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STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS IN AN ALTERNATIVE SETTING

by

Stefanie Soukup

A capstone thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Hamline University

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Capstone Advisor: Trish Harvey
Content Reviewer: Erin Mahnke
Peer Reviewer: Tim Davis

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“It’s the little conversations that build the
Relationships and make an impact on each student”
- Robert John Meehan

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Overview of the Chapter

When someone says the word “teacher,” what do you think of? Do you think of a person who helped you through a difficult time? Do you get upset and think this person was horrible and say to yourself, “I hated school?” Or do you think of nothing? There is a saying that has been passed around from teacher to teacher over the years, it goes: students do not remember what you taught them but rather how you made them feel. The more I teach, the more I believe in that statement. So, I started to ask myself the research question: Do student-teacher connections and relationships make a difference in our students’ academic success? Which is why I am studying the impacts of student-teacher relationships have on alternative high school students’ academic success in a Midwestern suburban school district. I want to increase my knowledge and understanding of the emotional impact teachers have on their students to increase student engagement within my own class. Throughout this chapter, the reader will learn about my journey to this research question stated above, how I got here and how it will impact my classroom and other professionals within this field of study.

My Educational Experience

Growing up, school was a huge struggle for me. I was one of those students who loved the social part of school: talking to friends, playing and watching athletic events and all of the fun school events. My struggles academically had nothing to do with my teachers’ lack of lectures and lesson planning but a lot to do with the lack of personal or

emotional connection. I never felt like I knew my teachers. It was the same routine; go to class, learn about a new topic, do an assignment, get a grade and then go to the next class and/or teacher. The lack of connections and the same routine day after day is something that I have been trying to avoid during my teaching.

When I started teaching I had no idea what I was getting myself into; I was like: “yeah, I have the fun subjects that everyone likes, Health, and Physical Education.” Those classes are easy and everyone loves learning about those subjects. Little did I realize, when I began working at an Alternative Learning Center (ALC), without a gymnasium and my own classroom it was not going to be that simple. As most educators understand, teaching at an ALC has a different student dynamic to it, and my first couple years of teaching were a struggle because I was developing lesson plans while trying to learn about this specific population of students. Probably the most interesting part of my entire first year was when I had students in class who were only a couple years younger than me; I was 23 years old and I had students who were 20 and 21 years old. Trust me, they did not respect me at all. They saw me as their peer and they tried to take advantage of me being gullible. However, after my third year of teaching something changed after one conversation.

The Conversation that Changed Everything

During my third year of teaching, I had a conversation with a coworker of mine that had a drastic impact on my teaching style and outlook. She asked me if I taught a relationships unit. I told her, “yes, of course,” and began to tell her all about my unit on Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD’s). She then asked me if I taught about healthy

relationships during that unit, so again I told her about the couple of lessons I teach that cover unhealthy and healthy relationships. Then she suggested that I teach an entire unit or quarter on healthy relationships because she felt like a lot of our students did not understand the difference between the two. She believed a lot of our students at that time were involved in unhealthy relationships. This conversation sparked my interest and I was so excited, I had so many ideas running through my head, and I knew how much value the students were going to get out of this curriculum. But then I thought, why is another faculty member telling me this stuff? Why am I unaware of my student's struggles? Why are students not coming up to me and talking to me about this stuff? I am the Health teacher after all. Why are they going to the Science teacher? I shifted my focus from lesson planning and constantly thinking about how I am going to teach something and what different teaching styles I can display during the lesson, to getting to know the students on a personal level by sharing my experiences with them. This changed my teaching forever. I started out really slow, by asking simple questions like: "how was your morning or afternoon?" or "what did you do last night?" but then the connection grew stronger during my relationships unit. I started to share about my life experiences and struggles, which naturally helped more students to open up to me because we were relating to one another. This empathy or connection caused my student's attendance to go up, students were passing more of my classes and completing their assignments, and they were behaving better during class.

However, I did start to notice a handful of students who I was connecting with would do well during my class but then go to another class and behave poorly. I thought

to myself, why is he or she being so wonderful for me but not behaving for other teachers? What is the difference? In my opinion, that difference was my ability to connect with my students and make them feel comfortable around me versus the other teachers who were lacking the ability to make those connections. This was why I wanted to research the relationship between students and their teachers. From my standpoint, they mattered, but I was not sure why or how they mattered. I just knew those relationships were important. This brings me to my research question: how can a relationship between a student and their teacher make a difference in their education.

Literature Preview

Alternative learning is a school for students who are struggling in the traditional school setting. Alternative students are often called students who are “at risk,” because they are behind on their credit and will likely not graduate from high school in a four-year period. These students tend to have poor school experiences, and oftentimes have a difficult time communicating and interacting with adults and their peers (McGee & Lin, 2017). “The quality of student-teacher relationships has been shown significantly associated with students’ social functioning, behavior problems, engagement in learning activities, and academic achievement” (Roorda, et al., 2011, p. 493). There are three theories discussed in the literature review to help understand how a teacher’s relationship affects their students, those theories are: Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1972), Nodding Theory (Burke, Noland, and Rheingold, 2012), and Attachment Theory (Roorda et al., 2011). Attribution Theory looks at the student’s perception from casual encounters and how those encounters affect the student’s academic outcomes. If a student feels like he or

she can do something they will likely be able to do it, but that “can do” attitude is attributed through positive interactions with their teacher (Weiner, 1972). The Nodding Theory suggests that if three conditions (caring, engrossment and reciprocity) have been met then the student will feel like the teacher cares for them and based on that caring feeling the student will be motivated to learn. Attachment Theory suggests that the student’s relationship with their parents affects their educational outcome. Meaning, if the student feels positive about his or her parents, they will perform well in school. There are two intervention programs that will be discussed in the literature review as well. In my experience, the most popular intervention used in an alternative setting is called Positive Behavioral Intervention Support (PBIS). PBIS is a three-level system that helps support students’ needs. Check and Connect (Murray & Malmgren, 2005) is the other program. Check and connect sets aside a time for the students and teacher to go over grades and behaviors.

Hoping to Learn

Throughout this thesis, I am hoping to learn more about my students and gain more teaching techniques that create positive interactions. I take a lot of pride and think that relationship building is one of my better skills as a teacher, but there is always room for improvement and growth. I want to grow as a teacher so I can help my students be successful in their academics and future professional lives. As you will read about in chapter two, alternative students are often at-risk students who do not get along with adults. I would like to be one of the adults who change the students’ opinions about

teachers and other adults. Becoming a support system and role model for my students is very important to me and I would like to further enhance those skills.

Research Importance

This research project is important because it directly impacts my students' grades, the school environment, the classroom environment, and the students' classroom behavior. Chapter two will discuss much more in-depth about the research studies that have been conducted that have proven all of those points. However, I do think that this research is directly important to me and my co-workers because it is research being conducted on our students who we see every day. This study will provide us with a brief insight of how our students feel about going to our school. As a staff, the majority of us try to make a collective effort to build connections but nobody (that I am aware of) has actually surveyed our students directly to see what they think and feel about school. Sometimes I (and I think most of my co-workers) wonder if we are doing a good job? Do we need to work on our relationship building skills? Do those skills make a difference in an ALC setting?

Conducting a weekly staff meeting is one of the many tools our staff uses to build stronger connections with our students. Our staff is very small; we only have nine teachers, one counselor and two administrators. During the meeting, we spend the majority of the time discussing students and our concerns about the events that are going on in their personal lives. Those insights are valuable because it helps develop empathy and connections to understand and know our students better. It also allows our staff to address any additional support systems or services that the school or county can offer the

student. In part, I wanted to do this thesis on student-teacher relationships because I would like to discuss the results with my co-workers to show them the impacts they can make by building connections with their students.

Summary

Chapter one discussed my personal journey to get to this research question: Do student-teacher connections and relationships make a difference in our students' academic success? I am studying the impacts of student-teacher relationships have on alternative high school students' academic success in a Midwestern suburban school district because I want to increase my knowledge and understanding of the emotional impact teachers have on their students to increase student engagement within my own class. While I did not connect with my own teachers throughout my personal educational experience, I feel like it is important to connect with students on a personal level and I believe that teaching in an alternative setting makes those connections even more valuable for the students. The conversation and reflection I had with my co-worker about creating a longer relationships unit had a huge impact on how I teach today. The research I am conducting will affect my classroom and my coworkers' classrooms as well. It will provide an insight on how our students feel about the school and if those feelings affect their grades. Chapter two provides the reader with a literature review. The literature review will go through in-depth research that has been conducted by other professionals in the educational field. The literature review will discuss the following subjects: defining alternative learning, comparing a traditional school and alternative school, defining

student-teacher relationships, student-teacher relationships, and classroom techniques for building positive relationships with students.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Overview of the Chapter

The literature review will examine previous professional research that has already examined student-teacher relationships. Do student-teacher connections and relationships make a difference in our students' academic success? This chapter will examine the following themes: alternative education, relationships, relationship theories and classroom interventions that can be used to build relationships with students. The purpose of this research is to educate myself on how my actions and relationship building skills affect my students' academic success, by specifically focusing on an alternative setting.

Alternative Education

Introduction

This section will discuss the definition of alternative learning and alternative students. It will compare an alternative setting with a traditional school setting, and explore the educational barriers students and teachers may face in an alternative setting. In my opinion, it is very important to note the differences between a traditional student versus a student in an alternative setting because a student in an alternative setting can potentially face different barriers in their lives that will ultimately affect their lives. By understanding this it can help other educators gain some insight and knowledge on how

to help their students. To quote Carl Sagan: “you have to know the past, to understand the present” (Sagan, 2020).

Defining Alternative Learning

All students have the capability of learning new information; some students enjoy hands-on activities, while others enjoy lecture-based learning. Every student deserves the opportunity to learn and earn their high school diploma. Eighty-one percent of Minnesota students will earn their high school diploma within a four-year period, but that leaves 19.1 percent of Minnesota students who are not completing their diploma in that same four-year period (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016). This is part of the reason Alternative Education (AE) programs exist. The programs are trying to bring the graduation rate up and help the “at risk” students become successful within non-traditional educational settings. Unfortunately, every year there are one million ninth-grade students who will not graduate in four years, and this is automatically putting them in the at-risk category (McGee & Lin, 2017). “In responding to the devastating dropout crisis, many public schools have embraced AE programs as a viable solution when students do not meet the goals, standards, and requirements of traditional educational settings” (McGee & Lin, 2017, p. 181).

Alternative Education is a broad term because alternative can be anything from a student who is learning from their home all the way to an online student (Aron, 2006, p. 3). In 1988, Minnesota legislators approved the state's first Alternative program (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016). The program served around 4,000 students from four different buildings (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016). Thirty-nine

years later, there are 560 different sites with Alternative Education/this includes 242 Area Learning Centers, 53 Alternative Learning Programs, 18 Contracted Alternatives Programs, and 247 Targeted Services Program, all of which serve roughly 157,935 students in the state of Minnesota (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016).

The alternative programs that this thesis will focus on are known as Alternative Learning Centers or ALC's. The Minnesota Department of Education (2016) glossary defined an ALC as a place "designed to help students who are struggling in a traditional school setting and are for students who are considered to be at risk of academic failure (as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school)" (p. 1). One of the many goals for ALC's is to bridge the gap for at risk students in order to avoid the levels of poverty they may face without a high school diploma.

Alternative Students

Students who are labeled to be at-risk have a number of different characteristics about themselves but most ALC students display at least one of the four most common characteristics or risk factors: failing class/behind on their credits, legality issues, students from a single parent home (typically an unmarried mother), and students who need financial assistance from the state (Aron, 2006, p. 8). There are also a lot of students in the alternative setting who experience highly stressful events during their past and unfortunately, those experiences can lead to substance use/abuse because they lack the coping skills to handle life's stressful events (Arpawong et al., 2015, pp. 475-476). Some of the stresses include: childhood sexual abuse, witnessing violence and being victims of

abuse. In 2016 the Minnesota Student Survey Interagency Team, including the Minnesota Department of Education, Minnesota Department of Human Services, Minnesota Department of Health and the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, conducted a survey called the 2016 Minnesota Student Survey Tables: Alternative Schools and Area Learning Centers, here are some of the results:

1. 26% of males and 27% of females stated that they had a parent or other adult from their household who physically harmed them in some way
2. 31% of females and 9% of males stated that he or she had a boyfriend, girlfriend or serious dating partner physically hurt him or her on purpose.
3. 17% of males and 19% of females rarely found healthy ways to deal with the difficult things in their lives.
4. 78% of males and 69% of females smoke tobacco products

Why are these statistics important? In particular, youth who attend alternative high schools may experience greater levels of stress than their mainstream high school classmates. A few of those stressors include: emotional and physical abuse or victimization, loss of parents, cycling in and out of foster care, being a witness to violence and other occurrences that cause them to feel disconnected from mainstream society (Arpawong et al., 2015). “Generally those students have left regular high schools, because of excessive truancy, poor academic performance, drug use, violence, illegal activity or disruptive behavior” (Arpawong et al., 2015, pp. 475-476).

On top of having higher amounts of stress, alternative students tend to have gaps in their social skills with adults and their peers. Those gaps can be described as

acquisition deficits or performance deficits. Acquisitional deficits are “can’t do” problems, such as I can’t do this or I can’t do that. Performance deficits are considered “won’t do” problems, such as I won’t do this or I won’t do that (McGee & Lin, 2017, p. 183).

Alternative Learning vs Traditional Learning Setting

According to Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.68, subdivision 1, the purpose of alternative education is to provide students who are struggling in a traditional setting with more options to help them succeed in their educational experience. A traditional school setting is often characterized as a setting where students and teachers meet at the same time during the school week to learn about a topic. Typically traditional classrooms have higher class sizes, small amounts of social interaction time and tend to be more lecture based. Research has shown that smaller class sizes will allow for more student-teacher interactions and those interactions can lead to an increase in their educational success, better behavior during class and a higher quality of instruction from the teacher (McGee & Lin, 2017).

Within the State of Minnesota there are four types of learning programs available for their students: area learning center, alternative learning programs, contracted alternative programs and extended learning. Contracted alternative programs are available to our students during the core day (meaning during the traditional set of school hours) and extended learning after/before school. The extended learning allows students to earn credit outside of their regular school hours (Minnesota Department of Education). One example of this is earning credit through a work seminar program, in which the

students earn elective credit by attending work. Another example is independent study, in which the students complete projects for a specific subject and then earn credit. For example, a student could read a Harry Potter book and write a book report to earn English credit. The last example of an independent study is online classes, where students have the option to complete online courses for credit. With those three alternative options students can earn credit during their regular school day and also earn credit after/before school hours. It is a great way for students to catch up on their credits. The fourth program is called Targeted Serves, which offers extended learning programs only (Minnesota Department of Education). The extended learning programs allows the students to have extra instructional time either before or after regular school hours, that will allow them to get caught up on their classwork (Minnesota Department of Education).

Educational Barriers

The most common educational barrier that students and teachers face when it comes to building relationships is access to resources. When schools and teachers have more money that typically results in more resources for our students by allowing them more learning opportunities and gets them highly qualified teachers. Teachers often have great ideas and want to help their students, but they lack the resources that are needed. Money is even more impactful to alternative settings because they do not receive as much as a mainstream school district. Putting this lightly, the students and teachers who need more of our state's resources are not receiving them, which is causing a barrier for our students to properly learn.

Schools earn money through the General Education Revenue. The General Education fund breaks the money down through ADM's (or Average Daily Membership). Typically, students have a 1.0 ADM but they are allowed to have a maximum of 1.2 ADM's in a given school year (Minnesota Department of Education). ADM is basically a formula that calculates the percentage of time the student attended school, so think of 1.0 as 100 percent and 1.2 as 120 percent. If a student was attending school 100 percent of the time then the school receives the full amount of revenue for that student, but if a student attended school 50 percent (or 0.5) then the school would only get 50 percent of the funding for that student (Calculating ADM, n.d.). Why does this matter? It matters because the more students that are enrolled in the school equals more money coming in from the State, which in turn equals better facilities and higher paid, more qualified teachers. However, things are much more complicated in the Alternative setting because they have a fluctuation of student enrollment numbers, so they are constantly dropping and adding students throughout the school year. Compare that to a traditional setting where the number of student enrollment stays relatively consistent throughout the school year. Another barrier related to money is that many school districts that are underfunded tend to have a higher amount of students and their families struggling and are considered to be a part of the low socio-economic categories (Murray & Malmgren, 2005).

Murray and Malmgren found:

For example, many urban schools suffer from a lack of sufficient resources and/or a mismanagement of resources, which can negatively impact the number of teacher vacancies, opportunities for teacher professional development, and

availability of time for establishing and maintaining supportive teacher-student relationships. (p. 140)

Teachers who work in an alternative setting also struggle with managing basic routines, have few support systems and can struggle with their own mental health (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). It is important to note that not every teacher feels those struggles and each district has its own unique characteristics and support systems. With that being said, the teachers who receive little support from their administration can feel like they are being blamed for their students' lack of success. That blame can lead to frustration, hopelessness, isolation and ultimately put a strain on meaningful student-teacher relationships with their students (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). The changing dynamics of the student needs have also changed, which has led to teachers feeling more stressed out and overwhelmed (Yu et al., 2018).

All of these barriers can impact this research study directly because if a teacher feels any of those barriers and frustrations, they may not focus their attention on building stronger connections with their students, because they are too focused on other things. In my opinion teachers need to make the time within their lessons to help understand their students' better, and this is even more critical in an alternative setting.

Relationships

Introduction

As educators we have a lot on our plates: we plan a lesson, grade papers, be a support system for our students and many more things. Sometimes we forget how our own actions and communication skills can impact our students. This section is going to

discuss how a relationship between a student and a teacher can positively or negatively affect the students' educational needs.

Defining Relationships

Teachers and students spend a lot of time together. It is estimated that teachers spend over a thousand hours during a regular school year with their students (Sparks, 2019, p. 1). This time together allows teachers and students to connect on an emotional level. Research also has shown that this relationship is very important for not only the student and teacher but the overall education of that student (Cooper & Miness, 2014; Roorda et al., 2011; Yu et al., 2018). Having a quality student-teacher relationship can improve a student's social skills, classroom behavior and engagement, and their overall academic experience (Roorda et al., 2011, p. 493).

Positive Relationships

Positive student-teacher relationships can be best described as “mutual understanding, warmth, closeness, trust, respect, care and cooperation” (Yu et al., 2018, p. 334) between one another. During a child's adolescence, the bonding that happens between their teachers can allow him or her to feel a sense of belonging and can lead to confidence for those students. A research study from Roser et al. (2000) found that during the adolescent period, the perception of the child and how they feel about their teacher will predict their academic success, motivation, and emotional adjustments later in their lives (as cited in Yu et al., 2018).

A research study by Krane, Ness, Holter-Sorensen, Karlsson, and Binder (2017) discussed the idea that student-teacher interaction needs to be a mutual responsibility,

meaning that both the student and the teacher need to be willing to take part in the interaction. If either the teacher or student is unwilling to interact with one another then that relationship will ultimately fail (Krane et al., 2017).

Cooper and Miness's 2014 study found the following:

Many students perceive agency in co-creating their relationships with teachers by regulating the extent to which they allow teachers to understand them. The researchers recommend greater attention to the development of understanding as virtue within high schools as a middle ground between a complete lack of understanding and extensive relational understanding. (p. 264)

As students get older, they tend to form more personal autonomy with their teachers, which is why teachers should be reflecting on their communication skills with their students. Teachers need to reflect on their good and bad communication skills and understand that their communication skills make a difference in how their students perceive him or her (Krane et al., 2017). If a teacher has good communication skills by providing their students with the proper emotional support, the likelihood of their students being successful will be higher. On the other hand, if a student feels negatively about their teachers' communication skills that may lead to lower grades, poor work habits and disciplinary issues (Roorda et al., 2011, p. 494). There are also some at-risk adolescents who have a difficult time adjusting to their own personal, social and structural issues that can lead to their "disengagement, disciplinary problems, and structural realities can lead to disengagement, disciplinary problems, alienation, and decreases in motivation and academic achievement" (Yu et al., 2018, p. 334). Despite all

the information people know about developing positive relationships with their students, there has been a decline in the quality and quantity of student-teacher interactions and student engagement through a students' education (Yu et al., 2018).

Negative Relationships

Similar to how teachers can make their students feel emotionally comfortable, they can also make their students feel the opposite, with negative relationships.

“Adolescents who are performing poorly in school may rely more heavily on teacher support than high performing students” (Murray & Malmgren, 2005, p. 138).

Unfortunately, a lot of teachers who need to provide their students with more support are lacking the resources that they need. “Teachers in such settings experience isolation, they may become fiercely competitive for scarce resources, and they rarely have time, energy, or resources to develop and sustain meaningful and effective relationships with high-risk students” (Murray & Malmgren, 2005, p. 141). This can take a toll on both the students and teacher.

Oftentimes students who have negative feelings towards their teachers and school, in general, will not succeed in the traditional setting and will be better equipped for an alternative school setting because it allows teachers to give that student more attention (McGee & Lin, 2017). Those same students are at risk for higher emotional and behavioral problems within the classroom. There is evidence that “suggests that conflict in early teacher-student relationships is more strongly associated with the long-term outcomes of children who are experiencing early behavioral problems than it is among children who are not at risk” (Murray & Malmgren, 2005, p. 138). According to Krane,

negative student-teacher relationships can also lead to high levels of conflicts between the student and teacher. Once a student has established that a relationship is negative it can be extremely difficult to overcome. This is mostly because there is a potential power struggle between the student and teacher. Students who feel negatively also have a tendency to think that their teachers do not care for them, are not interested in their success and do not want to help them with their school work and their problems (Krane et al., 2017). Those same students feel like their teachers are unfairly treating him or her or their classmates. This is why it is important for a teacher to engage in bonding activities with their students. Bonding activities can include: casual conversations that promote personal relationships, problem solving, teachers addressing students' personal needs, smiling, showing care and trustworthiness (Krane et al., 2017, pp. 382-384).

Relationship Research Theories

This section is going to discuss three different educational theories that teachers can utilize within a classroom. It is very important to note that all of these theories are used to help students and there must be ethical considerations that need to be thought about as well. These theories are used for educational purposes and should not be used for unethical reasons. Teachers are positive adult role models for our students and our students need to know and understand that they are in a safe place. With that being discussed the three theories in this section are: attribution theory, Nodding's theory, and attachment theory.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory discusses the importance of teacher interactions with their students (Martin & Collie, 2019, p. 862). “Attribution theorists investigate the perception of causality, or responsibility manifestly guides subsequent behavior” (Weiner, 1972, p. 203). An example of this theory is if a student has a positive experience in their science lab then they will likely enjoy science. On the other hand, if a student has a frustrating or negative experience in math class they might associate that math class negatively and that will then affect their behavior to learn (Weiner, 1972). Self-perception is also involved with the attachment theory, a student might look at themselves and think “I will never succeed” in this class, which can cause the students motivational levels to drop causing him/her to think “I can’t do this” and therefore they will not do the class work (Culatta, 2020). On the other side of this theory if a student believes they can do something they will likely build up enough motivation to complete the task or assignment.

Noddings Theory

Nel Noddings care-related theory originated in the early 1980’s. The theory suggests that care is the central foundation for student success (as cited in Burke, Nolan, & Rheingold, 2012). Nodding believed that three conditions needed to be met in order for caring to exist. “To start, take a simple schematic account of A caring for B. On Noddings account, this means: “A cares for B- that is, A’s consciousness is characterized by attention and motivational displacement, performs some act in accordance with care, and B recognized that A cares for B” (Burke, Nolan, & Rheingold, 2012). Basically, Noddings care theory stated that when someone shows another person love and attention,

that person will be more motivated to learn. The goal of this theory is to increase growth, prevent harm and meet the needs of the other person. There are three characteristics that are displayed for a potential caring encounter/moment with someone, those are: engrossment, motivational displacement, and reciprocity. Engrossment means that you are giving that person care at that present time and you are listening to the person's needs, which creates empathy for another person. Motivational displacement is "described as directing one's motivational energy to the service of the person cared for, toward the needs and goals of the cared-for, or their project" (Burke, Nolan, & Rheingold, 2012, p. 3). Reciprocity means that the person recognizes that the other person cares for him or her, but it is important to mention that the care might not be a give and take relationship. One person might be more caring than the other person. So how can Nodding's theory be connected to school teachers and students? When a teacher displays and connects with a student, then that student will grow his/her communication skills and develop a positive interaction between the two people. That connection or positive interaction can lead to learning motivation and positive classroom behavior. Simply put if a teacher shows a student he/she cares and makes positive connections/communications that will lead to more successful student academics (Smith, 2004).

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory is based on the mother-child relationship, which connects the idea that if a student has a positive relationship with their parents, he or she will have more positive feelings towards adults (Roorda et al., 2011). Parents who give their child

the emotional support and security that is needed while growing up are vital to the attachment theory because “sensitive teachers can serve as a secure base from which children can explore the school environment and become engaged in learning activities” (Roorda et al., 2011, p. 495). This theory also suggests that a child who is receiving that emotional support will likely feel more comfortable in class/school, which will lead to active learning and engagement. Examples of positive attachments characteristics teachers and students can have among each one another include: “a high degree of warmth, open communication, support, tolerance, empathy, interest and respect” (Krane et al., 2016, p. 378). On the flip side to this theory, if a student is not attached to his/her parents and not receiving the emotional support he or she will likely have a difficult time making those connections with other people and adults. Unfortunately, that may lead to a decrease in their academics and personal relationships throughout their lives. Therefore, it is critical for our students to receive that emotional support from both their parents and teachers because once that foundation is laid it will follow him or her most of their lives.

Conclusion

Attribution theory involves interactions between students and teachers, that can potentially form positive or negative experiences. Therefore, if a student has a positive experience in class, they will likely enjoy the subject and be open to learning more in that subject area. Nodding’s theory of self-care exists when the three conditions of caring, engrossment and reciprocity are met. The theory suggests that if the three conditions are positive for the student, they will likely be more motivated to learn. However, on the other side of things, if the conditions are considered negative by the student, they will

likely be unmotivated to learn during class. Finally, attachment theory is based on the relationship a student has with his or her parents. The student is connecting their relationship with their parents to other adults in their lives and ultimately their teachers'. Under this theory, if a student has the proper emotional support and security then they will likely feel positive towards their teacher. That support will then lead to the student being more willing to learn during school.

Classroom Teaching Techniques

Introduction

This research project has examined different ways the teacher can change their classroom to help support positive student-teacher interactions, but now we will be exploring interventions for the entire school. This section will be examining two different intervention programs that have been successfully utilized in schools to help support their students who are needing more support from their teachers and school. The two interventions are: Positive Behavioral Intervention Support and Check and Connect.

PBIS

Positive Behavioral Intervention Support is commonly known as PBIS. The PBIS framework began in the mid-1990s and has been increasing in its popularity among the public educational system, especially in the alternative education setting (Lampron & Gonsoulin, 2013). It has also been implemented as an intervention tool to help students who have experienced some type of trauma in their lives, have mental health issues, and/or physical health problems. The idea around the programs is to help keep students

out of the juvenile system by connecting him or her with their community. The main goal is to improve school safety by promoting positive behaviors.

According to the “PBIS: What You Need to Know” website (Lee, 2014), there are six guiding principles to the PBIS program. Those principles include: every child can properly learn behavior, early intervention is key, every child is different so the proper support needs to be provided for each student, the ways schools teach behavior should be scientifically researched, document student progress and finally use that data and documentation to resolve behavioral issues.

Since the principles are based on the students' specific needs and every student/school is different, there is a three-tier system that school staff can use to help implement the program. Tier 1 provides the lowest amount of intervention; it is described as being implemented to the entire school population. This universal tier teaches students respect, good behavior, and school expectations. At this level, the school might give their students rewards for displaying positive behavior, but the important part is that the teachers are recognizing the good behavior and giving those students praise. Tier one has shown to work very well in an alternative school setting by decreasing behavioral problems during class and increasing students' social skills (Whitcomb, Hefter, & Barker, 2016, p. 25).

Tier 2 builds upon tier 1 expectations but also adds another component for the students who are struggling with those basic behaviors and expectations. Therefore, this tier of support is not implemented to the entire school, but it is for a specific group of students who need more help. Schools will provide these students with support groups,

where he/she can practice positive behaviors and receive feedback from their teachers. An example of this is if a student continues to disrupt class, he/she might be put in a group or class with other students who are struggling with the same behavior (PBIS: Positive Behavioral Intervention & Support, 2019). During the group or class time, the students learn a variety of techniques and strategies they can utilize to fit his/her specific needs. This also provides a safe environment for practicing those techniques and strategies.

Tier 3 also has all the components of tier 1 and 2 but again it builds upon itself, so there are even fewer students who would be considered to be in the tier 3 category. Tier 3 is sometimes called individualized prevention (Lee, 2014; PBIS: Positive Behavioral Intervention & Support, 2019). This is considered to be the most intense form of intervention and support that is offered by the school. Everything this tier is individualized support and will fit the needs of that specific student who is struggling to perform in the other two tiers. This is also normally when an academic plan is put into place with students where they go over academic goals and progress (PBIS: Positive Behavioral Intervention & Support, 2019). They check in with someone periodically to reflect on the progress or lack of progress a student has completed over a period of time (Lee, 2014).

Check and Connect

Check and connect is a school program that is used to help monitor and check in with students and give them the potential added individual support they may need (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). “Homeroom or advisory periods are prime points in the

day for students to review their behavior from the previous day and set goals for a successful day to come” (Whitcomb, Hefter, & Barker, 2016, p. 25). Murray and Malmgren wrote about a study that Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair and Lehr conducted in 2004, when they investigated adult and student interactions. Their research involved increasing the interactions between teachers (who they called monitors) and students. They wanted to see those interactions that would lead to an increase in student attendance and classroom engagement (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). This investigation was conducted in a 20-month period of time, where they focused on late elementary and early middle school-age students. During this study, the researchers had adult monitors meet with students during the school day. They set aside specific times for those two people to meet so everything would remain consistent. The monitor’s job was to connect with their students and families to help them achieve high educational expectations and provide a support system for each student. The study found that the higher quality relationships that were built during this check and connect time predictor the success for student attendance and academic engagement (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). Therefore, if there was a low connection during the check and connect time the student would likely have lower attendance and achieve less academic engagement (Murray & Malmgren, 2005).

The school that this thesis is focusing on implements both the PBIS and Check and Connect forms of interventions. Check and Connect is utilized during our fifth-period advisory, where the students check in with their teachers to look at grades and talk about personal or academic issues or problems. These teachers or advisors provide the students and/or families with government resources they may need. The PBIS has been

implemented throughout the entire school, but there are specific tier 2 classes that have an added support system for our students. During this class time, the students go through classroom and social behaviors where they can talk through different situations and practice those situations with their classmates. Tier 3 is mostly implemented in the same way as the check and connects interventions through their advisory teacher. However, as an additional added support, some students meet with our administration on a weekly basis to discuss positive and negative classroom behaviors. Usually the administrators take on more of a mentoring role with these students (similar to a teacher's advisory role).

Chapter Summary

Minnesota first started implementing Alternative Education in 1988 to help at-risk students complete their graduation requirements. Today there are over 560 Alternative Education sites in the state of Minnesota. Alternative Education differs from traditional education because the student population in the alternative setting are students who are considered at-risk due to being behind on their graduation credit requirements. Alternative students have experienced more life stressors and have poor coping skills compared to a traditional student. Alternative Education has smaller class sizes and the teachers have built-in time to build positive connections or relationships with students during advisory or homeroom periods. When a student displays a positive relationship with his or her teacher or administration staff member, they will likely feel more motivated to learn, be emotionally stable in school, display lower behavioral problems during class time, attend class more frequently and pass more classes. The opposite is

said for negative relationships. When a student forms a negative relationship with a teacher or staff member, he/she is likely to have lower grades, display poor classwork, disciplinary issues, and will likely not graduate on time. There were three relationship theories discussed through this literature review, those included: Attribution Theory, Nodding's Theory and Attachment Theory. Attribution Theory investigates the idea that forming simple or casual connections and communication will lead to a positive experience for students to form the can-do attitude about a class. Those positive feelings then lead to the student believing they can complete a task during the class and will likely perform well. It also states that if a student has a frustrating experience in class he or she will be less likely to perform during that class period based on the can't do feeling they are experiencing. Nodding's Theory of care suggests that if a student feels like the teacher cares for him or her, they will be more motivated to learn and grow as a person. Attachment Theory is based on the student's previous experiences with adults and/or their parents. If a parent has given their child the emotional support he or she needed as a child, that child will then perceive adults in a positive manner. This child will likely feel more comfortable in a school setting, display little behavioral issues and perform well in school. Finally, there are two interventions used to build connections with students, those are: Positive Behavioral Intervention Support (PBIS) and Check and Connect. PBIS is based on a three-tier system, where each tier builds on the previous tier. Tier one is typically used for all of the students and tier three is an intervention support system to only a select few students who need it. PBIS is based on the student's needs and provides students time to practice their skills in a safe environment. Check and Connect is time for

teachers and students to build connections by talking and going through behavioral issues and successes, go through grades/credits and allow time for the student to express his or her concerns or frustrations about their lives or school. Moving forward chapter three is going to discuss the methods that will be used during this thesis.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Overview of the Chapter

I am studying the impacts of student-teacher relationships have on alternative high school students' academic success in a Midwestern suburban school district because I want to increase my knowledge and understanding of the emotional impact teachers have on their students to increase student engagement within my own class. Therefore, I am asking the question: Do student-teacher connections and relationships make a difference in our students' academic success? This is important to me because I teach in an alternative setting, with students who have little motivation to learn. I think building up those connections and having positive interactions with my students will help them succeed in their academics.

Chapter one gave the rationale for this research project and chapter two was the literature review where former experts researched the impacts a positive and negative student-teacher relationship has on his or her student's academics. It was very clear in chapter two that a teacher's relationship-building skills affect how a student feels about their class and/or school, which affects student motivation and academic success. This chapter will move from analyzing past professional research to the research methods conducted for this thesis capstone. Chapter three lays out the research design, explains the participants and setting, the research procedure, how the research data was analyzed, and the research ethics.

Design/Methods

The research that was conducted for this capstone thesis includes mixed methods research study that involved both quantitative and qualitative questions. Quantitative research is defined as a “systematic investigation of phenomena by gathering quantifiable data and performing statistical, mathematical or computational techniques” (Surendran, 2019, n.d, p. 1). This research gathers information and data through student survey data and student report cards. The survey used the Likert scale format. A Likert scale is a four to seven-point scale that measures a person’s attitudes or feelings towards something or someone (McLeod, 2019). This research study consisted of a four-point scale rather than a seven point scale because it will force my students to answer the questions by allowing them to decide one way or another. The reason for doing this is because I have found that the students who are in my classes tend to not take their time reading and reflecting on their answers. Meaning that if there is a neutral option they might fill in all the neutral answers and may not take this survey seriously. Qualitative research is looking for a deeper understanding of a problem or question that is being studied (McLeod, 2019). This study used qualitative research in the comments part of the questions and during the interview portion of this research study. This allowed the students to respond to the questions with an open-ended answer, meaning they will be writing about their opinions. Since this research study used both qualitative and quantitative methods, this is considered a mixed methods research project. I also believe that adding the qualitative

portion of the survey will allow me to get a deeper insight or perspective of the students' because it allowed them to write about their thoughts.

Rationale for plan

The rationale for this research is for me to educate myself on student-teacher relationships and allow me to gain insight into my own students by conducting a survey. All of this information will be utilized in my future classroom by allowing me the opportunity to understand more of my students and develop a connection with all students. Since I have an interest in relationship building, I would like to see if there is a connection between the students who are feeling positive and passing more classes, compared to the students who are feeling negatively and not passing classes or do those student-teacher connections not make a difference for her students. The mixed methods research study allowed me to have concrete number data with added student comments. Finally, all of this information gave me the opportunity to grow as an educator by reflecting on the positive and negative outcomes of this research.

Participants/Setting

There were 36 students who voluntarily participated in this research study. This thesis was conducted during quarter 4 (March 30th through June 4th). Each participant had previously attended more than one high school during their school career. Therefore this is not the first high school they have attended. Each participant has fallen behind on their high school credits and is enrolled in an alternative school, so they can get their school credits back on track. Each participant lives in the same midwestern suburb in Minnesota and is between the ages 16 and 19 years old. The participants who filled out

the survey completed it through an online survey platform. Each participant had two weeks to complete their survey. They completed the survey during their own time period and were only allowed to complete the survey one time.

Procedure

The students took a survey on their feelings about their relationship with their current teachers and school administration (see Appendix). It is important to note that this survey did not single out any teacher or student; it was only used as a research tool to see if the student had positive or negative feelings towards their teachers/school administration. After all of the surveys were completed, I placed the students into three different groups. The first group of the students were those who felt positive about their current school program, the second group was the students who felt negative about their current school program, and finally, the third group was the students who felt neutral about their current school program. How did the researcher split up the students into the three groups? I have added up each student's scores and then gave the student an average score. The group the student was placed in was based on their average score.

After the survey was completed and the students were put into their correct groups, then I analyzed their third quarter grades. Remember, each quarter consisted of three different grading periods, also called modules. Then I looked for a correlation between each student's survey responses and the amount of classes they passed or failed during quarter three. Passing classes means the students received a letter grade of a D- and above. During this study, I disregarded the students who did not complete the entire quarter because students are consistently enrolled or dropped from the school program

and I wanted to create as much consistency as possible. After all the grades and surveys were completed I analyzed my research.

Analysis

The first item that I analyzed was the student survey. As you can see the survey involved eight questions, with each question having four different responses. The reason for giving the participant four response options was because it forced the participants to decide on an answer. They were not given a fifth response option because I did not want the students to only choose neutral options and I wanted them to think about their answers. After each response, the participants also had the option to explain their reasoning for their response. In order to place the students into the correct category (positive, neutral, or negative), I calculated each student's average mean score and then placed them into the correct category based on their mean score. Students who had an average score of 2.5-4.0 were placed in the positive category. Students who had an average score of 2.1 and 2.49, were placed in the neutral category. Finally, the students who had an average mean score of 2.09 and below were placed in the negative category. Those category numbers were picked based on the four possible responses to each question (meaning that each student could decide: one, two, three or four on each question). Four meant that the student strongly agreed with the question, three meant that the student agreed with the question, two meant that the student disagreed with the question and one meant that the student strongly disagreed with the question. If you take all of the questions and average them out, 2.5 is the half-way point, so I decided to base the categories on that. After the student was placed in the correct category, I analyzed

their grades to compare how the student feels about the school and how many classes they passed or failed.

Ethics

All of the students and teachers who were involved with the survey will be volunteers. There was no punishment not taking the survey. The students and their parents were notified about the survey through their school email that was sent out from one of the district secretaries. Parents had the option to opt out of this research study; by either ignoring the email notification or by contacting me directly. All of the research data will only be used for educational purposes and there were no names linked to any of the information. This research study has received district approval from the Superintendent to conduct his or her research and has been following district policy and Hamline University research policies.

Hypothesis

My hypothesis for this study is that roughly 45 percent of the students will display positive feelings about the school, 30 percent of the students will fit into the neutral group and the remaining 25 percent will feel negative about the school. I am hoping to find that the students who display positive feelings about school will be passing 75% or more of his or her class and the neutral students will be passing roughly 50% of his or her classes, and the negative group of students will be passing 20% of his or her classes.

Chapter Summary

This research study consisted of a student survey that discussed the students' feelings about their teachers and school administration. The survey placed the students

into three groups, students' who displayed positive feelings, students' who felt negatively and students who felt neutral about their teachers and school staff. After I put the students into a group, I looked at the students' quarter 3 grades to see if there was a correlation between those feelings and them passing or failing their classes. I conducted this research study to gain insight on my students and to examine if building connections with my students makes a difference for them academically. All of the research that was conducted was completed in an ethical manner, all of the students who participated were volunteers, and the information will remain confidential. I am hoping to find that positive feelings will lead to passing more classes and negative feelings will lead to failing more classes. The upcoming chapter will discuss the results of this research study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Chapter Overview

Chapter four will review the results of the research. The chapter includes an analysis of each individual question and summarizes the results. I am studying the impacts of student-teacher relationships have on alternative high school students' academic success in a Midwestern suburban school district because I want to increase my knowledge and understanding of the emotional impact teachers have on their students to increase student engagement within our own class. Which is why I am asking the question: Do student-teacher connections and relationships make a difference in our students' academic success? This chapter goes in-depth by trying to answer that question by giving a student survey and exploring the students' grades to see if there are any connections between how the students feel about their school/teachers and their grades. This chapter goes over the results of that survey and the grades. The chapter will analyze each survey question, list the student average survey scores, go over student grades, and finally give a conclusion of the results.

Survey Results

This section analyzes the results from the student survey because I wanted to answer the question: Do student-teacher connections and relationships make a difference in our students' academic success? The survey was attempting to gain insight on my students' feelings towards their teachers and school staff. There were a total of 36 students who voluntarily participated in the student survey out of the 147 possible

students. Of the 36 students, 22 students identify as female and 14 students identify as male. Every student who took the survey had an average score of 2.625 or higher, which means that every student fit into the positive category and there were zero students who met the neutral or negative feelings categories. After the students completed their survey the researcher looked to see if there was a connection between their feelings about teachers and grades. I looked at their grades from quarter three to explore how many classes the students passed. Here were the results (as shown below in Table 1): thirteen students who participated passed 90-100% of their classes, three students passed 70-89% of their classes, six students passed 50-69% of their classes, nine students passed 20-49% of their classes, and finally five students passed 19% or below of their classes. This next section breaks down how each survey question was answered.

Table 1

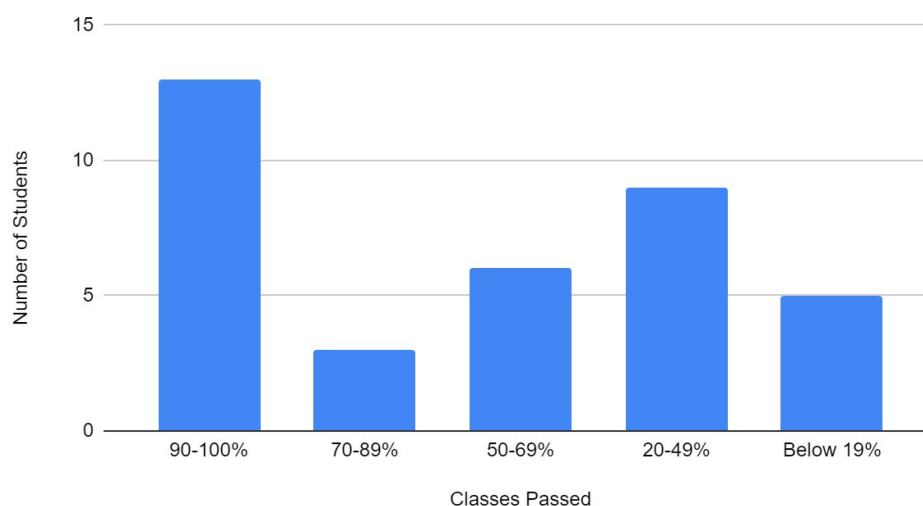
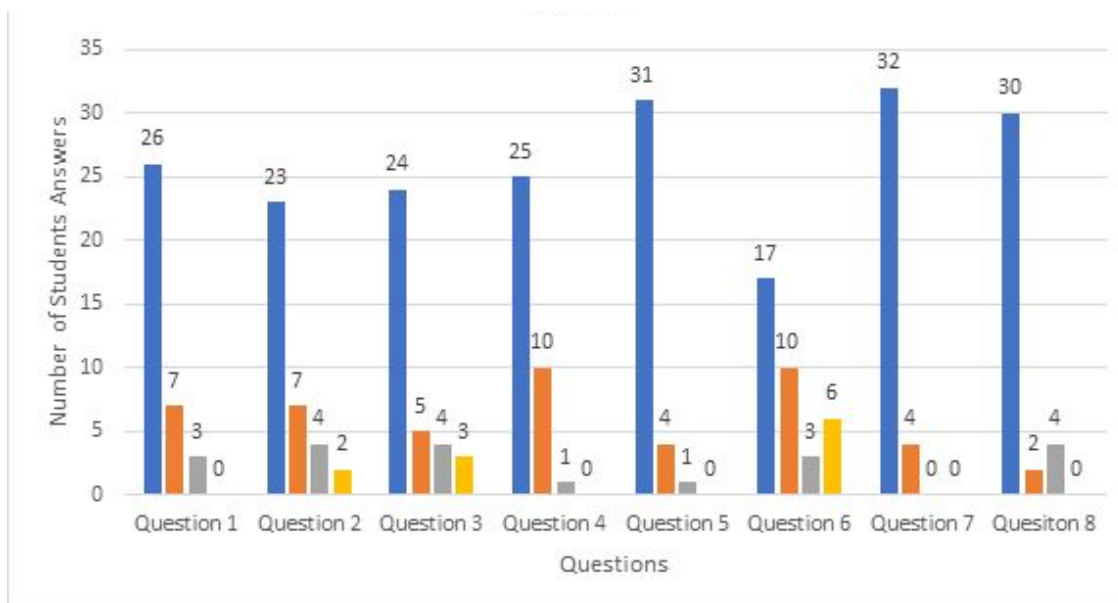
Percentage of Classes Passed by Students

Table 2

Responses to Survey Questions**Question One**

The first question that the students were asked on the survey was to compare their previous school experience to their current experience. This question was important because these are alternative students, meaning they came to our program to get help graduating due to their lack of credits or other situations that were written about in chapter two's literature review. Question one was: How would you rate your relationships with your teachers compared to your teachers from other schools? Most of the students answered this question with its highest rate (number 4), meaning that their teachers at their current school had a stronger relationship than their former teachers. Seventy-two percent of the students rated their current teachers at a 4, 19% rated their

current teachers at 3, 8% of the students rated their current teachers at a 2 and zero percent rated their teachers at a 1. This information can also be found above on Table 2.

After reviewing the results from question one, there have been a lot of positive relationships that have been developed between teachers and their students. One student said “I feel like the [teachers here] are more open with the students and want to build a relationship with the kids rather [than] the main high school, they are just paid to give out a letter grade and that’s all they are going to do.” Another student wrote, “[My] teachers connect more with their students and treat them like family.” While another student wrote “I feel more connected and more trusting to the teachers here [than] my old school and I actually receive help from teachers here.” Those were the positive experiences and comments that the students wrote about but there were also students who indicated a two on this question. They said comments like: “I am new to the schools, so I don’t really know anyone,” “I just haven’t really been in school [too] often,” and “teachers at my old school liked me just as much as [my current] teachers.” The last comment was interesting because the student did not indicate if his or her experience was positive or negative with his/her previous teachers.

Question Two

The second question on the survey was: I feel like there is at least one teacher or staff member who I feel comfortable talking to about my feelings. Krane et al. (2017) explored the importance of student-teacher interactions and how both the teacher and the student need to be willing to participate in those interactions. If one person does not want to participate then the connection is lost. Again, most of the students answered the

highest rating to this question, 23 of the 36 rated a 4, 7 students wrote in a rating of 3, 4 students rated 2, and finally 2 students rated this question at a 1. This information can also be found above on Table 2. Most of the students who rated this question low wrote in similar comments like this one “I don’t like talking about my feelings.” However, there was one student that wrote in something that stuck out, he/she wrote: “I did have one teacher who I felt like I could talk to, but he stopped teaching there.” This student clearly made a connection with a teacher who was here last school year but has since moved onto another school district, so they may feel a bit lost or unconnected with their teachers and school community. They feel like there is nobody to talk to about their feelings. It’s important that students feel like they have an outlet or someone to talk to. not only does it help them learn communication skills, it allows them to form a positive connection and/or experience with their school and community. Those interactions may seem small, but they can play an important role in the students’ educational experience. One student wrote “I’ve been able to [talk to my teachers] already, which has really helped me keep focus on schoolwork.” Another student wrote in “[my current] teachers are better at connecting with students personally and always make sure someone is on the right path.”

Question Three

The third question from the survey was very similar to question two, with the idea that communication with their teachers and staff is important. The third survey question was: If I have a problem and need to talk to an adult, I feel comfortable discussing my feelings with at least one teacher or staff member. There were twenty-four students indicating a 4, 5 students indicated a 3, 4 students indicated a 2 and finally 3 students

indicated a 1. This information can also be found above on Table 2. Some of the students wrote about how they have trust issues and do not feel comfortable talking to anyone about their feelings because they feel like if they share their actual feelings, then someone will use that against them in some way. Being at an alternative school setting this is not all that uncommon; students tend to have many negative life experiences with both adults and their peers which can cause them to shut down and hold everything inside. There were many students who wrote in a teacher or staff member who they felt comfortable talking with and one comment stuck out, "I know they won't judge me." That statement is important because if those students who are having trust issues felt the same way as the student who doesn't feel judged then maybe those students with trust issues would be able to open up more about their feelings. Krane et al. (2017) wrote about how older students develop a personal autonomy with their teachers and stressed the importance of a teacher's communication skills. Students are only going to share what they want with their teachers because they cannot force that out of them. Depending on the teacher's communication skills it can affect how a student perceives them and therefore affects how much the students are willing to share. If a student feels like a teacher is judging them then they will not be as forthcoming, but if they feel like they are understanding, caring, and comfortable around them, then they will be more likely to have meaningful discussions. Unfortunately, the students who are at risk (which are all the students who participated in the survey) are more likely to have a difficult time with those meaningful discussions (Roorda et al., 2011). The next question in the survey discusses caring.

Question Four

The fourth question in the student survey was: Overall, I feel like the majority of my current teachers and/or school staff care about me. Twenty-five students answered with a four, ten students answered with a three, one student answered with a two, and zero students said one. This information can also be located from Table 2 on page 45.

Here are some of the student comments:

“I’m actually passing my classes and have spoken up for what I need more”

“I feel like they care a lot more about their students and really want what’s best for them”

“[Teachers] are more supportive”

“The teachers seem like they really want us to succeed and I really appreciate that”

“All the teachers I’ve had really [tried] to get to know me and talk to me every day. I remember one teacher making a really nice comment about how I lit up the room with my energy when I walked in on a day I was really upset, and it turned my day around”

There was a neutral comment that I found interesting, it was: “I wasn’t so close to a couple teachers because they didn’t seem so friendly but I could tell they cared about me.” Even though this student did not think the teacher was the nicest he/she still felt or knew that the teacher cared for him. The student who answered with a two said that they

just had not been in the alternative school program all that long, so they are a little unsure. Question number five shifts the focus from caring to respect.

Question Five

Question number five was: Overall, I feel like the majority of my current teachers and school staff treat me and other students with respect. Thirty-one students answered with a four, four students answered with a three, one student answered two and zero students answered one. This information can also be located from Table 2 on page 45. Chapter two defined a positive relationship as having a mutual respect between two people and that respect or bond can lead to a sense of belonging and confidence for those students (Yu et al., 2018). Chapter two also discussed how that respect can have an impact on the students motivation to learn and their academic success (Yu et al., 2018). Many students' taking this survey felt like their teachers are respectful to not only them but to the other students as well. Here was one comment from a student "[from what I have seen] the teachers are always fair with all [their] students and treat everyone equally and with respect." Another student wrote in "even when the teachers I've witnessed have been disrespected, they still treated the disrespectful student with the most respect." The student who wrote in a two for his/her answer wrote "sometimes I get treated with respect and sometimes I don't." The next question in the survey discussed a students' motivation for passing and failing classes based on their teachers.

Question Six

The sixth question on the survey had by far the most variety of answers from the students. The question from the survey was: if I like or dislike a teacher, I am more likely

to pass or fail his or her class. There is research that indicates that if a student likes their teacher, they are more motivated to learn, and if a student dislikes a teacher they are more likely to be less motivated to learn. As previously discussed in chapter two, a student's perception of how they feel about their teacher will predict their success in the class (Yu et al., 2018). At-risk students tend to rely more on those perceptions compared to a student who is in a mainstream classroom (Roorda et al., 2011). Now, to the results of the question: seventeen students answered four, ten students answered three, three students answered two and six students answered one. Therefore about 75% of the students who took the survey said that the way they feel about the teacher is a big indicator or whether or not they will pass the class and 25 percent stated that their feelings about the teacher did not impact them passing or failing the class. One student wrote: "I have to have a connection with a teacher in order to do well. If I do not have a good connection, I feel like it takes a toll on my schoolwork for the class." While another student had the opposite reaction and wrote, "If I didn't like a teacher, I'd suck it up." So, there was more of a variety of opinions on this question. The seventh question on the survey takes it a step further from question six by discussing if they feel like teachers are helping them pass their class. This information can also be located from Table 2 on page 45.

Question Seven

The seventh question on the survey asked the students: from my overall experience in my current school program, I feel like my current teachers and staff are doing their best to help me pass class. eighty-eight point nine percent of the students answered a four and 11.1% of the students answered the question with a three. Please

refer to Table 2 (on page 45) for a visual aid. One student wrote “all [of the] staff care about me. I feel my experience here has helped me shape into the person I am today and teach me that I can be successful.” Another student wrote: “they don’t just tell you what you need to do, they know exactly where we can get it and how we can do a good job at it.” The final comment that came from a student was “[this school program] has always been a place for students needing a second chance that means passing classes and [they do] their best to provide.” The next section is going to discuss the eighth survey question about post educational plans.

Question Eight

The final question on the survey was: from my overall experience at my current school program, I feel like the teachers and staff are helping me with my educational and post-educational goals. Thirty students answered 4, two students answered 3, four students answered 2 and zero students answered 1. All of this information is on page 45’s Table 2 as well. The students who wrote a lower score down said comments like “I don’t know my goals, yet” and “I manage my own goals.” The students who wrote in a higher score said that this school program was preparing them for job and college by taking career placement examinations, field trips to job locations and listening to college and career presenters.

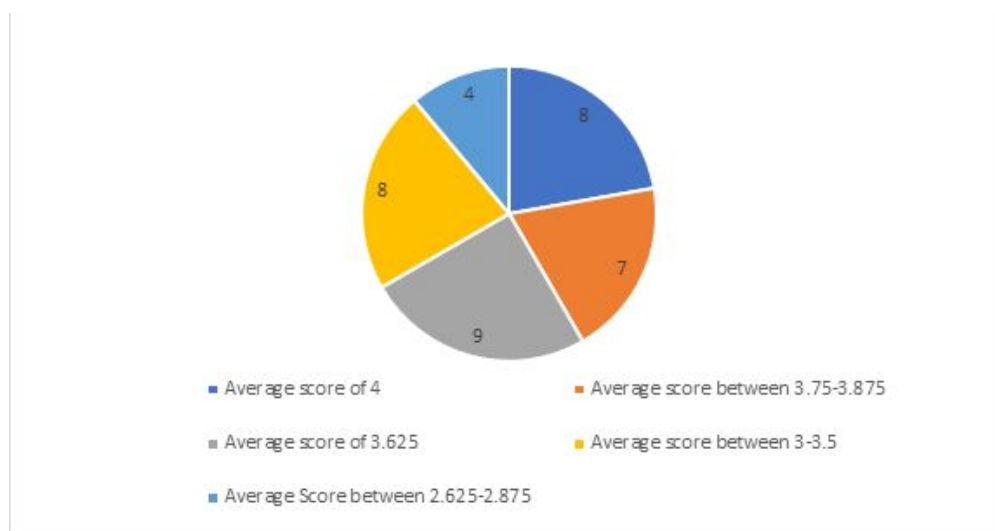
Student Averages

After the students took the survey the researcher then averaged out the students’ scores to place them in three different categories. Students who had an average score of 2.5 or higher belonged in the positive category, students who had an average between

2.1-2.49 were placed in the neutral category and finally the students who had an average of 2.0 and below were put in the negative category. Eight students had an average score of 4, seven students had an average score between 3.75-3.875, nine students had an average of 3.625, eight students had an average score between 3-3.5, and finally four students had an average score between 2.625-2.875. There were no average scores below 2.625. This information is found below on Table 3.

Tabel 3

Average Survey Scores



Student Grades/Interviews

Once the students received an average score, the researcher then looked at their grades to see if they passed or failed their classes. Thirteen students passed 90-100 percent of their classes, three students passed 70-89 percent of their classes, six students passed 50-69 percent of their classes, nine students passed 20-49 percent of their classes and finally five students passed less than 19 percent of their classes (see Table 1 on page 44). If I were to compare these results with the overall student population, it would be

very similar to this research study. The overall student population, there were 62 students out of 147 who passed more than 50% of their classes and there were 29 students out of 147 who passed more than 75% of their classes.

The final question on the survey asked the students if they would be willing to participate in an interview through either the phone or the internet. fifty-two point eight percent of the students were not willing to participate but there were 47.2 percent who said they would participate. However, when the researcher emailed the students for times and days to set up the interviews, there were no responses from the interviews. Luckily, the survey asked the students to explain their answers so there were many quotes from the students, that have been written about in this chapter.

Research Study Conclusion

This research study shows that there is a connection between students feeling positive about their teachers and them passing their classes. Twenty-two out of the thirty-six students who took the survey and scored positive on it passed more than 60 percent of their classes. However, this study did not show a connection between students who feel negative about their teachers and them failing their classes.

Chapter Summary

Chapter four discussed the results of the survey and student grades. Every student who participated in the survey fit into the positive category, meaning there were zero students who fit into the neutral and negative categories. While every student consistently said that they felt positive about their school setting, not every student answered the questions the same way. Question number six had the most variety of answers because it

was based on the idea of them passing or failing classes based on their feelings towards the teacher. Even though the majority of the students said that if they had a positive relationship, they would be more likely to pass their class, there were still a handful of students who said that the relationship part did not matter. After the students took the survey the researcher looked at each student's grades. Even though every student felt positive about the school, not every student passed all their classes. Thirty-six percent of the students passed over 90% of their classes, 8% passed 70-89% of their classes, 16% passed 50-69% of their classes, 25% passed 20-49% of their classes, and 13% of the students passed less than 19% of their classes. The research study found a small connection between the students' grades and their feelings. However, the study did lack the negative students' responses and feelings because they ended up being all positive students.

The next chapter of this research study is chapter five. Chapter five will be the final chapter in this paper and it will be a reflection on this research study, the limitations of the study, future research studies or projects and how these results will be communicated.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Chapter Overview

This research studied the impacts student-teacher relationships have on alternative high school student's academic success in a midwestern suburban school district. I wanted to study this topic because I work in an alternative setting and I would like to increase my knowledge and understanding of the emotional impact teachers have on their students to increase student engagement within my own class. This is why I explored the question: Do student-teacher connections and relationships make a difference in our students' academic success? Chapter five is the final chapter in this research study. The chapter covers the information I have learned and provides a literature review reflection, a limitations section, implications/communication of the study, and finally a conclusion.

Major Learnings and Literature Review Reflection

As I sit back and reflect on this entire research study and process, I realize that I have learned a lot of new information about relationship skills. This was my first time conducting a research study and writing a paper that required a lot of in-depth information. I learned about the important impacts both negative and positive relationships have on our students and how we are affecting the students academically.

Nel Nodding's theory about care being the main foundation for student learning and success had the most impact on me personally and professionally. As you have read about in both chapter two and four, the Nodding theory suggested that if care exists

between the two people then the student will feel loved and then be motivated to learn. Working in an Alternative setting, I personally think or wonder if students know that I (or we as a staff) truly care about them and want them to succeed in life. We only want what is best for them, and we want them to feel like they have a support system that will help them achieve their goals. Before this study I really wondered, do students' know that we care? I knew that some students know that we cared but after reading the survey responses from the students, it was very apparent that they knew we cared for them for whatever they needed. Almost every student had a teacher, who they could talk to because they felt like that teacher or staff member cared for them. I think that Nodding's theory is important for all teachers to know about, but even more valid for alternative learning teachers because we often get lashed out at by our students (or they just are acting out) but in a weird way we as teachers are taking on a much bigger role than educating them: we end up being a parental figure (Smith, 2004).

Attachment theory is another theory that has played a critical role in my teaching and learning (Krane et al., 2016). Attachment theory looks back at how the students feel about their own parents and connects those feelings to learning/other adults (Roorda et al., 2011). The theory suggests that students who feel emotionally supported at home while likely connected more with their teachers and then that will naturally increase their likelihood of academic success (Roorda et al., 2011). Now again, in alternative school setting we are going to have a wide range of students that range from having literally no emotional parental involvement to parents who are wanting to know everything about their child. Unfortunately, most of the students who I tend to have in my classroom have

little to no parental stability or involvement in their lives. Therefore, the attachment theory is so important, we need to connect to our students on an emotional level and be one of their emotional support systems. Many of the students said they could talk to their teachers because we were not judging them for their past actions, and we were there for them no matter what.

The final research that has been an important role in my teaching is the check and connect school program that was discussed in chapter two (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). Check and connect is used in schools to set aside a specific time during the school day for teachers and students to discuss their academics, behavior, goals, and anything else that the student needs support in (Murray & Malmgren, 2005). We use this at the school I am currently teaching in, we call it our advisory period. It is a 30-minute class period that is not structured in the same way a traditional class is structured because we use that time to go over grades/credits, goals (both academic and personal), go over anything going on at school and to discuss any behavior issues. This class is called advisory period, so every student has what we call an advisor. This advisory period is used as one of the most significant strategies that we used to help support our student's behavior issues. An example of this is when our staff is discussing a student and their struggling behavior, rather than getting administration involved we might tell their advisor about our concerns. Then the advisor (who has developed a positive relationship with the student) will talk to the student about their behavior and will help support the student by helping them realize that maybe their behavior was inappropriate and they will typically go over ways to correct the behavior. I personally like this because it allows the teacher who they

feel connected with to discuss what is really going on, they are connecting on an issue and then they can help support them (or care for them/make an attachment). The next section that you will be reading about will be discussing the limitations of this research study.

Limitations

There were a couple of limitations with this research study that I believe are important to note and discuss. The first limitation was the coronavirus that was happening during this research study. Typically, a virus or illness would not be a problem at school but in this case, it caused our schools to develop distance learning. Distance learning was implemented because schools were no longer allowed to have students physically in the building, meaning that everything had to be completed online. That alone affected the number of students who would participate in the survey because I planned to have the students take the survey with paper and pencil/pen. I believe, if this survey had been completed on paper and at school, I would have gotten more students, with more of a variety of answers. Unfortunately, a lot of our students were not regularly checking their emails, so they missed the opportunity to be a part of this study.

Which leads to my next limitation, the lack of variety in the answers from the students. Every student who participated in the survey was categorized in the positive category. While that was extremely flattering and felt amazing to hear all their kind words, it did take away from the fact that I was missing two entire groups of students, the neutral and negative category students. I really wanted to hear from the students who felt negative about our school because I wanted to know how we as a staff can improve. If I

had to guess that students who felt negative about our school and teachers did not participate because they likely saw the email and ignored it. Another possible reason for them not wanting to take the survey was they may have thought that they would get in trouble if they expressed their negative feelings. I wanted to see if there was a gap or something missing that we have not been doing regularly but unfortunately, I did not get to hear from them. I do think that by having this survey online, it made the students who felt negative about our school, just look at the email (if they saw it) and say to themselves, “there is no way, I am going to take that.” Also, by not having any students who were in those two categories, I was unable to compare more data with the positive behavior students, to see who was passing or failing more classes. I did send the survey link out two times to my students and there were 36 out of 160 students.

The final limitation of the study was not having any students participate in the interview. There were 17 out of 36 students who said they would be interested in participating in the interview. However, after sending out two emails asking each student to set up a time and date for an interview, none of the students responded to either of the emails. I do however think that the students did a good job expressing themselves during the survey, when they were asked to explain their answers. An interview would have given me a lot more information, but I think them not responding had a lot to do with everything needing to be over the internet instead of in person. Now, we are going to switch gears from limitations to how this research can be implemented or communicated.

Implications/communication of the study

After conducting this research, I would like to utilize the things I have learned into my classroom/curriculum. All the information that I found was a wonderful reminder of how teachers (including myself) impact our students beyond educating them. We need to examine and reflect on our own communication skills, our non-verbal communication, and ask ourselves if we are allowing time for our students to just talk to us. If I reflect on my own communication, if I can improve on something it would be allowing time during the school day to check in and talk to my advisory students on a regular basis. This last school year, I tried to connect with each advisory student at least once a week, however, that did not go as planned because I was not as consistent as I would have liked to be. This next school year I would like to implement that same check and connect idea with each advisory student but do it once every two weeks instead of trying to randomly check in with every student once a week. I think by making this a more formal process, I will be holding myself reliable. I also believe that allowing this time will let the student's who are a little bit shy to have one on one time with me. Also reflecting on my communication skills, I think this is a very strong part of my teaching because I do listen to the students and allow them to vent or talk about their feelings without judging them and then we go over ways to help them with their issues.

I would like to communicate my research study with my co-workers at some point. I have not picked a specific day or time frame for sharing this information, but it would probably be during the beginning of the school year meeting with all the

alternative learning staff. The staff consists of about thirteen people and I think it will be a good reminder of not only how much our roles impact the students but how much our students notice and appreciate the things we help them with.

Chapter Summary

During my capstone research study, I have learned how to conduct and write a research study. Nel Nodding's theory, attachment theory, and check and connect have helped me better understand my own communication skills and helped me learn about the importance of positive relationships with my students. The research study that was implemented went well but there were some limitations. Those limitations include the coronavirus, which resulted in moving the study online (instead of on paper) and I believe it had an effect on the number of students who took the survey. Another limitation that was discussed was that there were not any students who fell into the negative category and because of that, I could not compare the two groups of students. The final limitation of the study was that there were no student interviews. In the future, I hope to use what I learned in my classroom by implementing a more organized check and connect time with my advisory students. I would also like to share this information with my coworkers as a reminder of the important role they play in our student's lives.

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APPENDIX A

Student survey questions

Directions: Rate your experience 1-4 (1 = bad, 4 =Best)

1. How would you rate your relationships with your DCALS teachers compared to your previous teachers from other schools?

1	2	4	5
(Horrible)	(Worse)	(Better)	(Best)

2. I feel like there is at least one DCALS teacher or staff member who I feel comfortable talking to about my feelings.

1	2	4	5
(No)	(Not really)	(Sort of)	(Yes)

3. If I have a problem and need to talk to an adult, I feel comfortable discussing my feelings with at least one DCALS teacher or staff member.

1	2	4	5
(No)	(Not really)	(Sort of)	(Yes)

4. Overall, I feel like the majority of the DCALS teachers and/or school staff care about me.

1	2	4	5
(No)	(Not really)	(Sort of)	(Yes)

5. Overall, I feel like the majority of the DCALS teachers and school staff treat me and other students with respect.

1	2	4	5
(No)	(Not really)	(Sort of)	(Yes)

6. If I like a teacher, I am more likely to pass his or her class.

1
(No)

2
(Not really)

4
(Sort of)

5
(Yes)

7. From my overall experience at DCALS, I feel like the DCALS teachers and staff are doing their best to help me pass classes

1
(No)

2
(Not really)

4
(Sort of)

5
(Yes)

8. From my overall experience at DCALS, I feel like the DCALS teachers and staff are helping me with my educational and post-educational goals.

1
(No)

2
(Not really)

4
(Sort of)

5
(Yes)