

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE:
A CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES ON
STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS TO SCHOOL

by

Thomas R. Fox

Administrative Certificate, Western Connecticut State University, 2020

MA, Education, Michigan State University, 2016

BS, Science Education, Michigan State University, 2011

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Thomas R. Fox, BS, MA

Western Connecticut State University

Abstract

The typical high school in the United States can be considered a community comprised of students, teachers, administrators, counselors, coaches, and support staff interacting with one another. A student's level of connectedness to the school community can have several short and long-term positive impacts on his or her well-being. However, not all students feel as connected to their school as others. This is especially true for students in grades 9-12 in the United States (typically adolescents between the ages of 14-18). This qualitative case study sought a deeper understanding of student connectedness to school from the vantage point of students and educators at a high school in Connecticut. This study utilized pre-existing survey data ($n = 643$) and educator interviews ($n = 10$) to address the research questions. The pre-existing survey data from students were utilized to select educators who were interviewed. The survey data also provided descriptive statistics to help the reader better understand the students in the school where the research occurred. The interview data served as the primary data focus. The survey findings demonstrated that students form meaningful connections with a diverse range of adults within the high school. The findings from the educator interviews suggested that educators believed that they could increase students' feelings of connectedness to school by purposefully working towards creating trusting and

psychologically safe learning environments, mindfully humanizing interactions with students, and leveraging opportunities to increase informal interactions with and between students. The findings also indicated that educators believed increasing students' feelings of connectedness to school can be accomplished by encouraging their students to engage in their learning and participate in the school community.

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APPROVAL PAGE



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Presented by

Thomas Richard Fox, EdD

Dissertation Committee:

<u>Tricia J. Stewart, PhD</u>	<u><i>Tricia J. Stewart</i></u>	<u>11/08/2022</u>
Dissertation Committee Chair	Signature	Date
<u>Dee Lisa Cothran, PhD</u>	<u><i>Dee Lisa Cothran</i></u>	<u>11/08/2022</u>
Dissertation Committee Member	Signature	Date
<u>Nicole G. DeRonck, PhD, EdD</u>	<u><i>Nicole G. DeRonck</i></u>	<u>11/08/2022</u>
Dissertation Committee Member	Signature	Date
<u>Marcia A. B. Delcourt, PhD</u>	<u><i>Marcia A. B. Delcourt</i></u>	<u>11/08/2022</u>
Program Coordinator	Signature	Date

2022

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Finally, thank you to my mom and dad. I appreciate your patience as well as your unwavering support for me. I love you, and I hope to always make you proud!

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandparents. Grandma Fox, you taught me the importance of family connection. Grandpa Fox, you showed me how to always be a kid at heart. Papa Lubbers, your wisdom that “it takes all kinds” has guided my work and life. Lastly, Nana Lubbers, your “educator spirit” is—and will always be—a guiding light.

Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).

First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2007

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The transition to high school, typically from eighth grade into ninth grade in the United States, marks a pivotal moment for school-age children. In many ways, the beginning of high school symbolizes a child's first step into adolescence and young adulthood. This is because high school students in the United States, who are on average between the ages of 14 to 18, have reached the apex of their compulsory educational career. Adolescents' sense of connection to their school and school community is one factor that may play a role in the ease or difficulty of the transition from childhood to young adulthood.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has previously defined school connectedness as "the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as them as individuals" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Despite the CDC's concise definition, the definition and operationalization of student connectedness to school (SCS) has evolved over decades and remains somewhat ambiguous in the educational literature (Libbey, 2004). Words and phrases such as "school attachment," "belonging," and "school membership" can be found throughout the literature and appear to have the same or similar meaning as student connectedness to school. However, the varying phrases used to describe the phenomenon of student connectedness to school and related constructs have gained increased attention from scholars over the past few decades (Bowles & Scull, 2018; García-Moya, Bunn, Jimenez-Iglesias, Paniagua, & Brooks, 2019; Gowing, 2019; Joyce & Early, 2014; Klem & Connel, 2004; McNeely & Falci, 2004). This is fitting since SCS has been associated with various positive outcomes for students. For example, student connectedness to school, and related constructs such as belonging, social support, and

engagement, have been repeatedly linked to better mental health outcomes, reduced drug and alcohol use (Bond et al., 2007; Bonny, Britto, Klostermann, Hornung, & Slap, 2000; Joyce & Early, 2014; Steiner et al., 2019) and improved academic outcomes for adolescents (Klem & Connel, 2004; Mensah & Koomson, 2020). For these reasons, various educational organizations have increased their focus on helping educational leaders strengthen students' feelings of connectedness to school and teachers. For example, in 2020, The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) linked school-based social-emotional learning (SEL) programs to an increase in students' connection to their school. Since then, members of CASEL have advocated for school programs across the United States that focus on social and emotional learning as a vector for increasing student connectedness to school, amongst other positive outcomes. Aimed at improving holistic student outcomes, CASEL advocates for various curricula that highlight a renewed focus on student connectedness to school.

While the benefits of student connectedness to school have been firmly established and documented in educational literature, gaps remain regarding how schools can increase students' feelings of connectedness (Martin & Collie, 2019). Fortunately, this is beginning to change. For example, there has been an increase in studies exploring student connectedness to school, especially from students' perspectives. One example is from García-Moya (2020), who outlined some key findings related to students' perspectives on the central attributes of teachers with whom students tend to form connections. Her findings suggested the importance of a humanizing aspect to student connectedness to school and teachers (García-Moya, 2020). García-Moya (2020) explained that educators could actively work to humanize relationships with students by building and facilitating respectful and individualized

interactions with students, being empathetic of students, and finally, recognizing the importance of being approachable and supporting of students (García-Moya, 2020). García-Moya's findings—which are also supported by the present study—underscore the vital role adults within schools have in helping students feel a sense of connection to their school and community. Positive adult-student relationships are especially important for high school students because the high school years are when adolescents begin to rely less on family and extended family members for support while deepening their sense of self and relationships with friends and other adults.

The overarching research question of this study was: *In what ways can educational leaders increase students' feelings of connectedness to school?* The individual research questions that supported this were from the students' and educators' perspectives:

1. What are the positions and roles of the adults within a secondary school with whom students identify as adults they can speak with if they have a problem?
2. How do adults with whom students across grades 9-12 frequently select as people they feel comfortable speaking with understand the concept of student connectedness to school?
3. How do adults with whom students across grades 9-12 frequently select as people they feel comfortable speaking with understand and describe their ability to form meaningful connections with students?

Statement of the Problem

While there is an abundance of quantitative studies that indicate both the short-term and long-term benefits of increasing students' feelings of connection to their school and educators, there are fewer qualitative studies. In their 2019 review of the literature of 350

studies on SCS and their teachers, García-Moya, Bunn, Jiménez-Iglesias, Paniagua, and Brooks (2019) found that less than 10% of the available studies were qualitative. Of the limited number of qualitative studies on student connectedness to school, few studies have utilized data from educators' perspectives. Biag (2014) noted, "empirically, there is less knowledge about school connectedness from the perspectives of adults because most studies have focused on students" (p. 3). In efforts to increase the qualitative research that looks at student connectedness, this research incorporates the perspectives and insights of adults with whom students within a secondary school felt some sense of connection.

Rationale

United States high school students typically spend around seven hours in school each weekday (Monday through Friday) for approximately 180 days each year (Allard, 2008). During this time, students interact with several educators. This is because most high school students in the United States have different teachers for their core classes (math, English, science, and world history) and electives (e.g., art, music, technology, and world language courses). Seeing several educators throughout the day makes it more difficult for students to build relationships with their teachers at the secondary level compared to other grade levels, where students spend longer amounts of time with the same adult. However, the relationships that adolescents form with adults outside their family are essential to their growth and development (Jennings, 2003).

The current project examined student connectedness to school and student-educator connectedness—especially from the perspective of educators. Conducted at a high school in the Northeast region of the United States, this case study combined survey data from students and interviews from educators. This is essential work as highlighted through the claim,

One area for future research could be to refine and develop the understanding of the exact character of teacher connectedness. Future studies could enrich understanding of the role of teachers in supporting adolescent well-being by unpacking the concept of connectedness in order to make distinctions between different kinds of teacher support.

(García -Moya, Brooks, Morgan, & Moreno, 2015, p. 10)

A secondary yet important aim of this research was to provide readers with a deepened understanding of the concept of student connectedness to school. In pursuit of this effort, this qualitative case study included an analysis of the literature surrounding student connectedness to school.

There is an abundance of empirical data that supports the efforts of school leaders and personnel to increase students' feelings of connectedness to school. However, up until the last decade, most studies have been quantitative and have focused on the outcomes of student connectedness to school rather than what educational leaders and teachers can do within their schools and school districts to increase students' feelings of school connectedness.

Furthermore, only a small number of studies have sought to understand SCS from the perspectives of both students and educators. As such, this research has the potential to accommodate for some of the gaps in the literature pertaining to student connectedness to school, especially at the secondary level, where student connectedness has been previously said to be an underemphasized parameter in adolescent health and well-being (Shochet, Dadds, Hamm, & Montague, 2006). This research will add to a small yet growing body of qualitative case studies on student connectedness to school.

Another goal of this research was to utilize what Safir and Dugan (2021) referred to as “street data” and “map data” to explore students’ and educators’ perspectives on student connectedness to school within a single school. Street data are,

Qualitative and experiential data that emerges at eye level and on lower frequencies when we train our brains to discern it. These data are asset based, building on the tenets of culturally responsive education helping educators look for what’s right in our students, schools, and communities instead of seeking out what’s wrong. (Safir & Dugan, 2021, p. 57)

Map data are data that might be considered a little farther out than street data and includes data collected from such items as student surveys created by school staff members (Safir & Dugan, 2021). The school under study is zoned to one map area, and pre-existing survey data were used to gain insight into students' perspectives on connectedness to their school. It was vital to the researcher that the students who went to the school where the research took place had input on which educators were interviewed for this study. More specifically, educators with whom students identified as adults in the building with whom they could go to if they had a problem were interviewed and asked about their perceptions and understandings of how they formed meaningful relationships with their students and how to increase students' feelings of connectedness to school. These educators were identified using the school personnel-created survey. The survey data also provided descriptive statistics, which helped garner additional insight into student connectedness to school from the school's students.

Potential Benefits of the Research

The early 2020s have been marked by turbulence and turmoil across the globe. For example, March of 2020 was the beginning of school closures in the United States due to the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic. While there is still much to learn about the pandemic's full impacts, the COVID virus's negative consequences on student academic achievement and emotional well-being have been documented. Some research on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic indicates that students across all grade levels are struggling with mental health and have “unfinished learning” (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, & Viruleg, 2021). Furthermore, the prevalence of anxiety and depression among children and adolescents nearly doubled during the pandemic (Racine et al., 2021). However, the full impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students’ social and emotional well-being and their sense of connectedness to their school are still unknown. Unfortunately, there is little doubt that the world will face another global pandemic, and educational leaders will likely experience another time (or times) when physical school buildings will need to shut down. The good news is that increasing students’ feelings of connectedness to school has been found to mitigate some of the harmful impacts associated with having to close schools and implement fully remote learning (Hertz et al., 2021). Furthermore, increasing student connectedness to school has been documented as a protective factor against mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression (Joyce & Early 2014; Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002)

There have been 119 school shootings since 2018 in which at least one person was killed or injured (Diaz, 2022). Secondary school administrators and educators must reduce the number of students who feel isolated and alone and increase student connectedness to school. Teachers and other adults in the building are essential in helping students feel

connected to their school and school community. While the importance of student connectedness to school and related constructs such as social support and belonging should not be overly extrapolated, decreasing students' sense of isolation and increasing students' sense of connectedness may be one of many strategies adopted by policymakers in attempts to reduce the alarming number of school shootings in the United States (Bushman et al., 2018).

Research within the past decade has brought an increased awareness of the adverse effects of childhood trauma and an increased understanding of the number of children who face adverse childhood experiences (ACE). Adults (61%) who were surveyed across 25 states indicated that they had exposure to at least one adverse childhood experience as defined by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The importance of childhood adverse experiences is that these can have several negative consequences such as "...negative effects on health and well-being, and opportunity" (Center for Disease Control, 2020, "Prevention Strategies," para. 1). The collective trauma many are now facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other events such as war and school shootings have forced school leaders and community members to question what role public schools should serve in local communities. For these reasons, public school educators—perhaps more than ever—are being tasked with supporting students both academically and emotionally.

Increasing students' sense of connection to their school and school community is one way that educational leaders can work to mitigate the impacts of trauma and traumatic events for young people. For example, Joyce and Early (2014) found that student connectedness to school can provide a protective barrier to students' symptoms of depression. Similarly, McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum (2002) concluded that "When adolescents feel cared for by

people at their school and feel like a part of their school, they are less likely to use substances, engage in violence, or initiate sexual activity at an early age" (p. 138). Additionally, feelings of connectedness to school have also been found to provide a protective factor against the distress faced by students that have been cyberbullied (Molina, de Albéniz Iturriaga, Canales, Sierra, & Pedrero, 2022). Attempting to gain a deeper understanding of the nuances of student connectedness, as well as how educators understand this phenomenon, could help educators and educational leaders with the goal of improving holistic student outcomes and students' sense of connection to their community.

Both theory and empirical evidence suggest that decisions made by school policymakers and administrators to increase students' feelings of connectedness to their school and community can positively affect students (McNeely et al., 2002). One reason this work was necessary is a better understanding of how to utilize resources—including professional development—that increase with the work of teachers to increase the number of students who feel connected to their school and school community. This study has the potential to help educators and educational leaders gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of SCS, which may provide educators with a better understanding of how to forge increasingly essential and meaningful relationships with students. Once more, this research has contributed to the literature by helping educational leaders and teachers to prioritize strategies for integrating and increasing student connectedness to school.

Definition of Key Terms

1. **Affective or Emotional Student Engagement:** Students' feelings of belonging in the school setting (Finn, 1993) and the resulting reactions to these feelings which may include a student's willingness to do school work (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).
2. **Behavioral Student Engagement:** Behavioral engagement includes a student's level of participation in school (Finn, 1993).
3. **Belonging:** Feeling respected, welcomed, and wanted by others within their community (St-Amand, Girard, & Smith, 2017).
4. **Cognitive Student Engagement:** Cognitive strategies that students adopt and employ during the learning process (Walker, Greene, & Mansell, 2006)
5. **Engagement:** A multi-faceted meta-construct that consists of behavioral, cognitive, and affective or emotional components. (Finn, 1993; Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). In the broadest sense, student engagement can be defined as students' involvement in school (Finn, 1993).
6. **Social Support:** Social support is the extent to which one experiences and perceives support by others within their community (Taylor, 2011).
7. **Student Connectedness to School:** The extent to which students, "feel that they belong, believe teachers care about them and their learning, believe that education matters, have friends at school, believe that discipline is fair, and have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities" (Blum, 2005, p. 17). School connectedness has been previously associated with the following: A sense of belonging, social support, engagement, and student-educator connectedness (McNeely & Falci, 2004). Attending school (Bowles &

Scull, 2018) and feeling safe at school (Bucher & Manning, 2005) have been noted as prerequisites for student connectedness to school.

8. **Student-Educator Connectedness:** “The belief held by students that adults in the school care about both their learning and them as individuals” (American Psychological Association, 2014, para. 1).
9. **Teacher Support:** The “extent to which teachers are supportive, responsive, and committed to student’s well-being” (Wang, 2009, p. 242).

Overview of the Study

This dissertation about student and school connectedness is organized into five chapters. Chapter One provides the reader with a broad overview of the concept of student connectedness to school and establishes a need for a deeper understanding of student connectedness. Chapter One also introduces the reader to the research methodology as well as the overarching research question and sub-research questions.

Chapter Two is a theoretical framework that includes a review of the literature on student connectedness to school. This chapter begins by examining early literature on concepts related to student connectedness to school, including belonging, educator support, social support, and engagement. More recent literature on student connectedness to school, and related constructs, is explored. Several theories from psychology that support the need for a more granular understanding of student connectedness to school, especially at the secondary level, are introduced.

Chapter Three details the research methods of this qualitative case study. This chapter also provides the context of this study, a suburban high school in the Northeast region of the United States, as well as key demographics of the school where the study took

place. Chapter Three also includes a detailed description of the survey from which data were used for this study and an overview of the participants interviewed. The methods of data analysis, justification for the analysis, as well as validity considerations for this study are included in this chapter.

Chapter Four presents the findings of this research. The findings begin with an analysis of the descriptive statistics captured from the pre-existing survey data used in this research. The next portion of this chapter includes the analysis of participant interviews. Findings are organized into themes and subthemes throughout the chapter. The themes include: Creating a Sense of Trust and Psychological Safety, Humanizing Relationships, Increasing Informal Interactions, and Encouraging Engagement.

Chapter Five addresses each research question considering the findings. Answers to each research question and the implications of the findings are discussed. As an example, one of the findings includes the perception by educators that psychologically safe and trusting environments are prerequisites for meaningful learning. Among the implications of this finding is the need for school administrators to consider training educators on how to best build trusting and psychologically safe classrooms and schools where students feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks and engaging in higher order thinking. Chapter Five includes suggestions for future research as well as concluding remarks.

Research Questions

The overarching research question of this study was: *In what ways can educational leaders increase students' feelings of connectedness to school?* This study also investigated the following research questions:

1. What are the positions and roles of the adults within a secondary school with whom students identify as adults they can speak with if they have a problem?
2. How do adults with whom students across grades 9-12 frequently select as people they feel comfortable speaking with understand the concept of student connectedness to school?
3. How do adults with whom students across grades 9-12 frequently select as people they feel comfortable speaking with understand and describe their ability to form meaningful connections with students?

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Most students in the United States enter high school as young adolescents between the ages of 14-15 (Carmody, 2022). Significant and often dramatic shifts in physical, cognitive, and emotional growth occur for adolescents. These shifts include how adolescents think, reason, and understand their environment (American Psychological Association, 2002). For example, teenagers can reason more abstractly than their elementary counterparts and are more likely to appreciate nuance and varying perspectives (American Psychological Association, 2002; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2020). On account of these cognitive changes, many adolescents find themselves re-evaluating their identities and experimenting with their interests and viewpoints (American Psychological Association, 2002; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2020). While a great deal of variation exists amongst individuals, many adolescents begin to question the adults they once trusted without condition (American Psychological Association, 2002) and start exploring their ideas regarding personal beliefs and values (American Psychological Association, 2002; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2020). This exploration of identity largely depends upon teenagers' social interactions with other adolescents and adults within their immediate environment (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2020). While group affiliations and relationships with peers have been found to be the highest priority for many adolescents (Gowing, 2019), positive relationships with adults—especially adults outside of the immediate family—become increasingly crucial for healthy adolescent development (Jennings, 2003). Adolescents' sense of school connectedness, which includes feelings of connectedness to the adults within their school, contributes to healthy cognitive and emotional growth (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018; Arhar &

Kromrey, 1993; Huang & Baxter, 2021; Joyce & Early, 2014; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2020; Stracuzzi & Mills, 2010).

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, educational researchers became increasingly interested in the concept of adolescents' sense of connectedness to their school (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Finn, 1989; Goodenow, 1993a, 1993b). This interest resulted in an expansion in the number of publications on student connectedness and related constructs during the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, to more recent literature in the 2020s.

Unfortunately, there is no one definition of student connectedness to school (SCS) agreed upon by scholars at the time of this research as it is a complex phenomenon. Instead, several terms and phrases that describe student connectedness to school are frequently used interchangeably among educational researchers (García-Moya et al., 2019; Libbey, 2004). For example, in their review of 350 studies related to student connectedness, García-Moya et al. (2019) found an extensive range in the definition and the operationalization of the term SCS. Current and past examples of phrases used by researchers that have been used interchangeably or synonymously with student connectedness to school have included, but are not limited to, school bonding (Charteris & Page, 2021), school belonging (Allen, et al., 2018), student attachment to school (Mouton, Hawkins, McPherson, & Copley, 2006), feelings of school warmth (Voelkl, 1995), psychological school-membership (Goodenow, 1993b), and student identification with school (Finn 1989). Due to the variability in the use of the term SCS, some researchers have called for scholars to work towards a more precise definition and agreed upon operationalizations of student connectedness to school and related constructs (García-Moya, 2020; Panayiotou, Humphrey & Wiglesworth, 2019).

This theoretical framework begins with an attempt to clarify the meaning of student connectedness to school utilized within this dissertation. The section that follows introduces the reader to the early literature on SCS, including early and more current literature on the related constructs of belonging, student-educator support, social support, engagement, school climate, culture, and psychological safety. This review includes several theories in psychology that support the importance of SCS and presents the reader with a broad range of studies related to the positive impacts of increasing students' feelings of connectedness to their school. Finally, this review addresses SCS as it relates to social-emotional learning and the SAR-CoV-2 pandemic.

Evolving Literature on Student Connectedness to School

In the late 1980s and through the 1990s, educational policy researchers sought to identify school conditions and structures that could be leveraged by school leaders in order to improve student outcomes. Among some of the outcomes of focus were increasing student participation in school activities (Finn, 1989), reducing the number of students who dropped out of high school (Bryk & Thum, 1989), and students' overall feeling of connectedness to their school and peers (Arhar & Kromrey, 1993). Finn's research (1989) included early ideas on student connectedness to school and its relationship to student success and engagement. However, Finn (1989) used the term student identification with school in place of student connectedness to school. Finn proposed that a student's identification with school included: (a) students valuing school and school related outcomes, and (b) a student's sense of belongingness to their school community. In 1989, Finn proposed the participation-identification model in which he postulated the existence of a reinforcing relationship between successful student outcomes (such as academic success) with participation in school

activities, and a student's identification with school. Finn (1989) defined belongingness as the feeling by students that "they are discernably part of the school environment and that school constitutes an important part of their own experience" (p. 123). Finn argued that student participation in school related activities can lead to higher academic performance outcomes. In turn, high academic outcomes reinforce students' sense of identification with school. During that same year, Bryk & Thum (1989) found a positive association between lower dropout rates from school and schools that provided opportunities for students and educators to form informal connections through frequent yet casual interactions with one another. They also found that dropout rates were lower in schools where students viewed the discipline policies as being fair and equitable (Bryk & Thum, 1989).

In 1993, Goodenow expanded Finn's earlier definition of belonging. Goodenow (1993a) defined student belonging as "students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class" (p. 25). Goodenow postulated that while students come to school with varying abilities, their success—or failure—in school is at least partly a result of students' sense of membership in their schools and classrooms (Goodenow, 1993a). Goodenow (1993a) also found that a sense of belonging amongst one's peers supersedes all other concerns within an adolescent's life. Goodenow also articulated that a student's sense of belonging is a subjective yet essential component of adolescent motivation when at school (Goodenow, 1993a). This is an important finding as it suggests that if an adolescent perceives that his or her peer group values positive relationships with adults in schools, then he or she may be more likely to form positive relationships with adult members of the school community.

In attempts to operationalize and further examine student belongingness and the related construct of school membership, Goodenow (1993b) developed and validated the Psychological Sense of School Membership questionnaire (PSSM) to operationalize and further examine student belonging and the related construct of school membership. Goodenow synthesized the PSSM using her background knowledge regarding school belonging and the available literature related to student belonging and psychological school membership. In her scale development study, Goodenow (1993b) described a student's sense of school membership as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). This important definition has been used in more recent literature to describe students' sense of belonging (Green, Emery, Sanders, & Anderman, 2016). Goodenow's definition of a student's sense of school membership has also been used as a definition for the similar concept of student connectedness to school (Shochet et al., 2006).

In the same year that Goodenow developed the PSSM questionnaire, Arhar and Kromrey (1993) analyzed the relationship between interdisciplinary teaming policies at the middle school level (typically grades six through eight in the United States) and students' sense of belonging. Interdisciplinary teaming is the practice of grouping students together into "teams." These groups, or teams of students share the same teachers for the varying classes in which they are enrolled. Educators that share the same students are often encouraged by building administrators to meet to discuss concerns as well as successes that they have found while working with students within their respective team. Arhar and Kromrey (1993) used the Social Bonding Scale from the Wisconsin Youth Survey to operationalize and examine students' sense of belonging in relationship with interdisciplinary

teaming policies at the middle school level. Their research indicated that in high socioeconomic status (SES) school districts, student gender, race, socioeconomic status, family structure, and school organization (i.e., interdisciplinary teaming) did not significantly affect student social bonding to peers, teachers, or school. However, in lower SES schools, statistically significant effects were found between, interdisciplinary teaming, and students' sense of belonging. In this case, interdisciplinary teaming had a positive impact on students' sense of belonging. Their research also indicated that educators play an important role in increasing students' sense of belonging and that educators are most supportive of students when they feel a sense of support from educational leaders (e.g., principals and other administrators). Arhar and Kromrey (1993) wrote, "empowered, supported teachers are more likely to provide support for their students" (p. 18). Five years after Arhar and Kromrey's study was published, Beck and Malley (1998) wrote, "A Pedagogy of Belonging." In their paper, Beck and Malley (1998) reasoned that many students who drop out of school or fail their classes in school do so because they lack a sense of belonging to the school community and the educational process. The authors underscored the importance of positive student-educator relationships and argued that the bond some students form with their teachers can act as a leverage point, or a pathway to feeling a sense of belonging to the larger school community. In other words, a positive relationship with one or more educators may act as a catalyst that increases the likelihood of a student's sense of belonging to the school community. However, feeling a sense of connection with one or more educators does not guarantee a student's feeling of belonging to the school (Beck & Malley, 1998; García-Moya, 2020). This is an important finding since it implies that student connectedness to

school encompasses more than positive relationships for students with educators and adults within schools.

Constructs Related to Student Connectedness to School

The following section of this theoretical framework examines recent literature on the constructs of belonging, student-educator support, social support, engagement, school climate, culture, and psychological safety. Each construct is discussed in relation to the overarching concept of student connectedness to school. This section concludes with a definition of student connectedness to school utilized in this dissertation.

Belonging

Research points to students' sense of belonging to school as an important contributing factor to the academic success of students. For example, Demiroz (2020) found students' sense of belonging to be positively associated with academic achievement as well as positive perceptions of one's self in relation to their school community. In this particular study, Demiroz (2020) defined belonging as "students' perceptions of being respected, accepted, and seen as adding value to the school by all the other people in the school, with all their pros and cons or successes or failures" (p. 62). In 2017, St-Amand et al. extensively reviewed the literature on the concept of student belonging. They uncovered four defining attributes of student belonging. These attributes included "positive emotions, positive social relations, involvement, and harmonization" (p. 109). Using these four attributes of belonging, St-Amand et al. (2017) proposed six recommendations to increase students' sense of belonging to school. A summarized version of these six recommendations is provided. The recommendations include (a) teaching educators to use active listening skills with their students, (b) providing students with both personal support (as appropriate) and academic

support, (c) creating opportunities for and encouraging positive social relationships by embedding tasks that require teamwork into the curriculum, (d) implementing of social-competence programs, (e) creating spaces and opportunities for students to work together on activities in which they have a common interest both within the classroom and (f) outside of the classroom (e.g., extracurricular activities). The first two of these recommendations are based mainly upon direct interactions between educators and students and speak to the criticality of efforts to increase positive student-educator relationships.

Increasing positive student-educator relationships was later supported by a 2018 meta-analysis that indicated that teacher support was one of the strongest predictors of feelings of school belonging (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018).

Supportive teachers and educators were described as those who:

Promote mutual respect, care, encouragement, friendliness, fairness and autonomy. It is present when teachers are perceived as likeable, when they praise good behavior and work and are available for personal and academic support. Supportive teachers expect students to do their best, and scaffold learning to help the student achieve.

Teacher support is felt when students feel a sense of connection with their teacher.

(Allen et al., 2018, p. 5)

Allen et al. (2018) offered an encompassing definition of teacher-support that implies that students feel supported by their teacher when they feel connected with their teacher. An implication can be made that while teacher support is vital for a student's sense of belonging, teacher support, or more broadly speaking, educator support should be thought of as a discrete concept directly related to student-educator connectedness, which is also related to student connectedness to school.

Educator Support & Student-Educator Connectedness

In 2014, the American Psychological Association (APA) defined student-educator connectedness as the “belief held by students, that adults in the school care about both their learning and them as individuals” (American Psychological Association, 2014, para. 1). In 2020, García-Moya, Brooks, and Moreno (2020b) sought to clarify the meaning of student-educator connectedness by identifying central attributes associated with positive relationships with educators and students from the perspective of students in both England and Spain. Their work began to parse out earlier, more general references to educator support. The qualitative findings from their thematic analysis indicated that students in both England and Spain felt that the following practices by teachers were central to strengthening student-teacher connectedness:

[A] humanizing kind of personalized teacher-student interaction, including the student’s perception that teachers notice and respect them as an individual, are sympathetic, and can see things from the student’s perspective and act as supportive figures responsive to the student’s needs. Furthermore, student-teacher connectedness was linked to a teacher’s ability to build a learning-enhancing classroom environment, with key aspects for our participants including the teacher’s genuine commitment to their job, effective and nurturing management of the class, and motivating skills. (García-Moya, et al., 2020b, p. 16-17)

García-Moya, et al. (2020b) summarized their findings into two defining attributes of positive student-teacher relationships. The first was “humanizing relationships,” and the second was “relationships conducive to learning.” The theme of humanizing relationships included the three subthemes of respectful and personal interactions, empathy and

perspective taking, and support. The second theme consisted of relationships conducive to learning which included a commitment to teaching, class management, and teacher motivating students for learning. Of note is the subtheme of teacher support within the larger theme of humanizing relationships. Teacher support can be framed through the lens of the larger construct of social support, which will be described in the following section. It should be noted that García-Moya et al. (2020b) used the term student-teacher connectedness, which may be limiting because students form essential connections with other adults in the school who are not teachers. For instance, people such as coaches, school counselors, principals, and support staff. Therefore, the term educator will be used for the remainder of this research and will include all of the adults within a school building with whom students can form positive relationships.

Social Support

In 2001, Cohen, Gottlieb, and Underwood defined social support as “any process through which social relationships might promote health and well-being” (p. 4). The researchers further categorized such processes into two distinct groups. The first was support related to “the provision or exchange of emotional, informational, or instrumental resources in response to the perception that they are in need of such aid” (p. 4). Examples of this type of support include needing physical and emotional assistance after being hospitalized or the emotional support of a friend after a divorce or death in the family. This first category of social support includes both the support that one perceives is available to them in an acute or chronic event, as well as the actual support one receives during such event. This distinction is important and will be discussed further as it relates to student connectedness to school. The second category outlined by Cohen et al. (2001) focused on the “health benefits that

accrue from participation in one or more distinct groups” (p .4). In contrast to the first category of social support, this category is focused on the impact of one’s daily interactions with others with whom one comes into contact and how these interactions influence one’s perceptions of themselves. For example, the circle of friends one keeps and whether or not one feels supported by their friend group in stressful and non-stressful times. These two categories can overlap, and both varieties of social support have been applied to research within educational settings. For example, in their 2010 meta-analysis of the research on social support, researchers Chu, Hafner, and Saucier used Cohen et al.’s 2001 definition of social support to explore the relationship between social support and well-being in children and adolescents. In their analysis of 246 studies written between 1980 and 2008, the researchers found an association between social support and well-being among adolescents within secondary schools. Their research revealed that the perception of support, or the feeling that one could find and receive meaningful support if they thought they needed support had the strongest association with well-being than other types of measures related to social support. In contrast, a weak relationship was found between seeking support and well-being. These findings indicate that the feeling that one has support, or will be supported if needed, is more critical for one’s sense of well-being than actually receiving support (Chu et al., 2010). This could be because receiving unsolicited support may cause more stress to the individual receiving the support than having none (Chu et al., 2010). For this reason, secondary students who have the perception that they are supported and can access support should they need it—whether the perception is accurate—may have a stronger sense of well-being.

The source of social support is essential for adolescents. For example, social support from educators and family members has been found to be associated with adolescent well-being (Chu et al., 2010). Support from friends has also been associated with adolescent well-being, but friend support showed the weakest relationship with adolescent well-being compared to support from educators and family (Chu et al., 2010). This is an important finding since high school is often viewed as an essential place for teenagers to further develop socially through interactions with their peers. Peer affiliations and peer support is one of the most important relationships for high school students (Gowing, 2019). However, social support for students can come from many different people within their environment (e.g., parents, peers, teachers, and school staff). Research has shown that students who felt supported by educators within the school experienced higher levels of subjective well-being (García-Moya et al., 2015) and were more likely to engage in school and outperform those students that did not feel supported by educators (Jennings, 2003). Furthermore, the perception that one has support has been found to be beneficial to mental and physical health during non-stressful times—possibly acting as a reassurance that if one needs help, one can access it (Wethington & Kessler, 1986). It can be concluded that educator support is one of the most important sources of social support for secondary level students and that it is crucial for students to feel that they can access support from educators.

Engagement

Research has indicated that student engagement can be a predictor of academic and positive behavioral outcomes, including an increase in standardized test scores, grade-point averages, and attendance (Jennings, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004). However, similar to student connectedness to school, engagement is a multifaceted concept and therefore,

challenging to define and operationalize. Finn's (1993) work on engagement is often cited as being seminal to the field of educational research. Finn's early work divided student engagement into two categories: behavioral engagement and affective engagement (Finn, 1993). Finn, (1993) wrote that behavioral engagement could be determined by whether or not a student participates regularly in classroom and school activities. Using this definition of engagement, researchers later identified several variables to measure behavioral engagement including: academic performance (e.g., student grade point averages, achievement test scores, completion of homework, attendance (or lack of), and extracurricular involvement (e.g., school sponsored sports, clubs, and productions) (Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003). This expansion in the range of variables used to measure student engagement is important because students can engage in school in a variety of ways. Only considering academic engagement is limiting in that it does not account for a student's engagement in extracurricular activities or other ways that they can gain social experiences.

Finn (1993) defined affective engagement in relation to a student's feelings of belonging within their school and whether or not the student sees value in participating in school and school related activities. Finn (1993) also considered the possible outcomes of participation in school for students. Similar to behavioral engagement, affective engagement has been measured using several variables. However, unlike behavioral engagement, measurements of affective engagement tend to focus on self-reports of affective engagement from students. Examples of self-reported variables for affective engagement have included survey questions related to a sense of belonging, identification with schools, self-reports of

interest in learning, and whether or not students value school-related outcomes (Finn, 1993; Lam et al., 2014).

It is worth noting that while Finn's ideas surrounding student behavioral and affective engagement are still widely seen in the literature, scholars have expanded engagement to include a cognitive dimension (Jimerson et al., 2003). Cognitive engagement attempts to capture how deeply students engage in mental processing when completing their schoolwork. This form of engagement has been measured through inventories of learning styles, survey questions using students self-reporting their learning process, and meta-cognition (Lam et al., 2014). For instance, survey research on cognitive engagement has included questions regarding how often students set goals for themselves, ask questions in class, engage in metacognitive strategies, or receive and use feedback from their teachers on assignments (Fredricks & McCloskey, 2012).

School Climate, Culture, & Psychological Safety

Also related to student connectedness to school is a school's culture and climate. A school's culture represents the assumptions, beliefs, and values (both implicit and explicit) of the members of a school community (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Johnson, 2014). School climate can be used to describe the overall characteristics of the educational settings (Van Houtte, 2004). Culture and climate represent the settings in which student connectedness to school occurs. Culture and climate can be viewed as encompassing the entire school district or from merely within one classroom. The climate and culture of the school is at least partially dependent on students' sense of both physical and psychological safety. At school, physical safety is the belief that one feels safe from physical harm. Students who feel physically threatened by their peers, witness violence in school, or attend

school in buildings that are in disrepair are not physically safe at school. However, both physical safety and psychological safety are important prerequisites for learning (Bucher & Manning, 2005).

Although less commonly found in education literature, psychological safety has been recognized as an important construct within the business and corporate world, a realm in which employees are asked to participate in the ongoing improvement of their respective companies (Newman et al., 2017). However, calls have been made by educational researchers to investigate the idea of psychological safety from the perspective of school personnel and students (Higgins, Ishimaru, Holcombe, & Fowler, 2012). Grounded in organizational change theory, psychological safety is the feeling that one is able to express one's self and take interpersonal risks within a group or team setting without the fear of being overly critiqued or ostracized by the group (Edmondson, 1999; Kahn, 1990). From their review of the related literature on psychological safety, Newman et al., (2017) found that psychological safety is indeed a key cognitive state that allows for increased learning and that team leaders should work to foster learning environments which focus on a sense of psychological safety. Specifically, psychological safety was found to lead to an increase in collaboration as well as both team and individual innovation, learning, and attitudes within businesses (Newman et al., 2017). Psychological safety may be especially critical for secondary students since they are exceptionally concerned with how they are viewed by their peers (Gowing & Jackson, 2016). However, caution must be used applying psychological safety in both classroom settings and entire school settings, because of the limited research on this age group.

Student Connectedness to School

In 2005, Robert Blum defined student connectedness to school as the “extent to which students feel that they belong, believe teachers care about them and their learning, believe that education matters, have friends at school, believe that discipline is fair, and have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities” (Blum, 2005, p. 17). This comprehensive definition offered by Blum (2005) details student connectedness to school as a multifaceted construct that includes students’ feelings of belonging, social support, student-educator connectedness, and cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement. More recently, Bowles and Scull (2018) defined connectedness as “the degree that individuals perceive the people and places, experiences and activities in their lives as meaningful and important, in the present and in the future” (p. 3). Bowles and Scull (2018) completed a combined deductive and inductive review of the literature on student connectedness to school. As a result of their review, Bowles and Scull (2018) developed a sequential four factor model to define student connectedness to school. Their sequential four-factor model included: (a) Attending school, (b) Belonging, (c) Engaging, and (d) Flow. Attending school—the first component of the sequential model—assumed that for students to feel connected to their school community, students must be present at school. When students are chronically absent from school, they miss opportunities to interact with and build relationships with their peers, teachers, and other school staff members. The second component, belonging, included having a positive experience in school and that for students to feel a sense of belonging, they must also believe that their values align with the values of other members of the school community (Bowles & Scull, 2018). Bowles and Scull (2018) proposed that school engagement followed a sense of belonging in the school community.

The researchers suggested that engagement included students focusing on tasks at school, that families and friends played an essential role in a student's level of engagement in school, that teachers should work to engage their students, and that engagement included developing positive relationships with peers. Flow was the fourth and final component of the model proposed by Bowles and Scull (2018). The research team utilized Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) definition of flow. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) defined flow as "the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (p. 4). Bowles and Scull framed flow as an extension of engagement and surmised that "...the experience of connectedness can occur at various levels, each conditional on the satisfaction of the last, that is, that each of the four factors forms a sequence beginning with attending" (Bowles & Scull, 2018, p. 4). Bowles and Scull (2018) summarized their sequential four-factor models as follows: "The sequential aspects of the model express the transition from the individual who is alone and not connected with other students, though attending at school, to belonging, engaging and to the potential of flow experiences" (p. 11).

Although overlap is inarguable, student connectedness to school may be distinct from belonging, student-educator connectedness, social support, and engagement. More specifically, student connectedness to school is viewed by the researcher as a result of when students feel a sense of belonging, student-educator connectedness, social support, and when students are engaged in their school community. For example, a student may feel a sense of social support from their friends at school, and they may even feel a sense of connection with a specific teacher (i.e., Student-educator connectedness) without feeling connected to their school as a whole. García-Moya (2020) supported this idea when she wrote, "Indeed,

connectedness to teachers and overall feelings towards the school are distinct concepts” (p. 29). Similarly, students who engage in school in several ways (e.g., behaviorally or affectively), may yet lack feelings of connectedness to their school in totality. As such, the researcher believes that student connectedness to school results from the overlap between constructs of belonging, student-educator connectedness, social support, and engagement. However, a student’s sense of belonging to school may be the most complicated aspect to parse out from the larger construct of student connectedness to school.

A final note on definitions. For this research, the phrase student connectedness to school (SCS) will be used from this point forward as an all-inclusive term that incorporates belonging, student-educator support, social support, and engagement (Blum, 2005). Based on the available literature—as well as the researcher’s own experience as an educator—the researcher believes that the strength of a student’s feeling of connection to his or her school is a result of the overlap between feeling a sense of belonging to his or her school, receiving positive support from peers, forming positive relationships with adults in the school, and engaging within the school community. School attendance is a prerequisite for feeling connected to one’s school (Bowles & Scull, 2018, p. 4). The way that the researcher believes the constructs related to student connectedness to school work to support one another is shown in Figure 2.1.

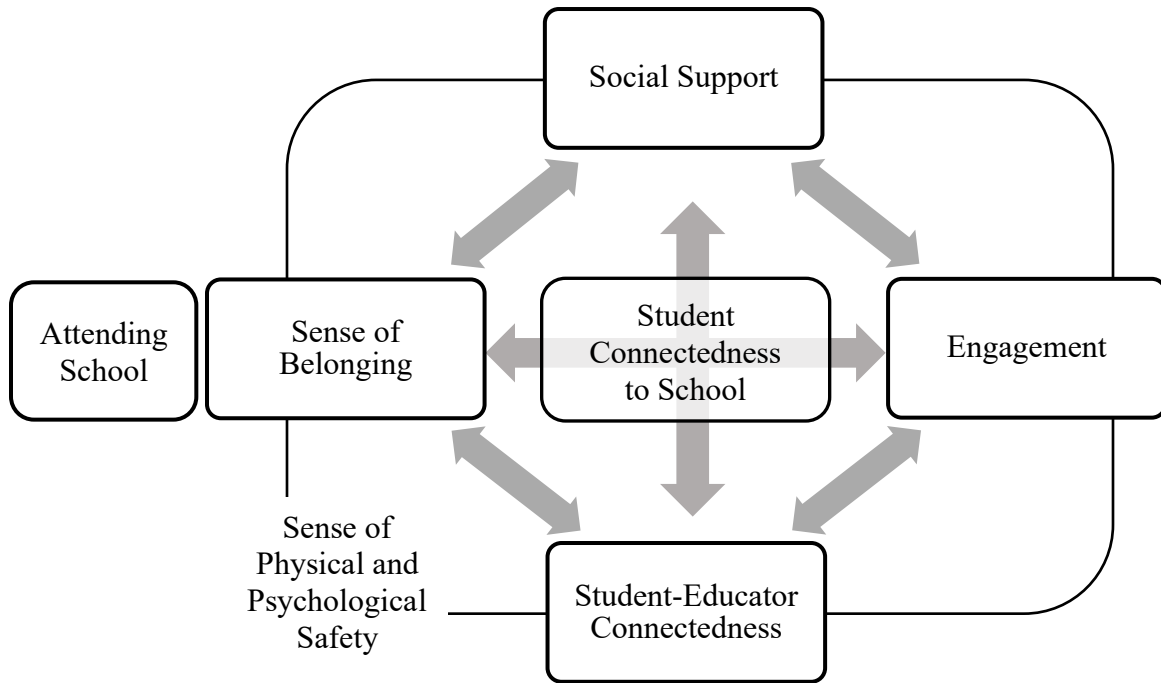


Figure 2.1. The relationship between SCS, social support, engagement, and belonging as understood by the researcher. Author synthesized, 2022. Based on the written work of Blum, 2005; Bowles & Scull, 2018; Bucher & Manning, 2005; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Furlong, et al., 2003; García-Moya, 2020; Stracuzzi & Mills, 2010.

The theoretical framework model proposed by the researcher (Figure 2.1), based on a synthesis of the literature, suggests that each construct (belonging, social support, engagement, and student-educator connectedness) plays a role in a student’s overall feeling of connectedness to their school and postulates that each construct reinforces the other. In other words, a student that is deeply engaged in school is more likely to feel a sense of belonging to school (Furlong et al., 2003). This increased sense of belonging could then motivate a student to become more involved in his or her school community. For example, the student may decide to join a new club or sports team, thereby increasing social support from peers who are also part of the club or team. The student could potentially form an

additional positive relationship with the educator in facilitating the club or team, further increasing the student's sense of connection to his or her school. Another example is when students feel a sense of support from educators (i.e., a stronger sense of student-educator connectedness), they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging, and earn higher grades in school—an indicator of cognitive engagement (Stracuzzi & Mills, 2010). The model (Figure 2.1) also acknowledges that a feeling of physical and psychological safety are essential components of student connectedness to school (Bucher & Manning, 2005).

The researcher believes that student connectedness to school should be approached as a subjective feeling held by students that results from the interactions between the interrelated constructs of belonging, social support, engagement, and student-educator connectedness. In fact, student connectedness to school may be best thought of as a construct that is not static in time but changes in the short and long term. In the short term, a student may feel more connected to school from one day to the next, depending on the events that unfold at school on a given day. In the long term, when students reach their senior (final) year of high school in the United States, their feelings of connectedness to school may be different than when they entered high school in ninth grade. This is because upper-secondary school grades (11-12) are a time in many adolescents' lives when they begin to engage in activities related to their future goals beyond their local school community.

Again, it is vital to acknowledge that researchers (García-Moya, 2020; Libbey, 2004) have made calls to parse out the meaning of constructs such as student connectedness to school in order to increase the validity and reliability of related studies. The issue of construct clarity is a matter that should continue to be addressed by other researchers within the field. For example, the term belonging (and phrases such as school bonding and student

attachment to school) have been used in place of student connectedness in previous research (Allen et al., 2018).

Supporting Theories of Student Connectedness to School

To better understand the complex underpinnings of student connectedness to school and its related constructs, it is important to utilize a theoretical framework covering various areas. While several theories and schools of thought support SCS and its associated constructs, five theories most closely related and used by researchers over the past few decades will be briefly examined.

These five theories include (a) Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological framework, (b) Maslow's work on human motivation, specifically the need to feel a sense of belonging, (c) psychological sense of community theory, (d) stage-environment fit theory, and (e) self-determination theory. Each of these theories was selected because each includes at least one component that is relevant to understanding SCS. Furthermore, each theory has been used in previous research as a framework for understanding student connectedness to school (Table 2.1). The summation and totality of these components from across a range of theories makes a strong theoretical argument for the concept of SCS.

Table 2.1

Theories Related to Student Connectedness to School

Theoretical Approach	Theory related to Student Connectedness to school	Examples of studies that utilize the theory for framing student connectedness or related constructs
Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Human Development	A person's development is at least partially dependent on the environment in which they grow up in. Certain aspects of the environment may help or hinder development.	Allen, Vella-Brodrick, & Waters, 2016; Usakli & Ekici, 2018.
Abraham Maslow's Theory on Human Motivation	Belonging is a specific human need and motivational factor – schools have the opportunity to foster students' sense of belonging.	Milheim, 2012; Webster, 2021.
Psychological Sense of Community Theory	Schools are communities and community centers. They are places to nurture and support the whole child.	Osterman, 2000.
Self-Determination Theory	Motivation is driven by the needs of autonomy, competence, and relationships.	Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lester, Waters, & Cross, 2013.
Stage-Environment Fit Theory	Positive adult relationships are important for student- especially at the secondary level.	Booth & Gerard, 2014

Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Human Development

Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development was first proposed by Bronfenbrenner in the 1970's and was refined up until his death in 2010 (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Bronfenbrenner's early work is useful in understanding student connectedness to school and related constructs because it orients the developing student as one who is

constantly influenced by their environment and the multiple systems within the environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). In his early work (1977), Bronfenbrenner described the ecology of human development as:

the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life span, between a growing human organism and the changing immediate environments in which he lives, as the process is affected by relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the setting is embedded. (Bronfenbrenner, 1977 p. 514)

Bronfenbrenner proposed a nesting system of factors that influences the individual. The nesting factors ranged from the individual's inherited, or biological character traits and expanded to the microsystem to the macrosystem. The microsystem included the developing person and the immediate environment. The next nested level was called the mesosystem. Bronfenbrenner described the mesosystem as, "the interrelations among major settings containing the developing person at a particular point in his or her life" (p. 515). Examples within the mesosystem include interrelations that occur in a young person's life between school, family, and peer groups. The next two nested levels included the exosystem and the macrosystem, both of which are best described by Bronfenbrenner himself:

An exosystem is an extension of the mesosystem embracing other specific social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate settings in which that person is found, and thereby influence, delimit, or even determine what goes on there.

(Bronfenbrenner, 1977 p. 515)

Examples of a person's exosystem included work, neighborhood, media, and government agencies. All of these spaces and institutions have an impact on the development of a person.

Beyond the exosystem is the macrosystem. The macrosystem refers to:

The overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems, of which micro-, meso-, and exo- systems are the concrete manifestations. Macrosystems are conceived and examined not only in structural terms but as carriers of information and ideology that, both explicitly and implicitly, endow meaning and motivation to particular agencies, social networks, roles, activities, and their interrelations. (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515)

In 2016, Allen, Vella-Brodrick, and Waters situated school belonging within Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework for human development, explaining that students can be framed as being at the center of multiple-levels of influence and that schools and educators have an important impact on the development of the student (Allen et al., 2016). Bronfenbrenner's ideas surrounding human development can help educational leaders recognize that students are influenced by multiple systems interacting to influence students. This recognition, as well as the examination, and exploration of the interactions and possibilities within and between each system can help to increase positive developmental outcomes of students.

Maslow's Work on Human Motivation

Abraham Maslow's seminal work on human motivation (1943) is relevant to student connectedness to school, especially in the context of students' feelings of physical safety, psychological safety, and belonging. In his 1943 publication, Maslow described hierarchal

human needs. These needs were categorized as basic needs, psychological needs, and self-fulfillment needs (Maslow, 1943). Basic needs included physiological needs and safety needs. The second set of needs, psychological needs, included belongingness and love needs as well as esteem needs. The final category of needs, self-fulfillment needs, included the need of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943; McLeod, 2018). Schools in the United States provide students with shelter, as well as sustenance in the form of lunch, and many schools across the United States also have breakfast programs to make sure students' basic needs are met. Schools can also provide students with opportunities to satisfy their psychological needs by creating caring environments that emphasize the importance of belonging and accomplishment.

Maslow (1943) also noted the importance of routine for children, which many schools provide. For example, Maslow (1943) wrote, "another indication of the child's need for safety is his preference for some kind of uninterrupted routine or rhythm. He seems to want a predictable, orderly world" (p. 375). Beyond the basic needs of physiological satisfaction and physical safety, Maslow proposed the love needs that included love, affection, and belonging. These needs underscored a person's desire to have friend groups and to feel a sense of affection with others. Schools have the potential to satisfy these needs in adolescents. Positive relationships founded on affection can come from friends and educators alike. Additionally, schools can foster a sense of belonging within students by creating opportunities for students to interact with one another to accomplish a shared goal. In the 1970s, Maslow expanded the five original needs to seven and then later into eight stages. The three additional stages included esteem needs, cognitive needs, and aesthetic needs (McLeod, 2017). This expansion is important as it addresses the developmental needs

of adolescents and adults beyond the more basic earlier needs described initially by Maslow in 1943. Esteem needs and cognitive needs are directly linked to student connectedness to school. When one feels a sense of connection to their school community, they are more likely to build self-esteem. In this way, engagement, a component of student connectedness to school, includes a cognitive dimension.

Psychological Sense of Community Theory

The psychological sense of community theory, first proposed by Seymour Bernard Sarason in 1974, attempts to describe the impact of the perception of being a part of a community on the behavior and actions of individuals. More specifically, for Sarason a sense of community is the “perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure” (Sarason, 1974, p. 157). Communities may be territorial, in that they are defined by a certain region or area such as a town, city, school, or neighborhood. However, communities can also transcend geographical boundaries and be considered relational, such as with religion, interests, skills, or other human relationships. In many situations, communities often include both a regional component and a relational component. For most students, the high school community includes a geographical component that allows for ease of transportation, but it also includes a relational component that is embedded within a school’s mission statement. Sense of community can also manifest when the students and staff members of a school community rally behind a mascot, sports team, or other school-related competition.

In 1984, the research team of David McMillan and David Chavis extended Sarason's sense of community theory. McMillan and Chavis (1984) proposed an explicit and precise definition of the theory and introduced four additional elements that connect all ideas of a community within Sense of Community Theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1984). These elements included (a) membership, (b) influence, (c) integration and fulfillment of needs, and (d) shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1984). Using the available research, McMillan and Chavis (1984) posited that the first element of a community (membership) included the attributes of boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system. Schools have the potential to foster all of these components of membership. For example, schools and school districts in the United States are marked by geographical boundaries that determine details such as which students can attend specific schools as well as the school's bus routes. School leaders have the potential to foster belonging and personal investment with their students and their employees. Finally, most schools have mascots and other common symbol systems such as logos and class ranking systems that help to reinforce a unique sense of community within a school district. Clubs and extracurricular activities can be found within a school community and can be leveraged to increase students' sense of membership, even for spectators who engage as supporters.

The second element of a community, influence, was understood by McMillan and Chavis (1984) to be a bidirectional concept in which a community member feels that he or she has an impact or influence on the community and that the community influences and shapes him or her. For example, within a classroom community, a student may feel a more profound sense of influence on his or her community when the student can co-create

classroom rules and regulations with his or her teacher and classmates. Some of the members of the community exhibit more influence on the community. For example, school district administrators tend to be more influential members of a school community as they determine school policies and have influence over the culture of a school and school district.

The third element of a community proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1984) included the integration and fulfillment of one's needs. The research team explained that the integration and fulfillment of needs could be understood as reinforcement (McMillan & Chavis, 1984). The researchers explained that "...for any group to maintain a positive sense of togetherness, the individual-group association must be rewarding for its members" (McMillan & Chavis, 1984, p. 12). For example, a high school student may find success organizing a community event such as a pep rally. If the student believes that they were successful in their organization of the pep rally then the student will likely feel motivated to continue organizing future events for their community, thus the community has reinforced the student's feelings of competence and connectedness.

The fourth element of a community described by McMillan and Chavis (1984) was a shared emotional connection, which is based partly on a shared history (McMillan & Chavis, 1984). In high school, this can develop in several ways and includes both students and educators. For example, participating in milestones such as prom and class trips can help build and reinforce connections between community members. The degree to which each community member experiences these elements (membership, influence, integration, fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection) likely exists on a continuum for individual students.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a complex theory that compares extrinsic motivation with intrinsic motivation and proposes that intrinsic motivation is best facilitated by meeting three basic psychological needs. These psychological needs included; feelings of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For Deci and Ryan (2000), competence referred to one's feeling that he or she can have influence on objects and events within one's environment. Deci and Ryan described autonomy to mean "volition" (p. 231). Volition is a voluntary action, while relatedness was explained (by Deci and Ryan) as the sense that one feels connected to, and cared for by others (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

Self-determination theory is a useful lens through which to view the needs of students within secondary schools in the United States. The theory supports the idea that when educators provide opportunities for students to complete rigorous tasks and assignments with some autonomy, and create assignments that encourage interactions with peers and adults in positive ways then students will be more intrinsically motivated to achieve, engage in school, and have a greater sense of connection to their school community (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Without such opportunities, students may be less likely to feel a sense of intrinsic motivation to succeed. On this matter, Deci and Ryan (2000) wrote,

Excessive control, non-optimal challenges, and lack of connectedness, on the other hand, disrupt the inherent actualizing and organizational tendencies endowed by nature, and thus such factors result not only in the lack of initiative and responsibility but also in distress and psychopathology. (Deci & Ryan, p. 76)

Self-determination theory has been used by educational researchers to understand the relationship between student connectedness to school and feelings of depression and anxiety

in students. Lester, Waters, and Cross (2013) utilized self-determination theory to frame their study on the relationship between school connectedness and mental health. Lester et al. (2013) found a “...strong and reciprocal relationship between school connectedness and mental health over time, with feelings of connectedness to school a more powerful predictor of mental health than the reverse” (p. 9). The researchers believed that self-determination theory, which includes relatedness, helped bridge the connection between the criticality of the interpersonal relationships formed within a school community with mental health outcomes.

Stage-Environment Fit Theory

Stage-environment fit theory postulates that people are more likely to succeed and to thrive when they are in an environment that fits their developmental needs (Eccles et al., 1993). Stage-environment fit theory helps to explain the importance of student connectedness to school. For example, adolescents who find themselves in environments where they have positive relationships with educators and peers, where they feel appropriately challenged, and where they have a sense of support if needed tend to be motivated to engage in school and in turn feel more connected to their school. Concepts such as social support and student-educator connectedness are rooted in stage-environment fit theory.

Children in the United States spend a great deal of their time in school (Allard, 2008). Unfortunately, when looking through the lens of stage-environment fit theory, some policies and common procedures and routines, including schedules found in many high schools in the United States are regressive for students with regards to their developmental needs. For example, as students transition from elementary school to middle school and

finally to high school, they tend to have more teachers throughout the day. Having several teachers can make it more difficult for students to form meaningful relationships with teachers at a time in their lives when having positive relationships with adults outside of their immediate family is important (Eccles et al., 1993; Jennings, 2003). Additionally, high school classrooms tend to be more teacher and whole group centered and provide fewer opportunities for student choice in activities in comparison to those offered in elementary and middle schools. Furthermore, most high schools across the United States use traditional percentage grading systems alongside of class ranking systems that encourage student comparison and even public evaluations. Eccles et al. (1993) noted that many common practices within middle and high schools across the United States are stifling to adolescent development. This is outlined in the researchers' (Eccles et al., 1993) concluding statements from their research study:

We have provided evidence of the negative effects of the decrease in personal and positive relationships with teachers after the transition to junior high school and have argued that this decline is especially problematic during early adolescence when children are in special need of close relationships with adults outside of their homes. We have also noted the increase in ability grouping, comparative and public evaluation, and whole-class task organization at a time when young adolescents have a heightened concern about their status in relation to their peers. We have described studies that suggest that the first year of junior high school is characterized by a decrease in the emphasis on higher level thinking skills at a time when cognitive development would suggest the need for more complex academic tasks. Finally, we discussed, and provided evidence where available, the negative consequences of these

kinds of developmentally inappropriate environmental changes on early adolescents' school motivation and academic self-concepts. (Eccles et al., 1993, p. 98-99)

Previous research has indicated male high school students are especially likely to feel a tension between their developmental needs and the common routines and schedules in high school (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Eccles et al., 1993). For example, in reference to their qualitative study in which they interviewed students on their high school experiences, Booth and Gerard (2014) found that "...boys conversations focused more on frustrations from their relationships and interactions with peers and teachers. Their examples depict males whose feelings of self-efficacy appear to be influenced negatively by an environment which is frustrating, illustrating a *lack of fit*" (p. 11). This is an important finding as it relates to student connectedness to school and the need to explore possible differences between groups of students and their views on how to increase their feelings of school connectedness.

Measuring Student Connectedness and Related Constructs

The previous section of this theoretical framework provided an overview of several theories supporting the need to examine and increase students' feelings of connectedness to their school and school community. The highlighted theories help explain the connection between belonging, student-educator connectedness, social support, engagement, psychological safety, and school culture and climate. The next section of this theoretical framework further describes how researchers have measured student connectedness to school in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research. It is important to note that the overlap in constructs related to student connectedness to school can be seen in the diversity of instruments used to measure SCS and its related constructs. The array of instruments used to measure SCS indicates the complexity of the topic. This section describes the various

instruments used to measure SCS over the last three decades. Instruments used in quantitative research will be addressed first, followed by qualitative and mixed-methods research.

Quantitative Studies on Student Connectedness to School

One instrument that has been used repeatedly by researchers over many decades to measure SCS is the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to Adult Health survey (Add Health). This survey, originally called the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, was first administered in 1994 to a representative sample of approximately 20,000 seventh grade through 12th-grade students in the United States. McNeely et al. (2002) were among the early researchers to use the data from the Add Health survey to study student connectedness to school. McNeely et al. (2002) used five questions from the survey to measure students' feelings of connectedness to school. These questions included: (a) I feel close to people at this school, (b) I feel like I am a part of this school, (c) I am happy to be at this school, (d) The teachers at this school treat students fairly, and (e) I feel safe in my school. Response options used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The researchers found that students' reported feelings of connectedness to school tends to be lower in schools that have "difficult classroom management climates" (McNeely et al., 2002, p. 145) and that the "overall level of school connectedness is lower in schools that temporarily expel students for relatively minor infractions such as possessing alcohol" (McNeely et al., 2002, p. 145).

Joyce and Early (2014) also utilized the Add Health Survey to measure the relationship between student connectedness to school, teacher support, and depressive symptoms in adolescents. To measure student connectedness to school, the researchers used

four of the five questions previously used by McNeely et al. (2002) but replaced “The teachers at this school treat students fairly” with “Students at your school are prejudiced.” In the same study, Joyce and Early (2014) measured student perception of teacher support separately using two Add Health Survey questions. These questions included (a) Since school started this year, how often have you had trouble getting along with your teachers, and (b) How much do you feel your teachers care about you? Joyce and Early (2014) found a statistically significant association between fewer depressive symptoms among students when students felt more connected to their school and teachers.

In 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Hertz et al. (2021) used a more recent iteration of the Add Health Survey to measure student connectedness to school. While the researchers did not list all of the questions used to measure SCS in their publication, they did write of their inclusion of “I feel like I am a part of this school” and “The teachers at this school treat students fairly.” This pandemic-based study found that when students feel connected to their school and family, they are less likely to face mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression while attending school both virtually and in-person. The aforementioned studies are only a small sample of the various ways in which educational scholars have attempted to understand student connectedness to school.

Another instrument that has been used to measure student connectedness to school is known as the School Connectedness Scale. The School Connectedness Scale was found to have high reliability in both urban and suburban settings (combined $\alpha = 0.78$) and validity (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011). The original School Connectedness Scale included 54-questions, and each question could be categorized as being related to a relationship with either adults, peers, or the school in general, and what Lohmeier and Lee (2011) later categorized as “three

levels of connectedness” (p. 90). The researchers (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) identified these three levels as (a) general support or belongingness, (b) specific support or relatedness, and (c) engagement or connectedness. The researchers posited that the School Connectedness Scale is a relatively easy instrument to use and that it “...holds promise as a powerful evaluation tool” (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011, p. 94) for measuring the construct of student connectedness to school (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011).

In 2020, García-Moya, Brooks, and Moreno sought to develop and validate a scale for measuring the more specific construct of student-teacher connectedness. The researchers (García-Moya, Brooks, & Moreno, 2020a) developed a 15-item scale to be used in survey research with adolescents to “assess the availability of at least one teacher to which the student feels connected to and the quality of these connectedness experiences based on three main dimensions: individualized personal interactions, empathy and perspective taking, and support” (p. 363). The research team found that their newly developed scale, the Student-Educator Connectedness Scale, demonstrated “...high internal consistency and a factorial structure consistent with the definition of student-educator connectedness used for scale development in both data sets” (García-Moya et al., 2020a, p. 357) and showed high internal consistency as well as aspects of validity. Per these findings, the Student-Educator Connectedness Scale should be further explored as an instrument that can be utilized to measure student-educator connectedness.

Qualitative and Mixed-Method Studies on Student Connectedness to School

There has been an increase in the number of qualitative and mixed-methods studies on student-connectedness to school over the past decade. For example, Gowing (2017) utilized a mixed-methods approach to understand both students’ and staffs’ understanding of

SCS. In her study, Gowing (2017) formed focus groups and used student diaries as well as a researcher developed student questionnaire. Gowing (2017) also used a visual analog scale (VAS)—a scale often used to measure pain in the health field—to have students indicate their level of connectedness to school. Gowing found that students' self-rated student connectedness scores were positively associated with “enjoyment of subjects, achievement of academic success in subjects, getting to know a staff member well, beliefs that teachers cared about whether students passed or enjoyed their subjects, and negatively associated with receiving detentions and unauthorized absences from school” (Gowing, 2017, p. 271).

Additional qualitative studies on student connectedness to school have employed open and axial coding and thematic generation (Biag, 2016; García-Moya, 2020; Rowe & Stewart, 2011). In 2020, García-Moya published her book titled, *The Importance of Connectedness in Student-Teacher Relationships: Insights from the Teacher Connectedness Project* (García-Moya, 2020). In her book, García-Moya details some of her findings from the two-year European Union funded study. The aim of the project was twofold. First, García-Moya and her research team sought a deeper understanding of factors that increase students' feelings of connectedness to their teachers. Secondly, the research team sought to develop an instrument that measures students' feelings of connection to their teachers. The research consisted of survey instruments, individual interviews, and focus groups of students and teachers in England and Spain. One of the key findings from this research indicated that student-educator relationships thrive when teachers individualize and personalize their interactions with students, demonstrate empathy and perspective-taking with students, show support for students, and are perceived as supportive (García-Moya, 2020).

Student Connectedness Enhances Outcomes for Students

Despite the inconsistencies in the literature related to the definition and the operationalization of student connectedness to school and its related constructs of belonging, social support, engagement, and student-educator connectedness, there have been many studies on these topics. With few exceptions, these studies have indicated a positive correlation between students' feelings of connectedness to school, academic achievement, and overall adolescent well-being. For example, empirical studies completed between the 1990s to the 2020s on school connectedness and related constructs have pointed towards statistically significant correlations between students' sense of connectedness, motivation in school, and participation in school (Mensah & Koomson, 2020; Voelkl, 1995). Feeling a sense of connectedness to one's school has also shown to lead to reductions in suspensions from school (Bell, Bushover, Miller, & Culyba, 2021) and lessened emotional distress, suicide, violence, cigarette use, alcohol use, marijuana use, and a delay in sexual activity (Eugene, Crutchfield & Robinson, 2021; Huang & Baxter, 2021; Joyce & Early, 2014; Resnick et al., 1997; Shochet et al., 2006). The following section elaborates on some of the studies on student connectedness to school and its relationship to the aforementioned positive adolescent outcomes.

Voelkl (1995) explored the relationship between students' perceptions of "school warmth" and school participation and achievement. Voelkl identified school warmth as whether or not students got along well with teachers and classmates, as well as the perception of school spirit. Voelkl's (1995) research revealed that students' perception of a warm school environment correlated with increased student participation and achievement.

However, Voelkl (1995) also found that that the influence of student participation in school likely brings about increased student achievement and feelings of school warmth.

A later work supported that student connectedness to school can have positive impacts on student was demonstrated by Resnick et al. (1997). Resnick et al. (1997) sought to “identify risks and protective factors at the family, school, and individual level as they relate to four domains of adolescent health and morbidity. These domains included (a) emotional health, (b) violence, (c) substance abuse, and (d) sexuality. Resnick et al. (1997) compiled the first report on the Add Health study. The researchers measured what they referred to as “student connectedness” using three survey questions from the Add Health Survey. These three questions asked students whether or not they felt that (a) teachers treated students fairly, (b) they felt close to people at school, and (c) they felt like they were a part of the school. The researchers found students’ perception of school connectedness and parent-family connectedness to be protective against emotional distress, suicidal involvement, lower levels of violence, and less frequent use of cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana. Similarly, Shochet et al. (2006) utilized Goodenow’s Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) instrument to determine a relationship between school connectedness and mental health and overall well-being in adolescents. Their findings indicated a strong negative correlation between school connectedness and depressive symptoms that were measured across two separate time spans. Shochet et al. (2006) also found that students’ prior mental health states did not predict school connectedness. As a result of these findings, Shochet et al. (2006) argued that their research indicated that more attention should be paid to increasing students’ feelings of connectedness to school in order to decrease students’ feelings of depression and anxiety.

More recent studies (Eugene et al., 2021; Huang & Baxter, 2021; Joyce & Early, 2014) have pointed to positive correlations between student-educator connectedness and academic achievement. For example, Joyce and Early (2014) utilized survey data from over 11,000 adolescents to measure the impact of student-reported school connectedness and the perception of how students got along with their teachers. Joyce and Early (2014) were especially interested in the effect of student connectedness on depressive symptoms. Student connectedness was measured using five questions from the Add Health Survey, while teacher support was measured using three questions from the same survey. Joyce and Early's (2014) findings indicated a correlation between higher school connectedness and teacher support and fewer depressive symptoms among students. More specifically, they found that feelings of higher school connectedness and feeling cared for by teachers was associated with fewer depressive symptoms among adolescents.

More recently, Eugene et al. (2021) found that feelings of school connectedness were associated with decreased feelings of depression and anxiety regardless of a student's race. However, the research team did find that the effect was more significant for White students than for minority students. Additionally, Huang and Baxter (2021), utilized data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and 12 items from Goodenow's Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale to examine the impacts of social support and connectedness to one's school on students' mental health. They found that having more support from educators and other reliable adults may decrease depressive symptoms and that positive feelings connected to one's school community can lead to fewer feelings of depression over time (Huang & Baxter, 2021). However, an important finding by the researchers was that stressful life events could lead to feelings of disconnectedness from

school even when students feel personally connected to educators. This finding matters because it highlights the complexity of student connectedness to school and acts as a reminder to school leaders that student connectedness to school includes several components that must work concurrently.

Social-Emotional Learning and Student Connectedness to School

There has been an increased focus on students' social-emotional well-being in the 21st century. One manifestation of this focus is an increase in the implementation of district-wide social-emotional learning programs across school districts in the United States (Gewertz, 2020). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social-emotional learning (SEL) as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL, 2020). One of the main goals of some SEL programs is to build the emotional intelligence of the staff and students who implement and participate in such programs. However, diversity in implementation and reported success of SEL programs varies across schools (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Furthermore, a note of caution is warranted here in that it has been found that one's perception of EI may lead to discriminatory behavior if certain children are seen as lacking a specific skill set as a result of their ethnicity or social-economic status (Wood, 2020). For this reason, SEL program implementers should consider cultural inclusivity in which staff reflect on the power differentials that exist within the context of the school. For example, educators can be encouraged to question their understanding of "the correct way to behave"

in a certain situation (Wood, 2020). If cultural differences and power asymmetries between educators and students are taken into consideration, then developing and implementing successful SEL programs in schools may be a worthwhile pursuit.

Students with stronger social and emotional skills tend to report heightened feelings of connectedness to their school (Panayiotou et al., 2019). Research has also indicated that when implemented using best practices, SEL programs may contribute to improved student attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). These findings indicate the presence of a reciprocal relationship between social-emotional skills and student connectedness. The findings are important as they indicate that when implemented properly, SEL programs can have a positive impact on the well-being of adolescents.

The SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic and Student Connectedness to School

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a heightened sense of the importance of student connectedness to school. In March 2020, many schools across the United States abruptly transitioned from in-person learning to full remote online learning. In an effort to foster and maintain relationships with their students, educators across grade levels created encouraging yard signs that were placed in front lawns and held virtual meetings with students. Through the pandemic, educators and educational leaders tried to preserve a sense of connection with their students. These actions have now been supported by recent literature. For example, it has been found that even during remote learning, students' feelings of connectedness to their school were negatively associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression (Perkins et al., 2021). Furthermore, Students who felt connected to their school during remote learning were less likely to experience anxiety and depression (Perkins et al., 2021). The full impacts from

the COVID-19 pandemic on students' social and emotional well-being as well as their sense of connectedness to their school are still unknown.

Summary of Chapter Two

In summary, this theoretical framework provided an overview of student connectedness to school and related constructs of belonging, student-educator support, social support, engagement, and school climate and culture. While there is still much work to be completed to come to a shared understanding of the meaning of the term student connectedness to school, this theoretical framework synthesized the research from the past four decades. This framework presented the reader with an inclusive meaning of the term student connectedness to school as it is understood by the researcher (Figure 2.1).

Additionally, five seminal theories (Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development, Abraham Maslow's theory on human motivation, psychological sense of community theory, self-determination theory, and stage-environment fit theory) were discussed and used to set the framework for student connectedness to school. Finally, the benefits of increasing students' feelings of connectedness to school were examined.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study design was selected to better understand the complexities of the concept of student connectedness to school at the secondary level. This research sought to honor the perspectives of both students and educators at the school in which this research took place. Students' perspectives were captured through pre-existing survey data from an instrument that was developed and administered to students by educators in the school district where the study took place. Adult perceptions and ideas were honored through in-depth interviews and thematic coding. A sample of convenience was utilized because of existing survey data and to address the overarching research question that guided this study: *In what ways can educational leaders increase student connectedness to school?* This study also supported the following research questions:

1. What are the positions and roles of the adults within a secondary school with whom students identify as adults they can speak to if they have a problem?
2. How do adults with whom students across grades 9-12 frequently select as people they feel comfortable speaking with understand the concept of student connectedness to school?
3. How do adults who students across grades 9-12 frequently select as people they feel comfortable speaking with understand and describe their ability to form meaningful connections with students?

Data from the selected survey were used to answer the first research question and to aid in the selection of adults to be interviewed to address research questions two and three. More specifically, educators who were frequently selected by students on the survey as people with

whom they could speak if they had a problem were invited to participate in this study. These educators were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol developed by the researcher and based on the literature surrounding student connectedness to school. Codes emerged from the interviews. Anticipated and emergent codes were then used to generate themes that were further explored through writing and reflexivity to reach the findings in Chapter Four.

Study Context

The research was collected at Heather Hills High School (pseudonym) in a suburban school district known as Springcrest Public Schools (pseudonym) in Connecticut. A comparison of demographics between the Springcrest Public School District and the State of Connecticut can be found in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Demographics for Springcrest School District and the State of Connecticut (2018-19)

Category	Springcrest School District %	State of CT %
Asian American	6.7	5.2
Black	3.2	12.8
Hispanic	19.6	25.8
Two or more races	3.2	3.8
White	66.8	52.4
Students with Disabilities	12.9	15.4
Free or reduced-priced meals	28.1	42.1
English Language Learners	6.0	7.6
Graduation Rate	93.1	88.3
College Entrance (Class of 2019)	77.0	71.5
College Persistence (Class of 2017)	89.2	87.8

Connecticut State Department of Education, 2019

The Springcrest Public School district is situated in a town consisting of approximately 20,000 residents, 82% of whom are White. As of the 2018-19 academic year, approximately 28% of students within Springcrest school district were eligible for free or reduced-price meals. While low by national standards, the number of students eligible for free or reduced-priced meals at Springcrest Public Schools has increased by approximately 10% since 2015. There has been a relatively stable population in the town in which the Springcrest Public Schools are located from 2014 to 2019. However, since the 2019-2020 school year the demographics of the school district has been shifting. For example, there are

a growing number of families and students whose first language is a language other than English.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of student connectedness to school at the secondary level this research took place at the high school within the Springcrest Public School District (Heather Hills High School). At the time of this study, Heather Hills High School had an enrollment of approximately 900 students. Heather Hills High School had a relatively high graduation rate (93%) and low student to teacher ratio (10:1). Both of these data points suggest privilege and success found at Heather Hills High School.

Data Collection

This qualitative case study utilized empirical data collected from existing survey data as well as in-depth participant interviews. The survey was the Heather Hills High School Safe School Climate Survey (SSCS) and is described in more detail later in this section. For reader clarity, all employed adults at Heather Hills High School will be referred to as educators. This is because all adults within the school have the potential to mentor students and form meaningful connections with students. Having both students' reported feelings (from the student SSCS) and educators' understandings (from semi-structured interviews) provided a richer interpretation of student connectedness to school at the secondary level. Furthermore, these combined data are not available in previous case studies.

The Safe School Climate Survey (SSCS)

The SSCS consisted of two sections, the first of which asked students questions related to the academic environment at Heather Hills High School. The second section asked questions about the social environment, including school safety. The majority of the survey questions were written as 4-point forced choice Likert scale questions with possible

responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Example questions on the survey included; “(a) I feel safe from physical harm while in the building,” (b) “staff members are sensitive to issues related to race, culture, gender (including transgender) sexual orientation, and disabilities,” and (c) “my teachers care about my success at school.” The survey included a total of 38 questions. The researcher reviewed each question on the SSCS and selected 10 questions from the survey deemed most relevant to this study (Appendix A). The questions selected were based on their relationship to the available literature surrounding school connectedness, social support, engagement, and feelings of belonging. The SSCS also consisted of a total of three open-ended questions. However, only one open-ended question was deemed relevant to the research. The open-ended question selected for the purposes of this research was: “I feel comfortable speaking to the following adults at Heather Hills High School.” With this question, students were encouraged to list any adult at Heather Hills High School with whom they felt comfortable speaking to if they have a problem.

There are several benefits to using pre-existing data sets, including collecting data quicker, which can provide cost savings, and reduce any source of risk to participants who might be associated with the research (Doolan, Winters, & Nouredini, 2017). Other pre-existing data sets that were examined included class lists from the classes of 2019 through 2022 and educator employer positions for the same time period. The class lists were used to determine the response rate of the SSCS. The list of educator positions was used to determine the positions held by each of the educators indicated by students as adults within the building that students could go to if they had a problem.

Validity of the SSCS. The items on the SSCS were based on definitions of the components of a safe school climate, especially those components regarding safety,

engagement, and environment. The SSCS was created by members of the school community to be used within Heather Hills High School and is accepted to be valid for the purposes of this study. The SSCS indicated content validity (Haynes, Richard, & Kubany, 1995) as each item was relevant to the members of the safe school climate committee and corresponded with at least one component of school climate and culture. Additionally, school staff members and students have reviewed the survey for content validity since 2015. Questions on the SSCS have been revised annually based on feedback from staff members and students at Heather Hills High School. To ensure the reliability of the SSCS, the researcher completed an internal consistency of reliability estimate using Siegle's (n.d.) reliability calculator. The results indicated internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.93$).

The data from the SSCS were utilized for three purposes. The first purpose was to determine the positions and roles of the adults at Heather Hills High School whom students identified as adults they could speak with if they had a problem (research question one). The secondary purpose of utilizing data from the SSCS was to determine which educators were selected most frequently by students as educators to whom students could speak if they had a problem. A list of the top five percent of educators was generated based on their selection by students. Results from these data points are briefly discussed later in this chapter and further in Chapter Four. The third purpose of using the SSCS was to gather descriptive data from students at Heather Hills High School with the intent of better understanding general feelings of student connectedness at the school in which the research took place.

Descriptive Statistics from the Safe School Climate Survey

Descriptive statistics included information regarding the number of SSCS responses from students, the cumulative scores on the survey, as well as the number of educators whom

students selected as adults in the building that they could go to if they had a problem by grade level. The number of students that listed zero adults in the building as people they could go to if they experienced a problem at Heather Hills High School were also available in the data displayed. The descriptive statistics are broken down by graduation year (e.g., the class of 2019, or grade 12). Whole-school data are also included.

The response rate of the SSCS across four grade levels (class of 2019-2022) was relatively high. The class of 2021 (grade 10) had the highest response rate while the class of 2019 (grade 12) had the lowest response rate. It is not surprising that the senior class had the lowest response rate. This is because the 2019 SSCS was given during the spring semester when many seniors are out of the building for various reasons such as internships or college visits. The response rate results are depicted in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

Response Rate of the Safe School Climate Survey

Population	Total Responses (<i>n</i>)	Response Rate (<i>M</i>)
Class of 2019 (12 th Grade)	135	58.9
Class of 2020 (11 th Grade)	150	65.5
Class of 2021 (10 th Grade)	191	81.9
Class of 2022 (9 th Grade)	167	77.7
Overall	643	71.0

Each question selected by the researcher on the SSCS for its relevance to this study was assigned a numerical point value based on the 4-point Likert scale that was used for each question. The response format ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” with the latter as a positive towards student connection. Therefore, the question, “Bullying is repeated

mean behavior intended to cause emotional or physical harm. Based on this definition, bullying is a problem at my school,” was reverse coded. As a result, the highest total point value on the SSCS was 36 points (the open-ended question selected for the purposes of this research was: “I feel comfortable speaking to the following adults at Heather Hills High School” was not counted in the total point value). The mean score on the selected questions on the SSCS from all students who took the survey across all grade levels was relatively close together in each grade level. The class of 2022 (grade nine) had the highest mean score while the class of 2019 (grade 12) reported the lowest mean score. However, the difference between the highest mean score, which was generated by the freshman class (grade nine), and the lowest score, which was generated by the senior class (grade 12), was less than one. Therefore, it can be concluded that the overall results from the SSCS did not vary greatly between each of the graduating classes at Heather Hills High School. These results are depicted in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Overview of the Heather Hills High School SSCS by Graduation Year

Population	Score (M)	Mode Score	Min Score	Max Score	Range in Scores	SD
Class of 2019 (12 th Grade)	25.2	26	13	33	20	3.4
Class of 2020 (11 th Grade)	25.3	26	12	33	21	3.4
Class of 2021 (10 th Grade)	25.9	26	12	33	21	3.4
Class of 2022 (9 th Grade)	26.1	26	18	33	15	3.0
Overall	25.7	26	12	33	21	3.3

The number of educators that students listed as adults who they could speak with if they have a problem was similar for students across grades 9-12. The highest mean of

educators listed was produced by the grade 12 class, while the lowest came from the grade 10 class. The overall range in the number of educators listed by students as adults within the building that they could speak with if they had a problem varied from zero to 10 adults. It is important to note that 10 adults were only selected by one student in the grade 10 class and is considered an outlier. However, given the nature of this research, it did not seem appropriate to dismiss this number because tests of significance were not conducted. Nonetheless, it is relevant to note that despite one student within the sophomore class who listed 10 educators with whom she could go to if she had a problem, on average, the sophomore class recorded the fewest overall number of educators with whom they felt comfortable speaking with if they had a problem when compared to other classes. These results are reported in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4

Connections with Educators Selected by Student Graduation Year

Population	Educators Selected by Students (<i>M</i>)	Mode	Range
Class of 2019 (12 th Grade)	2.3	2	9
Class of 2020 (11 th Grade)	2.1	3	6
Class of 2021 (10 th Grade)	1.8	2	10
Class of 2022 (9 th Grade)	2.0	2	9
Overall	2.0	2	10

While most students who took the SSCS listed at least one adult in the building with whom they have a social connection, a small population of students at Heather Hills High School who took the survey did not list any adults with whom they felt comfortable speaking with if they had a problem. The percent of students that did not name any adults in the building was similar for grades nine, 11, and 12. Of note is that the grade 10 class had the

highest percentage of students that did not list any adults with whom they felt comfortable speaking with if they had a problem. These results are depicted in Table 3.5

Table 3.5

Students Who Did Not Name an Educator on the SSCS by Graduation Year

Population	<i>n</i>	% of Class
Class of 2019 (12 th Grade)	17	12.6
Class of 2020 (11 th Grade)	18	12.0
Class of 2021 (10 th Grade)	37	19.4
Class of 2022 (9 th Grade)	20	12.0
Overall	92	14.3

Summary of the descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics presented in this study should be used to help the reader gain a better understanding of students' general feelings of connectedness at Heather Hills High School. The response rate of the SSCS was relatively high, indicating that most students at Heather Hills High School are at least somewhat engaged in school based on a connection to a Heather Hills School Adult. While there was some variation in scores, the mean scores on the Safe School Climate Survey for the questions selected to be used in this research were similar for each graduating class. The mean number of educators selected by each student within each class was also similar. However, overall, grade 10 students recorded (on average) the fewest adults with whom they felt connected and had the highest mean of students within the class that listed zero educators with whom they felt comfortable speaking if they had a problem. While caution is warranted regarding drawing any conclusions from this data without further statistical analysis, these data points may indicate that sophomore year (grade 10) is an especially challenging time for

adolescents at Heather Hills High School in terms of forming meaningful connections with adults.

Interview Participants

The researcher sought to better understand student connectedness at Heather Hills High School by honoring the voices of educators on student connectedness to school. More specifically, the researcher wanted to explore the perspectives of educators within the school that students frequently selected as adults they felt comfortable speaking with if they had a problem (i.e., adults with whom students felt a sense of connection). In order to achieve this goal, the researcher found the sum of the number of times an educator was selected by students as someone they felt comfortable speaking to at Heather Hills High School based on the SSCS responses. A total of 10 educators were selected to be interviewed. Eight of the interview participants were classroom teachers, one was an athletic coach, and one was a school counselor. While the athletic coach and school counselors were selected less frequently than some of the remaining classroom teachers not asked to participate in this study, the researcher felt that it was important to understand the perspectives of adults in the building other than classroom teachers. However, the school counselor and athletic coach were within the top five percent of adults at Heather Hills High School selected by students as someone they felt comfortable speaking with within their respective positions (i.e., school counselors and athletic coaches). Interestingly, many of the classroom teachers interviewed were also athletic coaches or held positions as club advisors, which likely increased their ability to connect with their students based on the extracurricular experiences that these adults participated in with students. Gaining the perspectives of a unique population of educators (i.e., those specifically selected by students at the school with whom they feel

comfortable speaking with) helped to contribute to a deeper understanding of the concept of student connectedness to school.

Interview participants were contacted via email with a request to participate in this study. If an educator agreed to participate then they were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix B) that outlined the goals of the study and described their rights, including confidentiality, Institutional Review Board information, and that they could opt out of the study at any time. Once educators agreed to participate in the study then participants selected the date and time of their interview. A list of participants, as well as information regarding each participant, can be found in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6

Semi-Structure Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Position Held at Heather Hills High School	Time in Education (Years)	Number of Times Selected by Students on the SSCS
Ms. McKenzie	Female	Art Teacher	5	33
Ms. Evans	Female	Math Teacher	10	33
Ms. Brown	Female	Social Studies Teacher	11	31
Ms. Saunders	Female	Social Studies Teacher	12	33
Mr. Keane	Male	Math Teacher	16	34
Ms. Wood	Female	School counselor	16	34
Ms. Davies	Female	English Teacher	17	32
Ms. Hill	Female	Science Teacher	18	20
Ms. Greene	Female	Athletic Coach	26	14
Mr. Otto	Male	Social Studies Teacher	34	47

All of the educators ($n = 10$) selected by the researcher based on the SSCS data agreed to participate in this study. The interviews ranged from between 30-minutes and an hour. Most educators interviewed had been working as classroom teachers for over 10 years ($M = 16.5$ years). The educator with the least experience had been working for five years while the educator with the most experience had worked for 34 years and was retired at the time he was interviewed. The majority of the educators interviewed (70%) had been working within

a school for more than 10 years but less than 20 years. In order to protect the confidentiality of everyone, the names of all participants in this study are pseudonyms.

Educator Interviews and Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions were conducted with educators who were selected to participate and who were employed at Heather Hills High School at the time the 2019 SCS was administered to students. Participants were interviewed for the purposes of addressing two qualitative research questions (How do adults with whom students across grades 9-12 frequently select as people they feel comfortable speaking with understand the concept of student connectedness to school?) and (How do adults with whom students across grade levels 9-12 frequently select as people they feel comfortable speaking to understand and describe their ability to form meaningful connections with students?). Semi-structured interviews fostered participants the ability to reconstruct and reflect upon their experiences and their understanding (Seidman, 2013) of student connectedness to school. The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix C.

The interview protocol consisted of two sections. During the first part of the interview, educators were asked about their years of experience in education, their pathway to becoming an educator, and their current position at Heather Hills High School. The remainder of the interview protocol included questions related to student connectedness to school, belonging, student-educator connectedness, social support, and engagement. The semi-structured interview protocol allowed educators who were interviewed to make their own links and connections between the aforementioned concepts. The interview protocol also gave the educators the opportunity to reflect on their own ability to form meaningful

connections with students at Heather Hills High School and what they believed school administrators could do to foster student connectedness to school.

Interviews were completed over Zoom, a video and voice-call digital application. Per the consent of the interviewee, the interviews were recorded so that the researcher could go back and listen to the participants' responses. During the interviews, data were also recorded and transcribed using a digital application called Otter. This service provided voice transcription to text, which can then be listened to and checked for accuracy. Using both Zoom and Otter allowed the researcher to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts during data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data from Heather Hills High School Safe School Climate Survey and the educator interviews were coded and analyzed using qualitative thematic exploration. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, was used to help store, organize, and analyze the existing data, interview transcripts, and researcher notes. A summary of the analysis for each research question can be found in Table 3.7.

Table 3.7

Research Questions and Analysis

Qualitative Research Questions	Analyses	Semi Structured Interview Questions	Existing Documents	Researcher Journal
What are the positions and roles of the adults within a secondary school with whom students identify as those that they can speak to if they have a problem?	Descriptive Statistics, Qualitative Thematic Coding		X	X
How do adults with whom students across grades 9-12 frequently select as people they feel comfortable speaking with understand the concept of student connectedness to school?	Qualitative Thematic Coding	Q8, Q9, Q10, Q12, Q14, Q15, Q17, Q18		X
How do adults who students across grade levels 9-12 frequently select as people they feel comfortable speaking with understand and describe their ability to form meaningful connections with students?	Qualitative Thematic Coding	Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q11, Q13, Q16,		X

The Safe School Climate Survey

This study analyzed one academic year (2018-2019) of pre-existing student survey data from four grade-levels (grades 9-12) using Heather Hills High School's Safe School Climate Survey (Heather Hills High School, 2019). The Safe School Climate Survey (SSCS) was explicitly developed and vetted by a group of teachers, administrators, and school counselors in 2015 for the expressed purpose of being used at Heather Hills High School. The SSCS has been administered every year since 2015 through 2019. The SSCS provided important data from the perspectives of students which was relevant to educators,

administrators, and students at Heather Hills High School. The SCSS requires an answer for each question. Therefore, incomplete surveys were not collected. This supports that the only survey data available was from students with at least some engagement in school.

Descriptive statistics. Starting with the pre-existing SSCS data, the researcher created a list of all of the adults in the building listed by students on the SSCS as people within the school that they could speak with if they had a problem. An assumption was made that students feel some sense of connection with the adults that they selected on the SSCS. The researcher recorded the role of each adult based on their primary duty. For example, if a classroom teacher was also an athletic coach, then the adult was categorized as a classroom teacher. Using this same example, educators were then categorized based on their discipline, subject area, or job title in the building (e.g., secretary). The data indicated that the majority of adults listed by students as adults in the building that they felt comfortable speaking if they had a problem were classroom teachers (65%). This is logical as the majority of the employed adults at Heather Hills High School are classroom teachers. The other adults at Heather Hills High School that students selected as those that they could go to if they had a problem (35%) were not classroom teachers. Of note is the diversity in the job titles of the adults within the building whom students formed connections.

Educator Interviews

After data from interview participants were recorded using Zoom and Otter, the interviews were all printed and cleaned by the researcher. Data cleaning consisted of reading and re-reading the transcripts and re-listening to interviews in order to correct any errors in the transcription process. Once the data were cleaned, then data analysis began for the interviews.

The researcher used a systematic three-pronged data analysis process, as described by Ravitch and Carl (2016). This process included (a) data organization and management, (b) immersive engagement, and (c) writing as representation. Data organization and management encompasses “developing a plan for data organization, developing a rationale for the use of (and decisions surrounding) transcription” and “engaging in pre-coding of the data” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 239). Pre-coding “is a process of reading, questioning, and engaging with the data (e.g., transcripts, artifacts, and field notes) before you formally begin the process of coding the data” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 243). After cleaning the data, the researcher organized and managed data using NVivo. This included coding within NVivo, using a list of 27 anticipated codes, or a priori codes, generated prior to coding the transcripts. Anticipated codes were based on a review of the literature as well as the researcher’s previous experiences as an educator. Some of the anticipated codes included: reciprocity, humor, empathy, educator visibility, and educator support. After a priori codes were generated then transcripts were coded. New codes were allowed to emerge from the data during the coding process. The initial inductive coding process resulted in over 70 codes, all of which were recorded in a codebook. Some of the codes included: educator intuition, authenticity, and educator self-awareness.

Immersive engagement, which consists of “multiple readings of the data” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 239) as well as conducting “data analysis strategies including coding, connecting strategies, and dialogic engagement” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 239) was completed. This began with the pre-coding of the transcripts on the printed copies of the interview transcripts and the simultaneous creation of a list of interviewee quotes related to the research questions. The interviews were organized, coded, and analyzed using NVivo software. A codebook was

written and shared with the researcher's primary advisor for transparency purposes. Data coding in NVivo included defining each code, fitting each code into a structure, and ensuring that each code was distinct (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding led to patterns which, after reflection and through the writing process, led to themes. In this way, primary, secondary, and tertiary themes were then generated based on the codes created and thematic analysis began.

Thematic analysis of the data included the systematic use of quotes from interview participants and the subsequent analysis of each theme through writing. Careful attention was taken to ensure that each theme generated was supported by the data collected, with excerpts from interview participants that were purposefully and thoughtfully selected and included in order to support the themes generated (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A balance of both description and analysis was used throughout the writing. Additionally, the ethical question of, "if people in my study were reading this, how would they feel?" was considered by the researcher throughout the writing and analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 290). A total of five themes were generated. These themes included: (a) recognizing the potential of positive relationships with all educators, (b) creating a sense of trust and psychological safety, (c) humanizing relationships, (d) increasing informal interactions, and (e) encouraging engagement. These themes are written about in greater detail in Chapter Four.

Data Collection Procedures and Timeline

The following data analysis timeline highlights key procedures of this research:

1. The researcher applied for and was granted approval from the Western Connecticut State University (WCSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix D) to conduct the research (November 2020).

2. The researcher gained consent to conduct the research from district leaders (school superintendent and school principal, Appendices E and F, respectively) within the selected school district (November 2020).
3. Initial review of the data from the high school's Safe School Climate Survey was completed. Data from the survey were used to select educators within the district to participate in the educator interviews. Educators were contacted and asked to provide consent for interviews (December 2020 through February 2021).
4. Educator interviews ($n = 10$) were started and completed using the researcher generated interview protocol (Appendix C). Interviews were recorded using a video conference recording application and transcribed using a voice transcription application (February 2021-March 2021).
5. Interview transcriptions were cleaned and re-read multiple times. Important quotes were documented (March-April 2021). Cleaned transcripts were uploaded to NVivo (March-April 2021).
6. Initial codes were recorded and discussed with the researcher's primary advisor. This included anticipated and emergent coding. Patterns and subsequent themes began to take shape. Writing as analysis began concurrently (April 2021).
7. Drafts of thematic analysis were shared with the researcher's primary advisor. Theme editing included the process of triangulation of feedback from the researcher's primary advisor as well as further exploration of the existing research related to the topic (April 2021 through July 2022).

8. Concurrent with the analysis of the interview data was the analysis of the pertinent descriptive statistics from the Safe School Climate Survey (April 2022 through May 2022).
9. Dissertation edited and finalized (May 2022 through October 2022).

Limitations of the Study

With any research studies there are limitations. In the case of this research, one of the limitations is that the research was conducted during a time of a global pandemic—COVID-19, which may have altered educators’ understanding of the constructs in this study due to the collective trauma faced by all during the pandemic. Another limitation is that this case study relied on a pre-existing instrument that limited the case to one school district. It is also important to acknowledge the limitation of only interviewing educators frequently selected by students as those with whom they feel comfortable speaking with as a connected adult. The researcher understands that there are a number of students that make deep and meaningful connections with educators who were not asked to participate in this research. However, the researcher sought to understand the perspectives of educators repeatedly selected by students as a way to honor students’ perspectives. With regards to student perspectives, it is critical to acknowledge that there were several students who did not take the safe school climate survey. As a result, their ideas are not included in this study. This is a limitation because it is important for all students to be able to share their ideas regarding student connectedness to school. While students may have not responded to the SSCS for a variety of reasons, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of the students who did not respond are the most disengaged and disconnected from school.

Additionally, the constructs being used in this study (student connectedness to school belonging, social support, student-educator connectedness, and engagement) are complex constructs each of which are surely interwoven with one another and difficult to measure and operationalize precisely. However, this is one of the benefits of exploring constructs such as student connectedness to school using qualitative research. Moving towards a deeper understanding of these topics may help to increase student connectedness to school. Finally, the researcher acknowledges that while this qualitative research may not be generalizable, it is surely transferable to other similar school districts and can be used to help inform policies and practices surrounding student connectedness to school, especially in regions with similar demographics as the ones where this study took place.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher holds the belief that the purpose of schools lies well beyond academics. Schools and school districts are essential aspects of most communities in the United States. Schools provide childcare for working families, jobs for people that live within and around the school community, and perhaps most importantly, schools are one of the institutions that instills the foundations of democracy and the democratic process. For example, schools are one of the places that bring people together to learn and to socialize. Therefore, school leaders must do what they can to foster student connectedness to school.

The researcher's interest in this study stems from his fascination with the undeniable—yet difficult to measure—importance of student connectedness to school, especially at the secondary level. As both a student and an educator, the researcher has experienced student connectedness and how it has enhanced his own engagement in his learning. As a teacher, the researcher believes in the importance and potential of human

connection as a motivating factor for both students and educators to engage in their school community.

The researcher's previous work and educational experiences have set a foundation that allows for a close examination of school connectedness. The idea of student connectedness piqued the researcher's interest, and as he immersed himself in the literature surrounding the topic, he became even more excited to immerse himself in the scientific process, with the prospect of gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of student connectedness and related constructs.

The researcher's experiences prior to work on his dissertation includes the successful completion of all of his classwork as a doctoral student in the Instructional Leadership Program at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury, Connecticut. Preceding his doctoral coursework at Western Connecticut State University, the researcher completed an action research project and his Master's in Education at Michigan State University in East Lansing, Michigan. With regards to praxis, the researcher has been a teacher for a decade and a member of a variety of school-based committees related to school culture and school climate.

The researcher believes that due to the nature of this topic, the most fitting research design was a qualitative case study approach bound by a single secondary school. The complexities of the educational setting make it extremely difficult to isolate confounding variables that may arise in a purely quantitative study that explores topics related to school community and connectedness. Additionally, the researcher believes that qualitative and quantitative data that already exists within schools and focuses on the positive attribute of a school community (Safir & Dugan, 2021) should be utilized more frequently by researchers

to gain a more nuanced understanding of student connectedness to school at the community level. As such, the researcher concluded that a qualitative case study that utilizes both descriptive statistics and in-depth educator interviews provided a rich understanding of the nuances of school connectedness from the perspectives of both students and educators.

Respect, Trust, and Rigor in Qualitative Research

Maintaining respect for the participants was a critical component of this qualitative research. The researcher honored students and educators by centralizing them and working deliberately to capture their ideas related to student connectedness to school. Furthermore, the researcher strived to produce trustworthy research (Stahl & King, 2020) and to use rigorous research methods (Ravitch & Carol, 2016). Ravitch and Carol (2016) wrote that rigorous qualitative research should “seek to understand and represent as complex and contextualized a picture of people, contexts, events and experiences as possible” (p. 389-390). Ideally, qualitative researchers should be transparent about the limitations of their study, honor their studies participants by creating and documenting clear and systematic research procedures and sequencing, and should be open to emerging findings while simultaneously grounding the research in the available literature related to the research questions (Ravitch and Carol, 2016).

Trustworthiness in qualitative research ensures that the reader of the research can be confident in the results that were reported (Stahl & King, 2020). Aspects of trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Stahl & King, 2020; Stenfors, Kajamaa, & Bennett, 2020; Toma, 2005). The researcher sought to ensure each of these aspects of trustworthiness, and discusses each component as it relates to this study in the following section.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research “ensures the study measures what is intended and is a true reflection of the social reality of the participants” (Maher, Hadfield, Hutchings, & Eyto, 2018, p. 3). Credibility was primarily established in this research by involving an informant, the researcher’s primary advisor. The advisor read and re-read quotes from interview participants as well as the themes and sub-themes generated by the researcher. Additional credibility was established through the application of theoretical triangulation in which the researcher used multiple theoretical orientations in order to situate the research (Stahl & King, 2020). The researcher’s own experience as an educator as lends to the credibility of this research.

Transferability

Transferability has been defined as “the ability of the findings to be transferred to other contexts or settings” (Maher et al., 2018). Stahl and King (2020) noted that, “transfer in qualitative research is not a recipe, but rather a suggestion that must itself be researched for its applicability to a new context” (p. 27). Thick descriptions were written in the pursuit of transferability. These included descriptions of the study context as well as the analysis of educator interviews (Chapter Four). One of the goals of this research was to expand upon, and co-create, a deeper understanding of how schools can work to increase students’ feelings of connectedness. More specifically, the researcher hopes that the lived experiences of the participants in this research can be used to inform local policy makers, or at least school administrators, in their attempts to help increase students’ feelings of connectedness to their schools and school communities.

Dependability

Dependability has been defined as “the extent to which the research could be replicated in similar conditions” (Stenfors et al., 2020, p. 598). The data collection and analysis processes (including the interview protocol, Appendix C) were documented and are shared in this chapter as well as in the appendices (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). Additionally, a researcher timeline was included in this chapter to increase the dependability of this study through transparency of the research methodology.

Confirmability

Confirmability has been previously compared to objectivity in quantitative studies (Maher et al., 2018; Stahl & King, 2020). To maintain confirmability the researcher first discussed and outlined assumptions, potential bias, and positionality with his primary advisor (Toma, 2005). The researcher addressed bias and issues surrounding trustworthiness by keeping a reflective and reflexive researcher journal. The researcher also attempted to align conclusions with previous findings and theories within the literature while simultaneously allowing for new themes to emerge from the lived experiences of the research participants.

Researcher journal. A researcher journal was used throughout the data collection and analysis process. The journal served as a place in which data were collected and where the researcher’s intentionality was reinforced (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Additionally, the journal provided a space to reflect upon thoughts, make meaning, triangulate data, and express emotions that surrounded the research. The researcher journal served as a record for any changes in framework or actions that took place during the research and data analysis process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The journal also helped to ensure the researcher addressed any bias by examining his work and reflections as they were kept during the study. Finally,

the researcher journal allowed the researcher to record and share questions and ongoing ideas with the researcher’s primary advisor. An example of excerpts from the researcher journal can be found in Table 3.8.

Table 3.8

Examples of Excerpts from Researcher Journal

Date	Excerpt
November 16, 2020	As of now, I have student connectedness linked to social support, but how is it linked to belonging? Is it a sub-set of both social support and belonging?
November 19, 2020	Educators spoke about an ability to “read the room” and respond to their students in intuitive ways. What is this? How did they learn to do this?
April 23, 2021	I noticed a pattern of educators recognizing the “power” they can harness when a student admires or respects them. What does this mean about educators’ personalities and how they can leverage relationships with students to help motivate students?

Reflexivity

Reflexivity was a critical component of this research. Reflexivity is the “continual process of engaging with and articulating the place of the researcher and the context of the research” (Stenfors et al., 2020, p. 598). The researcher used a reflexive researcher journal to keep track of his positionality regarding the findings. Ideas regarding quotes, their meanings, and emerging themes were contemplated and shared with the researcher’s primary advisor and trusted colleagues (all while maintaining confidentiality). Additionally, the second and third re-coding processes occurred after time was taken to allow all of the interviews to be processed by the researcher and discussed with the researcher’s primary advisor and trusted peers within the field. The researcher's primary advisor discussed and reviewed the themes with the researcher. The final theme generation resulted from several iterations and

revisions. The researcher's writing was reflexive, and the researcher strived to represent the voices of the interviewees.

Ethics Statement

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval preceded all data collection, and the researcher was in possession of a valid Human Subjects Certificate from the IRB during the time of this research. Permission to conduct this research was obtained from the district's superintendent and the school principal (Appendices E and F). After consent was obtained from district leaders to conduct the study, then participants were asked to sign a consent form prior to the initial data collection, which included an explanation of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and their choice to approve or deny any data collected (Appendix B). The names of all participants as well as organizations in this study and any implicit or explicit reference to their positions or organizations were referenced only through the use of pseudonyms in all written transcripts and documents. The data were stored on a password protected electronic device.

Summary of Chapter Three

This qualitative case study, bound by a single high school, sought to provide further insight into student connectedness to school at the secondary level. Pre-existing student survey data from an instrument (The Safe School Climate Survey) created specifically for the use at the school where this research took place was utilized for this research. This survey data provided insights from students on their general feelings of connectedness to their school. The data also served as a tool to collect information regarding the adults at Heather Hills High School with whom students formed meaningful connections. The pre-existing data from the SCSS allowed the researcher to locate and interview a unique population of

educators on their ideas regarding student connectedness to school and their beliefs surrounding how they formed meaningful connections with their students. Put another way, educators frequently selected by students as adults they could go to if they had a problem were interviewed. The educators interviewed ($n = 10$) included eight classroom teachers, one school counselor, and one athletic coach. Additional data used in this research came from class lists obtained from the school where the research took place and lists of the adults employed at Heather Hills High School during the academic year that the 2019 Heather Hills High School Safe School Climate Survey was administered.

The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. This analysis included immersive engagement with the data. The SSCS and the interview transcripts were read, cleaned, and re-read by the primary researcher. Codes were produced and all data analysis procedures, writing, and findings, were shared with the researcher's primary advisor. Additionally, in the pursuit of producing trustworthy results, the researcher maintained a researcher journal throughout the analysis process. The journal was used to record possible bias, share ideas with the researcher's primary advisor, and facilitate reflexivity generally.

Additionally, thick descriptions were written to increase the possible transferability of the findings. Ultimately, this research sought to honor the lived experiences of the students and adults at Heather Hills High School, especially as their experiences relate to school connectedness. The researcher attempted to balance using previous findings and theories within the literature surrounding student connectedness to school while simultaneously allowing for new themes to emerge from the lived experiences of the research participants.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The intent of this qualitative case study was to better understand student connectedness to school and related constructs from the perspective of both high school students and educators. This chapter first examines students' perspectives by analyzing the pre-existing student data from Heather Hills High School's Safe School Climate Survey (SSCS). The remaining section highlights the perspectives of both students and educators by analyzing the interviews of educators whom students most frequently selected as adults in the building that they could go to if they had a problem on the SSCS. While students were not directly interviewed, their input was utilized with the educators selected to be interviewed. The findings from the educator interviews yielded the primary themes of: Creating a Sense of Trust and Psychological Safety, Humanizing Relationships, Increasing Informal Interactions, and Encouraging Engagement.

Recognizing the Potential of Positive Relationships with All Educators

Although, there were demographic similarities in participants, there was diversity in the roles and positions of the people in the building that students selected as adults they formed connections with at Heather Hills High School. While the majority of the adults listed by students as people they could go to if they had a problem on the SSCS were primarily classroom teachers (65%), there were an unexpected number of adults whose primary role at Heather Hills High School was something other than a classroom teacher (35%). Aside from classroom teachers, students listed the school's activities director, administrators, athletic coaches, building substitutes, the college and career advisor, custodial staff members, school counselors and other staff in the school guidance offices (school

psychologist and social-worker), instructional coaches, the library-media specialist, paraeducators, the school's resource officer (SRO), and school secretaries. Figure 4.1 shows the various roles of educators selected by students as adults in the building they could speak with if they had a problem. Educators selected more than one time were not included in Figure 4.1.

Student Voices: The Various Roles of the Adults in the Building with Whom Students Formed Connections

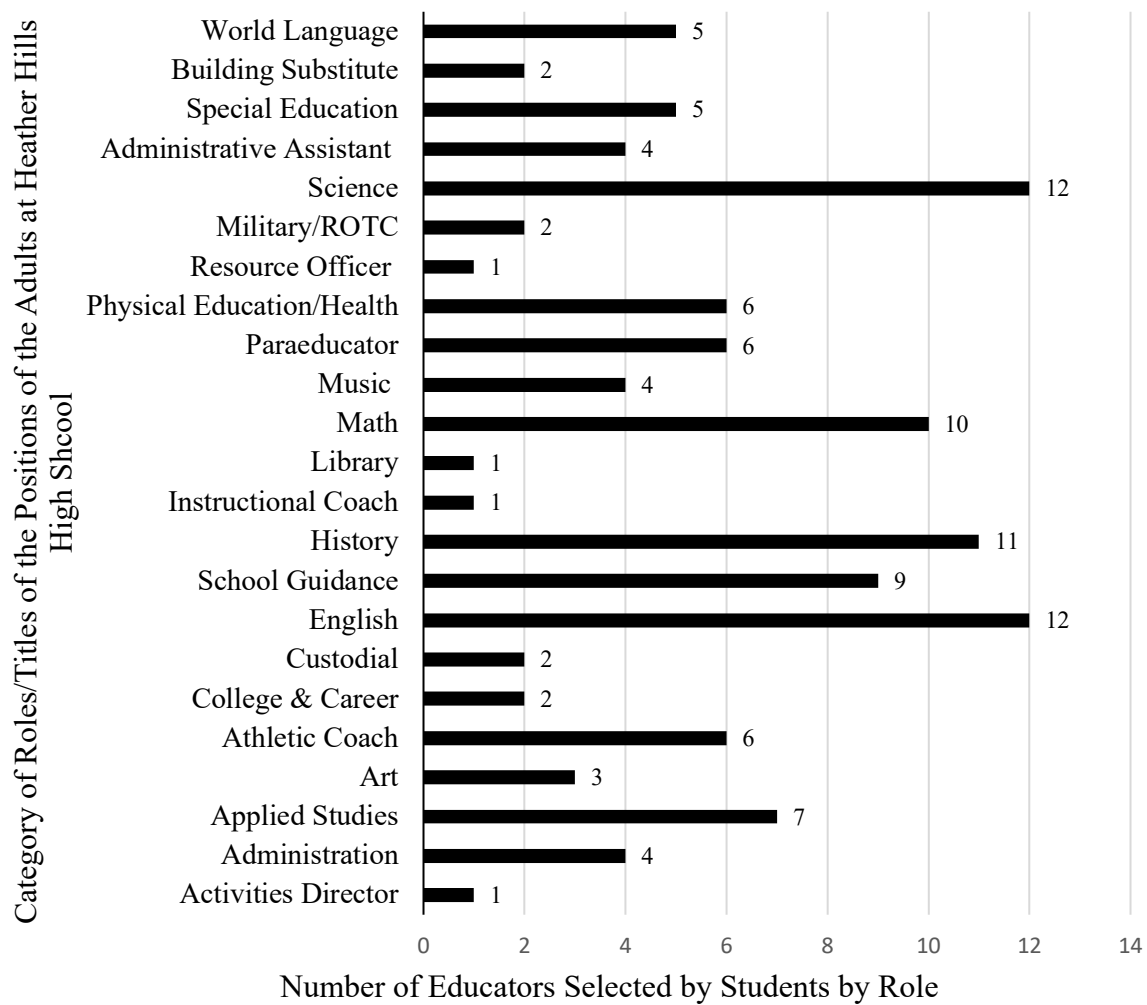


Figure 4.1. The Roles of the Educators Selected by Students on the SSCSS at Heather Hills High School as Adults in the Building with whom they Can Speak with if they have a Problem.

The finding that students form meaningful relationships with a variety of adults at Heather Hills High School besides classroom teachers is an important consideration for administrators and human resources departments within school districts. Positive relationships with adults outside of a students' immediate family are essential for the development of adolescents (Booth & Gerard, 2014). Furthermore, supportive adults in the building who are not classroom teachers are likely to have more heterogenous educational backgrounds. Having a variety of caring adults within the school will only increase the number of students who have an adult in the building with whom they can identify. Furthermore, these non-teaching adults may be able to find unique ways to encourage students who are having a difficult time engaging academically in school or feeling disconnected from their school. For these reasons, hiring committees within a school district should prioritize asking all job candidates about their interest and ability to form positive relationships with students. While this may be a common practice for roles with direct interactions with students, such as educators and paraeducators, all positions that could foster positive student-adult relationships should be considered when hiring other faculty members, including custodial or secretarial staff.

The next section of this chapter is an analysis of the data that was used to create the themes and findings from this research. These themes included: Creating a Sense of Trust and Psychological Safety, Humanizing Relationships, Increasing Informal Interactions, and Encouraging Engagement.

Creating A Sense of Trust and Psychological Safety

The majority of the students (90%) at Heather Hills High School who took the Safe School Climate Survey reported that they felt safe from physical harm when at school.

Historically, Heather Hills High School has experienced few physical fights between students. These data from students align with the information collected from educators during employment interviews. When asked about student connectedness to school, educators did not discuss physical safety. However, when asked how they facilitated student connectedness to school, most of the educators interviewed (Ms. Davies, Ms. Evans, Ms. Greene, Ms. Hill, Mr. Keane, Ms. McKenzie, Mr. Otto, Ms. Saunders, & Ms. Wood) spoke about their attempts at creating trusting environments for students and supporting their students' psychological safety.

While distinct concepts from one another, trust and psychological safety share some overlap (Edmondson, 2003; Newman, et al., 2017). Trust has been previously defined as, “an individual’s or group’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open” (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999, p. 189). Trust relies on the trustee’s sense of safety and security with another person (McKnight & Chervany, 2001). Psychological safety has been previously defined as the feeling that one is “able to show and employ one’s self without the fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career” (Kahn, 1990, p. 708). Unlike trust, which is primarily centered around two people, psychological safety incorporates groups and group members. Educators described the importance of the purposeful creation and maintenance of trusting and psychologically safe environments concerning their facilitation of meaningful learning (Ms. McKenzie, Ms. Hill, Ms. Davies, and Ms. Wood). Establishing feelings of trust and psychological safety amongst students were described by educators as being critical prerequisites for the type of cognitive and creative risk-taking that accompanies higher-order thinking and meaningful learning. For

example, Ms. Wood, a school counselor, expressed the belief that for students to engage in the most meaningful types of learning, they must first feel a sense of trust and psychological safety within their learning environment. Ms. Wood described her views on the relationship between trust, psychological safety, and meaningful learning in the following quote:

We learn as human beings, and the way to learn best is to be relaxed and learn naturally, rather than cramming it down your throat. We don't do rote memorization anymore. We want [students] to use higher-level thinking and to be higher-level thinkers. [The students] have to be calm and at peace and secure enough [in their learning environment] to be able to allow that to happen. (Ms. Wood)

Ms. Wood shared her belief in the existence of a relationship between learning and one's environment. More specifically, she conveyed the belief that students need to feel a sense of trust and safety within their environment in order to engage in higher-order thinking. Her quote also illustrated a belief that it is more important for students to participate in learning that facilitates critical thinking, such as analysis and synthesis, as opposed to tasks and routines related to remembering and recalling. However, trusting and safe environments are prerequisites for deeper-level learning. Ms. Davies, an English teacher, concurred with this idea. When asked about student connectedness to school, Ms. Davies was adamant about the criticality of purposefully creating a trusting and psychologically safe space for her students.

I think about students feeling safe and secure enough to be their authentic selves.

Really, to advocate for what they need, to speak honestly about what they think, and to be vulnerable with me and with their classmates. Honestly, it doesn't even matter how connected they are with you as a teacher if you don't have the whole class community, you don't establish that classroom environment that allows for [trust in

the whole group], then there's only so much you can do as one teacher. You really have to establish that community. [Students need to] feel safe enough to be vulnerable and honest. (Ms. Davies)

Ms. Davies' quote is another example of the belief in the importance of establishing and maintaining classroom environments where students feel a sense of trust and psychological safety amongst one another as well as with the teacher. Ms. Davies acknowledged the importance of establishing a relationship with individual students. However, she emphasized the criticality of the role of the educator as someone who should not only attempt to make connections with each student but someone who should facilitate trust and psychological safety between students within their classroom. Ms. Davies suggested that regardless of whether or not students felt connected to her as the classroom teacher, for students to engage meaningfully, they needed to feel safe to share in the larger classroom community.

Fostering a sense of trust between her and her students, and psychological safety amongst students, can increase positive student behaviors associated with critical thinking, such as students engaging in communication and collaboration. Since students do not work with their teachers on a one-on-one basis but rather in classrooms with other students, it is reasonable to believe that students benefit from a deep sense of psychological safety within the classroom. Students must feel safe expressing themselves in front of their peers. Therefore, educators must purposefully work towards establishing and maintaining a community in which students feel a sense of trust and psychological safety. Creating and maintaining a psychologically safe and trusting environment takes time and effort. Secondary educators should be careful not to assume that just because most students in their classrooms have attended school with one another for several years, they feel safe expressing

themselves in front of their peers. As the leaders of the classroom, educators can facilitate lessons that help to build their students' sense of trust with one another and foster psychological safety.

Ms. Hill also underscored the importance of psychological safety as a prerequisite for critical thinking and meaningful learning. As a classroom teacher, Ms. Hill identified creating a trusting and safe environment as something she is purposeful about achieving. Ms. Hill said that she, “tries to create a safe emotional space for [students], where they can take risks and advance academically.” Ms. Hill later described being purposeful about establishing classroom routines and expectations that facilitate psychological safety. Ms. Wood's, Ms. Davies,' and Ms. Hill's belief that students are more likely to learn best and think critically when students' needs to feel safe and secure are met aligns with Abraham Maslow's (1943) seminal work on human motivation. Maslow explained that when people are preoccupied with feelings of insecurity, anxiety, or instability, they cannot focus their attention on learning (Maslow, 1943). The link between critical thinking and feelings of trust and psychological safety is also supported by the work of Edmonson and Lei (2014) who wrote, “...a climate of psychological safety can mitigate the interpersonal risks inherent in learning in hierarchies. People are more likely to offer ideas, admit mistakes, ask for help, or provide feedback if they believe it is safe to do so” (p. 36). The implication from Ms. Wood, Ms. Davies, and Ms. Hill, as well as the literature, is that educators can purposefully shape and maintain learning environments (e.g., classrooms) in which students feel a sense of trust and psychological safety, and by creating these positive environments, educators can help to facilitate more meaningful school and classroom experiences for all students. Similarly, past research on trust has found that students are more likely to trust their teachers when the

students believe that the rules and classroom procedures implemented are beneficial to both the teacher and the students (Knight, 2018). For example, one of the primary objectives of classroom rules should be to protect both the students' and teachers' physical and psychological safety. Ms. Hill, a science teacher, spoke about her non-negotiable safety rules during science experiments. She explained that the way her students responded to her when she reinforced expectations indicated to her whether or not students trusted her and believed that the rules she enforced were beneficial to both the teacher and students. This was conveyed in the following narrative:

There's sometimes a safety issue that comes up [in a science classroom] and I might have to raise my voice and hopefully we're at that point where they know that I'm there for their betterment and they usually recognize it as, "Okay, yeah, you're right." You know, when you're at that point, and you have to correct their behavior for whatever reason, the way they respond lets you know that you're in the right spot. Students are willing to take a step back and check their own behavior. (Ms. Hill)

Ms. Hill's quote illustrates her belief that when her students demonstrate self-monitoring when she asks them to change their behavior, she has built trust with them. Ms. Hill believed that how students responded to her when she needed to exercise authority (e.g., raise her voice to reinforce expectations) indicated she had built trusting relationships of mutual respect with her students. Ms. Hill was not the only educator interviewed who reflected on the relationship between facilitating trust and safety in the classroom and increasing her students' sense of well-being.

Ms. McKenzie, an art teacher at Heather Hills High School, spoke about her expectations regarding how her students should interact with one another in her classroom

and that she expected students to treat her, as well as each other, with respect as a way to develop and maintain a safe classroom environment. Ms. McKenzie discussed attempting to model this type of behavior for her students on a regular basis. She felt that taking the time to establish these types of expectations with her students and reinforcing them throughout the school year increased her students' sense of trust and psychological safety. Ms. McKenzie believed that a result of building trust with her students was that more of her students were able to engage in meaningful learning. Ms. McKenzie elaborated on the expectations she set in her classroom at the beginning of the school year in the following quote:

I say to students, "I expect that you will respect me and you should expect that I will respect you." I think that's important, and how I build relationships with my students. Art can be messy, or it can be dangerous, or it can be emotional. There are so many things that we have to respect in those terms. (Ms. McKenzie)

Ms. McKenzie believed that it was important for her to establish clear and concise expectations surrounding respect. She felt that establishing a respectful environment was a non-negotiable component of the interactions that occurred in her art room. Ms. McKenzie explained how she continuously referred back to her expectations surrounding respect throughout the school year. Consistently reinforcing expectations can help to create an environment in which students know what to expect and what is expected of them, which is a component of trust. Additionally, Ms. McKenzie's quote showcased her belief that the process of expectations surrounding respect is not unidirectional and that a reciprocity of trust reinforces student-educator relationships.

Some of the educators (Mr. Keane, Mr. Otto) interviewed attributed their individual personality traits to their students' sense of trust and psychological safety within their

classrooms. For example, Mr. Keane, a math teacher, expressed that he saw himself as someone who is “warm and friendly” and that he believed this was one of the reasons his students felt a sense of trust and safety in his classroom. Mr. Keane noted:

I like to think I'm warm and friendly and I want kids to feel like my room is a safe place for them. That they can come in [to my room] and not have to worry about anybody bothering them or anything like that. This goal started years and years ago. It [has helped me to] create that comfort that my students have being in my classroom. (Mr. Keane)

During his interview, Mr. Keane expressed a depth of understanding about how the content he teaches (math) can be overwhelming to students and that he made a conscious decision to mitigate this by being a welcoming and supportive individual. Mr. Keane’s insight and his open acknowledgement regarding his students’ feelings that the content he teaches is challenging is important to underscore. Not all educators are as aware as Mr. Keane regarding how challenging content can impact his students sense of psychological safety in the classroom. Mr. Keane’s quote illustrated an educator whose goal was to develop a safe classroom environment for his students. While subjective character traits such as “friendliness” or “warmth” may help to contribute to students’ feelings of safety and trust, educators can be intentional about setting goals and expectations for themselves and their students that emphasize fostering students’ sense of trust and psychological safety in the classroom. Educators may also consider setting goals around reflecting on how others, including students, perceive them as the adult leader and their ability to help their students feel welcomed. By setting goals around trust and classroom safety—especially psychological safety—educators can take a first yet important step in creating a classroom in

which students feel safe enough to share ideas and actively participate in their learning without fear of being judged or ridiculed by others.

Normalizing Discomfort

Normalizing students' feelings of nervousness and inadequacy—especially those related to being a novice learner and making mistakes within a specific subject area such as math, science, or art was an important finding from the interviews. High school level courses can be increasingly complex and demanding for students regardless of any previous success students may have had in specific subject areas in earlier grades. Educators expressed that due to the challenging and specialized content they teach, many high school students feel a heightened sense of nervousness from being a beginner and having to apply new skills and ideas in front of their peers and teachers. For these reasons, educators can help build their students' self-esteem by working to normalize discomfort in their classrooms. When asked about her thoughts on student connectedness to school and student-educator connectedness, Ms. McKenzie, an art teacher at Heather Hills High School, underscored her commitment to normalizing the feelings of inadequacy that teens can experience when they first start making art at the secondary level.

It is important to realize that art can be very uncomfortable for a lot of people. I always tell my students, "If you put me out on the football field, I would feel very lost and confused and I would probably require a lot of feedback throughout my time on the football field." And I know that not all of my students have a strong artistic background either. So, it's a lot of one-on-one. It's a lot of building up the room for students to feel comfortable with one-on-one feedback. I'm sure at times it could feel like maybe my students think that I'm just honing in on something or criticizing their

work when in reality it's about [their] growth. Once we build that up in the classroom and that relationship, they ask more for [teacher feedback]. They're like, "well, what do you think about this" and "how can we do this?" It's [building students' self-esteem in art so that they are open to feedback and seek feedback from their teacher] definitely a work in progress. (Ms. McKenzie)

Engaging in learning can be intimidating for students in various classroom contexts. In all classes, not just art, students are asked to share their thoughts and work, some of which may be immensely personal. Educators can facilitate a positive experience for their students that minimizes the adverse effects of vulnerability and the interpersonal risks involved in working collaboratively with other students and their teachers. Ms. McKenzie recognized that many students were novices when it came to making art. Ms. McKenzie's purpose was to mindfully establish a classroom environment where students felt safe expressing themselves through art. She told her students that it was okay to be a beginner and feel a sense of struggle and discomfort. Furthermore, her quote illustrated a level of self-reflection regarding her past experiences of being a beginner and the feelings associated with the novelty. This type of reflection of a new experience is essential for secondary educators, most of whom have degrees within the fields that they teach. For this reason, secondary educators can forget what it feels like to be a beginner. The anxiety that comes with first learning the skills and techniques associated with the subject areas they teach may be forgotten. The ability to put themselves in the experiences of their students—with empathy and awareness—is one way that teachers and educators can proactively normalize their students' experiences and increase trust and psychological safety between themselves and their students.

Mr. Keane and Ms. Evans, both of whom are math teachers at Heather Hills High School, described wanting to legitimize their students' sense of discomfort in their math classes. Both educators acknowledged their students' feelings of "math phobia" and recognized that, as teachers, they have the capacity to make instructional moves related to creating a psychologically safe learning environment. Mr. Keane noted, "math can be very intimidating for kids to begin with. If I can decrease [students'] nervousness, anxiety, and fear then more of them will be able to access the math content." Similarly, Ms. Evans described some of her students as feeling like they are "math survivors" and not "math kids." What Ms. Evans meant by this is that she recognized that some of her students came to her with a sense of apprehension about math and fear that they do not have the innate ability that some students have to be successful in her math class. She explained that she acknowledged these students' sense of discomfort surrounding math and made it a point to help them feel like welcomed members of her class despite their feelings of anxiety.

[I tell my students that] they belong in the class academically, meaning, they're slated for the right class and they belong here. [Even if] they feel like they're not a math kid and in my class they're just a survivor. If they're here, then I tell them that they belong in my class. (Ms. Evans)

Both Mr. Keane and Ms. Evans described their attempts to ease their students' discomfort by acknowledging students' fears surrounding math. Mr. Keane and Ms. Evans validated their students' discomfort, or math apprehension, and then took steps to increase their students' sense of trust and psychological safety. By expressing that they saw their students as competent, Ms. Evans explicitly communicated to her students that they had been properly placed, and that she believed that her students had the prerequisite skills to be successful in

her math course. Her goal was to help build her students' self-esteem and reassure them that they were capable of being successful in math.

Normalizing making mistakes. Learning new subjects, skills, and techniques can be difficult for adolescents and adults. However, the middle and high school years are marked by a heightened awareness of one's self and a propensity to want to fit in with peers. Although making mistakes is a natural part of learning, secondary students are especially hesitant about making mistakes in front of their peers and educators. Adolescents with a heightened attention to self in relation to others fear being ostracized by peers and seen as incompetent by their teachers. Educators can develop learning environments in which teachers normalize making mistakes. Educators can help students recognize that mistake-making is integral to the learning process. Throughout the educator interviews, it became apparent that educators recognized that some of the discomfort and anxiety their students faced was due to the fear students held about making mistakes in front of their peers and their teachers. Ms. Saunders, a history teacher, drew upon humor and used self-deprecation to ease and validate her students' anxiety surrounding mistake-making.

I think admitting when you make mistakes as teachers, or making little jokes about ourselves can sometimes ease the situation. If a kid makes a mistake, I'm like, "Oh, don't worry I've done that 20 bajillion times, don't worry about it," just so that they know none of us are perfect and we all need to try things out, and then if we don't get something right it's okay, we'll just work on it for next time. (Ms. Saunders)

By normalizing making mistakes and admitting to her own mistakes, Ms. Saunders attempted to ease her students' feelings of stress and anxiety surrounding the learning process. Ms. Saunders' quote also demonstrated her commitment to her students regardless of their

mistakes. Ms. Saunders told her student that they would “work on it for next time.” By letting her students know that they would continue to work together on their academic goals, Ms. Saunders is implicitly communicating to her students that she cares about them and that they can depend on her to continue to help and support them. Ms. Wood, a school counselor, shared that she felt educators should do what they can to minimize their students’ feelings of anxiety surrounding mistake making by explicitly telling students it is okay to make mistakes or offer an incorrect answer.

A teacher may tell [students], “You don't have to get the right answer every single time. You can come back tomorrow, and we'll try again. It's a new day. Let's try this again. I believe in you. You have to believe in me.” (Ms. Wood)

In her quote, Ms. Wood highlighted that educators can set the tone with the potential for every day to be a fresh start. Educators have the capacity to create and sustain classroom environments in which students feel a sense of trust and safety that protects students from being overly critiqued or penalized for making mistakes. Building students’ sense of trust and psychological safety is a process that flows back and forth between educators and students and is not static in time. In this way, educators can act more like coaches or even cheerleaders on the sideline for their students, guiding them and cheering them on as students jump (and sometimes fall) over the hurdles that they may face in the classroom. Students may also be more forgiving and patient with their teachers, who indeed also make mistakes when teaching. Fostering an environment of trust and psychological safety for others facilitates a sense of reciprocity between students and their teachers. Teachers can capitalize on how they create lessons and classroom experiences that facilitate students’ sense of trust

and psychological safety while legitimizing teenagers' feelings of anxiety and normalizing mistake-making as a vital part of the learning process.

Humanizing Relationships

Humanizing relationships has been previously reported by students to be an important characteristic of educators with whom students form connections (García-Moya, Brooks, & Moreno, 2020b). The concept of humanizing relationships, or relationships between students and educators that were more personal as opposed to neutral or simply transactional in nature, was also found to be a theme in this research. Educators at Heather Hills High School spoke about how they believed they fostered personal and humanizing relationships with their students. The educators' ideas were synthesized into three sub-themes related to the theme of humanizing relationships. The three subthemes were related to teachers' actions and included: (a) valuing and adjusting to students' emotional states, (b) being flexible with students, and (c) supporting students beyond the content that they taught.

Valuing and Adjusting to Students' Emotional States

Educators understood themselves to be perceptive and reactive to their students' emotional states. Educators described using their perceptions to guide their interactions with students. For example, Ms. Brown, Ms. Hill, Mr. Keane, and Mr. Otto each recounted greeting their students at the start of class and then using their students' reactions (both verbal and non-verbal) to their salutations as an informal tool to calibrate their students' emotional well-being. Take for example, this quote from Mr. Otto:

You really have to get a read on kids. I think that's a great way to make connections. When they come [to class] you get a feel. There's this kind of feel that you get from their vibe. It could be about how that day is going to go or how their day is going.

They might have had a crappy day at home or drama with a boyfriend or a girlfriend or something like that. (Mr. Otto)

In the previous example, Mr. Otto used the term “vibe,” which is an informal term meaning the mood a person appears to be in based on their verbal and non-verbal expressions. Mr. Otto illuminated small, yet essential steps educators can take that can profoundly impact the relationships they form with their students. For example, educators can use checkpoints throughout the day to assess their students’ well-being and respond appropriately based on their perceptions of their students’ emotional needs. Mr. Otto explained that after he got a sense of how his students were feeling, he made decisions regarding how he interacted with his students. For example, Mr. Otto noted, “you might have to adjust your lesson or adjust how you’re going to deal with students or [whether or not] you are going to call on them.” Taking the time to check on students, even briefly, and then carefully and deliberately reacting to students’ needs demonstrates sensitivity to students and is a way to acknowledge their humanity. Using one’s perceptions to assess students’ emotional needs has been documented by researchers as an essential tool that educators can use to minimize conflicts with students (Sipman, Thölke, Martens, & McKenney, 2019). When educators are responsive to their students, they demonstrate to their students that they care about them as individuals. Moreover, educators demonstrate empathy and understanding by being emotionally responsive to their students.

Like Mr. Otto, Ms. Hill used the term “read students” to describe how she assessed her students’ well-being and applied her assessment to individualize her interactions with specific students. When asked about how she forms meaningful relationships with students, Ms. Hill noted:

It's being able to kind of read them and know when the kids need you to step back in order to connect with them, or which ones really need you to pry. I don't know how to explain how I know how to do that. For example, there was one girl who I just knew needed space. I knew if I kept going after her with kindness and my bubbly and crazy attitude, it would have driven her nuts. I quickly [realized] it was more about giving her space, and acknowledging that she was there, and always saying, "good morning" and "hello" and being kind and including her when I could. You just have to read what the kids need—each kid needing something different. (Ms. Hill)

There may be times when the personalities of educators and students are not very compatible (such as the case illustrated by Ms. Hill). However, educators can still acknowledge their students and attempt to connect with students regardless of perceived differences in personality or personal temperament. Ms. Hill's quote brought an important finding to the surface. In her example, Ms. Hill explained her perception and intuition about her students and how she reacted to students based on implicit cues such as body language. Like Ms. Hill, educators can use their observations of their students and adjust to students' personality preferences, especially as they get to know their students. Educators should not expect all students to respond to the teachers' personalities in the same way. Instead, educators can show care and empathy by adapting to their students' personalities. While the student Ms. Hill described in her narrative did not explicitly state her preferences, Ms. Hill used her perception of how her students responded to her and adjusted her interactions with students accordingly. Ms. Hill exemplifies how educators like herself have learned to become attuned to their students' emotional states.

Ms. Hill was asked how she learned to be perceptive and responsive to her students' unique personalities and temperaments. She described not knowing how she learned to "read her students" but rather, Ms. Hill felt that this was something that came naturally to her and that she strengthened her ability to be perceptive of her students over time. A history teacher, Ms. Brown, shared similar insight into the phenomenon of teacher perceptiveness and intuition and how perceptiveness and insight can be developed, strengthened, and leveraged to make connections with students.

You're in the room with the kids, you start seeing certain things. You start picking up on things. I don't want to call it a vibe or anything but it does sort of come across as that. You start to recognize, "okay, I spend fifty-seven minutes with this kid every day. I'm going to get to know them." It's like, Kayla's off a little bit. Normally she's joking around, but today she's really serious. Let me just touch base with her. "Hey Kayla, what's going on? Everything okay because you seem a little bit out of the ordinary?" Again, that intuition that people have. You follow it. You might be wrong. I don't know if that is something that can be taught, so much as I think it's something that you develop, and when you're in a situation or position where that can be helpful, I think it helps to develop it. I mean, do I think everybody has it? Maybe to some degree, but not everybody uses it that way. (Ms. Brown)

Ms. Brown emphasized her understanding of the development of her own educator intuition. She described her belief that the strength of her intuition was a result of using it and exercising it over time. Ms. Brown acknowledged that while she used her intuition to make decisions regarding how she interacted with students, she realized that her intuition is not guaranteed to be accurate. Ms. Brown described how she acted to check in with her students,

to confirm her perceptions, without being overly invasive of her students' privacy. Ms. Brown demonstrated her ability to be aware of and attentive to her students' emotional states and exemplified how educators can follow up with their students to show students that they care for them. She acknowledged that tension sometimes exists between having a feeling that something is wrong with their students but also not wanting to "pry" if students appear reluctant to talk. To avoid conflicts that might arise between students and educators, educators can check in with their students and ask them how they are doing. Ms. Brown underscored this point when she later explained that she sometimes sends students an email after class to inquire with a student or visit them at their desks to ask if they are doing okay.

The educators that understood themselves to be perceptive and responsive to their students' emotional states were veteran teachers. These educators had an average of approximately 20 years of teaching experience. Ms. Brown, the teacher with the least experience, had been teaching for over a decade (11 years), while Mr. Otto had taught for 34 years. Based on these data, it could be implied that, at least in part, an educator's ability to notice and respond to their students' emotions could be driven by experience and time in the field. However, new teachers and more senior educators can be made aware of the potential of developing their own intuitive ability in the pursuit of increasing student-educator connectedness and students' overall feelings of connectedness to their school community.

Accommodating of Students

There was a perception among educators (Ms. Davies, Ms. Hill, Mr. Keane, and Mr. Otto) that while establishing and maintaining clear expectations was necessary for classroom management, being accommodating of students was of equal importance. In the following quote, Ms. Davies explicitly identified the strain between consistently reinforcing classroom

expectations and being accommodating of her students. Ms. Davies uses the word “flexible” to mean accommodating.

I always say, and it's going to sound contradictory, but you have to be consistent and you have to be flexible at the same time. That sounds like such a paradox. But it is true. There are very few absolutes in this world. I think that you need to remember that students are human beings and let them recognize that you're also a human being and that you're reasonable. (Ms. Davies)

Experienced educators recognized that providing classroom structure for students was not the same as control and uniformity. Establishing expectations and being consistent while simultaneously being accommodating provides students with a certain amount of necessary leeway. Students will make various behavioral and academic mistakes throughout the school day; they will not always be able to meet their teachers’ expectations, just as educators will have days in which they may not be able to meet all of their students’ expectations. To show flexibility and to be accommodating reinforces the human aspect of teaching and learning. Furthermore, educators can be understanding and show benevolence to their students by being accommodating to their students’ emotional states and preferences. For example, Mr. Otto, a retired social studies teacher and an educator whom numerous students selected as someone with whom they could talk if they had a problem at Heather Hills High School illustrated the importance of being accommodating of his student in the following quote:

I guess I’m kind of easygoing, but as I told you, you know I'm easygoing, but I felt like I was firm and fair. I think that helps. That helped me make connections with those types of kids [students that struggled to make connections with other educators at Heather Hills High School]. To be able to

provide that structure, but also knowing that sometimes that just doesn't work.

You have to be flexible, and I think that's one of the keys in teaching and connecting with kids. (Mr. Otto)

Mr. Otto believed that his ability to be both structured and willing to acclimate to his students was one reason he could form connections with students. Mr. Otto's quote further underscores the tension between providing students with a sense of structure and being attuned to what each student may need from moment to moment in order to access the content and maintain a positive relationship with the teacher. Mr. Otto explained that having structures in place, such as clear and consistent expectations, can be helpful for students. Structures provide the consistency that can ensure students' sense of stability and safety. However, when the structures become overly rigid, then they do not allow space for the human aspect of teaching and learning. Mr. Otto believed that his ability to adapt to students made it easier for him to connect with students. Ms. Hill, a science teacher, also perceived teacher accommodation as a critical aspect of student-educator connectedness. As is clear from the following narrative from Ms. Hill, she believed that being overly rigid can lead to classroom management problems:

There are rules and expectations but being super, super strict and not having flexibility doesn't work for me. I think talking to kids one-on-one is really important. If you get into it with a kid in the class, you've lost the class. That's it, you're done. I think if a kid is being really disruptive, pulling them outside and talking to them, or telling them to go for a little walk on their own. I think that that's really important because if a kid's going to start bickering with you in person in front of the other students, then you're not going to win. They can say stuff you can't. (Ms. Hill)

Ms. Hill addressed her preference to avoid power struggles with students—especially in front of their peers. Talking to students one-on-one rather than addressing student mistakes in front of their peers removes students from their peer audience and bypasses negative public interactions. This is because an audience can heighten emotions and create a “winner” and “loser” scenario. Removing an audience and allowing time for de-escalation allows students and educators to have more open, honest, and compassionate conversations with one another. In this way, being flexible about how educators handle volatile classroom situations while avoiding power struggles is important for maintaining safe and nurturing environments for all students.

It is important to note that while educators talked about being accommodating with their students, they did not indicate that they ever lowered their behavioral or academic expectations for students. Instead, they described being adaptable with students regarding how they approached and responded to them as a strategy for keeping students engaged. For example, Mr. Keane, a math teacher, explained how he attempted to be accommodating regarding his standard classroom regulations and policies to encourage his students to access the math content he taught rather than backing away from the content. Mr. Keane explained, “Sometimes you make little exceptions because you know that a little bend is enough to get them [students] through, and bring them to that next level so that they can bypass [whatever they are struggling with] and access the learning.” Mr. Keane described interacting with his students in such a way that showed them that he cared about them by modifying his classroom rules and routines to help students move forward. Educators can demonstrate care and support to their students when teachers make exceptions to rules and routines for

students experiencing a tough time. Educators with experience who trust their decision-making abilities can adapt and support students when facilitating relationship building.

Showing Care Beyond Academic Content

Educators at Heather Hills High School spoke about wanting to help their students in all facets of their lives, including beyond the content they taught or the sport they coached. This theme of showing students care beyond the content area appeared in several ways. For example, Ms. Hill, a biology teacher, felt that it was essential to underscore her belief that the content she teaches (biology) came second to her students' overall well-being.

If you really want to be an educator, you really have to be invested in who the students are, but I don't think everybody is and it makes me sad. I know that it is a lot of work [to invest in the students]. I like teaching, biology, don't get me wrong, but the reason I'm teaching is not for biology or science—it is for the students. Even though some of these kids—oh my goodness they suck the life out of me, but then I've gotten to the end of it all and they say something to somebody else [about the impact I had as their teacher] and you're like, “man, all that hardship was for something.” I know [it sounds] so cliché but you literally change their lives. If you can do that for a kid, I think that's important. (Ms. Hill)

Ms. Hill draws attention to the emotional investment she has made to connect with her students beyond her content area. Ms. Hill described wanting to influence her students constructively and that she felt a strong sense of personal reward when she positively impacted her students. When secondary educators like Ms. Hill see themselves as adults that can have a beneficial influence and impact on the lives of students, they may be more likely to take the time to focus on students' overall sense of well-being. In other words, because

Ms. Hill saw the positive manifestations of her investments in her students, she continued to invest in adolescents during a crucial developmental period in their lives.

Secondary educators who inquire about the interests and goals of their students both within and outside their content specialties (e.g., history, science, athletics) implicitly communicate to their students that they are valued as individuals. This point was highlighted by Ms. Greene, a track and field coach, when she expressed wanting her athletes—especially her senior athletes, to take time to think about their lives beyond Heather Hills High School. When asked how she formed lasting and meaningful connections with students, Ms. Greene expressed that she thought getting students to think and talk about future plans was an important factor in forming meaningful connections. She noted, “I really want to know what's in their hearts and minds about their future. For some of them, it's the first time anybody's even ever asked them about their plans after high school.” As a track and field coach, Ms. Greene’s job does not necessarily include helping students plan and prepare for their lives after high school. However, Ms. Greene took it upon herself to learn about her athletes’ future goals and aspirations. In this way, Ms. Greene demonstrated care well beyond the confines of her specialized discipline. This degree of care surely can help increase students’ feelings of connectedness to their school community.

While Ms. Hill and Ms. Greene highlighted their beliefs that it was vital for them to show students that they care for them and their future goals and plans, other educators perceived themselves to show care and interest in their students in more minor but perhaps equally important ways. The following quote from Ms. McKenzie showcases her proclivity for wanting to help and support her students through a variety of different tasks both related and unrelated to the subject that she taught (art):

I think that connectedness, or student-educator connectedness also goes back to looking at the student holistically, getting to know the student and supporting them holistically. Whether it's [helping the students with] academics, or [listening to student when] they're struggling with friendships, or just [helping student with] organizing their backpack, and helping them get organized. I think that helps them [students] feel more connected and that you're not just another adult in their life that wants them to do well in this one area or looks at them like they're a number or percentage. (Ms. McKenzie)

In the previous quote, Ms. McKenzie described various ways that educators can help their students. There are many opportunities for educators to take care of their students and to check-in with them throughout the school day. Increasing student connectedness can pay off with an increase in academic engagement. Seizing the opportunity to help students can lead to candid conversations between educators and students that may further strengthen a sense of student-educator connectedness. Furthermore, showing care beyond the content area that an educator teaches can facilitate movement away from more transactional-type interactions and towards more humanizing and caring interactions. Students often reciprocate care for their teachers by engaging in their assignments or persevering through challenging coursework because of the goodwill that has been created between educators and students. However, when students do not feel a sense of connectedness to school or their teachers, they will be less likely to engage in coursework that they find challenging.

Increasing Informal Interactions

Many secondary school schedules in the United States allow for very little unstructured time. Student days are packed with academic coursework. In the case of Heather Hills High School, students are permitted to take four minutes between each of their classes. This time can be used for tasks such as retrieving items from lockers, using the restroom, and transitioning between classes. Additionally, state law requires that students receive a 30-minute lunch period. This provides little socialization time. During some days within their schedule, students at Heather Hills High School were required to attend a course called “advisory,” which met approximately every other week for around 25 minutes. The student handbook described advisory as:

All students at Heather Hills High School are assigned an advisory group for their four years of high school. Students report to their advisory classroom during advisory time. The purpose of the [advisory] program is to strengthen the connection between faculty members and students, to promote a positive school culture, to foster discussions on a variety of topics in order to keep students engaged and informed about their community/world, and to disseminate important information. Students, staff members, various clubs/groups are encouraged to plan advisories for the school community. Advisories take place 2-3 times per month on A-days. Attendance is mandatory. (Heather Hills High School Student Handbook, 2018, p. 8)

Despite having advisory—a course dedicated to increasing student-educator connectedness and student connectedness to school, many educators at Heather Hills High School believed that the advisory program was too structured and that students and educators would benefit from having more unstructured time together. For example, during advisory, educators were

required to implement lesson plans that included formal presentations delivered through a program similar to Microsoft PowerPoint. Educators explained that time could be utilized to have more frequent free-flowing conversations with students and that this unstructured time would increase student connectedness to school. Educators voiced that they felt it was important for students to have informal interactions with adults and peers in the building. The following quote from Ms. Brown is one example of the belief held by educators that informal and unstructured interactions with students are an essential part of student connectedness to school.

I wish there was more time to get to talk to the kids about whatever they want to talk about, even if it's their grades or just kind of more natural conversations. [I wish there was more] time to ask [students] questions and time for students to do their own thing. (Ms. Brown)

Ms. Brown believed additional time is necessary for students and educators where they could build relationships with one another in an informal and unstructured setting. The following quote showcases her belief in the need to provide additional support time:

I think [check in periods would] be a good place for a lot of kids who don't feel connected to feel connected with somebody. It would throw out that pressure of [students feeling like] "okay they're grading my assignments," It just [would be] a non-threatening environment that they can get to know another teacher. (Ms. Brown)

Creating space for unstructured and informal interactions fits teenagers' developmental needs. While class periods such as advisory may allow for the dissemination of critical information unrelated to content-specific courses and activities in the building, educators and administrators need to consider the value of the informal interactions that Ms. Brown and

other educators described. Recognizing that informal interactions with students are essential and devoting time to having these types of conversations is another way for educators to help increase students' sense of personal value and student connectedness to school.

Teachers can also have informal interactions with their students within their class periods. For example, Mr. Keane expressed that he valued having informal conversations with his students and that he tried to find time within his lessons to make connections with students. Mr. Keane noted, "I love the idea of being able to share [my hobbies with students]. I have a love of cooking, so I share recipes with my students." A school counselor, Ms. Wood, also called for time for educators and students to have a chance to interact in an informal setting. In fact, Ms. Wood explained that she felt that student-educator connectedness was rooted in informal interactions. When asked about how to increase student connectedness to school, she responded with the following quote:

I think all of that [student connectedness to school] comes down to having more time with the students. Having [time] at the end of the period, rather than being on the hamster wheel to nowhere, where they're [students] running to their next class. I think a little bit of downtime at the end [of a class period] where teachers can conference individually with students, or student can get started on their schoolwork, or [teachers might say] "everybody, close your books, pull out your earbuds, we're all going to listen to the same thing and just chill for five minutes so that you can mentally prepare to go back on the hamster wheel and run like crazy." (Ms. Wood)

Ms. Wood is deeply aware of the hectic pace of adolescents' school day. Ms. Wood, a school counselor, recognized that students need breaks from work and opportunities to socialize and to grow in a variety of ways. Ms. Wood understands that building in some time

for students to relax can help adolescents' overall well-being. Ms. Saunders also expressed this idea in the following excerpt:

I do think it's important to take a couple of minutes [at the start of class], and just chat with [my students]. Even if it doesn't have to do with history, necessarily, you know, just ask them about their weekend. Talk to them about their pets, find out stuff about them and ask them stuff and make those connections for a little bit each class period. (Ms. Saunders)

Educators need to get to know their students to build connections with them. Educators can learn about their students and form relationships with students in a variety of ways. For example, educators can leverage class time to have authentic and informal interactions with their students. Ms. Saunders believed it was worth her time to take a few minutes before addressing the content of the lesson to get to know her students better. Getting to know students is essential regardless of how educators choose to do so in order to build positive relationships. The following excerpt from Ms. Brown exemplified another way in which educators can create time within their class period to have an informal and organic conversation with their students:

Today we just took a break and walked. It was so interesting because it was the first time that [the students] just started talking to me without me initiating the conversation. It was very non-threatening. It was interesting because [the students] just started talking about things like sports that they were trying. (Ms. Brown)

By building the routine and getting students moving, Ms. Brown found students initiating engagement independently. She leveraged this time before starting her lesson to find out

quick facts about her students, which over time, helped Ms. Brown really get to know each of her students more personally.

Students have varying comfort levels within a typical classroom setting. Some students will feel more comfortable than others volunteering answers and ideas in front of their peers. Additionally, some students are more willing to discuss their interests than academics. While teachers should encourage students to engage in academic discourse, finding ways to interact with students who may be uncomfortable doing so can increase students' feelings of student-educator connectedness. Contrary to the adage that students should be seen and not heard, student voices should be encouraged in school, and informal interactions that decrease the pressures that can surround more formal classroom discussions offer another entry point for students to express themselves, develop self-esteem, and build connections with their teachers and peers.

Increasing Social Support Between Students

There was a perception among educators that there should be more opportunities for informal interactions between students. Educators believed there should be formal and informal systems that allow students to interact with one another in non-academic moments. For example, Ms. Davies, an English teacher, and Ms. Wood, a school counselor, both described the value of allowing students to interact with one another outside of class to build relationships and make new friends. Ms. Davies noted that students should have the chance to “interact with others in a non-academic way, in an informal and casual way, that allows people to form friendships and relationships” (Ms. Davies). Giving students a chance to interact with one another outside of the classroom was also described by Ms. Wood as

something that could be done by educators and educational leaders to increase students' sense of belonging as well as students' ability to self-regulate and self-govern.

If we could have high school recess, then kids wouldn't hate [high school] as much.

There's just such joy and enthusiasm out on the elementary school recess

[playground] because students are free to be whoever they're going to be. There's a

lot of societal self-correcting that goes on at the playground. If you throw sand at

kids [then other kids] aren't going to want to be your friend. This type of feedback

naturally evolves into, 'I want friends, so I'm not going to throw sand. (Ms. Wood)

Both Ms. Davies and Ms. Wood drew attention to important developmental needs of adolescents, including the desire for autonomy, self-expression, friendship formation, and self-regulation. These educators' quotes call attention to the tension that exists at the secondary level between the developmental needs of students and the rigid structures that govern many secondary students' schedules in the United States. School administrators—especially at the secondary level—should consider the developmental needs of their constituents and find opportunities for students to experience autonomy as well as casual student interactions within the school's schedule.

One possible way to increase casual student interactions between students is through peer mentor courses. Heather Hills High School had a peer mentor class at the time of this research. The peer mentor curriculum included a student mentor training period, in which students enrolled in the peer mentor class were taught best practices for being a mentor to another student. After the initial training period, students were then paired with a student whom educators in the building had identified as someone who might benefit from having a peer mentor. Students at Heather Hills High School could also elect to have a peer mentor.

Ms. Davies is one of the educators who taught the peer mentor class. The following quote from Ms. Davies described the types of students that are often paired with peer mentors:

Most of the kids who are referred to this program, they're not looking for a tutor or academic support, they are looking for belonging, they feel disconnected. Having this peer mentor is a way to help them find connection and community. I think that's a support that our schools are working on and is it's a good idea. (Ms. Davies)

Ms. Davies, an educator whom many students at Heather Hills High School form connections, works more formally to connect peers with other peers in a social program. Her quote implied her belief that educators at Heather Hills High School had a responsibility to help increase students' sense of belonging and connectedness, regardless of a student's academic standing. Ms. Davies believed that some students need additional ways to feel like they belong to the school's community. Programs like the peer mentor course at Heather Hills High School can help facilitate friendships by building student relationships.

Encouraging Engagement

In the broadest sense, student engagement in school is a measure of how much a student is involved in his or her learning and school community. Student engagement has been said to be synonymous with student connectedness to school (Axelson & Flick, 2010). In order to better understand the ways educators at Heather Hills High School conceptualized the relationship between student connectedness to school and student engagement, all educators were asked what they thought it looked like when students are engaged in their learning and school community. Educators were also asked about why they thought engagement was important for students. Educators described various forms of student engagement within the high school. Educators underscored the importance of student

engagement, especially as it related to student connectedness to school. For example, Ms. Brown spoke about this belief in the following quote: “I think there's probably a very big connection between student connectedness [to school] and student engagement. I think if students aren't connected it's probably unlikely that they're engaged.” She continued by saying, “those [students] that are participating, that are collaborating, that are turning their work in, that are asking questions, those are probably the same kids who feel connected to the classroom.” Ms. Brown’s idea that engagement in school is an important component of student connectedness to school is supported by the literature (Bowles & Scull, 2019; Finn, 1993; Stracuzzi & Mills, 2010). Ms. Hill expressed similar sentiments as Ms. Brown. Ms. Hill noted, “I think you get more [student] engagement [when students make] connections with their teachers.” It is clear that teachers believe that students do better in school when they are engaged and when students are connected in meaningful ways with others. When asked about student engagement, Mr. Keane began by defining engagement in a broad sense (i.e., how much a student is involved in his or her learning and school community). He then listed components of behavioral engagement (e.g., students raising their hands, student compliance with rules and procedures, and student participation) but continued to describe the importance of other forms of engagement such as cognitive engagement (e.g., task persistence and the depth of student responses). The following excerpt from Mr. Keane demonstrated his belief that engagement can look different for each of his students.

Student engagement in class, in the academia, is somebody who’s actively participating in their learning, doing the work, asking questions, interacting with people, etc. That is, to me, student engagement, and it can vary depending on the kid. I had this one kid who never asked a question in class, never said a word in class.

Why? [Because] she got it. She didn't need any of that. I knew she was going to do every single assignment. I knew that every single assignment would be done to the best of her ability. I knew that every single test and quiz was going to be done to the best of her ability. [I knew] she was engaged. Now engagement can look different depending on who they are, I had another kid whose way of showing engagement was [by] talking 50% of the class, going back and forth [asking] about problems with me to the exclusion of everyone else. (Mr. Keane)

Some students will openly demonstrate behavioral engagement by raising their hands and contributing to whole class discussions. However, other students may be reluctant to engage in the same way. Demonstrating behavioral aspects of engagement can be intimidating for some students, especially high school students who are highly sensitive to how they present to their peers. Students may be reluctant to answer their teachers' questions due to fears of being negatively perceived by their peers. Educators can show care for their students by recognizing that students come to school with different learning preferences and varying ways to show that they are engaged. Once more, educators can create opportunities within their classrooms and schools that promote various forms of engagement.

Four subthemes directly related to engagement emerged from the educator interviews. First, educators (Ms. Brown and Mr. Otto) at Heather Hills High School expressed that they believed all students benefit from engaging in school activities outside the classroom. Educators explicitly encouraged their students to participate in school-sponsored events because they believed it enriched student experiences. The other three subthemes were centered around engagement within the classroom. Educators applied a growth mindset; the belief that intelligence can be developed, and is not static, or fixed (Dweck, 2016), to how

they interacted with and assessed students, and they discussed how they used personal stories and personal authority to engage their students as well as manage their classrooms and connect with students. Each of these subthemes around student engagement are discussed in the following sections.

All Students Benefit from Engagement Outside of the Classroom

Offering opportunities for students to become involved in extracurricular activities can increase students' feelings of belonging, social support, engagement, and connectedness to their school. Several clubs, societies, athletic teams, and student organizations are offered to students at Heather Hills High School in the hopes that there is something of interest for every student. When asked how he thought Heather Hills High School could increase students' feelings of belonging and connectedness, Mr. Otto expressed that he believed that it is critical for all students to be involved in at least one extracurricular activity. Mr. Otto shared, "I think it [should be] mandatory that [students] participate in some type of extracurricular activity." Mr. Otto explained that some students may be hesitant to get involved in their school community, but he felt that those who did participate in a school sponsored organization felt a stronger sense of connectedness than the students who did not. Mr. Otto was an athletic coach for several decades, which likely increased his ability to form positive relationships with several students at Heather Hills High School. Mr. Otto shared that he outwardly encouraged his students to join a sports team, club, or other society. Similarly, when asked how Heather Hills High School staff members could increase student connectedness to school, Ms. Brown also expressed the belief that one way to increase students' feelings of connectedness to school was to encourage students to participate in

extracurricular activities. She expressed the opinion that all students should be involved in school sponsored clubs and sports. Her belief is outlined in the following quote:

I almost wish there was a way for the kids to all be involved in something. I don't know if we advertise enough for the clubs that we have outside of school or after school or in the community, or just something they [students] can do to feel a part of the school or the community. I think it is so important because otherwise these kids are going home at 2:15 and doing homework. I think it's important that they [students] feel part of something beyond what happens in the classrooms. I think that's where many of those [student-educator connections] come from. I think it's such a special thing that coaches and advisors have with some of these kids. (Ms. Brown)

Ms. Brown believed that Heather Hills High School staff members could do more to advertise and encourage students to participate in school and community activities. Ms. Brown expressed that at the very least, all students should feel like they have something they can do to feel a part of their school community—and that it was especially important for students to have extracurricular opportunities available to them after the school day ends. These beliefs expressed by the educators align with the available literature. For example, students that are involved in extracurricular activities both in and outside of school, tend to have an increased sense of self-confidence and self-esteem, as well as an increased feeling of belonging within the school community (Buckley & Lee, 2021; Korpershoek, Canrinus, Fokkens-Bruinsma, & de Boer, 2019).

Mr. Otto and Ms. Brown described encouraging their students to get involved in extracurricular activities within the school community. Ms. Brown believed that community

engagement can be just as powerful for students as directly participating in a school sponsored club or sport. Mr. Otto and Ms. Brown are both teachers as well as coaches and club advisors. As coaches and advisors, they understood the unique bond that they formed with their students as a catalyst for student-educator connectedness. Educators at Heather Hills High School noted that regardless of how students chose to engage in school, engagement was something that educators believed to be an important component of their students' academic success as well as students' feelings of connectedness to school. The science teacher, Ms. Brown, further described other ways students could engage as school supporters, there for their peers.

[I tell my students,] “go to the sporting events or go to the school play and just see your classmates in a different environment.” I think it is really important, so I encourage kids all the time to get involved in the school because I think it makes them feel like they are a part of something. I think that it's actually very critical in terms of student connectedness. I don't know the data on this, but I'd be curious to see [the research on] kids that don't feel like they're part of the school. My guess is that it's probably the kids who aren't involved in any of the school activities or clubs.

(Ms. Brown)

Ms. Brown's quote highlighted the connection between student connectedness to school and engagement. Ms. Brown believed that students participating in or watching extracurricular activities felt a stronger sense of belonging and connection to their school than those students that did neither. Unfortunately, some students may be hesitant to get involved in school-sponsored activities due to time commitments or feelings of anxiety surrounding practicing and performing around their peers. In other words, students may perceive that the benefits of

engagement are outweighed by other factors, such as social anxiety. In other cases, having students come and support their peers must be normalized. Pep rallies and dances like homecoming can further encourage engagement. Educators can motivate their students to participate in extracurricular activities, sporting events, or other after-school activities. Positive outcomes of engaging in activities sponsored by the school community may include meeting and making new friends, discovering new interests, and feeling an increased sense of belonging to the school and school community

Utilizing a Growth Mindset to Increase Student Engagement

Simply stated, a growth mindset refers to the belief that intelligence can be developed, and is not static, or fixed (Dweck, 2016). Educators with whom students at Heather Hills High School formed connections with spoke about their students' abilities as being malleable and that students could grow and achieve more if they worked hard. More specifically, educators described having growth mindsets for their students and then finding ways to acknowledge students when they achieved new goals. A note of caution should be made with regards to this subtheme. While educators should celebrate their students' growth, they must remember that a growth mindset is more than simply praising students' effort. Instead, a growth mindset requires educators to be honest with their students about where they are in terms of meeting a learning outcome and working with the student to achieve their goals (Dweck, 2016). Celebrating small wins is one of the best ways to motivate people (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). Educators recognized and celebrated student progress and achievement, regardless of a student's starting point. Ms. Saunders recounted one example of how she celebrated her students' academic achievement.

I think sometimes, especially when I'm grading student work, where I know the kids put a lot of effort into it, even if it's not like a big grade, I try and leave them a little positive comment. If I know that they're working harder, especially if they've been having a hard time then I try to remember to leave a positive comment. I try to encourage students by leaving them a little positive reinforcement on their assignments. I had a student who really failed their very first AP [Advanced Placement] US History test and then they did much better the second one, so I sent them a little email congratulating them and letting them know how much better they did. I [did this] to let them know I'm proud of them and [to] positively connect with them as well. (Ms. Saunders)

Students want to be successful in school. Students that disengage from their work may do so as a result of a lack of confidence and self-esteem in their ability to be successful in school and school related activities. Educators can help build their students' confidence and self-esteem by celebrating and encouraging students when they notice that students are making progress and growth towards learning goals and objectives—even if the progress is seemingly minor. For example, Ms. Greene, a track and field coach, described a system she developed that recognized her athletes for their progress towards their goals. Her system included sending out a weekly email in which she placed a symbol next to any athlete's name who achieved a personal record at a track meet. She also placed symbols next to athletes' names who earned a qualifying mark for post-season track meets—track meets reserved for athletes outside of the regular season who reach specific times, heights, or distances in their respective events. Educators can develop their own systems for monitoring and celebrating student progress. However, educators should be cautious about public displays of monitoring

student progress as this can cause anxiety for many high school students and be detrimental to adolescent development. Furthermore, educators may also consider what students they are acknowledging and rewarding when developing systems in their classrooms for rewarding students for their efforts. or within the context of their position. Educators must be aware of marginalized students, including those with hidden disabilities, and work towards creating systems that celebrate all types of achievement, growth, and development.

Ms. Saunders believed that some students needing the most positive reinforcement might be less likely to get positive feedback from educators and staff members. As a result of this notion, Ms. Saunders described her attempt to form connections with her students by prioritizing student growth. When asked about her ability to form positive relationships with students at Heather Hills High School, Ms. Saunders noted, “I think if I give them positive reinforcement, then that builds that connection, even if they're not doing great in my class, even if they are getting a C, I'm still congratulating them on things that they did well.”

Encouraging students that have struggled with school in the past may increase the likelihood that they will want to re-engage in school by building-up students' self-esteem. For this reason, Ms. Wood and Ms. Davies, a school counselor and an English teacher, called for changes to how students are recognized and celebrated at Heather Hills High School.

I would honestly like to see student of the month be for overall improvement, not straight A's. If you go from a D to a C minus because you worked hard, I think that that would go a further distance for that one particular kid than the kid who wins every single award. (Ms. Wood)

Students who consistently achieve high grades are typically acknowledged for their efforts, reinforcing their propensity to do well in school. If more students are celebrated for their

efforts rather than the result (i.e., a high grade), all students may be encouraged to overcome obstacles that prevent them from engaging in school. Furthermore, students have a variety of talents and skills that are not always academic in nature; therefore, they are not always known to their teachers or to their classmates. This is especially true at the secondary level, where content area teachers often feel like they have little time to allow students to showcase their abilities and skills outside of the subject area they teach. Ms. Davies felt that it was important that schools develop systems in which school administrators recognize the variety and diversity of students' talents and as one way to build students' self-esteem. Educators should consider looking for opportunities to celebrate their students' skills, talents, and growth within their classrooms.

Sharing Personal Stories

Personal stories, mainly light-hearted stories embedded with humor, were understood by some educators (Ms. Evans, Mr. Keane, and Mr. Otto) as catalysts for increasing student-educator connectedness and student engagement. Educators can use short and amusing stories to create a more cheerful classroom atmosphere, provide students with short breaks from their work, and form connections with their students. For example, Ms. Evans, a math teacher, explained that she believed that sometimes her students struggled to engage in her lessons because they faced conflicts within their family and social groups. She noted that, "If [students are] having a bad day, I always try to come up with a story." Ms. Evans went on to share a time in which she told a story to her class about herself in order to connect with her students and to re-engage her students through humor. Her story utilized self-deprecation and a personal anecdote and provided her students with both a window into her own life as

well as a short humorous respite before asking them to return to their course work. Similarly, Ms. Saunders spoke about using stories to engage and motivate her students.

Sometimes, when I feel like the class is a little out there, starting to look a little tired, I like to throw in a good story, you know, just be like, “kids, this reminds me of the time that I was in Egypt and yada-yada.” I tell the students a little silly story to lighten the mood. (Ms. Saunders)

Students, like adults, may struggle to focus on a given task for long periods. Students can benefit from breaks from their work. Mr. Otto also discussed how he used stories to engage his students. Mr. Otto spoke about “luring” students into learning by sharing stories about his background as it related to the curriculum. Mr. Otto shared:

My whole line was, “what way can I lure these kids into learning?” Is it going to be through a story of my background or is it going to be through some event [or] story or whatever it may be? [It could be] something in my life, a way to open up my own life [to the students]. Not too much but just a little bit. (Mr. Otto)

This excerpt from Mr. Otto brings attention to the tension educators face between sharing personal details about their lives in the pursuit of strengthening student-educator connectedness and not wanting to overshare or overstep across an invisible yet important boundary between educators and their students. While stories can be used to engage students and form connections with students, educators should be cautious about what and how much they choose to share. When choosing to share personal stories, educators need to consider the developmental stage of the students and the nature of the story. However, personal stories can be one way to develop meaningful relationships with students and promote student-educator connectedness.

Using Authority to Engage Students

Educators at Heather Hills High School grappled with ideas surrounding power and authority within their classrooms and offices. During the interviews, educators (Ms. Brown, Ms. Hill, and Mr. Keane) outwardly contemplated their understanding of authority and how educators earn, use, and share authority with their students. For example, Ms. Hill spoke about how she attempted to find a balance between giving her students an appropriate amount of leeway when it came to sharing authority in the classroom and when she needed to exercise her authority as the teacher and singular adult in the room. In this way, educators also discussed the concept of personal authority. Personal authority, or charismatic authority (Pace & Hemmings, 2007), is the “compliance [of students] that rests on the personal qualities of the teacher. The student’s compliance arises from a desire to please the teacher, rather than the fact that the teacher is perceived to have powers, expertise or status endorsed by the school community” (Macleod, MacAllister, & Pirrie 2012, p. 502-503). Educators that have developed strong and meaningful relationships with their students are more likely to exercise personal authority effectively, which can have a far-reaching positive impact on student engagement (García-Moya, 2020). For example, Mr. Keane spoke about being liked by his students and leveraging his relationships with his students to manage student behavior and to engage students in math. Mr. Keane’s understanding of students liking his personality was not based solely on his personal characteristics but also the time he invested in building a positive relationship with his students. Mr. Keane described an understanding that by establishing personal authority, he could minimize his need to exercise other types of more demanding and possibly damaging types of authority such as bureaucratic authority, which is the authority granted to teachers solely based on their position as an adult and teacher (Pace

& Hemmings, 2007). Throughout the interview, Mr. Keane described how he worked to build positive relationships with his students by getting to know them, learning about their interests, and using humor and stories to reengage students. By focusing on positive relationships with students, especially by recognizing their interests and preferences, Mr. Keane perceived that he was able to increase student engagement and earn the respect of his students. Mr. Keane's view on student-educator connectedness and student engagement is consistent with the literature. For example, personal authority has been described as a type of authority which involves a "considerable amount of give and take as well as dialogue between teachers and students" (Macleod et al., 2012 p. 503). Ms. Hill used the analogy of moving up and down a ladder to chronicle her ideas surrounding authority as well as the power asymmetries that exist in the classroom.

You're up here, as the teachers, and [the students] are down here, like a ladder.

[Some teachers might say to their students], "I am above you and you're going to be below [me] and you're going to do what I say," but that's not how I like my classroom. I want [both the students and the teacher] to move more towards the middle [of the ladder] so I'm moving down and giving up a little [authority] while [the students] are moving up and opening up a little bit. (Ms. Hill)

In the previous quote, Ms. Hill is talking about the give-and-take needed to find the balance required to create a classroom that fits the developmental needs of her students. Ms. Hill believes that her students could earn more latitude in her classroom, especially as she built connections with her students. Ms. Hill then went on to explore her own ideas about whether or not educators and students should ever have equal authority in the classroom. Ms. Hill

was somewhat hesitant about discussing her ideas surrounding authority and power distributions within the classroom.

Should you ever be equal? I don't know but, I don't think so. I don't want that in my class. I think when you get closer to an equal, or you're almost to that middle ground, I think that's when you're getting to that connected zone. You kind of want to get to the middle [and be] together more where there can be moments where they can see that you are vulnerable, and it's okay, you're okay being vulnerable. That's what I mean by you kind of dropping down. You're not like giving them authority but you're letting your guard down and being vulnerable. (Ms. Hill)

Ms. Hill pointed out that she felt it was important that her students believed that they did not equally share authority with Ms. Hill, but rather that they felt like they could connect with her more by sharing some authority with her students. Ms. Hill demonstrated the need for a hierarchy between adults and students, while understanding that this should not be a rigid hierarchy. Ms. Hill's account draws attention to the consideration's educators can take in terms of how they lead and manage their classrooms. Establishing behavioral expectations with students is an important part of managing the safety and well-being of students. However, some forms of authority may damage student-educator connectedness and may be less fitting to the developmental needs of adolescents. Developing personal authority with students takes time and can be intimidating for some educators due to less than traditional dynamics of power and control being released with personal authority. However, once educators establish personal authority with their students, then educators can be more open and honest about who they are as people with students. The use of shared personal authority and the leveraging of student-educator relationships to increase engagement is supported by

the findings of Havik and Westergård (2020). They found that when students perceived that their interactions with teachers were positive and provided students with emotional support, students were more likely to engage in their work. Havik and Westergård (2020) also found that females were likelier to engage emotionally than their male counterparts and that secondary students were less likely to engage than elementary students. One of the important implications of the current findings of this research, as well as the findings of Havik and Westergård (2020), is that if students, especially male high school students, appear disengaged, then one of the first steps for educators should be to try to connect with these students in an emotionally supportive way. While this may seem obvious, School leaders can highlight the importance of building relationships with students before taking other approaches, such as reprimanding students for disengaging.

Ms. Hill believed that being more open about sharing authority has ultimately led to increased student-educator connectedness and a classroom environment that was more conducive to deep and meaningful learning. Other types of authority require that the authority figure be perceived as threatening and forceful. These types of authority are less humanizing and their overuse may lead to decreased student engagement. The following excerpt from Ms. Brown relates personal authority to student engagement.

I feel that [students are] probably more apt to want to do the work when they feel connected to a teacher. When I get those kids, who don't have that intrinsic motivation, I go out of my way a little bit for those kids to get to know them, and reach out, and [I] want to help them and get to know their life. I feel like [the students] that I try to make connections with are more apt to reengage in the class.

You know, those kids that you take some extra time with more so than maybe for others. (Ms. Brown)

Ms. Brown highlighted her belief that there is indeed a link between student-educator connectedness and student engagement for student academic success. The relationships that are built by educators with their students can be a motivating factor for students, especially for those students for whom academics do not come easy. Students may be increasingly willing to engage with and heed the advice of an educator with whom they have formed a positive relationship.

Summary of Chapter Four

Prior to summarizing Chapter Four, it is important to remind the reader that the educators interviewed for this research were in the top five percent of adults as selected by Heather Hills High School students as faculty members students could speak with if they had a problem. In this way, students provided important information about adult-student relationships. One of the unifying character traits of the educators interviewed was their readiness to prioritize relationship building with students and take time out of their daily lesson plans to build and maintain positive relationships with students. Whether it was beginning the school year with a lesson on classroom expectations to build safety and trust with and between their students, or taking breaks from normal classroom routines to have causal interactions with their students, all of the educators made it a priority to find ways to know their students. This is an important finding since educators, especially secondary educators, in the United States often feel pressured to teach as much of their curriculum as possible and prioritize academic content over everything else. However, the pursuit of efficiency and content coverage was less important for the educators interviewed for this

research. In other words, all of the educators in this study held the belief that the purpose of school lies beyond merely the content taught in school and includes a human component that is essential for the development of adolescents.

Educators at Heather Hills High School emphasized the importance of establishing and maintaining trusting and psychologically safe learning environments for their students. The educators believed that trusting and psychologically safe environments were critical prerequisites for meaningful learning, higher-order thinking, and student connectedness to school. To create psychologically safe spaces, educators described how they worked to normalize their students' feelings of discomfort and build their students' sense of self-esteem. Educators demonstrated empathy for adolescents and acknowledged that being vulnerable in front of others—especially other teenagers—is intimidating. However, educators expressed that vulnerability is essential to the learning process.

Educators explained that they attempted to humanize and personalize their relationships with students. Some educators (Ms. Brown, Ms. Hill, and Mr. Otto) drew attention to their ability to become attuned to their students' emotional states and use their intuitions in their pursuit of showing care and offering support to students. This was an unexpected finding because there is scarce research on educator intuition as a means to connect with students.

Educators also perceived themselves as flexible and expressive of care for their students beyond the academic content area they taught or the sport they coached. However, educators recognized that they were constantly engaging in a sort of balancing act when it came to giving students the appropriate amount of leeway and providing structure and routines for their students. Additionally, educators described the importance of finding time

in which they could interact with their students in informal ways and expressed the belief that increasing informal interactions between students would lead to increased feelings of student connectedness to school.

Educators understood student engagement to be closely related to student connectedness to school and described ways in which they worked to increase student engagement in their classrooms. However, like student connectedness to school, student engagement is a complicated construct that includes several layers and components. Educators acknowledged that student engagement could take many forms, both within and outside the classroom. For example, students can participate in sports and clubs sponsored by Heather Hills High School by being on teams or being club members and attending events in support of one another. Regardless of how students became involved at Heather Hills High School, educators wanted students to engage in their classrooms and the school community because they believed it was beneficial for students to be involved and interact with their peers outside of academic courses.

Finally, educators also acknowledged that their students displayed engagement in various ways, including by showing support for other students as spectators at events. Within the classroom, educators also spoke about looking for and finding ways to celebrate student academic growth and achievement alongside their students. In their efforts to increase student-educator connectedness and students' overall feelings of connectedness to their school, educators recounted sharing personal stories with their students about themselves as people, thereby working to humanize themselves in the eyes of their students and engage their students in learning. Educators also discussed how they leveraged the

relationships they built with their students and their charismatic personalities to keep their students engaged and to build and strengthen relationships.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative case study—bound by a single high school in Connecticut—was to gain deeper insight into student connectedness to school from the perspectives of both students and educators. Three research questions guided this study. Research question one sought to uncover who students considered as adults at Heather Hills High School with whom they formed positive connections. Pre-existing survey data from The Safe School Climate Survey, an instrument created by educators within the school, were used to garner students’ perceptions of school connectedness in the school where the study occurred. The pre-existing survey data also allowed for the identification of staff members within the school whom students identified as adults that formed meaningful connections with students. Research question two aimed to uncover what a sample of these adults believed about student connectedness to school to better understand what schools can do to increase students’ feelings of connectedness to school and the school community. The third research question explored what educators personally did to form meaningful connections with students. A total of 10 educators were asked and agreed to participate in the present study.

Through semi-structured interviews, educators shared their perceptions on how they believed schools could increase students’ feelings of connectedness. Educators also shared their beliefs regarding how they formed meaningful relationships with students. The educator interviews were recorded and transcribed. After the transcripts were checked for errors, then the researcher began the process of pre-coding the data. Next, the interviews were coded and analyzed using NVivo software. Primary, secondary, and tertiary themes

were generated based on the codes created during the analysis stage of the study. An overview of the themes is depicted in Figure 5.1

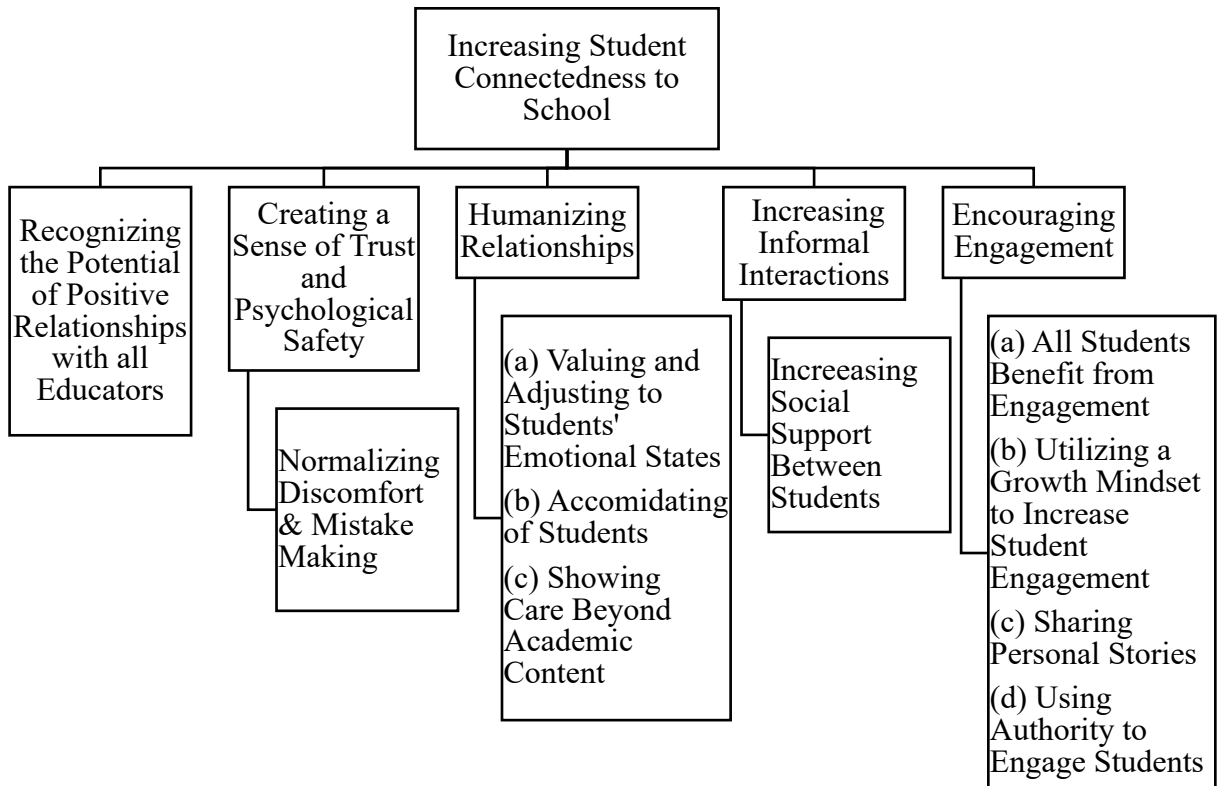


Figure 5.1. Increasing student connectedness to school: Overview of the themes from the survey data and educator interviews at Heather Hills High School.

Implications of Student Connectedness with Educational Professionals

The data collected from the Safe School Climate Survey revealed that students formed connections with a variety of adults at Heather Hills High School. While classroom teachers were selected more frequently (65%) than other positions (35%), the data indicated that students form meaningful relationships with adults who work at Heather Hills High School other than classroom teachers. Students selected adults with over 14 job titles at Heather Hills High School including classroom teachers, the school’s activities director,

administrators, athletic coaches, building substitutes, the college and career advisor, custodial staff members, school counselors, school psychologist, social-worker, instructional coaches, the library-media specialist, paraeducators, the school's resource officer (SRO), and school secretaries.

Heather Hills High is a welcoming school where educational professionals work to know students and be known by them. The fact that students selected such a wide range of adults that they have positive connections with speaks to the commitment that educational professionals place with interacting positively with students. Furthermore, the very existence of a staff and student created data collection instrument to improve the school speaks to the care and commitment of the educators at Heather Hills High School. The range of job categories also speaks to the idea that different students connect with different people. While many students connect with teachers, others connect with those in non-academic roles. For example, a student can build a positive adult-student relationship with a paraprofessional or one of the school secretaries. These adults other than classroom teachers provide an opportunity for students to engage on a one-on-one basis, which can foster positive relationships.

There are several implications for school administrators based on the finding that Heather Hills High School students formed positive relationships with various adults within the school. Given the importance of having caring adults for all students, actions should be taken from school district leaders and human resource personnel to facilitate that individuals who are hired understand their vital role as adults who can enrich the lives of young people. Therefore, during employment interviews, school administrators should inform all candidates, not just classroom teachers, about the expectation that all employees engage with

and serve as informal mentors for students. This is because all adults that are brought into schools have the potential to form positive relationships and make a difference for students.

Another implication for policy and practice is that school administrators and human resource personnel should advertise and utilize hiring practices to ensure that diversity, equity, and inclusion are considered. During the 2015-2016 school year, the majority of teachers in the United States were White (King, McIntosh, & Bell-Ellwanger 2016; United States Department of Education, 2016), which is not reflective of the vast diversity found in student populations, including the student population at Heather Hills High School. In other words, the hiring pool for educators tends to be homogenous. This is problematic because students of color are less likely to see themselves represented in the faculty and staff of schools that predominately hire White applicants. Given the reality that students find connections with a range of employees, adding diversity across the educator workforce is one way to increase students' exposure to adults with varying cultural and educational backgrounds. Focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion in hiring practices is one way to quickly address adult representation for students. In this way, school leaders can take immediate action and begin diversifying their faculty and staff as openings arise. Having educational professionals who share similar cultural backgrounds as the students could help more students form meaningful relationships and further enhance student-educator connectedness and well-being.

Implications for Future Research Regarding Student Connectedness and Educational Professionals

Research that can expand upon student connectedness to educational professionals that is still needed includes researchers investigating the ways in which adults other than classroom teachers form connections with students and how this impacts students from the perspective of these educational professionals. Additional research in this area could lead to a richer understanding of how adults across various school-based roles can work collectively to increase student connectedness to school with a focus on the connection to students' overall well-being. In general, more research should be conducted that examines the impact of positive relationships with adults in schools, beyond a focus on classroom teachers.

Another vital area of future research would be to explore student-educator connectedness from the perspective of students who do not feel connected to staff members within a school. It is essential to investigate how not feeling connected to adults at school impacts a student's overall sense of well-being, especially from the students' perspectives. It is important to understand why some students believe they feel no connection to educational professionals and what these students believe could be done to foster connections for them. Researchers should also consider attempting to understand more about the adults in schools with whom the most disengaged, socially marginalized, or students with non-dominant diversity and identity backgrounds form connections. For example, future researchers could research the ways some adults can readily build meaningful relationships with LGBTQ+ students, students of color in primarily White schools, or students whose first language is a language other than English.

Another opportunity for future research lies in understanding how students' perceptions of connectedness to school vary across grade levels. Students in the ninth grade have different developmental needs from their 12th-grade counterparts. This is important as trying a *one-size-fits-all* approach to student connectedness to school may cause tension for students with varying developmental needs. Therefore, educational researchers should consider examining the unique needs of students within each grade level in a typical secondary school in the United States in relation to levels of student connectedness to school. As such, future studies could include examining cohorts of students over time and analyzing how students' feelings of connectedness to school varied and changed throughout their high school experience.

Implications of Educational Professionals Creating Connections with Students

Educators thought creating and maintaining learning environments in which students felt a sense of psychological safety and trust were foundational components of student connectedness that must be facilitated. More specifically, educators believed that it was important for their students to feel safe from negative repercussions if they took academic and interpersonal risks when participating in academics. This amounted to students feeling psychologically safe when at school and played a critical role in increasing student-educator connectedness.

Given the importance participants placed on different forms of safety, and especially psychological safety, it is necessary for school administrators and educators to work together to build both formal and informal systems to increase physical and psychological safety amongst students. The importance of this should be made explicit for all teachers, especially more junior teachers who are still learning some of the art and craft of teaching. By making

explicit the expectation that teachers should foster a learning environment that supports student risk-taking more teachers will adopt this approach and better support students academically and socially. Therefore, school leaders should examine how they can grow their own, as well as their staffs' knowledge of psychological safety. Learning how to increase students' sense of safety and trust may be intimidating for some school leaders and teachers because increasing psychological safety involves a degree of openness to criticism and critique from students and school staff members (Seyda & Tabancali, 2020). However, it is important work that should be undertaken, especially if school leaders want to engage in practices that supports students and educators working together effectively and harmoniously (Wei & Ohland, 2021).

Educators interviewed expressed the belief that informal interactions between members of the school community was an underemphasized routine. When it comes to creating policy or supporting practice, school administrators and teachers should look for, and where possible, create opportunities for casual and informal interactions between members of the school community. School administrators should encourage educators to interact with and check-in with students during less structured points in the school schedule. This could increase relationship building opportunities between members of the school community. Another way to increase student and educational professional connectedness is to vary the way advisory takes place so that there is some personal ownership built in for both teachers and students. This could be another way that policy and practice could support student connectedness in that a focused examination of how advisory takes place and meets connection goals should be annually reviewed and revised as needed.

A unique aspect of this research was the realization that teachers believed encouraging students to engage as spectators at events helped students who were not in sports, music, or other extracurriculars find a way to make connections and feel part of the school community. This was seen as a way that students could become involved in their school and community. Encouraging students to join a club, sport, or another school-sponsored event is one way for adults to show students that they care about the school community. Educators can also personalize interactions with students by suggesting a specific club or sport that they feel would fit with the students. To foster a larger sense of school pride and connectedness, it can also be meaningful to encourage students to form their own clubs. The act of knowing one's students and taking personal interest in their social activities can further cement positive feelings for their educators on the part of students.

For these reasons, school leaders should facilitate opportunities for educators to engage with students in a range of ways. Additionally, appropriate compensation should be given to encourage educational professionals to give their time as coaches and advisors for extracurricular activities, with an eye towards a range of opportunities that will interest a variety of students.

Implications for Future Research on Educational Professionals Creating Connections with Students

While there is research on the benefits of psychological safety for adults, less research has been conducted on the impact of psychological safety on students (Newman et al., 2017; Higgins et al., 2012). Therefore, researchers should investigate how teachers and administrators can work together to increase students' sense of psychological safety in

relationship to school. This is especially important given the ongoing increase of students with anxiety and other mental health concerns.

Another area that researchers should examine is the ways in which secondary school schedules and policies currently exist and how they could be restructured in ways that promote informal and casual interactions between community members within a school and school district. For example, many high schools across the United States are structured so that students have very short breaks between classes, but it doesn't have to be this way. It would be interesting for researchers to explore how extended periods between classes could be structured to allow for more relaxed interactions between school community members.

Implication for Practice: Relationships Make the Difference

The educators interviewed worked to humanize and personalize their interactions with students. Humanizing and personalizing interactions with students included valuing and adjusting to students' emotional states as part of one's teaching and learning experience each day. This included demonstrating care for students beyond the academic content that the educator taught and valuing students as whole people. Educators were unified in the importance of getting to know their students personally within each class period and that this was vital to developing relationships with students. For all educators interviewed, this meant taking short breaks from the curriculum to pursue relationship building. This suggests that school administrators should explicitly encourage secondary high school level educators to find opportunities within their class times to build relationships with students that foster adults and students getting to know one another. For example, teachers can observe students as they come to class and be mindful of their students' actions and body language. Educators can look for indicators that their students are having a hard time and respond to their students

appropriately. For example, an educator can check in with a student that appears to be visibly upset. Simply acknowledging that the student is having a tough time could help to build teacher rapport and promote positive student-educator relationships. While structures and rules can be important for maintaining a predictable and safe learning environment, being able to adjust a lesson or accommodate a student when they are having a hard time is a way for educators to demonstrate care and humanity. Therefore, a recommendation for practice is that educators should look for opportunities to accommodate their students when they are struggling emotionally or academically. This could include modifying due dates for assignments or letting students visit with the school counselor. School administrators can assist educators with this goal by facilitating the construction of knowledge amongst educators within schools regarding when it might be appropriate for educators to accommodate and show flexibility for students. School administrators should also work to create the normed expectation that a student-centered school includes educators who are interested in whole student development, which fosters academic achievement.

Educators shared personal stories to engage and personalize their interactions with their students. Being known as a person is not only important for students, but when adults are known it facilitates relationship building. While personal narratives can be used to help facilitate student engagement and student-educator connectedness, personal stories can also help students see their teachers as complex, multidimensional people. In terms of a recommendation for practice, this once again has more to do with the climate and culture that are fostered by administration. A culture of trust and support of educators must be present in order for individuals to feel vulnerable enough to share about one's self. School district leaders need to prioritize the discussion and expectation of how student engagement is

supported through personal connections and provide professional development opportunities that support this work.

Implications for Future Research: Relationships Make the Difference

There are several areas for future researchers related to personal connections between adults and students including researching the impact of spending time and resources on training secondary level teachers to purposefully facilitate and grow student connectedness to school within their classrooms rather than creating separate periods, such as advisory, to promote student connectedness and relationship building. One reason for this is that separate classes dedicated to relationship building can be seen as forced and cumbersome by students and staff alike, especially at the middle and secondary levels (McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010). Researchers may consider comparing groups of students required to attend an advisory program throughout the school day to those who encounter educators trained to personalize relationships with students and build relationships during their regularly scheduled academic courses. It would be interesting to uncover how the two groups of students compare in terms of their overall engagement in school.

Another important area of future research is the concept of educator perceptiveness, or intuitive pedagogical tact. Intuitive pedagogical tact is “a teacher’s ability to instantly and adequately act upon the complexity of classroom situations” (Sipman et al., 2019). Intuitive pedagogical is rarely prioritized or even mentioned in teaching training schools and colleges (Sipman et al., 2019; Sobkow, Traczyk, Kaufman, & Nosal, 2018). While educators in this study discussed their ability to be perceptive and responsive of their students’ emotional states, they struggled to articulate how they learned this skill. It would be interesting for future studies to explore the concept of intuitive pedagogical tact in relation to student-

educator connectedness. Researchers could investigate the impact of including classes and workshops on developing educators' emotional intelligence on intuitive pedagogical tact. These studies could examine student-educator connectedness through the lens of intuition research using both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Conclusion

The need to increase student connectedness to school—the extent to which students feel support from their teachers and peers, feel that they belong, and engage in school—is supported by several seminal theories in psychology, including Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), Maslow's work on human motivation (Maslow, 1943), psychological sense of community theory (Sarason, 1974), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and stage environment fit theory (Eccles et al., 1993). Furthermore, student connectedness to school has been found to enhance student academic engagement (Mensah & Koomson, 2020), to act as a protective barrier against mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression (Joyce & Early, 2014; Shochet et al., 2006) and lessen emotional distress, suicide, and violence among adolescents (Eugene et al., 2021). For these reasons, administrators and educators must prioritize increasing students' feelings of connectedness to school.

Student-educator connectedness, a facet of student connectedness to school, involves the deliberate choice by educators to find the time within busy school schedules to learn about their students and to create psychologically safe classrooms where groups of students feel comfortable engaging in the learning process. In order to foster relationship building and student-connectedness to school, educators must recognize the developmental needs of adolescents and the importance of individualizing positive interactions with them. This

qualitative case study confirms what many educators understand intuitively; that building personalized relationships with students matters for students' academic and social development and well-being. Focusing on positive student-educator relationship building with students can enhance their overall connectedness to school. Educational leaders must commit to supporting the holistic well-being of students.

Positive student relationships with various educational professionals increase student connectedness within the school community in significant ways. School leaders can demonstrate their commitment to student connectedness by strengthening school programs, enhancing hiring practices, and increasing professional development opportunities focused on student connectedness, engagement, and positive relationships amongst community members. These opportunities should include building the capacity of educators to create safe classrooms and schools that emphasize humanistic-based relationships and engagement in the school community.

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Appendix A

Safe School Climate Survey Questions and Related Literature on Student Connectedness

Question	Relationship to Student Connectedness to School	Supporting Literature
I feel safe from physical harm while in the school building	Physical Safety	N/A (Face Value)
I feel socially and emotionally safe at school	Emotional Safety	N/A (Face Value)
Bullying is repeated mean behavior intended to cause emotional or physical harm. Based on this definition, bullying is a problem at my school	Physical and Emotional Safety, School Climate	Crownover & Jones, 2018
My teachers care about my success in school	Social Support, Educator Support	Lohmeier & Lee, 2011; Shochet, et al., 2006
When I receive feedback from my teachers, I apply it in order to improve my skills/performance in that subject	Engagement (Cognitive)	Lam, et al, 2014
Adults at HHHS school are kind, considerate and respectful	Social Support, Educator Support	Lohmeier & Lee, 2011; Shochet, et al., 2006
I can access a student services professional (counselor, social worker, psychologist) if I need one	Social Support, Educator Support	Lohmeier & Lee, 2011; Shochet, et al., 2006;
I am proud to be a member of the HHHS community	Engagement (Affective)	Lam, et al, 2014
Students at HHHS are kind, considerate and respectful	Social support	Lohmeier & Lee, 2011
I feel comfortable speaking to the following adults at Heather Hills High School	Student-Educator Connectedness	García-Moya, 2020

Appendix B

Formal E-mail to Educators with Interview Request

Dear Educator,

I am currently enrolled in the doctoral program in Instructional Leadership in Education at Western Connecticut State University and I am in the process of completing my dissertation. My dissertation aims to better understand student connectedness to school along with the areas of student engagement, belonging, and social support.

I am contacting you with the hope that you will grant me your time to interview you regarding your understanding of student connectedness to school. Your name will not be used in the study. Please note that the interview will be recorded for research analysis purposes but you may withdraw your interview at any time without penalty. I will be the only one to view the interview transcripts, unless it becomes necessary for my dissertation chair to see them for analysis purposes.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you may choose not to participate. If you decide to participate in this research study, you may stop the interview at any time without completing the interview. There will not be any consequences for withdrawing your participation.

Please reply to this e-mail by filling out the information below to confirm your willingness to be interviewed. Once you have responded, I will contact you to set up a time to conduct the interview. If you have questions about the study, you may contact me, Thomas Fox, at [REDACTED]. A copy of this consent form is available for your records. Your attention to this is greatly appreciated.

Please complete the following consent form if you agree to be interviewed.

Name: _____ Title: _____

Yes, I agree to be interviewed by Thomas Fox for the purposes of the study outlined above.

No, I do not agree to be interviewed by Thomas Fox

If you have questions that I can answer, please reach me at, Thomas R. Fox, at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Thomas R. Fox, MA

Doctoral Student

Western Connecticut State University

cc: Tricia J. Stewart, PhD, Research Advisor, WCSU

Appendix C

Educator Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Tell me a little bit about your background as an educator.
2. Will you describe ways in which you interact with students in the classroom or in school?
Probing question: Tell me about how you interact with the content you teach and the students as they move through the learning process.
3. Can you tell me about ways in which you make connections with students? Probe: Are there certain types of kids that you believe are drawn to you? What about the ones that you reach out to form connections?
4. Probing question: What are the barriers that may exist when trying to make connections with students?
5. Talk to me about a memorable connection you have made with a specific student.
6. Probing question: What fostered this connection? What else can you share with me about your connection with students?
7. Explain your understanding of “Student Belonging” for me.
8. What are the things that you think foster student belonging at your school? Probe: What, if anything, is done to actively support students’ sense of belonging?
9. Tell me what “social support,” in relation to students, means to you.
10. What types of social supports do you think are important for today’s students? Probe: Why are these important?
11. Talk to me about your classroom management strategies. Probe: Do these vary by grade level? Are there times when you have had a challenging group of students and had to try new things? What types of classroom management strategies fosters student connectedness?
12. How would you describe student-educator connectedness?
13. What do you think it is about educators within the building (like yourself) that form connections with their students?
14. Please define “Student Engagement” for me.
15. In what ways is student engagement important? Probe: Why?

16. Describe, if you can, some of the ways in which you talk to students that appear to be struggling to engage in class?
17. If you could describe one thing that you think schools could do to increase student connectedness, what would it be?
18. Based on what we have discussed today, what else would you like me to understand about students and their feelings of connectedness to their school — especially as it relates to social support, engagement, and a sense of belonging?

Appendix D:

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Letter

Hello Thomas Fox,

I am pleased to inform you that your I.R.B. protocol number 2021-34 has been approved by expedited review. This email is documentation of your official approval to start your research. If you need a copy of this official approval for funding purposes, please let me know [REDACTED]. The WCSU I.R.B. wishes you the best with your research.

You have 1 year from the date of this email to complete your research; if you are still conducting that date, you will need to fill out a renewal application. When are you finished with your study please fill out and return via email a Termination/Completion Report (available here: <http://wcsu.edu/irb/forms.asp>) so we know your study is complete.

Finally – and most importantly! – we have recently learned that current BOR technology policies do *not* guarantee privacy of *any* info stored on work computers physically, remotely, or otherwise (i.e., laptop, Dropbox, etc.). As such, to maintain the truth of any anonymity or confidentiality promises you make to participants (consent form, for example), you will need to store all electronic data obtained from those human subjects on a system/computer/file *not* connected to any CSU system. It is your responsibility as the primary researcher to make sure personal data of participants remains securely private – something not guaranteed in the currently existing CSU system.

Rest assured, (because it's ridiculous to expect faculty to store work-related research on non-work-related systems and/or to conduct research where participants are not guaranteed anonymity/confidentiality), we are working to gain an exception for research purposes to this policy. But until then, it's technically and legally possible for anyone in the system office to access your participants' data at any time – without your consent or knowledge before doing so... which makes any guarantees made on research documents (e.g., consent forms) deceptive unless info is stored elsewhere.

Thanks,

[REDACTED]
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Western Connecticut State University
www.wcsu.edu/irb

[REDACTED]
Secretary Psychology Department
C.E.L.T.
I.A.C.U.C.
I.R.B.
Western Connecticut State University
181 White Street
WA 304
Danbury, CT 06810

Appendix E

Letter to the Superintendent – Consent Form

RE; Superintendent

I am currently enrolled in the doctoral program in Instructional Leadership in Education at Western Connecticut State University and am in the process of completing my dissertation. I am hoping to use pre-existing data and interviews with educators from your school district for the purposes of my dissertation. The aim of the study is to better understand school connectedness along with the areas of student engagement, belonging, and social support.

I am writing to you with the following requests:

1. To allow me (the primary researcher) to access and analyze pre-existing data from the high school administered Safe School Climate Survey from 2019.
2. To allow me (the primary researcher) to interview teachers (per their permission) regarding their understanding of student connectedness.

Please note that no educational time will be used to collect data from students for this research project. However, I will need to ask educators (teachers, school counselors, and other support staff) if they will grant me permission to interview them. There will be no costs accrued by participants or the school district for the proposed study.

The study will **not** include any student or staff member's names, as pseudonyms will be used for confidentiality. The WCSU Institutional Review Board has approved this research project (IRB. protocol number 2021-34). If you have questions concerning the rights of the subjects involved in this research study, please contact the WCSU IRB Chair at irb@wcsu.edu or my dissertation chair, Tricia J. Stewart, PhD, at [REDACTED]

If you have questions that I can answer, please reach me at; Thomas R. Fox, at [REDACTED]

Name: [REDACTED] Title: Superintendent of Schools

Yes, I agree to provide Thomas Fox with access to the pre-existing data from the 2019 Safe School Climate Survey for his analysis. I agree to allow Thomas to interview educators (per their permission) within this school district.

Sincerely,



Thomas R. Fox, MA, Doctoral Student,
Western Connecticut State University
cc: Tricia J. Stewart, PhD, Research Advisor, WCSU

Appendix F

Letter to the Principal – Consent Form

RE; Principal

I am currently enrolled in the doctoral program in Instructional Leadership in Education at Western Connecticut State University and am in the process of completing my dissertation. I am hoping to use pre-existing data and interviews with educators from your school for the purposes of my dissertation. The aim of the study is to better understand school connectedness along with the areas of student engagement, belonging, and social support.

I am writing to you with the following request:

To allow me (the primary researcher) to interview teachers (per their permission) regarding their understanding of student connectedness.

Please note that no educational time will be used to collect data from students for this research project. However, I will need to ask educators (teachers, school counselors, and other support staff) if they will grant me permission to interview them. There will be no costs accrued by participants or the school district for the proposed study.

The study will **not** include any student or staff member's names, as pseudonyms will be used for confidentiality. The WCSU Institutional Review Board has approved this research project. If you have questions concerning the rights of the subjects involved in this research study, please contact the WCSU IRB Chair at irb@wcsu.edu or my dissertation chair, Tricia J. Stewart, PhD at [REDACTED]

If you have questions that I can answer, please reach me at, Thomas R. Fox, at [REDACTED] or by phone at [REDACTED]

Name: [REDACTED] Title: Principal

Yes, I agree to provide Thomas Fox with access to the pre-existing data from the 2019 Safe School Climate Survey for his analysis. I agree to allow Thomas to interview educators (per their permission) within this school district.

Sincerely,



Thomas R. Fox, MA
Doctoral Student,
Western Connecticut State University
cc: Tricia J. Stewart, PhD, Research Advisor, WCSU



**Edd in Instructional Leadership
Department of Education and Educational Psychology
Dissertation Registration Form**

Student: Thomas R. Fox

Date 11/8/2022

Dissertation Title: POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS MAKE THE DIFFERENCE: A CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES ON STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS TO SCHOOL

Dissertation Committee Members: See attached Dissertation Approval Page

For Office Use Only.

<u>Tricia J. Stewart, PhD</u>	<u>Tricia J. Stewart</u>	<u>11/08/2022</u>
Dissertation Committee Chair	Signature	Date

<u>Marcia A. B. Delcourt, PhD</u>	<u>Marcia A. B. Delcourt</u>	<u>11/08/2022</u>
Program Coordinator	Signature	Date

<u>Joan S. Palladino, EdD</u>	<u>Joan S. Palladino</u>	<u>11/08/2024</u>
Dean, School of Professional Studies	Signature	Date