review Board: irb@seu.edu

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS
Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time.

CONSENT DOCUMENTATION
I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and of the benefits of my participation. I also understand the following statements: I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older.
I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form will be given to me. I hereby give permission for my participation in this study.

_____ _____
Signature of Participant Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

_____ _____
Signature of Researcher Date

Appendix C

Email Invitation to Participants

Dear Teachers:

As many of you know, I am a graduate student at the Southeastern University pursuing my doctorate in Curriculum & Instruction. I am inviting you to participate in a study that examines the perceptions of National Board Certified Teachers in developing teacher-student relationships and cultivating empathy with middle school students.

If you participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in one 30-45 minute audio-recorded interview.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and will not affect our professional relationship in any way and result only in minimal risks to you. Your identity will remain completely confidential, and you may withdraw from the study at any point throughout the study.

If you have any questions about participation in this study, you can contact me as the Principal Investigator and/or the chair of the research study.

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Tara Bensinger, ttbensinger@seu.edu [redacted]
Dr. Sarah Yates, Principal Investigator/Dissertation Chair sjyates@seu.edu 863-667-5416

Appendix D

Southeastern University IRB Approval

Southeastern University
IRB Reviewer's Review Sheet

Protocol #: 2019 ED 38

Exempt: Yes ☑ **No** ☐

Principal Investigator's Name: Sarah Yates **Today's Date:** 12/03/19

Co-Investigators: Tara Bensinger, Janet Deck

Project Title: National Board Certified Teachers ' Perceptions of Developing Teacher-Student Relatio

1. Does the research place subjects at more than minimal risk? **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

Minimal risk is defined as the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort is no greater than that ordinarily encountered in daily life or during routine physical or psychological examination or tests)

Notes: _____

2. If more than minimal risk, does the merit of the project outweigh the risks and are the benefits maximized and risks minimized? **N/A** ☐ **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

Notes: _____

3. Are there any ethical issues regarding the study's design and conduct? **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

Ethical issues may include but are not limited to the Belmont Report principles: respect for persons (voluntary, fully informed consent); beneficence (obligation to protect subjects from harm and secure their well-being); and, justice (benefits and burdens of research are fairly distributed)

Notes: _____

4. Is subject selection equitable? **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

If special populations are included the IRB should ensure that subjects can understand the research, give full consent, and voluntarily agree to participate, and they should consider any other possible special problems. Are vulnerable or special populations included in the research?

- ☐ Pregnant women
- ☐ Fetus/fetal tissue
- ☐ Prisoners
- ☐ Minors Under Age 18
- ☐ Elderly subjects
- ☐ Minority groups and non-English speakers
- ☐ Patients
- ☐ Mentally/Emotionally/Developmentally Disabled persons
- ☐ Behavioral Abnormalities, psychological or disease condition
- ☐ None of the above, Normal Healthy Volunteers

Notes: _____

5. Is the recruitment and consent process (including telephone scripts, ads, brochures, letters, compensation) fully described, appropriate, and non-coercive? **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

Notes: _____

6. Are risks (physical, emotional, financial, legal) to subjects minimized? **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

Notes: _____

7. Confidentiality of Data:

Are there procedures for protecting privacy and confidentiality? **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

Notes: _____

8. Is Informed Consent Included in the Application? **Yes** ☐ **No** ☐

Stipulate Missing Elements:

Is affiliation with SEU clearly noted?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Is the Faculty PI identified?	**N/A** ☐	**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Is the study faculty sponsor identified (if appropriate)?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Does the consent state the study purpose accurately?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Is it clear what the subject(s) will be asked to do?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Are risks or discomforts clearly and fully stated?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Are benefits clearly and fully stated?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Are alternatives listed (if appropriate)?	**N/A** ☐	**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Are confidentiality or anonymity issues addressed?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Is the PI's contact information included?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Is the IRB's contact information included?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Is it stated that the subject can withdraw at anytime?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Is the consent understandable at an 8th grade reading level?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Assent Form		**Not Required** ☐	
Is one needed (can the child really refuse to participate)?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Is it one page or less?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐
Is the language simple and sentences short?		**Yes** ☐	**No** ☐

Notes: _____

Additional Comments/Requirements by IRB:

RECOMMENDATION:

☑ **Approved as submitted**

☐ **Approved with stipulations as noted**

☐ **Approval Deferred; add'l information required** (additional IRB review required)

☐ **Not Approved**

Signature: IRB OFFICE **Date:** 12/03/19

Appendix E

School District Research Approval

Board of Education

[redacted]

Superintendent

[redacted]

To Whom It May Concern:

Tara Bensinger submitted a dissertation research request to [redacted] Board of Education. She has been granted permission to interview teachers at [redacted] Middle School for her dissertation. Student interviews are not included in this approval and will not be allowed.

Thank you,

[redacted]

Director of Curriculum & Instruction